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References

Huddled over word cards, fourth-grade students in small groups energetically explain to one another why the words the group generated should be sorted in a particular way.

*Eggs, sand,* and *predator* belong together because turtles bury their eggs in the sand, but predators sometimes get their eggs anyway.

No. No. I think that eggs should go with *female,* mating, and travel because baby turtles are hatched out of eggs that the females lay after mating and traveling long distances.

What if we put *predator* with *people* and *birds?* People and birds sometimes hurt baby turtles. And remember that picture of the people by the turtle eggs?

After resolving how to sort the words into groups, the students decide on a label for each group of words and then share their thinking with classmates.
This activity, which we call Preview-Predict-Confirm (PPC) and summarize in Figure 1, supports children’s thinking about the language and content of a text as they draw on observations and background knowledge to generate and semantically sort words.

**Preview**

The teacher in our example begins by sharing the pictures in an informational book, in this case *Sea Turtles* (Gibbons, 1995). Encouraging the students to enjoy the pictures in the book with her, the teacher silently and slowly turns the pages, ensuring that all children see each one.

**Predict**

After sharing the pictures, the teacher asks the students what words they think they might find in the book. Not unexpectedly, the first word shared is *turtle*. The teacher asks why the students think the author may have used that word. “Because almost every page has a picture of a turtle!” “Because we saw the title of the book!” “It’s what the book is about!” After nodding with understanding, the teacher asks for another word prediction and the reason for it. More students volunteer words, and each time the teacher asks why the student thinks his or her word will appear in the text.

After several predictions have been discussed, the teacher helps the children organize themselves into small groups (four is a good number) and gives each group a plastic bag containing 30 to 40 blank cards or fewer, depending on the ages and abilities of the children. We usually use small index cards cut in half or quarters. Each group’s task is to generate and record words they predict will be in the book, one word per card. Articles (*the, an*), conjunctions (*but, and*), and other words that contribute little to the unique meaning of the text should not be recorded on the cards. If a group requests additional cards or completes the task before other groups, the teacher provides more cards, aiming to stretch the students to generate as many words related to the topic as they can. Some groups initially find it difficult to generate enough words to fill their cards. The teacher provides encouragement and sufficient time for them to think and talk about the topic; then he or she prompts them to discuss the pictures they saw. By talking with peers in their group about the topic and the pictures, children, given time, generally are able to generate enough words to fill their cards—unless the topic is considerably outside the realm of their experience or knowledge base.

The next step is to sort the words semantically. The teacher asks the students to sort them into several groups, or categories, so that those words that belong together are placed in one group. The children negotiate categories, discussing how certain words might fit together and how others fit...
elsewhere. After sorting their words, they decide on a label for each category. The teacher does a quick “whip” around the room, and each group shares its category labels (e.g., “Our categories are physical characteristics, survival, habitat, and behaviors”).

The teacher then asks the students to scan the words their group generated and select one word they think every group is likely to have recorded on a card. (She eliminates the word turtle as a choice, or any of the words shared with the whole class at the beginning of this activity.) Each group writes its selection in large print on a sentence strip. Next, the teacher asks the students to identify a word they think might be unique to their group. What word do they suspect no other group recorded? After writing that word on a sentence strip, each group selects a final word from among its cards—one they think is the most interesting. This interesting word might be one they hope is in the text because they would like to know more about it.

Once the final word is recorded on a strip, a representative from each group stands at the front of the room with the strips. In turn, each representative presents his or her group’s “in-common” word prediction by holding up the appropriate strip. After all representatives have shared, the teacher questions why several (or all) of the groups did (or did not) select the same word. What are the big ideas in the text likely to be? Why would so many of the groups think that a certain word will appear in the text? What does the word have to do with the topic of the text? What do we already know about the text and the topic that leads us to suspect the word will appear? Next, each representative reveals his or her group’s unique-word prediction. Again, this is followed by a discussion of the word choices. In what context might each word appear? What led each group to select its word? Finally, each representative shares the group’s most interesting word. What made the students interested or curious about this word? How might it be used in the text?

**Confirm**

After the discussion, the text is read. In the case of *Sea Turtles* with our fourth-grade group, the teacher reads the book aloud. By this point, the students are very curious about the book and eager to listen to it. As the teacher encounters words that are on the students’ cards, you can hear “Oh! We have that word!” “See! Those raccoons are predators!” The teacher concludes the activity with a discussion of the text and the match between the words the author chose and those the students selected, followed by a conversation about the benefits of previewing a text in this way.

**Reasons to use PPC**

It has long been recognized that vocabulary significantly influences reading comprehension (Graves & Watts-Taffe, 2002; Nagy & Scott, 2000). Domain knowledge (i.e., knowledge about the topic of a text), too, is critical for comprehension (Anderson & Pearson, 1984; Hirsch, 2003; Narvaez, 2002; Pressley, 2000). Activities that support vocabulary development and the acquisition of knowledge, then, can contribute to students’ success in reading. Preview-Predict-Confirm is designed to build content-specific vocabulary because it requires students to think about and use the language of a discipline. Students draw on their own relevant vocabulary, are exposed to the vocabulary of their peers, and pay close attention to the author’s language as they later read or listen to the text (see Yopp & Yopp, 2002). PPC also provides a structure for activating and building students’ background knowledge on the topic of the text. By having to generate words and semantically organize them, students think about what they already know or believe they know about a topic. They learn from their peers who may have different experiences and other knowledge about the topic.

In addition to enhancing comprehension of a text through attention to vocabulary and domain knowledge, PPC engages students in other behaviors that are supported by the professional literature.

- PPC encourages oral language (see Biemiller, 1999). Students must articulate to their group and to the rest of their classmates their reasons for selecting words and explain how those words connect to the topic.
- It promotes student engagement in at least two strategic comprehension behaviors (see Pressley, 2000). Students predict the language and content of the text as they generate words,
and they ask questions as they think about the pictures, draw on their background knowledge, and consider words. (Why does the turtle appear to be crying? Are sea turtles reptiles or amphibians? What are the people on the beach doing with the eggs?)

- It creates a sense of anticipation and encourages self-directed purpose setting, which is critical for independent reading and learning (Blanton, Wood, & Moorman, 1990). After predicting and discussing words and ideas that may appear in the text, students are motivated to discover what the author wrote, learn whether their words are used, understand the contexts in which their words are used, and get answers to their questions. (See Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000, for a discussion of the importance of motivation in reading.)

- It engages students in a thinking strategy. Students are asked to list-group-label their word predictions, which requires them to explore and discuss relationships among concepts (Taba, 1967).

- It provides students with a window on their peers' thinking strategies. In addition to generating and defending their own word selections, they listen to—and learn from—the choices and explanations of peers (see Almasi, 1996).

- It increases social interaction about a book. Students have to talk to one another about the ideas in the text as they engage in the activity. Talking about books has been demonstrated not only to motivate students to read but also to deepen their literacy learning (Wilkinson & Silliman, 2000).

- It fosters critical interactions with text (Heath, 1991) as students judge the language of the author and are challenged to consider how their own words might have been used. ("That's a good word." "The author didn't use this word, but I like it. I would have used it in the section on types of turtles.")

- It gives teachers an opportunity to conduct an informal assessment of the match between the language and content of the text and the language and the background knowledge of the students (Narvaez, 2002). How close are the students' predictions to the words used in the text? With which concepts are they already familiar? What are their misconceptions? Will more or less support be needed as the students read this text?

**A critical role**

Texts and text-related activities that develop students' language and background knowledge play a critical role in students' current and future reading achievement. Informational texts are an obvious vehicle for exposing students to new words and new concepts, yet research has shown that informational texts are lacking in many primary-grade classrooms (Duke, 2000; Yopp & Yopp, 2000). Getting informational texts into classrooms, sharing them with students of all ages, and engaging students in activities that draw attention to the language and concepts found within the pages of these texts—activities such as Preview-Predict-Confirm—can enhance the breadth of students' vocabulary and domain knowledge and, in doing so, contribute to students' reading success.

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**References**


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