

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.

Spring Word Bank				
Weather	Activities	Smells	Sights	Sounds
clouds	baseball	blissom	rainbow	boom
circus	swimming	flowers	dew	crash
sunsets	catching objects	rains	waterfalls	ding-dong
sunsets	feeding tadpoles	velvet	grass grass	thunder
Fog	Fishing	smell	baby birds	birds
rain	pullit jumpy	apple blossoms	birds eggs	buzzing
water droplets	playing outside	fresh air	clouds	crack
lightning	swimming	barbecues	lightning	crack
atmosphere	riding bikes	worms	frogs	stale
clear sky	digging		antelions	ping-pong
climate	planting		birds	spring papers
condensation	running		blossoms	rust
water vapor			mud	ah-choo!
condensation			puddles	
dew point			mist	
fresh chad			worms	
condensation				

A brainstorm of spring words

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.