

Research-Proven Strategies for Improving Content Vocabulary for Middle School English Language Learners

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Abstract

This article examines strategies that are research proven to improve the content vocabulary of English Language Learners in middle school. It describes the characteristics of English Language Learners and the research based teaching methodologies for effective vocabulary instruction including word exposure frequency and morphology. It observed that intentional teaching of fluency and vocabulary are important aspects of helping English Language Learners to learn and succeed in content area classrooms. In general, it is beneficial for teachers to understand the linguistic needs of middle school English Language Learners in order to ease the process of instruction. In effect, it improves the scores of middle school English Language Learners in standardized tests. It also enhances valuable interpersonal and communication skills.

Keywords: Content vocabulary, English Language Learners

Introduction

Over past decades there has been an increase in the number of immigrants to the United States. Most of these immigrants have limited English proficiency. Inversely, the influx in number of English Language Learners (ELLs) enrolling in schools has increased. According to the Migration Policy Institute of 2010, Limited English Proficient (LEP) immigrants make up 9 percent of the U.S. population. For example, the number of ELL students in Indiana has increased by 53.2 percent between 2007 and 2008. The total ELL students in the state grew 408 percent between 1994-95 and 2005-06 (Batalova & McHugh, 2010). This is recorded to be the third-fastest growth amongst all states. Most ELLs speak Spanish as their native language (Pandya, McHugh, & Batalova, 2011). Research statistics suggest that ELLs tend to obtain lower scores on standardized tests than native English speakers (Soto-Hinman & Hetzel, 2009). The purpose of this article is to review evidence-based research on improving the content vocabulary of ELLs in middle school.

It is a common observation that ELLs do not acquire the breadth and depth of the academic vocabulary from exposure to content texts. Taboada, Bianco, and Bowerman (2012) noted that exposure is not enough to make the ELLs comprehend the vocabulary needed for academic success. According to the Nations Report Card of 2007, the overall average reading and vocabulary scores of ELLs were lower than non-ELLs (National Center for Education Statistics, 2007). Bi-literacy can be challenging for teachers. Teacher effectiveness and student success level can be enhanced if the right strategies are devised, planned, and implemented for ELLs. Borgioli (2008) stated that middle school ELLs' ability to attain academic and literary proficiency in content areas may be masked even though they may possess good interpersonal and communication skills. Content area teachers may strive to move the students into the cognitive academic language proficiency, so that the ELLs can become more effective in the use of vocabulary (Taboada, Bianco, & Bowerman, 2012).

Characteristics of English Language Learners

ELLs have diverse learning characteristics. The students come to school with different backgrounds and levels of proficiencies in their first language. Second language acquisition depends on the student's age, previous formal schooling, and native language proficiency. ELLs sometimes enroll into schools with limited or no reading vocabulary (Klinger, Boardman, Eppolitto, & Estella, 2012). These limiting factors contribute to the lack of ability to comprehend vocabulary in content area classrooms. Vocabulary knowledge accounts for over 80% of the variance of reading comprehension scores at grade level (Rashidi & Khosravi, 2010). Klinger et al, (2012) discussed that teachers need to tailor instruction with scaffolding techniques that will increase the vocabulary skills of middle school ELLs. The ELLs face situations of not being able to grasp middle school content area vocabulary. Since their cultural backgrounds may not have allowed them opportunities to encounter academic learning, it may be difficult for them to use content vocabulary in everyday school activities. Uchikoshi (2013) suggested that it becomes necessary to devise teaching and instructional strategies to help ELLs acquire the needed vocabulary skills for academic achievement in content area classrooms. de Schonewise and Klinger (2012) recommended that teachers should implement culturally responsive teaching in order to theoretically support direct vocabulary instruction for ELLs. Before a teacher can devise strategies for the students, it is necessary that they are aware of the level of language proficiency of each student. This can be the guiding principle for future strategies that can be employed in scaffolding techniques for explicit vocabulary instruction of students (Coleman & Goldenberg, 2010). Quirk and Beam (2012) noted that when a teacher is in the process of assessing the ELLs' language proficiency, students who might sound fluent in the language may not actually have mastered the technicalities of the new language. There are two levels of proficiency of language. The first is Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS), and the second is the Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency or CALP (Cummins, 1999). It is a general observation that the students who sound fluent in a language, have strong social language skills or BICS and can discuss events related to their lives in English (Eckerth & Tavakoli, 2012). It is important that teachers should not make this a criterion of judging the academic and literal proficiency level of the students' English capabilities. ELLs usually struggle with the cognitive academic language proficiency or CALP. New language vocabulary skills require between five and ten years to develop. Complicated language structures are needed for understanding the vocabulary that has greater linguistic complexity. As stated above, the time that a student takes in learning vocabulary in a new language can be extensive. Making it a part of the knowledge base requires explicit vocabulary instruction, hard work, and practice (Coleman & Goldenberg, 2010).

According to Watkins and Lindahl (2010), adolescents possessing reading skills in their native language have an added advantage in the acquisition of English as a new language. The knowledge base can be useful in building and developing English skills. Researchers Kieffel and Lesaux (2010) found that knowledge, skills, concepts, and ideas that a student learns in their first language can transfer into their learning of the second language as outlined by Stephen Krashen's transfer hypothesis. These researchers hypothesized that the level of transfer is dependent on the amount of similarities that exist between the two languages. The greater the similarities between the native language of the student and the English language, the easier it becomes for the student to grasp English vocabulary (Kieffel & Lesaux, 2010). In this case, the use of cognates during instruction becomes very important.

Research-Based Teaching Methodologies for Effective Vocabulary Instruction

A. Word Exposure Frequency

1. The Interactive Read-Aloud

ELLs need frequent exposure to new vocabulary. Researchers suggest that instruction propelled towards academic language and vocabulary skills must involve exposing the learners to decontextualized language (Harmon, Wood, Hedrick, Vintinner, & Willeford, 2009). According to a research done by Freeman and Freeman (2006), effective teachers read aloud to and with students every day. Reading aloud promotes understanding and may foster a student to use decoding skills of vocabulary words in the reading material. When used with content area textbooks, students can participate in whole class choral reading (Paige, 2011). Whole class choral reading accompanied by readers theatre, as encouraged by Young and Rasinski (2009), will help improve reading vocabulary and comprehension skills of ELLs. Taking pauses while reading and trying to grasp the essence of the written content can also be helpful for the ELLs reading comprehension (Roy-Campbell, 2012). Bolos (2012), depicted that interactive read-alouds can attribute to effective integration of vocabulary comprehension in the process of engaging the learners.

2. Word Walls

A Word Wall is a literacy tool used in the classroom for displaying commonly used vocabulary sight words. It is available for students' reference and helps them visually gain familiarity with high frequency words and gain reinforcement of vocabulary. There are a number of things that a student is expected to do in class. Listening and using content vocabulary to demonstrate understanding and learning are critical. A print rich environment is necessary for middle school learners. Reutzel and Cooter Jr.(2007) advised that teachers can employ interactive word walls for students use in the classroom. Using content area word walls in and outside of the classroom can enhance the comprehension and retention of content area vocabulary for the ELLs (Cox, Jackson, and Tripp, 2011). Explicit instruction of high frequency or Tier 2 words is necessary for comprehension purposes. These Tier 2 everyday words are important for ELLs to understand content texts (Kieffel and Lesaux, 2010). Harmon et al (2001) asserted that in order to deepen vocabulary and word knowledge for ELLs, frequent use of interactive word walls within the classroom can enrich learning. Scott and Nagy (2004) analyzed that students need to participate in vocabulary instruction that provides multiple opportunities to engage them in comprehending numerous contexts. Another researcher, Nam (2010) discussed that teachers can use word wall words in content area lessons as an associative learning facet for vocabulary instruction. Using pictures and words written in English and/or in the learners native language can be helpful. Word wall items will assist the ELLs to draw on the mature conceptual and lexical systems of their native languages because target vocabulary items will have corresponding words (Nam, 2010). Harmon et al (2009) added that the notion of acquiring knowledge through associations of one's existing experience is reinforced when visual images can be used to represent new ideas.

B. Morphology

Reutzel and Cooter Jr. (2007) suggested that morphology can be useful for vocabulary instruction. Morphology is the study of the forms and formation of words in a language. According to Wasik and Iannone-Campbell (2012), it is important to teach morphemes across content-areas with attention given to the word's internal structure and meaning within the context of a sentence. A morpheme is the smallest indivisible unit of a language that retains meaning. Templeton et al (2012) recommended that one of the greatest benefits of teaching vocabulary generatively through morphology, can help middle school ELLs make connections across content areas. These connections support specific word learning objectives (Flanigan, Templeton, & Hayes, 2012). Teachers can instruct vocabulary by demonstrating to the learners how words in English are formed through the combination of meaningful word parts (Flanigan, Templeton, & Hayes, 2012). Kieffer and Lesaux (2007) reported that comprehension is related to understanding morphology. Children have a smaller word bank stored in their mental lexicon compared to adults. Teaching morphology will enhance their ability to expand their English vocabulary word bank.

Discussion

Vocabulary Enrichment

Intentional teaching of fluency and vocabulary are important aspects of helping ELLs learn and succeed in content area classrooms. The type and depth of vocabulary instruction will be based upon the language needs and fluency of the ELL. Paraphrasing difficult text into simpler language can help the ELL understand and use vocabulary. Discussing new and difficult vocabulary can help the ELL effectively practice its use in the future. It is worthwhile to note that students retain vocabulary words that have been explicitly taught. The strategies mentioned in this article can be a starting point for middle school ELL teachers in helping ELLs succeed in content areas.

Conclusion

Middle school ELLs need certain strategies to help them learn content based vocabulary. This research paper presented strategies and techniques that can be used to help students learn new vocabulary. It is important for teachers to understand the linguistic needs of ELLs in order to tailor meaningful instruction. Using strategies and techniques like those discussed above can make the process of teaching content area vocabulary easier and more effective for the middle school ELLs.

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