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# Performing Poetry: Acquiring Robust Words

by Laurie A. Ringe

It was my mother who first introduced me to the importance and beauty of vocabulary. She did this by speaking to my seven siblings and me all day and every day from the moment we were born. I remember listening to her running dialogue as we walked through the grocery store. She would discuss what we were buying and what was on sale, using large words when speaking to us even when we were very young. Words were not simplified to match our age. I recall thinking that I didn't really understand every word that my mother spoke, but I could figure out some words by the context in which they were used. My mother had a large vocabulary because she was interested in literature. She modeled this for us by always having a book she was reading, taking us to the library weekly, reading to us each night, and talking to us about school and what we were reading. Words and language were valued in our home.

Words and language are important and crucial in education as well. The implications are astounding as demonstrated in the seminal study by Stanovich (1986). This study, which highlighted the "Matthew Effects" in reading (i.e., the rich get richer and the poor get poorer), showed that students with a wider vocabulary achieve more and make faster progress than students with a limited vocabulary. Another study done by Cunningham and Stanovich (1997) showed that the vocabulary skills of first-grade students predicted reading achievement in their junior year of high school. These findings prove how critical it is for our students to have a voluminous bank of words to draw upon from early on. These studies compelled me to take a closer look at my teaching practice in the area of vocabulary instruction. Since I have always loved teaching poetry, I decided to learn more about how poetry could be used to help students acquire vocabulary.

## Vocabulary Acquisition

Vocabulary acquisition is a very slow and gradual process. For full knowledge and ownership of a word



**Laurie A. Ringe**

to occur, repeated encounters and exposures to partially known or unfamiliar words are necessary (Eckerth & Tavakoli, 2012). For students to have the greatest possibility of gaining ownership of a word, the instructional strategies provided to students must be interactive, rich, and multi-faceted. Studies have shown that when students are actively engaged in vocabulary instruction, more words are learned (Sobolak, 2011).

According to Gallagher and Anderson (2016), it is clear that "in spite of all the research in support of vocabulary instruction, there is a lack of robust vocabulary instruction in many American schools" (p. 274). Robust vocabulary instruction is important. Teaching words that students need to know and strategies to learn words will deepen their understanding not only of the text they read, but also of specific concepts in particular content areas.

Whether teaching content vocabulary, story specific vocabulary, or high frequency words, teachers need to find a way to help students connect to words in a meaningful way. Understanding how to teach a strategy is not enough. Teachers must implement the strategy masterfully to achieve effective results with students (Marzano, 2009).

Many people have researched the best ways to teach vocabulary, but before choosing a strategy to implement, teachers must understand that all children come to school with different levels of exposure to vocabulary. Students enter schools with a variety of background knowledge when it comes to vocabulary acquisition (Sprengr, 2013). Building background knowledge in students who enter our classrooms with very few experiences academically or from real-world involvement is no easy task (Sprengr, 2013). For all students to be able to learn a set of words, it is best to present the words in contexts that make sense to them. If students are given a category such as *parts of a plant*, they may remember not only the words, but also the connections in meaning. Students need several exposures to words to support depth of learning. Neuman and Roskos (2012) support this idea when they suggest that, “Children need many encounters in meaningful contexts to learn our most challenging or sophisticated words” (p. 66).

Because time is limited for vocabulary instruction and because new word introduction is so crucial, the words that educators choose to teach are extremely important. Words must be chosen that will give students the greatest utility for speaking, writing, and comprehension (Sobolak, 2011). Teachers can introduce partially familiar words, such as *gigantic* and *enormous* or content-specific words, such as *photosynthesis* and *chlorophyll*, to help students gain a deeper understanding of words and their connections over time.

Beck and McKeown (2007) have suggested that rich instruction and increased time spent working with words will prove to be most beneficial to young children. One of these methods is the implementation of poetry. As Krehel (2003) contends, “Educators have employed drama throughout time, including poetry performance to reinforce and facilitate literacy” (p. 20).

Since poetry is readily available and can be accessed by all educators, it is a solid option for teachers to pursue. Poetry is engaging, can increase comprehension, and can be used across all subject areas. Poetry, then, should be explored as one method of increasing and growing a student’s vocabulary.

## Vocabulary Acquisition Through the Use of Poetry

Poetry is a powerful tool to use as part of a strong reading curriculum. As explained by Perfect (1999), “It is a genre especially suited to the struggling or unmotivated reader. Poetry easily finds a home in all areas of the curriculum, enhances thinking skills, and promotes personal connection to content area subjects” (p. 728). Poetry can make a meaningful impact on students if used consistently and throughout all subject areas. Routman (2001) emphasizes similar feelings toward poetry when she recognizes that poetry encourages language and word play. Poetry, she offers, is a vehicle by which a powerful connection can be made between reading and writing. Additionally, poetry frees students to write in a creative manner.

Some teachers, however, feel threatened by the idea of teaching poetry. This may be because they feel uninformed as to how to teach it or because they assume that teaching children to write poetry is beyond their ability as a teacher (Linaberger, 2004). Regardless of insecurities about teaching poetry, teachers must do their best to incorporate this genre into the curriculum. It is best explained by Perfect (1999) when she points out:

It nurtures a love and appreciation for the sound and power of language. Poetry can help us see differently, understand ourselves and others, and validate our human experience. It enhances thinking skills and promotes personal connections . . . such attributes deserve a closer look. (p. 728)

Poetry then must not be feared but must be embraced and celebrated in all literature-rich classrooms. As we begin to explore this genre in our classrooms, we may discover numerous positive effects.

Researchers and teachers alike have found several benefits to using poetry in a classroom. Stange and Wyant (2008) assert that poetry helps to teach several concepts such as repetition, alliteration, rhyme, phonemic awareness, and rhythm. Teaching students these literary

devices help them to focus on the power of words and “expands their literacy capacity” (p. 212). They continue by explaining that reading and writing poetry not only strengthens literary skills but also facilitates the development of critical thinking.

Using poetry to teach vocabulary words is another use for this genre. Rupley, Nichols, and Logan claim, “Poetry performance particularly enhances conceptual vocabulary development, comprehension, and oral reading fluency, all critical elements of literacy development” (as cited in Krehel, 2003, p. 20). In addition, Krehel also remarks that, “Poetry as an explicit teaching strategy has maintained a steady, albeit supplemental role throughout modern time” (p. 20). Understanding the important role that poetry has played and continues to play in education, teachers should find ways to incorporate poetry into their lessons. Poetry may be used with cross-curricular instruction to enhance learning, engage students, and increase vocabulary.

### **Application to the Classroom**

Poetry is an effective vehicle for helping students to connect to words, increase their comprehension skills, and keep students engaged (Marzano, 2009). Knowing how effective poetry can be as a tool to increase student engagement and broaden vocabulary skills, I decided to utilize poetry in a way that I had never done before.

My love of poetry began while student teaching with a supervising teacher that was enamored with poetry. She was passionate and enthusiastic about each poem that she introduced to her class. That excitement transferred not only to her students, but also to me.

My successful experiences with poetry during my student teaching led me to try poetry in my classroom with my own students. I was a bit fearful, but soon learned that if I was excited, my students became excited as well. I started out small and decided to introduce a poem each Wednesday. On “Poetry Wednesday,” I would read the poem to my students so that they could hear the rhythm and flow of the piece. We would then chorally read the poem and search for rhyming words. After finding the rhyming words, we

would read the poem several times to increase fluency. Sometimes the boys would read alone and then the girls would follow suit. Other times, tables one, three, and five would read, and then tables two and four would read. Students would take the poem home to read five more times to a parent, sibling, pet goldfish, or stuffed animal for even more fluency practice. Besides fluency practice, I used poetry to teach nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, prepositions, and word choice. I noticed my students looking forward to Wednesdays and to our poetry time. They asked me repeatedly when poetry time was to occur. That excitement made it obvious to me that there was something powerful in using poetry in my classroom.

Throughout my many years of doing these poetry activities with my students, I noticed that they would constantly point out words that were interesting or words that they did not understand. One day a “light-bulb” moment occurred to me. I had never really used poetry as a vehicle for teaching new vocabulary! This was very compelling and somewhat shocking to me because I thought that I was a master at the utilization of poetry. Here was a whole unexplored, uncharted territory of poetry that I had never even thought about. I wanted to grow as an educator and to expand my knowledge of word acquisition, so I decided to conduct an action-research study of how poetry may help students to acquire robust words.

Teacher research is a recognized form of action research. The working definition of teacher research is that it is systematic and intentional inquiry that is carried out by teachers (Lytle & Smith, 2016). Many action research projects, including mine, focus on improving school and classroom practice as well as contributing to knowledge about teaching and research.

At the beginning of October during the 2017–2018 school year, I began my classroom action research study with my second-grade class that was comprised of 12 boys and seven girls. One of my students was a simultaneous bilingual, who came from a household where she had been exposed to English and Farsi. A Title 1 school with 25% free and reduced lunch

population, our elementary school was located in the western suburbs of Chicago.

I began the study by administering a teacher-created Poetry Attitude Survey which measured attitudes toward poetry (Appendix A). The data from the Likert scale pre-survey showed me that 68% (13 of 19) of the students liked poetry already. Six students had a favorite poem, and nine had written a poem before. The one result that was surprising to me was that even though 16 of 19 students liked learning new words, only nine students reported learning new words through poetry. This data reinforced the need to utilize poetry to teach new words. I had used poetry to teach fluency, parts of speech, and literary devices for many years, but I had never used poetry to teach new words to my students. It was then that I decided to focus on only one aspect of the pre-survey: the acquisition of new words.

### **Beginning the Poetry Unit Study**

Before I began the study, which I conducted from October 2017 to December 2017, I received consent from my principal, and from my students, and their parents. Next, I chose five poems to use in my study (Appendix B). The primary reason for choosing the poems were that they contained four or more robust words that second graders would not typically know. In addition to choosing poems that contained robust words, the poems also contained rhyme, rhythm, repetition, alliteration, bold print, and several other creative conventions commonly used by poets. My goal in choosing these specific poems was not only to choose poems that had some challenging words, but also to choose poems that were fun. I knew from past experiences that literary devices make poetry fun. After choosing the poems, I selected four robust words from each poem and created multiple-choice pre-tests and post-tests for these words.

On the Monday I began my study, I administered a pre-test to gauge student understanding of the selected words. I gave the pre-test by reading each question and possible answer aloud. I did this so that all students heard the same thing at the same time. For each multiple-choice question, the robust word was listed

with four possible meanings from which students could choose.

Each week, we followed the same assessment and instruction routine. These activities took approximately 15 minutes a day, five days a week, for five weeks. On Monday, after all students completed the pre-test, I read the poem aloud once. Directly after, my class read the poem with me three times. We then discussed the meanings of the robust words. On Tuesday, we read the poem again. This time we used motions and physical gestures, created by the students, for each robust word. An example of this was when we learned the word *drowsy*. Students would lay their heads on their hands as if falling asleep. Another example would be when we learned the word *guzzled*. The students would pretend as if they were holding a glass filled with liquid which they would drink quickly. On Wednesday, we read the poem again, and my students drew a picture representation for each of the four words, which we called a four-square vocabulary quilt. Students placed each word into one of the four quilt squares and drew a symbolic representation. The poem went home with the students on Wednesday night to be read to a family member. I had the students trace their hands on the back of the poem for five family members to sign upon the completion of each reading. On Thursday, my students chose one of the four robust vocabulary words to wear on a lanyard for the entire day. Throughout the day, students explained the meaning of their word to anyone who asked. On Friday, my students read the poem again and used the robust words in a poem that they wrote on their own, thus applying the new words that they had learned. At the end of the day on Friday, my students took the post-test on the four robust words.

As the unit progressed, I found that the choral reading of the poetry became the most anticipated portion of the week. The students seemed excited to participate in the fun and silly activities that I created. We read the poems using unique voices such as a high-pitched voice, a low-pitched voice, a robot voice, or a baby voice. Sometimes we read the poem sitting down. We jumped up every time we heard a robust word, or we made an exaggerated motion such as swinging our arms

above our heads when we said the word “lasso.” Other times, we configured ourselves in parallel lines facing each other to read the poem. One line of students read aloud, and then the opposite line of students read aloud. The students enjoyed thinking of new ways to accentuate the robust words. One idea that my students came up with was to write each robust word on an index card, which was posted on the wall in our classroom library. Every time my students used the word, found it in a book they were reading, or heard someone else use it, they would put a tally mark on the card. Because my students helped to create different activities, they were very invested in the learning. The possibilities for practicing the words were endless.

At the end of the five-week period, I noted several findings. When looking at each student’s pre- and post-test for the five weeks, I noticed that all students gained one, two, or three robust words with each post-test

(Figure 1). Students who had gotten four words out of four words correct on the pre-tests maintained the same score of 100% after studying the words for a week. All students grew in the word acquisition area. This was exciting!

Even though the purpose of my study was to understand if students could acquire new vocabulary words through poetry, I noticed changes in my students’ attitudes towards poetry, as well. I noticed that my students were excited for “poetry time.” They would ask several times each day if it was “poetry time.” They were enthusiastic and engaged each day during the poetry activities. At the end of each session, many students asked if we could spend a little more time working with the poems.

Another attitudinal change came during our reading and writing time. During week three of the study, I

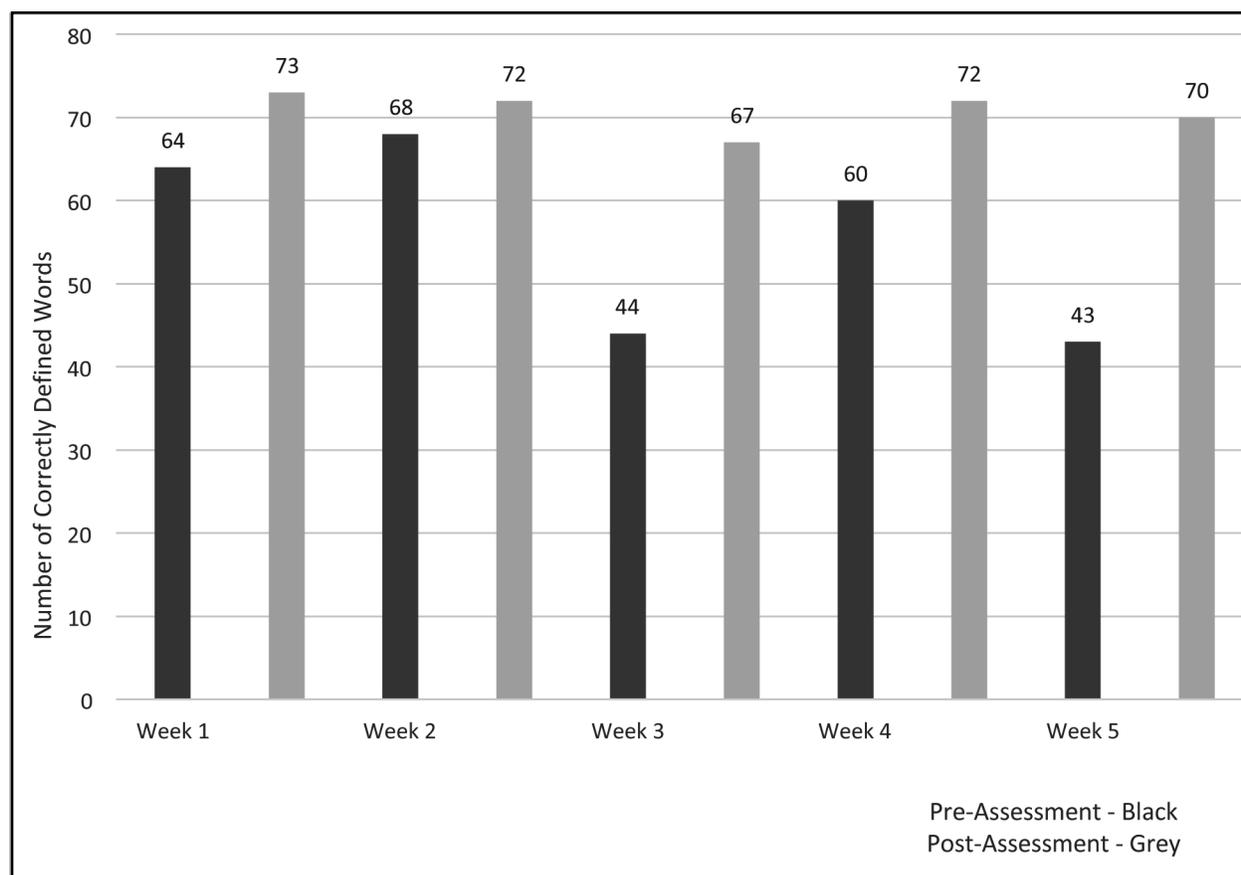


Figure 1. Class pre- and post-assessment data.

noticed that four of my girls were reading poetry books together. They had gone to the learning center in search of these books. Suddenly, those same four girls were choosing to write poetry during free writing. After the girls wrote their poems, they shared the poems during "Author's Chair." When other students heard these poems, they became excited and began to write and share their poetry. This study proved to be positive in more ways than I had ever thought possible. Students were able to gain an average of two to four new robust words each week. Multiplied by 36 weeks, the word acquisition possibilities could be astounding. Beyond this was the change in attitude that I witnessed in my classroom. My students went from reading poetry, to enjoying poetry, to writing their own poetry.

### **Implications**

Teaching is a profession that challenges the best of teachers to constantly reflect on their practice, consistently search for the most impactful way to deliver material, and continuously stay abreast of current best practice in all areas of the curriculum. All of these aspects of teaching in and of themselves can be daunting; however, through my research, I learned a few simple ways to enrich and improve vocabulary instruction that all teachers will be able to use. All teachers can improve vocabulary instruction with just a few simple tweaks to an already existing reading program. The techniques, strategies, and words chosen are of utmost importance, but if using poetry, these aspects will easily fall into place.

The most difficult part of this whole process is choosing the poetry to use with your students. Some teachers may wish to choose poems that appeal to diverse learners (Appendix C). Poems may also be selected based on a particular theme or topic. There are poems available that are appropriate for middle and high-school students as well.

After selecting a poem, decide if there are any challenging words that your students may not know. If the poem is riddled with difficult words, the students may become bored, disinterested, or frustrated. The poems should include high frequency words and grade-level

appropriate words as well so that students do not struggle to get through the poem. We must remember that the purpose of utilizing poetry is not to frustrate children or to lower self-esteem, but to encourage the love of this genre while teaching new words.

After selecting a poem, decide upon a select group of enjoyable, hand-on activities that can be done with students on a weekly basis. These activities should be incorporated with a consistency, structure, and routine that students will come to know, love, and expect. Activities can be changed and traded periodically, but the time must be carved out and kept consistent. Children respond positively to a well-structured environment. In a classroom, one aspect of this structure could be a routine done each day, without fail. We can emphasize the importance of vocabulary by carving out a sacred time for vocabulary instruction and sticking to it.

Some teachers may not have the time to devote to the daily activities suggested in this article. If that is the case, a modified version of these activities could prove to be impactful if integrated into the set curriculum even once weekly.

It is important to remember that a teacher may not be able to see results from this change in vocabulary instruction immediately. Students will need to acclimate to the new routine and will also need some time to understand the vocabulary activities. Some students will need more time than others.

Vocabulary acquisition and usage are of utmost importance in education today. Students who have acquired a large word bank at an early age are much more likely to experience future success. Teachers must adjust their teaching to reflect that knowledge by making vocabulary an important part of each day. If teachers learn to embrace vocabulary through the use of poetry, small changes will result in large gains. To get started, I recommend the following:

1. Carve out a sacred time for vocabulary instruction each day.

2. Select poems that include robust words and literary devices.
3. Focus on one poem a week.
4. Set up a routine of engaging activities to practice the robust words.
5. Send the poem home one night a week to be practiced five times for fluency.
6. Incorporate writing with each poem.
7. Have poetry books accessible to your students all year long.
8. Have fun exploring poetry with your students.

## Conclusion

My mother knew what was truly important. She created a warm and nurturing environment for my family where robust words were used, valued, and discussed. She modeled vocabulary usage through her love of literature, reading, and speaking. The words that she chose to use were large and sometimes foreign to us, but she eventually taught my siblings and me to love and to appreciate words.

Teachers have this same type of power. They can influence their students in immense ways by embracing words, having a passion for learning words, and by making vocabulary an integral part of their classrooms on a daily basis.

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## Author Biography

**Laurie A. Ringe** is a graduate of the Master of Education in Literacy program at Judson University. She has 20 years of experience in the elementary classroom and currently teaches in a western suburb of Chicago. She recently gave a presentation at the Illinois Reading Conference about the many benefits of using poetry as part of a literature-rich curriculum. She can be reached at [Laurie.ringe@gmail.com](mailto:Laurie.ringe@gmail.com).

## Appendix A: Poetry Survey

### Questions About Poetry

1. Do you like poetry?

●──────────●──────────●

☺                      ☹

Yes                      Maybe                      No

2. Do you have a favorite poem?

●──────────●──────────●

☺                      ☹

Yes                      Maybe                      No

3. Have you ever written a poem?

●──────────●──────────●

☺                      ☹

Yes                      Maybe                      No

4. Do you like learning new words?

●──────────●──────────●

☺                      ☹

Yes                      Maybe                      No

5. Have you ever learned new words by reading a poem?

●──────────●──────────●

☺                      ☹

Yes                      Maybe                      No

6. Would you like to write your own poem someday?

●──────────●──────────●

☺                      ☹

Yes                      Maybe                      No

## Appendix B: Poems Used During the Study

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## Appendix C: Multicultural Poetry

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