

Discovering the Best Vocabulary Teaching Strategies for Elementary Students Learning English as a Second Language

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Abstract. This research asks: What strategies work best for teaching vocabulary to English language learners? A systematic, direct, explicit approach was used by a reading intervention instructor to teach word recognition skills, teacher-selected vocabulary, and student-selected academic words to elementary students who were at various stages of learning English. The instructor provided a sheltered classroom and sought to motivate students to become involved with each other socially. The systematic, direct, explicit instruction involved the use of scripted lesson plans that covered calendar words, affixes, and strategies to use when unfamiliar words are encountered during contextual reading. Contextual reading included the use of library books and websites that provided information students needed to complete a multicultural quilt. Students were assessed using the following reading tests: the Scholastic Reading Inventory (SRI), Johns Individual Reading Inventory (IRI), and the Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA). This research indicates that students who were consistently involved in this research were successful in building their bank of academic and social vocabulary. Students also became knowledgeable in the use of strategies to recognize unfamiliar words. Since the conclusion of this paper, two of the students involved in the original study are currently reading at grade level according to the Johns IRI and DIBELS. The other student no longer attends this school.

Introduction

As immigration increases, so does the need for elementary schools to accommodate students who are learning English as a second language (L2s). As a reading teacher working with L2s for the first time, vocabulary acquisition for grades three through five became my focus. L2s lack Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) or social vocabulary. They also lack Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP), or academic vocabulary (Peregoy & Boyle, 2005).

Three girls in a third grade reading class of six students participated in this study. They were chosen because English is their second language.

Method

The first step in meeting the needs of L2s is to provide a sheltered environment where a student feels secure, accepted, and valued (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2004). Aspects of sheltered instruction include using visuals, expressive body movement, and allowing extra time for students to respond. Repeating and pausing during conversation and oral reading, using themes and concentrating on central concepts are also methods used in a sheltered atmosphere. Another aspect of a sheltered environment is the allowance for extra reading instruction. I provide remedial reading instruction for grades Kindergarten through grade five in addition to the ninety minutes students receive in the regular classroom. During this research, I was observed by a university instructor using the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP). I earned a perfect score which shows that I do use sheltered techniques during reading intervention.

The three students involved in this research were at different levels of reading proficiency. Two spoke fluent English and had consistent school attendance. The third student spoke little English and had infrequent school attendance. All three qualified for thirty minutes of reading intervention because of scores on tests mentioned previously.

Teaching must be standards-based and goal oriented (Echevarria et al., 2004, McKeown, 1993, Nation, 2002). Therefore, each day began with setting or reviewing personal goals of the students for their reading success and discussing objectives for each lesson (Echevarria, et al., 2004). This provided motivation and active involvement (Richek, 2006).

The curriculum used for the first two weeks of this research was a scripted program, Language Foundations (LF). LF provides lessons in phonics written so that students discover the phonics rule being covered. The teacher begins the lesson by asking the student to echo several words while listening for the sound that the words have in common. The words are written on the chalkboard and discussed. Short narrative stories are included with each lesson. These stories use words that are spelled with the new phonics rule. The LF lessons spiral. This means they build upon previous lessons. During two of the four weeks covered in this research, this curriculum taught prefixes and suffixes with the same type of discovery lessons. LF provided systematic, explicit instruction in word recognition (Richards & Renandya, 2002).

Students were asked to keep journals. Journal entries centered on themes that encouraged students to share facts about themselves or feelings about reading material used in class. Response journals are a way to activate and build upon students' prior knowledge (Dutro & Moran, 2005). Rather than directly correct mistakes written in the journal, I would respond to the students in their journal by repeating what they had written in a way that provided the correct form of spelling, grammar, or punctuation that the student missed. Response journals provide a means of motivation and comprehension building for students as students are sharing their feelings and receiving one-on-one attention from their instructor (Hill & Flynn, 2006, Parsons, 2001). Response journals are also summative assessment tools for the teacher (Peregoy & Boyle, 2005). After reading and responding to the students' journal entries, I taught vocabulary words that students misspelled or misused. Students were asked to make a semantic web (Hernandez, 2003) and word maps (Vaughn & Linan-Thompson, 2004, Lenski & Johns, 2003). The students were also asked to play sorting and matching games with synonyms and target vocabulary.

To address the need to build social vocabulary as well as academic vocabulary, the teacher asked the students to work in cooperative groups to make a multicultural quilt. Students were asked to find websites and library books about the place where they were born. This level of reading material called for students to use strategies for understanding unfamiliar words. Students learned how to become word detectives. Using Post-It notes, students "captured" a word they did not know by writing it in the center. They attempted to find the meaning of the word using context clues. In one corner of the Post-It note, students wrote their best guess for the definition of the word. In another corner, they wrote the true definition after using a dictionary or glossary. On the bottom of the note, they wrote a picture or sentence to remind them of the meaning of the word. At the end of the day, students were asked to share their words with a partner or the class (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002).

Students were responsible for designing their own square of the multicultural quilt. They drew maps, flags, and pictures of animals and flowers from their country or state of birth. Students were also required to provide a written explanation of their work.

Final scores showed that one student's reading level improved slightly. A second student remained at grade level. The third student, who began the year with the lowest reading scores and attended school inconsistently, scored slightly higher but still read at a beginning reader level (BR).

The number of days attended is important to note. One of the goals of this research was to show that systematic instruction contributes to vocabulary acquisition. The word systematic implies consistency. Student C attended school infrequently; therefore, her instruction was not systematic.

Computerized tests did not show conclusive results for this research. However, a motivation rubric showed that students were motivated to learn because they enjoyed the activities in their reading intervention class. This research did not involve information concerning curriculum or instruction used in the regular classroom. Further research should include this information. A pretest and post-test of specific vocabulary words would have been a valid and reliable measurement for this research. However, part of this research included teaching students to teach themselves new words using self-selection. It would have been difficult to predict words each student would choose. Research shows that L2s develop social language (BICS) within two years of being introduced to a new language. Research also shows that an L2s academic language may take up to five years to develop into a proficient stage (Vela, 2003, Peregoy et al., 2005). If this research had taken place over several years, or even several months, it may have shown different outcomes.

Conclusion

This research did not provide conclusive evidence that four weeks of thirty-minute, intense instruction combined with motivational activities in a sheltered classroom made a difference in standardized test scores. There was improvement for two students and no improvement for one. However, students in this classroom felt motivated to participate and complete tasks. Perhaps, if this instruction had taken place over a longer period, students would have shown improvement on standardized tests.