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United States and Nepal

"To Build a Fire": Creative Frames, Adolescent Readers, and New Words

He worked slowly and carefully, keenly aware of his danger. Gradually, as the flame grew stronger, he increased the size of the twigs with which he fed it. He squatted in the snow, pulling the twigs out from their entanglement in the brush and feeding directly to the flame. He knew there must be no failure. When it is seventy-five below zero, a man must not fail in his first attempt to build a fire—that is, if his feet are wet. If his feet are dry, and he fails, he can run along the trail for half a mile and restore his circulation. But the circulation of wet and freezing feet cannot be restored by running when it is seventy-five below. No matter how fast he runs, the wet feet will freeze the harder.

—Jack London, "To Build a Fire" (1908)

In the U.S. secondary English Language Arts classroom, the American short story is a literary genre that students generally encounter early on in their middle-school and high-school years. Short stories—usually polished literary gems—might be read in one or two classroom periods, and they are often a starting point for the more ambitious novels that follow. Jack London's "To Build a Fire" is one such example—the dark narrative of a frontiersman who, as night falls in the Yukon wilderness, hurries to build a fire to save himself from freezing. In London's narrative, nature defeats man; the frontiersman dies alone.

If short stories are common in U.S. English Language Arts classrooms, one simple reason is their length. They are short. "To Build a Fire" is approximately one dozen pages long. Moreover, certain short stories have entered the status of classics in the secondary-level English Language Arts curriculum. In English as a second or foreign language (ESL/EFL) classrooms, there are many reasons to incorporate short stories such as London's:

- American short stories are a window into a larger tradition of U.S. literature—and the cultural history they represent.

- Because they are short, short stories do not require the same sort of time commitment that reading a novel might.

- Classic American short stories such as London's—which was written in the early twentieth century—are widely available on the Internet and even accessible through American English publications. Often in the public domain, many classic American short stories can thus be integrated into a classroom reader or grade-level curriculum without copyright concerns.

However, reading short stories with adolescents can pose a number of challenges. For example, teachers working with English learners (whether in North Carolina, Nepal, or in other contexts around the world) are concerned about students understanding stories at the word level. Research has long underscored the importance of vocabulary instruction for literacy development and, in particular, for reading comprehension (Ely et al. 2014). Contemporary scholarship and practice in the field of ESL/EFL continue to emphasize, among other things, the development of adolescent readers' academic language; vocabulary building is seen as central to that endeavor (Echevarría, Vogt, and Short 2012; Vogt, Echevarría, and Short 2010). But a challenge for teachers who work with readers in secondary-level English classrooms is to teach vocabulary in the context of shared readings—and in ways that engage students in collaborative, motivated meaning-making.

The broad and detailed strategies presented in this article are practice-based and designed to provide teachers with concrete starting points as they look for interactive, multimodal, and student-centered ways to build vocabulary for reading classroom texts. We begin by locating these strategies with a brief review of various arguments surrounding text-based direct vocabulary instruction in the adolescent classroom, with an emphasis on multimodality. We continue with a series of flexible, participatory starting points for teaching and learning new words in reading-based language classrooms, using the London excerpt at the beginning of this article as an anchor.

Our intent is to provide practitioners and learners with actual examples of dynamic, cooperative strategies for engaging adolescent readers with the new words encountered in a prescribed literature curriculum. We encourage our readers—if they are not yet ready to take these steps in their own classrooms—to try them out in professional-development or small-group settings where experimentation and adaptation are valued.

FROM LISTS TO MEANING-MAKING: LEARNING NEW WORDS IN CONTEXT

Wilhelm (2008) emphasized the importance of reading instruction that provides engagement and authenticity for adolescent learners. Effective reading instruction incorporates reader-centered strategies, opportunities for reader-response—including embodied elements such as drama, movement, and visualization—as well as interactions with a wide variety of texts and genres to meet diverse student needs and interests. Further, Smith and Wilhelm (2002, 2006) found that characteristics such as a sense of competence and control, an appropriate challenge, a desire to apply or to do something as a result of reading, connections to students' interests, and opportunities for social interactions with text all influence how adolescent students—particularly boys—engage with text. We argue that engagement and responsiveness should extend to the initial and sustained vocabulary instruction that supports students' comprehension of text. This is especially true in English language–teaching contexts, where no matter how short or long a text is, vocabulary matters tremendously.

In our childhood in the United States, learning new words was a weekly part of our pedagogical diets. Every week we took home lists of words—first, to copy (usually ten times); then, to define (usually with the help of a dictionary); and, finally, to write into sentences that illustrated the words' meanings. After we reached middle school and then high school, the lists slowly dissipated and new words were something we encountered in our English Language Arts classrooms through reading—often excerpts of a required literature curriculum such as the passage with which we began this article.

In our observations in secondary-level English Language Arts classrooms, we have seen vocabulary encountered through reading as learning asides whereby a problematic word is identified and then explained to the class, followed by a request for confirmation of whether or not our

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students understood—usually in the form of the teacher asking, "Okay?" Or maybe we see teachers trying to coax students who are struggling with a short story or some other literature selection to figure out what the word might possibly mean from the contextual clues embedded in the text itself. When someone gets it right, we are glad; and if no one can figure it out, we simply tell them all what the word means and move forward with the story. However, effective vocabulary teaching and learning that leverages textual interactions (fiction and nonfiction) demands much more active engagement on the part of teachers and learners (National Reading Panel 2000).

Reading at the secondary level is demanding for a number of reasons. Even in high schools, vocabulary knowledge remains essential for reading and listening comprehension (Curtis and Longo 2001; Pressley 2002). When students lack an understanding of the vocabulary terms in a text, comprehension of that text becomes increasingly difficult, if not impossible. The monotony of traditional vocabulary instruction is familiar to many students. However, a weekly routine of looking up, defining, and memorizing word definitions does not support active engagement in reading, nor does it help students to develop a deep understanding of word meanings in the context of a literature curriculum.

Robust vocabulary learning, grounded in text, should center on understanding concepts, not on memorizing definitions. Words are labels for concepts; however, a concept represents more than the definition of a single word. As Vacca, Vacca, and Mraz (2016, 208) explain, "concepts create mental images, which may represent anything that can be grouped together by common features or similar

criteria: objects, symbols, ideas, processes, or events." Concepts are best learned through direct, firsthand experience (Nagy 1988). Although such experiences are not always possible in the classroom setting, students can learn concepts through a variety of vicarious experiences and interactive strategies (Lesaux, Harris, and Sloane 2012). Strategies that encourage collaborative, text-based interactions between teachers and peers can support students' understanding of vocabulary concepts (Fisher and Frey 2014).

We have written extensively about the potential of applied-theater techniques to engage adolescent language learners in what we have called the "performance of literacy," as the learners and their teachers negotiate complex literature that, in many cases, is imposed by a state curriculum (Murray and Salas 2014a, 2014b, 2015a, 2015b; Murray, Salas, and Ni Thoghdha 2015). But in terms of building background vocabulary, the questions are where or how to begin? What to do first, second, and third? As a preface, we note that the three strategies and associated activities we present in the following sections were ones that we took up in the summers of 2014 and 2016 with cohorts of Nepalese secondary-level public-school teachers working in rural areas with a paperback class reader (a state-mandated, grade-specific collection of short readings and exercises) and limited resources.

We fully recognize that in the contexts and circumstances of teaching in many institutions where space, time, and resources are short, these activities might be daunting or seemingly impossible. That said, what we do know for sure is that active and intentional vocabulary building through reading can bring adolescents a sense of competence and control, appropriate challenge, and

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opportunities for social interactions in ways that ultimately enrich language and literacy teaching and learning. As an anchor text for these activities, we use the previous short paragraph from "To Build a Fire."

STRATEGY 1: WHICH WORDS? SELECTING AND ORGANIZING NEW WORDS

Selecting vocabulary words from a short story or any sort of text for meaningful instruction can prove challenging for teachers. As Ganske (2012, 213) explains, "different situations require different levels of word knowledge." Beck, McKeown, and Kucan (2013) categorize vocabulary words according to three levels or tiers. Tier 1 words are those that are basic, high-frequency, and high-utility words commonly used in everyday language. Native speakers of a language typically do not require direct instruction to comprehend Tier 1 words. Tier 2 words are also high-frequency and high-utility words; however, words in this category are more-advanced terms. Direct vocabulary instruction is often needed in order for students to comprehend Tier 2 words. Tier 3 words, while low-frequency in terms of their use in everyday language, are unique to content areas and are essential for understanding concepts within those content areas.

A common approach to teaching the new words in the London short story might sound like the teacher reading the story line by line as follows:

> The teacher reads a line: "Gradually, as the flame grew stronger, he increased the size of the twigs with which he fed it."

> The teacher then asks a question such as, "Do you know what twigs are?" and provides a synonym—"The stem of a leaf."

> The teacher continues reading: "He squatted in the snow, pulling the twigs out from their entanglement in the brush and feeding directly to the flame."

> The teacher asks, "Do you know what *entanglement* means? Twisted."

After the teacher has more or less deciphered the words for the students, the class returns to the text with an emphasis on the meaning of the words together—at the sentence or paragraph level.

We argue that reading a text and coming to understand the words that constitute it can be approached in ways that support vocabulary instruction but are still participatory and require relatively minimal resources. Effective vocabulary instruction involves using strategies that support students in making connections between new vocabulary and their prior knowledge. It also involves providing students with multiple opportunities to apply and extend their knowledge of words and concepts (Smith and Wilhelm 2002; Vacca, Vacca, and Mraz 2016). A deliberate and purposeful shift in vocabulary instruction from a vertical format (the teacher telling students which words are important and their meanings) to a horizontal format (the teacher and students identifying words they suspect are important but unfamiliar) can begin with what some call interactive student notebooks (ISNs).

Interactive Student Notebooks

ISNs anchor students' individual learning experiences in a composition notebook. Students can reference the ISN throughout the year at their leisure. Students enjoy the personalization the ISN offers for this type of learning. In terms of steps, while you are introducing a new text, give students five

minutes to annotate the text. First, read it aloud; as you read, ask students to circle unfamiliar words that they expect will be of significance to the meaning. The expectation during annotation is to do a "first read" to establish a basic understanding of the text and to seek unfamiliar vocabulary words within the text, which the students can note by circling. In small groups, students compare their lists and consolidate—locating unfamiliar and potentially significant words and resolving some of the meanings for words that at least one of the students already knows. Finally, the teacher brings the class back together as a whole group to create an "anchor chart" of unfamiliar words. We suggest limiting the anchor chart to ten or 15 words at a time. We also recommend that teachers divide the larger text into smaller sections—assigning these more manageable sections to groups of students.

The resulting anchor chart or list is somewhat similar to a typical "word list" that students might be assigned to learn. However, in the context of reading-based vocabulary teaching and learning, the anchor list should provide students with a foundation or scaffold for accessing the text at hand—by highlighting key words that they will need to understand the text's meaning. Along the way, teachers might strategically intervene as students create their anchor lists by adding a key word here and there that the adolescent readers might not identify as important but that teachers know they will need.

For a short paragraph such as London's, an anchor list might include words or chunks such as *keenly aware*, *twigs*, *entanglement in the brush*, and *flame*. Rather than having the teacher impose which words matter most, we suggest appointing a leader for each group of four to six students to bring each small group's initial list to the board to consolidate

with the other group leaders. Out of many words, the leaders will find similarities and come up with an anchor chart that reflects the consensus of the entire class. Granted, this might seem like a lengthy exercise—and it can be. But the point of the ISN is for student-readers to identify the words they think they need to learn—thereby claiming more ownership of their vocabulary development.

Organizing Meanings

To access a text, students must have a firm understanding of the newly encountered words. Using a new vocabulary-word graphic-organizer template, students transfer words from the ISN into graphic organizers that ask students to define and illustrate the words and apply them. One very popular graphic organizer in U.S. K–12 (kindergarten through 12th grade) classrooms is Four-Corners Vocabulary (see Vogt and Echevarría 2008). Four-Corners Vocabulary organizers enable students to contextualize words by creating a chart divided into four quadrants with an illustration (representing the word), a sentence (that includes the word), a definition (of the word), and words related to the original word (synonyms, antonyms).

To get started, teachers may select from the combined students' ISN—assigning individual words to students or groups of students. If you use the Four-Corners template, have students begin in the upper left-hand quadrant with an illustration of the word. They can illustrate, for example, the word *flame*. Then, in the upper right-hand quadrant, have students define the word by using technologies available to them (dictionaries, the Internet, etc.)—for example, "A flame is the visible, gaseous part of a fire." In the lower left-hand quadrant, have students compose a sentence in which the target word is used in a meaningful way, as in "The flame of the candle

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brightened up the dark room." Finally, in the lower right-hand quadrant, have students identify either synonyms or related words: *fire*, *heat*, *smoke*, etc.

The Four-Corners format can be elaborated into six, eight, or more corners as a way to differentiate and challenge students with mixed ability levels. In the additional quadrants, students might provide the part or parts of speech that the word could take on, depending on the context. Examples would be "flame (noun)" and "fiery (adjective)." Or students might define what the word is not: "A flame is not cold. A flame is not dark." Teachers and students can add categories/dimensions of the word they want to emphasize and create additional quadrants in the graphic organizer to contain these layers of meaning.

In some cases, teachers might want to have multiple groups create a Four-Corners graphic for the same key word—as a way of reinforcing its meaning across the class and celebrating the different representations those students generate of the same word. In other cases, students or groups of students might be assigned different words for their graphic organizers. We have found both approaches to be productive. After students or groups of students generate Four/Six/Eight-Corners vocabulary graphics, have them talk together about what they have done and share with the larger group. If multiple students or groups of students have taken up the same word or chunk, compare and contrast how they approached the target word.

Afterward, the student-generated graphic organizers can be used strategically in the classroom environment as visual reinforcement of the target lexicon in the form of a Word Wall—an organized collection of words prominently displayed in a classroom. This display or Word Wall is subsequently used as an interactive tool for reinforcing the ISN words the students identified together and processed through the graphic representation. Comprehension is reinforced through reading and rereading the target reading passage.

STRATEGY 2: TAKING ON WORDS PHYSICALLY

The ISN, Four-Corners Vocabulary exercises, and Word Wall are three starting points for collaborative and communicative vocabulary instruction. But for the most part, these activities are sedentary; they do not give students much chance to move. Moreover, for many teachers, especially in rural contexts, rudimentary classroom supplies are not always available or affordable—especially for graphic representations such as Four-Corners. Drawing from applied theater, we point teachers to game-centered activities that help build a frame for learners negotiating new words through speaking, listening, gesturing, and observing playfully.

Word Wheel

A Word Wheel is an example of an interactive ensemble performance that teachers can use to help learners build vocabulary mastery and text comprehension. The first step is to select a word from the anchor list the students have generated from the text excerpt (e.g., *flame*, *gradually*, or *freezing*). Divide the class into groups of six students. Ask the groups to brainstorm how they might present the word to their peers—both verbally and nonverbally. For example, students might whisper, "Flame." They might repeat the word—"flame, flame, flame"—with unsteady voices. They might yell the word. Alternatively, they might take

the phrase where the word appears in the text and vocalize the entire chunk, saying, "Directly to the flame." Or the students might choose a related word—such as *fire* or *heat*—to vocalize.

In terms of nonverbal representations, students might move their fingers or hands or entire arms in a flamelike manner. Or they might represent the word by embodying the feeling of warmth or heat—rubbing their hands together over an imaginary fire or burning their fingers on an imaginary flame. The point of the activity is more exploration than performance. Encourage playful experimentation, anchored in each word's sounds and its layers of meaning. Remind hesitant students to look to one another for ideas.

After the small groups brainstorm multiple possibilities, have a representative from each group come to the front of the classroom. To share, the representatives form an outward-facing circle. Let's say, for example, that there are four groups and therefore four representatives. Have one take a position at 12:00 (if the circle were a clock), another at 3:00, a third at 6:00, and the fourth at 9:00. Have the four representatives slowly rotate clockwise—stopping when one of them reaches a preestablished marker or point, such as 12:00, with 12:00 being directly at the front of the class.

When an individual reaches that designated point (and where that person is clearly visible to the rest of the class), the "wheel" of students stops spinning momentarily, and the individual student at the marker briefly interprets the word through sound and movement in front of the class. The slowly circling wheel, we recommend, might spin two or three times with each participant having a chance to redo his or her improvisation or create another. Again, the individual verbal or nonverbal performance of the word is brief—lasting just a second or two or three. Also, the individual performs the word only when he or she reaches the preestablished marker or point.

We encourage teachers to adapt the Word Wheel to their classroom environment. Perhaps groups of students might work on different segments of a text. Perhaps each entire small group will take a turn presenting its Word Wheel. Whatever the adaptations, the Word Wheel is intended to act at multiple levels. The activity taps into familiar, universal game actions, such as rotating in a group circle, being "it," taking turns, and interpreting or guessing a teammate's verbal or nonverbal clues and repetition. What we love best about this particular activity and its variations is that it allows many students to be successful.

Corridor of Words and Living Word Walls
An equally kinesthetic vocabulary activity might take the form of a Corridor of Words (see Murray, Salas, and Ni Thoghdha 2015). Building on the previous exercise, this activity creates an opportunity for participants to explore the voice and perspective of the frontiersman, reinforcing and stretching vocabulary. After encouraging students to think about how a person alone might speak to himself or herself, line up the class in two rows with, for example, 15 students in Column A facing 15 students in Column B to create a human corridor. Have each student think of one word, phrase, or sentence the frontiersman may have had in mind while trying to start the fire. Support vocabulary can be posted on a board or generated by the class to get ideas flowing. Each student softly repeats his or her word or phrase simultaneously. Each student—first one from Column A, then one from Column B—takes a turn strolling down the corridor, listening. When they reach the end of the corridor, learners rejoin their row at the opposite end.

A collective variation of Word Wheel and Corridor of Words is an activity that we call Living Word Walls. Here, students are divided into four imaginary walls or lines, forming the shape of a square. In the center of the square sits a classmate who is holding a word on a card. Each "wall" takes a turn embodying or articulating the word in unison. For example,

with the London excerpt, a selected phrase might be "seventy-five below zero." One wall of students makes the sound of a fierce wind blowing. Another wall chants (in unison) the line directly from the narrative where the phrase appears: "When it is seventy-five below zero, a man must not fail in his first attempt to build a fire."

The third and fourth walls might chant related words or phrases while making accompanying movements. They might say, "His feet are wet" while shaking the moisture off their feet, or they might huddle together with teeth chattering as they chant, "Freezing feet cannot be restored; freezing feet cannot be restored; freezing feet cannot be restored"—again with choreographed, interpretive movements.

Observing and listening in on individuals and groups preparing and enacting these activities gives insight into students' communication in context. Following either activity, prompt the group to process and reflect on vivid moments, words, or ideas that linger after the activity is over.

STRATEGY 3: FROM TEXT TO WORDS TO TEXT

Much vocabulary work hones in on single words so that reading may become more meaning-filled and fluent. Afterward, students can explore bigger things—like lines and sentences and paragraphs and pages. Yet meaning need not always flow from part to whole or from read to spoken or written. Creating an improvisational drama context takes an immersive approach to vocabulary. Participants embody the ideas and perspectives of the short story through role and story, leading to vocabulary growth, practically in a safe yet playful communication context (Piazzoli 2011). For instance, take a

single line from London's short story— "A man must not fail"—as a starting point for drama. Have the group first speak that line using a variety of gestures and inflections. How many ways can the meaning be slightly altered and nuanced through tone and gesture? What are other ways to say the same thing? Read the London passage chorally, creating gestures, echoes, and vocal variations that highlight the repeated phrase in an embodied recitation. Then discuss: "Why might someone repeat such a phrase?" and "How does the meaning change when we whisper the phrase? How does the meaning change when we shout it out? Why?"

Bigger Than Words

The Bigger Than Words activity prompts close reading and text analysis by students, inspired by embodied activity. Drama and storytelling can also be used to tell and then revise, expand, and retell a story or poem— before or during reading. Since the exemplar short story describes a setting or scenario, the teacher can work with the class to create stops along the story's journey. The teacher, the students, or some combination may set the stopping points for the narrative. Working to depict the entire story or passages from the story through pantomime or wordless action strengthens access to vocabulary. Small groups of students create the characters, setting, and/or elements of "To Build a Fire": the man and his sled dog, the frozen landscape, the excruciating cold, his wet feet. These might then be conveyed through short pantomimed scenes or tableaux (human statues). Each group is responsible only for its short portion of text. One student walks through each location and participates or observes as the teacher reads and rereads the passage. Then the sequence occurs without words, only

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pantomimed action. This activity makes space for repetition, body–word connections, visual information, collaboration, and a sense of play, all creating a context for vocabulary development.

CONCLUSION:
LIGHTING A FLAME TO READ BY

Classic American short stories have long been an element of the U.S. secondary-level curriculum and are portals to a much larger literary tradition in liberal arts education. "To Build a Fire" is one such example—a foundational reading in American literature that resonates with contemporary representations of our relationship with our environment (see Krakauer 1997). As such, London's short story and others like it are important reads for adolescent youth. Yet English learners do struggle with literary texts—even short ones.

In this article, we have argued that within the prescribed literature curriculum, direct vocabulary instruction remains integral because vocabulary instruction matters, especially for literacy development and reading comprehension. Much of the research demonstrates that an increasingly flexible and multimodal approach to contextualized vocabulary instruction may help more adolescent readers as they approach a prescribed literature curriculum; still, teachers often default to the familiar sequence that we grew up with—the one that begins on Monday (with a list of words), followed by definitions and sentences and memorization (Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday), and ends with a Friday quiz. Vocabulary matters, and in some cases lists of words serve an important purpose—especially in large classes with limited possibilities for interactions between students and teachers.

We note that the activities in this article can and should be recursive—something teachers and students take on before, while, and after reading and rereading a text or a passage from a text such as the one from "To Build a Fire." We encourage our colleagues and students to try out these strategies, adapt them to their contexts and classrooms, and build off of them as they rethink the ways that new words students encounter might be taught and learned. It might take more than one time; it might take two, three, or more. However, text-based, participatory, and multimodal vocabulary instruction is akin to a small but powerful flame that might grow students' and teachers' energy and fortitude for making meaning of a classic American short story— and the many other texts adolescent readers will encounter in their journeys through secondary school and beyond.

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