Visualizing Vocabulary

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Abstract

This action research project investigated instructional methods used for teaching vocabulary to nineteen second grade students. Explicit vocabulary instruction accompanied with student created definitions and visualizations were used to teach vocabulary to twelve female and seven male students, including six ESL and one autistic child. Instruction was given for six words per story and pre and post test data was collected for four stories. Findings proved that students learned and internalized newly acquired vocabulary when they were given explicit instruction and created personal visualizations. Student comprehension of words was evident in post test data, tracking of vocabulary usage, and visualizations created by students.

Background/Context

In order to conduct a beneficial research project it is essential to pick a topic that is relevant to the life or interests of the researcher. A main focus in schools has always been improving reading scores of students. Vocabulary development is crucial to help attain this reading progress. This research project focuses on how to explicitly teach vocabulary to students. It also brings to light the importance of how meaningful visualizations can create personal connections in students’ minds. These two practices can significantly impact student comprehension and achievement in reading.

Students can then apply this new vocabulary into their everyday lives which will help them grow as learners and as members of society. Improving vocabulary will also improve students’ test scores and comprehension since they will have more background knowledge and exposure to more words. Vocabulary development, as a foundation for learning, is crucial to students’ reading development.

The research question of this study is to explore how explicit vocabulary instruction and creating visualizations of new vocabulary terms will impact student comprehension and
achievement in reading. The student population to be observed is a class of nineteen second
grade students. In this class, there are twelve females and seven males. Six students are classified
as ESL and one student is autistic. The students will be observed during regular reading
instruction, specifically during vocabulary building instruction.

This topic is very meaningful to the researcher because of the lack of vocabulary
observed in students over the years. Students need to have exposure to new vocabulary in order
to develop as readers and speakers in their lives. It is important that teachers find meaningful
ways to teach vocabulary so that these new words become familiar and relevant to students.
Otherwise, they will not be retained and applied into their normal conversations. The researcher
wanted to study the impact that can be made when teaching vocabulary explicitly to students in a
significant manner.

**Research on Vocabulary Instruction**

Reading instruction is essential to teach students the skills they will need to apply to all
other subjects as well as their every day lives. Wanzek, Vaughn, Ae-Hwa, and Cavanaugh (2006)
suggested that there may also be benefits to experiencing success in reading, such as improved
self esteem, positive self concept, appropriate social skills, and overall social competence.
Students need to develop a strong foundation in reading to experience success throughout their
educational careers. Teachers need to ensure that their reading instruction includes phonemic and
phonics building, vocabulary building, and fluency practice to lead to the overall goal of reading
comprehension. This research project shows how meaningful vocabulary development correlates
with reading improvement. By providing students with explicit initial vocabulary instruction,
giving them meaningful examples and non examples, and by facilitating them to visualize a
personal definition of their new vocabulary words; teachers can foster vocabulary growth in their students.

In Free Reading (Krashen, 2006), a strategy for building children’s reading skills through vocabulary development is suggested. The researcher found that students who read for pleasure do much better than their peers who are forced to silent read for periods of time. Student’s test scores were tracked by this researcher and he found the prior statement to be true in eight out of ten cases. He found that students must develop a love for reading. In connection with his work, this project discusses the importance of helping students develop a love for using new words and exploring their meanings.

Otaiba, Kosanovich-Grek, Torgesen, Hassler, and Wahl (2005) found that many of the core reading programs used in schools are evaluated using a rating scale. The main aspects of reading such as phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension are all looked at in each program. Vocabulary development is one of the key aspects looked at in making this rating. They found that vocabulary development needs to be explicit and meaningful to children’s lives in order to be successful in the classroom. Reading programs that had a strong vocabulary component incorporated into the other four aspects yielded more educational gains in the students tested.

Rupley (2005) states the importance of students’ vocabulary acquisition early in their education (before third grade). Students’ comprehension scores were tested and it was confirmed that vocabulary development played a major role in improving scores. Reading comprehension is influenced in many ways by vocabulary knowledge or lack thereof. Teachers can assess students’ vocabulary knowledge and plan intervention accordingly if needed. Students need opportunities to develop their vocabulary through experience, explicit instruction, and social interactions. This
study by Rupley (2005) fits perfectly with this particular action research described in this paper. Vocabulary development helped raise student’s comprehension scores and enhance student writing in the classroom observed. This research project focuses on specific vocabulary instruction to achieve these same goals with this second grade population.

The previous research keys in on the importance of vocabulary development in young learners. Explicit instruction is one of the proven instructional methods that lead to student success in vocabulary. This research study will use explicit instruction accompanied with visualizations and other various instructional methods mentioned within to ensure that children are provided with the strong vocabulary foundation they need to thrive in their reading. The goal of this project is to use effective teaching strategies while allowing students to grow a love for reading and vocabulary in the process.

**Methodology**

**Participants**

Nineteen second grade students, 12 female and 7 male, participated in our action research. The children’s reading levels spanned from a first grade level (DRA 12) to a second grade level (DRA 24). Six of the children in the study were ESL students and one child is classified as autistic. Three of the children in the class had previously been retained because of their reading levels, which where at a DRA 12. Five of the students in the class (including the three previously mentioned) had reading levels of 12, which usually coincides with beginning first grade readers. Most second graders should enter second grade with a reading level (DRA level) of 18.

**Materials**

Some of the vocabulary instruction in this study comes from the *Scholastic Text Talk* teacher’s guide (2005). This book provided an assortment of children’s books to be used for this
project as well as the vocabulary to be focused on. Various books were used in the study such as, *Ruby the Copy Cat, Amelia’s Road, Mole’s Hill, Alexander and the Wind-Up Mouse, and Strega Nona.* A vocabulary pocket chart with laminated sentence strips was needed to post the vocabulary words and definitions.

**Procedures**

Students will participate in explicit vocabulary instruction on a daily basis. They will be exposed to this explicit instruction on 6 new words for each story we read. Teacher observations and whole group student discussions will be an indicator of student progress. Students will have a vocabulary pre-test at the beginning of each week (Day One) and a post-test (Appendix A) at the end of each week (Day Five) to see if they have a deep understanding of the words. Students will also be asked to visualize the words and create a representation of what the word means to them in their vocabulary notebooks throughout the week. This representation will be used to see if they have created meaning of the new words and this will be tested on each post-test.

On Days three and four, students will develop a deep understanding of three words per day. The teacher will have the students repeat these words as they look at the spelling. Repetition and focused attention on the spelling of the words will help them internalize the concepts. The teacher uses examples of each word to allow students to apply the word into different contexts. The teacher uses non-examples of each word to reveal to students situations in which the word would not apply to the context. The words are posted on the wall and left up for two weeks so students can refer to the chart to use these new words in their writing and speaking while also noting their use in books they may be reading.

On Day five, students will be given more examples and non-examples of each word to deepen their understanding of them. Students will also give their own examples and usage of the words to add meaning to their visualizations (Appendix F). On Day six, students will take their
post test (Appendix A). On Days 7-9, students will try to find classroom situations to apply and use the new words. The class will keep a tally of every time they use one of the words in the correct context or see it in literature. The teacher will encourage the use of these words throughout the year and cite some examples of students’ usage in the documentation. On Day Ten, the students will celebrate the word with the most tallies by sharing their personal experiences related to the word and acting it out.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Daily Vocabulary Instruction Procedures</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Day One</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Vocabulary Pre-test</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teacher will read story and introduce 6 new vocabulary words. Teacher will note their usage in text.</td>
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| **Day Two** |
| 1. Focus on three of the words and explain them, provide example and non-examples; |
| 2. Have students create visualizations; |
| 3. Teacher will post student created definitions on vocabulary chart on wall. |

| **Day Three** |
| 1. Focus on remaining three words and explain them, provide example and non-examples; |
| 2. Have students create visualizations; |
| 3. Teacher will post student created definitions on vocabulary chart on wall. |

| **Day Four** |
| 1. Students will review their visualizations and add words to them to elaborate on their understanding of each; |
| 2. Teacher will quiz students on words giving them opportunities to hear more examples and non-examples of each. |

| **Day Five** |
| Students will take post test |
| Words will be written on small chart and each time one is used in writing or speaking; it will be tallied on chart. |

| **Day Six** |
| Students will celebrate the “word winner” or word with most tallies by acting it out together. |
| Words will be written on small chart and each time one is used in writing or speaking; it will be tallied on chart. |

| **Day Seven** |
| Words will be written on small chart and each time one is used in writing or speaking; it will be tallied on chart. |

| **Day Eight** |
| Words will be written on small chart and each time one is used in writing or speaking; it will be tallied on chart. |

| **Day Nine** |
| Students will celebrate the “word winner” or word with most tallies by acting it out together. |
Data Sources

Several instruments were used to measure the results of this project. All of the data will be collected to see if explicit instruction and visualizations can lead to students having a meaningful connection to these words. This allows them to recall them and apply them.

First, student DRA2 scores will be used for formal assessment purposes. The DRA2 is a formal reading assessment used in the district. It tests student’s oral reading and comprehension.

Secondly, pre and post tests were created by the teacher/researcher on a lesson to lesson basis to analyze student learning of each set of words. These tests contained true/false questions and inference type questions as well as a section where students were asked to create a visualization of each word.

Another data source was a vocabulary tracking sheet that was posted in the front of the room to mark every time one of the words was used. The teacher took note of the student usage and application of the words following instruction.

Finally, the teacher will give visualization quizzes on a weekly basis. These will consist of students drawing their sketch and adding words or a sentence to explain the meaning of various words.

Data Analysis

The researcher will mainly use the pre and post tests for data analysis. The scores will be charted and analyzed to see if the vocabulary instruction helps them learn the intended words for each lesson. The mean scores of these quizzes will be presented in graph form to determine the effectiveness of the teaching strategies. Student DRA2 scores will also be presented in this graph
form. DRA scores will be looked at to see if this vocabulary development has a positive impact on increasing scores.

Another tool that will be used to gather information will be the students’ vocabulary visualizations. The teacher will look at each student’s work individually to see if they drew a picture that connected to the meaning of the word and if they added their own words to show that they had a personal understanding. If the students drew a meaningful and correct illustration for each word and explained their drawing in their own words, then they will receive full credit. These papers will allow the researcher to determine whether or not students can create their own meaning with the new words using the teacher judgment.

Student writing samples will also be evaluated to conclude if students are applying these new words to their everyday writing assignments without being prompted to do so. The teacher will observe the students’ normal writing activities and assignments to determine if students actually use the new vocabulary words in their everyday writing.

**Parental Consent Procedure**

All parents will be notified of the goal of this instruction so they can be aware of how the students use these new words outside of school. Parents can help reinforce the usage of these vocabulary words by praising students for using new and challenging words. No permission is required for this research and all materials will be gathered and supplied by the administering teacher.

**Analysis/Findings**

**Pre and Post test findings**

This chart shows the students’ scores over four different vocabulary units. The pretests were issued before students began work with the words and the posttests followed the instructional plan. Individual student scores can be viewed in *Appendix B.*
Figure 1. Student scores on vocabulary pre tests and post tests.

Student scores doubled from every pre test to post test. Before explicit instruction, students scored less than fifty percent on every pre test. In contrast, students scored over ninety percent on all of the post tests. Students improved in all three areas of the test including their visualizations and descriptions, true/false, and multiple choice questions. On the pretest students were weakest in the area of drawing visualizations because they did not have a fifty-fifty chance of getting the question correct, as in the other categories of test items. After instruction, students could provide detailed visualizations with personal explanations of the words.

Student Visualizations

This graph (Appendix F) shows how students scored when they were asked to draw visualizations for the given words from the vocabulary instructional unit. The before score stands for their mean scores before they received explicit vocabulary instruction with the words, while the after score shows the mean score following this instruction.
When students were asked to draw visualizations of some of the vocabulary words (found in Appendix C) before the project began, they only scored twenty-three percent. However, after the project they could draw correct visualizations for these same words ninety-two percent of the time. Student visualizations improved drastically because students could now draw on their classroom experiences and personal connections with the words to guide them in their drawings.

**DRA2**

The student DRA2 scores are shown in this graph below. The first administration of the DRA came before the research project began. The second administration fell in the middle of this research project and the third administration of the DRA came after the conclusion of this project.
Figure 3. Student DRA2 scores.

The DRA is administered three times a year in second grade. The average DRA score of the students entering second grade was below grade level prior to this study. After the third administration, the researcher found that the average DRA score was right on grade level (28) for students entering third grade while five students scored above grade level. This progress shows the impact of the vocabulary instruction on the students’ overall comprehension scores.

**Student Word Usage**

The graph below shows how many times the students in the classroom used or found the specific vocabulary words for each two week period.
Figure 4. Student word usage (relating with pre and post tests).

The teacher tracked how many times the new words were used by students in the two week period for each set of words. There is no data for how many times the students used these words prior to instruction because students did not know these words well enough to apply them in conversation. Therefore, the words were either not used at all or used very seldom in the correct contexts. After instruction, students used the new words an average of 78 to 79 times in these four vocabulary units. The teacher used the Word Winner chart (Appendix D, bottom) to count how many times the class used the new words in writing, speaking, or found them in their reading. Before this vocabulary instruction, students rarely used these words because they had not been exposed to them.

One student announced to the teacher that they would take the new vocabulary home with them and share the words with their family since they did not know much English. This comment made the researcher realize how important vocabulary is to our lives. Some of the words learned can be applied to student conversations and schoolwork on a daily basis. The list of words explicitly taught to students over the course of the year can be found in Appendix C.
The teacher also noticed that the students would apply these new words across the curriculum. For example, when the class learned about weather the students used the new vocabulary words, *damp and drafty* to describe the outside conditions. When the students learned about animals; they stated that certain animals must *adapt* when the weather changes. There were numerous examples of students applying their new vocabulary in the classroom as well as many examples out of the classroom. Students’ writing improved greatly because of their application of these new vocabulary words (Appendix E). Students in the cafeteria stated that their lunch was *scrumptious*. One of the parents called the teacher and commented that their child told them they were *anticipating* coming back to school on Monday. These specific examples show that the students not only learned the words but they internalized them and made them a part of their everyday vocabulary.

**Discussion**

The researcher can clearly determine that this vocabulary instruction has increased the scores on the post tests. Students were unfamiliar with the majority of the vocabulary words before instruction. After instruction, students performed significantly higher on the test. In all of the testing scenarios, students’ scores have increased by more than fifty percent. Students have also increased their usage of the words in the classroom. Students used these new words less than one percent of the time before explicit teaching and exposure to them. The researcher charted the usage of the new words on a weekly basis and concluded that, after instruction, the classroom students used an average of 78 to 79 times per two week period as discussed in the procedures.

Explicit vocabulary instruction accompanied with having students create personal visualizations for the vocabulary causes students to internalize the meaning of new vocabulary.
This, in turn, leads to students implementing the new vocabulary in their everyday conversations as well as in their daily writing. An increase in students’ DRA scores may be correlated with students’ increased vocabulary knowledge from the instruction in this study. One limitation to this study was that DRA scores are affected by many other classroom practices, which is why the researcher can’t specifically link the increase in scores to this vocabulary instruction. However, students’ vocabulary improvement likely contributes to their increases in the DRA scores.

This correlation coincides with the research by Al Otaiba, Kosanovich-Grek, Torgesen, Hassler and Wahl (2005), who found that the five aspects of reading; phonics, phonemic awareness, fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary all play a crucial role in reading development. Vocabulary is just one of the factors that need to be addressed in order to have meaningful reading instruction. Another limitation of this study was that there was no comparison group. In future studies concerning this topic, a comparison group of students who do not receive this instruction, would be beneficial for statistical comparison. This would allow researchers to determine how beneficial this vocabulary instruction is compared to not having it at all.

Rupley’s (2005) study of the impact of vocabulary knowledge on reading comprehension was also proven by this study. Students in this study saw their comprehension scores increase as well as their recognition and application of new vocabulary in different contexts. Vocabulary knowledge helps students improve academically and feel more confident as learners because vocabulary knowledge gives them more word choice when they are trying to express themselves.

Students in this class were enthusiastic about learning new vocabulary words and they were determined to implement their new vocabulary in their everyday lives. Students were able to apply the newly learned vocabulary words in their everyday lives as evident by the statements
made by students and parents regarding this project. Students made significant gains in vocabulary shown by all of the data sources. Students’ understanding and comprehension of the words increased as did their usage of the words. The researcher feels that by adding some of these new words to their everyday conversations, students have been given new ways to describe their feelings and surroundings.

**Reflections/Action Plan**

In conclusion, this project proved the importance of vocabulary instruction in the elementary classroom. The action research pretests clearly showed a lack of student vocabulary knowledge prior to instruction and a significant increase in vocabulary knowledge following explicit instruction. The researcher will continue to teach vocabulary as described in the methodology section. Students took pride in speaking and writing with more intelligent words and knowledge and confidence are two key elements that will lead students down a successful path. All students, ESL and special needs students included, benefited from explicit instruction and visualizations. These teaching strategies were successfully applied to vocabulary instruction. The challenge that lies ahead is incorporating these teaching methods into all curriculum areas.

**References**


Appendix A Vocabulary Quiz Format

Name: ________________________    Date: ___________________

Circle One

1) Who would have labored?

   One who moves rocks all day               or             one who watched movies all day

2) Which would be accidental?

   A farmer discovering oil on his land      or     a farmer finding his crops he planted

3) Which would you associate with Thanksgiving?


4) Which is **permanent**?
   
   Your baby teeth or your adult teeth

5) Which would be more **sturdy**?
   
   A rotten bridge or a paved highway

6) Which would be **cherished**?
   
   A letter from a pen pal or a coupon from the paper

**True or False**

7) You would be tired if you **labored** in the sun all day?
   
   True or False

8) It would be **accidental** if you didn’t mean to, but knocked a vase off the table?
   
   True or False

9) You can **associate** playing in the snow with summer?
   
   True or False

10) If something is **permanent** then it lasts a long time?
    
   True or False

11) A **sturdy** chair would break if you touched it?
    
   True or False

12) You would throw a **cherished** object in the trash?
    
   True or False

13) Draw a visualization of the word **cherished**.
14) Draw a visualization of the word **labored**.

15) Draw a visualization of the word **accidental**.

16) Draw a visualization of the word **associate**.

17) Draw a visualization of the word **permanent**.

18) Draw a visualization of the word **sturdy**.

### Appendix B - Individual Student Scores (Vocabulary Quizzes)

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**Individual Student Scores (DRA)**

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**Appendix C  New Vocabulary Words Learned Over Course of the Year**

Lesson 1: coincidence, loyal, murmured, recited, bitter, sensitive

Lesson 2: delicate, drafty, rave, trickster, genuine, imposter

Lesson 3: assortment, civilized, contributed, inappropriate, concoct, orderly

Lesson 4: damp, nasty, perfect, suspicious, gullible, versatile

Lesson 5: compliments, hero, sputter, valuable, abundance, eavesdrop
Lesson 6: basking, dazzling, gazing, instead, anticipation, exhausted
Lesson 7: astonishment, gleefully, launched, splattered, chaotic, complicated
Lesson 8: craving, joyfully, screeched, scrumptious, devious, scheme
Lesson 9: clutched, crooned, gasped, sighed, adapt, plunged
Lesson 10: adventure, cautiously, envy, precious, fond, transform
Lesson 11: burst, gathered, quivered, strolled, compromise, obstacle
Lesson 12: destination, intricate, selected, venture, enthusiastic, merchant
Lesson 13: miserable, necessities, privilege, stranded, opportunity, reliable
Lesson 14: labored, accidental, associate, permanent, sturdy, cherished

Appendix D - Vocabulary Chart on Wall and Vocabulary usage Tracking Chart (Word Winner portion)
Appendix E – Student Writing Samples from Morning Work

Student 1 (Words used: eavesdrop, suspicious, cautiously, assortment, scrumptious)
The day I eavesdropped on my sister.

My sister’s friends came to the house in her room.
I was suspicious because I thought they were going to play a trick on me. I cautiously sneaked to the door and eavesdropped.

My sister opened the door and caught me. I yelled, “Oh Man!”

I went to buy her an assortment of chocolate. She said, “Scrumptious” and she shared the chocolate with her friends.

Student 2 (Words used: envy, assortment, scrumptious, privilege, abundance, contributed)
The day I

Saw something

Cool!

One morning I woke up and looked at my calendar. It said Gina's birthday. I was supposed to where your new dress outfit. When I got there everybody envied me. There was an assortment of presents and a scrumptious cake. I was privileged to be there. Gina was surprised at the abundance of friends and presents waiting for her. It was a great party and I was glad I contributed.
Appendix F – Student Visualization (Quiz and Journal)

G'day R Goush

December 2005

My tiny puppy is my first book.

Compliments, you can review some

worker.

abundance I have too much toys,

here I am superman and I am flying.
destination

Hey, look there my destination.

selected

I need to select one flower.

merchant
Finally, this was a long venture. I'm feeling restless.

This could be the vessel.

I'm very enthusiastic.