
2006

A Case Study of Vocabulary Instruction for High School Students

John A. Sargent
East Texas Baptist University

Rachel Olney
East Texas Baptist University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/icctej>



Part of the [Christianity Commons](#), and the [Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Sargent, J. A., & Olney, R. (2006). A Case Study of Vocabulary Instruction for High School Students. *International Christian Community of Teacher Educators Journal*, 1(2). <https://doi.org/>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in International Christian Community of Teacher Educators Journal by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ George Fox University. For more information, please contact arolfe@georgefox.edu.

A Case Study of Vocabulary Instruction for High School Students

Abstract

A review of typical vocabulary instruction in a high school classroom. Several themes emerged from this case study, which highlight the related difficulties and challenges that accompany a popular approach to vocabulary instruction.

A Case Study of Vocabulary Instruction for High School Students

John A. Sargent and Rachel Olney

Summary: A review of typical vocabulary instruction in a high school classroom. Several themes emerged from this case study, which highlight the related difficulties and challenges that accompany a popular approach to vocabulary instruction.

Introduction

The students in Ms. Smith's sixth period American History class are busy copying words the teacher states are important for them to comprehend. On an overhead transparency, there is a list of 15 words the students must find a definition for, write the definition down on a sheet of paper and then use the word in a complete sentence. Sound familiar? This example of vocabulary instruction is common in classrooms throughout the United States.

There is a clear relationship in the literature between vocabulary and reading comprehension (Davis, 1994). Vocabulary is the basis for communication, reading, and writing. Effective instruction while teaching vocabulary is a challenge for the instructor but is vital for the student. Vocabulary is crucial for all aspects of education. The student must understand the word and its meaning to gain comprehension of its use. Teachers tend to struggle to produce effective and relevant instruction of vocabulary. One of the most popular processes used by educators to teach vocabulary is assigning the student to look up words in dictionaries and give definitions, parts of speech, synonyms, and antonyms, but according to Greenwood (2002, p. 258), "Looking up words or committing definitions to memory leads at best to a superficial understanding and rapid forgetting of words."

The students tend to copy the definition, repeat it back to the instructor and shortly forget the word altogether. Greenwood (2002) affirms that using definitions to learn new words has two problems. First, definitions

do not usually contain enough information for ease of use and understanding. Second, a person must know a word in order to understand the definition.

We believe the constant regurgitation of the definitions of vocabulary words create boredom, off-task behavior, and ineffective instruction. Teachers must seek new and inventive avenues of teaching vocabulary. It is critical that educators take this problem seriously and enact and support an effective and reliable plan to change the teaching process of vocabulary words from didactic instruction to a constructivist format. This will allow the students to not only learn and comprehend vocabulary but to seek the opportunity to learn more.

Research Question

How does didactic instruction of vocabulary words affect the comprehension of meaning to advanced sophomore English students?

Limitations of Study

There are three limitations to this study. First, this is an intrinsic case study that is based on observations and reflections from one classroom. Due to this limitation, the results could differ if conducted in another classroom. The second limitation is the personal biases we may possess. We believe that didactic instruction of vocabulary is unsuccessful and a waste of time. The third limitation is that the scope of this study was limited. Different results may have occurred if the study was conducted over a longer time frame.

Review of Literature

In a recent article by Johnson and Rasmussen (1998) six features of effective vocabulary instruction were listed. First, students should be provided with multiple exposures to words in a variety of contexts over time.

Second, words should be taught in the context of a story, theme, or content area unit. Third, teachers should help students activate prior knowledge when learning new words. Fourth, relationships should be established between new words and known words and concepts. Fifth, students should be taught to use context clues and dictionaries to enhance their word knowledge. Finally, students should be taught to interact with words so deep processing can occur.

According to Dixon-Krauss (2001), traditional instruction of vocabulary is unsuccessful in promoting students' comprehension of vocabulary words. In a classroom research study, Dixon-Krauss discovered a new and effective manner to introduce vocabulary that allows the student to understand and remember the vocabulary words at a greater rate than using the traditional method of writing definitions from a dictionary and making a sentence with them. Dixon-Krauss used a teacher-student social interaction method to achieve success. The research showed that a post-reading lesson on vocabulary was more successful than a pre-reading lesson.

As the specified class finished reading assigned portions of the literature, they would list and discuss the vocabulary words and their definitions in relation to the words used in the novel. This provided relevancy and connection for the students. The students were also allowed to write in their journals without a specific assigned number of vocabulary words to use. When they were given this freedom to recall and relate what they had read without the emphasis on specific vocabulary words, the results showed success in comprehension. Although they used fewer of the vocabulary words from the reading, they used more of them correct than before the altered assignment.

An analysis of the class after the implementation of this method showed many interesting and positive trends. The students were more focused on the content of the novel instead of the individual words, creating more comprehension. They reacted to the story more emotionally; they connected with characters and the plot more than previously and their attitude toward vocabulary shifted from negative to positive. The conclusion of the research suggested the development of vocabulary knowledge needed to take place after reading an assigned section of the novel because the novel provided a relevant connection for the students.

Nilsen and Nilsen (2003) stated a source-based approach to teaching vocabulary provided beneficial and effective instruction. The ability of a student to comprehend the basic concept of a word and its relationship to other words provided the student a connection to vocabulary. This method allowed students to recognize relationships between words to reinforce understanding. The source-based method encouraged a hands-on approach to allow the student to visualize the relationships and meanings of words. The implementation of the source-based method allowed students to understand how the understanding of one basic word can unlock the meanings of many words. Student involvement was an important part of this method and was central to the success of this method.

Brabham and Villaume (2002) emphasized the traditional method of teaching vocabulary could be useful, but needs enhancement through activities and assignments which allow the student to connect the word to prior knowledge and relevancy. An extensive and detailed look at vocabulary instruction allowed us to discover why vocabulary instruction does not receive the emphasis it deserves. Vocabulary is the basis for communication and educational growth. Brabham and Villaume supported the idea that incidental learning of vocabulary words through reading, conversing, and word play was beneficial, but the traditional approach did not measure up to the expectations of successful comprehension. To understand and retain the vocabulary words, the student must make a connection to the word. Brabham and Villaume reinforced the idea that comprehension and retention could be achieved through innovative, constructivist strategies, which must be utilized in the classroom.

Brabham & Villaume (2002) insisted that classroom environment is vital to promoting a rich vocabulary in students. An experience rich environment providing novel and interesting experiences that were centered on classroom life stimulated the student. A classroom alive in print with shelves filled with all kinds of novels and other print material encouraged the student to fall in love with words. Conversations in this classroom were full of life with words designed to kindle student thought.

Recent research by Foil and Alber (2002) has provided the middle and high school teacher with options to

teach vocabulary. Foil and Alber argued that a multi-sensory approach through drama is an effective means of teaching vocabulary. Additionally, Foil and Alber affirmed dramatic approaches like pantomime, skits of word meaning, and charades aided the learner by appealing to the tactile/kinesthetic learning style of students.

Semantic mapping is another effective and research validated strategy that empowers students to achieve success in vocabulary development (Anderson-Inman, Knox-Quinn, & Horney, 1996). Various computer programs are available to aid the teacher in empowering students to build vocabulary through semantic mapping. Inspiration software includes various graphic capabilities that stimulate students to create their own and participate in the development of semantic maps.

This limited review of the literature indicated that the most effective method of vocabulary instruction must include activities and assignments which enhance the students' ability to build comprehension from relevancy and previous knowledge. It must be a method beyond the traditional process of defining a word from a dictionary and writing a sentence using the word.

Method

Setting

The setting for this study was a ninth through twelfth grade high school located in rural northeast Texas. This case study took place in a 10th grade advanced placement English classroom during the spring semester of 2004. The students were assigned to the classroom due to advanced learning levels. The classroom contained a gender and ethnic makeup of 48% male and 52% female with 90% White, 9% Black and 1% other.

Participants

The participants in this case study were the teacher, 24 students, and one of the researchers who was in the field. The teacher, Mrs. Smith, has taught in public school systems for 19 years. Her teaching assignments have varied from ninth grade English to advanced placement, senior English. The students consisted of advanced level 10th grade English students.

Sampling

In this study, we used purposive, also known as purposeful, sampling because we selected the participants. This technique sought to ensure the perspectives of participants likely to affect the issues were included in the study (Stringer, 2004).

Data Collection

Observations

For our observations we examined and attempted to record in detail the events that occurred in the classroom. This included teacher questioning, student response, classroom discussion, and individual as well as class participation. Observations depicted the description of the participants, the arrangement of the classroom setting, the re-enactment of dialogue that occurred between teacher and students, and activities that occurred during the class.

Reflections

Reflections were kept as a record of our thoughts about what occurred during each class period that was observed. These reflections assisted in associating feelings and opinions with activities that occurred in each class observation. The reflections helped support the observations by further depicting the activities of the students, the students' reactions to occurrences in the classroom, and our personal view on Mrs. Smith's instructional method.

Interviews

We obtained interviews through informal questioning that was more like a conversation than an interview. We asked Mrs. Smith some questions about how she thought vocabulary should be taught and presented to the students. Afterward, we sat down and recorded all that could be recalled of her responses.

Validity and Bias

We used low inference descriptors, actively sought out negative cases, and used member checking in order for the study to be valid. We accounted for bias by using a field log, peer debriefer, and member checking when applicable.

Data Triangulation

Data triangulation was achieved by the examination of observations, student reflections, and informal teacher interviews. Close examination of these three data sources enabled us to determine patterns and themes that occurred.

Data Analysis

We used Constant Comparison Method (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) in order to determine if certain categories, patterns, or themes were occurring in the data. Dye, Schatz, Rosenberg, and Coleman (2000) compared the Constant Comparison Method to a kaleidoscope. At first, each piece of data was like colors that are seen when one looks into a kaleidoscope. As the process continues the kaleidoscope gradually transforms its design into a distinct pattern

Results

Research Question

How does the didactic and formal instruction of vocabulary words affect the comprehension of meaning to advanced sophomore English students?

Main Themes

The results of this study can be divided into two main themes that address how didactic and formal instruction of vocabulary words negatively affect the comprehension of meaning to advanced 10th grade English students:

Students forced to learn vocabulary in a formal didactic manner do not comprehend or retain the majority of the new words.

Didactic teaching of vocabulary promotes off task behavior.

Learning vocabulary in a formal didactic manner.

One major theme emerging from this study concerned students learning vocabulary in a formal didactic manner who do not comprehend or retain the majority of the new words. Mrs. Smith taught vocabulary in the traditional didactic manner and this method did not empower the students to learn the vocabulary words. During the first week of observation the following was

recorded during an observation period:

Mrs. Smith asks the class the meaning of parochial, a word they were reviewing. Five students respond they have never heard of the word before. Mrs. Smith responds, "Oh come on, I can't believe that!" Jane reads the definition out of a dictionary and the students discover that parochial means local church.

The next word discussed by Mrs. Smith is recluse. The class looks up the definition in the dictionary and writes it down. Other words are discussed briefly and then looked up in a dictionary. Mrs. Smith states, "Please write some idiot sentences with the words we have discussed today and turn them in tomorrow."

In a reflection written during the first week we pondered this method of vocabulary instruction and the fact that most of the students do not seem to understand the words. The reflection included the following words, "This type of vocabulary instruction is driving me crazy, the students see no use for it and they are not getting it!"

During our first interview Mrs. Smith stated, "Most students are having a hard time with vocabulary."

This method of didactic teaching with the students looking up definitions and writing sentences was the method of choice for teaching vocabulary in Mrs. Smith's classroom. During the second week of observations, the following interactions were observed:

Mrs. Smith states, "I don't understand why you are not learning these words. We are out of time for this vocabulary and I don't care anymore! I know this is boring, but there is no other way to learn them." Again, the homework of writing sentences is given to the class with instructions to write the idiot sentences so you will learn the words.

A reflection from week three contains the following, "There has got to be a better way to do vocabulary! I don't know yet what it is, but these students are lost and they lose any sense of desiring to the assignment."

During the last week the following observations were made:

Students begin to check their vocabulary words and

their usage in sentences from the previous night. As they begin, Mrs. Smith complains, "You are not getting these words and you must because they are on the SAT! I can't believe you don't understand this."

The following was recorded in a reflection written during the last week, "The students don't seem to be learning the vocabulary words that Mrs. Smith is presenting each day in class. They are going through the motions and using their deep processing skills to learn the words."

An interview during the last week produced the following response when Mrs. Smith was asked about other methods to teach vocabulary, "I think this method is effective because we have so many words to teach for the SAT test. We must get through them all."

Off task behavior. The second major theme emerging from this case study concerns off task behavior that was generated during this method of didactic teaching. Throughout the study there were numerous instances of students engaging in behavior that was not related to the lesson. Initial observations taken during the first week of the study showed the following instances of off task behavior:

Students were talking throughout the vocabulary lesson today. While Mrs. Smith was going over the words, seven students were conversing about the weekend and their respective boyfriends and girlfriends. One student was writing a note to another student and several other students were reading material that was not from the class.

The first reflection elicited the following thoughts, "The class today demonstrated to me how these students do not want to deal with this way of teaching vocabulary. They constantly talk, do other things, and in general do not pay attention to the classroom happenings."

During the middle week of observations I noted how the students were engaging in many different discussions during the class. My words reflect this, "Today was another frustrating day. When this class does the SAT vocabulary, Mrs. Smith loses them. She even realizes it."

Observations made during the third week of the study

paint this off task behavior with clarity. I note the following: "Matt and Jean are having a conversation about a movie they saw this weekend."

Additional observations were:

Jess and Cathy are passing papers back and forth during the vocabulary instruction. While Mrs. Smith is teaching several words, 16 of 20 students are engaging in some type of behavior not related to the lesson. During a particular class session, when the teacher was giving the vocabulary words, the definitions, and the parts of speech, the students were discussing the best way to cook hot-pockets.

Throughout the study Mrs. Smith stated that some off task behavior is natural for high school students. She responded, "Even though some high school students might be off task, most will be able to get what they need."

The analysis of the observations, reflections, and interviews confirmed that students who are forced to learn vocabulary in a formal, didactic manner, do not necessarily comprehend or retain the majority of the words. This study also corroborates this traditional process of teaching vocabulary is ineffective and promotes off-task behavior. Students tend to perform off-task activities during the recitation of definitions.

Implications

The purpose of this case study was to examine how the didactic and formal instruction of vocabulary words affects the comprehension of meaning. Additionally, the implications of this research are primarily for middle and high school teachers. Several important points emerge from this study and give suggestions for how vocabulary should be taught in a middle or high school classroom.

The first implication is the vital requirement for teachers to seek new and innovative ways to teach vocabulary. The standard traditional didactic method of vocabulary instruction does not work and results in off task behavior. These methods need to include constructivist lessons which allow the student to base comprehension on prior knowledge and relevancy. Students' active involvement will also enhance the success of the lesson.

There are a number of active instructional methods that were mentioned during the review of literature. Semantic webbing is a methodology that allows the student to construct relationships between words and establishes connections vital to their comprehension. Drama is an effective means of teaching vocabulary through a student's tactile and kinesthetic modality. The keyword method enables the student to learn a word by recoding, relating, and retrieving it to something familiar. Vocabulary picture cards empower students to create their own pictures about the meanings of their words and are a very effective way to aid comprehension.

The second implication of this study is our belief these active methods empower each student to comprehend vocabulary at a deeper level than the traditional didactic methodology. Students need to be engaged in their instruction and constructivist methods enable their deep understanding and processing of the word. When students process the meanings of words at a deeper level they retain meaning and are able to use these words in effective ways.

We have several suggestions for further study. A longer qualitative case study should be conducted over the course of an entire semester in order to gain a complete picture of what is happening in a particular classroom. Quantitative research studies should be conducted exploring the efficacy of vocabulary methods designed along constructivist guidelines where student take active roles in their vocabulary learning.

Finally, this case study provides readers the opportunity to make decisions and apply them to their own situation based on the results, analysis, implications, and conclusions of this research. Each reader must judge whether or not the findings are applicable to their own unique situation based on the information provided in this study.

References

Anderson – Inman, L., Knox – Quinn, C., & Horney, M. A. (1996). *Computer based study strategies for students with learning disabilities: Individual differences associated with adoption level*. Journal of Learning Disabilities, 29, 461-484.

Brabham, E. G. & Villaume, S. K. (2002). *Vocabulary instruction: Concerns and visions*. The Reading Teacher, 56, 264.

Davis, F., (1994). *Fundamental factors of comprehension in reading*. Psychometrica. 9, 185-197.

Dixon-Krauss, L. (2001). *Using literature as a context for teaching vocabulary*. Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy. 45, 310.

Dye, J. F., Schatz, I. M., Rosenberg, B. A., & Coleman, S. T. (2000, January). *Constant Comparison Method: A Kaleidoscope of Data*. The Qualitative Report, 4, 1-2. Available: <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR3-4/dye.html>

Foil, C. R., & Alber, S. R. (2002). *Fun and effective ways to build students' vocabulary*. Intervention in School and Clinic, 37, 131-139.

Gabler, I. C. & Schroeder, M. (2003). *Constructivist Methods for the Secondary Classroom*. Boston, MA: Pearson Education, Inc.

Greenwood, S. C. (2002). *Making words matter: Vocabulary study in the content areas*. The Clearing House, 75, 258-263.

Johnson, A. P. & Rasmussen, J. B. (1998). *Classifying and super word web: Two strategies to improve vocabulary instruction*. Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy. 42, 204-208.

Lincoln, Y. S., and Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic Inquiry*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Nilsen, A. P. & Nilsen, D. L. F. (Feb. 2003). *A new spin on teaching vocabulary: A source-based approach*. The Reading Teacher, 56, 436.

Stringer, E. T. (2004). *Action Research in Education*. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Pearson Education, Inc.

John A. Sargent and Rachel Olney work in the School of Education at East Texas Baptist University.