

# Teaching Vocabulary in Meaningful and Memorable Ways: Explicit Instruction in the English Classroom

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## ABSTRACT

This article discusses the importance of facilitating explicit vocabulary instruction in the English Language Arts (ELA) classroom. Vocabulary research on best practices suggests that explicit instruction can potentially increase student learning outcomes. The discussion begins with research on effective instruction, identifying words to teach, and ends by providing practical strategies that can be used in the ELA classroom.

## KEYWORDS

direct vocabulary instruction; explicit vocabulary instruction; vocabulary pedagogy

As a storyteller, words are my endless supply of inspiration, my palette of splendid colors, my toolbox filled with everything I need. Words are . . . the shyness of a fawn's breath, the sobbing at a pet's death, the last cracker in the box, the gloriously tailed fox, the sweet fullness of cantaloupe, the faith it takes to have hope, the bridge that crosses every sea, the steppingstones to you from me. (Fresch & Harrison, 2020, pp. x–xi)

Fresch and Harrison (2020) assert that words are a powerful tool used by storytellers. Words can inspire. Words can illustrate ideas. Words can articulate complex emotions and dispositions. But, most of all, words can serve as connectors between people. During my time as an English Language Arts (ELA) teacher at the middle and high school levels, my students struggled with academic vocabulary. I wanted, better yet, I needed to devise a plan to support students in learning academic vocabulary in meaningful and memorable (Allen, 2007) ways. Like the storyteller mentioned above, I wanted my students to realize the dynamic and eloquent potential that words possess. More importantly, I wanted to: (a) build my students' academic vocabulary, and (b) engage them in explicit vocabulary instruction to develop their vocabulary knowledge.

During my secondary school experiences, vocabulary instruction was facilitated in the following fashion: On Mondays, we read and copied definitions of vocabulary words on notebook paper. On Tuesdays, we were to use each word in a sentence. On Wednesdays and Thursdays, the words lingered awkwardly on the outskirts of the chalkboard. And on Fridays, we completed an oral spelling test of all the words. Then, something odd happened; the words returned to the dictionary from whence they came. To a great degree, these mundane and low-engagement instructional approaches enabled me to become adept at copying words from scuffed dictionaries. However, to deliver rich, meaningful, and effective vocabulary instruction, teachers must adopt

multiple dynamic activities. Students will benefit more from rigorous and repetitious instruction than from haphazardly studying hundreds of words from simple lists and definition charts.

In this article, I describe intentional, meaningful, and explicit strategies for teaching vocabulary that can catalyze effective instruction. This article discusses the classroom context of my work, defines memorable and meaningful vocabulary instruction, explains how to identify vocabulary words, and provides a depiction of explicit vocabulary instruction in action.

### Classroom Context

One of the primary considerations in developing a process for vocabulary instruction required me to consider the students in my classroom. As an 18-year educator, I have worked in some challenging Title 1 schools in Texas. Most of the students I served were multiple years below grade level, they struggled with academic vocabulary, they were culturally and linguistically diverse, and, on average, at least 40% of my students each year were considered multilingual learners. Because of the diverse composition of my classroom, I wanted to provide *meaningful* and *memorable* (Allen, 2007) vocabulary instruction that pushed students to do more than copy words and definitions from dictionaries. Throughout my teaching career, I developed research-based assignments to build students' vocabulary knowledge and skills. In this paper, I discuss a few of these strategies and how they can be leveraged in the ELA classroom.

### Meaning and Memorable Vocabulary Instruction

According to Allen (2007), current vocabulary instruction practices are ineffective. She maintained that in some classrooms, vocabulary instruction consists of students copying words from the dictionary and writing sentences with selected words. Allen further explained that students need *memorable* and *meaningful* approaches to vocabulary instruction that involve more than just giving students word lists. Additionally, Scott et al. (2008) explain that students' ability to use vocabulary in their writing does not happen without intentional vocabulary instruction.

Lane and Allen (2010) postulate that direct vocabulary instruction is needed as an everyday literacy practice. The authors maintain that students do not come to school with adequate vocabulary knowledge and for students from diverse backgrounds, there is a difference in vocabulary knowledge. Lane and Allen further explain that the vocabulary knowledge gap will continue to expand for students who lack adequate vocabulary knowledge. Ford-Connors and Paratore (2015) agreed with the claim that vocabulary knowledge is an important part of literacy development. They stated,

If young people are to succeed in a world that is dominated by ever-changing digital technologies, and accordingly new literacies, and ever-growing competition in a global economy, they will need to acquire and maintain high levels of literacy skill and analytical ability. (p. 50)

Some scholars articulated the importance of vocabulary instruction for reading comprehension and writing development (e.g., Elleman et al., 2019; Harmon & Wood, 2018). Harmon and Wood (2018) discussed that vocabulary instruction is vital for reading comprehension. To build students' vocabulary, the authors suggest pre-teaching key academic words before reading a text and providing assignments where students use new vocabulary in writing activities. Alternatively, Elleman et al. (2019) stated that vocabulary instruction is significant for overall language development, and there is a positive relationship between vocabulary instruction and building students writing capacity. When teachers provide students

with the opportunity to use new vocabulary in writing essays and persuasive paragraphs, these practices have the potential to increase reading comprehension and writing skills. They further reported that when children better understand oral and written discourse, they can better express their experiences and thoughts in conversations and writing. Conversely, Fresch and Harrison (2020) argue that vocabulary development is important for both reading and writing. The researchers suggest that teachers must face the challenge of teaching students vocabulary words they will need to be effective readers and writers. They advocate for using vocabulary instruction to empower students' knowledge of words in different and engaging ways.

### Identifying Words to Teach

Other researchers (Fisher & Frey, 2014; McKeown et al., 2012; Quigley & Coleman, 2019) documented the significance of teaching tiers of vocabulary, and they submit that this intentional approach can potentially increase learning outcomes. McKeown et al. (2012) reported that tier 1 words are words used in everyday speech (i.e., book, girl, sad, talk), tier 2 words are general academic words that appear in informational, technical, and literary texts (i.e. exacerbate, uproarious, exotic, robust), and tier 3 words are domain-specific words and are specific to a domain or field of study (i.e. quadratic formula, waning crescent, linear plot, colonialism). The authors further claim that tier 2 words have a wider application for reading a variety of texts. Thus, tier 2 words should be a primary target for vocabulary instruction.

Fisher and Frey (2014) acknowledge the benefit of providing direct instruction of tier 2 vocabulary words. In their paper, the authors reviewed the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in Reading and Language Arts and suggested that for students to meet the cognitive level of these standards, students will need extensive practice with words. They stated, "Clearly, the architects of the standards wanted to ensure that students learn a lot of words and phrases and know how to mobilize this knowledge as they read and write" (p. 595). Even though Texas has not adopted the CCSS, there is an explicit focus on building students' vocabulary knowledge and skills as indicated by the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS). Similarly, Quigley and Coleman (2019) assert that students should receive instruction for both tier 2 and tier 3 words as students will be unfamiliar with academic and domain-specific vocabulary. They also advance that these tiers of words should be carefully selected and aligned to vocabulary instructional strategies across all content disciplines.

### Explicit Vocabulary Instruction in Action

The initial step in developing vocabulary instruction for my classroom involved selecting tier 2 vocabulary from Levine's (1994) *Vocabulary for the High School Student*. The words featured in this text are words my students would encounter on the State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness (STAAR). Additionally, Levine's work is considered a seminal resource in vocabulary instruction, and the words selected from the book continue to appear on district, state, and national tests (i.e., NWEA, Accuplacer, Advance Placement).

Equally important, I leveraged the TEKS to identify vocabulary standards students must master as they matriculate through high school. Table 1 provides the TEKS aligned to my explicit instruction process.

**Table 1: Vocabulary Standards**

Grade-Level	Focus	Standard
9 <sup>th</sup> Grade	Dictionary Skills	Use print or digital resources such as glossaries or technical dictionaries to clarify and validate understanding of the precise and appropriate meaning of technical or discipline-based vocabulary.
9 <sup>th</sup> Grade	Context Clues	Analyze context to distinguish between the denotative and connotative meanings of words.

*Note.* Most of my experience has been at the middle and high school levels. I have used this instructional process for grades eighth through tenth. I used ninth-grade standards to show how the strategies I will describe align to one of the grade levels I have taught.

After the standards were identified, the following components were unpacked for each standard: (1) standard content vocabulary (tier 3 vocabulary) and (2) verbs. The standard vocabulary was identified because it was important to understand the content terms that students needed to know to master the standard. Meanwhile, identifying the verbs in the standard was essential to ensure that the vocabulary activities were aligned with the cognitive level of the TEKS.

Next, mastery objectives or learning targets were created for each standard to capture the vocabulary skills and knowledge students were expected to master. Laidlaw-Almaguer (2012) and Moore et al. (2015) insist that beginning with academic standards is one of the first steps to planning assignments for students. Moore et al. (2015) described that “Learning targets drive what is taught, to include all activities, assignments, and assessments that occur during lessons and units” (p. 9). In this vein, unpacking standards was vital for developing instruction for vocabulary standards students needed to master on formative and summative assessments.

### **The Vocabulary Process**

**Day 1: Working with Context Clues.** For 36 weeks, 18 weeks per semester, students engaged with explicit vocabulary instruction. Five words were selected each week, with one bonus word per week. On day one, students were introduced to five vocabulary words through a *Do Now* (Lemov et al., 2016) entitled, *Working with Context Clues*. Research scholars advised that building both definitional and contextual information about words is an efficient strategy for building student vocabulary knowledge (McKeown, 2019; Wright & Cervetti, 2017). According to Lemov et al. (2016), a *Do Now* can be used to review content from a recent lesson or for students to practice with standards they have mastered. Using a *Do Now* to develop vocabulary skills provided students an opportunity for repetitive practice by using context clues to determine the meaning of unknown words.

The *Working with Context Clues* assignment required students to read each sentence and put a box around the context clues. Then, students determined the definition and wrote it in their own words (see Figure 1). Students were given five minutes to complete the *Do Now* and the answers were reviewed using whole class instruction. If the class did not identify the correct definition of the word, they were given the option to use the dictionary to determine the meaning. It was required for students to answer at least four of the context clues questions. The bonus word was not covered in class. Instead, students were required to identify the context clues and determine the word’s meaning on their own in preparation for the assessment at the end of the week.

Figure 1: Working with Context Clues

**Objective:**  
I will use context clues to determine the meaning of a word in a sentence.

**Instructions:**

- 1) Read the sentences below.
- 2) Use context clues to determine the meaning of the vocabulary word.
- 3) Put a box around the words in the sentence that gives you a clue about the meaning of the vocabulary word.
- 4) Write the meaning of the word in the blank provided.
- 5) If you cannot determine the meaning of the word by the context; make an educated guess.

**Example:**

**Sedentary** individuals, people who are not very active, often have diminished health.

**sedentary** means: not active

1. Tom was very **squeamish** and would pass out at the site of blood.  
**squeamish** means: \_\_\_\_\_
2. To be a fireman, one needs to be **robust** because fighting fires is a difficult job.  
**robust** means: \_\_\_\_\_
3. The basketball announcer's **uproarious** voice filled the packed arena.  
**uproarious** means: \_\_\_\_\_
4. The siren was able to **captivate** the sailors with her amazing voice.  
**captivate** means: \_\_\_\_\_

After the *Do Now* was reviewed with the class, students wrote the vocabulary words on index cards. On the front side of the index card, students wrote the words, and then on the back side of the card, students wrote the definition in their own words. In some cases, students provided a visual representation connected to the vocabulary word (see Figure 2). Each student was issued a 2-inch binder ring to attach their vocabulary words. The purpose of this strategy was for students to build a study tool to support them in learning the vocabulary words of the week. Alternatively, if students had access to technology, programs like Quizlet or Padlet were used to create note cards as well.

Research on best practices in vocabulary instruction suggests that providing students opportunities to analyze context clues, discuss the meaning of words, engage with new words in different contexts, and assess student word learning are efficient routines to build students' vocabulary knowledge (Pennsylvania Training and Technical Network, 2021). Interestingly, Ford-Connors and Paratore (2015) synthesized qualitative research on increasing the vocabulary knowledge of young adolescents. One of the strategies discussed in their work was using context clues to build students' word knowledge. The authors emphasized that teaching students how to use context clues can support students at various levels in learning new words.

Figure 2: Vocabulary Note Cards



**Day 2: Working with Synonyms and Antonyms.** On day two, students completed the assignment entitled, *Working with Synonyms and Antonyms*. Students identified both synonyms and antonyms for the vocabulary words and created an original sentence with the synonym for each word of the week (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Working with Synonyms and Antonyms

**Instructions:**

Using a thesaurus, find a **synonym** and **antonym** for all this week's vocabulary words. Write the synonym and antonym in each box and create a sentence with the synonym for the vocabulary word. Make sure you underline the synonym in the sentence you create.

**Example:**

Word: **sedentary**

Synonym	Antonym
inactive	active

Synonym Sentence: The football player was inactive because of his elbow injury.

1. Word: **squeamish**

Synonym	Antonym

Synonym Sentence: \_\_\_\_\_.

2. Word: **robust**

Synonym	Antonym

Synonym Sentence: \_\_\_\_\_.

3. Word: **uproarious**

Synonym	Antonym

Synonym Sentence: \_\_\_\_\_.

4. Word: **captivate**

Synonym	Antonym

Synonym Sentence: \_\_\_\_\_.

The instructional approach of connecting vocabulary words to synonyms and antonyms is aligned with the work of Dorothy Frayer. Frayer and colleagues (1969) developed the Frayer Model to support students in learning about key concepts. The model consists of defining a term, identifying the characteristics of the term, and providing examples and non-examples. Examples or synonyms of the word support students in using words with the same definition. In contrast, antonyms or non-examples support students in understanding what the word is not.

In the same way, other researchers (Crosson & Lesaux, 2013; Phillips et al., 2008) advanced the notion that using synonyms is an effective approach for building student word knowledge. Beach et al. (2015) described the various methods a U.S. History teacher used to enact vocabulary instruction in his self-contained special education class. The authors suggest that providing instruction that challenges students to identify synonyms and use them in sentences can serve as a scaffold to build students' vocabulary knowledge. Blachowicz and Fisher (2004)

explained that synonym webs, feature analysis, and teaching students' antonyms help them set clear parameters in meaning and understanding how the dimensions or features of words differ.

**Day 3: Work with Personal Connections.** On day three, students were required to make personal connections with the words of the week. Students identified an object, person, or profession connected to the vocabulary word (see Figure 4). Then, students wrote a sentence with the word using one of the previously mentioned connections. Shanahan (2005) described that integrating real-life examples connected to vocabulary words supports students in making connections with words. Bromley (2007) found that one way for students to learn new words is to make associations. He further explains that students can learn new words because of the connections made with their schema. Comparably, Faulkner (2010) reported the benefits of increasing students' usability of vocabulary words in persuasive writing. The authors discovered that "when students' brains are actively engaged in discussion, discovering, and demonstrating, then the words and their representative meanings become more permanent, visible, and understandable" (p. 114).

*Figure 4: Working with Personal Connections*

**Instructions:**  
 Reflect on this week's vocabulary words. When you make a **personal connection** with new vocabulary, it helps you to remember the word for lifelong learning. For each word, write an **object, person, or profession** that reminds you of the vocabulary word. Then, use the personal connection you made with the word in a sentence. Make sure you use correct grammar when creating your original sentences.

**Example:**  
**Sedentary** reminds me of a man in a wheelchair.  
 object / person / profession  
 Sentence: The **sedentary** man in the wheelchair gave me an odd look when I skipped him in line.

1. **Squeamish** reminds me of \_\_\_\_\_.  
 object / person / profession  
 Sentence: \_\_\_\_\_.

2. **Robust** reminds me of \_\_\_\_\_.  
 object / person / profession  
 Sentence: \_\_\_\_\_.

3. **Uproarious** reminds me of \_\_\_\_\_.  
 object / person / profession  
 Sentence: \_\_\_\_\_.

4. **Captivate** reminds me of \_\_\_\_\_.  
 object / person / profession  
 Sentence: \_\_\_\_\_.

Kelley et al. (2010) also reiterated the value of making personal connections to target vocabulary words. The researchers stated that to “maximize student attachment and vocabulary growth, students need to be personally connected” (p. 12). They further insisted that for students to build personal connections with vocabulary words, they need to engage with topics and texts that reflect their world. Overall, research shows that connecting vocabulary instruction to students’ schema through real-life examples (Shanahan, 2005), personal association and connections (Bromley, 2007), and persuasive writing (Kelley et al., 2010) has the potential to build students’ word knowledge.

### *Independent Practice*

After students were exposed to the instruction during class time, it was essential for students to practice with vocabulary for homework to further cement their word learning. Wilson (2017) expressed that after students appear to understand the new material they should be allowed to apply or practice using the new information. Therefore, students were given the option to choose an assignment from a vocabulary menu (see Figure 5) to practice with the new vocabulary words they were learning in class. Vocabulary assignments were assigned based on ability and interest. The assignments provided for students included but were not limited to the Vocabulary Comic Strip (see Figure 6), Vocabulary Cinquain (see Figure 7), and Vocabulary Padlet (see Figure 8).

To complete the Vocabulary Comic Strip, students created a fictional story with the vocabulary words for the week. Then, students created the original comic strip on construction or white paper 8.5 by 11 inches. The Vocabulary Cinquain assignment required students to create a five-line poem. At the top of the poem, students wrote the vocabulary word. On line one, students wrote a synonym for the vocabulary word. On line two, students wrote two words that described the word with the word in the center. On line three, students identified three professions that connected with the word. On line four, students wrote a sentence with the word, and on line five, students wrote an antonym for the word. To complete the Vocabulary Padlet, students created four cards. One card for each word of the week. On the first card, students created a voice note pronouncing and spelling a word. Secondly, students created a card with a visual representation and sentence connected to a word. On the third card, students wrote the etymology, past tense, and synonym of a word. On the last card, students wrote the meaning, antonym, and sentence for a word.

Shostak (2002) and Bromley (2007) stated that students need multiple exposures to a word to build their word knowledge. Harmon et al. (2010) echoed this sentiment and asserted that “it takes meaningful encounters with word meanings in a variety of contexts for students to internalize word knowledge” (p. 106). As a result, the vocabulary instruction in my class converged around providing students multiple exposures to practice with new vocabulary and meaningful encounters that aligned with their schema.

**Figure 5: Vocabulary Assignment Menu**

<b>Instructions:</b>		
<p>Choose one of the vocabulary assignments as your independent practice to learn your vocabulary words of the week. You must receive approval from Dr. Whitaker to complete the Create-Your-Own Assignment. Once you have selected your assignment, take this handout to Dr. Whitaker to receive the instructions for the assignment you selected.</p>		
<p><b>Vocabulary Comic Strip</b></p> <p>Description: Using the week's vocabulary words, create a vocabulary comic strip.</p>	<p><b>Interrogative Vocabulary</b></p> <p>Description: Using the week's vocabulary words, create interrogative sentences.</p>	<p><b>Vocabulary Cinquain</b></p> <p>Description: Using the week's vocabulary words, create a vocabulary cinquain poem.</p>
<p><b>Padlet</b></p> <p>Description: Using the week's vocabulary words, create a Padlet with figurative language, visual representation, and pronunciation that includes the vocabulary words.</p>	<p><b>Journal</b></p> <p>Description: Using the week's vocabulary words, create a vocabulary journal with visual images and sentences with the words in context.</p>	<p><b>Origami</b></p> <p>Description: Using the week's vocabulary words, create a mind flayer.</p>
<p><b>Vocabulary Word Box</b></p> <p>Description: Using the week's vocabulary words, create a vocabulary word box with synonyms, antonyms, and visual images.</p>	<p><b>Create-Your Own</b></p> <p>Description: Using the week's vocabulary words, create your own assignment to practice with the vocabulary words. (*You need approval from Dr. Whitaker for this assignment so that you can be assigned to a group.)</p>	<p><b>Personal Dictionary</b></p> <p>Description: Using the week's vocabulary words, create a personal dictionary with the part of speech, sentences, and language of origin, where applicable.</p>
<p><b>Freestyle Vocabulary Poem</b></p> <p>Description: Using the week's vocabulary words, create a freestyle poem using a metaphor, simile, and personification.</p>	<p><b>Who's Got Jokes?</b></p> <p>Description: Using the week's vocabulary words, create jokes for your debut on the show Who Got Jokes?</p>	<p><b>Short Story Vocabulary</b></p> <p>Description: Using the week's vocabulary words, create a short story.</p>

Figure 6: Vocabulary Comic Strip

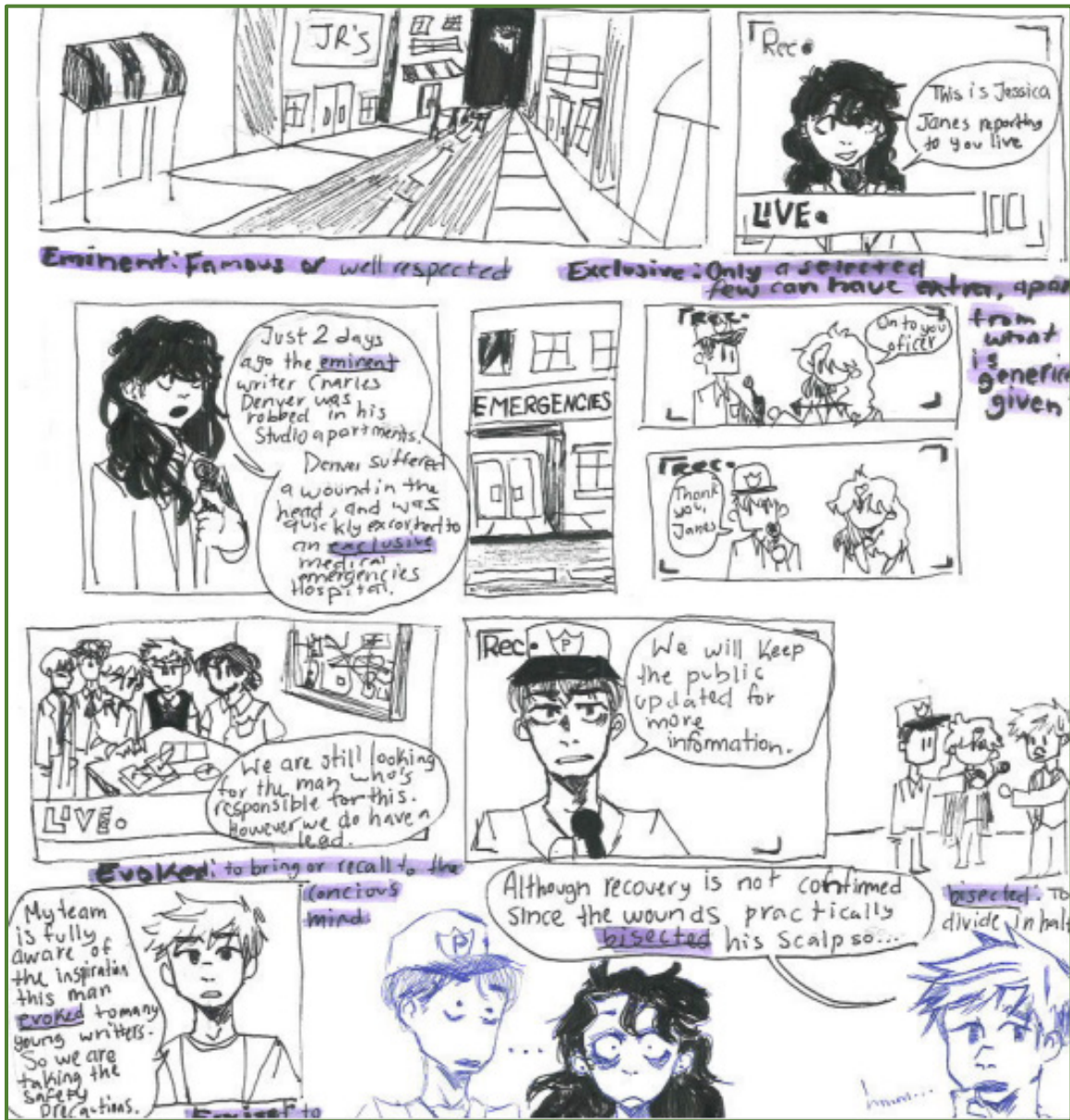


Figure 7: Vocabulary Cinquain Strategy

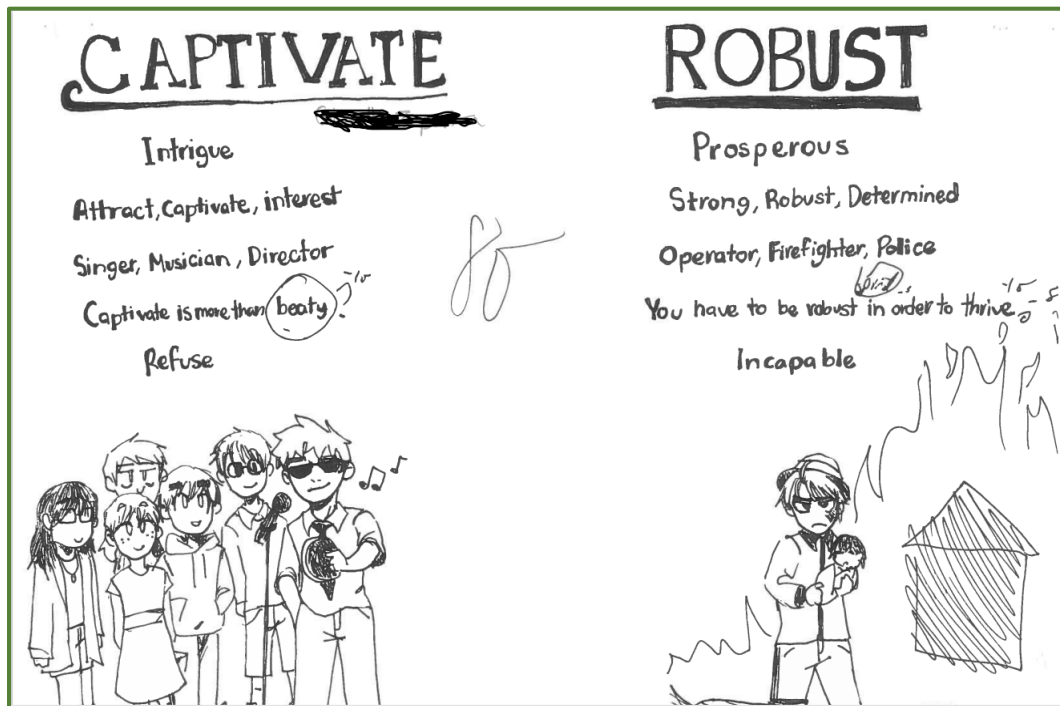


Figure 8: Vocabulary Padlet

Vocabulary Words Week

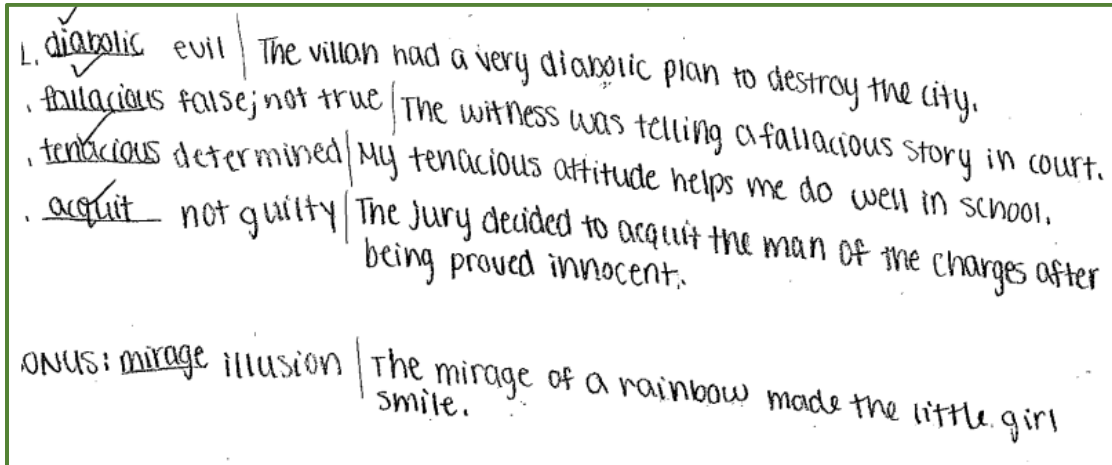
<p><b>Excise</b></p> <p>Audio • 00:04</p>	<p><b>Eminent</b></p> <p>An eminent individual shines bright like the stars that scatter the sky such as Michael Jordan.</p>	<p><b>Bisect</b></p> <p><b>Etymology-</b> Modern Latin</p> <p><b>Past tense-</b> Bisected</p> <p><b>Synonym-</b> Divide or separate</p>	<p><b>Evoke</b></p> <p><b>Meaning-</b> To bring or recall to the conscience mind.</p> <p><b>Antonym-</b> Repress</p> <p><b>Sentence-</b> We cannot move on to the future if we forever evoke the past.</p>
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### Assessment

Throughout the week, the context clues (Day 1), synonyms and antonyms (Day 2), and personal connections (Day 3) served as formative assessments to monitor students' vocabulary learning. Moreover, the independent practice activities were designed to prepare students for the vocabulary test at the end of the week. On Friday, students were given a vocabulary assessment. Students were required to spell and use the words in a sentence in the correct context. Meanwhile, if students wanted to earn extra credit on the assessment, they were required to spell the bonus word correctly and use it in a sentence (see Figure 9). The purpose of the assessment was for students to use the

words in a sentence in the correct context and demonstrate a deeper level of thinking and understanding about the words of the week that extended beyond memorization and matching (Moore, 2014).

**Figure 9: Vocabulary Assessment**



### Conclusion

Ultimately, this article does not cover the countless possibilities for facilitating explicit vocabulary instruction. Many of our students come to school and do not have the academic vocabulary needed to read and comprehend complex texts. Our students need vocabulary instruction that is meaningful and memorable (Allen, 2007). When teachers engage in explicit instruction, students will begin to use words to articulate complex emotions. They will begin to express critical thoughts and reflections filled with language that befits their ideas. But, most of all, students will begin to understand that they can use words: to inspire others, to inspire themselves, and to express their dreams for today and the future.

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