

# Dancing Definitions™

## *An Explicit Teaching Strategy Designed to Accelerate the Building of Academic Vocabulary and Academic Language Mastery*

**Dancing Definitions** is a pre-reading teaching strategy that leads to mastery of definitions critical to understanding a text selection that is to be read or a subject that is to be studied. Using inquiry approaches, the teacher engages students in discussions that help them understand the meanings of each of the words. To ensure understanding, students are guided in relating the vocabulary to their experiences and prior knowledge. Only after this step are the definitions and "tag" sentences memorized. Both brain-based and culture-based approaches are incorporated to accelerate memorization.

Why memorization of the definitions and sentences? Isn't understanding enough? In addition to supporting long-term memory of word meanings, the clear, precise, expressive academic language patterns internalized as the definitions and "tag" sentences are memorized become models that students can use as references when explaining or applying these word meanings in their speech and writing. These academic language models are especially important for those students who need significant acceleration in the development of language skills to meet literacy standards.

### SKILLS ADDRESSED

- *Vocabulary Development:* Accelerated study and high retention of definitions.
- *Language Development:* Internalization of language patterns in models of clear precise definitions and example sentences.

### STEPS INVOLVED

#### *Teaching for Understanding*

1. Carefully scan a text planned for an upcoming lesson. Identify **all** the words whose meanings students are not sure of or important words whose meanings students understand but cannot clearly explain. **The meanings of all these words need to be taught.** (The list of words for vocabulary study in Teachers' Editions of text books seldom, if ever, include all the words that most underperforming students need to master for excellent comprehension.)
2. Using inquiry, discussion, pictures and other visual aids, internet resources, etc., explore with the students the meanings of the words. Relate these words to their experiences and prior knowledge so that they are clearly understood. This is the teaching step.

#### *Working Toward Mastery*

##### **Retention of Word Meanings and Development of Language Skills**

3. Choose 8-10 essential, challenging words for *Dancing Definitions*. Include one or more of the identified important words whose meanings students understand, but cannot explain using clear, precise language. If the list is more than 10 words, then make two or more lists to be taught over a period of days.
4. By revising and adapting textbook explanations and dictionary and glossary entries, create definitions and tag sentences consistent with the usage of the words in the selection to be read. **Be sure to include "tag sentences"**. The "tag sentences" help relate the word meanings to students' experiences. The definitions "dance" as they are written in a memorable, rhythmic pattern. (The students don't dance.) Some are taught using restrained, meaningful physical movements. Write the definitions and tag sentences on chart paper.
5. Using rhythmic recitation, meaningful repetition, teacher modeling, and continual search for patterns, lead students in the memorization of the definitions and tag sentences. This is the mastery phase. The definitions become a part of students' memory base, available for exact recall in clear precise language.

3.

6. Students are introduced to and taught to a level of understanding before memorization eight to ten definitions and tag sentences every three to four days and hundreds during the year.
7. Depending on the grade level, students gradually take responsibility for some of the preparation and teaching activities.

### **CAUTIONS**

Avoid sing-songy, choppy recitation patterns. Think in terms of phrases as opposed to single words.  
e.g.

Use phrases such as in this example:

Majestic means.....Majestic means... stately and dignified---or of great size

Avoid a choppy approach such as: Ma—jes—tic -means - state--ly and dig-ni-fied or- of- great- size

\*As you lead the memorization of the definitions and sentences, be careful not to repeat words and phrases in any rule-governed way. Sometimes the last phrase of the definition is repeated and sometimes not. Some of the phrases are repeated in the rhythmic pattern in some definitions and some in another definition are not. It is about a flow and eliminating robotic types of patterning. The *Touching the Spirit* principles together with research on the human brain support this approach. Go with the flow!

### **RELATED LEARNING AND CULTURAL (Touching the Spirit™) PRINCIPLES**

- Mastery (as opposed to only explanation and discussion) of vocabulary and language skills as essential to the acceleration of literacy skills for students who are significantly behind.
- The use of rhythm, recitation, repetition, and relationships as culture and cognition- based teaching and learning patterns.
- There is a strong link between movement and learning.
- The continual search for patterns, expectations of excellence, teacher modeling, intensive direct instruction and practice, and focus on discourse and inquiry as supportive practices.
- Memorization of vocabulary meanings to serve as references for reading, writing, and speaking.
- Memorization of excellent language models to internalize their patterns.
- Utilizing culture and cognition in the *acceleration* of learning.
- Novelty and ritual aid in learning and retention.

### **APPLICATION**

- Students demonstrate heightened understanding of a text selection, due to the pre-reading mastery of the word meanings and sentences.
- Students retain the definitions and apply this knowledge when they meet these words in other contexts.
- Students' writing reflects the transfer of excellent academic language patterns due to the memorization of numerous definitions and tag sentences.

### **EXAMPLES**

#### **Expository Text Examples**

*Dancing Definitions*  
Geometry  
Vocabulary Mastery List  
Part I

1. **Geometry is the branch of mathematics that deals with the measurement and relationships of points, lines, angles, plane figures, and solids.**

*Geometric figures are all around us. For instance, the round table, and the rectangular desks.*

2. If something is **geometric**, it has lines, angles, circles, triangles, or similar shapes.  
*The quilt my grandmother made was very geometric.*

3. **Dimension** is the measurement of length, width, or height.  
*The dimensions of our classroom are \_\_\_ feet long, \_\_\_ feet wide, and \_\_\_ feet high.*

4. In mathematics the word **figure** can mean a form or a shape.  
*Some geometric figures are triangles, circles, and squares.*

5. A **polygon** is a figure that has three or more straight sides.  
*Our teacher asked us, "Is a square a polygon?" and we said "yes".*

6. A **square** is a polygon that has four sides all the same length and four right angles.  
*The little screen on my cell phone is a perfect square.*

7. If something is **perpendicular**, it is straight up and down.  
*The light pole outside our window is perpendicular to the street.*

8. A **right angle** is an angle of 90 degrees. It's formed by two lines perpendicular to each other.  
*My desk has lots of right angles.  
(Students run their hand over a right angle on their desks e.g. one of the angles where the top and legs meet.)*

9. A **right triangle** is a triangle with a right angle.  
*This is a right triangle. (Students make the shape with their arms.)*

10. A **hypotenuse** is the longest side of a right triangle. It's the side opposite the right angle.  
*This is the hypotenuse of this right triangle. (Students make the shape of a right triangle with one arm and with their other arm motion where the hypotenuse would be.)*

### **Narrative Text Examples**

*Excerpt from: Fly Eagle Fly An African Folktale retold by Christopher Gregorowski*

Even though the farmer was reluctant, they went into the valley and crossed the river, the friend leading the way. The bird was very heavy and too large to carry comfortably, but the friend insisted on taking it himself.

"Hurry," he said, or the dawn will arrive before we do!"

Carefully the friend carried the bird onto a ledge of rock. He set it down so that it looked toward the east, and began talking to it.

The farmer chuckled. "It talks only chickens' talk."

4.

But the friend talked on, telling the bird about the sun, how it gives life to the world, how it reigns in the heavens, giving light to each new day.

"Look at the sun, Eagle. And when it rises, rise with it. You belong to the sky, not to the earth."

At that moment the sun's first rays shot out over the mountain, and suddenly the world was ablaze with light.

The golden sun rose majestically, dazzling them. The great bird stretched out its wings to greet the sun and feel the life-giving warmth on its feathers. The farmer was quiet. The friend said, "You belong not to the earth, but to the sky. Fly, Eagle, fly!"

He clambered back to the farmer.

All was silent. Nothing moved. The eagle's head stretched up, its wings stretched outwards; its legs leaned forward as its claws clutched the rock.

And then, without really moving, feeling the updraft of a wind more powerful than any man or bird, the great eagle leaned forward and was swept upward, higher and higher, lost to sight in the brightness of the rising sun, never again to live among the chickens.

### Dancing Definitions

#### Fly, Eagle, Fly

An African Tale retold by Christopher Gregorowski with forward by Bishop Desmond Tutu

#### Part 1 of 2

1. Majestic means stately and dignified or of great size.  
*The queen rose majestically from her throne.*
2. Clamber means to climb up on something awkwardly.  
*We clambered up on the rocks.*
3. A ledge is a narrow flat surface or shelf, especially one that sticks out from a wall of rock.  
*We rested on a ledge up in the mountains.*
4. To clutch something means to grasp it very tightly.  
*The little boy clutched his mother's hand as they crossed the street.*
5. Dazzling means to make something almost blind by too much light.  
*The lights of the oncoming cars were dazzling.*
6. To lean is to stand in a slanting position.  
*He leaned way forward so he could see.*
7. Reluctant means not wanting to do something.  
*I reluctantly cleaned my room, but then I was glad I did.*
8. To insist means to demand that something be done.  
*My mother insisted that I go to bed.*