



# English: Words as Gifts

## What if an English class were about words as gifts?

Stuart was concerned that English class units had become “a means to an end” as a result of curriculum pressure. He thought the children were seeing words only as tools or skills rather than as something that can make gifts. He also wanted students to see that words can influence us for good or evil; they can challenge and change us. We need wisdom to discern whether we accept what words are saying—not all gifts are wanted.

“I started with a series of quick role plays: one giving a gift someone wanted (a box of chocolates), another giving something they would not want (a single sock). In each case, the children imagined the gift, and I just whispered what they had to role-play. We then discussed whether words could be gifts, how they could be good or bad, and how we need to think about the gift that is made by words and whether we want to receive it.

“We read *The Selfish Giant* by Oscar Wilde as part of studying narrative. I placed a gift bag on the front table and asked the students what ‘gifts’ the story gave us. For example, it might trigger thoughts that challenge us to be less selfish. The students’ suggestions were written on cards and placed in the gift bag. We explored the narrative of the story in the usual way, keeping in mind the gifts the story might be making to us. At the end of the session, we reviewed what we had learned from the story using the suggestions in the gift bag as prompts. Each child had a small gift template and wrote what gift the story had made to them. I added the following question to the display: ‘We receive gifts from stories. How do we decide whether we want them?’ Later I went through the templates and typed up the students’ words and thoughts, and added them to the display mounted on gift paper.”

## What’s going on here?

Stuart **saw** English class as something that offered a gift that could be received with gratitude, and that could challenge and change us.

He **engaged** students in experiencing role plays and stories to engage their imagination and focus their awareness. He also asked them to respond

reflectively in writing.

He **reshaped his practice** by using key words (gift), role plays, a choice of story, questions, templates, and a display to consistently support the lesson's focus.

## What does this have to do with faith, hope, and love?

Many words make gifts: gifts of information and emotion, thoughts and imagination. Those gifts can be good or bad, and discernment is needed. Language is one of the ways we relate to each other, and words also carry responsibility: how we use words is a moral choice. Words are not “just” words; they can become gifts of **love** or legacies of damage.

## What difference does it make?

Changing the framework to “words as gifts” did not change the content being taught, but it offered a new framework to experience and think about the content, and it highlighted the need for discernment.

## Where could we go from here?

The framework of “words as gifts” could be used for different parts of English:

- Words as gifts for delight/fun, etc. (e.g., a playful poem)
- Words as gifts for communication and to help in relationships (e.g., writing letters)
- Words as gifts to gain understanding of self, others, the world, or God (e.g., traditional stories, Bible stories, other words that give insights)
- Words as gifts to serve others (e.g., dialogue, advice)
- Words as gifts to make a difference (e.g., famous speeches or biographies used to inspire and encourage)

- Words as gifts to heal and restore (e.g., speaking comfort or speaking out against injustice)

## Digging deeper

Christians often call the Bible the Word of God, a gift from God to his people, to be received with gratitude. The Holy Spirit speaks through words to challenge, change, and inspire (2 Timothy 3:16). The words of Scripture also serve as a point of orientation from which other words that we encounter can be weighed.

*When you read God's Word, you must constantly be saying to yourself, "It is talking to me, and about me." Soren Kierkegaard*

The separation of word and deed is not part of biblical thinking; the two are seen as tightly bound. Faith, hope, and love are not just words but a way of life. In the Bible, James talks of faith that must become deeds to be considered faith (James 2:17). This close connection between words and their deeds or consequences means that words are taken very seriously. Words can hurt or heal, encourage or destroy. The Bible compares untamed words to weapons that injure; it also compares words to a forest fire that destroys (James 3:5).

Wisdom is needed in making judgments about words. Wisdom is a deep level of understanding and discernment. It is not the same as knowledge or intelligence. It is possible to be intelligent and lack wisdom. Wisdom is knowledge that changes how we live in a God-ward direction. Wise people recognize their own limitations and trust God, knowing that many things are deeper than they may seem and that not all words bring life.



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