

**Improving Vocabulary of English Language Learners  
Through Direct Vocabulary Instruction**

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### Abstract

This is a report of a professional development project. The purpose of the project was to provide professional development to teachers in vocabulary instructional strategies and to examine vocabulary acquisition of English language learners. The participants were 8 second grade ELL students and 6 second grade teachers. The eight second grade students were given a pretest on their vocabulary knowledge. The vocabulary strategy of read alouds with direct vocabulary instruction was then administered to them. At the end of seven months, the students were given a post test on their vocabulary knowledge. Results from the pre/posttest comparison indicate that students' scores did improve under direct vocabulary instruction. The teachers were also given a pre and post questionnaire on their knowledge and confidence of teaching ELL students. Results from the questionnaires indicated that teachers gained both knowledge of and confidence in direct vocabulary instruction. Due to the importance of vocabulary acquisition for ELL students, educators need more formal training on effective instructional strategies to use in their classroom.

**Key Words:** *English Language Learners (ELL), Vocabulary Acquisition, Direct Vocabulary Instruction, Read Aloud*

## Improving Vocabulary of English Language Learners

### Through Direct Vocabulary Instruction

#### **Introduction**

English Language Learners (ELL) often feel that vocabulary is their most frequent obstacle when having to access information from classroom texts (Silverman & Hines, 2009). This can be problematic knowing how vocabulary acquisition is a critical component of academic language (Ajayi, 2005). Therefore, ELL students are having to learn both the English language and the academic language at the same time. Although many students can learn new vocabulary through incidental learning while listening to a read aloud, ELL students have a much harder time with this because so many words are unknown to them. Therefore, ELL students need to have direct instruction with vocabulary words. Many of the studies discussed how vocabulary knowledge is not just about knowing the words, but really having a depth of knowledge on the word. Vocabulary knowledge is dependent on many things. Interestingly, studies have shown that when there is a strong knowledge of the first language, children will learn a second language faster. The studies also found that a child's vocabulary size was significantly correlated with their articulation. Vocabulary knowledge is also dependent on how much the learner is involved. Higher involvement resulted in more effective initial vocabulary learning and better retention of the words.

Not only is vocabulary knowledge important for academic language, it has also been positively correlated with reading comprehension (Biemiller & Boote, 2006). This literature synthesis not only looks at the importance of vocabulary and its link to reading

comprehension, but also examines instructional practices and strategies to use in the classroom with ELLs. Ideally, vocabulary instruction for ELLs would combine direct teaching of words with incidental learning and multiple opportunities to hear these words in multiple contexts (Carlo, August, Mclaughlin, Snow, Dressler, Lippman, & White, 2008). With this type of instruction and strategies in place, the obstacles that ELL students face in the classroom will begin to lessen.

### **Statement of Research Problem**

The school where this project was conducted is a very small school that does not have much diversity. The population is beginning to change though, and teachers are having a hard time adjusting their teaching. We only have 16 ELL students in the whole school. Therefore, a lot of teachers have never even taught an ELL student before. There has been no formal training on teaching strategies for ELL students because it has not been needed in the past. However, now with the population changing and more ELL students coming to our school, there is a need for teachers to be equipped with strategies on how to teach ELL students in their classroom. The purpose of this project is to inform teachers on ways to improve the vocabulary acquisition of ELL students through direct vocabulary instruction.

## **Review of Literature**

### **Vocabulary**

When one thinks of vocabulary, they tend to think of the meaning of the word. However, word knowledge involves spelling, pronunciation, morphology, syntax, and depth of meaning (Carlo, et al., 2008). Vocabulary knowledge has both breadth and depth. Breadth of vocabulary is the number of words for which the learner has

knowledge. Depth of vocabulary knowledge is how well the learner knows the words (Qian, 1999). So it is possible to have a breadth of vocabulary, but not depth and vice versa. There is an importance on improving depth of vocabulary knowledge in our ELL learners (Qian, 1999). It is important for them to really understand and know the words and be able to apply the words in different situations.

ELLs find that vocabulary is their most frequent obstacle when having to access information from classroom texts (Silverman & Hines, 2009). This can be challenging in a classroom where they are learning both the English language and grade level content at the same time. There are many factors which can contribute to the growth of an ELL's vocabulary. Jackson, Schatschneider, Leacox, Schuele, & Davison (2014) conducted a study to see whether children who were exposed to English at an earlier point in life was a factor in their vocabulary growth. However, this was not necessarily the case. In fact, a higher vocabulary in their first language was a significant predictor of growth in English vocabulary (Jackson, et al., 2014). The learner's level of competence in their first language is a factor in their target language learning and educational development (Ajayi, 2005). Articulation is another factor that has been significantly correlated with ELL children's vocabulary size (Roberts, 2005). Stahl (2003) has argued that the most prominent indicator of oral language proficiency is vocabulary knowledge, which is particularly important for comprehension.

### **Comprehension**

In order to comprehend text effectively, students must be able to identify words effortlessly and must simultaneously understand the words' meanings (Mancilla-Martinez & Lesaux, 2010). Students are then taught that if they come to a word they don't know,

they are to use context clues to help them decipher the word. However, ELLs are less able to use context to help figure out the meaning of unfamiliar words because a higher proportion of the words in the text are likely to be unknown to them (Carlo, et. al, 2008). Therefore, direct instruction of vocabulary will not only increase ELLs word knowledge, but also their reading comprehension levels.

Studies have found that continued exposure to English in school alone has not been enough to accelerate ELL's vocabulary growth and reading comprehension scores to age appropriate levels (Mancilla-Martinez & Lesaux, 2010). There have been high correlations found between vocabulary and reading comprehension (Biemiller & Boote, 2006). This implies that there needs to be a focus on direct instruction for vocabulary in order to raise a students' comprehension level. In one study, Carlo et al. (2008) found that ELLs who received English vocabulary instruction performed as well or better than the English-only control group in both areas of word knowledge and reading comprehension.

An increase in vocabulary knowledge has not only had positive effects on reading comprehension, but on listening comprehension as well (Proctor, 2005). Droop (2003) found that compared with monolingual speakers, listening comprehension tends to be more dependent on language minority learner's vocabulary knowledge. When English Language Learners lack the vocabulary knowledge, they also struggle with understanding spoken language.

### **Instruction**

Vocabulary instruction that works for non-ELLs works as well if not better for ELLS (Silverman & Hines, 2009). Carlo, et al., (2008) found that curriculum that

focused on teaching academic words, strategies for inferring word meaning from context, and tools for analyzing word meaning improved the performance of both ELL and EO students to equal degrees. Ideally, vocabulary instruction for ELLs would combine direct teaching of words with incidental learning and multiple opportunities to hear these words in multiple contexts (Carlo, et al., 2008). Both incidental and direct vocabulary development may be especially important for ELLs because they encounter more unknown words and are less able to use contextual clues (Nagy, Townsend, Lesaux, Schmitt, 2012). It is also important for ELLs to have high involvement when learning new vocabulary words. Kim (2011) found that retention of unfamiliar words depends on the learners' involvement when processing the words. Higher involvement resulted in more effective initial vocabulary learning and better retention of the words (Kim, 2011).

Ajayi (2005) conducted a sociocultural study where the instructional practices and academic blueprints were looked at. She found that the blue print that teachers teach from does not teach learners to construct vocabulary meanings to reflect their own life experiences. She also found that a tight structure of the lesson plans and control in the classroom did not allow for an atmosphere where language learners could practice English (Ajayi, 2005). It is critical for language learners to be able to practice speaking English in a comfortable place and to hear their classmates speak English as well.

### **Strategies**

Vocabulary acquisition is a critical component of academic language (Ajayi, 2005). Therefore, it is important to have instructional strategies in place to make sure that ELL students are receiving vocabulary instruction. Wessels (2011) found that there are five characteristics necessary for student's vocabulary learning: assessing

background, connect unknown vocabulary to known knowledge, ensuring opportunities for meaningful vocabulary use, providing multiple exposures, and focusing on higher level knowledge. She introduced the strategy of doing a Vocabulary Quilt to ensure direct vocabulary instruction. Before reading a book, students activate their prior knowledge of certain vocabulary words. Then, during the reading phase, students discuss new vocabulary in an authentic context. In the after reading phase, students strengthen their vocabulary understanding by focusing on higher level knowledge (Wessels, 2011). It is important to explicitly teach vocabulary using effective strategies that will engage the students. Sibold (2011) believes that repetition is key. The more interaction students have with the vocabulary words, the more likely they will learn and remember them.

Silverman & Hines (2009) had a different approach to vocabulary instruction through multimedia. Students were shown different video clips to reinforce the vocabulary learned through the unit. For children who experienced the multi-media enhanced vocabulary intervention, the gap between non-ELL and ELL children in knowledge of words targeted during the intervention was closed (Silverman & Hines, 2009). Multimedia is another way to reinforce vocabulary in a different context.

An ELL student is learning both the English language and content language at the same time. Therefore, they have found that vocabulary is one of their biggest obstacles to overcome. Through direct vocabulary instruction, students need to experience the word in many contexts and multiple times. When direct vocabulary instruction is implemented, ELL students are not only able to improve their vocabulary, but it has been found to improve their reading comprehension as well.

## **Research Methodology**

### **Overview of the Project**

This study took place in a small, affluent school with 540 students. Of these 540 students, only 16 students are ELL students. The teachers at this school have never been formally trained in teaching ELL students or students of diversity. Therefore, with the population beginning to change, it was found that the teachers were in need of professional development. Originally, the professional development classes were going to consist of host ELL teachers in grades K-5. However, with differing planning times, this posed a problem. Therefore, the professional development classes consisted of the six second grade teachers in the school. Second grade was chosen because it was the grade level with the most ELL students.

The 8 second grade ELL students were given a pretest on their vocabulary knowledge. Then, over a seven month span, direct vocabulary instruction was implemented in the classroom through read alouds during their literacy block. At the end of the seven month span, the 8 second grade students were then given a posttest on their vocabulary knowledge.

The professional development classes took place over a duration of eight months. The pre questionnaire was given during the first meeting before any concepts were talked about. The post questionnaire was given at the last meeting at the conclusion of the eight months. Over this eight month span, there were a total of five face to face meetings. Meetings one, two, and five were all forty minutes in length. Meetings three and four were twenty minutes in length.

**Hypothesis**

Through a series of professional development classes on the importance of vocabulary for ELL students, teachers will indicate an increase in knowledge and use of strategies for teaching ELL students. Also, with direct vocabulary instruction through read alouds, ELL students will show an increase in vocabulary knowledge.

**Description of Participants**

The participants were six female second grade teachers. Four of the teachers were Caucasian and two were African American. The level of expertise ranged from two years teaching to fourteen years teaching. Every participant indicated that they had never had formal training on ELL students. However, every participant also indicated that they have had an ELL student in their classroom at some point.

The student participants were 8 second grade ELL students. Five of the students were female and three were male. 3 of the students spoke Nepali, 4 students spoke Spanish, and 1 student spoke Chinese. Their English language proficiency had some variation with 1 student being level 2, 6 students were level 3, and 1 student was level 4 on a 6 level scale.

**Procedures**

For this study, the researcher administered a questionnaire prior to any professional development to get a baseline of how teachers viewed their knowledge when it came to teaching ELL students. The researcher then met with the six teachers on five different occasions during their planning time. The focus of these meetings were on the importance of vocabulary for ELL students and strategies to use in the classroom. Teachers were able to see, hear, and learn about strategies that they could use in their

classroom. The teachers were then able to implement some of the strategies with feedback and observations. They were then given another questionnaire after the five professional development meetings to assess their knowledge when it came to teaching ELL students.

In addition, the students were given a pretest on vocabulary knowledge prior to any direct vocabulary instruction. The teacher then did a read aloud with students once a day during the literacy block. During this time, the teacher used direct vocabulary instruction based around the book. The teacher would preview two to three vocabulary words prior to reading the story. Then, during the reading, the vocabulary words would be directly taught again while using the context of the story. After the story was read, the vocabulary words were again reviewed with the students. After seven months, students were given the posttest on vocabulary knowledge to see if it had improved at all.

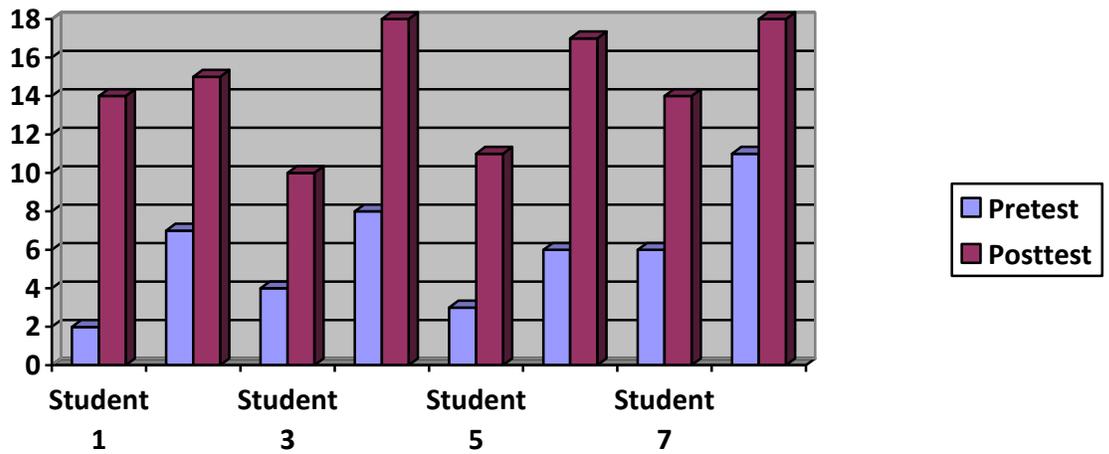
### **Results**

A vocabulary pre and posttest was given to students that was composed of twenty questions. The pretest scores ranged from 2 to 11 whereas the post test scores ranged from 10 to 18. The students' scores increased anywhere from 6 points to 12 points (*Table 1*). These increases in scores signified significant gains in students' vocabulary knowledge (*Graph 1*).

**Table 1: Results of pretest, posttest, and change**

	Pretest	Posttest	Increase
Student 1	2	14	12
Student 2	7	15	8
Student 3	4	10	6
Student 4	8	18	10
Student 5	3	11	8
Student 6	6	17	11
Student 7	6	14	8
Student 8	11	18	7

**Graph 1: Results of pretest and posttest**



A t-test was completed on pretest and posttest scores (*Table 2*). According to the t-test, there was a statistically significant difference between the two groups with a p value of <.0001. Therefore, there was a correlation between direct vocabulary instruction

and student vocabulary knowledge. The students' scores increased greatly with a pretest mean of 5.88 and a posttest mean of 14.63.

**Table 2: Results of t-test comparing vocabulary scores on pretest and posttest**

	Pretest	Posttest
Mean	5.88	14.63
Standard Deviation	2.90	3.02
t-test results: 12.0557, df = 7, P(.0001) < 0.05		

Based on the results of the t-test conducted, the null hypothesis can be accepted. There was a statistically significant difference between students' pretest and posttest scores. Therefore, it can be concluded that direct vocabulary instruction does have a positive effect on ELL students' vocabulary knowledge.

The teachers' questionnaires also showed increases in knowledge and comfortableness with teaching ELL students (*Table 3*). Teachers reported an increase in score on each question. The average of the scores increased from 0.66 to 2.5 points.

**Table 3: Results from teacher pre and post questionnaire**

	Pretest Scores	Pretest Average	Posttest Scores	Posttest Average
<b>Question 1</b>	2,1,2,2,2,1	1.67	4,4,4,5,3,4	4.0
<b>Question 2</b>	3,2,3,3,1,3	2.5	5,5,5,5,5,5	5.0
<b>Question 3</b>	1,1,1,1,1,1	1.0	3,4,3,4,3,3	3.33
<b>Question 4</b>	2,3,4,2,2,2	2.5	4,5,4,4,3,5	4.16
<b>Question 5</b>	3,3,2,1,4,3	2.67	5,5,5,5,5,5	5.0

<b>Question 6</b>	3,4,4,3,2,2	3.0	5,4,5,5,4,4	4.5
<b>Question 7</b>	2,2,3,3,3,3	2.67	4,3,3,3,4,3	3.33
<b>Question 8</b>	3,2,3,3,3,2	2.67	4,4,4,4,4,4	4.0

Based on the results of the teacher questionnaires, they hypothesis can be accepted. Teachers indicated an increase in knowledge and use of strategies for teaching ELL students. This was due in part to the series of professional development classes on the importance of vocabulary for ELL students.

### **Discussion**

Students took a pre and posttest on vocabulary knowledge. During the study, direct vocabulary instruction was taught using read alouds. Although there are many ways to teach vocabulary, read alouds were used in this study because they were already in place in the classroom. Every student in the study showed a significant increase in their vocabulary knowledge. ELL students need direct vocabulary instruction because they are learning both content and the English language at the same time. They are not able to use context clues in the same way as other students because they do not have English proficiency yet. Therefore, when students are directly taught vocabulary, both their content knowledge and English proficiency will increase. In addition to directly teaching vocabulary, students also benefit from repeated interactions with the words. This allows students to understand the vocabulary words in multiple contexts and really gain a deep understanding of them.

Prior to the professional development, teachers indicated that they lacked an understanding of teaching ELL students. They were not sure of strategies to use, the importance of vocabulary, or they did not feel that they had been adequately trained. Students from all different backgrounds are placed in teachers' classrooms without proper training on the specific needs for the students. Teachers are expected to know the best ways to teach each and every student in their classroom. After the professional development classes, teachers indicated that they were more comfortable, felt that they did have strategies to use, and knew how important vocabulary was with ELL students.

### **Implications for Classroom Practice**

Vocabulary can be incorporated into the classroom in many different ways throughout the day. Teachers can preview and review vocabulary words before and after reading a text. Another interesting way is to reinforce vocabulary words through multimedia. ELL students also need time to practice communicating and using the vocabulary words while practicing talking with classmates. The way that students learn vocabulary is less important than the fact that they are learning new vocabulary.

### **Limitations of the Study**

One limitation of the study was that there was no group comparison. Only one group was used for the study. Another limitation was that the student sample used in the study was small. This was due to the fact that there were few ELL students in the whole school. This also resulted in another limitation in that the participants were not randomly selected. Instead the whole ELL second grade population at the school was used. In the future, I would like to redo the study using a larger sample of students who are randomly

selected. I would also like to redo the study using various teachers to see if teaching style plays a part in the results.

The teacher sample was also small due to a conflict in differing planning times. I would like to continue professional development with the teachers, but I would like to include more grade levels in the future.

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