On Your Way with Dr. Christina Williams

Mini session 3/5 Comparing Words, Dynamic Dictionary

INTRO

Whether you're a teacher who's on your way to school to work with kids and you're leaning into the science of reading movement, or you're on your way to tutor some great kids who are struggling with learning to read and spell well, or you're a parent who'd like to learn to better equip and inspire your children from home, the *On Your Way* podcast is for you.

I'm Dr. Christina Williams, and I'm your host.

During the main episode about vocabulary, I shared that there'd be **mini** episodes, following, where I'd share how students received vocabulary instruction in our classroom—so you can try them in your teaching situations. I've already shared mini episode #1:

~~**1** how to highlight words featured in the authentic materials you share during your read aloud time, so words are introduced in context, and you provide student-friendly definitions~~

Today I'm going to share

~~**2 how you can encourage the use of more sophisticated vocabulary while your students are writing**~~

~~**3**~~ how to promote comparisons of words (make connections between words to aid in recall)

4 how to address roots and affixes with your students (that won't put them to sleep) and address words' grammar structures
5 how to provide multiple exposures to the words you've featured/intentionally noticed

Comparing words can be an effective way to focus attention on subtle differences in word meanings. Even words we use often can be nuanced in ways we don't fully recognize until we compare and/or contrast them with other words having similar meanings.

In this podcast, we're going to explore a variety of ways to compare word meanings in such a way that (hopefully) inspires us to closely consider our word choices as we express our thoughts with others in speech and in print.

I'll begin by sharing how **you** can use semantic gradients with kids. In educational settings, we often call this **an exploration of "shades of meaning**." We'll be considering word meanings and word relationships while placing them on a gradient. We'll begin with our initial thoughts about word meanings, but a dictionary or dictionary app will be called upon to firm up our thinking.

This work is very well suited for examining adjectives, or *describing words*, which are quite useful in everyday linguistic tasks. We'll discover what we know while also nudging our kids toward using more sophisticated words and to strive to more accurately convey what they are trying to say.

Before you begin working on sorting words, I suggest giving your kids some of those paint swatches with colors arranged from lightest to darkest. Share that a gradient is organized in order of magnitude—or how much of something there is. In the paint swatches show colors with an increasing amount of pigment added to the base, often white. You can demonstrate adding more and more pigment by showing white paint in a jar and gradually adding more and more of a selected color. Painting a swatch of paint with white, then white plus a bit of blue, then a little more blue, then a little more blue, etc. can do the trick for showing a *gradient.* In the following lessons, we're going to organize **words** on a gradient. Each word will have more or less of something—depending on the words we're using. First, we're going to compare words showing size.

Activity 1:

String a piece of clothesline across your teaching space and have plenty of clothespins on hand. I hung mine in front of a whiteboard so the word cards stayed vertical ensuring students could see them well. You'll present your students with word cards (I use cards like the ones I shared about in the previous episode, those 24" sentence strips but instead of cutting them into thirds, I cut them into fourths so I have lots of 6" long cards (with handwriting guidelines) onto which I've written the words I've selected for the lesson) that will be hang on the clothesline. The

clothespins make it easy to continually rearrange the words as your class deems necessary, to reveal the most sense-making progression of word.

For an example, I have recently written the following words on those 6" cards: big, diminutive, average, microscopic, huge, gargantuan, wee, normal, immense, tiny, minuscule, puny, enormous, miniature, large, small, mammoth, gigantic, moderate

One at a time, you will give a student a word card to read aloud to the class and then have him or her place it in the center of the semantic gradient/clothesline. You'll give the second student another word to read aloud, and you'll ask him or her to consider if this word conveys more than or less (in size) than the first. The student will place that second word card to the left (if it means less than) or right of the first (if it means more than). The third student will read the next card aloud and determine where she or he'd place that word in relation to the other two cards hanging on the line and try to justify why they feel that is the correct spot. Students can debate the placement of any words, if they'd like, and a group discussion can ensue. *This is the good stuff!* I love hearing my students share why they have the impressions they do about word meanings. And the process of debate helps to fix the word meanings in kids' minds. Remember, you'll have a dictionary or dictionary app on hand (and/or in kids' hands) to ensure accurate definitions, but there is nuance at play too.

Consider the word *wee.* Some kids will have never heard the word before. Others may remember that it's what is said in that sweet game we play with babies' toes and piggies going to the market. When we get to the smallest toe, we say, "Wee, wee, wee . . . All the way home." Some kids may know a song about Zaccheaus, "a wee little man" from the Bible. The point is, we're drawing attention to what kids already know about words and we're building upon that word knowledge and sharing it with the group. With a quick dictionary check, we see the definition is simply *little.* But where would we place it on the gradient. No two words can take the exact same spot. Is *wee* smaller or larger than little?

Note that there will not always be a "correct" answer as your group debates word placements on the clothesline—or the *semantic gradient*. Though words have nearly identical meanings, some words make us *feel* as though one means more or less of something. We're going to take that into consideration as well. I'd place *wee* before *little.* Perhaps, because the word is so rarely used, it packs a bigger punch.

Note that I will place words in order from smallest to largest according to **my** background knowledge, and **you** may place those same words in a somewhat different order according to yours. This practice isn't about being right; it's about thinking through similar word meanings and sharing your feelings—knowing what you know about them and how you've experienced them being used. But it's not **just** about our feelings.

As your students are sorting the words from smallest to largest, you will notice that outside of the "dime a dozen" words *big* and *small*, and maybe even *tiny* and *huge,* most of these words are five-dollar words (or Tier 2 words). Here's was our group's agreed upon organization of those words I shared earlier:

microscopic-minuscule-miniature-tiny-diminutive-puny-wee-small- moderate-average-normal-big-large-huge-gigantic-immense-enormous-mammoth-gargantuan

After exploring these words, when your kids are writing about the size of something, they are certainly better equipped to express themselves more clearly.

Instead of saying, "My mom packed a small piece of cake in my lunch," they can provide a more impactful picture when they say, "The piece of cake my mom pack in my lunch was minuscule."

One more thing: After this lesson, leave the clothesline where it is for the week or so. Kids will be more inspired to incorporate a five-dollar word, perhaps, when they observe the gradient. AND please encourage them to be on the lookout for other words you could add to the gradient. Because the words are on clothespins, it's easy to add more words to the line! You can even challenge your students to add some of the words they'd like to learn to a gradient they make on a piece of paper. It doesn't need to have all the words, but recording about 5-7 of the less-familiar words on their own gradients and placed in their writing folders so they have them on hand—just in case they're needed is a nice way to close the lesson and move onto the next.

When we've finished with a group of words, I also take photos of our final word progression and place them with the word cards in a zipper pouch along with a string of yarn. I allow kids to try organizing them (on a table or on the floor) individually or as a small group. They can check the photo to see if the work they did matched what we'd done earlier—or not. And the thinking they do about who is right can be so powerful.

*Note: Isn't it funny that **diminutive is a big word** that means small, and **big is a small word**that means big?

The Reading Rockets website encourages teachers who are using semantic gradients to

1. Select a pair of opposite words to serve as anchor words. They indicate that you can set up the gradient horizontally or vertically, but you must leave plenty of space for adding words to the gradient. I typically use horizontal formatting (with a clothesline for whole-class instruction and strings of yarn (with no clips, just laid on the table or the floor) for small group instruction, but using a vertical visual display can harken the comparison to a thermometer. This would be especially effective for adjectives comparing temperatures. I want to try that!

2. Though you can generate, with your students, at least five synonyms for each of the opposite words to add to the gradient (as Reading Rockets suggest), initially, I recommend you choose the ten words and present them on word cards— ready for your students to sort. Especially while you're just launching this kind of vocabulary work, kids tend to have difficulty generating **words** and instead use **phrases**. For example, when you invite your students to come up with words having nearly the same meaning as *hot*, many younger children say, *hotter than a firecracker*, or *hot like the oven.* To keep this confusion at bay, so your kids can focus on word meanings, please provide words to the kids in the initial stages of this instruction. Later, you can have kids add to the gradient, and a few sessions later, perhaps, they may begin to generate their own words.

3. As is typical with the most effective instruction, it's beneficial to begin by modelling how to approach the task of organizing words from the *least* something to the *most* something, by thinking aloud as **you** decide where to place words on the gradient. Separate two anchor words and begin adding other words within and beyond those two initial words.

4. Continue to add words to the gradient, with input from students, knowing that you'll need to adjust word placements as you do so. This makes a clothesline with clothespins to hold the words pretty handy. If you do it right, you can slide the clips one way or another without having to unclip the words from the clothespins. Just make sure the word card is at the tip of the clip and the hollowed-out part is on the line. Remember, some words will go outside of the first anchor words. You could use cold and warm for your first investigation. Some words will be more cold than cold. Some words will be more warm than warm. And some words will fall between the two.

5. By far, the most important piece of this work is having students justify their reasoning for placing certain words where they believe they would fall on the gradients. The resulting conversations about the subtle differences among the words is pure gold.

So much more great work can be accomplished using the semantic gradients when you've completed them.

You will certainly want to note that the words near one another on the gradient are synonyms. They have nearly the same meanings. (When I say synonyms, you say same. NOTE: *Synonym and same both begin with an s*). The words at opposite ends from one another are antonyms. They have nearly opposite meanings. (When I say antonyms, you say opposite. NOTE: *They both antonym and opposite begin with short vowels.*)

I'll share a semantic gradient examples sheet with this episode on the Book Bums website at www.bookbums.com under the Teacher tab and Podcast. You'll find lots of words your students can use to sort 1) as a class, 2) in small groups, or even 3) individually. Keep that clothesline up for a while and simply change the words every week or so. With writing tasks, challenge students to try to "use a word from our gradient."

You can find lots of ways to compare words. Whether they're words in your word bank, words you've selected that correspond with other content areas, or words your students request while using the Dynamic Dictionary, comparing words helps kids to gain a deeper sense of word meanings and the review promotes memory and even orthographic mapping—the process by which words are stored in our mental lexicons. And we want *all* the words!

You can challenge your students to organize selected words according to parts of speech (nouns, verbs, adjectives, etc.), in order of importance (king, peasant, princess, cook, wizard), in alphabetical order (baseballs, bats, home plate, bases, gloves), in chronological order (Civil War, Revolutionary War, World War 1, Desert Storm, World War 2) in numerical order (ones, millions, tenths, ten thousands, tens, hundredths), etc.

Here's another way you can compare words with your students:

When students begin writing their own stories, they can tend to overuse the word *said.* Notice together that the word *said* is used a lot in books with dialogue. To move kids into more skilled writing, notice together other ways authors say "said" in the books you're reading in class. Begin collecting a list of words authors use that better convey *how* the words are stated.

Get ready. I'm going to share LOTS of ways to say **said**, because you're probably not imagining that there are nearly as many ways as there actually are**.** Please note that this is not even close to an exhaustive list. Here we go . . .

Instead of saying said, authors say:

announced, whispered, stammered, **guffawed**, muttered, shouted, mumbled, corrected, commented, replied, responded, reassured, growled, snapped, rambled, pointed out, concluded, objected, reported, cried, wailed, surmised, **chortled**, kidded, tittered, cajoled, begged, implored, suggested, bragged, mimicked, **smirked**, insisted, pleaded, guessed, warned, bellowed, groaned, chided, **lisped**, hissed, roared, shouted, complained, commanded, **snarled**, seethed, spat, griped, mocked, confessed, **moaned**, squeaked, whined, squealed, protested, cheered, congratulated, cackled, gushed, praised, consoled, exclaimed, sputtered, **yawned**, added, agreed, boasted, announced, continued, coached, divulged, echoed, gloated, insinuated, mouthed, **mused**

Do you see what I mean?

When you've got a good list going with your students, you can begin sorting these ways of saying *said* into categories like:

When words are said quietly- (mouthed, whispered, mumbled)
When words are said in a fun way- (chortled, giggled, squealed)
When words are said with anger- (spat, cackled, gloated)
When words are said with joy- (cheered, praised, shouted)
You get the idea. In the classroom, have kids practice writing individual sentences with dialog—working first on the basic structures (using commas and quotation marks), but then moving into using alternative, more expressive words for *said.*
Okay, we've discussed semantic gradients and some other ways to compare words. Now let's consider words having the same spellings and/or sounds.

1) <u>There are words to help us categorize words with the same spellings and/or the same sounds.</u>

Following are some roots we can use to heighten our kids' awareness of words.

homo = same
hetero = different
phone = sound
graph = writing
-nym = word

Considering these roots, it becomes clear why the following words are perfect for describing some oddities with words we know.

homo<u>phones</u> (are two or more words having the same sounds but different spellings and different meaning

the number two, to that shows direction, and too indicating more than enough or also

homo<u>graphs</u> (are two or more words having the same spellings <u>but different meanings</u>)

1) Some homographs sound identical (making them <u>homonyms</u> like bat -which can be a mammal, an instrument used in baseball, or something you do with your eyelashes)

2) Some homographs sound different (making them heteronyms like bow and bow or read and read.

There are Lots of Words Made by combining two words.

- **First, we have compound words** (Butterfly & toothpick are examples of single compound words; grown-up & well-known are examples of hyphenated compound words, and coffee shop & ice cream are separated compound words that look like two separate words, but they function as a single unit of meaning. In each of these compound words, two words, in their entirety, are put together to make a new word.)

- **Next, let's consider contractions** (such as didn't, did + not & would've, would + have) Contractions are words, often two words put together, where some letters have been "squished out" to better match the informal ways we've come to say some words. We use an apostrophe to acknowledge the missing letters in contractions.

*Note that not all contractions are made from two words (E.g., madam-ma'am, cannot=can't, of the clock-o'clock)

- **Finally, do you know about portmanteaus?** These are words that take part of one word and part of another word to make a brand-new word (For example, the word motel is = motor + hotel, and brunch is = breakfast + lunch)

2) If you're using a word bank where you're placing the words you're highlighting from your daily read aloud selections, there will come a time when it will be helpful to organize your words according to their parts of speech.

This work will help your students to more easily find the words they're looking for and to use them properly.

There are eight parts of speech including: nouns, pronouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, prepositions, conjunctions, and interjections, but the primary areas where you'll have words in your word bank are

Nouns (naming a person, place, or thing) such as:

celebrity, din, rumpus

Verbs (action words) such as:

trudge, negotiate, coax

Adjectives (describing words) such as:

resplendent, furtive, ebullient

and **Adverbs** (words modifying verbs and adjectives and adverbs—that often end with l-y) such as:

willfully, soothingly, chorally

NOTE: The following parts of speech (pronouns, conjunctions, prepositions, and interjections are rarely tier 2 words. We need to teach our students about these words, but they're not often a category of focus for vocabulary instruction.

- Pronouns, words used to replace nouns such as she, they, I, this, and you
- Conjunctions, connecting words such as such as and, but, for, and because
- Prepositions, words that show how one noun in relation to something else such as in, by, after, and above
- Interjections, words that show a sudden eruption of remark or an exclamation such as whoa, hey, and sheesh

3) <u>Another way for your kids to practice decoding words, determining the meanings of those words, recognizing ways the words can be grouped together, and then labeling those categories.</u>

Here's how it works:

You'll provide your students a list of sixteen words.

For example, you can list the following words:

first, green, snakes, Spanish, frogs, Italian, third, turquois, last, tan, English, toads, Chinese, newts, silver, and second.

You'll have the students read them, and then they are to determine which words "go together." After they find the four sets of four words that go together and record them into columns, they'll label the category for each group of words.

From the previously provided word list, your students would determine that first, last, third, and second go together. They're all ordinal numbers. Green, turquois, tan, and silver go together, because they're all color words. Snakes, frogs, toads, and newts go together because they're all cold-blooded animals. Finally, Spanish, Italian, English, and Chinese go together because they are all languages people can speak.

Note that I added a few less-known words to offer a bit of challenge (in decoding and categorizing).

If you really want to engage your kids, challenge them to make a sort for their classmates to solve. This is the perfect kind of optional homework assignment that kids actually love. I created a form kids can use to mix up their words, and I copied some of the best ones for the students to do as a warm-up for the next week as students were entering our classroom. Just knowing that their work could be used by their peers was a powerful incentive. Please don't add rewards beyond intrinsic rewards. That diminishes the value of this powerful work.

As I hope you can see, there are lots of ways to compare words in such a way that expands students' vocabularies. I've shared some good ones here, but there are more! Here's the thing: When you're fascinated with words, your students can't *help* but come to enjoy them too.