Literature as Language: Using Kids’ Books to Teach About Words

by

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Long, long ago when I was in the seventh grade, the West Chester School District adopted a text called Word Wealth to help students develop skills in vocabulary and spelling. Most of the seventh-grade students grumbled, moaned, whined, and complained about the weekly lesson and test. “Why do we have to learn this? Whoever heard of such a word? When would anyone use a word like this?” was the seventh-grade mantra. Although I joined in (what seventh-grader would ever disagree with her peers?), I really loved the weekly word list. The words were unusual, unique, one-of-a-kind. The book explained each word’s etymology and gave several examples of usage in context. The spelling part of the program didn’t sink in — I was a terrible speller then and still am — but the study, meaning, and general fascination with words has stuck.

But how, as a librarian and a teacher, do I convey to students just how wonderful words can be? How do I get students to appreciate the selection of the “right” word as it enriches the text in a variety of ways? Maybe I can’t guide every child to become a devoted word lover and user, but I should be able to spark an interest and encourage students to notice the power and influence words can have.

Some topics of study lend themselves to word appreciation more than others. Poetry is an obvious example, but I’ve brought word study to the notice of students while teaching mythology, character development, sequencing, rising action, folk and fairy tales, note taking, and much more. To suddenly introduce a word study lesson in the midst of literature can seem abrupt and disconnected unless, through the years, it’s become a routine and natural part of reading and writing. To make that happen it’s best to introduce the study of words at all grade levels in a manner appropriate to students’ maturity and development. By doing so students play with the sounds and meanings of words throughout their education.

And surprisingly enough, it’s fairly easy to do. Almost all children notice words very early in their lives and quickly learn to use them. Young children realize that imitating the sounds of adults can bring a gratifying response. Who hasn’t applauded a baby’s first words or rushed to satisfy their early commands? As children mature and conquer the oral language of family, peers, and community, they can expand their language by turning to literature. Toddlers learn nursery rhymes and chants through repetition and practice with parents and care givers. As they memorize and master these, they become more capable of listening to longer folk and fairy tales which also rely on repetition and rhyme to emphasize the tale’s plot. That in turn promotes the child’s ability and desire to translate text.
on his own. Book publishers know this and promote authors whose books follow a predictable pattern and use a basic set of rhyming words. The very best of these authors, such as Theodore Geisel (aka Dr. Seuss), also invest these books with a humorous premise, funny characters, or an unlikely situation that makes them a favorite of beginning readers. *Green Eggs and Ham* or *The Cat in the Hat* may have never won a literary award, but everyone remembers them fondly.

As a librarian/teacher, I need to find a way to promote word study as I instruct, engage, and enrich students throughout the grade levels. In this article, however, I will concentrate on some ideas that can be put to use in kindergarten, first and second grade.

Letter recognition is one of the beginning tools of word observation. Simply noticing how letters are shaped and their associated sounds are a part of the typical kindergarten curriculum, but several books take this basic skill and invite students to experiment and play with the alphabet. The 1997 Caldecott Honor book, *Alphabet City* by Stephen Johnson, leads children to notice how the alphabet letters can be found in many everyday objects seen in towns and cities everywhere. There are “A”s formed by the supports of a sawhorse blocking off a construction area. Looking at the side of an overhead traffic signal the reader sees the shape of an “E”, and “Z”s are made as metal fire escapes cling to the sides of brick buildings.

*Alphabatics* by Suse MacDonald simply has each letter shown in a bright color in both upper and lower case. She then, usually in a series of progressive blocks, has the basic letter shape transform itself into part of a larger picture that begins with that letter. For example, “d” becomes the curled tail of a dragon; “m” becomes a man’s mustache; “n” flips and turns to become a nest for baby birds. The letters imitate the title by turning and twisting in acrobatic moves to become something else. Some of the words will be familiar to a young child, while others, like yak, xylophone, and quail are easily understood because the letter has become a picture to illustrate the word. Unfortunately, there is no plot to tie the letters to a common theme.

A book like Arthur Geisert’s *Pigs from A to Z* requires much more discrimination in letter identification. Seven pigs plan and build a tree house. Hidden within each illustration are five forms of an alphabet letter for the reader to find. To allow the student to search even more, some of the pigs are hidden and the preceding and following alphabet letters are also included in the picture. Some of the letters and pigs are easy to spot but others are not. For example, as the little pigs enjoy
a spectacular view shingling the roof of their tree house in the “S” picture, it’s simple to spy the “S”-shaped roads among the mountains in the background. It takes careful examination to notice a rope has curled into an “S” as one pig uses it to haul shingles to the top. The ski jump on a nearby mountain forms another “S,” and water from a dam flowing into a waterfall creates a “T.”

Children and adults find it tough to resist the appeal of teddy bears. Kathleen and Michael Hague have combined their talents to create Alphabears. Each little teddy, distinct in appearance and circumstance, has a rhyming couplet to emphasize its personality. As they go through the alphabet, readers can meet Robert Bear, “who thinks that it’s great to sit by the fire and read until late;” Charles Bear, a “stuffy old bear who wears a bow tie and a part in his hair;” or little Laura Bear, who “doesn’t like lightning — she thinks that the sound of thunder is frightening.”

The Guinea Pig ABC by Kate Duke shows guinea pigs, equally charming and cute, illustrating a single word or concept with their antics. Some are obvious; a guinea pig peers anxiously down from the line across the “H,” suggesting “high.” A guinea pig slides down the curves of an “S”; the word “slippery” is printed below. Vain is the word choice for “V,” certainly not an easy concept to explain to young students. But one look at the guinea pig adjusting her dandelion bonnet while admiring herself in a hand mirror makes the concept crystal clear.

All alphabet books don’t rely on simple letter presentation. Nikki Grimes’ C is for City features many double-page spreads for the alphabet letters with a rhyming verse that leads the reader past common big city sites, people, and happenings.

T is for turnstile and trains full of tourists,
   for tough-talking boys with steel taps on their shoes,
T is for taxi and two-story town houses,
next door to temples with hard, wooden pews.

The accompanying illustrations match the text but also incorporate more items, such as a trombone, teddy bear, telephone, tennis racket, tutu, trash can, and top hat, whose names match the letter. As with Pigs from A to Z, a key is included for those who like to check if they’ve found all the answers. It’s also fun to spot the big black and white cat who meanders through on every page.

Definitely a challenging read-aloud is Aster Aardvark’s Alphabet Adventures by Steven Kellogg. The alliterative title becomes a lovely lesson to link the letters with words that show the same successive sound. It’s a mighty mouthful to master. Kellogg’s illustrations complement a complicated collection of words.

Some beginning students find it easy to learn one short word and, by rhyming, begin to recognize its root and how it can change. Sometimes the story doesn’t always have a complex plot. One Fish, Two Fish, Red Fish, Blue Fish and other titles by Dr. Seuss are favorites of beginning readers simply for their predictability and how easily the illustrations prompt the correct rhyming text. A fish that has wrinkled scales, a long straggly beard, and grubby glasses is obviously elderly, while a wide-eyed baby fish tucked into a carriage is just a youngster, so reading the lines “old fish, new fish” is easy for most students. There’s something about the pattern of rhyming that allows many children to first memorize it, then “read” it. Jamberry by Bruce Degen continues this format. Building on the word “berry,” a boy and bear spend a “berry” nice day picking, eating, and frolicking. They put berries in “Hatberry, shoeberry, in my canoeberry” as they float

“Under the bridge
and over the dam
looking for berries
berries for jam.”

Most readers can’t “bear” for the story to end and want to reread it again and again.

Other rhyming stories use “terse verse” to present the rhyme. One Sun by Bruce McMillan presents a complete story by only using two rhyming words for each page. McMillan illustrates his text with photography. Under One sun a small boy spends a day at the beach with a “wet pet” and friends. They see a “snail trail,” “a lone stone,” and “six sticks.” They play with a “stuck truck,” “small ball,” “whale pail,” and “white kite.” They join the “tan man” (lifeguard) on his “neat seat.”

A Day At Camp by George Ella Lyon features short verse complemented with water colors by Peter
Catalanotto. Each illustration is set atop a larger illustration producing a layered effect. The campers find a “frog log,” then see a “bug tug” as ants wrestle food to their hole. When a reptile unexpectedly appears, it’s time for a “snake shake” as the campers run off in panic. Students usually find it easy to guess the second word of the rhyming pair with the help of the illustrations.

With the aid of a picture, students are also able to complete an even longer rhyming phrase. “I Can’t,” Said The Ant by Polly Cameron provides support for the beginning reader by using a repetitious rhyme scheme throughout, showing the word to be rhymed and read, and also giving a small sketch of the word. By combining all those cues, even reluctant readers feel confident in making a guess to complete the line.

Most students seem to know how to rhyme automatically. They know that “sink” and “bed” do not rhyme but “red” and “bed” do. But other students just don’t understand and even the ones that do can’t always articulate how rhymes work. This is when the librarian/teacher can use a text that enriches and supports some students and at the same time provides examples and practice for others. In the book The Witch’s Hat by Tony Johnston, a witch’s hat accidentally falls into her magic pot which transforms it into a bat, rat, and cat. As in the story, I too have used a “magic pot.” After the letter “H” from hat gets dropped in, students pull out other alphabet letters from the pot and try positioning them as the beginning letter sound of “_at.” Bat, rat, and cat were all in Johnston’s book but now students get a chance to see that it can also become fat, mat, Nat, pat, and sat. Depending on the letters and the ability of the students, it can also become flat, slat, vat. And just think how it changes when “e” or “o” gets placed at the beginning of “_at.” For some students the physical task of maneuvering different letters into position helps them better understand the concept of rhyme. A set of letters can be used repeatedly by a group or individuals to experiment with changing and rhyming words.

Probably one of the most popular of easy rhyming books that relies on a limited vocabulary and has a humorous plot is Nancy Shaw’s Sheep In A Jeep. Margot Apple’s five sheep, realistically drawn animals with human facial features, start out happily enough in a jeep; but, by the story’s end, post a sign “_eep for sale—cheap.” It’s a great combination of terse verse, easy rhyming, and delightful illustration. The book was such a hit that Shaw and Apple have also published Sheep on a Ship, Sheep in a Shop, Sheep Out to Eat, and Sheep Take a Hike. Shaw and Apple recently published Sheep Trick or Treat (Houghton, 1997). All these titles usually become favorites of beginning readers and other readers too.

As students achieve success and become more confident in their ability to read, they begin to seek more of a challenge in their texts. They still love and continue to read and reread their favorites, but they also want to prove to themselves and show others their capability to understand and enjoy words which are more difficult. Rather than concentrate on recognizing individual words, students now look at phrases and “bigger ideas” groups of words can convey. Instead of a literal word-by-word interpretation, students understand words in a more figurative sense.

With her lack of understanding and mistaken interpretations of common words and phrases,
Amelia Bedelia, who's been shared by two authors and drawn by several illustrators, delights beginning readers. Her confusion with phrases, idioms, and homophones lets beginning readers laugh at her “foolish” errors while reinforcing and broadening their own understanding. Amelia Bedelia, through the years, has turned the Rogers' household topsy-turvy, tried a variety of unsuitable occupations, given a bridal shower with real water, played baseball, celebrated Christmas, cared for a baby, gone camping, introduced her relatives, and acquired a driver's license — all with hilarious results. She puts out the lights by hanging them on the clothesline in the backyard, and steals home while playing baseball by picking up the base. When Mr. Rogers allows her to practice driving the car, here's what occurs:

"Bear left!" shouted Mr. Rogers.
"So Amelia Bedelia made a sharp turn to the right.
"Amelia Bedelia!" shouted Mr. Rogers. "Why did you turn right?"
"Because," said Amelia Bedelia, "you warned me about the bear."
"What bear?" asked Mr. Rogers.
"You said there was a bear on the left," said Amelia Bedelia.
"There was no BEAR!" yelled Mr. Rogers. "I said bear LEFT."
"If I'd known that the bear had left, I would not have turned right."
Mr. Rogers was about to blow up. The tire beat him to it.

Amelia Bedelia, first written in the mid 1960s, has always presented homophones within the plot such as when the mechanic asks Amelia Bedelia,

"Would you like me to give you a tow?"
"I've got all the toes I need," said Amelia Bedelia.

The brief homophone is meshed seamlessly within the context of Amelia Bedelia's driving lesson under the tutelage of Mr. Rogers. But not all books are able to do this so successfully.

Never Monkey With A Monkey by Sylvia Root Tester could easily double as pages from a bad workbook. Some books go too far beyond a student's experience. For example, in Fred Gwynne's A Chocolate Moose For Dinner, a child overhears her parents at the dinner table talk about a “gorilla war,” “car pools,” and “holding up a bank,” and while the illustrations show the littlegirl's misinterpretation of the words or phrase, there is nothing to suggest the true meaning of the idioms. Readers who don't understand initially may continue to have the wrong idea about the meaning of a common expression. This book probably seems more humorous to adults than to children.

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Mrs. Toggle and her primary-grade classroom seem to be a more modern interpretation of Amelia Bedelia. Mrs. Toggle usually becomes involved in dilemmas because she has not listened carefully to the exact wording. Her misunderstanding is usually compounded by other adults in the school, such as Mrs. Schott, the school nurse, Mr. Stickler, the principal, and Mr. Paige, the librarian. In both Mrs. Toggle's Zipper and Mrs. Toggle and the Dinosaur, it is Mr. Abel, the custodian, who solves the problem with common sense, everyday practicality and a word to the wise.

Students can begin to expand their vocabularies as they become more and more familiar with literature. Beginning readers may not be able to read all of the words in the more advanced picture books, but when the teacher reads these books to them, they can learn about unfamiliar situations. Alexandra Day, most famous for her wordless books about Carl the dog, has created two animal characters: Frank, a bear, and Ernest, an elephant. They learn to interpret, understand, and use terms specific to a restaurant, a baseball game, and a trip on an eighteen wheeler. All of the books, Frank and Ernest, Frank and Ernest Play Ball, and Frank and Ernest: On the Road incorporate the terms naturally within the context of the story. While helping Mrs. Miller run the diner and working as counter help and cook, Frank and Ernest take the customers' orders, "A hot dog with ketchup for Jimmy, and a serving of Jell-O for me, if you please,"
and change it into “Paint a bow-wow red, Frank, and I need a nervous pudding.” While driving a truck, they plan to “stop at this oasis and put on the feed bags” and enjoy “a cup of road tar.” The illustrations show them parked at a roadside restaurant having a meal and a cup of coffee. These same words are also set off from the text in a boxed frame and listed glossary-style on the front and back end covers.

Kathleen Schurr and Patricia MacCarthy both use the animal kingdom to guide readers through various terms. Schurr shows the parent and baby names of animals in Cats Have Kittens — Do Gloves Have Mittens? MacCarthy explains the correct term for a collection of things or group of animals in Animals Galore! and Herds of Words.

To help students understand common idioms like “every cloud has a silver lining,” or “he who hesitates is lost,” Betty Fraser has gathered a collection of expressions in First Things First that show children in common, everyday experiences that illustrate sayings such as: “Birds of a feather flock together,” “Too many cooks spoil the broth,” or “The early bird gets the worm.”

As students are exposed to literature that develops and promotes complex word use, hopefully they’ll feel confident about trying to incorporate more varied words into their own style of writing. Some students do this more naturally, quickly, and easily than others. They’re the lucky ones — they’ll probably always somewhat unconsciously read and absorb style, language, and usage of words and be able to reconfigure and develop it in their own writing. But other students may feel more at ease when they have a model to copy or an example to imitate. There are now several picture books or beginning readers that invite students to do just that.

Hippopotamus Hunt by Bernard Most uses the old word-search idea of taking a word apart to make new words. From “hippopotamus” each of the words in brackets can be found as the story unfolds. The hippo and hunters find a [map] which leads them [south]. When the hippo got stuck in mud the hunters [push] him [out] and then clean him [up] with [mop] and [soap]. As they continue their search along the [path] they come to a [hut] where the [most] words can always be found — the library.

Catherine Hepworth with her alphabet book, Antics! does the opposite of Bernard Most. Rather than find smaller or other words from a large word, she takes a “little” word, such as “ant” and then places it within
a larger word, such as flamboyant, quarantine, vigilantes and has ants (the insects) illustrate and interpret the term.

*All Aboard Overnight* by Betsy and Giulio Maestro encourages readers to build compound words by describing the sights, sounds, and experiences while on a train. The characters in the story check the timetable for departures as they board the train with their suitcases. They wave through the windowpane as the train departs from the station and watch as the countryside passes by. Besides the words used in the text, the authors also provide a list of compound words that can be found scattered through the illustrations.

Another delightful book, *When Bluebell Sang* by Lisa Campbell Ernst, the story of Bluebell the cow’s rise to fame with her remarkable singing, also emphasizes compound words like tiptoe, dressmaker, newspaper, and homesick.

Ruth Heller has authored a series of books that promote language usage. The books are colorful, have a readable, rhythmic text and introduce the use of nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs in an informal way. The parts of speech have never been portrayed more attractively and brightly. For example in *Up, Up and Away: A Book About Adverbs*, Heller explains, then shows

ADVERBS work terrifically when answering specifically...

"How?"

"How often?"

"When?"

and "Where?"

then shows

*Penguins all dress DECENTLY.*

*Toe dancers practice FREQUENTLY.*

*This house was painted RECENTLY... and small green frogs live THERE.*

She cautions, still in rhyme:

*Before an ADVERB answers "when?"
it always

answers

"where?"

and then shows

*This ship will sail*

AWAY

*TODAY.*

*It will not sail*

TODAY

AWAY.

What an easy, clear, to-the-point explanation of a usage rule and all illustrated beautifully.

Authors of picture books are willing to introduce beginning readers to many elements of literary style. Rather than simply explaining onomatopoeic words, Dayle Ann Dodds provides numerous examples of animals, people, and machines and the sounds they make and contrasts them with quiet little bunnies in her book, *Do Bunnies Talk?*

*Sheep BAAA*

*Trucks VA-ROOM*

*Big bass drums*

*go BOOM BOOM BOOM*

*Chipmunks CHATTER*

*Snakes HISS*

*Lips SMACK*

*when they give you a kiss*

*Bees BUZZZZZZZ*

*Cows MOO*

*But quiet little bunnies never do.*

Although by the end of the book you have the feeling that those bunnies just may not be as quiet as you thought.

These are just some of the many ways in the primary grades to notice and observe words in literature. Hopefully, they will influence children to do so on their own while reading and writing more independently at the intermediate and secondary levels.

My favorite book, the book I reread regularly, the book that for me symbolizes how words can become cornerstones of a novel or your life, is *The Phantom Tollbooth* by Norton Juster. Milo, the book's protago-
nistor, is like many of us; "nothing really interested him — least of all the things that should have." Milo lets words envelop him without much notice. Many students are similar to Milo with their indifference to words. They write using a minimum of effort in word selection and sentence development and avoid figurative language and elements of style. But after Milo travels through the phantom tollbooth and takes on the quest of returning the princesses Rhyme and Reason to the warring kingdoms, Milo is introduced to the power and influence words can have. King Azaz the Unabridged presents Milo with a small box to use during his mission. He explains,

In this box are all the words I know. Most of them you will never need, some you will use constantly, but with them you may ask all the questions which have never been answered and answer all the questions which have never been asked. All the great books of the past and the ones yet to come are made with these words. With them there is no obstacle you cannot overcome. All you must learn to do is use them well and in the right places.

No longer then does Milo wait for words to prompt his beliefs, feelings, and actions. He is no longer a passive conduit for words — now he’s the initiator of a word’s selection and use. As students are exposed to, guided by, and challenged with literature in which words play a prominent part, I hope that they too, as Milo did, will note and marvel at the prominent role words play and become intrigued and adept at incorporating them into their lives, their speech, and their writing. And then, like Milo at the novel’s end, “his (their) thoughts darted eagerly about as everything looked new — and worth trying.”

One final note: Word Wealth, I’m happy to report, is still alive and well in the West Chester School District, some thirty-four years later. Is it still making some seventh grader’s life miserable? More than likely it is, but it may also be the prompt that allows others to realize the wealth of knowledge, emotion, and communication that words can provide.

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NWP Announces Miriam Ylvisaker Award

This year’s National Writing Project Miriam Ylvisaker Award for the best Quarterly article written by a classroom teacher is awarded to Robert Roth for his article, “Creating Work of Their Own: Skills and Voice in an Eighth-Grade Research Project,” published in the Fall, 1996 issue.

According to the judging committee, “Roth’s article was an honest and vivid portrayal of both the students he teaches and his approach to teaching a long-term project. Roth engaged the reader with “snapshots” of four students in his class who reflected a wide range of skills, motivations as well as success with his project. It was just as refreshing and important to read about Carolina, who asked and answered complicated and thoughtful questions about the rebellion in Chiapas, Mexico, as to read about Anthony who ‘hated projects,’ resisted choosing an original topic, and ultimately did not have much success in Roth’s class. Roth uses both opportunities to reflect and learn from his teaching practice, and in doing so teaches all of us well.

In addition, the article demonstrates a thoughtful and carefully considered approach to teaching writing that all teachers, not just eighth-grade research-project teachers, will find useful and refreshingly honest.”

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