

Word Painting: Using a Musical Technique to Enhance Vocabulary

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Word painting supports vocabulary development by engaging students' creativity as visual artists and music composers, with no music or visual art experience required!

Vocabulary knowledge is foundational to learning to read. Knowing a word helps students comprehend text, construct and remember ideas, and connect new information with prior knowledge (Schwanenflugel & Knapp, 2015). Unfortunately, research has indicated seriously limited vocabulary acquisition for some groups of children before they enter school (Fernald, Marchman, & Weisleder, 2013; Hart & Risley, 1995). By grade 2, differences in vocabulary size among learners from different abilities and socioeconomic groups are significant (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2013).

To address this word gap, experts have recommended indirect and direct approaches to vocabulary instruction (Wright & Cervetti, 2017). Indirect vocabulary instruction occurs through conversations, reading to students, and students reading often. Direct instruction, in contrast, involves explicit teaching—discussing the definitions of specific words during shared reading of a selected text and providing contextualized examples (Apthorp, 2006). Whether vocabulary instruction is indirect or direct, one of its main goals is to promote word consciousness, an enjoyment in learning about and using words in a variety of ways and contexts (Schwanenflugel & Knapp, 2015).

Particular attention has been given to the types of words that should be taught during direct instruction. Teaching Tier 2 words and their meanings can contribute to closing the vocabulary gap (Beck et al., 2013; Biemiller, 2010). Tier 2 words are words that students are ready to learn because they already have an understanding of the concept the word represents; for example, they know the concept “scary” but have not yet learned the word *terrifying*. Tier 2 words differ from Tier 1 words, which are the most basic and common words that students likely know (e.g., *happy*, *flower*), and from Tier 3 words, which are

used in a specific domain (e.g., *ecosystem*, *biosphere*) and, although equally important to teach, are best learned in content areas (Beck et al., 2013).

How Do I Select Tier 2 Words for a Specific Grade?

Kucan (2012) provided clear guidelines for identifying Tier 2 words:

- Look for words that can be used across domains.
- Ask yourself whether your students have knowledge or experiences that would help them understand the word.
- Consider whether the word is useful and important to comprehension.

In Leo Lionni's classic picture book *An Extraordinary Egg*, the words *impress*, *triumphant*, and of course, *extraordinary* are examples of Tier 2 words.

As with all instruction, teaching Tier 2 words should be done through engaging activities. We propose an activity that has its roots in word painting and engages students in musical and visual art activities that enhance vocabulary.

What Is Word Painting?

Word painting is a musical term for a compositional technique that has been in use throughout the his-

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tory of music (Randel, 2003). When composers create music for singers, they sometimes use musical effects to make a word or phrase sound like its meaning. For example, a composer might set the lyric “I am joyful” to a series of notes that get higher or words about sadness to notes that descend in pitch. The music then metaphorically paints the meaning of the text; the word is sung in a way that sonically demonstrates its meaning. Although still in use by songwriters today, this technique was particularly popular among English and Italian composers in the 16th century.

Famous Word Painting Examples

In the song “A Spoonful of Sugar” in the musical *Mary Poppins*, the heroine sings, “Just a spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down,” and the word *down* starts on a high pitch and slides down. In the baroque oratorio *Messiah*, the choir sings, “And we like sheep have gone astray.” On the word *astray*, the choir sings many different pitches, rapidly moving up and down, like sheep running around all over the place. In these examples, the words are illustrated with musical gestures; the word meanings are reflected in how the words are sung.

Why Music?

Music helps us remember things. Have you ever sung the alphabet song as you put a list in alphabetical order or tried to find a name in an address book? The advertising industry also takes full advantage of this phenomenon, using musical jingles in commercials to ensure that we remember brand names.

Music helps us remember because we perceive it both cognitively and affectively; when we listen to music, our brains turn collections of rhythmically organized pitches into patterns that we recognize as tunes or melodies and make us *feel* them as emotion (Levitin, 2006). When an experience impacts us on an affective level—makes us *feel*—it tends to stick with us. Perhaps this is why music, and more generally the arts, are recognized as enhancing learning experiences (Lloyd, 2017).

Why Composing?

Composing involves organizing sound for the purpose of communication and expression. Many music education experts claim that composing provides the most effective vehicle for students to exercise creativity in a music context (e.g., Swanwick, 1999; Webster, 2002). Renowned creativity researcher

Csikszentmihalyi (1996) suggested that humans create because they are hardwired to enjoy designing and discovering new things. Composing is a rich opportunity for students not only to be creative but also to explore their own personal experience (Reimer, 2003). Composing provides students with an opportunity to send a piece of themselves out into the world.

Why Graphic Notation?

Composing can be a very sophisticated activity, but it does not have to be. When you think of a composer composing, you probably think of someone writing musical notation, but in essence, musical notation is simply a visual representation of sound. Also, composers do not always use traditional notation; instead, they sometimes simply use made-up symbols to elicit the sounds they want. Composers use graphic notation to visually represent on paper the sounds they want musicians to make. Composers draw lines and shapes to communicate with the instrumentalists or singers who will perform their music. Imagine what kind of sounds a violinist would make if you gave them a piece of paper with a dark, sharply jagged line on it and said, “Play this!” An online image search will reveal many intriguing examples of graphic notation.

Word Painting in the Primary Classroom

As we explained earlier, *word painting* is a term used by music theorists to describe how a composer metaphorically paints a word with sound or musical gesture. In the activity described here, we invite students to actually paint or illustrate their words in a way that communicates how they imagine a performance of the word should sound.

In our version of word painting, the word is painted both visually and sonically. It is a two-step process that involves creating both music and visual art. First, students explore and choose a suitable sonic representation that evokes the meaning of their word. Second, they experiment and decide on a visual way to illustrate and elicit how the performance should sound.

Although we focus on word painting in the primary classroom, this technique of enhancing vocabulary can certainly be used in upper grades. English learners and students who struggle with reading would also benefit from word painting as the technique combines sensory information and

allows students to show their understanding in different ways (Brouillette, 2012).

Step 1: Thinking Sonically

To create musical effects, composers manipulate different elements of music. In the previous examples, we described composers manipulating the musical element of pitch, making the music go higher or lower. Yet, composers also vary the element of volume, by making music louder and softer, and the element of rhythm, by organizing the music into sounds and silences of different durations. The element of timbre refers to the particular tone or quality of the instrument or voice; the composer might want a brassy timbre like a trumpet or a smooth timbre like a Japanese flute.

When word painting, composers need to consider which musical element or combination of elements should be manipulated to express the word's meaning. Not all word painting needs to involve pitch getting higher and lower, although that would work well for a word like *mountainous*. Some words might lend themselves better to a variation in volume. *Self-conscious*, for example, might start loud and get soft, as though someone were frightened by the sound of their own voice. *Blossoming* could start soft and get loud, like a flower opening up. Word painters could work with rhythm by elongating certain syllables, making others short, and/or leaving spaces between syllables or phonemes of various lengths. The word *exhilarating* could start with syllables stretched out and far apart that become shorter and closer together at the end of the word, to illustrate and evoke the sound of increasing excitement. A word painter might choose to explore timbre with a word like *constricted*, squeezing the sound out of a tight throat.

Step 2: Thinking Visually

When students have decided how their words should sound, they create visual representations that enable performers to imagine and reproduce the intended sounds. Students might paint the word slanting upward to indicate pitch getting higher; bigger letters might represent louder volume; physical space between syllables might indicate rhythm; certain colors might represent certain timbres, such as pastels for smooth timbres and bright colors for bold tones. There is no right or wrong way to do this. Imaginative exploration is encouraged!

Figures 1–4 provide word painting examples that feature explorations of different musical elements,

Figure 1
A Word Painting Featuring the Musical Element of Pitch

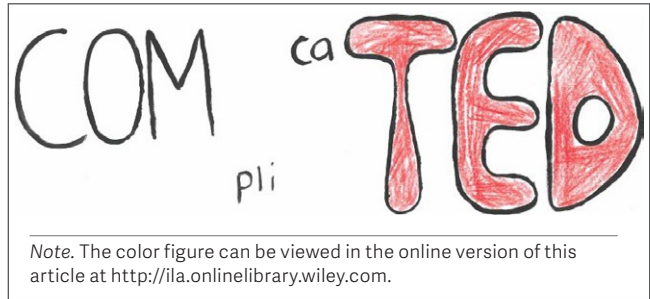


Figure 2
A Word Painting Featuring the Musical Element of Volume

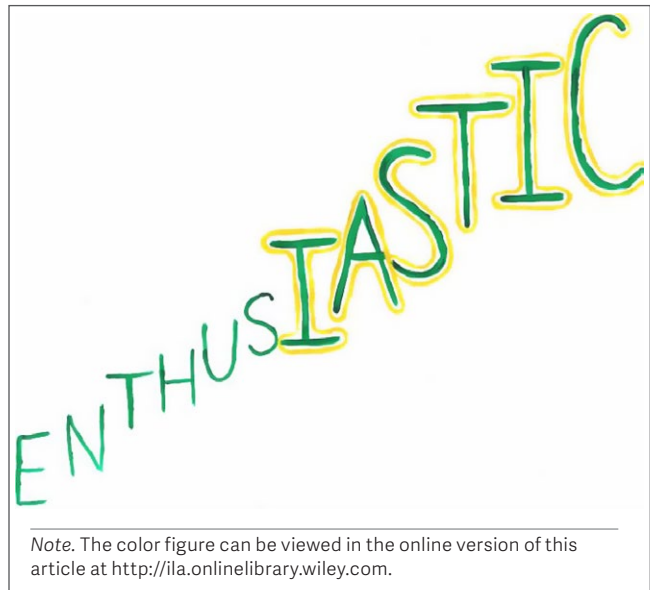
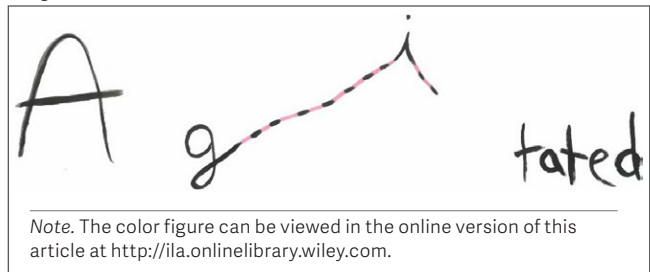
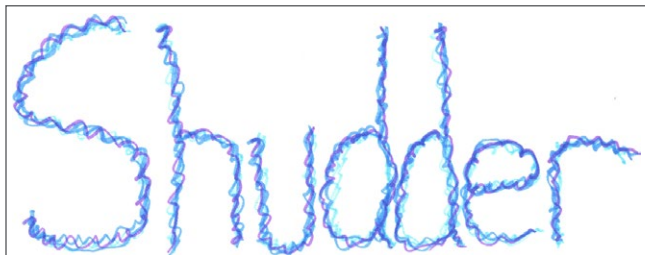


Figure 3
A Word Painting Featuring the Musical Element of Rhythm



with different visual techniques employed to communicate how the performer should use their voice to paint the meaning of the word.

Figure 4
A Word Painting Featuring the Musical Element of
Timbre



Note. The color figure can be viewed in the online version of this article at <http://ila.onlinelibrary.wiley.com>.

Wait a Minute, Do I Have to Sing?

Neither you nor your students have to sing. Performing word paintings does entail using your voice expressively and possibly even acrobatically, but actual singing can remain optional and specialized musical knowledge is not required.

How Does Word Painting Work to Expand Vocabulary?

In creating their word paintings, students connect the word to a visual and a sonic representation that they create themselves and that are directly related to the word's meaning. According to constructivist learning principles, students learn best when they actively develop conceptual structures through reflection and abstraction (Bereiter, 1994). Through word painting, students come to know the word and its meaning in new and abstract ways. Students will never forget their own words, and they will probably remember many of their peers' words as well.

But Deep Understanding Is More Than Just Remembering the Word and Its Meaning. Ideally, students will have a chance to combine painted words together, connecting them to form an extended narrative that contextualizes the words: "Bashir saw a magnificent blue heron. He was aghast to see the bird eat an old donut someone had dropped on the ground. Littering made Bashir furious." We recommend combining painted words as an extension activity.

Pause and Ponder

- What are some Tier 2 words that would lend themselves particularly well to becoming word paintings?

- What texts could you use to find paintable words?
- Would your students enjoy word painting in pairs or alone?
- Where could you display word paintings?

A Sample Teaching Sequence for Primary Students

1. *Preparing your students for word painting:*
 - a. During shared reading with your class, encourage students to listen for new or interesting words and collect some Tier 2 words. Talk about each word identified. This is the time for explicit teaching: Discuss the word's definition, how it is used in the context of the book, and other ways it can be used. Keep a "word collector" (a posted chart paper divided into alphabetical sections) beside your gathering place to record new and interesting Tier 2 words.
 - b. Model word painting during shared reading. When students (or you!) identify new and interesting words, show the class how you might paint the word, sonically and visually. The next few times, ask students for ideas and compose the word paintings collaboratively. Keep a collection of ways in which a word can be painted near the word collector for students to reference.
2. *Painting words:* When you have collected enough Tier 2 words, write each word on an individual card. Have individual students or pairs select a word (e.g., by drawing a word card from a basket), compose a sonic performance, then visually illustrate how their performance sounds. Although we use the term *painting*, markers, crayons, and colored pencils work just fine. Once students have composed and visually represented their sound compositions, have them share their work with the class.
3. *Performance day:* Have students present their word paintings to the class. After the composers have modeled how the word should sound, have the rest of the class try it out. Encourage the composers to help the class get the performance just right.

Final Thoughts

Through the integration of visual arts with music and literacy, this activity can leverage students'

multimodal meaning making to help them develop deep, confident knowledge of a variety of Tier 2 words. Word painting has rich potential to promote word consciousness, enhance vocabulary, and set students firmly on the path to increased reading comprehension and literacy success.

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