

Vocabulary Instruction: A Review of Traditional Approaches and Effective Methods
Amanda Watts
Lynchburg College
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Instruction of individuals with disabilities is an area of research that has been given a great deal of attention, especially with respect to literacy. Throughout history, educational trends have come and gone, but the foundation of a solid literacy method relies on research based practices. An effective vocabulary component is without doubt a necessary one. In addition to multiple theories and opinions of “best practice,” countless journals, books, articles, etc. have delved into the many methods of instruction in the area of vocabulary. While more traditional approaches have been favored throughout educational settings for many years, new research has strongly emphasized the need for a differentiated approach.

Using recent research, this paper will provide an overview of the importance of vocabulary instruction as it relates to reading success of students with learning disabilities. The purpose of this review was to summarize issues with traditional approaches and discuss more effective methods for instructing vocabulary, including mnemonic strategies, semantic mapping, concept muraling, and experiential learning opportunities.

Importance of Vocabulary Instruction

Research by Baker, Simmons, and Kameenui (1995) indicates that children acquire an average of 3,000 new words annually. Carlisle (1993) suggests that many students with reading disabilities have reading vocabularies that are extremely limited, often having poor oral vocabularies and word recognition skills as well. Moats (2001) labeled the limited knowledge of words, confusion of multiple meaning words and their uses, and partial knowledge of word meanings as “word poverty.” This limited knowledge of words can have severe implications in the secondary grades where reading comprehension, decoding, and vocabulary knowledge are core skills (Simmons & Kameenui, 1990).

According to Fountas and Pinnell (2001), in order to construct meaning from texts, children must engage in a number of behaviors, all of which involve comprehension and are related to the understanding of the vocabulary presented within their reading. Personal experience, understandings of the world and other people, and experiences with different texts over time all contribute to the construction of meaning while reading (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001). Without these components, children often lack the ability to make meaningful connections with novel words, thus leading to difficulties with successful vocabulary growth in the content classroom.

In a recent publication by the Center for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement (CIERA), vocabulary instruction was identified as one of the five areas of reading instruction included in an effective reading program (National Institute for Literacy, 2003). Vocabulary, whether learned directly or indirectly, is vital to the acquisition of oral and written language. Without an understanding of what words mean, readers have significant impairments in reading comprehension as well as oral language (National Institute for Literacy, 2003).

According to Carlisle (1993), effective vocabulary instruction encompasses such practices as building semantic relationships, providing ways to remember basic word meanings, integrating information with prior knowledge, and facilitating multiple exposures to words. Fountas and Pinnell (2001) also suggest that students should be given opportunities to read a wide variety of texts in order to continue to assimilate new words into their prior knowledge, experience the words in context, and have repeated exposure in meaningful ways. Similarly, Cunningham and Stanovich (1998) contend that a majority of a student's acquisition of vocabulary occurs indirectly through exposure to texts and wide reading. This suggests that

children should be exposed to as many reading experiences as possible in order to foster the growth of vocabulary.

Students with reading disabilities, however, are severely limited in the number of the books that they read when compared to peers without reading disabilities (Carlisle, 1993). Differences in the amount of independent reading and inability to learn words from context are some of the most significant obstacles for students with learning disabilities (Jitendra, Edwards, Sacks, & Jacobson, 2004). Students with disabilities also have substantial deficits in reading comprehension, including remembering details and facts, interpretation, and making inferences (Mastropieri & Scruggs, 1997). These struggles with reading result in a lack of motivation to read and the failure to engage in the amount of reading attributed to growth in vocabulary (Jitendra et al., 2004). Reading comprehension, including that in the content classroom, relies on background information and prior knowledge of words. This is built, in part, by exposure to numerous words through wide reading. (Baker et al., 1995; Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002; Carlisle, 1993).

Issues with Traditional Approaches to Vocabulary Instruction

Research indicates that textbooks that are used throughout upper elementary and secondary content classrooms strongly emphasize traditional approaches to vocabulary instruction (Harmon, Hedrick & Fox, 2000). The traditional approach to vocabulary instruction, which includes activities such as matching words to their definitions and “fill in the blank”, can be disadvantageous to students with learning disabilities and/or cognitive deficits primarily because it relies upon memorization rather than personal connection or active involvement with words.

In addition to the limitations of how vocabulary words are presented, there is little differentiation in regards to students' prior knowledge of text, essentially assuming that exposure within the text would be sufficient for generalization (Harmon et al., 2000). Students with learning disabilities often have memory deficits that interfere with their ability to learn new vocabulary (Mastropieri & Scruggs, 1997). They also have difficulty naming, describing, and remembering verbal information because of issues with storage and organization of verbal information (Mastropieri & Scruggs, 1990). Additionally, content textbooks often require students to complete written assignments incorporating key terms within their writing, despite the lack of support and limited exposure to the terms in context (Harmon, Hedrick & Fox, 2000). Anderson and Nagy (1993) argued the assumption that knowing a definition is not the equivalent of knowing the meaning of word by stating that definitions have decreased instructional value because they are a reference, not a teaching aid. Students should not be expected to extract personal connections or meaning from a word simply through exposure to its definition (Anderson & Nagy, 1993).

Dictionary definitions are not necessarily effective for providing meaningful connections to words because they are out of context, are very condensed, and are abstract (Carlisle, 1993). Many dictionary definitions refer to other words, such as synonyms or antonyms, because of constraints in space, making it difficult for students to achieve the explicit meaning of a word. Also, many students are not successful when using context in order to infer meaning and have difficulty deciding which meaning is appropriate when confronting multiple meaning words (Carlisle, 1993). According to McKeown (1985), dictionary definitions and context sentences are ineffective for providing an appropriate understanding of a word and can be misinterpreted because of limited information and confusing definitions.

Effective Strategies for Vocabulary Instruction

Despite all of the information that is discussed regarding vocabulary instruction, the following paragraphs will provide in depth information about individual strategies, research that has been conducted, and how they can be utilized in a successful reading program.

Mnemonic Strategies

Memory deficits that interfere with reading and acquisition of language can be supported by mnemonic strategies that emphasizing student strengths such as identifying words that sound alike and picture memory, while deemphasizing weaknesses such as encoding of unfamiliar information (Uberti, Scruggs, and Mastropieri, 2003). Mnemonic strategies are useful in developing ways to encode information so that retrieval will be much easier (Mastropieri & Scruggs, 1997). The keyword method, specifically, enhances acquisition of concrete and abstract vocabulary and has been proven effective in content classrooms (Uberti et al., 2003).

Research indicates that mnemonic strategies enhance memory and learning by creating a connection between prior knowledge and novel concepts through visual and auditory cues (Mastropieri, Sweda, & Scruggs, 2000). In order to implement a keyword mnemonic strategy, vocabulary words are related to a definition, a keyword that acoustically relates to the vocabulary word, and a picture that relates to both the keyword and definition (Uberti et al., 2003). Students with learning disabilities outperformed students without disabilities and greatly improved their achievement when compared to students that learned vocabulary strictly through traditional methods (Uberti et al, 2003).

Mnemonic illustrations make abstract terms concrete and meaningful, and encourage students to relate information to prior knowledge (Mastropieri & Scruggs, 1997). Mnemonic instruction that is effective incorporates some teacher guidance as direct instruction of mnemonic

techniques increase attention, repetition, and practice and ensures that students will be provided with feedback (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1998). They are also useful for students that do not have prior knowledge of vocabulary, and aspects of mnemonic strategies, such as acoustic encoding, is especially useful for students that lack semantic encoding skills because of language delays (Mastropieri & Scruggs, 1997).

Semantic Mapping and Concept Muraling

According to Swanson (1986), deficits in semantic memory may cause difficulties with storage and processing of words. Students with these deficiencies have difficulty relating words orthographically, semantically, or phonemically and are unable to effectively retrieve them during reading. Words that are stored are difficult to access and may be clustered in poorly related groups (Swanson, 1986). This difficulty in organization and retrieval can make learning vocabulary particularly difficult. Methods such as semantic mapping and concept muraling have been proven effective in several research studies (Farris & Downey, 2004; Scanlon, Duran, Reyes, and Gallego, 1991).

Interactive Semantic mapping is a collaborative process in which students interact with peers, activate prior knowledge, ask and answer questions, and make meaningful connections to concepts (Scanlon et al., 1991). Students begin by brainstorming about a concept and assemble all of information that they know in relation to that concept. Next, students search for clues within headings, pictures, captions, bolded or italicized words within their text. They begin to develop a semantic map by labeling terms generated from the brainstorm and clue list. These maps are graphic organizers intended to help students understand concepts by drawing relationships among them (Scanlon et al., 1991). After generating the map, they will read and revise the map per discussions and further research. Post-tests indicate that students reflect

greater recall and comprehension of content area concepts when they utilize the semantic mapping technique (Scanlon et al., 1991). Semantic mapping is primarily an approach that encourages peer assistance and group cooperation in order to generate a map, however, the strategy can be modeled and practiced in order to encourage students to use this strategy independently when encountering difficult or lengthy text as well.

Similarly, concept muraling is an approach to creating a visual representation of information being taught. It is a direct instructional approach where the teacher provides prompting through several steps in order to engage students in actively connecting images to concepts that they have learned (Farris & Downey, 2004). Students are provided with a graphic depiction of thought processes. Concept muraling, however, involves pictures rather than words, and deals with entire concepts as opposed to vocabulary in isolation. The teacher begins by examining the curriculum and identifying important concepts to be learned. Next, the teacher creates a visual for each concept using poster board, an overhead, or other items. These images are organized in logical order so that as material is discussed, students are aware of the visual images in relation to the concepts being covered (Farris & Downey, 2004). Students are actively engaged in the completion of the mural through reading, questioning, discussion, and direct instruction. As students encounter unfamiliar words, they are added to the concept mural. After the muraling is completed, students are asked to review what concept each picture depicts (Farris & Downey, 2004).

Concept muraling prepares students for information that they will encounter. It can build self-confidence in students because it enables them to engage in classroom activities and provides background knowledge and visual representations of information (Farris & Downey,

2004). Semantic maps encourage understandings of relationships within a concept and provide students with an opportunity to be active in identifying these relationships (Scanlon et al., 1991)

Exposures to novel concepts and the overwhelming number of new interactions with words necessitate effective vocabulary instruction in the content classroom, especially with learners with special needs. The comprehension of language, both written and oral, involves the ability to manipulate one's storage of ideas, concepts, and labels for these concepts (Rudell, 1986).

Although there are many different methods for teaching vocabulary words to students, Mckeown and Beck (1988) suggest that integration of multiple methods rather than a single method would be the best approach. Carr and Wixson (1986) provided guidelines for vocabulary instruction by suggesting that teachers help students relate vocabulary to their background knowledge, provide experiences beyond memorization and definition alone, provide active student involvement, and foster strategies for independent vocabulary acquisition. Students with learning disabilities benefit from explicit, sequential, and functional instruction of vocabulary in multiple contexts (Jitendra et al., 2004). All of the techniques previously discussed relate to these guidelines and encourage student achievement and motivation.

Experiential Learning Environments

Discussion of words prior to reading may provide students with an understanding of a topic in order to activate their prior knowledge of a topic. According to Carlisle, If students are already have a good "experiential grasp" of a topic, they will be more capable of comprehending the passage that they are reading. Students need "anchors" in order to learn new words and concepts that will connect to information that they already know (Blachowicz & Obrochata, 1998). Although field trips are avenues for supplying students with these anchor experiences,

teachers are limited to the number of field trips that they can take during the school year (Blachowicz & Obrochata, 1998). Field trips often integrate curriculum and content, engage the senses, are preceded by information that prepares students for the experience, and provide opportunities for exploration. Field trips can also encourage new ideas, provide growth in vocabulary, and facilitate discussions about content (Blachowicz & Obrochata, 1998).

In order to provide students with similar experiences, teachers can provide video- assisted instruction and read aloud texts that present new vocabulary, discuss prior knowledge, and question students to encourage critical thinking (Blachowicz & Obrochata, 1998). These experiences provide a rich learning environment that engages the senses and allows them to be actively involved with a concept that would be abstract in other situations. Elements of other techniques, such as concept muraling and semantic mapping, are easily incorporated in video- Assisted instruction and read alouds of texts (Blachowicz & Obrochata, 1998).

Prior to instruction, teachers choose the standards to be taught, review and choose the vocabulary that they would like to emphasize during instruction, and collect pictures to use for semantic mapping or concept muraling (Blachowicz & Obrochata, 1998). Students begin by writing a list of words that they connect to a topic after a visual or auditory cue from the teacher. Students are provided a picture in order to generate “target vocabulary words” and engage their senses in the instruction of new vocabulary. During read aloud activities, students are exposed to words many times through the use of multiple texts (Blachowicz & Obrochata, 1998).

After discussion and writing about what was learned during the unit, students are provided with activities such as semantic sorts, reading new books that relate to the instruction, word games, and rereading of teacher read books. Finally, students complete a writing activity,

such as a report or a shape book and create a final list of words that they know (Blachowicz & Obrochata, 1998).

Video-assisted vocabulary instruction and read aloud opportunities provide students with prior knowledge of vocabulary and opportunities to interact with words in context (Xin & Rieth, 2001). Video can provide sensory stimulation, depicts movement that can lead to the formation of mental images, and expose students to auditory and visual cues (Xin & Rieth, 2001). Video depicts a real situation versus an abstract definition and makes otherwise difficult information seem relevant. Research indicates that students that are instructed using video-assisted instruction outperform students that engage in traditional instruction in knowledge of word meanings (Xin & Rieth, 2001).

Discussion

Students with learning disabilities often lack the skills necessary to build vocabulary through traditional methods. They do not engage in wide reading, they often lack the background knowledge to make personal connections with text, and many have memory issues that interfere with storage and retrieval of new words. In addition, they often lack strategies to understand abstract words, even in context, and have difficulty gaining a deeper understanding of words.

In order for students to acquire language, they must engage in activities that will allow for multiple exposures in a format that emphasize their strengths. In addition, the weight of standardized testing makes vocabulary instruction essential for students with or without disabilities. Instruction that combines memory devices, graphic organizers and concrete depictions, and experiential learning can be successful with students that have difficulty with

vocabulary instruction. With the methods discussed previously, instructing individuals with disabilities in the area of vocabulary can be less strenuous and result in greater gains.

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