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## SAVOR the Word to Reinforce Vocabulary in the Content Areas

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## **SAVOR the word to reinforce vocabulary in the content areas**

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Success in the content areas is determined mainly by the degree to which students master important concepts. This grasp of concepts is the major goal of instruction in all content areas regardless of the modes of presentation such as reading from a textbook, viewing a filmstrip, or listening to a lecture. Along with concept development, the subject matter teacher must recognize the importance of words, whether printed or spoken, to content area learning. Words and content are inseparable. As Allington and Strange (1980, p. 143) state, "identifying a set of key concepts is primarily a task of identifying the vocabulary or the words that represent the concepts."

The major goal of vocabulary instruction in the subject areas should be on understanding and meaning. According to Herber (1978, p. 132), students "need more help in building the related concepts and experience needed to attribute meanings to the words than they do in learning word-recognition skills that enable them to pronounce the words."

Student understanding of the vocabulary can never be left to chance. Teachers must prepare readers for technical vocabulary and related concepts they will encounter in their textbooks and other subject matter materials. Estes and Vaughan (1978,

**Figure 1**

<b>MONSTERS</b>					
	Hairy	Huge	Strong	Mean	Transformation
King Kong	+	+	+	+	-
Hulk	-	+	+	-	+
Dracula	-	-	-	+	+
Cookie Monster	+	-	-	-	-
Godzilla	-	+	+	+	-

<b>FRUIT</b>				
	Grown in temperate climate	Tart tasting	Tree grown	Grown in bunches
Apple	+	+	+	-
Banana	-	-	+	+
Lemon	-	+	+	-
Grapes	+	+	-	+
Melons	+	-	-	-
Persimmon	-	-	+	-
Kumquat	-	+	+	-

pp. 138-52), Vacca (1977), and Stieglitz (1980) present good examples of preparatory activities. However, words must be introduced and used many times in various situations before they can become part of a student's speaking, listening, and reading vocabularies.

It is, therefore, essential that subject matter specialists provide students with meaningful contexts for the exploration and reinforcement of vocabulary. The Subject Area Vocabulary Reinforcement (SAVOR) procedure described in this article is an example of a strategy that teachers can easily use to reinforce and expand content area vocabulary and concepts.

**Semantic feature analysis**

The SAVOR technique is based on an activity described by Johnson and Pearson (1978). The procedure, known as semantic feature analysis, helps students better understand the similar and different meanings of words.

The authors recommend certain steps in implementing a semantic

feature analysis activity. The teacher should first identify a category of words highly familiar to the students. For example, from the repeated appearance of monsters in the movies and on television, a category of "monsters" is well within the experiences of many students. The teacher should then elicit words from the pupils that fit in this category (King Kong, Hulk, Dracula, Cookie Monster, Godzilla) and have the students list these examples in a column on their own pieces of paper. Next, the students should list across the top of the page some features of these monsters (hairy, huge, strong, mean, transformation). Following this, pupils should fill in the matrix by using pluses (+) or minuses (-) to indicate whether a monster has a particular feature. Two examples of completed matrices are provided in Figure 1.

Johnson and Pearson state that as pupils have more experiences with semantic feature analysis, they will discover that some words share the same feature but vary in the amount or degree of that feature. The authors

**Figure 2**

<b>SHAPES</b>					
	Four sided	Curved or rounded lines	Line segment	All sides equal in length	Right angles
Triangle	-	-	+	+	+
Rectangle	+	-	+	-	+
Parallelogram	+	-	+	+	+
Circle	-	+	-	-	-
Trapezoid	+	-	+	-	-
Semicircle	-	+	+	-	-
Square	+	-	+	+	+

suggest that "At that time you may want to switch from a + and a - system to a numerical system (0 = none, 1 = some, 2 = much, 3 = all)" (p. 40).

Once the matrix is filled in, lead the students to discover the uniqueness of each word. As pupils examine the different patterns of pluses and minuses, they should realize that no two words have the same pattern, thus no two words are identical in meaning.

### **The SAVOR procedure**

Although the steps used to implement the SAVOR procedure are similar to those of semantic feature analysis, there is a major difference in the focus of the two techniques. While semantic feature analysis is used to increase student awareness of similarities and differences in meaning, the SAVOR procedure stresses the reinforcement of vocabulary essential to understanding important concepts in the content areas.

The SAVOR technique is most appropriately used as a culminating activity of a lesson or series of lessons. It should be used only when pupils have had some experience with or knowledge of a topic. Exposure to the SAVOR technique provides opportunities for both teacher and students to manipulate ideas and

expand concepts introduced during instruction.

The following example of how a subject matter specialist can use the SAVOR procedure is from mathematics and the topic is shapes. Two assumptions should be made. First, the pupils have been exposed to a series of lessons on shapes, and second, the students have had experience with this type of exercise and are familiar with the steps needed to complete the activity.

The teacher reintroduces the topic of shapes and then divides the pupils into small groups. Groups of no more than five seem to function best. The members of each group are asked to generate a list of shapes. A recorder lists in a column words that fit in this category: triangle, rectangle, parallelogram, circle, trapezoid, semicircle, square. Next, pupils are asked to identify features common to one or more of the examples of shapes listed in the column. These characteristics are written across the top of the page: four-sided, curved or rounded lines, line segments, all sides equal in length, lines at right angles.

Students are then asked to put pluses or minuses next to each shape and beneath each feature. This step is completed as a group activity and

**Figure 3**

	One or more satellites	Larger than Earth	Circled with rings	Closer to Sun than Earth	Frigid temperatures
Jupiter					
Mercury					
Venus					
Saturn					
Pluto					

gives group members an opportunity to agree or disagree with each other's choices. When pupils disagree, they are encouraged to defend their decisions. Materials such as textbooks, workbooks and class notes can be used as references to defend choices. Pupils can, therefore, learn a great deal from each other.

For example, one group member who placed a plus next to "parallelogram" and beneath "all sides equal in length" supported his choice by stating that a rhombus is an example of a parallelogram that has four equal sides. Another student, in defending her decision for putting a plus next to "triangle" and under the same characteristic explained that an equilateral triangle has three sides equal in length.

Once the matrix is completed (Figure 2), lead students to discover and discuss the unique and common features of each shape. Also, the members of each group can give additional words and features and complete the expanded matrix with pluses and minuses. As an example, shapes identified in the discussion such as rhombus can now be included on this list.

#### **Introducing the SAVOR procedure**

The SAVOR procedure is introduced to students in stages. As pupils progress through each of the stages recommended below, they become

more familiar with the technique and less dependent on the instructor for directions.

*First stage: Understanding the process.* To introduce students to the SAVOR procedure, the teacher selects a topic that is very familiar to the students. This first topic should not come from the class content area, on the assumption that pupils need to understand the process fully before they can be expected to apply it successfully to material from the content areas. It is best to begin with categories that are concrete and within the experience of the pupils before progressing to more abstract and less familiar topics. Examples of starter categories could include jobs, fruit, sports, vehicles, and furniture.

Once a category has been chosen, either by the instructor or pupils, the teacher explains each step of the procedure, and then, using an overhead projector or chalkboard, works with the students to complete the matrix according to the steps discussed in the "monsters" example. Eventually, students should be able to work together in small groups to select a topic and complete the matrix independently.

*Second stage: Applying the process to subject matter.* The application of the SAVOR technique to subject matter material can be made as soon as pupils have shown they understand the process. The teacher begins by

selecting a content area topic. It is assumed that, as a result of prior instruction, students possess a certain degree of familiarity with the chosen topic. Examples of topics that lend themselves to the SAVOR procedure are (1) social studies—wars, climates, branches of government; (2) science—planets, insects, organs of the body; (3) English—literary genres, parts of speech, Shakespeare's plays; (4) mathematics—units of measure, angles, triangles.

The instructor identifies the vocabulary and concepts that are key to understanding the topic and uses this information to develop a portion of the matrix. A science teacher might produce the material that appears in Figure 3, based upon a series of lessons in a unit on the planets.

The incomplete matrix is then presented to the entire class and the teacher shows pupils how to fill in the matrix with pluses and minuses. Teacher and pupils accomplish this task together. Reasons for choices are discussed whenever students disagree with each other. As the need arises, time is devoted to reteaching concepts which were not fully mastered.

*Third stage: Building towards independence.* As pupils progress, they are given more and more responsibility to complete the task on their own. When they have developed sufficient understanding of the topic, the teacher divides the class into small groups. The topic for the exercise is either given by the instructor or selected by the students. The members of each group follow the steps needed to produce a matrix. They then share the results of their work with the whole class. Throughout the process, students are encouraged to pursue their own thoughts and to share and

elaborate on ideas with others in the group as well as the entire class.

The teacher's role during a small group activity of this type is clearly defined by Herber, (1970, p. 205).

You do not remain idle during the group work. This period of time provides an excellent opportunity to observe your students' strengths and weaknesses as part of the functional diagnosis. You should be ready to step in and help a group resolve a problem. If the entire group is following an erroneous line of reasoning, a quick question on your part will direct them. If one group is doing the work only superficially, a question from you will show them the superficiality. If a group is spending too much time on each step, a word from you will urge them on. If two or three individuals, or an entire group, are having particular difficulty with any combination of the skills, you can realistically devote time to these students as the remainder of the class is engaged in purposeful activity.

During this exercise, as students work together to complete the grid and share and discuss their choices, the teacher can observe them informally and determine how well they have mastered major concepts. The teacher can then decide whether or not students are prepared to move on to the next topic or unit.

Finally, depending on the topic, the subject matter specialist may want to increase the complexity of the exercise by having students switch from a plus and minus system to a numerical system based on a scale from zero to three (0 = none, 3 = all). This modification provides students with opportunity to attain greater precision as they complete the matrix.

### **Concluding remarks**

Reinforcement is critical for vocabulary instruction in the content areas. Accordingly, it is most important that classroom teachers take advantage

of every opportunity to familiarize students with terms essential to understanding the important concepts.

The SAVOR procedure is an example of a reinforcement strategy that can lead to more than the simple memorization of words and their meanings. Students exposed to this approach have the experience of examining relationships and manipulating ideas. They are actively using vocabulary introduced in previous lessons. This type of involvement should eventually lead to the internalization of new words inherent to

understanding major concepts in the content areas. ■

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#### Thoughts on a fellow student

Your stare twists inward for miles  
after leaving your eyes. I sit here,  
no better than you in intellect,  
ready for competition, and I read  
your body's advertisements: arms  
folded, a coat zipped to the chin,  
and sometimes the hat.

You were in grade school once, where  
almost everyone cared, and you  
may have helped someone like me  
in math. Now your effort stays  
soft, skittered by personal ghosts.  
You focus on the teacher, assured  
that he will not inspire, inform,  
or stop your drift to the safe place.

*Dean E. Schoen, Escanaba, Michigan*