

# Vocabulary understanding and invigoration



**Profession essay: Module 1. Language and language use**

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## **Table of Content**

<b>Introduction .....</b>	3
<b>Relevance to the Danish schooling system .....</b>	3
<b>Method:.....</b>	4
<b>Theory .....</b>	4
<b>Observations and analysis .....</b>	7
Appendix 1. Lesson plan .....	8
Appendix 2. Lesson plan .....	9
Appendix 3. Lesson plan .....	10
Appendix 4. Lesson plan .....	11
Appendix 5. Continuum for language acquisition processes. (Stæhr, 2019, p.181) .....	12
Appendix 6. Selected student assignments:.....	13
Appendix 7. Selected student assignments:.....	14
<b>References.....</b>	15

## Introduction

*You can never understand one language until you understand at least two*

- Geoffrey Willians

Language acquisition today entails far more than merely acquiring a language; it involves an acquisition of foundations of knowledge, understanding and opportunity which affects how we can position ourselves in a global society, and it shapes our perception of ourselves and others. Through language, you are given the opportunity to open the door to another culture, experience a different history, different values and traditions, hence, giving you a basis for comparison and consequently understanding your own culture by understanding another. One element of Willian's quote refers to how the acquirement of a second language enriches and cultivates one's first language, or more specifically; introduction of a second language vocabulary enriches and cultivates the vocabulary of one's first language by improving your ability to express yourself precisely and convincingly. The importance of vocabulary can hardly be overestimated, and compared to other grammatical prerequisites such as syntax, pronunciation and morphological rules it is perhaps the most obvious and essential of language meaning-making. Hence, I am interested in the theory behind vocabulary acquisition, how do you approach vocabulary teaching and how do you inspire the learner to pursue it? I have formulated the following investigation query:

**I would like to examine whether a focus on vocabulary, and in particular vocabulary depth, will motivate students to become more confident and interested in how they express themselves more accurately, captivately and convincingly when producing language.**

## Relevance to the Danish schooling system

It is evident that the Danish Primary and Lower Secondary School has long been giving the English subject a relatively high priority in recognition of its status of lingua franca<sup>1</sup> and its significance for interaction on the global scene. The Danish school reform from 2014 brought forward the introduction of the English subject from third to first grade (Folkeskolen.dk, 2013), acknowledging the need to provide Danish students with the necessary linguistic competences to conduct themselves in a global society. The subject's learning objective emphasizes the need for students to gain insight into English speaking societies in order to identify similarities and differences and hence reach a deeper understanding of their own culture (Børne- og undervisningsministeriet, Engelsk Fælles Mål §1, stk. 3, 2019). This aims to develop the students' understanding of cultural differences in preparation for life as a global citizen. Furthermore, it is accentuated that the teacher should use methods which further the student's interest in the subject and confidence in their own abilities (Børne- og undervisningsministeriet, Engelsk Fælles Mål §1, stk. 2, 2019). Especially these two objectives are relevant to my investigation query. Firstly, because it demonstrates that substantial vocabulary competences are necessary to obtain the required standard of English. Secondly, because one of the focal points of my query is concentrated on the importance of a functional teaching approach and stimulating the students' interest and motivation for vocabulary acquisition. I have planned my investigation concentrating on Birgit Henriksen's theories and observations regarding the prerequisites for mastering words and the advantageous aspects of focusing on the students' receptive vocabulary (Henriksen, 1995). I will also draw on Beverly Derewianka and Pauline Jones' thoughts on a functional approach to grammar and include one of their strategies for teaching narrative writing (Derewianka &

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<sup>1</sup> A language adopted as a common language amongst speakers whose native language is different.

Jones, 2016). Finally, I will discuss Lars Stæhr's theories on processes in language acquisition and his views on the need for including a systematic direct teaching approach (Stæhr, 2019).

## **Method:**

I conducted my investigation in a Danish year 4 classroom where I normally teach English. All lessons are taught using target language only. Students of very mixed abilities characterize the class; there are children who are hesitant and cautious in their productive language and who possess a fairly limited vocabulary knowledge as well as children with a developed and sizable vocabulary. My investigation was carried out over a period of three weeks in weekly intervals (please see lesson plan, appendix 1, 2, 3 and 4). Having introduced the topic of vocabulary the previous week, explaining the difference between depth, width and fluency<sup>2</sup> and familiarizing the students with concepts such as synonyms and antonyms, I spent the first lesson explaining the notion of turning the volume button up or down on your language. I illustrated the concept using figures to clarify low, middle and high volume. Furthermore, I introduced three different resources for turning the volume button up or down; graded core words, boosting words and repetition. I was careful to remind the students that by controlling your language in this manner, you will be more accurate and hence more effective in your communication; be it descriptive, persuasive, expository or narrative communication. I then wrote a simple short sentence on the board encouraging the students to give examples on how to use the above resources to turn the volume button up or down. The second lesson I read aloud the story of "Jack and the Beanstalk" (please see appendix 2 and 3) as well as an extract of the same story written in a slightly more descriptive language. We collectively identified boosting words, graded core words and repetition words in the two text examples, and discussed the differences in the two texts. For the third lesson we collectively looked at examples for graded core words and boosting words before asking the students independently to write a short sentence containing an adjective. The students were then told to write the same sentence, but this time turning the volume button up or down; first by using a boosting word and afterward by grading the adjective. In the final task the students were asked to write two versions of a scene in the "Jack and the Beanstalk-story". In the first version the mother would get extremely angry when realizing that Jack has swapped the cow for five beans. In the second version the mother is not faced and acts rather indifferent to the news. In order to collect empirical data from my investigation I would make notes following each lesson of what seemed to work well and what seem to cause difficulties for the students. I focused on whether the students understood the purpose of vocabulary acquisition and the tasks they were set, did they participate in group-discussion, did they display a good understanding of vocabulary including width, depth and fluency and did they seem motivated? I also collected the students' written work for evaluation.

## **Theory**

As mentioned above I am interested in Henriksen's observations regarding the concept of "mastering words". Referring to the qualitative aspect of vocabulary Henriksen accentuates that in order to fully know a word, an in-depth understanding of the word in relation to other words within the same semantic field is required. This includes various synonyms, antonyms, collocations, its stylistic structure and whether it can

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<sup>2</sup> Vocabulary width refers to the quantitative measures (how many words do you know), vocabulary depth refers to qualitative measures (how well do you know each word) and fluency refers to the speed of which the learner can activate a word from his long-term memory, receptively as well as productively.

be used figurative or as part of an idiom. To illustrate the implications of this, Henriksen refers to Carter and McCarthy's study on basic words from 1988 (Henriksen, 1995). The study maintains that for a learner to master the first 850 words, in say English, the learner is in fact required to learn 12,450 different meanings. Consequently, Henriksen emphasizes that learning words does not merely involve an amassment of isolated words; it is a process of constant revision, where one's vocabulary is continuously expanded as new meanings and connections are discovered, leading to a more precise understanding of a word's meaning and its position amongst other words in the semantic field. Furthermore, Henriksen refers to the work of M. Svendsen Pedersen who accentuate the need to clarify that words should not be read (and understood) isolated, but in a textual context. Svendsen Pedersen states: "...it is not just a question of learning 'technical words' but just as much one of learning to be able to decode the specific subject framework they are part of" (Henriksen, 1995, p.14). A notion that links to English linguistic J. R. Firth, known for drawing attention to the context-dependent nature of meaning, and who famously said that "You shall know a word by the company it keeps" (Firth, J. R. 1957).

Henriksen also touches upon an interesting concept which she refers to as the learners' hidden resources. Based on one of her investigations on students' acquisition of adjectives she learned that students' receptive vocabulary is often considerably better than their productive vocabulary. Henriksen underlines the importance of becoming better at exploiting students' great receptive potential, including their partial understanding. Furthermore, she suggests that a strong receptive vocabulary could point towards placing a greater demand on students. Clarifying her proposal, she explains that it is possible to work with higher-level texts, provided the degree of difficulty in assignments matches the level of the student (Henriksen, 1995).

You can draw comparisons between Henriksen's attention to context in vocabulary and Derewianka and Jones' thoughts on a functional approach to grammar. Derewianka and Jones follow a philosophy which is based on, amongst others, Michael Halliday's theory of language (Derewianka & Jones, 2016). Halliday views language as a service of meaning; language learning is learning how language is used appropriately to achieve a purpose. Hence, Derewianka and Jones describe language as a system of choices that varies according to the context. The context includes the genre, i.e. the social purpose for communication and it includes the register consisting of Field, Tenor and Mode. Field is the ideational function of language that tells us what is happening; here we express, connect and develop our ideas. Tenor is the interpersonal function of language where we interact with others by taking on various roles; we could be asking for information, making requests, expressing opinions etc. Mode is the textual function that helps us organize e.g. ideas or attitudes into a coherent text (Derewianka & Jones, 2016). The predominant idea behind a functional approach to language and grammar is that you learn words in relation to a context. It systematically describes how the choices we make in our language production are influenced by context factors. In contrast to a more traditional approach, which perceives language as a set of rules to be followed, the functional approach considers language as a resource, and aims to extend the learner's potential to make meaning more effectively. As such, meaning-making becomes the key to understanding linguistic structures and processes. Notably, Derewianka and Jones provide examples in their text how a functional approach can be implemented in the classroom. One such example is a focus on "saying" verbs in narratives. Here the teacher must explain to the students that whilst it is adequate to use neutral verbs such as "said", "replied" or "stated", you make a text more effective by choosing a verb which gives an insight into perhaps the character's emotions or the situation. This can be done by using verbs such as "he whined" or "she whispered". It is beneficial for the students to be given the opportunity to identify unusual "saying" verbs in a text in order to contemplate how the narrators' choice of words contributes to the

development of the story and the characters. Hence, students are provided a scaffold and a tool for choosing well-selected “saying” verbs in their own writing (Derewianka & Jones, 2016).

Lars Stæhr’s theory regarding vocabulary acquisition takes a somewhat different approach compared to the context centered functional grammar Derewianka and Jones represent. Stæhr clearly supports a more systematic, direct and targeted method of vocabulary teaching, explaining that the qualitative and quantitative vocabulary requirements faced by L2 learners is too big to rely on indirect<sup>3</sup> teaching methods alone (Stæhr, 2019). However, Stæhr never dismisses a functional approach, and adopts a functional perspective in the majority of his work. His analysis of the language acquisition processes describes how words are required gradually over time, and this process can be illustrated in terms of stages on a continuum (please see appendix 5). Referring to Henriksen’s three interdependent development dimensions (Stæhr, 2019, p.181), Stæhr emphasizes that language acquisition is a gradual developing process; not an “all or nothing” phenomenon. In the first continuum you acquire knowledge about the meaning of a word; moving from a recognition to partial understanding to exact understanding. The second continuum describes the degree of in-depth knowledge, i.e. the understanding of a word’s paradigmatic and syntagmatic relations. This continuum reflects the development of the learner’s lexical network and cognitive knowledge, and although Stæhr does not comment on it, it clearly supports a functional perspective. The first and second continuums are interconnected because a more precise knowledge of a word’s meaning (continuum 1) entails an advanced understanding of its relating words (continuum 2). The third continuum illustrates a movement from a receptive control of a word towards a productive control; the faster and more precise the learner can interpret the word, the faster the learner can subsequently produce the word adequately and automatically (Stæhr, 2019). Moving on to consider which conditions endorses and contributes to these processes of vocabulary acquisition, Stæhr refers to studies which emphasize the importance of how and how often students are exposed to different words, as well as how and how often they engage with different words. He accentuates the importance of the learner:

- meeting the word repeatedly and in different context.
- having a certain understanding and interest for the topic.
- feeling a need to learn the word.
- is aware when being introduced to the word and succeeds in establishing a link between the word’s form and meaning.
- forming an in-depth understanding of the word through different tasks.

Considering the above, it appears that Stæhr advocates a more systematic and direct approach to vocabulary acquisition almost as an accompanying, but highly conscious, systematized and planned supplement to functional and context-centered vocabulary teaching. He explains that in a direct approach students are given receptive- and productive orientated vocabulary tasks with the primary objective of introducing new words or consolidating already known words. According to Stæhr this is the most effective way of introducing learners to new words as the method ensures that the learners’ attention is directed towards carefully selected words. Additionally, it can aid the repetition and context-variation requirement that Stæhr accentuates as essential in a successful vocabulary acquisition development (Stæhr, 2019).

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<sup>33</sup> Indirect teaching method: includes reading and listening practice with a specific focus on comprehension as well as communicative tasks where the student produces language, strengthening and consolidating knowledge in the process. (Stæhr, 2019).

## **Observations and analysis**

In my investigation I aimed to combine a direct approach intermittently with a functional approach to vocabulary teaching. In my initial introduction of the concept of turning the volume button up or down it was obvious that the students benefitted from the use of multimodal elements in the form of the speedometer and the linear explanation. In the early stages I had to clarify that low is not a negative entity; lowering the volume of the word "love" is not "hate", which is an antonym, but e.g. "like". However, I was particularly impressed with how quickly the students understood the difference between the resources for raising and lowering the volume. They were able to offer suggestions for graded core words, boosting words and repetitions, not only demonstrating an understanding of turning the volume button up or down, but also demonstrating an understanding of the difference between the three separate resources.

Considering their age, this level of receptive command and knowledge in a second language is impressive and indicates a strong receptive vocabulary. Henriksen's suggestion to utilize student's relatively strong receptive vocabulary seems to be a good strategy for this class, provided the assignments are kept within the ability of the students' productive level. Partly because you are able to work with more context-based or specialized topics, partly because the material is challenging and motivating - also for the stronger students.

Although I was extremely pleased with the students' motivated response and performance throughout the investigation, I encountered a few difficulties during the third and last lesson. The majority of the students found it difficult to grade the core words listed in example 1 (please see appendix 3) where words were taken out of context. Here their limitations were exposed regarding vocabulary; whilst they all knew what the word "happy" meant, they did not know the words "ecstatic" or "content". Hence, they found it difficult to grade the words. However, in the following task (please see appendix 4, task 1) it was obvious that grading the core word in their own sentences appeared to be much easier. Perhaps they, more or less instinctively, chose adjectives whose semantic field they knew well, but it was obvious that they performed much better when suggesting graded core words for their own sentences. This observation supports a functional perspective and Henriksen's theory that a word's meaning is found in its position amongst other words. The final task (please see task 2, appendix 4) was a little daunting for some of the students.

Complying with Henriksen's recommendation of keeping the assignment level within the individual student's ability, I asked a few of the students to write more short sentences (task 1) instead of becoming overwhelmed by task 2. The remaining student continued with task 2, and as soon as they got underway they seemed engaged and motivated. As an additional scaffolding support I read aloud a few of the "Jack and the Beanstalk" re-writes which seemed to inspire some of the more hesitant students and helped clarify the task. Evaluating and discussing the answers, I asked the individual student to identify boosting words and graded core words in their work. They were all able to do so. Evaluating the two written tasks (please see appendix 6 and 7), it is interesting how some of the students employ multimodal resources in the form of capitalization to indicate shouting or anger. I find it encouraging to observe that the students use the tools available to them to express themselves as accurately as possible. Finally, it is noticeable that several students found it more difficult to express an indifferent response from the mother rather than an angry response. They resolved this problem by re-counting a dialogue about the beans between Jack and the mother, indicating that the mother was not angry. I thought this was a rather resourceful and clever way of getting around a productive language limitation.

## Appendix 1. Lesson plan

# English lesson week 18

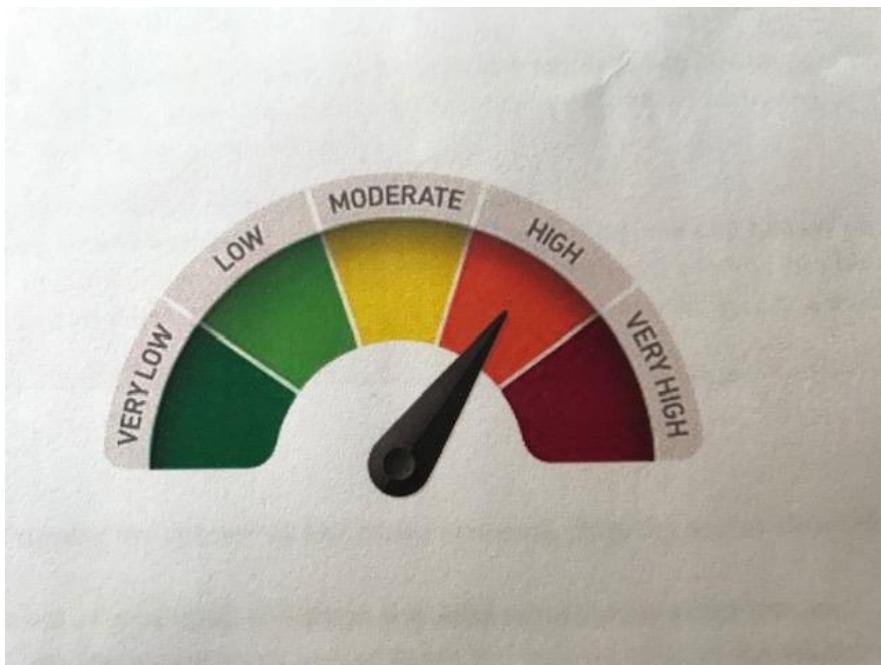
# Vocabulary acquisition/Ordforrådsøvelser

## Vocabulary - turning the volume of your language up or down

Last week we were focusing on understanding different words we know really well and we were talking about synonyms and antonyms. If we understand a word really well (you will often call it depths of understanding) you will be able to use it correctly and precisely. **Remember:** The more words we know and the deeper we know them - the better you will be able to express yourself.

An effective way of getting your message through when writing or speaking is “to turn the volume of your language up or down”. You can “turn up or down” the volume of your opinion, emotions or judgment in many different ways using different resources. (Look at the chart below):

## Turning the volume of your language up or down



## Appendix 2. Lesson plan

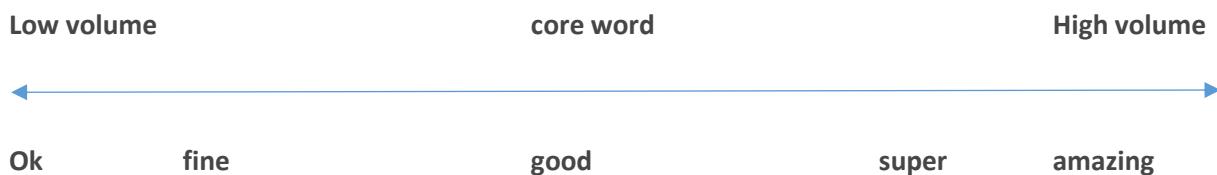
Let's have a look again at the sentences we worked with last week.  
I wrote on the board about my good friend Clara.

*“Clara is good at playing football”*

I will then divide the sentence into sections as per the following:

*“Clara | is good at | playing football”*

Let's try to turn the volume up or down for the adjective "good"



So, if we turn the volume button up or down we can describe Clara's football skills much more accurately. Your language also becomes much more interesting to listen to or read.

# English lesson week 19

**Listen to the fairytale of “Jack and the Beanstalk”:**

Once upon a time there was a boy named Jack, who lived with his mother on a small farm. They were very poor, and so one day his mother asked Jack to take their only cow to town and sell it at the market.

On the way to town, Jack met a man who offered him five magic beans for the cow. Jack took the beans and gave the man the cow. When Jack came home, his mother was very angry and threw the beans out of the window.

"You silly boy!" she shouted.

Next morning, there was a beanstalk growing in their garden. It grew high up into the sky. Jack jumped out of bed and started to climb. He climbed and climbed until he reached the top.

There he saw an enormous castle. It was the home of a giant and his wife. He knocked on the door and asked for some food. The giant's wife invited him in and gave him breakfast.

"You'll have to hide if my husband comes home. If he finds you here, he will eat you alive!" she said. Just then the door opened and in walked the giant. "Fee-fie-fum! I smell the blood of an Englishman!" he shouted.

"Sit down and have something to eat," the giant's wife said quickly to the giant.

Jack hid under the table. Later, he overheard the giant counting his coins. When the giant fell asleep, Jack stole a bag of gold coins. But at that moment the giant woke up and chased Jack down the beanstalk.

Quickly, Jack took an axe and chopped down the beanstalk.

The giant was killed, and Jack and his mother lived happily ever after.

### Appendix 3. Lesson plan

Here is an extract of another version of the same story:

**Once upon a time, there lived a widow woman and her son, Jack, on their small farm in the country. Every day, Jack would help his mother with the chores - chopping the wood, weeding the garden and milking the cow. But despite all their hard work, Jack and his mother were very poor with barely enough money to keep themselves fed. "What shall we do, what shall we do?" said the widow, one spring day. "We don't have enough money to buy seed for the farm this year! We must sell our cow, Old Bess, and with the money buy enough seed to plant a good crop." "All right, mother," said Jack, "it's market-day today. I'll go into town and sell Bessy."**

Find examples of words in the text where the writer has "turned the volume up or down"

Boosting words	They were <b>very</b> poor
Graded core word	There he saw an <b>enormous</b> castle
Repetition	<b>What shall we do, what shall we do?</b>

Identify the words on class and write them on the board

- What kind of "turning the volume button up or down" does the writer mostly use?
- What does the "turning the volume button up or down" do to the text?
- Looking at the two texts about "Jack and the Beanstalk"; which one is most descriptive? How does it make you feel as a reader? Which one do you prefer and why?

## English lesson week 20

### Example 1. Grading core words (gradebøjninger)

Volume button turned down	Core meaning	Volume button turned up
ok, fine, pleasant	nice	lovely, adorable
content, pleased	happy	over the moon, ecstatic
sleepy, drowsy	tired	exhausted
Uneasy, nervous	scared	anxious, petrified

Continue filling in the chart with your own words

## Appendix 4. Lesson plan

### Example 2. Boosting words (you can put boosting words in front of main word or phrases)

Boosting words		Main word
	← →	
Volume turned down	Volume turned up	
a little ..., pretty...	really..., extremely...	scared
an ok ..., a fine...	a good..., my best..., an amazing...	friend
a bit...	pretty..., very..., so so...,	old

Continue filling in the chart with your own words

#### Task 1.

Write a simple short sentence with an adjective: ex. "My schoolbag is heavy". I would like you to write the sentence again - this time grading the core word (the adjective). Ex:

My schoolbag is overweight (turning the volume up)/ My schoolbag is bulky (turning the volume down).

Then write the sentence using boosting words. Ex:

My schoolbag is a little heavy. / My schoolbag is extremely heavy.

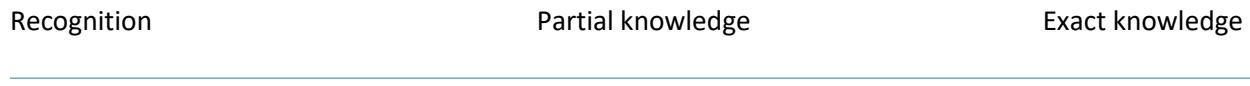
#### Task 2.

I would like you to write two versions of the paragraph where Jack comes home to his mum and shows her the beans:

1. In the first version, Jack's mum is ok about it, she doesn't get angry and she doesn't shout at him. (But remember, it doesn't mean your writing should be boring or short - try to explain her reaction using words where the volume button is turned down; = a little bit, somehow, rather, sort of, cross, annoyed, irritated etc.)
2. In the second version, Jack's mum gets really angry. Try to describe her reaction with words where the volume is turned up; = very, really, extremely, completely, unbelievably, furious, fuming, livid etc.)

Appendix 5. Continuum for language acquisition processes. (Stæhr, 2019, p.181)

**Continuum 1: Level of knowledge of the word's meaning:**



**Continuum 2: Level of nowledge concerning the word's paradigmatic and syntagmatic relations:**



**Continuum 3: Level of receptive and productive control:**



## Appendix 6. Selected student assignments:

### Example 1.

:Jack came home with some beans,

The mother said: Jack it doesn't do anything we can make a soup with them.

Jack says: fine enough but then it should be 4 beans.

:Jack came home with some beans

His mother shouted: Jack!! are you stupid or what do you think. You have no brain!! Jack says: sorry mom that was the only thing I could get for the cow.

mother says: go away from my sight now.

### Example 2.

Jack came home from the marked, he had sold his cow. his mom inquired what he get from the cow. Jack says: 4 magic beans. His mom became mega angry. And said: YOU ARE SO STUPID!!! WHAT WERE YOU THINKING???

Jack came home from the marked, he had sold his cow. his mom inquired what he get from the cow. Jack says: 4 magic beans. His mom became happy. She says: what kind of magic do they contain? Jack says: i don't know.

Jack's mom says fine. Should we find a place to plant them? Says Jack. Yes says Jack's mom.

### Example 3.

ANGRY JACK AND THE BEANSTALK:

Jack walks into the room mum says: what did you trade for the cow?. jack: i got 5 beans

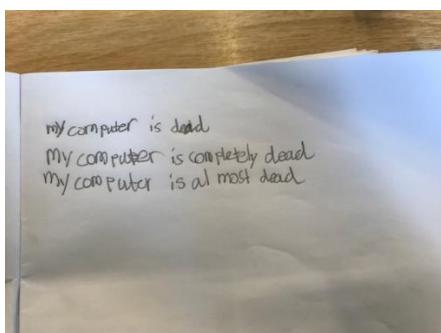
mum: WHTÝ WOULD U TRADE A COW FOR 5 BEANS GO TO U ROOM NOW U LITTLE DEVIL CHILD. jack: b-but mom.

mum: NO BUTS ROOM NOW!!!!!! jack: okay mom.... :C.

I dont care mom jack and the

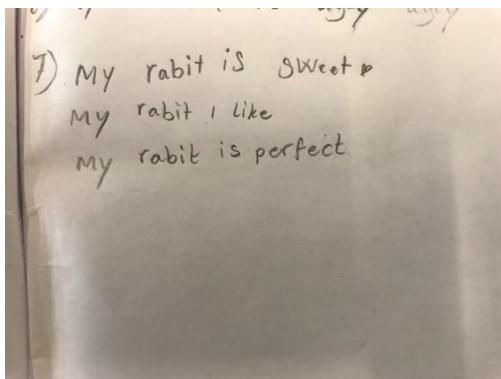
beanstalk: jack walks into the room mum says: what did you trade for the cow?.jac: i got 5 beans mun what 5 beans it's okay. okay i do not know if they are magic beans so it's okay my beautiful boy go to sleep it's late. Jack: okay mom. And Like that they slept

### Example 4.

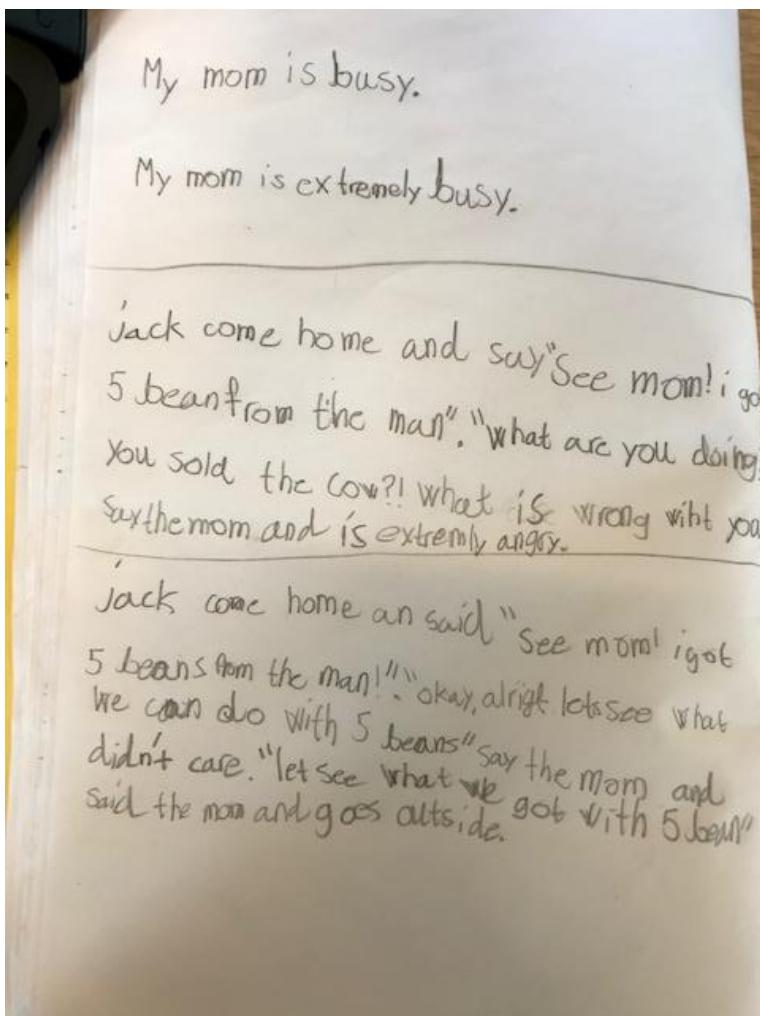


## Appendix 7. Selected student assignments:

### Example 5.



### Example 6.



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