

12 Steps to Creating a Language-Rich Environment

By Genia Connell

As teachers, we constantly strive to create a classroom environment where children are exposed to high quality language in varying forms. After all, language acquisition and its use are at the core of all the reading, writing, and communication we expect of our students. It is not enough, however, for students to be passive observers of the language they see on word walls or hear in a read aloud. A language-rich classroom has many different layers and I believe the key to each is student engagement.

If your goal is to create a language-rich environment, student exposure to language should be meaningful, deliberate, repetitive and engaging — meaning it directly involves the students as active participants. This week I will share with you 12 ways I try to make my classroom an interactive, language-rich environment each and every day.

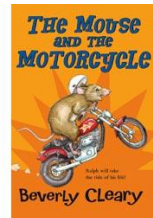
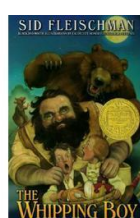
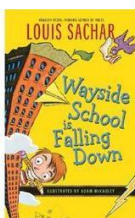
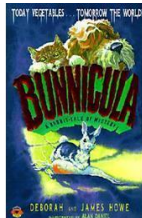
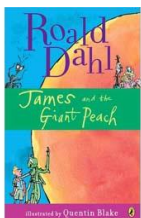
1. Read Aloud Every Day

Reading aloud and its follow-up conversation allows teachers the opportunity to help students increase vocabulary, create a shared literary experience, evoke discussion, and model fluency. I purposefully choose read-aloud books at a higher level than most of my readers in order to give them access to language they wouldn't be able to read and understand on their own.

I stop frequently during reading to discuss author's craft or a particular word the author has used. If I believe a word I've just read may be unfamiliar to most, I give an additional, more familiar meaning as well. In each book I read, we collectively select words that we like the sound of for our literature word wall. These words frequently show up in my student's writing as well as conversation. For example, after reading *James and the Giant Peach* as a read aloud to start the year, the words *pandemonium*, *chaos*, and *extraordinary* have become regular parts of every student's working vocabulary.

I often buy multiple copies of my read-aloud books, and they are often the most sought-after books in our classroom library. My students love to read along with me as much as they like to use them for their independent reading time.

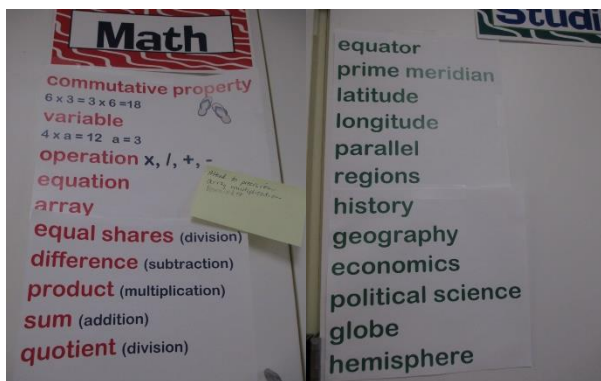
Some of my favorite read-aloud books to use with my third graders because of the language and author's craft involved include:



2. Use Word Walls

Word walls are another key component of a language-rich environment. These organized displays of words provide an always-available visual reference for my students. Research by Robert Marzano (2004) indicates that, ". . . students' comprehension will increase by 33 percentile points when vocabulary instruction focuses on specific words important to the content they are reading as opposed to words from high-frequency lists [teaching frequently-occurring words out of context]."

Therefore, my word walls have evolved over the years and they now showcase subject-specific terminology. To keep students engaged, I allow them autonomy in choosing words for our word wall. At times we generate these words during whole group discussions, but more frequently my third graders write new words on the wall themselves or attach a sticky note with words they would like added. Once a month I type up and print out the new words. To help students make meaningful connections between words and concepts, we frequently add small pictures or symbols to the words.



3. Use Anchor Charts

Like word walls, anchor charts serve as a visual reference of concepts that have been taught, acting as a visible reminder of concepts, cues, and our guidelines for learning. Posting these charts helps my students make connections to prior learning and they serve as a scaffold as new learning takes place. I have to admit most of my anchor charts are not beautiful, *pinnable* endeavors. They are messy works in progress that result from the combined efforts of my students and me. After a time, if I realize a chart is used consistently by my students (or if I plan to show it in this blog!) I will recopy it so it looks a little neater. For an even better understanding of why anchor charts are a necessary component of a language-rich environment (and why it's okay to have messy ones!) read Alycia Zimmerman's post "[Anchor Charts: Academic Supports or Print-Rich Wallpaper?](#)"

4. Create a Diverse Classroom Library

Common Core State Standards call for a balance of fiction and nonfiction text, however, those genres can be present in many different forms. Fill your libraries with a variety of picture and chapter books, magazines, graphic novels, travelogues

— whatever you can find, at varying levels. The more materials students have available, the more likely they are to read, thereby increasing the amount of language they are exposed to. Read about how I completely changed the way I let students choose and use their reading material last year to promote lifelong readers in my post, "[Rethinking the Book Box.](#)" For ideas on how to organize your classroom library check out Zimmerman's post, "[Organizing My Classroom Library . . . Again!](#)" and my post from last year, "[Simple Solutions for an Organized Classroom Library.](#)"

5. Put Language in Unexpected Places

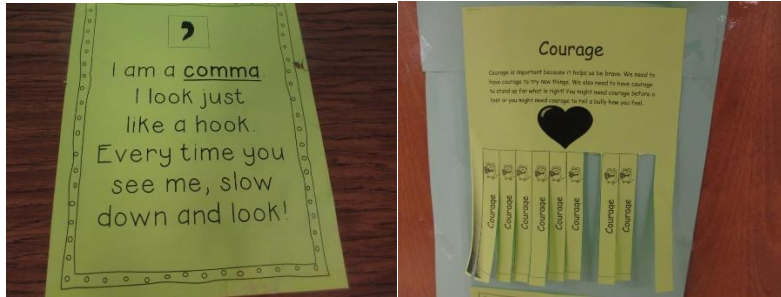
Exposing students to language frequently and systematically is important in a language-rich environment. Our school has embraced the importance of repetitively exposing our students to language, not only in the classroom, but everywhere! Our entire school serves as a great example of students finding language in unexpected places. Because we have nearly 30 *different* languages spoken as first languages in our school of 500 students, you can often find words affixed to everyday items to help our English learners as well as our burgeoning readers. Inspirational quotes have been painted all around the building by our building principal. Students often stop to read the wording on the quilts that are created annually.

Above each classroom door in our building, we all have *dispositions* — traits that we chose to reflect characteristics we strive to instill in our students. We each wrote a personal definition of our disposition that is framed and hanging outside our door. Sandy Lew Allen, an amazing AP art teacher in our district, had her students illustrate each disposition as they envisioned it. When you see the pictures below, you will see that they are not necessarily words you would expect young elementary students to know and use. Because of daily exposure to the words, however, they have become exactly that, a normal part of their everyday language.



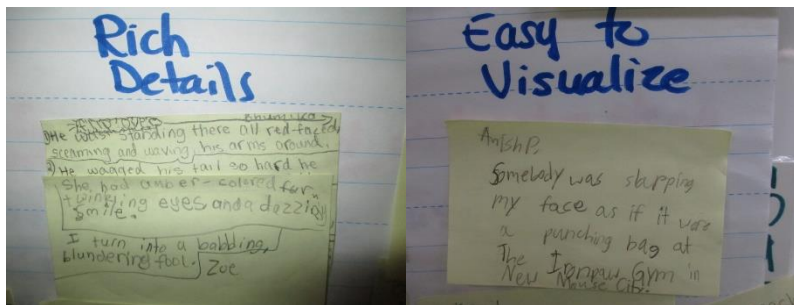
Independence is my classroom disposition. Each teacher wrote the framed definition that is posted outside our doors.

Our school's reading committee chooses a different word each month to highlight that students find in the most unexpected places — the bathroom, tables, in the hallway, the lunch line, etc. These words and their meanings are viewed consistently while they are up, and students eagerly await the next round each month.



6. Search for *Awesome* Language While Reading

During readers workshop I frequently use mentor text and point out different ways language is used by the author. When my students have independent reading immediately following our mini-lesson, they are tasked with looking for similar examples of language. Armed with a reading response sheet or an arsenal of sticky notes, they jot down any sentences or phrasing they feel deserves the title *awesome*. Afterwards we sort them into categories such as language that show rich detail or emotion, is easy to visualize, or uses a simile or metaphor. I find this activity has students paying closer attention to the details in the story, boosting their comprehension as well as their knowledge of author's craft.

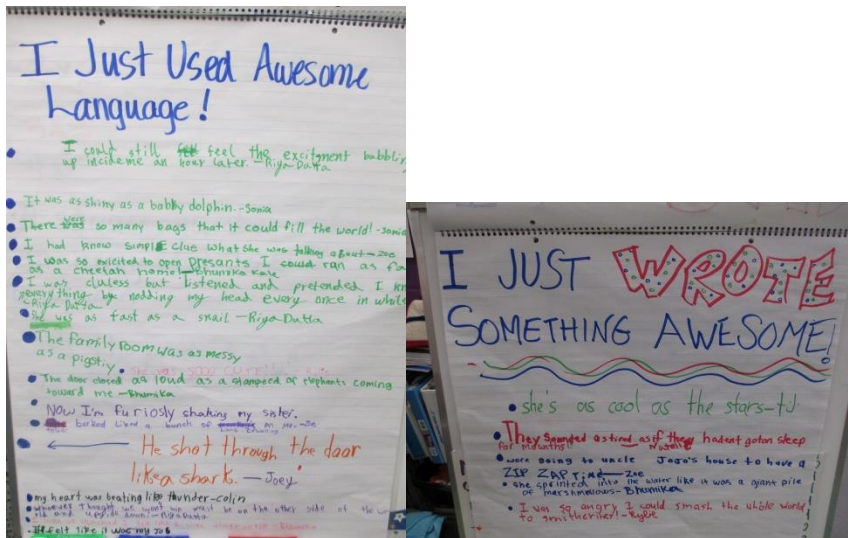


7. Encourage *Awesome* Language in Writing

Many times over the years I have told my students to use “descriptive language” in their writing. Those were the times I had the same inspiring effect on my students as Charlie Brown's teacher, *Wah-Wha-wa-Wha-wa-wa*. These days, I **show** my students what really great language in their writing looks and sounds like by using mentor text. Of course I allow my students to become mentors as well. We even keep a chart during our writers workshop for students to share what they felt were the most awesome sentences they wrote that day. This simple chart is the greatest motivator in my classroom. Students have really attempted to use language

creatively in their writing just to have a great sentence they think will evoke *ooohs* and *ahhs* from their classmates.

To be completely inspired in your use of mentor text to improve your student's writing, Zimmerman's post, "[Using Mentor Texts to Empower Student Authors](#)" is a must read.



8. Play with Words

In my classroom, it seems like everything, including practicing word skills, is more fun and engaging as soon as you attach the word “game” to it. Students enjoy practicing words during word study using the vocabulary function of Spelling City and with the many interactive whiteboard games that can be found at [Smart Exchange](#). Be sure to check out Beth Newingham’s [Spin-a-Word](#) and [Candy Land](#) SMART Notebook files. When students finish early they can always use their “free” time on the computer or tablet playing interactive games at [Merriam Webster’s Word Central](#) or on our class website where there are a variety of word games from [Scholastic](#), [ABCYa.com](#), [Funbrain](#) and more. During indoor recess, students enjoy board games like Scrabble, Boggle, Balderdash, Spell-Up and even old standbys like hangman and Pictionary. When words become play, the students eat them up!

9. Find New Ways to Say Old Things

Each week we choose a word that is overused and I challenge my third graders to think of synonyms that could be used instead to “spice up” their writing. They love adding their spicy words to the chart paper as they think of them or encounter them in their reading. I type up the words and post them so students can use them all year long in their writing. I always tell my students, *Words like “said,” aren’t dead, they’re just very, very tired!*

10. Engage Your Students in Daily Conversations

To put it simply, talk to your students. Interpersonal communication requires students to use all the language you have been working to help them acquire in a natural, unstructured manner. Conversation is also a skill I fear is slipping away as technology takes over our lives. Glancing around a restaurant a couple of months ago, I noticed the majority of couples, and even entire families not talking to each other over dinner, but instead mesmerized by the hypnotic glow of their phones and tablets. Embarrassingly enough, my family wasn't exempt from this group. I made it a goal this school year to talk to every one of my students at least once each day — not about school, but about them. As a result, I know more about my students than ever before and they can usually hardly wait to tell me a story about something, anything, when they walk through the door in the morning or during recess.

I've also built in time for students to have short exchanges with each other when we gather on the carpet for our mini-lessons. My third graders engage each other in conversation, practicing skills we've modeled like making eye contact, talking *to* and not *at* someone, appropriate responses, etc. The few minutes I dedicate to the art of conversation each day is well worth the difference I notice in my students' confidence and conversational skills.

11. Speak Like an Adult

When I read aloud to my third graders, I don't read like a third grader. Instead, I read like an adult, using appropriate intonation and expression. I know this modeling will help my students become fluent, expressive readers. That same logic applies to how I speak to my students in the classroom — I use proper words and terms even if they might seem over the head of my students. I believe it is very important to use correct words and terminology if you want your students to learn and use them properly. Simply stated, if I want their vocabulary to rise up to my level, I don't go down to theirs.

12. Involve the Parents

Language acquisition starts in the home and most parents would love to learn how they can create a language-rich environment for their students at home. At conferences and in newsletters or phone calls, share with your parents what they can do at home to create a language-rich environment for their children. [Scholastic Parents](#) has many great articles on bolstering language skills that you can share with parents. Two of my favorites are "[The Power of Language](#)" and "[Helping Children Build Language Skills](#)."