The Power of Word Banks

Word Banks—lists of words generated by the class and related to a topic of study—are simple, yet powerful tools. By brainstorming to create the word bank, all students have the opportunity to speak, listen to each other, and experience reading and writing with words related to their learning. Posted as a reference, a word bank encourages students to review past knowledge and use the words listed to integrate content in their writing, as in the following example.

A third-grade class I was working with had just completed a study of different kinds of clouds and precipitation. To integrate their learning with our poetry unit, we asked the class to brainstorm words about spring and spring weather. To get their ideas flowing, we went back and discussed one of the books from their recent science unit—a technique known as touchstoning. Showing the cover and doing a quick picture walk through the book activated the students’ prior knowledge, allowing them to revisit what they already knew.

After listing all the science vocabulary associated with clouds and weather, the students naturally progressed to listing other words they associated with spring. The word bank grew to include spring activities, smells, sights, and sounds. We were even able to introduce the poetic element of onomatopoeia when discussing spring sounds like the “boom!” of thunder. The students then wrote their own individual poems, using the word bank as a resource. This type of contextualized repetition helps all students—and especially ELLs—retain content-area vocabulary and use it.

Keeping the word bank available is also helpful for assisting students who needed more individualized instruction or who have been absent. The chart is also a good resource to promote buddy work: Have an EO student review the word bank with a student who is still learning the language.