Increasing Students' Use of Descriptive Words and Figurative Language in Their Writing by Creating a Climate of Words in the Classroom

Mary Brigid Stanley
University of Northern Iowa

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Increasing Students' Use of Descriptive Words and Figurative Language in Their Writing by Creating a Climate of Words in the Classroom

Abstract

The effects of immersion in a climate of words and subsequent use of descriptive words and figures of speech in student writing was investigated in a Grade 6 language arts classroom. Five students were exposed to a climate of words for six weeks. The hypothesis was made that a climate of words in the classroom will have an effect on students' writing. The same common prompt essay assignment was given at the beginning and end of the six weeks, and the number of nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, sensory words, and figures of speech were compared. All the students showed an increase in the use of these words. Even though too few subjects were available for statistically verifiable data, this investigation can serve as a precursor to a more rigorous study involving a larger sample and a control group to better analyze the impact of the climate of words on student writing.

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INCREASING STUDENTS' USE OF DESCRIPTIVE WORDS AND FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE IN THEIR WRITING BY CREATING A CLIMATE OF WORDS IN THE CLASSROOM

A Graduate Research Paper
Submitted to the
Division of Education
Department of Curriculum and Instruction
in Partial Fulfillment
of Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in Education

UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA

by
Sr. Mary Brigid Stanley, PBVM
July 3, 1997
This Research Paper by Sister Mary Brigid Stanley, PBVM
Titled: Increasing students’ use of descriptive words and figurative language in their writing by creating a climate of words in the classroom

has been approved as meeting the research requirement for the Degree of Master of Arts in Education.

Mary J. Selke
Date Approved
Graduate Faculty Reader

William Waack
Date Approved
Graduate Faculty Reader

Greg P. Stefanich
Date Approved
Head, Department of Curriculum and Instruction
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Students are exposed to a great number of new words during their school years. Patricia Herman and William Nagy stated in 1984 that students in grade 5 encounter about 10,000 unknown words. These words appear in their homes, communities, and school environments. At school new words are encountered in the lunch room, on the playground, at sports events, and in every class student attend. The students need specialized technical vocabulary in art, social studies, math, science, religion, reading, physical education, and music classes.

The type of words a student knows may be related to the words to which a student is exposed. If the student hears and reads a wide variety of descriptive literature and figurative language, he or she may be more likely to use that language when speaking and writing. Descriptive language brings images to mind and evokes memories of sights, smells, sounds, and textures. Figurative language creates connections with ideas and objects with which the reader is already familiar. If descriptive and figurative language is not found anywhere else in a student's environment, it is encountered in school-based reading and writing programs (Allington, et al., 1993).

Vocabulary instruction, a part of every content area, requires a commitment of time, energy, and management. Every teacher spends some time teaching students the words they need to know. More importantly, the teachers spend time teaching students the ideas behind the words. From the writer's own experience, reading and language programs provide exercises and lessons which directly address how students can learn new words from context clues, semantic analysis, and dictionary definitions. After instruction and practice, students are often tested on their retention of the vocabulary meanings and the ideas these words represent. Some students
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demonstrate they remember and understand vocabulary words while others do not.

Contextual Background
After direct instruction in reading and writing using vivid description and figurative language, the writer's sixth grade students did not write vividly or use figurative language unless directly instructed to do so. This group of students wrote with concrete nouns in active and passive voice with a very succinct, bland style. Several of these students were very creative in their verbally expressed ideas even though their written word usage was not equally as rich. These students struggled with finding enough details to create paragraphs of five to eight sentences. When they did elaborate on an idea, they tried to add more details rather than make what they had written more vivid. Several questions kept surfacing for the writer. Why did so few descriptive and sensory words and images find their way into the students' writings? Why did so few students use figurative language? How could students learn interesting words and ideas but not use them? In order to answer the above questions, the writer used the classroom as an investigative laboratory.

In clarifying these questions, information about vocabulary acquisition and instruction was sought. From the perspective of the writer, language arts programs contain general vocabulary acquisition components that use an array of teaching techniques such as semantic mapping, memorization of definitions, sentence writing, and discussion. These programs employ a variety of testing and evaluation options. The teacher's own attitude, teaching methods, and class activities may be the key to eliciting curiosity about words and an appetite for learning words. These factors all contribute to creating a climate of words in the classroom.
Descriptive Words and Figurative Language

Problem

Many studies (Beck, Perfetti, & McKeown, 1982; Cermak, & Craik, 1979; Martin, 1995; Nagy & Herman, 1984; Stahl, & Fairbanks, 1986; Stahl, & Kapinus, 1991) have been done to describe how students learn words and how teachers can teach vocabulary, but research needs to continue to examine how teachers can motivate student excitement about words to the point where students will spontaneously use descriptive words and figurative language. The problem centers on how to encourage students to become excited about words.

Research Question

Will participation in a climate of words cause students to become excited about figurative language and learn a large number of words thoroughly enough to use them spontaneously in their writing?

Purpose

The purpose of this investigation was to attempt to increase the students’ spontaneous use of figurative and descriptive language by providing a climate of words in the classroom. Since direct instruction in descriptive words and figurative language had not caused the students to use these in their own writing without specific directions to do so, the writer attempted to change the climate of the classroom in order to surround the students with vivid description and figurative language and provide opportunities to use both in their writing.

Hypothesis

Participating in a climate of words will have a positive effect on students’ use of descriptive words and figurative language in their writing

Limitations and Delimitations

Because the writer’s classroom was the site of the investigation, several
factors limited the study and the ability to use this study to make generalizations. These factors were sample size, lack of control group, and consistency of time spent in each activity.

**Limitations**

Limitations included those factors that were unavoidable such as sample size and consistency of class hours. The sample size was the greatest limitation. The writer had access only to her own students and, since instruction at the school was done in small groups, the sample size was small. The study began with 7 students and decreased to 5 after the first week of the study. Such a sample is too small for a valid statistical analysis, so the results of this study will be used only to describe this group and components found to be effective in accomplishing the desired objective.

The second factor, a control group, was not used. At this time, the researcher was primarily interested in increasing the amount of figurative language and descriptive words used by this instructional group.

A third factor, class hours per day, affected the study. The number of class hours each day varied according to demands in other curricular areas. Students experienced decreased class time when attending D.A.R.E. classes, reading to their classroom buddies, and visiting the public library. These were accepted components of the language arts time block and could not be changed. The decrease in class time sometimes led to the exclusion of the activity time in which the students immersed themselves in words. The sample size and variability of class hours were not able to be controlled by the writer.

**Delimitations**

Delimitations are those factors controlled by the researcher. These include the length of the investigation and the length of time given to activities.
The total time frame of this study was six weeks. It was not known whether six weeks would be sufficient time for a climate of words to make a measurable impact on the students’ use of figurative language and descriptive words, but this frame fit the time allotment for one of the six anthology texts used in the reading program at the students’ school.

Time for activity and instruction was a second factor controlled by the researcher. Within the daily schedule, at least 20 minutes was allowed for word activities on the days the activities were done.

Factors both controlled and not controlled by the researcher limited the scope of the study and its ability to describe a wider population. Sample size, class hours, duration of the study, and length of activity time were all limiting factors.

Definitions

**Climate of Words**

"Vocabulary learning takes place when students are immersed in words" (Blachowicz & Fisher, 1966). This climate can be created with discussion at the dinner table and in the classroom, wide reading, and being read to. It can be created by the student being surrounded with words, word plays, literature, and direct vocabulary study.

**Deep Processing**

It has been noted that stimuli are processed very quickly at a number of different levels of understanding (Selfredge and Neisser, 1960; Treisman, 1974; Sutherland, 1968, as cited in Craik & Lockhart, 1972). These authors go on to state that preliminary stages involve sensory features while later stages are more concerned with:

- matching the input against stored abstractions from past learning; that is,
later stages are concerned with pattern recognition and the extraction of meaning. This conception of a series or hierarchy of processing stages is often referred to as 'depth of processing' where greater 'depth' implies a greater degree of semantic or cognitive analysis. (p. 675)

**Descriptive Language**

Nancy Horowitz (1995) encouraged students to create images with words by using words that appeal to the senses, arranging words in a meaningful way, and choosing words that show, not tell what happens.

**Figurative Language**

Figurative language refers to words and phrases that cause the reader to compare new ideas and objects with familiar ideas and objects. Readers need to distinguish between literal and non literal (figurative) language when reading (Karlin, 1980). For students to write figuratively, they must be familiar with the various forms of figurative language such as similes, metaphors, and idioms. Students need to be creative enough to visualize the characteristics they want to compare, and be self-motivated to include these devices in their compositions.

**Spontaneous Usage**

Students using a writing device without prompting is a more certain indicator of deep processing (Irvin, 1990; Blachowicz & Fisher, 1996).
Chapter 2

Review of the Literature

The writer began a literary investigation of the question, "Will participation in a climate of words cause students to become excited about figurative language and learn a large number of words thoroughly enough to use them spontaneously in their writing?" Several issues were studied: how children learn words, how teachers can effectively teach vocabulary, and how one sets up a vocabulary experiment. The ERIC data base, UNISTAR, and elementary reading programs were tools for locating articles, texts, authors, and teaching materials. Most of the research was limited to literature published after 1986. However, the writer did use the reference lists from articles and texts to locate original research as far back as 1972.

Research has been published to describe how students learn new words and to suggest how teachers can best teach vocabulary. Students know words on a variety of levels from recognizing the word in print to being able to use the word in a new context. Because students learn so many words in the course of a year, vocabulary instruction has three goals: to help students learn new words, to develop word consciousness, and to become independent learners. Four factors of instruction enhance student learning: repetition of the words, student involvement in studying the words, contextual and definitional information provided to the student, and the semantic frameworks of the words. Teachers can use a variety of instructional techniques and activities to help students learn new words. At what point will these new words spontaneously arise in the students' writings? A key to this question lies in understanding the levels of "knowing" words.
Depth of Word Knowledge

It is difficult to describe what "knowing" a word means. P. David Pearson and Richard T. Vacca (as cited in Marzano and Marzano, 1988) distinguished between knowing the definition of a word and knowing the idea behind the word. Blachowicz and Fisher (1996) summarized two word classification systems. In the first, I.L. Beck, M.G. McKeown, E.S. McCaslin, and A.M. Burkes (as cited by Blachowicz and Fisher, 1996) classified word knowledge as unknown, acquainted, or established. The term unknown meant the reader did not connect meaning with the word. They used acquainted to mean the reader knew the definition of the word. The term established meant the reader understood the idea behind the word.

Klausmeier (as cited by Blachowicz and Fisher, 1996) formed a more elaborate scale with four stages: concrete, identity, classification, and formal. The concrete stage described a word that was experienced one or more times. It could be discriminated from other words and remembered. In the identity stage the student recognized the same concept in a different context. The next stage, classification, involved the student knowing several ideas in one group and being able to correctly classify them. In the last stage, formal, the student used the word in a new way, composed an original sentence with the word, and gave examples. The writer might conclude from the reviewed literature that the deeper the level of word knowledge, the more accurately the student can use the word and more completely understand the idea behind it.

Earlier, researchers tried to describe the process of learning the meaning of words in the fullest sense. In 1972, F.I. Craik and R.S. Lockhart described a process of knowing words as deep processing. They described learning a word as a rapid process that takes place on a number of levels. They are categorized
into preliminary and later stages. They recognize preliminary stages as those involving sensory features. In relation to later stages they state that,

Later stages are more concerned with matching the input against stored abstractions from past learning; that is, later stages are concerned with pattern recognition and the extraction of meaning. This conception of a series or hierarchy of processing stages is often referred to as 'depth of processing' where greater 'depth' implies a greater degree of semantic or cognitive analysis. (p. 675)

Cermak and Craik (1979), in their investigation concluded that this deep processing was an elusive concept since it is hard to describe, hard to measure, and hard to test.

**Linking of Word Knowledge to Writing**

For the writer, this idea of deep processing seemed to be a link between the way students learn vocabulary and a clue to how teachers can best facilitate vocabulary learning. It is evident from the reviewed literature that some researchers believe that directly using a semantic framework builds relationships between words and between words and experiences.

In their connection of vocabulary to writing, Nourie and Davidson (1992) acknowledged that the interaction of word knowledge, reading comprehension and writing justifies direct vocabulary instruction. They made a critical connection between writing and word knowledge when they stated, “increased word knowledge improves writing clarity” (p. 4).

Since writing is a window into what children know (Blachowicz & Fisher, 1996), writing becomes the measure by which we can determine deep processing. From the literature one can conclude that it is in the “deep processing” of words, reaching that level of knowing the idea behind the word,
that students can reach into their word banks to select the most appropriate words to express their ideas and emotions. At this level students can write using figurative language and descriptive words.

Goals of Vocabulary Instruction

Students learn a great number of words during their school years. William Nagy and Patricia Herman (1984) compared the number of words known by capable and less capable readers. They estimated that students in grade five have encountered about 10,000 unknown words per year and learn new words at the rate of 3,000-4,000 words per year. Even though vocabulary is taught systematically, no program can effectively teach students that many words nor teach students all the words they need to know to master the curriculum content. Educators must acknowledge that they will not be able to direct all vocabulary acquisition (Nagy & Herman, 1984). Camille Blachowicz (1993) proposed three goals of vocabulary instruction: to learn words, to promote “word consciousness,” and to foster student independence.

Students Must Learn Words. Nagy and Herman (1984) state that the first goal of vocabulary instruction is to help students learn words. Exposure to the language itself can cause learning. This exposure can include students reading (Nagy & Herman, 1984), listening to stories (Elley, 1989), and playing word games (Blachowicz & Fisher, 1996). Students’ vocabularies can also be developed through direct vocabulary instruction in the reading program (Allington et al., 1993) and content areas (Martin, 1995).

Students Must Develop “Word Consciousness”. The second goal was to promote “word consciousness”. Anderson and Nagy (1992) stated that figuring out a word should be approached as one would solve a problem such as using word parts to develop the whole. Students would need to be sensitive to
nuance of meaning. Blachowicz and Fisher (1996) suggest this can be done by modeling and direct instruction. Word consciousness begins to develop when teachers acquaint students with words and the concept of highlighting interesting words as they appear in text (Blachowicz & Fisher, 1996).

**Students Must Become Independent Learners.** The third goal of vocabulary instruction was to help students become independent learners. Students need to know a range of strategies. The need to be able to extract meaning from the context of the word, use structural analysis to understand a new word, and have the reference skills to use a dictionary and thesaurus. They also need to possess the self-motivation to be independent learners (Blachowicz & Fisher, 1996; Irvin, 1990). Both teachers and students contribute to effective learning of vocabulary words. Teachers are responsible for organizing learning opportunities. Students are responsible for learning words, developing an understanding of the nuance of words, and becoming independent learners.

**Factors That Enhance Student Learning**

Teaching techniques play a part in effective vocabulary instruction. Four factors enhance student learning of vocabulary words. These four factors include repetition of the word, student involvement with the word, contextual and definitional information, and consideration of the semantic framework.

**Repetition.** The first factor, repetition, refers to the number of times the student encounters the new word (Irvin, 1990). Stahl and Kapinus (1991) also relate the effectiveness of vocabulary instruction to the number of exposures to the word. This would be analogous to drill and practice to keep skills honed. Multiple exposures reinforce the memory and add to the memory network by enlarging or changing it (Blachowicz & Fisher, 1996).
Student Involvement. The second factor of effective vocabulary learning is the level of student involvement. This is accomplished when students use words meaningfully (Blachowicz & Fisher, 1996). This occurs through discussion at school or at home, independent projects, and word plays. “Vocabulary learning takes place when students personalize word learning” (Blachowicz & Fisher, p. 8). Students can connect the new word to previous experiences and can write about the idea behind the word. Teachers can involve students by using analogies and metaphors, creating physical models, participating in Socratic dialogue, and introducing new experiences to explain the word (Marzano & Marzano, 1988).

Context and Definitional Information. There has been a debate concerning the primacy of contextual versus definitional information in vocabulary acquisition. This is the third factor that enhances student learning. Classic research such as that by Stahl and Fairbanks (1986), as well as more recent classroom research by W.B. Elley (1989) and B.R. Martin (as cited in Tanner, 1985), showed that students do learn vocabulary words more effectively through direct instruction than through having no instruction at all. Nagy and Herman (1984) contend there are so many words students learn that direct instruction cannot account for a fraction of them. Since teachers are not instructing students in the majority of the words they learn, students must be learning them from context. Jenkins, Stein, and Whisk (as cited by Marzano and Marzano, 1988) cautioned that context may not be the best modality for learning vocabulary since context is often vague and students may not have the skill or motivation to learn words solely through context. After reading findings such as that, “Nagy maintained that a combination of definitional and contextual approaches is more effective than either approach alone” (Irvin, 1990, p. 9).
Semantics. Consistent with the idea of context is making connections of what students know to words they are to learn. For that reason, semantics, a fourth factor, is a useful strategy. Constance Weaver in Reading Process and Practice (1988) used this description: “The semantic system gives language its life; it has to do with meaning, sense, idea, and thoughts” (p. 234). Learners build a rich system of words, to make webs, connections, and graphic organizers. Blachowicz and Fisher (1996) wrote, “as learners read or meet words in other meaningful contexts, they begin to build frameworks of relationships that we refer to as ‘the word's meaning.’ Each time a word is encountered, another bit of information is added to the framework, enlarging or changing it” (p. 3).

The reviewed literature indicated four factors that enhance student learning are repetition, student involvement, context and definitional information, and semantics. It also suggests that these same factors contribute to the success of students learning new words. Using these methods, it is possible for a teacher can create a rich climate of words that can enhance a students’ experience of language.

Climate of Words

Earlier in this review reference was made to the three goals of vocabulary instruction: to learn words, to gain word consciousness, and to become an independent learner. These goals can be accomplished through creating a climate of words in the classroom that is rich and inviting. This climate of words entails motivating students to learn words and providing opportunities for them to do so.

Description. Blachowicz and Fisher (1996) state that, “vocabulary learning takes place when students are immersed in words” (p. 7). Examples of
this immersion are discussion in the classroom, being read to, reading widely, word plays, games, and displays. Anderson and Nagy (1992) stated, “Encounters with words should be playful, so as to provoke curiosity and an interest in word study. Figuring out an unknown word should be treated as an exercise in problem solving, so as to promote independence in word analysis” (p. 9). This climate can be pervasive as in surrounding students with bulletin board displays, daily activities, and journaling. It can also be direct as in explicit vocabulary instruction and writing assignments.

**Student Motivation.** A key to creating a climate of words is to motivate the students to learn words. Turner and Meyer (1995) described three classroom characteristics that promote student motivation: challenge for the student, shared control over student learning, and collaboration among the students. According to Turner and Meyer (1995), students are challenged when they have the opportunity to use higher order thinking skills, have the freedom to generate new ideas, and have the security to make mistakes. The students share control of their learning when they determine the level of difficulty, when their needs and interests are met, and when they share in the evaluation of the experience. Collaboration means the students can ask questions of one another not just of the teacher, can use all available resources, and can respond respectfully to one another. By using these three ideas: challenging curriculum, shared control of learning, and peer collaboration, students can be made partners in learning. This frees them to become more fully involved in activities which in turn will enhance their learning.

**Vocabulary Activities**

Creating a climate of words involves both motivating students to learn and surrounding them with words. An abundance of activities is available for
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teachers and students which would make learning words interesting, rich, and effective. Activities can be those led by the teacher during class such as C2QU, clustering, semantic work and word elaboration, or activities can be student-led such as word games and word plays.

**C2QU and Cluster Approach.** Direct instruction can take the form of C2QU as described by Blachowicz and Fisher (1996). C2QU (See-Two-Cue-You) is a teacher-led class activity. An overhead transparency of the words to be discussed is prepared. C1 involves using the word in a broad context. C2, a second sentence, presents the word in a more narrow context with some definitional clues. Q is the question the teacher asks that involves a semantic interpretation of the word. U is the student using the word meaningfully.

The cluster approach as described by Marzano and Marzano (1988) involves presenting vocabulary words in semantically related categories so students can gain information from the related words as well as make connections with the other words. For example, the vocabulary word “vague” is clustered with dim, pale, dull, faint, fuzzy, murky, transparent, and opaque. Through recognition of some of the words as synonyms and antonyms, students begin to build an understanding of the word “vague”.

**Activities Using Semantics.** Semantic related activities are also effective because they make connections for the students. Some of these activities include semantic feature analysis (Irvin, 1990), semantic mapping (Irvin, 1990), and semantic gradient (Cramer & Castle, 1994). Semantic feature analysis involves students' prior learning. After a word is selected, the teacher lists related terms in a column and features to be emphasized in a row across the top to create a chart. The students then complete the chart by indicating “+” if the word contains that feature or “-” if the word does not contain that feature.
Semantic mapping (Irvin, 1990) creates word categories. The vocabulary word is written on the board. Then the teacher and students together brainstorm as many related words as they can. After that they add labels to groups of words. Charts are made of the maps and are displayed in the classrooms.

Nancy Cecil (as cited in Cramer & Castle, 1994) suggested using semantic gradient. This entails selecting two opposite words for the first and last words of a column. The students then brainstorm related words and decide if those words belong on the gradient. If they do belong, the students determine the position. The class discussion is the most important component. All three semantic activities, feature analysis, mapping, and gradient, enable the students to use prior word knowledge and make connections among words.

Other Teacher-Led Activities. Other teacher-led classroom activities are available. These include using word genres, word elaboration, and structural analysis. Teachers can include word genres in their word studies. Examples of word genres include portmanteau words such as smog and motel, acronyms, anagrams, collective words, oxymorons, onomatopoeia, and palindromes (Blachowicz and Fisher, 1996). Word elaboration as described by Cecil (as cited in Cramer & Castle, 1994) is a technique that involves questioning the students to include more description in their sentences. An example sentence would be “The balloon flew away”. Questions to ask could include “Who held the balloon? What caused it to fly away? What color and shape was the balloon? What happened to the balloon as it flew away?” Structural analysis is taking the root of the word from its affixes, decoding the meaning of the word from the parts, and learning compound words, syllabication and accent (Karlin,
1980). Word genres, word elaboration, and structural analysis are all teacher-led classroom activities.

**Student-Led Activities.** Students can choose and lead word activities. Students can collect favorite words (Cecil as cited in Cramer & Castle, 1994), create class dictionaries, create their own words, and play word games such as Hugger mugger, Scrabble, Probe, Hink Pink (Blachowicz & Fisher, 1996), Camouflage, Writing Aerobics, and 20 Words (Cecil as cited in Cramer & Castle, 1994). It can be concluded that teacher-led and student-led activities can provide rich interaction of students with words.

The purpose of this study was to attempt to increase the students' use of descriptive words and figurative language by creating a climate of words. A sample group was selected from the researcher's language arts classroom, the students participated in a climate of words, and the effects of the climate of words was examined through the writer's analysis of pre- and post-experience common prompt student essays.

**Subjects**

Within a class of 35, a group of five students was chosen to be the subjects of the study. Twenty-three students were in two faster paced instructional groups than the sample group, and six students were in two slower paced instructional groups than the sample group.

Members of the sample group had taken two standardized tests in the fall of 1996. The subjects' verbal Cognitive Ability Test (CogAT) scores ranged from 98 to 107; their Iowa Tests of Basic Skills (ITBS) scores in reading ranged from 3.5 to 6.3 Iowa Grade Equivalent (I.G.E.) with a mean of 4.8, and their vocabulary scores ranged from 5.0 to 7.3 (I.G.E.) with a mean of 6.4. The test scores from their last reading test ranged from 31 to 42 of 46 items with a group mean of 37.7.

The sample group's vocabulary test scores from the school's reading program showed a mean of 8.4, median of 8, and modes of 7.8, and 10 (see table 1).
The classroom setting was multi-aged. A seventh grade reading group was also in the room. The teacher instructed one group at a time and provided learning activities and work time for the group not being instructed. Four days per week, two eighth grade instructional groups were in the room for 20 minutes of study time.

Several activities took the 6th grade group from the language arts classroom. Another teacher took them to the public library for 30 minutes every other week, the associate pastor met with the students 15 minutes every week, the homeroom teacher arranged for the students to meet with their reading buddies in grades 3 and 4 for 30 minutes once every other week, and the students met for DARE class one hour a week.

Procedure

The teacher gave the students a common prompt essay with these directions: "Describe something that happened this weekend. Make it interesting for your classmates." It should be noted that none of the students were told the purpose of the initial and/or follow-up assignments. The teacher collected the essays, noted the length of the essays, and then counted nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, sensory words, and figures of speech (see Table 2).

The students were exposed to a climate of words for six weeks. In creating a climate of words, the teacher planned a variety of activities: word plays, word games, semantic mapping, finding puns, illustrating figures of speech, writing stories, and reading literature. The students created a word bank of sensory words, wrote examples of hyperbole, made a bulletin board,
and discussed how words affect the tone of a literary excerpt. (see Appendix)
The teacher kept a daily journal of the activities, student time spent on the
activities, student responses to the activities, and teacher reflections. At the
end of six weeks, the same common prompt essay was given and data was
collected from that essay in the same manner as the first (see Table 3). The
data from the two essays were then compared to determine any increase in the
presence of descriptive words or figurative language.

Insert Table 3 about here
Comparing the pre-experience essay to the post-experience essay showed the group increased their use of nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, and figures of speech. Sensory words were used by only one student on the pre-experience essay (see Table 4).

Students 1 and 4 showed an increased use of the selected words in five of the six categories. Student 2 showed an overall growth of only +4 but increased the use of adjectives by +12. Student 4 showed the greatest overall growth by increasing the use of counted words by +47. The sample group’s greatest increase in word usage occurred with adjectives (see Table 5).

Student data from the vocabulary tests of the school’s reading program were collected in order to compare the effectiveness of vocabulary strategies in the experimental environment with strategies common to the regular classroom environment (see Table 6). Even though the range and mean varied between the mid-experience test and the post-experience test, the median and the mode remained higher than the pre-experience vocabulary results. The sample size was too small for analysis.
This experience of creating a climate of words was more difficult than the writer anticipated. Developing and implementing the climate of words took time for finding appropriate activities and placing them into the lesson plans, organization to fit the activity time into the students' schedules, flexibility when the students were not ready for the activity that was planned, and adaptability to meet the needs of individual students on any given day.

Students at this age level experience unpredictable moods. These moods may have a positive, negative, or neutral effect on their learning. Some students may write well when they are upbeat, and others may not write well when they are upbeat. This could also be observed in students who are in a negative frame of mind.

The writer noted that the pre- and post-experience writing did not necessarily reflect gains in other areas of language arts such as reading and spelling. For example, the student whose writing included so many more words in the post-experience writing did not show a corresponding increase in correctly spelled words on the spelling test or more correct answers on the reading test.

The students had a tendency to separate each of the classes into distinct blocks. Upon reflection, the writer realized the classes are taught that way even though the writing assignments often correlated with the theme of the reading assignment.

Conclusions

In view of the data collected from this investigation, some conclusions can be drawn regarding the effect of a climate of words on the participants'
writing, their use of sensory words and figurative language, the effect of the vocabulary activities on the participants' vocabulary test scores, and the unforeseen limitations of the investigation.

Participants' Writing. Some of the changes in writing were dramatically positive while differences in the use of sensory words and figures of speech were nearly zero. The students showed an overall increase in the number of descriptive words in their writing. Two students increased use of words in five of the six categories. One of these students characteristically wrote very short paragraphs.

While analyzing the data, the writer noted two precautions in interpreting the data. First, since most students used descriptive words to modify nouns and verbs, it was unclear whether the increased use of nouns and adjectives was due to the climate of words or the increased use of nouns and verbs. Second, since a control group was not used in the study, no conclusions could be drawn about whether the increased use of nouns and verbs is an effect of the climate of words or of the students’ normal maturation in writing ability that would have occurred outside a climate of words.

Sensory Words. The use of sensory words was nearly zero. The students spent several days studying and writing with sensory words to enhance description in their writing. This leaves two questions for the writer. Is there a difference in the students’ definitions of sensory words and figures of speech from those of the writer? What effect did the topic of the common prompt essay have on the students’ responses. For example, from field notes every student listed what they did over the weekend rather than describe one or two events in detail. Would they have used more sensory words if the topic had
been limited to describing one thing, rather than something, that happened this weekend”?

**Figurative Language.** The study showed the students did not markedly increase their use of figurative language. According to field notes, the researcher spent several class periods and students spent several activity periods studying, using, and writing with figurative language. Several questions surfaced. Since the students were asked to write about themselves, do they disassociate vivid sensory perceptions with their everyday life? Do students write about ordinary events only in ordinary words and phrases? Are they limited by their writing style rather than by vocabulary? For example, all students wrote their essays as a list of activities rather than a detailed description of any one or two activities.

**Effect on Vocabulary Test Scores.** The range of test scores fluctuated unpredictably. Even though the mean fluctuated, the median and mode remained constant in the mid-experience and post-experience tests. Even though the number of students was small, there may be some indication that the vocabulary strategies used as a part of the climate of words could have a positive effect on students’ vocabulary test scores.

**Unforeseen Limitations.** Two major unforeseen limitations were noted. The study did not take into account student attitudes and motivation as factors in affecting the quality of the essays, and the study did not take into account student learning styles and/or writing styles. These two limitations could have a major impact on the quality of student writing, its change over time, and the interpretation of data collected from spot samplings.

The data showed students did increase their use of descriptive language, but it cannot be concluded that these changes were caused by the climate of
words established in the classroom. The students did not increase their use of sensory words and increased their use of figurative language by only one word. The vocabulary activities could have had a positive effect on the students' vocabulary test scores. Unforeseen limitations included the effect of student motivation, attitudes, learning styles, and writing styles.

Recommendations

Two major recommendations arose from this study. First, there is a need to repeat the study after revision of the sample size, checking the activities for appropriateness, repetition and effectiveness, and adding a control group. The second recommendation is that research needs to be initiated to determine the effectiveness of the individual word activities and how to determine what students believe to be interesting writing, descriptive words, and figurative language.

Research Design. The factors that prohibited the application of any statistical analysis also prohibit generalizations based on the study. For this reason, a larger population or sample needs to be selected so that trends that can occur can generate statistically verifiable data. A control group also needs to be used so that some conclusions can be drawn about the effectiveness of the climate of words versus the regular classroom experience.

Climate of words activities. The activities were the heart of the climate of word atmosphere. An abundance of teacher-led and student-led activities could be found that contribute to creating a climate of words. When repeating this study, the researcher would correlate the activities to specific student outcomes; provide instruction, practice, and repetition for the learning activities; and discontinue those activities the students and teacher did not think effective in reaching the outcomes.
Referring to field notes, the writer found that some activities made a greater impression on the students than others. It would be important to study how a classroom teacher can determine the effectiveness of individual activities. This could take the form of action research or a literary search.

Referring again to field notes, the writer found that student perceptions of descriptive words and figurative language may differ from those of the writer. Students tended to pick out unusual sounding words as factoids rather than sensory and loaded words. A need exists for research in how to align teacher and student definitions of descriptive words and figurative language.

In summary, following a six week experience in a climate of words, the sample group increased their use of some descriptive words: nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, and figurative language. The study was limited by sample size, so no statistically significant data was obtained. The researcher saw this study as a precursor to a more rigorous research design that would incorporate a larger sample, a control group, a reevaluation of the activities, and a correlation of the activities with specific student outcomes.
References


### Table 1

**Sample Group Vocabulary Test Summary**

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Appendix

Student and Teacher Activities Used to Create a Climate of Words

- Word clustering exercise with reading vocabulary words
- Making analogies with reading vocabulary words
- Finding and sharing puns from newspapers and magazines
- Reading Fred Gwynne's books of puns and word plays
- Playing Hugger Mugger
- Creating synonyms and antonym lists for commonly used verbs and adjectives
- Writing a descriptive paragraph
- Solving word puzzles
- Creating semantic gradients
- Producing lists of sensory words
- Illustrating sensory words
- Illustrating figures of speech
- Wrote sentences using new vocabulary words
- Webbing to generate a word bank for an essay
- Using a thesaurus to find synonyms
- Writing a story with as many sensory words and descriptive language as possible
- Identified sensory and loaded words and figures of speech from a text
- Wrote a story using hyperbole after examples were given in class