“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
Robust vocabulary learning, grounded in text, should center on understanding concepts, not on memorizing definitions.

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Effective vocabulary instruction involves using strategies that support students in making connections between new vocabulary and their prior knowledge.

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
Students might whisper, “Flame.” They might repeat the word—“flame, flame, flame”—with unsteady voices. They might yell the word.

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 NiThoghdha 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,
How many ways can the meaning be slightly altered and nuanced through tone and gesture?

What are other ways to say the same thing?

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
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.

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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