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Reading for Pleasure and Vocabulary Instruction – Pac Man with Purpose

Author and lecturer **Kelly Ashley** makes a brilliant comparison to Pac Man's journey - Pac Man with purpose - in this comprehensive article which is full of hints and tips to travel with determination to the destination of becoming a lifelong reader.

I am a child of the 80s. Rubik's cubes, mix tapes (on cassette, of course) and arcade games like Pac Man were staples of my childhood. Four decades later, retro 80s trends are making a comeback and Pac Man is no exception. Waka, waka, waka... this ubiquitous cry draws us back into the maze-action video game, pitting our hungry, yellow hero against supernatural forces.

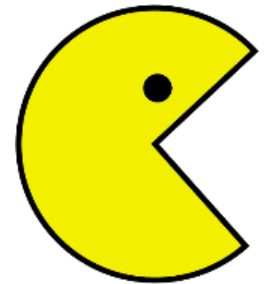
Pac Man's insatiable campaign for 'pellets' in the game can be likened somewhat to our learners' journey in obtaining new vocabulary. Whilst his is somewhat of a mindless quest, roaming the maze without a clearly determined path, we must not take the same approach with our pupils. Clarity of thought for our learners' passage is paramount – understanding the destination and planning the expedition, Pac Man, but *with purpose*. According to Beck, et al. (2013), the ambition is to acquire 50,000 to 60,000 words by the end of formal education. If learners are on this trajectory, they must devour between 2,000 and 3,000 new words per year. This monumental trek cannot be achieved with explicit instruction alone.

Explicit instruction

Some words will need to be examined more closely through targeted or 'explicit'

instruction. Using this approach, focus words are selected and taught in depth, employing a range of word learning strategies such as: saying and repeating (phonology); scrutinising visual features (orthography); exploring similar (synonyms) and opposite (antonyms) words; analysing usage, connections and grammatical function (pragmatics, semantics and syntax); investigating the linguistic history (etymology) and diving into how words are constructed (morphology).

A pitfall of explicit instruction is teaching new words unrelated to context or use. The power of our lexicon is revealed in how words are chosen and used for specific purposes – context is king. Whilst a 'word of the day' approach can be tempting, it is imperative that the focus remains firmly on communication. In my *Word Power* approach, I suggest selection of a 'Weekly Top Ten' (Ashley, 2019), ten words chosen for their semantic connectedness, the ultimate goal - communication. Key questions for word selection include: Which do children need to know at this point in time and for what purpose? How will they test out new language, in different contexts, thus deepening their understanding?





Implicit instruction

Beck et. al. (2013) suggest explicit instruction of 400 words each academic year, leaving 1,600 to 2,600 more to add to learners' word hoards through other means. This is where implicit instruction approaches can help as pupils battle their way through the maze of word learning. The EEF (2021) defines implicit instruction as 'exposure to a rich language environment with opportunities to hear and confidently experiment with new words.' Consider how this is enacted in your context by:

- **Examining interactions between adults and children.** Do exchanges support application and choice of newly-learned vocabulary? Is communication modelled effectively? Intentionally plan meaningful contexts for learners to apply new language as they read, write, speak and listen. Drop newly-learned words into informal conversations, demonstrating how to select words for communication.
- **Allowing for ample time to hear and share stories read aloud.** Observe and reflect on children's behaviours as they choose books to read - when and how do they share and enjoy reading on their own and with others? Engage them in choosing books to read aloud with 'book voting stations' – two or three books for story time, a peg or counter indicating their book of choice as in the image (left). The benefit here is engaging learner-led choice. Even if 'my' choice isn't read aloud, this is still available in the reading environment to share with a friend during independent reading time or to borrow for home reading.
- **Reviewing the quality of the book stock available in the school and/or classroom library.** Are there texts that tempt and reflect different diversities and realities? Is the book



stock up-to-date with new and bold as well as old and gold authors, poets and illustrators? Invite readers to recommend using 'book promotion.' Give '3 words to tempt,' 'post-it mini-reviews' or an 'elevator book pitch' to generate excitement and interest. Buying new book stock is an investment; make the most of this expenditure by amplifying awareness.

- **Pondering the place of poetry, non-fiction, graphic novels, comics, magazines and other text forms in the classroom and at home.** How do the materials on offer spark opportunities to play with language and broaden world knowledge? Access to a wide range of texts – different forms, themes, genre and structures – help us explore how language is used for different purposes. Some children will be familiar with comics and magazines from home reading – are we aware of these reading practices? How might the introduction of other text forms, such as graphic novels, tempt them into our reading community?

The 'power pellet' of vocabulary learning

When evaluating instructional approaches, we often think of only two sides of a coin – explicit and implicit. But what if there was something else, something potentially even more powerful than instruction? There is, in fact, a pivotal piece missing in this instructional maze – a magical 'power pellet.' In the Pac Man game, our hero chomps a flashing 'power pellet' and immediately becomes invincible – moving at speed, indefatigable in his quest. This upgrade is akin to the lexical boost that reading for pleasure (RfP) provides alongside vocabulary instruction. RfP is an underlying force in our learners' linguistic arsenals with innumerable qualities. Our language learners' 'power pellets,' however, are made up of volition, agency and the desire to read.

This acknowledgement of the potentiality of reader volition is mirrored in McQuillan's findings (2019), which report that vocabulary instruction alone was not as efficient in the short or longer term for building wider vocabulary knowledge as compared to 'just reading.' It is recognised, however, that there is a strong place for vocabulary instruction to support learners who have not yet acquired the necessary reading skills (word recognition, comprehension and fluency). For these children, a dual-mode approach to instruction (both explicit and implicit approaches) is an essential piece of the puzzle to further support language development.

We mustn't forget, however, that the ultimate goal is to build life-long readers, those who not only can read, but choose to do so. This is the key to continued vocabulary growth and sustainability over time. The OECD (2004) reinforces this effect – 'the will to read (reading for pleasure) directly influences the skill, and vice versa.' Reading for pleasure, in this sense, can be our transformative 'power pellet' – enabling cognitive, social, emotional and relational benefits.

The efficacy of RfP and the additional positive influence on vocabulary development are also well-recognised in research by Sullivan and Brown (2013). They found that being a frequent reader of choice is linked to substantial progress between 10 and 16 and that RfP is most strongly linked to progress in vocabulary. Reading for pleasure, in fact, is more strongly linked to cognitive progress in adolescence than parental education or influence. Children who read for pleasure also gain wider general knowledge of the world (Cunningham & Stannovich, 1998; Clark & Rumbold, 2006).

Tackling the 'ghosts'

However, this journey isn't always smooth sailing and the path is often lined with obstacles. Just as Pac Man must be wary of the 'ghosts' in the game, we must also be mindful of certain conditions that can cause roadblocks to language development. These hurdles will be different year to year, cohort to cohort, pupil to pupil, but as professionals and leaders of learning in our classrooms, it is our role to tackle these obstacles head-on. Tackle these obstacles head-on by:

- **Building strong foundations in early literacy skills.** Consider whether shared reading, storytelling, high-quality modelling and interactions are key features of Early Years provision. Listening to and enjoying books read aloud are essential pedagogies to employ, alongside the freedom to share reading preferences, informally chat about books and discuss reader identity. Develop links with the local library and/or local independent bookshop to invite children into community reading spaces from a young age – establish habits that will last a lifetime.
- **Recognising and celebrating the raft of word and world knowledge that children possess.** Think carefully about influences that have shaped your learners' knowledge. What is their personal identity and how are 'everyday literacies' at home enacted? What celebrations and special occasions do they take part in with their family and in their community? Do they have access to books in the home and who do they see as 'readers' amongst friends and family? Unlock this diverse knowledge by talking to families about their daily lives, inviting them into school for coffee mornings and other informal events.

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- **Fostering language-rich environments in school and at home.**

Vocabulary development is not as simple as just teaching a random assemblage of new words. Language-rich environments provide a wrap-around framework of support as learners test out new words to use for different reasons.

- **Consider how explicit and implicit instruction are inter-connected in practice.**

For instance, if a trip to the farm shop is planned, new language may be introduced. *Farm, shopkeeper, organic, produce, delicious, ripe or healthy* may be apt choices for explicit instruction. For the implicit focus, weave in opportunities for role play as pupils generate questions they can ask before, during and after their visit - What types of organic produce do you have? What do you think is the most delicious fruit?

- **Offer books and other reading material linked to food or farming, inviting interaction with peers and offering adults golden opportunities to model new language.**

Choices may include the *Kitchen Disco* by Clare Foges and Al Murphy or the poetry anthology *Midnight Feasts* by A.F. Harrold. Local restaurant menus, food catalogues from local supermarkets and farm shop marketing materials would round off this linked reading selection nicely. This is connected vocabulary learning and that which is clearly linked to purpose, curated to invite readers to spaces where they can use resources to enrich understanding.

- **Sparkling interest in words and language**

English is a living language. Words are constantly arriving and leaving this corpus as language is dependent on social use. Ignite interest by exploring word ‘roots’ (morphology), revealing connections between the new and known. Delve

into word history (etymology), exploring curious word stories. *Literally* by Patrick Skipworth, *The Dictionary of Difficult Words* by Jane Solomon and *An Interesting Word for Every Day of the Year* by Meredith Rowe are three books that can kindle this early love of language. Reading aloud sessions can be transformed into ‘interactive read alouds’ by emphasising new or interesting words with physical actions, exaggerated facial expressions and sound effects. Carry this practice into independent reading time by encouraging learners to act out new ideas they encounter as they read on their own or with a buddy. Some may even choose to record new discoveries in a ‘word journal’ for safe keeping. By sharing a passion for language, we are inviting ownership. The first step in this journey is to get them to notice, then we (and they) can be the amplifier

Forging a path through the ‘maze’ of vocabulary learning.

By tackling these ghost-like barriers head-on, we can facilitate a smoother run through the maze of vocabulary learning. Whilst each learner will forge their own path, learning and connecting language in different ways and at different rates in their mental library, we can support them holistically by being aware of obstacles and helping to clear the way. This involves examining not only the approaches to explicit and implicit vocabulary instruction, but also the time and energy that is devoted to fostering RfP practice and pedagogy within the reading curriculum offer. Building volitional readers cannot be left to chance; there is too much at stake. This needs time, dedication and staff development, just as other skill-focused aspects of our reading curriculum are afforded.

The Open University's year-long [Reading Schools Programme: Building a Culture of Reading](#) is a fantastic way to start this journey. This evidence-informed programme empowers school leaders to build a rich reading culture and curricula that will impact on children's life chances.



Through supported, year-long exploration, schools identify focus children who may be considered RfP disadvantaged – those who are not readers of choice, those without true volition and agency. This may be children in receipt of Pupil Premium funding or the most vulnerable 20%, however, this may also include those who can read, but don't choose to do so defined as 'can, but don't' (Moss, 2021) or those who read in school (perhaps the chosen books as part of the reading curriculum) but not at home. These children are missing the enigmatic boost of RfP, that which we know cannot only support, but magnify vocabulary development.

The *Teachers as Readers* research (Cremin et al., 2014) found that teachers who have strong knowledge of children's literature and other texts and also of children's reading practices are better positioned to make decisions around RfP pedagogy and practice, thereby building strong reading communities.

- Establish your own knowledge as a starting point - know yourself as a reader; know your learners as readers.
- Recognise what they bring to the language table and how you can shape provision most effectively, building on and broadening their experiences.
- Construct a bespoke maze of reciprocity and interaction, celebrating the contributions of all.
- Ensure plentiful opportunities to utilise new language with true purpose as they navigate the network of vocabulary learning.

By nurturing a love of words, we can invigorate our learners' taste for language and establish life-long reading habits. In short, we can be Pac Man with purpose – knowing the journey and travelling with determination to the destination.

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Kelly Ashley (@kashleyenglish) is a lecturer in Reading for Pleasure for *The Open University*. She is also author of *Word Power: Amplifying vocabulary instruction* (2019). She has a particular interest in the intersection between language, experience and reader identity. Explore free OU resources for developing RfP in your school by visiting <https://ourfp.org/>.