

The Effects of Purposeful Vocabulary Instruction

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Introduction to Action Research

Abstract

Vocabulary instruction is an important part of the literacy framework. It introduces students to tier two (high frequency words that appear in written texts for mature language users (Beck & McKowen, 2013)) words that are not often heard in colloquial language. Many primary elementary teachers struggle to incorporate vocabulary instruction into their daily practices. However, this is a vital skill for all readers to develop as they learn to read and read to learn. It is important that students have the opportunity to interact with these new words, understanding what they mean, how they fit into semantics in English and word associations. There are several ways to do this through teacher read alouds, class shared readings, and cloze reading strategies. Teachers need to focus on incorporating informational texts into their classroom libraries, teaching students how to preview a text and preview key vocabulary terms. With these instructional techniques, teachers can provide rich vocabulary instruction to students. This literature review gathered background information for an action research study answering the question: What effect will purposeful vocabulary instruction in a second grade elementary classroom have on student literacy skills as measured by benchmark assessments, performance assessments, weekly word check ins, and teacher observational notes?

Keywords: Vocabulary instruction, second grade, literacy

In the primary elementary classroom, literacy is a paramount skill. Students are learning how to interact with phonemic awareness, becoming more knowledgeable with decoding words, learning comprehension strategies and transitioning their skills of learning how to read into reading to learn. These developments are influenced by many factors including literacy instruction, interactions with literacy independently, with peers and through technology, and in content areas such as science, social studies and health. Despite these multiple opportunities to interact with literacy, vocabulary instruction is often neglected in literacy instruction (Duke & Block, 2012).

Vocabulary is an important part of the learning to read process in the primary elementary grades. Unfortunately, teachers do not often have purposeful lessons to introduce students to vocabulary (Duke & Block, 2012). In most cases, new vocabulary is introduced during read alouds in vague and potentially confusing ways that do not allow students to interact with the words being introduced to them. Many primary teachers believe incorporating word-reading instruction in their daily literacy lessons will help improve students' vocabulary and reading comprehension skills (Duke & Block, 2012, Mahdavi & Tensfeldt, 2013). While it is important to include word reading instruction in the primary elementary classroom, there is a difference between teaching word-reading and vocabulary instruction. With word reading instruction, students are interacting with sight words, learning what they look like, how to say them and how to write them. This straightforward learning is essential to developing reading skills.

Vocabulary instruction, on the other hand, provides students the opportunity to interact with more difficult words not often heard in colloquial language. It requires more attention and active learning from the students (Beck & McKowen, 2013). It is important to not only include vocabulary but also make students more word conscious (Owocki, 2012). Making students more

word conscious encourages them to notice words they are not familiar with and seek understanding. If students are not word conscious, the reading comprehension of a text suffers. According to Murnane, Sawhill & Snow (2012), vocabulary instruction is similar to developing student background knowledge. The schema associated with vocabulary instruction can make the difference in a student's comprehension skills (Murnane, et al., 2012, Mahdavi & Tensfeldt, 2013). Without schema and exposure to new vocabulary words, students will be at a disadvantage to their peers. Hart & Risley (2006) argued, as noted in Fien et al. (p. 308, 2011), vocabulary differences are due to background differences starting as early as 3 years old. Students who struggle to read and therefore read less are exposed to less words and even fewer vocabulary words (Mahdavi & Tensfeldt, 2013, p. 77). By second grade the difference in word knowledge can range from 4,000 to 8,000 words (Fien, 2011). Therefore, it is vital that primary elementary teachers incorporate purposeful vocabulary instruction into their literacy lessons to expose students to more vocabulary, deepening their schema and creating opportunities to interact with text.

There are limitations to the studies done in relation to vocabulary acquisition as a comprehension strategy. In comparison to other comprehension strategies, vocabulary previewing is not shown to be as effective (Hawkins, Musti-Rao, Hale, McGuire & Hailley, 2010). With this limitation in mind, it must be noted that vocabulary instruction should be taught in addition to the regular language arts curriculum to continue to develop the student as a well rounded reader.

Current research on vocabulary instruction indicates that teachers must have purposeful vocabulary lessons planned for students, both orally presented and through print. This can be done in the primary classroom with teacher read alouds, shared reading and incorporating more

exposure to informational texts. According to Mahdavi & Tensfeldt, (2013) a common way to incorporate vocabulary instruction and knowledge in the primary elementary grades is through teacher read alouds. With teacher read alouds, a teacher orally introduces students to new vocabulary and uses repetition, word banks and pictures to support the new learning (Mahdavi & Tensfeldt, 2013, Fien et al., 2011). Students must also be using new vocabulary words in receptive (illustrations) and expressive ways (acting out the words) to show understanding (Mahdavi & Tensfeldt, 2013). Beck and McKeown argued, as cited in Mahdavi & Tensfeldt (p. 81, 2013), students must actively use new words to develop genuine understanding of them. In addition to teacher read alouds, using a shared reading in the classroom has also shown a positive relationship with vocabulary acquisition and comprehension strategies through collaboration and social interactions throughout the whole class (Kesler, 2011). The teacher covers up key vocabulary and leads the students in a discussion about what reading strategy students are using to determine the hidden word. During this time, the teacher gives the students work time to collaborate on possible words and their synonyms and eventually reveals the word. This allows students to draw correlations between words, print, and the meaning of the text as a whole. The other suggestion in improving vocabulary is through the implementation of information texts in the elementary classroom. There is a dire need to incorporate informational texts into the primary classroom. It allows students the opportunity to interact with nonfiction knowledge and develop vocabulary skills in addition to comprehension, and overall reading strategies (Duke & Bennett-Armistead, 2003). One reading strategy that can be practiced while reading informational texts is the close reading strategy. In this strategy, students (with teacher help) reread a text three times to determine different information. On the second read, the focus is on vocabulary and the key ideas associated with new vocabulary (Fisher & Frey, 2014). Lastly, in

research done by Hawkins, et al., (2010) the researchers studied the effect of silent previewing, listening previewing and vocabulary previewing on fourth grade comprehension scores. The study showed the strongest relationship between listening previewing and vocabulary previewing on the student's later performance on reading and comprehending the passage (Hawkins, et al., 2010). Overall, these vocabulary lessons are important to be used with vocabulary words that will challenge and push students' learning to the next level. According to Beck, McKeown and Kucan (2013, p. 24), it's important to prioritize "tier two words" that students will encounter more often in the academic setting rather to challenge their word knowledge bank. When selecting words to use in the above mentioned solutions, teachers must be explicit and purposeful about the words they choose to identify and examine more closely in vocabulary instruction.

Based on my findings in this literature review, I will measure my students' initial comprehension skills and vocabulary knowledge. After analyzing the results, I will intervene in different ways. I will pay closer attention to the words that I choose in my vocabulary instruction. I will pay attention to and prioritize tier two words that students will encounter more often in the academic setting. First, I will continue to use shared reading in my classroom as an instructional strategy once a week and incorporate the importance of determining vocabulary words and identifying synonyms for hidden words. I will also pay purposeful attention to the new vocabulary words that appear in the classroom read aloud. I will develop a system for my students to record and make the new words meaningful to their learning. Second, I will use interventions within my guided reading groups to target struggling students and their vocabulary through the use of background knowledge building, more exposure to informational text and practice with close reading strategies.

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