Vocabulary Acquisition in English Language Learners

By: Marquitta Heggins

Submitted to

Professional Education Faculty

Northwest Missouri State University Missouri

Department of Professional Education

College of Education and Human Services

Maryville, MO 64468

Submitted in Fulfillment for the Requirements for

61-683 Research Paper

Spring 2015

July 20, 2015
Abstract

This study aims at investigating the impact of a which teaching method of explicit or implicit vocabulary teaching strategies on developing English Language Learners’ vocabulary size and improving their reading comprehension skills in the content areas. The sample study consisted of 32 third graders. A vocabulary and reading comprehension pre-test was administered to both groups at the beginning of the study to ensure that they were equivalent and homogenous. The experimental group was taught vocabulary explicitly. The control group was taught an implicit vocabulary teaching method. The same vocabulary and reading comprehension pre-test was given as a post-test. The results were analyzed and a combination of explicit and implicit vocabulary strategies proved to be effective. Conclusions, implications and recommendations are listed in the research paper.
Introduction

Background, issues and concerns

One of the most important challenges that learners will face during the process of second language learning is learning vocabulary. Vocabulary has been recognized as crucial to language use in which insufficient vocabulary knowledge of the learners led to difficulties in second language learning. By learning new words, students can increase their listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Besides teaching individual words, effective vocabulary development for English Learners includes teaching vocabulary strategies they can apply to new words they encounter.

The Department of Education requires all English Language Learner students who have been in the United States for as little as one year to take the same English Language Arts Assessments as native speakers of the English language. These students are not proficient in the English Language. Educators must address the testing of English Language Learners.

Practices under investigation

The practice under investigation is rather or not a specific teaching influences ELLs acquisition of content vocabulary. There will be an investigation to see if explicit instruction of vocabulary is more beneficial than implicit instruction and vice versa. Student performance on preselected vocabulary test will be assessed. Instructional choices for differentiation will be evaluated on outcome or assessment.
For English Language Learners, vocabulary development is especially critical for their ability to read and comprehend texts. If one specific method achieves a higher standard of achievement, it is important to evaluate which method of instruction is more beneficial for students. The results of the study would also provide evidence of how effective the strategies students use to acquire vocabulary. Possible recommendations could be made to assist teachers in instructing English Language Learners.

Conceptual Underpinning

Second language acquisition can be defined as the ways in people learn a language other than their mother tongue, inside or outside of a classroom (Ellis, 1997). The process of second language acquisition can be lengthy. Students observe and internalize the new language. They use gestures, pointing and nodding to communicate. There are many complexities when it comes to learning a second language. Language learners play an active role in language development. Learners acquire a second language by drawing on their background experiences and prior knowledge in their first language. Language learners develop strategies and use what they know to communicate.

Vocabulary acquisition is a critical component of academic language. Developing a solid vocabulary is essential to gaining proficiency in the students’ target language. Vocabulary itself is multi-faceted and should be considered as part of all aspects of language development including but not limited to spelling, pronunciation and grammatical behavior.

Explicit instruction has always been a controversial issue when it comes to language teaching. The use of grammar in the language classroom is not well seen by teachers who prefer
a communicative approach to language teaching. This is mostly due to the idea that explicit instruction simply “involves the direct explanation of grammatical features followed by practice activities” (Ellis, 2010, p. 19), as it was done in the so criticized grammar translation and audio-lingual methods. Explicit instruction has been part of language instruction since its beginning. As mentioned by Ellis (2010, p. 4), “grammar translation, the audio-lingual method, the oral-situational method and PPP (present-practice-produce) involve either deductive or inductive explicit instruction”. Researchers have proved that explicit instruction is often superior for developing explicit knowledge (Ellis, 2010).

Vocabulary is important because it is a strong predictor of reading comprehension. If children are to understand the text, they must know what most of the words mean before they can comprehend what they are reading. Children with well-developed vocabularies can recognize a new word in text faster and easier if the word has an identity in their mind. Students can also learn vocabulary through indirect and direct exposure to words in a variety of language contexts. For example, students can learn vocabulary indirectly when they engage in conversations with others, through read aloud, and through independent reading.

Best practice suggests a combination of these strategies. Explicit instruction is vital for initial instruction in skill acquisition. This is especially the case for struggling readers, who often require intense support to acquire reading skills. Beginning reading instruction should emphasize explicit instruction, particularly for phonics instruction. Implicit instruction is important when generalizing skills to other contexts.
**Statement of the Problem**

Many English Language Learners face problem with vocabulary development and comprehension with the English language. Becoming proficient in a language is a complex and demanding process that takes many years. The speed of acquiring a language is based on many factors and the learner’s environment. The trepidation and difficulty on students to perform well in the second language causes them anxiety that is specific to the second language classroom.

**Purpose of the Study**

The main purpose of this paper is to examine and investigate the use of current vocabulary teaching and learning strategies among elementary students. Improving academic success among English language learners (ELLs) is a challenge faced by many schools and districts. The task is complicated by several factors, including the demographics of the ELL population. The purpose of the study is to determine which method on instruction is more beneficial to English Language Learners in acquiring content vocabulary.

**Research Question**

RQ: Is there a significant difference in the acquisition of a second language between explicit instructions compared to implicit teaching methods.

**Null Hypothesis**

Explicit instruction does not have a significant value over implicit when it comes to second language acquisition.
Anticipated Benefits of the Study

Regardless of the results of the study, the anticipated beliefs include finding out which results work best for students who are learning English as a Second Language. Students will be engaged in a learning activity that will improve their knowledge and skills associated with learning content vocabulary. The beliefs and practices of content area teachers for supporting vocabulary learning in such a manner are related to the importance they place in helping students develop necessary strategies for reading informational texts.

Definition of Terms

ELL- English Language Learners, according to The Glossary of Education Reform, are students who are unable to communicate fluently or learn effectively in English, who often come from non-English-speaking homes and backgrounds, and who typically require specialized or modified instruction in both the English language and in their academic courses.

ESL- English as a Second Language is the study of the English language by a non-native in an English speaking environment.

Explicit Instruction- teaching where the instructor clearly outlines what the learning goals are for the student, and offers clear, unambiguous explanations of the skills and information structures they are presenting.

Implicit- teaching where the instructor does not outline such goals or make such explanations overtly, but rather simply presents the information or problem to the student and allows the student to make their own conclusions and create their own conceptual structures and assimilate the information in the way that makes the most sense to them.
Summary

A study was conducted to see if there is a significant difference between implicit and explicit teaching of vocabulary. If the results conclude one teaching strategy is more beneficial than the other, teachers should consider the teaching strategy that produces the most valuable results.
Review of Literature

The new Common Core Standards have incorporated a new component labeled, "Vocabulary Acquisition and Use." It is true that vocabulary is central to language teaching as well as learning and is of paramount importance to a language learner. Several researchers have investigated the effect of using different strategies and techniques to facilitate the vocabulary teaching/learning process, and as a result, to improve students’ reading comprehension skills.

In the article “Building English language learners academic vocabulary: Strategies and tips”, Sibold (2011), looks at the Three Tier Model of vocabulary acquisition and how language instruction has a significant impact on the language successes of English Language Learners. Parents and teachers are provided with strategies to help students improve their understanding of basic words (Tier 1), general academic and multiple meaning words (Tier 2), and specific content words (Tier 3). This article gives specific activities that teachers and parents can use to improve student’s learning. This study also provides the teacher with this is what we did; this is what you need to do.

In the article, The Relationship between Vocabulary Learning Strategies and Vocabulary Proficiency of English Language Learners by Tılfarlıoğlu, F., and-Bozgeyik, Y. (2012), researchers compared 104 six-year-old children belonging to 4 groups (English monolinguals, Chinese-English bilinguals, French-English bilinguals, Spanish-English bilinguals) on a series of tasks in order to determine the effect of bilingualism on development. Taking into account language, cultural background, and the language of schooling, researchers examined the outcomes of language tasks and cognitive tasks across the groups. They found that bilingualism
had a positive effect on executive control tasks, but that the performance on the language task varied depending on educational experience and the similarity between the two languages.

In the article, Sentence Reading and Writing for Second Language Vocabulary Acquisition by Pichette (2012), study compares the relative effectiveness of reading and writing sentences for the incidental acquisition of new vocabulary in a second language. Writing and writing instruction have often been viewed within the learning-to-write perspective (Pichette, 2012, p. 6). This article explores strategies for implementations of “core vocabulary” with reading and writing instruction to develop content vocabulary. It also investigates the role of general vocabulary knowledge. Students with an extensive knowledge of English words have more success in reading and writing in second language acquisition.

Abad, E., and Baradaran, A. in their article The Relationship between Learner Autonomy and Vocabulary Learning Strategies in Iranian EFL Learners with Different Language Proficiency Level, learners uses strategies in self-instruction context and the degree of autonomy they exercise would help them develop foreign language skills without the help of a teacher or language group(s). This article explores the relationship between learner autonomy and vocabulary learning strategies. It focuses on helping language learners become autonomous. Helping students take responsibility and monitor their vocabulary development is a learning process that helps promote students ability to stay motivated to acquire vocabulary.

Ferrell and Daloghu (2006), discuss how vocabulary acquisition is one of the important features in estimating one’s language proficiency. It focuses on the relationship between second language proficiency and the amount of vocabulary a learner knows. Developing a solid vocabulary is essential to gaining proficiency in the students’ target language. Vocabulary itself
is multi-faceted and should be considered as part of the larger language structure and use, involving spelling, pronunciation, and grammatical behavior.

Traditional science lessons have often begun with teachers presenting students with science vocabulary words and asking them to write the words, find the definitions in a dictionary or the glossary of the textbook, match the words to definitions, or use the words in a sentence (p. 19). Respectively, two articles that focus on Science vocabulary, Albakri (2013) and Fathoman and Kessler (1992), both focus on how to teach strategies that are effective as well as how to integrate them into daily language. To many English-speaking students science words seem like a new language, and to English language learners, these words are a new language. Through hands-on inquiry instruction, all students can develop context-based content knowledge along with language development.

Vocabulary Learning Strategies plays a key role in vocabulary learning. English Language Learners lack of this knowledge may have an effect of the skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking. According to Swanson and Howerton (2012), “This gap in vocabulary and reading achievement widens in later school years” (p. 32) Vocabulary learning strategies helps facilitates vocabulary acquisition and help students become more independent in acquiring language.

Learning a second language is never easy. Students must wrestle with new vocabulary, rules for grammar and sentence structure, idioms, pronunciation and more. Some people, however, seem to catch on much more quickly than others. Home and community factors play a major role in second language acquisition. In the article, Home and Community Factors Influencing Bilingual Children’s Ethnic Language Vocabulary Develop, the authors examine
speech communities. Culture plays a major role in language development. People who are confident and outgoing find it easier to learn a second language. They have less fear of making mistakes, and making mistakes is an integral part of learning a new skill.

Students whose families and communities set high standards for language acquisition learn more quickly than those who do not. Exposure to high-quality ESL programs is also essential. Students do best when they are allowed to speak their native language as they try to learn the new one because that helps them process the information. The learning environment should be comfortable, and students’ successes should be recognized.
Research Methods

Research Design

Based on the aim of the study, the best approach would be to adopt a quantitative research design. The research will investigate vocabulary learning strategies. The research design for this study was a quantitative design. A Pretest-post-test experimental design which was used to investigate the effectiveness of using implicit or explicit teaching strategies to develop students’ vocabulary and to improve their reading comprehension The independent variable consisted of the two different groups of students, the experimental group which was taught explicit method and the control group which was taught the implicit method. The dependent variable consisted of a multiple choice test.

Study Group Description

The study group will consist of 32 third grade students selected from 4 third grade classrooms. The students range from beginning, intermediate and advanced levels based on the Access for ALL test taking the previous school year. The student population consisted of 18 boys and 14 girls. There are a variety of ethnicities represented. 21 students are Bosnian and represent the largest population in the study. Of those 21 Bosnian students, 10 are girls and 11 are boys. The second largest population represented in the study are Iraqi students. There are 7 Iraqi students in which 3 girls and 4 boys. The last population of students represented are Hispanic. There are 4 students represented, 3 boys and 1 girl that are represented in the study. Of the 32 students represented in study 24 students receive free or reduced lunch.
**Data Collection and Instrumentation**

The data collection instrument for the qualitative study will consist of a survey. Given the age group of the students, it is imperative to explain the difference between explicit and implicit instruction. Students will be surveyed on which method of instruction they prefer.

**Statistical Analysis**

Statistical Package (ASP) software was used to compute the statistical calculations in this study. A descriptive T-test was calculated to come up with the findings. A t-test was conducted to see if there was a significant difference between explicit and implicit instruction in acquiring content vocabulary. The mean, mean D, t-test, df, and p-value were concluded from this test. The Alpha level was set at 0.25 to test the null hypothesis. Additionally, Microsoft Excel was used to compile some totals used in the research.
Findings

A t-test was conducted to interpret whether there was a difference in explicit and implicit instruction compared to traditional methods of teaching for English Language Learners in acquiring content vocabulary. The following tables, graphs, and charts will represent the findings.

Thirty-two third graders were chosen to participate in the study to determine if there is a significance difference in content vocabulary learning based on implicit or explicit instruction. Given the age of the students it was imperative to thoroughly explain the difference between the two teaching strategies. The data collected is represented based on a pre and post-post that measured vocabulary development and reading comprehension.

The assessment consisted of a grade level appropriate reading passage that contained Science vocabulary within the text. Students were asked to read the passage and answer 10 questions related to the passage.
The test represents 32 third grade students. The t-test represents the 32 students who were taught explicit and implicit vocabulary development methods. The mean for implicit instruction is 74.375. The mean for explicit instruction is 75.625 with a Mean difference of -1.25. The df is 16 for both explicit and implicit instruction. The p-value is 0.413. The null hypothesis states implicit instruction does not have a significant value over explicit instruction in student vocabulary development. The null hypothesis is not rejected because the p-value of 0.413 is greater than the alpha level of 0.25.
The chart above represents the results of the t-test.
The chart above represents the pre and post-test of Group A. Group A were taught an implicit method of instruction only. What’s intriguing about the data is the students performed better on the pre-test opposed to the post-test. These results lead the researcher to believe implicit method of instruction may not be the best teaching strategy for English Language Learners in acquiring content vocabulary.
The chart above represents Group B pre and post-test results. Group B was taught explicit instruction only. The students who were taught an explicit vocabulary strategy did slightly better than the students who were taught the implicit method of vocabulary. The results lead the researcher to believe than an explicit method of instruction is better for English Language Learners.
Conclusion and Recommendations

Vocabulary instruction is a best practice for students to be more successful in reading and in all content areas. Children learn vocabulary explicitly through instruction and implicitly through reading and listening. Schools have an expectation that students enter kindergarten with experience with books. Educators are noticing that many students need more exposure to books and literacy experiences when the students enter school.

Teachers should try hard to vary their vocabulary teaching techniques and strategies and should avoid traditional ones which mainly depend on memorization. Students should be given enough chance to develop their meaning-attack skills by utilizing the implicit vocabulary teaching strategy effectively. - The utilization of the explicit vocabulary teaching strategy should also be given enough attention so as to provide students with background knowledge about the assigned texts and to facilitate students’ reading comprehension.

Cuing learners to use strategies and to think about the strategies they use is an important part of strategy instruction. There is room for further investigation of the study. As much as I am aware of the fact that academic English vocabulary is generally difficult to understand for the average ELL, I would advise the teachers not to simplify the curriculum. Instead, ESOL teachers should focus on determining the major concepts and processes in the English for Academic Purposes curriculum that students must know. When teachers help students to focus on the most important vocabulary, the content in the English for Academic Purposes classroom becomes manageable and the workload less overwhelming.
References


Effective Literacy and English language instruction for English learners in the elementary grades: A practice guide (NCEE 2007-4011).


