

Podcast 494: Enhancing Thinking through Vocabulary

Episode Transcript

Andrew Pudewa: The enhancement of vocabulary levels up anything they want to say because it's hard to think a thought that you don't have the words to think it in.

Julie Walker: Hello, and welcome to the Arts of Language Podcast with Andrew Pudewa, founder of the Institute for Excellence in Writing or as many like to say, "IEW." My name is Julie Walker, and I'm honored to serve Andrew and IEW as the chief marketing officer. Our goal is to equip teachers and teaching parents with methods and materials, which will aid them in training their students to become confident and competent communicators and thinkers.

Julie Walker: So Andrew 2025. That's the year we're on, by the way.

Andrew Pudewa: They go by awfully fast, don't they? Julie?

Julie Walker: They sure do. We have selected a theme about thinking how to think, how to teach thinking, and this episode fits in that thread of the year. And specifically, I would like to speak with you about vocabulary and how vocabulary actually helps with building the skill of thinking.

Andrew Pudewa: We see this in kids writing. It's so obvious, especially if they have no experience with what we do and would fall into that general kind of reluctant writer category. Not because they're not smart, just they've never really learned, and you ask them to write something, and the words they use are very limited.

They're, in their active vocabulary, very limited. The stereotypical example that I will often use is ask a child to write about their dog or their pet, and they're all excited. "Yeah, I can write about my dog and they'll start: *My dog is a really awesome dog. I really, really love my dog because she is so awesome. She is really, really fun, and I really, really love my totally awesome dog.*" And then they run outta steam. What more can you say? You've just said everything that you can think of to say about your dog. Of course you read it, and it's not good, but how do you get past that? And that's kind of maybe a little bit of an extreme example, but I've seen things that are pretty close to that.

Julie Walker: Sure.

Andrew Pudewa: And one of the things that I have delighted in all these years of running around and teaching writing classes and meeting lots of kids and making videos and getting letters from kids is just how the enhancement of vocabulary levels up anything they want to say because it's hard to think a thought that you don't have the words to think it.

We're kind of limited in our thinking by the vocabulary that we have available, or we end up trying to say something with lots of little words, but it doesn't carry the same impact as a

maybe less common, but more precise term. So I know we've done, from the very beginning, Webster was all about vocabulary. The spelling program has got some unusual words in there, and people have sometimes said, why do you have these odd words in a spelling program? People don't often use these words. Well, that's because they don't know them.

Julie Walker: Right. Exactly.

Andrew Pudewa: If they learn them in the process of learning to spell them, now they've got more words and they can say more things. Of course, the banned words list—this works marvelously well to sensitize kids to options. Don't just go with the first word that pops in your mind because that's going to be *awesome* or *cool*.

Julie Walker: Right,

Andrew Pudewa: What are some alternatives to that? And once you get into that zone of giving kids some words that they temporarily are disallowed from using, then they have to start searching for more and better options and then they start to use those and play with them. And again, we can always go back to our favorite metaphor, cooking, right? Yeah. You have your little spice rack, you've got your ingredients, you're limited by what you've got. The more ingredients you have, the more creative you can be.

Julie Walker: Not just ingredients, but quality ingredients. I love watching some of my favorite chefs on YouTube videos, and toasting your spices enhances the flavor; grinding your own spices rather than buying the. Oh, God forbid you would use a prepackaged mix. But even turns out the dry spices that you buy in the containers are substandard, and what you need is the whole spices and a little spice grinder and it's like, wow, okay.

Andrew Pudewa: prepackaged mix is better than nothing.

Julie Walker: Yes. Okay.

Andrew Pudewa: I mean, if you're trying to play with stuff, and, but it is kind of that way where you get into the world and you have certain tools and you play with them and you experiment and then you like that. So now you want better tools, better ingredients.

Kids are just like that with words. So how do we furnish the vocabulary? Well. We could look at it on the listening, speaking, reading, writing track. Children will probably never use a word that they've never heard. I mean, when you're older, maybe teenager or something, you have a tool like a thesaurus and you go find a word, and maybe you haven't heard it, but you can get a pretty good guess on how it's pronounced.

You maybe recognize some roots or something and you can experiment with using it. But with young children in that rapid vocabulary acquisition period from six to 12 years old, they're going to be pretty much limited to the words they've heard. So what do we want to do? Get high quality literature into their ears, into their brain.

Because if they're just limited to whatever they hear in daily conversation with peers and parents and other people, they're not going to have that same opportunity for that level up of vocabulary they'll get from reading the books that we've talked about on various podcasts. So that would be the first one.

Then if we go into the speaking zone, now we're looking at the power of memorized poetry. Because poets very often have to use words that you don't normally bump into, even in books, and use them in ways that you don't normally bump into, particularly in daily life. They have to match the meter and the rhyme scheme, and so they're, they're using words in, in unique ways, and that peaks the imagination and it sticks in the memory.

Then if the student will go ahead and memorize the poem and then recite it a few times or a few dozen times, it moves the word from the passive vocabulary. Okay. I can hear or read that word and kind of know what it means into the active vocabulary. I can use that word. I can speak that word, and then I can write that word.

So that listening and speaking is really just very critical foundational to everything. Now, if we look at at reading, listening is kind of auditory reading in a way, but when you're looking at text, you're more likely to see a word and say, I don't know that word. Stop and find out what it means.

If it's an audio and it's just going by, yeah, there's words you don't know, but you can't really stop it, right? Sometimes one of my grandchildren will interrupt, what does that mean? And I'm happy when they do that, but a lot of the time they just want to get the story. But when you're a little older and you're reading and you see a word and you're not quite sure what it is, if you have the discipline to find out, and whether that means ask a nearby adult or use a dictionary like tool that you have, whether it's a one of those ancient things we call books or a phone or a tablet or something, and take the time. That's one of the best disciplines you can help children develop, especially around that age, I would say of 12, 13, 14, 15. See a word, don't know what it is. Go find out. Understand what it means, the definition. Maybe look at the roots too. Then go back and read what you were reading. So careful reading, close reading when it comes to vocabulary acquisition is very, very important. And I think most children aren't going to get this instinctively or naturally.

Most children are going to need it modeled and then do it with them, and then hopefully they pick it up and say, okay, I tried this reading a hard-to-read book which was *Moby Dick*, and there were a lot of words I did not know,

Julie Walker: Interesting.

Andrew Pudewa: And it kind of made me astounded, how did he know all these words? How did he get so smarter than me? But he's also kind of in a specific zone of wailing and nautical terminology and a time period, and it's just amazing to me how many kind of cool and interesting words there were, but I thought, well, if I'm going to extract maximum value

out of this, and it was hard because I don't think I got every word, but I was trying, at least I was trying.

And then some things, you can't understand them if you don't know the words, right? So it's things that are more of a technical or theological nature, right? If you don't know the word. You don't know what the sentence means. If you don't know what that sentence means, you're not going to really understand what the paragraph or the whole idea was about.

So that would be the reading side. And then the writing side is going to be dependent on the active vocabulary that you have built in those other areas. And then just having the willingness to wait to stop and search in your mind for the perfect word.

Julie Walker: Maybe you can't find it in your mind, so you go to word lists, which is what we do.

Andrew Pudewa: that is what we do. Of course, one of my favorite products and we've had it a long, long time. Bless the woman who made it. She's brought a lot of joy to a lot of people. *A Word Write Now* is better than a thesaurus because a thesaurus can just kind of mechanically give you a list of synonyms that are possible.

They're not organized in a way that would be as useful, whereas *A Word Write Now* is organized by character quality and the words are separated into parts of speech. We have the -ly adverbs, the strong verbs, the quality adjectives, and even some nouns. And I think those books would be fun for kids just to scan through even if they aren't trying to get the strong verb they need in this very paragraph right now.

Julie Walker: So I tell you a story. I don't know that I've ever told this story on this podcast before. You know my poor kids. I tell stories about them and I say, Hey, you have to listen to the podcast because you know this one's about you. So my youngest son, Mikael, who works for us now, does a lot of our video editing.

His favorite book growing up was the Oxford Dictionary, Andrew. It was the Illustrated Oxford Dictionary. And he would, that was his book that he would fall asleep to, and he became so, I don't know, smart, he learned words that adults didn't know. Like we were playing Pictionary one time with another family, not Pictionary. It was some type of word game where he was partnered up with my friend Jim. When Jim got the word, he said, there is no way that my daughter Amy, and our son Mikael, there's no way they're going to get this word. So he is describing the word, are you ready? Flying buttress. And Mikael, who was four years old at the time, was like, oh, oh, I, I know what this is. Hold on, hold on. Flying buttress, and Jim fell out of his chair, could not believe that Michael could. And I think about that, this award right now, just, hey, give that book to your kid and let them look at the colorful pictures and the list of words that go with that character quality. You've got grumpy.

I think of the one book that my granddaughter loved to read, *The Pout, Pout Fish*. Do you remember the *The Pout, Pout Fish*?

Andrew Pudewa: I think I missed that.

Julie Walker: Oh, well he is always sad and sitting at the bottom and everybody's trying to make him smile. But no, he was the pout, pout fish. And I think that's kind of like they took a page from this book, a word right now, where they're trying to show character qualities in these animated characters—delightfully colored, almost cartoonish characters that describe angry or... I can't think of the words, but yeah.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, and good children's authors do this as well. Not necessarily even relying on pictures. One book that comes to mind is *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, and I read that recently to some grandchildren and I just thought he's brilliant. He is a brilliant writer, and the character of Willy Wonka in particular, he set that character up to use a very high level of vocabulary, but he'd say a word that the kids don't know, and then he would define it in eight different ways. They would then learn not just that word, but other words that were all in that category of meaning.

Julie Walker: Interesting. Yep.

Andrew Pudewa: And then once you have kind of a category of meaning, then you start to be able to differentiate the nuances between the synonyms. Because synonyms are what words that mean the same thing, but there's no two words that mean exactly the same thing.

And I just realized what a brilliant writer he is, brilliant in that he understood children really well, and he was able to play with the words in such a delightful way that they're learning and not even really noticing that they're

Julie Walker: Yep. Well, I wanted to just wrap up what it is we're talking about today and just be very specific about how we teach vocabulary at IEW, because we don't have a book that says Vocabulary Building Skills. We just kind of infuse it in a lot of our different materials, starting with *Structure and Style for Students* as we mentioned.

If children are to choose an -ly word, they need a list of -ly words, and we provide that list and there's a whole bunch of vocabulary. And we do that for prepositions. We do that for the banned word list, where they're creating a list of substitutes for weak, lame, lousy words. Right? And that's *Structure and Style for Students*.

Our theme-based books have vocabulary built in, and there's oftentimes games that are included with them, and they get extra points if they use the vocabulary word in their writing assignment. Then of course we mentioned *A Word Write Now* is just this great resource for any type of writing that we teach here at IEW.

But then our *Fix It! Grammar*: every lesson has a word, every day has a word that the students are to define, and they define the word in the context of how it's used in the sentence, and that's such an important skill. So although we don't have, like I said, a vocabulary curriculum, we teach vocabulary in the context of grammar.

Andrew Pudewa: And to put a clincher on this, the spelling program has a lot of good vocabulary.

Julie Walker: And there we go.

Andrew Pudewa: As well, and people will sometimes ask this question, well, is this a complete language arts program? I don't think that there's any easy way to define that. I think it's kind of like saying eighth grade standards—like that doesn't mean anything, but if we look at what we're doing, the things that we're doing are all integrated, and so in that way, absolutely. It is a complete language arts program.

Julie Walker: That's what we do. Thank you, Andrew.

Julie Walker: Thanks so much for joining us. If you enjoyed this episode and want to hear more, please subscribe to our podcast in iTunes, Stitcher, or Spotify. Or just visit us each week at IEW.com/podcast. Here you can also find show notes and relevant links from today's broadcast. One last thing: would you mind going to iTunes to rate and review our podcast? This really helps other smart, caring listeners like you find us. Thanks so much.