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TEACHING

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*Vocabulary*

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IN ALL

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CLASSROOMS

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CAMILLE BLACHOWICZ  
&  
PETER FISHER

# *Teaching Vocabulary in All Classrooms*

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***Merrill, an imprint of Prentice Hall***

PRENTICE HALL, UPPER SADDLE RIVER, NEW JERSEY 07458  
COLUMBUS, OHIO

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Blachowicz, Camille L. Z.

Teaching vocabulary in all classrooms / Camille Blachowicz, Peter Fisher.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-02-310172-5

1. Vocabulary—Study and teaching. I. Fisher, Peter, 1948- .

II. Title.

LB1574.5.B53 1996

372.6'1—dc20

95-20374

CIP

Editor: Bradley J. Potthoff

Production Editor: Linda Hillis Bayma

Copy Editor: Lucinda A. Peck

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Design Coordinator: Julia Zonneveld Van Hook

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Cover Designer: Rod Harris

Production Manager: Pamela D. Bennett

This book was set in Sabon by Carlisle Communications, Ltd. and was printed and bound by Quebecor Printing/Book Press. The cover was printed by Phoenix Color Corp.



© 1996 by Prentice-Hall, Inc.

A Simon & Schuster Company

Upper Saddle River, New Jersey 07458

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Photo credits: Scott Cunningham/Merrill/Prentice Hall, p. 59; Barb Schwartz/Merrill/Prentice Hall, p. 114. Photos on page 20 supplied by the authors.

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4

ISBN: 0-02-310172-5

Prentice-Hall International (UK) Limited, *London*

Prentice-Hall of Australia Pty. Limited, *Sydney*

Prentice-Hall of Canada, Inc., *Toronto*

Prentice-Hall Hispanoamericana, S. A., *Mexico*

Prentice-Hall of India Private Limited, *New Delhi*

Prentice-Hall of Japan, Inc., *Tokyo*

Simon & Schuster Asia Pte. Ltd., *Singapore*

Editora Prentice-Hall do Brasil, Ltda., *Rio de Janeiro*

*To the three J's (who also love words)—  
Jim, Jake, and Jesse*

*To Sheila*

*and to our colleagues who have so  
generously shared their ideas*

# Preface



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Vocabulary instruction is like the weather: Everyone talks about it, but no one is quite sure what to do about it. This text is therefore written for preservice and in-service teachers of *all* grade levels and in *all* content areas who recognize the importance of vocabulary development but aren't sure what to do with it in the classroom. This text is also written, however, for teachers who have a sense of direction but who want some new, classroom-tested strategies to renew their curriculum.

## Focus of the Text

Research and practice emphasize that attention to learning vocabulary is an important part of all content learning as well as a significant part of any literacy program. Therefore, many of the techniques for teaching vocabulary that are explored in this book have the broader goal of enhancing the acquisition of content knowledge. Also explored are independent means of learning vocabulary such as using metacognitive and contextual clues.

## Special Features

Each chapter of this book has the following special features to help guide the reader.

- ***Prepare Yourself*** A knowledge rating activity that introduces the major content issues by asking you to evaluate your own prior knowledge.
- ***Strategy Overview Guide*** A guide to the instructional strategies highlighted in the chapter. It can also be used as a quick reference tool.
- ***Teaching Idea File Cards*** Shorthand references to a number of strategies and resources most practical to duplicate into a teacher resource file or curriculum resource guide.
- ***For Further Reading*** Selected, teacher-friendly references that encourage greater investigation.



If you are a reading and language teacher or a content area teacher, if you teach in kindergarten or in high school, if your students are gifted or at-risk, this text has ideas for your classroom. If you are a student or a teacher of methods classes in reading and language, in social studies, in science, or special needs instruction, this book will supplement your other texts by giving you ideas for handling the important vocabulary unique to your classes. We hope that you will use the ideas in the text as springboards for experimentation in your own classrooms.

## Acknowledgments

Most of the ideas we share in this text have been developed over the years by teachers in many different classroom situations. We thank you. We have tried to give credit to our contributors wherever possible but know that ideas get adapted, modified, or changed as they meet individual classroom needs. If you, the readers, have any new adaptations or suggestions that we could credit to you in future editions we would love to hear from you.

Our thanks do also go to our colleagues and students at National College of Education of National-Louis University and to the many teachers with whom we work closely. Special thanks to Amy McCann, Becky McTague, Elsie McAvoy, and Joan Stahl for their ideas and assistance. We are also grateful to our reviewers whose thoughtful ideas helped refine this text. They are: Ruth Beeker, University of Arizona; Donna Camp, University of Central Florida; Edward Holmes, Towson State University; Patricia Kelly, Virginia Tech; Ruth DeWitt Olle, Northern Illinois University; Timothy Rasinski, Kent State University; Roberta Reith, Union College; Leo Schell, Kansas State University; Sam L. Sebesta, University of Washington; Jeanne Siebenman, Grand Canyon University; Lana Smith, Memphis State University; and Gail Tompkins, California State University.

Lastly, we would like to thank Linda Scharp, Brad Potthoff, Christie Catalano, Linda Bayma, and Cindy Peck for helping us bring our work into print.

Camille Blachowicz  
Peter Fisher

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## Chapter 1



# Vocabulary in the Classroom

A Theoretical and  
Practical Perspective

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### Prepare Yourself

Prepare yourself by evaluating your own knowledge. Rate your ability to answer some of the key questions for this chapter. Check the boxes that best describe your prereading knowledge.

Key concept questions	Well informed	Aware	Need ideas
1. <i>What is some of the basic instructional research on vocabulary learning?</i>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. <i>What goals emerge from the research on vocabulary instruction?</i>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. <i>What guidelines for vocabulary instruction can be drawn from research?</i>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>



## Strategy Overview Guide

This chapter presents background, ideas, and strategies to help you understand the research foundations for vocabulary instruction. In subsequent chapters, this “Strategy Overview Guide” will describe the instructional strategies introduced in the chapter, their goals, and useful comments for selecting and using them in the classroom.

Vocabulary instruction is like the weather—everyone talks about it but nobody knows what to do about it! In this chapter, we set the stage for the instructional ideas that comprise the main part of this book by introducing you to some of the research that underpins good vocabulary instruction. Because the history of research on vocabulary is so rich and varied, we have organized our discussion around two research questions that are critical to the choices you’ll have to make for your own classroom: What do learners know (or not know) about vocabulary and what does research suggest about instruction? Each of these questions will be introduced, discussed, and used to generate some guidelines for classroom instruction.

## RESEARCH ON VOCABULARY LEARNING

One of the longest, most clearly articulated lines of research in literacy education describes the strong connection between readers’ vocabulary knowledge and their ability to understand what they read (Davis, 1944, 1968). This relationship not only makes good, intuitive sense to a non-educator, who might suggest, “You certainly will understand what you read better if you know the words!” but also to teachers and researchers who observe and study the ways in which complex, unfamiliar, or technical vocabulary makes reading difficult.

An interesting side of this connection, however, is the fact that, despite this strong and persistent relationship, programs designed to teach vocabulary have often had surprisingly little effect on reading performance (Dale, Razik, & Petty, 1973; Meyzinski, 1983; Stahl & Fairbanks, 1986). One issue that contributes to this difficulty is the lack of clarity across research as to what is being referred to as “vocabulary learning.” This learning can involve the growth of either receptive or expressive vocabulary in general language development, can refer to learning new concepts or new labels for already known concepts, and can refer to the learning of words through many modalities, such as in speech and conversation, through listening and from reading and writing. The use of a single term to describe all of these types of learning seems to be a paradox; using an overly simplified interpretation of the connection between vocabulary knowledge and comprehension might lead to inappropriate classroom decisions. As in all areas of education, teachers must consider many factors in constructing their own framework for vocabulary development in the classroom. While vocabulary development is a product of learning, that learning can take place in many ways, not always as a result of teacher-directed instruction.

Learning and instruction are the focus of the next part of this chapter. For researchers and for teachers planning for their own classroom instruction, the two major lines of research, which we noted earlier, are: What do learners know about vocabulary? and What does the research say about the effects of different types of instruction?

## What Learners Know

There are several ways to use your knowledge of what learners know or don't know to make instructional decisions in your classroom. First, we must look critically at what it means to "know" a word. Most researchers agree that word learning is not an all or nothing proposition, like a light switch that turns a light on or off. A better metaphor is that of a light dimmer switch that gradually supplies an increasingly richer supply of light. Most researchers agree that learners move from not knowing a word, to being somewhat acquainted with it, to a deeper, richer, more flexible word knowledge that allows them to use new words in many modalities of expression (Carey, 1978; Dale, 1965; Graves, 1984; McKeown & Beck, 1989; Stahl, 1985). Repeated encounters with words in rich oral and written contexts provide experiences and clues to the word's meaning that build over time and help develop and change our mental structures for a word's meaning (Eller, Pappas, & Brown, 1988; Nagy, 1988; Vosniadou & Ortony, 1983).

Rich exposure to words, such as that provided by wide reading, helps students construct and retain meaningful personal contexts for words (Whittlesea, 1987). For example, the word *wardrobe* in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (Lewis, 1950) becomes meaningful in a way it never could in its dictionary definition or in an isolated sentence. Specific events in the novel help the learner note that a *wardrobe* is a piece of furniture that can be located in a bedroom, that it has a front door, and that it is big enough to walk through. Readers who have read that wonderful book have no trouble conceptualizing or remembering the term *wardrobe*.

As learners read or meet words in other meaningful contexts, they begin to build frameworks of relationships that we refer to as "the word's meaning." Each time a word is encountered, another bit of information is added to the framework, enlarging or changing it. For example, the student reading the sentence

I saw two frimps.

may start to build a framework for frimps that looks like this:

Class = visible objects  
       *frimps* can be seen  
               can be counted (there are two)

Reading on and seeing the sentence

They looked tasty to me.

adds further information to the reader's framework:

Class = food  
       *frimps* can be seen  
               can be counted (there are two)  
               look edible  
               look attractive

Reading further to the sentence

I picked them off the bush, and peeled and ate them. Yummy!  
modifies the framework somewhat to include this information:

<p><b>Class</b> = fruit or vegetable  <i>frimps</i> can be seen                    can be counted (there are two)                    look edible                    look attractive                    grow on a bush                    have peels</p>
---

Reading the last sentence

My stomach turned cold; I died.  
results in a framework that looks like this:

<p><b>Class</b> = poisonous fruit  <i>frimps</i> can be seen                    can be counted (there are two)                    look edible/but are poisonous                    look attractive                    grow on a bush                    have peels</p>
--

Any reader who already has a knowledge of food, fruits, fruit peels, and poisonous fruit can add *frimp* to an already existing network of meaning connecting those categories. However, for a student who is not familiar with the anchor concepts of “food,” “fruit,” “peels,” and “edible or poisonous food,” picking up the information from the context might be more difficult. If *frimps* are important to the curriculum, a teacher might wish to handle instruction differently based on what the students already knew.

Using a more realistic example, imagine a group of fourth-grade students who are familiar with the term *crown*. Teaching the meaning of the word *diadem* won’t be too difficult. Students already have the concept of a “crown” and are learning only a new label for a related term. Little, if any, instruction, might be needed. Alternatively, an associational, mnemonic, or imaging method might be used, with the teacher encouraging students to create their own relationship for the word by connecting it to the reading selection in some general or personal way, such as with a drawing of one of the characters with clothing labeled. For the same students, in the same selection, the word *nostalgia*, however, would probably be harder to teach because it is an abstract concept that might not be too familiar to most 9-year-olds. To

teach the word, the teacher would have to help students establish a rich network of related concepts, such as “longing,” and “the past.” So it makes sense to look on “knowing” a word as a continuous process that can be affected by meaningful encounters with words and by instruction aimed at helping learners develop a network of understanding. The instructional situation that the teacher selects will vary depending both on the frameworks of knowledge the learners already have and the importance of the term to the task at hand.

A second way researchers have examined the questions of learner knowledge is to analyze what young learners typically learn during their school years. The question here is, How many words do most students learn during their school careers? Researchers have made many attempts to answer this question, attesting to the interest it holds. From 1891 to the present, researchers have struggled with issues about vocabulary size, with widely varying estimates resulting. Estimates of vocabulary size for first graders have ranged from 2,500 to 25,000 (Graves, 1986). Concerns about students who may be underprepared for school stimulated a renewed interest in this question in the last 20 years (Becker, 1977). Most recent estimates suggest that school-age students learn, on an average, of 3,000 to 4,000 words per year (Nagy & Anderson, 1984; Nagy & Herman, 1987) with some researchers still suggesting that this average varies widely based on the background of home and school experiences (Becker, 1977; White, Graves, & Slater, 1989). *Learning* in most of these studies refers to growth in familiarity of recognition for certain frequent words as measured on wide-scale tests or through research studies such as those carried out for *The Living Word Vocabulary* (Dale & O'Rourke, 1976). This rapid and large growth again suggests that a significant amount of vocabulary learning takes place through incidental or environmental learning, from wide reading, discussion, listening, and media, for example, rather than from direct instruction. We learn from interacting with and using words in meaningful contexts.

Examining the two strands of research on how words are learned and how many are learned during the school years can also shed some light on the paradox noted earlier in the chapter: Why does the preteaching of vocabulary not always affect comprehension? We know from our own reading experiences and from research (Freebody & Anderson, 1983) that we can comprehend stories fairly well without knowing every word. Reading materials are redundant; they give us lots of information to help us get the gist without knowing every word. For example, consider the following paragraph with the key word *glunch*:

The *glunches* were walking toward the house.  
Their antennae bobbed in anger.  
Each paw held a different weapon: swords, guns,  
bludgeons, and truncheons.

Several clues tell us that, whatever a *glunch* is, more than one are coming toward the house: the word has a standard plural ending (-es), the verb *were* indicates plurality, and the word *their* in the following sentence refers to more than one. *Glunches* are capable of locomotion (walking) and have paws. Because of what we know about

*anger* and *weapons* and their use, and from past reading and experience, we can infer that the *glunches* may be about to attack. Further, our knowledge of stories suggests that, if this paragraph occurs in a longer selection, there will be some sort of battle or other resolution of their anger in later paragraphs. We could also read passages prior to this paragraph to try to find out what motivated the *glunches* to anger.

It's clear that we could understand quite a bit about this paragraph without knowing the key word *glunch*. Learners' knowledge of the syntax, grammar, stories, concepts, and the world in general can help them overcome their lack of word knowledge. This explains why wide reading and a wide range of exposure to both oral and written language are critical factors in incidental word learning. We learn about grammar, syntax, and stories—all information that allows context to help us understand even when we don't know every word. For many narratives, prior knowledge and context can help students understand without the need for preteaching of specific vocabulary.

There are, of course, limits to the support that rich context and our own prior knowledge can provide. If there are many unknown words, comprehension will be too difficult. There are also situations in which the context is not rich enough to support readers without help (Jenkins, Stein, & Wysocki, 1984). For highly technical reading, or reading with many new concepts, building a conceptual base, with new terminology, may be necessary before adequate understanding can take place.

Further, some learners come to school knowing fewer school-type words (Becker, 1977) or have limited networks of meaning for the words that are familiar to them (Graves & Slater, 1987). This lack of knowledge makes it harder for these students to make new connections of meaning that support contextual learning. Some learners also lag behind others in their ability to use strategies that allow them to gain new word meanings from context (McKeown, 1985). Research suggests that judicious attention to concept development and vocabulary can have a positive effect on the growth of usable vocabulary and can also positively affect comprehension (Beck et al., 1982; Mezynski, 1983; Stahl & Fairbanks, 1986). With the understanding that all instruction must deal with the variable of what the learner already knows, we can move on to the next issue, What do we know about vocabulary instruction?

## RESEARCH ON VOCABULARY INSTRUCTION

There are many ways to organize the vast quantity of research that exists on vocabulary instruction. With the understanding that instruction will vary based on what the learner already knows and the level of knowledge that is needed for understanding, we can tease out a few aspects of good classroom instruction. The research reported in the following paragraphs is organized around seven statements supported by the research (see Figure 1.1). Although we will consider them separately, it is important to note at the outset that they are all interdependent. For example, the fact that vocabulary learning should be active is necessarily connected to the fact that vocabulary learning takes place when words are personalized. The purpose of this section is to introduce you to the trends in research and to suggest that different types of instruction, instructional facilitation, and learning are possible and desirable in a classroom de-



Immerse students in words.  
Encourage students to be active in making connections between words and experiences.  
Encourage students to personalize word learning.  
Build on multiple sources of information.  
Help students to control their learning.  
Aid students in developing independent strategies.  
Assist students in using words in meaningful ways; meaningful use leads to long-lasting learning.

**Figure 1.1** Suggestions from Vocabulary Research

pending on one's goals and the constraints of the classroom. This section will present the research, and the final section will attempt to relate instructional research to goals.

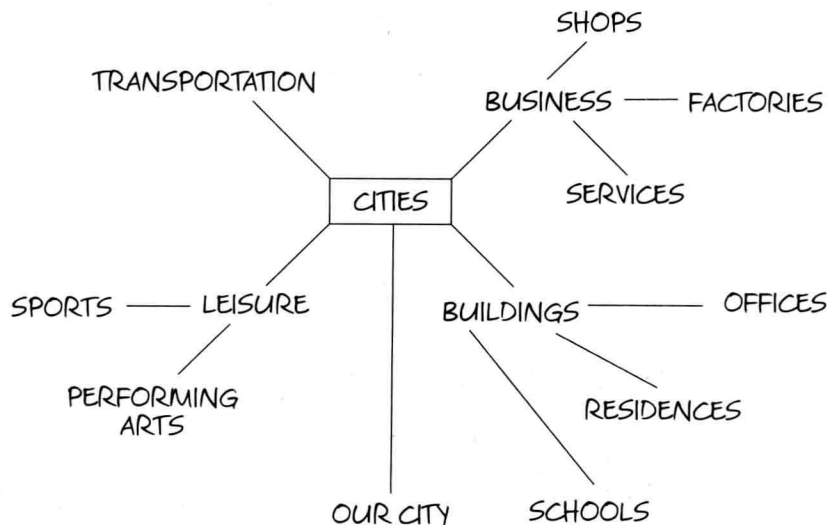
*Vocabulary learning takes place when students are immersed in words.* Just as teachers have begun to use the phrase “flood of books” to talk about situations where students have many and varied opportunities to read (Anderson, Wilson, & Fielding, 1988), so the phrase “flood of words” is an important issue for general vocabulary development. Reading to children has been shown to extend not only their recognition of new words but also their ability to use these words in their own retellings (Eller, Pappas, & Brown, 1988; Elley, 1988). Wide reading is another hallmark of word learning, with many studies suggesting that word learning occurs normally and incidentally during normal reading (Herman et al., 1987; Nagy, Herman, & Anderson, 1985). Further, discussion in the classroom (Stahl & Vancil, 1986) and around the dinner table (Snow, 1991) is another correlate of incidental word learning. While this type of learning through exposure cannot guarantee the learning of specific vocabulary words, it does develop a wide, flexible, and usable general vocabulary.

*Vocabulary learning takes place when students are active in discovering how words are related to experiences and to one another.* As in all learning situations, having learners actively attempt to construct their own meanings is a hallmark of good instruction. In fact, many comparisons of instructional methodologies suggest that it is critical to have learners take an active role in constructing a network of meaning for a word. Learning new words as we have new experiences is one of the most durable and long-lasting ways to develop a rich vocabulary. Words like *thread*, *needle*, *selvage*, *pattern*, and *dart* are naturally learned in the context of learning to sew, just as *hit*, *run*, and *stolen base* take on special meanings for the baseball player. As noted earlier, discussion is another way to involve learners in examining facets of word meaning. Answering questions that call students to evaluate different features of word meaning is another way to become actively involved in discovering meaning (Beck & McKeown, 1983). For example, explaining one's answer to the question, “Would a recluse enjoy parties?” helps students focus on the important features of the word *recluse*, a person who chooses to be alone rather than with others.

Making word meanings and relationships visible is another way to involve students actively in constructing word meaning. Semantic webs, maps, organizers, or other relational charts such as the one in Figure 1.2 not only graphically display attributes of meanings, but also provide a memory organizer for later word use. Many studies have shown the efficacy of putting word meanings into graphic form such as a map or web (Heimlich & Pittleman, 1986), a semantic feature chart (Anders, Bos, & Filip, 1982; Johnson, Toms-Bronowski, & Pittleman, 1982), advanced organizer (Herber, 1978), or other graphic form. It is critical to note, however, that mere construction of such maps, without discussion, is not effective (Stahl & Vancil, 1986).

Other approaches that stress actively relating words to one another are (a) clustering strategies that call for students to group words into related sets, brainstorming, grouping, and labeling (Marzano & Marzano, 1988); (b) designing concept hierarchies or constructing definition maps related to concept hierarchies (Bannon, Fisher, Pozzi, & Wessell, 1990; Schwartz & Raphael, 1985); and (c) mapping words according to their relation to story structure categories (Blachowicz, 1986). All of these approaches involve students in constructing maps, graphs, charts, webs, or clusters that represent the semantic relatedness of words under study to other words and concepts. Again, discussion, sharing, and use of the words are necessary components of active involvement as are feedback and scaffolding on the part of the teacher.

*Vocabulary learning takes place when students personalize word learning.* We have already commented that one of the most durable ways to learn words is to learn them in the context of developing some important skill or concept. These meanings are personalized by our experiences. Words not learned in firsthand experiences can also be personalized; relating new words to one's own past experiences has been a component of many successful studies. Eeds & Cockrum (1985) had students pro-

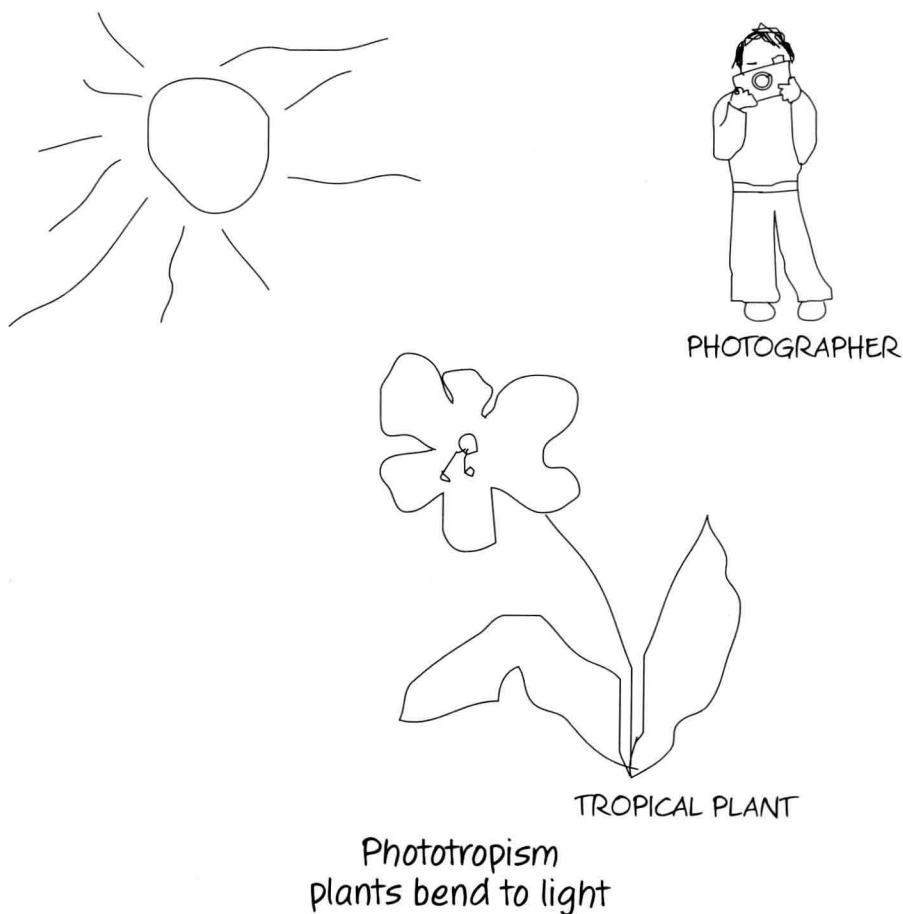


**Figure 1.2** Web Example

vide prior knowledge cues for new words, a method related to that used by Carr (Carr & Mazur-Stewart, 1988), who asked students to construct personal cues to meaning along with graphic and other methods. Acting out word meaning (Duffelmeyer, 1980) has also led to increased word learning.

Creating one's own mnemonic or image is another way to personalize meaning. While active, semantically rich instruction and learning seem best for learning new concepts, tagging a new label onto a well-established concept can be done through the creation of associations. Mnemonic strategies, or those aimed at helping us remember, such as ROY G. BIV for the colors of the spectrum (red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and violet), are time-honored ways to assist memory. Key-word methods are the best known of these word-learning strategies. They involve the creation of a verbal connection, an image, or a picture to help cement the meaning in memory.

For example, to remember the word *phototropism*, the bending of plants toward light, a student created the picture shown in Figure 1.3 as a visual mnemonic. The



**Figure 1.3** Keyword Image—Phototropism