

The Effects of Vocabulary Instruction on ESL Reading Comprehension

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Abstract: *This study evaluates the possibility of using vocabulary instruction in ESL reading comprehension context. The categorizations of vocabulary instructional studies have indicated the variety of instructional approaches studied in the past three decades. Effective vocabulary instruction requires us to create many opportunities for students to learn words, related concepts and their meanings. This paper provides the importance of vocabulary instruction related to reading comprehension. Observation and semi structured interviews provide important insight into how ESL learners in the classroom are engaging with words. This article reports and discusses the findings of vocabulary instruction on reading comprehension. Findings revealed that most teachers understand the importance of vocabulary instruction in the content areas. Words allow speakers to express and broaden their understanding pertaining the world around them.*

Keywords: Vocabulary Instruction, Reading Comprehension, ESL learners

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary can be described as oral vocabulary and reading vocabulary. Oral vocabulary refers to words used in speaking or recognizing it in listening. Reading vocabulary refers to words used in speaking or using in print. Vocabulary is more than a list of words and although the size of one's vocabulary matters, its knowing how to use it which matters most (Hackman 2008). There is a strong relationship between vocabulary and reading comprehension. Vocabulary growth leads to reading comprehension. According to Carvei, Zoi (2003), has stated that the relationship between vocabulary and reading comprehension is so intense that they can produce great correlations.

The National Reading Panel (NICHD, 2000), identified vocabulary as one of the five major components of reading. Its importance to overall schools success and more specifically to reading comprehension is widely documented. The National Reading Panel (NRP) stated that vocabulary plays an important role both in learning to read and in comprehending text.

The scientific research on vocabulary instructions reveals that most vocabulary is learned indirectly and some vocabulary must be taught directly.

Children learn word meanings indirectly in (three) ways. Firstly, they engage daily in oral language. Young children learn word meanings through conversations with other people, especially adults. As they engage in this conversation, children often hear adults use new and interesting words. The more oral language experiences children have, the more word meanings they learn. Secondly, they listen to adults reading to them. Children learn word meanings from listening to adults reading to them. Reading aloud is particularly helpful when the reader pauses during reading to define an unfamiliar word and after reading engages the child in a conversation about the book. Conversations about books help children to learn new words and concepts and to relate them to their prior knowledge and experience. Third, they read extensively on their own and children learn any new words by reading extensively on their own. The more children read on their own, the more words they encounter and the more word meanings they learn.

There are two types of vocabulary instruction taught which are indirect vocabulary instruction and direct vocabulary instruction. Indirect vocabulary learning instruction where students learn vocabulary indirectly when they hear and see words used in many different contexts: for example, through conversations with adults, through reading and through reading extensively on their own. Direct vocabulary learning instruction which is, students learn vocabulary directly when they are explicitly taught both individual words and word learning strategies. Direct vocabulary instruction aids reading comprehension.

In general, schools should be language rich environments where teachers and students attend to and celebrate language in all forms and contexts include orally, in writing, while reading and in specific content areas as per Blachowiz, Ogle & Waffs Taffe(2000), Vitale & Romance (2008), Wood Hammman & Hedrick (2004). Effective vocabulary instruction begins with diverse opportunities for word learning: wide reading, high-quality oral language, word consciousness, explicit instruction of specific words, and independent word-learning strategies.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Vocabulary Framework

Beck, Mckeown and Kucan (2002), presented useful framework for classifying vocabulary and making instructional determination regarding which words to teach and how to effectively teach them. According to this model, vocabulary within a reading selection can be grouped into 3 tiers. Tier 1 words are the commonly occurring basic words of English. These are known as lexical items that native speakers of a language easily recognize. Tier 2 words are academic vocabulary and other lexical items which appear frequently across a variety of domains. Tier 3 words are low frequency words often associated with specific disciplines. Calderon (2007), provides in detailed overview of the three tiers of words below:

Tier 1

Tier 1 words are the most basic, commonly occurring words in English. Many of the Tier 1 words are easily recognized words in English. Many of the Tier 1 words are easily recognized by native speakers of English but not necessarily by second language learners. Adult second

language learners typically know the concepts of these words. The meaning of Tier 1 words can often be conveyed using visuals, realia, gestures or demonstration. Teachers allow students to obtain a native language translation.

Tier 2

Tier 2 words are high frequency words in the speech of mature, proficient users of English. It includes academic vocabulary and other words which appear across a variety of domains. Tier 2 words are typically critical for comprehending the meaning of a text. These words add richness and depth to a learner’s vocabulary and powerful impact the verbal functioning of second language learners. Tier 2 words are ideal choices for explicit and elaborate instruction.

Tier 3

Tier 3 words are low frequency words often related with specific disciplines. They tend to be highly technical and precise in meaning. Thus, tier 3 words should be directly taught only in relation to a specific reading selection and they are essential for comprehension of that particular text with adult learners native language translations can be used to quickly convey the meaning of Tier 3 words.

Graves (2006) also recommends daily interactive read aloud to introduce students to tier two vocabulary (Table 1) and promoted daily guided writing to encourage the practice and use of new vocabulary words. Similarly Kucan and Beck (1997) advised that thinking aloud is the one of the way to promote and practice vocabulary instruction in the form of teacher led and peer led discussions. These practices encourage students to take responsibility in classroom discussion. Students are able to focus, pay attention and spend more time thinking about their are reading.

Table 1 : Beck, Mckeown & Kucan Word Tiers (2002)

Tier 1 Words	Tier 2 Words	Tier 3Words
Basic words – Most cannot be demonstrated and do not have multiple meanings and no need instruction. • Sight words	High frequency words used across many domains	Low frequency words-Limited to specific domains content area words.
How many? 8000 words	How many ? 7000 word families	How many? 400 000 words
Example : keep	Example : tend	Example : economic

2.2 Reading Process

Grabe (2009), stated that reading is usually taken for granted and readers usually seem to put little effort in and make little planning for the reading process. However, as Goodman stated that reading is a complex activity which requires formulating hypothesis about the text and confirming them after interacting with the text.

Moreover, reading is a receptive language process. According to Weir (1998), reading is the process of receiving and interpreting information encoded in language form via the medium of

print. Comprehension which is useful expressions that contradicts the term decoding (Urquhart & Weir, 1998) by putting the emphasis on reading and understanding is the most widespread purpose for reading and it is usually assumed to be easy reading (Grabe and Stoller 2002).

Comprehension occurs when the reader creates link between the various information from the text and what is previously known (Grabe, 2009). Moreover, many people read for different purpose as for educational and professional. In addition, Grabe (2009), agreed that the purpose of reader make sense of the information in the text, synthesize, criticize and selectively utilize that information. In order to understand the complex nature of reading comprehension and the set of general underlying process that are triggered as we read, the most well known models of the reading process ; bottom up, top down and interactive processes. The bottom up model describes reading as a mechanical process in which the reader follows a text letter by letter, word by word and sentence by sentence (Grabe and Stoller 2002). In this model, the reader brings little background knowledge to the text to make inferences.

Meanwhile, another well known model is the top down model which assumes that the readers goals and expectations control the comprehension. The reader looks at the text to find the most useful information (Esley & Grabe 1996). However, inferencing and the reader's background knowledge are fundamental components of the top down process (Grabe 2009). The interactive model combines the useful aspects of top down and bottom up processes. Finally, the final model has received more support when compared to the previous two (Grabe & Stoller, 2002 ; Urquhart and Weir 1998).

2.3 The Vocabulary Problem in Reading

According to Schmitt (2010), all teachers and researchers taking major roles in the language learning process can agree is that being competent in a second language requires learning vocabulary, as evidenced by the high correlations between vocabulary and various areas of language proficiency. When the factors that are essential to reading are examined, vocabulary knowledge is generally held as the major one. It has been recognized as the main predictor of successful reading by many scholars (Baldo, 2010; Nagy 1988; Nassaji, 2006 ; Schmitt 2004). Meanwhile, Killian (1995) stated that the difficulty of comprehending reading texts can even be determined according to the difficulty of the words they include.

In order to be successful readers, learners need to recognize the written words and know what they mean (Biemiller, 2007). Word recognition is the most significant processes that enhance reading comprehension. Without automatic word recognition, fluent reading comprehension is not achievable. Since vocabulary knowledge is a great contributor to reading comprehension, lack of sufficient lexical knowledge is a serious problem for second language readers (Grabe 2009). However, a great number of vocabulary items makes it clear that direct instruction cannot be insufficient on its own to help learners overcome the difficulty (Sterberg as cited in Walters, 2004).

In order to reduce the vocabulary problem, Nation (2008) suggests that teachers help learners deal with unknown words in a text in ten ways. Before the text is read, teacher explains the form,

meaning and use of some unknown words. Second, simplify the text by replacing with previously vocabulary items that have similar meanings.

Listing the meaning of the unknown words which are in glossaries are another way that is offered. The meaning of the words can be given in students' native language or in the target language. Another way is putting words in an exercise after the text. These exercises can be word meaning, matching, word part analysis or collocations activities. Teachers use these exercises only for high frequency words since they take a lot of time to implement in the classroom. On the other hand, for low frequency words the meaning of the words the meaning of the word should be given quickly. Furthermore, teachers can help the learner use a dictionary which is a useful vocabulary learning strategy. As Nation (2008) emphasized that is helping learners use the context, guess the meaning of the word and using word parts to help a word to be remembered. The final way that is to list and to deal with unknown words. It is done during reading, instead of dealing with the unfamiliar words before the text (Nation, 2008).

Although Nation (2008), suggests there are ten useful strategies not all of them are highly effective. Using word parts to remember the words may not be appropriate for all proficiency level. Moreover, simplifying glossaries does not seem helpful in real life situations where learners encounter with authentic texts and deal with the unknown words in reading texts. In fact, the researcher suggests that five options for dealing with unfamiliar words or vocabulary can be done by learners. Learners ignore the words, look up in the dictionary and benefit from their knowledge of word parts. In addition, they can discuss someone or try guessing the meaning from context. Learners can use these steps in combination.

2.4 Vocabulary and Comprehension

Pearson (2007) stated that vocabulary instruction has come to the forefront of the discussion of reading and comprehension. Vocabulary instruction has returned to a place of prominence in reading curriculum (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000). Some studies have shown that many children who read at the third grade level will not automatically become proficient in comprehending in later grades. Therefore, developing students' vocabulary will assuage the declining comprehension skills that students possess (RAND Education, 2002).

Therefore, Nagy and Scott (2000), reported that a child must be able to comprehend the meaning of 90-95% of the words in a text in order to be fully understood. Joshi (2005) believes that in order to increase comprehension and fluent reading a well developed vocabulary is necessary. The link between vocabulary and comprehension is measurable as most students who do well on vocabulary tests also do well on reading comprehension tests. According to Pearson (2007), has briefed that while we know more about vocabulary, there is still more need to be discovered concerning its link to comprehension. Despite researchers inability to document the exact relationship between vocabulary and comprehension, its importance in reading research and curricula cannot be denied. Vocabulary knowledge in the primary grades is a significant predictor of reading comprehension (Graves, 2006).

2.5 Vocabulary Instruction

There is a great deal divide between what we know about vocabulary instruction and what we do (Greenwood 2004). Many teachers know they need to do a better job teaching vocabulary to students who find reading difficult (Tompkins & Blanchfield 2004). Traditional vocabulary instruction for many teachers involve having students look words in the dictionary, write definitions and use words in sentences (Basurto , 2004). Word lists, teachers' explanations, discussion, memorization, vocabulary books and quizzes often are used in an effort to help students learn new words.

Vocabulary is a principle contributor to comprehension, fluency and achievement. Vocabulary development is an outcome with word meaning of comprehension (Naggy & Scott 2000). Moreover, Allington (2006) and Samuels (2002) stated that fluent readers recognize and understand many words and they read more quickly and easily than those with smaller vocabularies. Students with large vocabularies understand text better and score higher on achievement tests than students with limited vocabularies.

2.6 Direct Vocabulary Instruction

Direct vocabulary instruction where teacher intentionally focused instruction on developing students knowledge of word meanings by targeting specific words has been recommended as one of the important strategy for improving knowledge (Biemiller, 2001; Blachowicz, Fisher & Ogle & Watts-Taffe, 2006). In fact, Beck & Mckeown (2007) stated that increasing the amount of direct vocabulary instruction results in more word meaning acquired by students. According to National Reading Panel (2000) direct vocabulary instruction has also been demonstrated to improve comprehending the text.

Biemiller &Boote (2006) briefed that vocabulary instruction consisting only of explicit explanation of word meaning has been shown to improve student word knowledge. However, multiple exposures to new words and instruction has resulted in higher level of word learning and may be necessary for students to gain sufficient knowledge of word meaning that can enhance reading comprehension. Recently, Baumann (2009) examined the question of the strength of direct vocabulary instruction that needed by students to increase in word learning but did not allow an increase in comprehension of text containing the taught words. The researcher also noted that the intensity calculations applied to the vocabulary studies which may not provide appropriate guidance for instruction of vocabulary learning. It shows that single exposure vocabulary instruction may not be enough for students to enhance reading comprehension.

Reviews of the vocabulary research for students with and without reading difficulties to identify key aspects of direct vocabulary instruction for improving student word learning and comprehension (Stahl & Fairbanks 2006).These recommendations include:

- a. Providing definitional and contextual information to teach word meaning.
- b. Connecting new words with known concepts including comparing and contrasting new words

with known words.

- c. Providing multiple exposure and practice with new words.
- d. Implementing instructional activities that allow students to use and identify meaning of new words in a variety of ways and in rich contexts.

2.7 Explicit Vocabulary Instruction

Research indicates that the intentional, explicit teaching of specific words and strategies increase word knowledge and reading comprehension (Mckeown, Beck, 1985). One of the most important aspects of explicit instruction of vocabulary is how a teacher chooses words. Unfortunately, the lists in textbooks are not a consistent source of word selection (Blachowicz et al.2006). The textbook lists are likely to focus on tier three words that appear occasionally in print and conversation. This task proves impossible since direct vocabulary instruction has time constraints.

Teachers can use specific search criteria in their selection to find words that appear in content areas with different meaning. It includes words that are important to understanding a specific selection or concept words that appear in other texts (Beck, et. al 2002). In addition to Beck (2002) and other researchers alternative ways in selecting words to teach living word vocabulary and the general service list of English words can serve as a starting point for word selection activities (Blachowicz et.al 2006). Teachers serve in helping students of second language and others with small vocabularies in general.

3.0 THE STUDY

The purpose of this study was to determine usage of vocabulary instruction in classroom reading instruction. This was done through a case study involving seventeen teachers from three established public schools in Kajang District. The teacher interviews were conducted separately. The samples were purposively and conveniently chosen on the basis that these are established schools in the centre of town. This study employed qualitative research methodology in seeking teachers' perception or beliefs on vocabulary instruction towards reading comprehension. A semi structured interview was chosen as it is most appropriate strategy to elicit insight towards understanding a phenomenon (Cresswell, 2007). The interviews were transcribed and analyzed through thematic content analysis. A list of categories was generated from the data to form the outline for analysis.

4.0 FINDINGS

Several instructions were sorted out from the seventeen teacher's beliefs or perception on vocabulary instruction towards ESL reading comprehension.

Table 2 : Teachers Perception on Vocabulary Instruction Towards ESL Reading Comprehension

Number of Teachers	Examples of Excerpts from Transcripts	Instruction
15 (88%)	<p><i>“ Students enjoy learning new words and engaging in word play.”</i></p> <p><i>“They enjoy reading . Their reading pace has picked up as well.”</i></p> <p><i>“ I can see reading scores that have improved a lot”.</i></p>	Explicit instruction
12 (71%)	<p><i>“The more students read the more vocabulary they learn”.</i></p> <p><i>“It is a good source of word meanings especially with learning disabilities”</i></p>	Implicit instruction
16 (94%)	<p><i>“Most of the children have improved their reading level. The children have a lot more confidence in themselves.”</i></p> <p><i>“ Using storyboards allow them to make use of different reading strategies”.</i></p> <p><i>“ They become more aware of the new words they encounter.”</i></p>	Multimedia methods
14 (82%)	<p><i>“ They enjoy reading with small group”.</i></p> <p><i>“ My students more confidence in reading like sounding out words, follow along with finger when reading”.</i></p> <p><i>“ Using flashcards , they easily recognize spelling and sight words”.</i></p>	Capacity methods
17 (76%)	<p><i>“ They feel successful and learned rules during word attack of the lesson”.</i></p> <p><i>“ Using semantic helps to develop an understanding body of knowledge and explore new information.”</i></p> <p><i>“ They learn many new words by reading extensively on their own”.</i></p>	Association methods

5.0 DISCUSSION

Researchers have accredited a relationship between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension (Stahl & Naggy 2006). Students who begin school with more vocabulary knowledge tend to comprehend the text they read and their reading comprehension increases their vocabulary knowledge. Students who begin school with limited vocabulary knowledge may struggle with reading comprehension.

There is a possibility of reducing the problem of low vocabulary knowledge and offers a wide range of research based instructional methods that can support all students developing expressive

and receptive vocabulary (Christ & Wang 2010). Wide reading has been viewed as the main way for children to increase their vocabularies.

Students need guidance to learn new strategies that will help them increase their vocabulary and reading comprehension. Students frequently guess at unknown words in a text. According to Cohen & Byrness (2007), students can increase their new word and develop strategies with efficient instruction from the teacher. It is essential to help students learn how to solve problem when they came to unknown words within a text. Effective vocabulary instruction arises when learners are actively processing to new words when provided with both definitional and contextual information. In other words, effective vocabulary instruction selectively chooses words to be given rich, deep and extended instruction.

Vocabulary instruction leads to gain in comprehension. It can be learned by the way in the context of storybook reading or from listening to the reading of others. Repeated exposure to vocabulary items is important for learning. The best achievement was made in instruction that involved multiple exposures in authentic context beyond the classroom. Learning in rich contexts is valuable for vocabulary learning. It means the learner will find useful vocabulary words in many contexts. When vocabulary items are derived from content materials, the learner will be equipped with specific reading matter in content areas. However, computer vocabulary instruction shows positive learning impact over traditional method.

According to Rupley (2009), direct instruction for reading focused on five critical areas included phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension. Nelson Walker (2013) investigated the relationship between the quality of reading instruction and reading achievement of at risk and not at risk students in 42 first grade classrooms. Results showed that classes whose teachers received the extra direction coaching higher on test phonemic awareness, alphabetical principles and fluency skills and that there was more group practice. The author suggests that it was difficult to change teacher's behavior for instructionally complex topics such as vocabulary and comprehension. Direct vocabulary instruction progressively repeated exposure in many contexts that the students involved in thinking critically using examples in authentic text of words. Teachers encourage learners to spell and write words repeatedly all the while engaging language learners in word consciousness through various activities (August, Artzi & Mazrum 2010). Placing the students where vocabulary is emphasized lead to students' attitudes towards reading comprehension. Using word wall increased their awareness as a tool in finding word meaning. Students have confidence in finding the meaning. It allows them to speak, write and read more effectively about the topic they were studying.

Context clues also help students to build word identification and the development of word meaning. One student can interpret easily if more attention can be paid to building meaning. It helps students to support word meaning and word identification. It helps to create good interaction with the text that supports the identification of unknown words. In one recent study, Baker (2013) researched the impact of structured read aloud lessons for grade one students that were systematic and maintained an enjoyable teaching and learning atmosphere for teachers and students. The authors hypothesized that a more structured approach to reading instruction that was explicit and focused on comprehension and vocabulary knowledge.

The read aloud intervention incorporated core elements of explicit instruction. Lessons were organized around modeled teachers led instruction moving toward independent student practice. Teachers and students engaged in frequent interactions about text with at risk students. Finally extensive feedback was provided to students with corrective feedback for incorrect response. Teachers in the comparison condition instructed using the read aloud procedures they would typically use in their classroom.

6.0 CONCLUSION

Reading comprehension is a cognitive process that integrates complex skills and cannot be understood without the critical role of vocabulary learning and instruction. Students read a text to understand what is read and to find out information or to be entertained. Graphic and semantic allow students to represent graphically the meaning and relationship of the ideas that underlie the words in a text vocabulary is one of the most important parts within comprehension. Many studies found a variety of methods by which students acquire vocabulary through explicit instruction and direct instruction to improve their comprehension of what they have read. A positive relationship between vocabulary and reading comprehension was established.

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