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First Words

“When I use a word,” Humpty Dumpty said, in a rather scornful tone, “it means just what I choose it to mean, neither more nor less.”

“The question is,” said Alice, “whether you can make words mean so many different things.”

“The question is,” said Humpty Dumpty, “which is to be master—that’s all.”

—Lewis Carroll

This is a text about vocabulary and the role it has in students’ academic success. More importantly, *Vocabulary Instruction for Academic Success* focuses on the critical role teachers have in actively teaching vocabulary and vocabulary skills to today’s students. Our first words are about two teachers and their impact on one student.

Teacher 1/Kindergarten: When Chad was four, during the summer before he began kindergarten, he and his dad made frequent trips to the library. At this early age, Chad already had favorite authors, his absolute favorite being Mercer Mayer. When his father asked him why he enjoyed Mayer’s books so much, Chad stated, “I like his pictures and the words he uses.” Imagine Chad’s disappointment when on one library visit, he found a

Mayer book about one of his favorite topics, frogs, only to discover the book had no written story. Mayer's wonderful illustrations were there, but the author had not written a single word.

Chad's dad had a solution. They would purchase their own copy of *A Boy, a Dog, and a Frog* (Mayer 1967), and Chad would be the author. Chad thought this was a fine idea. After they looked through the book, they went back and examined each page. As they did so, Chad told the story and Chad's dad wrote down, right below each illustration, the great words Chad used. When they were done, Chad's dad wrote, right on the cover, "Story by Chad Bishop."

Chad's kindergarten year began and, in no time at all, Teacher 1 presented her students with their first show-and-tell responsibility. They were to bring to class something that was especially important to them and share it with the class. Chad's choice was *A Boy, a Dog, and a Frog*, the book he had authored as summer came to an end. Chad, both nervous and proud, shared his book.

It was at this point that Teacher 1 did something that to this day, 30 years later, Chad has not forgotten. What did Teacher 1 do? She said to him, "Chad, what a great story and what grand words you used to tell it. You are quite an author. May I take your book home and show it to my husband?"

That afternoon, Chad came home with his chest out and head high. He was an author who used "grand" words and his teacher was showing his book to her husband! Chad has since earned his graduate degree in creative writing, completed two novels, and teaches high school English. There is little doubt that Teacher 1 had a significant impact on the professional role Chad assumed in life.

Teacher 2/Late High School: Chad, now well into his high school years, was on the varsity swim team, dating a foreign exchange student from Sweden, and writing for the school newspaper. He was also a conscientious student. The Friday before his first formal dance—he had asked the Swedish foreign exchange student, Eva, and she had accepted—his biology teacher assigned 200 vocabulary words to be defined, and the definitions were to be turned in the following Monday.

Chad did not greet the assignment with enthusiasm. He hadn't picked up his tux, his car was a mess, he needed a haircut, and the swim team had an important meet. Sunday was not an option, as he had to head down the road with his family to celebrate a grandparent's birthday. The family rallied. Chad's mom picked up the tux, his sister washed his car, and his dad provided transportation to the swim meet. During and even after the meet, while Eva and the dance beckoned, Chad searched for the definitions to 200 biology terms. He finished, donned his tux and, looking exceptionally handsome, raced out the door for an "Enchanted Evening Under the Sea." His mom, dad, and sister breathed a sigh of relief and ordered pizza.

On the way to the birthday celebration the next day, Chad thanked his parents, both of whom are teachers, and his sister. He stated, rather empathically, that if he ever teaches, he will never give his students an assignment like the one he was given. He wondered aloud how many of those definitions he would remember in 10 years, or even 10 days!

On Monday, because so few students had completed the definitions, the teacher rescinded the assignment. Chad was not happy and asked whether those who had completed the assignment should receive extra credit. The teacher complied. Although the extra credit made

this experience a bit more tolerable, it could not buy back the hours he and his family lost that weekend because of a meaningless assignment.

These stories depict two teachers—one who had a tremendously positive impact and another who, unintentionally, had a rather negative impact.

As you read *Vocabulary Instruction for Academic Success*, you will see that current researchers make it very clear that vocabulary growth is essential to academic success and that the teacher's role in this growth is critical. You will also be provided with an abundance of vocabulary strategies—unlike the one used by Chad's high school teacher—that lead students to make new words their own, words they will then be able to use to enhance their social, academic, and professional worlds. Every chapter begins with an opening activity to help you start thinking about what is in the chapter ahead. Take the time to complete these short activities and even jot down your answers. At the end of each chapter, you may wish to revisit the chapter opener and see if any of your responses have changed. Each chapter concludes with a section called "Think About It." This is your opportunity to reflect on what you have learned in the chapter and to apply your learning. You are encouraged to turn to the chapter of this book that most appeals to you at this moment but hopefully you will visit the other chapters as well. Together, they provide you with important information that will support you as you develop a rich vocabulary program for your students. Best wishes.