Students' Engagement of Reading Beyond the Word

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Abstract

Teachers spend a great deal of time teaching students new vocabulary words. As the student matures, the student will learn how to read and write these words into sentences using similes, idioms, metaphors, and many other parts of speech. The authors will explore some basic areas of learning in the English language and the breakdown of five random, common, diverse words, and how teaching students to read may be more difficult for some learners.

If you have ever performed an online search for the question, "What's in a word?" you were probably directed to a 1954 television show, a variety of games and quotes, or William Shakespeare. Much has been written regarding words, the grammar behind them, their definitions, the semantics of a word within a sentence, the morphemes, and phonemes, and many other parts of speech. Authors have written stories, using words intentionally to make a point, to complete a thought, to invent new ideas. Brilliant writers can create an escape from the ordinary with the reader's imagination. Words by themselves have such deep meanings and can be very personal or profound from individual to individual, taking on a life of their own. Even using the word "word" will evoke something in the hearts and minds of many people, whether that is something spiritual, communicative, contemplative, enlightening, or other feelings too numerous to state. In fact, many people around the world would have one thought when speaking about the meaning behind a word, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1, The Official King James Bible Online). Moreover, words are transitional, for example, the word "obtuse" in the English language may mean boorish or slow, on the other hand, in math it is an angle more than 90º, but less than 180º. Yehuda Berg, founder of the Kabbalah Centre, once stated:

> Words are singularly the most powerful force available to humanity. We can choose to use this force constructively with words of encouragement, or destructively using words of despair. Words have energy and power with the ability to help, to heal, to hinder, to hurt, to harm, to humiliate and to humble. (BrainyQuote, 2001-2014b, para. 1)

Nathaniel Hawthorne, an American novelist and short story writer, stated, "Words - so innocent and powerless as they are, as standing in a dictionary, how potent for good and evil they become in the hands of one who knows how to combine them" (BrainyQuote, 2001-2014a, para. 1).

The focus on students' engagement of words, by themselves, within a sentence, in a paragraph or stanza, and beyond the word itself, or for that matter the moral or the point of the combination of words within the text will be explored. The following literature review is based on materials written by researchers in regards to the technical aspects of writing. Subsequently, the literature review is a brief exploration on the construction of words, and on five selected words as specific discoveries on the depth of those words and their impact on readers, students, writers, and those who would be merely lovers of words.

Temple Grandin, author of *Thinking in Pictures* (2006), spoke of struggles an autistic individual may have in regards to the comprehension of words and how they may see a word in its abstract form. Even bright students with limited life knowledge may struggle with comprehension in the abstract form, such as with poetry.

A Brief Review of Literature

Lehrer (2012) stated words reference things, events, or properties to connect word relationships to a variety of linguistic idioms, such as a metaphor or a metonymy may act as a trajectory to reveal the differences or rivalry of words to each other and to provide comprehension to the context of the word's importance. Words may be vague, ambiguous, pragmatic, entailing, transcending, or transforming. Moreover, she stated a formal theory for grasping the correlation of "idiolects, dialects, and communal languages are proposed to account for the dynamic interaction of individuals and communities which occurs continuously" (p. 97).

Ecalle, Bouchafa, Potocki, and Magnan's (2013) acknowledged reading is a complicated enterprise where a common course of interaction occurs, either by a

> (a) bottom-up processing from word recognition to higher levels, such as the monitoring of comprehension and inference making; and (b) top-down processing such as knowledge of the general subject matter of the text that could help readers identify lower information levels. (p. 128)

They continued to state sentence-level development is pivotal to reading comprehension.

Ardoin, et al. (2013) maintained the variance in reading comprehension can be explained by a curriculum based measurement (CBM) demonstrating the disparities in oral reading rate of words between those readers who grasp at least some of what they read to non-readers who are unable to understand anything they read as they attempt to decode each word. Moreover, inconsistencies among students who are able to comprehend is affected by the variability in the extent to which they are able to decode, and not to the realization of the passages read. However, there are differences in the reading accomplishments of students who are unable to understand what they read; but, these differences can possibly be explained by reading words out of context. Rommers, Dijkstra, and Bastiaansen (2013) declared activating and coalescing word meanings within sentences aid in language comprehension. However, they wondered whether obscure idiomatic expressions, such as "to spill the beans," intended for exact word meanings, may develop

into an unrelated broad allegation of the expression. Is the intent behind, "spilling the beans," revealing a secret or does it actually mean food has been dropped? In their study, they wanted to know what happens in comprehension when exposing the figurative or literal allegations behind expressions. They employed standard terminology in sentences and then replaced them with semantically related or unrelated words. They analyzed two brain operations to explain the processing of plausible linguistic input, since everyday dialogue includes many idioms. They concluded it was apparent word comprehension does vary across contexts. "When reading predictable and opaque idiomatic expressions, for which literal word meanings are irrelevant, the processing of literal word meanings can to some extent be 'switched off'" (Rommers et al., 2013, p. 775).

Connell and Lynott (2014) declared understanding the lexical of a word is made possible by the strength of how the word is visually understood; whereas, the performance of being able to read aloud is made possible by the strength of both the visual and auditory experience. Furthermore, an individual's perceptual awareness is connected to how his or her reading relates to their point of view of a word's meaning based on how quickly and accurately the word is cultivated. In addition, using words in a variety of visual and/or auditory representations aids in the process that drive a "lexical decision or reading-aloud response" (p. 527). Furthermore, a range of variables associated to word significance has been found to influence lexical choices more vigorously than just the act of reading aloud, such as imageability, the number of meanings, concreteness, body-object interaction, the number of semantic attributes, and the extent of context clues around the word. For instance, individuals are able to recognize high-imageability (concrete) words such as *desk*, over low-imageability (abstract) words, for example *love*.

Rodd et al. (2012, p. 1095) stated, "Changes to our everyday activities mean that adult language users need to learn new meanings for previously unambiguous words." For example, the word "tweet" is not the sound a bird makes, but a term to the social media site, Twitter. Individuals need to learn new meanings for words they have already ascertained in their mental lexicon, especially in the field of technology, for instance mouse, friend, window, and virus. In their study, Rodd, et al. revealed learning a new word meaning, may be specifically difficult for children who have already learned a different linguistic meaning with an unrelated semantic connected with the new word.

Cai and Lee (2012) researched inferencing strategies for new learners to process unfamilar words. They reported the data revealed learners use a variety of strategies or knowledge sources to infer a word's meaning. Furthermore, they stated most of the knowledge sources did not relate to the actual comprehension of the word itself. According to them,

> This suggests that no knowledge sources are universally effective or ineffective, and that what is crucial is the ability to use the various knowledge sources flexibly. The finding that learners in this study are able to use the inferencing strategy and different knowledge sources shows that listening comprehension is as active a process as reading comprehension. (p. 141)

Moreover, Cai and Lee (2012) stated:

> Semantic knowledge of words in the local co-text combined with background knowledge and semantic knowledge of the overall co-text. The finding the use of most knowledge

sources does not relate to the comprehension of the word suggests no particular knowledge source is universally effective or ineffective and it is more crucial to use the various knowledge sources flexibly. (p. 122)

Ecalle, Bouchafa, Potocki, and Magnan (2013) asserted reading is a complex activity where information may be processed from a bottom-up word recognition to higher levels of comprehension and inferencing, or from a top-down knowledge of the general theme in texts that aids a reader's ability to identify lower level information. Moreover, they stated sentence-level processing is fundamental to reading and evaluating sentence processing, and is a critical and elementary component of reading comprehension. Tracey & Morrow (2006) declared readers' understanding relies on their construction of meaning. In order to connect meaning to a text, readers must connect the text to the individual's unique prior knowledge and experience.

Rosenblatt (1978, p. 21) stated reading is "a transaction between the reader and what he senses the words as pointing to." Nauman, Stirling, and Borthwick (2011, p. 319) stated, "… key qualities that define strong writing are ideas, organization, voice, word choice, sentence fluency, conventions, and presentation." In addition, they declare words are used to reveal things or thoughts, such as the word "couch" is labeled as furniture. It is a manner in which allows individuals to communicate with each other in a fundamental manner. Words also can represent something that people do, such as running and jumping, or something that enables people to be things, such as intelligent, married, or retired.

"The words people say are important, but the way they are said is important, too" (Draper, 2014, p. 276). For example, words spoken to an authority figure would be modified for a child, or something stated at a football game would not be heard at a funeral.

Finally, Mork (2015, para. 4) stated that writers weave symbolism "into their writing to allude to a feeling, mood or attitude without directly stating the perspective or mood intended. Symbolism is supplemental to the story." Symbolism makes the words come to life in the minds of the reader.

Engagement of Reading beyond the Words

Those individuals, who have the ability to master words, may earn great fame or fortune, for they have the ability to speak what is in the heart of others. A single word can bring down even the most famous or admired individual. A single word spoken at the correct time may have great power. Cyrano de Bergerac declared at the end of his life, "One thing is left, that, void of stain or smutch, I bear away despite you, my panache" (Rostand, 1998, p. 126). The direct translation of panache is *plume*, and a plume used to be used for writing. Additionally, when Tybalt asked Mercutio for a word in *Romeo and Juliet*, Mercutio responded, "Make it a word and blow" (Shakespeare, 2015, p. 138). The word *blow* in itself may have multiple meanings. Yet, not saying any words may also have great meaning. "Spiteful words can hurt your feelings but silence breaks your heart" ("Welcome to the Quote Garden," 2015b, para. 66). Nehamas (1985) stated that Nietzsche considered a word as sovereign, leaping out of a sentence, yet when reaching out, it could confuse the meaning on the page, perhaps even nurturing it to life at the detriment of the entire composition. On the other hand, the manner in which a word is spoken, such as with boldness, meekness, powerfully, or with repetition affects the significance of a word. It is in the pause of using words, when pauses or hesitations are used, that brings meaning to a particular word

and contemplation when to speak and when not to speak. In terms of tone, all one has to do is listen to musical genius Andrea Bocelli sing in Italian, and while not understanding a single word, the tone in his voice transforms the listener to an emotional place so magical and beautiful, the listener feels exactly what should be felt as Bocelli's message is delivered to his audience. It is with an equally magical voice in which the tone is delivered by an author that creates a definite and specific mood by the reader. The syntax in using words matter, everyone knows that if you say the word "you" and then say something negative afterwards, anger and distrust may ensue; whereas saying the word "you" and then saying something flattering afterwards, one could feel gratitude, happiness, or love. Hence, the order of words and what is said in front of or behind a word, could transform and transpire emotions, can manifest itself into something that is meant to feel wonderfully passionate or horribly hurtful or anything else in between. Even when different people read spiritual materials, such as the Bible, Torah, Quran, or one of the many choices, they interpret the words on the page with unique perspectives. The passages of those books will be interpreted by the mood within an individual's own voice, or by the reader's personal experience that may aid in the elucidation of written materials, or maybe these utterances act merely as witnesses of momentary divergences to personal penuries. For this, book clubs have been fashioned. Furthermore, the syntax and diction is critical in how a book is read and decoded. Then the author has his or her own tone and point of view. Would the reader agree with the author upon the outcome of the book once inscribed then perused? Did the author make his or her point? That may only matter if the reader was able to grasp the author's tone and diction. Phrases and words may be used in metonymies (i.e. transmutations, misnomers, and synecdoches). The dictionary and thesaurus provide a means for interpretation, such as definitions, pronunciations, etymologies, phrases, idioms, usages, or related words. Most people use words to give a straight-forward answer, but when a simile, metaphor, metonymy, personification, or imagery, is used in a poem, it is transformed into something so much greater than simply using words by their literal meaning.

The Breaking Apart of Five Words

"Doctors, nurses, all like fireman poking around in the ashes, searching for a hidden cause…Death is like a pet dog, it comes when you call it" (Spelling Television, Inc: A CBS Company, 2013). The metaphor, *ashes*, references the body. One of the first times the word ashes were used in this manner was based on a Bible verse, "How can dust and ashes be arrogant? Even when they are alive, human bodies are decaying" (Sirach 10:9, Common English Bible). The phrase "ashes to ashes, dust to dust" was gleaned from this verse along with three other verses from the Bible and written in the *Book of Common Prayer* (Collins, 1995-2015). Based on this history, the word, *ashes,* has come to mean the state of the physical body before and after life. A novice reader may not be able to make the connection towards comprehension of the term ashes as written in the quote from the television episode. Moreover, the simile connection of "Death is like a pet dog, it comes when you call it" (Spelling Television, Inc: A CBS Company, 2013) may be confusing as well. Death will not just appear when those words are spoken. In fact, death is more complicated than that, the closest death could draw nearer by will is only in the case of suicide or murder. However, the quote is meant to be poetic or artistic even. As if the writer uses his typewriter as a brush stroke using words to color the intention of his meaning on a blank page. The writer has made a statement by syntax, diction, an artistic flare, a tone, and a point to his message. It is up to

the reader to decode the words by all the literary tools taught in school to determine the author's message, and if the reader is very lucky, perhaps he or she will see something more than the writer's original intent. Those discoveries to the lovers of words are gold.

Ashes

A single word, can conjure up many different ideas, for example, the word "ash" can have multiple meanings, such as the ash from a volcanic mountain, a cigarette tray, campfire, fireplace, forest fire, religious ceremony, or from a cremation.

Figure 1. Images. Adapted from the following sites: (Images left to right: Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia, n.d.; Bataille, 2010; Kessler, 2012; Orange Live, 2014; Pixgood, n.d.; Houghton Star, 2013; American Cemetery Supplies, 2004-2005. Images may have been altered by shape and size.)

When the character, Gis Butorac, stated, "… like fireman, poking around in the ashes" (Spelling Television, Inc: A CBS Company, 2013), a reader with a disability, such as autism, may be confused with the combination of words, such as fireman and ashes, put together to create a message. Firemen put out fires, such as in a forest fire, they would have very little business with cremations; however, because the writer is using similes and metaphors, discovering the point behind the message may be overlooked. In addition, many individuals seek moisture cream for their ashy skin appearance.

Death

Depending on an individual's spiritual belief, the word "death" has a tendency to take on a life of its own. For example, some people believe the physical body is only a stopover before it settles in its final resting place. Carrie Underwood's song "Temporary" states,

This is my temporary home,
It's not where I belong
Windows and rooms that I'm passin' through
This was just a stop, on the way to where I'm going
I'm not afraid because I know this was
My temporary home. (2010, para 2)

However, others will personify death. In the final scene of *Cyrano de Bergerac* (Rostand, 1998, p. 126), Cyrano argues with death by stating, "All my laurels you have riven away…and my roses; yet in spite of you," while others choose not to believe in a God nor in an after-life. Some people believe in a singular God of three persons; whereas, others believe in many separate gods. Hence, when death is broached, each individual reader based on his or her own personal belief may perceive the interpretation of the writer's meaning completely differently. Even Mexico celebrates the *Day of the Dead* to honor "deceased loved ones" (Barbezat, 2015).

Then, an author may write about the death of a character's will to live or his spirit, or of an attitude or behavior due to a shift in the conflict, or some may suffer brain death. In *Death of a Salesman* (Miller, 1949), does Willy Loman experience the death of his career, or is it more than that? While he does not actually die, his career is killed off to a younger salesman who receives a promotion over Willy. Willy seems to have lost his flexibility or the spirit and desire to stay in touch with younger potential clientele; hence, he is unable to change with the new era of selling and be able to move forward with his livelihood.

Phrases used for death may be stated as *to die for*, meaning that something is so pleasant that it would be worth dying for. Characters in a story may die of natural causes, be murdered, commit suicide, die of a debilitating disease. When a couple becomes engaged, they avow to stay married until *death do you part*. Some phrases include the word *commit*, such as in to commit genocide or suicide, while some people will *pass away* or just be *drop dead gorgeous*. Some characters are executed, killed, murdered, drowned, cremated, or buried. In 2 Kings 2:11 (The Official King James Bible Online), Elijah was sent up to heaven in a whirlwind. Arnošt Lustig declared:

Some people know they'll live until spring and that's all they need to be happy. When I was feeling good, I just let the sun go down, knowing I'd see it again next morning. When I felt worse, and it didn't matter for what reasons, every sunset seemed to me like the end of the world. Maybe it's true, that the world dies every day at evening and is born again in the morning. But not always for everybody. (Goodreads, 2015, para. 12)

The word *death* or a variation thereof, conjures up a tremendous variety of concepts and emotions in terms of tone, mood, and symbolism to both the writer and the reader.

To Get

The irregular verb *get* becomes a worn out word for novice writers; however, a reader may see synonyms of this word in a number of ways in a text passage. The dictionary has a long list of definitions and synonyms of this word. The phrase, *I get it*, is interpreted by either purchasing "it" whatever *it* symbolizes, or *getting it* could epitomize the significance of *I understand it*, or a signal

(e.g. a television channel) that may be received. The verb infinitive of *to get* changes from *get* to *getting* to *gotten.* Other ways of saying to get may be to obtain, catch, become, move, understand, or to cause. The irregular verb, *have,* may be another synecdoche of the verb *get.* A get is also a divorce document in Jewish religious laws, which is presented by a husband to his wife to cause their divorce (Wikipedia Foundation, 2015). As a verb auxiliary, *get* takes on many meanings; a few examples are listed below (Meriam Webster, n.d.):

> *get after* = to pursue with exhortation, reprimand, or attack
> *get ahead* = to achieve success (determined to *get ahead* in life)
> *get a life* = to stop wasting time on trivial or hopeless matters
> *get* a move on = hurry
> *get at* = 1 to reach effectively, 2 = to influence corruptly**:** bribe, 3 = to turn one's attention to, 4 = to try to prove or make clear (what is he *getting at*)

Any foreigner who attempts to learn the English language may struggle on the comprehension of this overused verb infinitive of *to get*.

Red

Color words, such as red have also been used for the tone of a story to create a particular mood. Red has been symbolized as exotic, angry, fiery, vibrant, and beautiful. Many people have interpreted the color of red as the color of death because it represents the blood that leaves the body. While others see blood as the color of life, because of its necessity for life in carrying oxygenated rich blood throughout the body. Teleflora, LLC (2015, para 5) stated that red has an "indisputable energy" one of power that can transform unassuming flowers into an "essence of desire, strength, and passionate love. With beauty, courage and heat as its symbolism…" QSX Software Group (2002-2014, para. 1-3) stated,

> Red is the color of fire and blood, so it is associated with energy, war, danger, strength, power, determination as well as passion, desire, and love.

> Red is a strong and emotionally intense color. It enhances human metabolism, increases respiration rate, and raises blood pressure. It has very high visibility, which is why stop signs, stoplights, and fire equipment are usually painted red. In heraldry, red is used to indicate courage. It is a color found in many national flags.

> Red brings text and images to the foreground. Use it as an accent color to stimulate people to make quick decisions; it is a perfect color for advertising, red is often used to evoke erotic feelings (red lips, red nails, red-light districts, 'Lady in Red', etc.). Red is widely used to indicate danger (high voltage signs, traffic lights). This color is also commonly associated with energy, so you can use it when promoting energy drinks, games, cars, and items related to sports and high physical activity.

Mork (2015, para. 4) declared that red symbolizes damnation, "Fire, flames, heat, hot temperatures" and that light red represents sensitivity, sexuality, love, joy, and passion. Stories have centered themes around the color red, such as in the *Scarlet Letter* and "The Scarlet Ibis."

Love

Countless songs, books, poems, movies, newspaper and magazine articles, etc. have been written about love. It has been described as a need and a desire. It is an ongoing hot topic of Conversation with all generations of human beings. Love may be easily found for some and very difficult to comprehend by others. It can be lucid or confused. Sometimes love grows, other times, it ends. The word love may be applied to a variety of concepts, such as love of: friends, pets, spouse, children, parents, siblings, extended family, world, material possessions, ideas, neighbors, God, and more too numerous to mention. The Official King James Bible Online, speaks of loving one's enemy (Matthew 5:43 – 48). Stories of wars, whether real or imagined, have started because of love. The article, "Top 10 Wars in the Name of Love" (n.d.) is about times in history where the use of military, in the name of *love*, conquers many. Among those in love were: Helen of Troy, Cleopatra and Julius Caesar, Bathsheba and David, and Richard I and Princess Berengariaof. People have committed murder and suicide over issues of love.

Love may be denoted emotionally, spiritually, or physically. Even families show love in a variety of ways, some people believe that saying I love you, represents love, while others do not believe in saying it, but in displaying it only. Moreover, the idiom, *love is blind*, may, or may not be true, which may also apply to love being lost. People vow to marry forever because of love, but divorce when forever is too far away.

Love is defined by each individual's experiences and expectations. Love can be obvious or hidden.

Mother Teresa (n.d.) stated, "The hunger for love is much more difficult to remove than the hunger for bread." Maugham (as cited in "Welcome to the Quote Garden," 2015a, para. 9), declared, "Love is only a dirty trick played on us to achieve continuation of the species." Regardless of how one views love, it is a complicated emotion; hence, this word has infinite possibilities within a written manuscript. In addition, this word alone becomes the focal point of many conversations in book studies, classrooms, intimate dialogues, and personal contemplations.

Conclusion

Comprehending words may take longer than a lifetime to appreciate. However, for students who must take a state assessment, comprehending a single word or a word within a specific combination of other words, may transform words into something magical. Additionally, the person who has the ability to manipulate words fully, whether that is in a sentence or a phrase is someone who would be able to wield great works of art or power. Words are powerful! With a twist of the truth, words can place you on top of the world or in a jail cell. English teachers may discuss the technical uses of words in their classes, such as grammar, syntax, tone, mood, or metaphors, but do the students really understand it, or are teachers just teaching the mechanics of reading and writing? When a student is able to find small nuances in words read in class and then instruct their teachers on their findings there could be a moment of bliss for the teacher. A single word may lift a man's spirit or bring him down to tears by simply reading a word, or a combination

of words, and understanding its implications or multiple implications. Shakespeare is still being read in schools today, because he was a master of wordplay. Students would discover gold, should he or she be engaged to read the words, or *between the lines*, or beyond the words in order to discover not only the author's intent, but to glean the moral of the story, or any wonderfully hidden message that was unintentionally prearranged within the text.

Finally, only five words were scrutinized, yet many texts are filled with millions of words. It is an amazing feat English language speakers and writers ever comprehend each other at all. New and experienced readers must critically examine texts in order to find all the hidden treasures waiting for them beyond the word.

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A high degree of personalization will encourage the engagement of students in expanding the writing across the curriculum, and ensure that middle school Humanities goes beyond the English class. In the real world, we read and write in all disciplines. Taking writing beyond the English class showcases how writing is used in real world settings. This blog is brought to you by The Nellie Mae Education Foundation as part of a series on blended humanities. For more stayed tuned for the Getting Smart on Blending Middle Grade Humanities bundle and see the other posts in this series Reading engagement with factual expositions has served as the traditional means whereby students are provided with accepted scientific facts organized into a coherent body of knowledge. Such practices are reflective of. Â Nonetheless, there is growing realization that reading extends beyond unreflective decoding of the printed scientific word. Scholars like Freire and Macedo (1987) argue that â€œreading does not consist merely of decoding the written word or language; rather, it is preceded by and intertwined with knowledge of the worldâ€¦ reading the word implies continuously reading the world.â€ Authentic Engagementâ€"students are immersed in work that has a clear meaning and immediate value to them (reading a book on a topic of personal interest). Ritual Complianceâ€"the work has little or no immediate meaning to students, but there are extrinsic outcomes of value that keep them engaged (earning grades necessary for college acceptance). Passive Complianceâ€"students see little or no meaning in the assigned work but expend effort merely to avoid negative consequences (not having to stay in during recess to complete work). Â In the engaged classroom, you will observe that all students are authentically engaged at least some of the time or that most students are authentically engaged most of the time.