Vocabulary role-play (Herrell, 1998, Jordan & Herrell, 2002) is a strategy used to encourage learners to make connections among their past experiences, the content currently being studied, and vocabulary that is new or being used in an unfamiliar way. Students are introduced to new vocabulary and given an opportunity to discuss and use the vocabulary in context through role-playing. Often several groups of students are given the same vocabulary and asked to write and perform a skit in which the words are used and demonstrated. Since the groups are likely to write and perform skits in which the vocabulary words are used in different contexts, the skits serve to show multiple uses of the same words. In this way, English language learners are given an opportunity to see the vocabulary words used in context, as well as demonstrations of several contexts in which the words may be used appropriately.

The steps in implementing vocabulary role-play are:

- **Identify key vocabulary** - Determine the vocabulary words that will be used in a lesson or reading. Make cards with the words written on them.
- **Teach the lesson or read the book** - As you teach the lesson or read the book, either reading aloud or having the students read, stop as you encounter key vocabulary and discuss and act out the words. Pronounce the words carefully and have the students practice pronouncing them, especially if the words contain sounds difficult for them. Be sure to reread the page fluently after the vocabulary is explored. As each word is explored, place it in a pocket chart so students can see it clearly.
- **Connect the vocabulary to past experiences** - After the lesson is complete or the story is read, show the cards to the class, one by one, and ask the students to talk about ways in which they have seen the words used. Use this opportunity to explore multiple meanings of words.
- **Sort the words** - Further explore the words by engaging the students in word sorting. Ask them if any of the words have similar meanings or if any of them are names for things—nouns. Identify the movement words—verbs—and place them together. Review the word meanings in several different ways to help the students remember them. See the chart below for a typical word sort.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Movement Words</th>
<th>Names for Things</th>
<th>Descriptive Words</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>VERBS</td>
<td>NOUNS</td>
<td>ADJECTIVES/ADVERBS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paraded</td>
<td>Ledge</td>
<td>Scary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prowled</td>
<td>Geranium</td>
<td>Slowly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stroked</td>
<td>Statue</td>
<td>Quickly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Winked</td>
<td>Puddle</td>
<td>Sparkling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>stretched</td>
<td>Park bench</td>
<td>leisurely</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- **Plan ways to use the words** - Leave the words on display in the pocket chart. Use the words in directions during the day. Encourage the students to use the new vocabulary in their writing and celebrate verbally when they do. Involve the students in creating scenes using the new vocabulary by dividing the class into small groups of three to five students and giving each group a set of four or five words. Make sure that each group has at least one member who is a strong reader. Instruct each group to create a scene in which all their words are used.

- **Give students time to practice** - Give the groups time to work on their scripts and practice performing their scenes. Encourage the groups to make and use simple props.

- **Perform the scenes** - Give each group a chance to perform the scenes that they have written. Discuss how the words were used after each scene is performed, celebrating innovative uses of the new vocabulary.

- **Focus on multiple word meanings** - Compare and contrast the uses of the words by the groups, emphasizing the differing contexts used in the skits, and the similarities and differences in the ways in which the words were used.

**Applications and Examples**

**Example 1 – Ms. Lee’s First Grade**

Ms. Lee has brought her calico cat, Muffin, to school to visit the children in her first-grade class. Many of the children express fear at the possibility of handling Muffin, but Ms. Lee wants them to become more comfortable with her. She chooses a special book about a calico cat to share with her class. As she sits in the big rocking chair in the corner of the classroom with Muffin sleeping in her lap, Ms. Lee shows the cover of the book she holds, which has no picture on it.

"The title of this book is *The Third-Story Cat* (Baker, 1987),” Ms. Lee says. "There is no picture on the cover to help us guess what it is about. What do you think it might be? What is a third-story cat?"

"Maybe there were two other stories about the cat,” Jacob suggests.

"That’s an idea,” Ms. Lee agrees.

"Have you ever heard the expression third story before?” she asks.

"I think my uncle lives on the third story,” Tony answers tentatively. "You have to go up a lot of stairs to his apartment."

"That’s right, Tony. Third story means the same thing as third floor,” Ms. Lee opens the book to the title page where the students can see a lovely watercolor painting of an apartment building with three floors. In the apartment on the third floor you can see a calico cat sleeping on the window sill.

"Look up here in the window,” Ms. Lee says. "Do you see a cat that looks just like Muffin?"

"O-o-o-h,” the students sigh. "It does look like Muffin."

Ms. Lee then uses the illustration of the apartment building to show the meaning of the word third story. She sweeps her hand across the first floor of the apartment building in the picture and says, “The people who live on this floor can walk out their doors and be on the sidewalk. This is the first floor or first story.” She points to the doors that open onto the sidewalk and to the sidewalk itself as she says the words.
“The people who live on the second floor, or second story, have to go up some stairs to their apartments.” Ms. Lee points to the doorway and moves her hand up to the second floor as she explains. 

“The people who live on the third story have to go up even more stairs,” Ms. Lee explains as she points to the third floor.

“There are a lot of big words in this story,” Ms. Lee says. “The author of this book, Leslie Baker, uses a lot of wonderful words to tell us about all the exciting things this cat does one day. Let’s read the story and find out what adventures the cat has.”

Ms. Lee reads the story aloud to the students, using the beautiful illustrations to help them understand the new vocabulary that is introduced in the story. She stops to demonstrate the meaning of the word startled as the cat is surprised by a butterfly flying up out of the geranium box. She has one of the children demonstrate the word crept as the cat is balancing along the ledge on the three-story building. As the story is read the children are exposed to a number of new words describing the ways in which cats move, such as paraded, prowled, twitched, and leaped. Some other words require some physical practice, like winked and stroked.

After the story is read, Ms. Lee goes through the new words again and has the children make a large circle. They walk around the room and act out the movements the cats made in the story. They wink, creep, twitch, and parade until they are all very silly. They show the difference between being startled and being frightened, between winking and blinking, between parading and prowling, and between patting and stroking. When they sit back down in the circle, Ms. Lee shows them cards with the new words printed on them and as she holds each card up a child volunteers to act it out.

Ms. Lee leaves the new vocabulary word cards in a part of the room near the pocket chart and shows the children how they can use the cards to fill in the blanks in the pocket chart story. They are invited to make new sentences with the cards during center time and they even have a new pointer with a calico cat on the end of it to use as they read the sentences they are making. Ms. Lee smiles as she watches the children busily building sentences with the new vocabulary words. One of the children is carrying Muffin around the room with her as she acts out the new words she has learned from The Third-Story Cat.

Example 2 – Mr. Valdez’s Fourth Grade

Mr. Valdez’s fourth graders are studying Florida history. They are reading about the barefoot mail carriers who brought the mail down the beaches to the first settlements and the ways in which the various people came to Florida to establish permanent residences. Some of the vocabulary is unfamiliar to the students and Mr. Valdez wants to make sure that the words are understood by all his students. Going through the Florida history book, Mr. Valdez selects the words barefoot, cypress, brackish, humid, Everglades, and tidepools, and writes the words on sentence strips.

After he reads the section from the Florida history book aloud to his class, Mr. Valdez asks the students to talk about the ways in which they have heard the words used before.

Jonah starts the discussion by saying, “I like to go barefoot in the summertime. My mother is always telling me to put my shoes on.”
“I know what it means to go barefoot,” Katie adds. “I just don’t understand why the mail carriers were barefoot.”

Mr. Valdez takes the time to explain that since there were very few roads in the early days, the easiest route down the state was walking along the beach and so the mail carriers often got their feet wet. To protect their shoes, they walked barefoot until they came to places where they needed to wear shoes. Then they would stop and put their shoes back on.

Carla talked about brackish water and how her dad is often worried about the salt water at their beach house invading the drinking water. “That’s what he calls brackish water," she explains. “It’s when the salt water invades the fresh water.”

“Yes,” Mr. Valdez agrees. “But in some places in the state it’s a natural thing for water to be brackish. Some of the rivers empty into the ocean and there is an area in which the salt water and fresh water mix. That’s also brackish water.”

The discussion continues until each of the words has been discussed. Mr. Valdez then divides the students into groups of three and asks them to write a short skit in which they use as many of the new vocabulary words as they can. One member of the group is assigned as the note-taker and the skits are written. The students are given 15 to 20 minutes to make simple props and each group is given a chance to act out its skit. Some of the groups have one of the members read the script while the other two do the acting. One group chooses to do a charade and asks the class to guess which word they are portraying. Another group has a complete dialogue with each of the speakers emphasizing a few of the new vocabulary words. One of the groups even performs a rap routine using the new words. By the time all six groups perform, all the new words have been demonstrated multiple times in many different contexts. Mr. Valdez is confident that the new vocabulary is thoroughly understood by everyone.

**Conclusion**

Vocabulary role-play provides the link between learning a new word and using the word in context, or multiple contexts. Role-play enables the student to create experiences with which to link the new vocabulary. The study of words, their multiple meanings, and origins can also be effective with the use of vocabulary role-play. Students can add brief videos to illustrate word meaning, create animated computer dictionaries, publish vocabulary books, and illustrate word posters—all of which increase their interactions with and understanding of English vocabulary and multiple meanings.

**References**

