The Relationship Between Vocabulary and Reading Comprehension in Third Grade Students

Who Are English Language Learners and Reading Below Grade Level

By: Kelsey Boyer

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to determine if direct vocabulary instruction would lead to increased reading comprehension in third grade students who were English Language Learners reading below grade level. The measurement tool used in this study was the Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment System, Third Edition. This study used a pretest and posttest to measure growth in reading comprehension. The growth rate of comprehension was higher in students after they received direct vocabulary instruction. This study utilized a variety of strategies and techniques discovered through a review of literature on vocabulary acquisition. The more words that students know and understand through vocabulary instruction, the more likely they are to comprehend what they have read. There are growing numbers of English Language Learners in classrooms across the country and therefore research focusing on the impact of vocabulary instruction on the reading comprehension of these students should continue. Data gained from this research can be used by educators to support the reading comprehension of English Language Learners in their schools.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Overview

The number of English Language Learners (ELL) is growing rapidly in our education system. These students lack the vocabulary that native English speakers possess and educators are faced with the challenges of bridging the achievement gap and helping English Language Learners become successful readers.

Vocabulary has been identified by the National Reading Panel as one of the five components of a balanced literacy program (National Reading Panel, 2008). Comprehension and vocabulary go hand in hand, because to comprehend the larger texts being read, readers must have knowledge of the smaller words that make up the text. The National Reading Panel recommends direct instruction in vocabulary, as well as multiple exposures to words in context to increase vocabulary.

The goal of reading is comprehension, so educators need to find ways to increase the vocabularies of non-native English speaking students in an effort to increase their reading comprehension. Common Core State Standards have led to an increase in text complexity, and comprehension demands have become more rigorous. For students who already lack in vocabulary when compared to their peers, these standards can be overwhelming.

Vocabulary knowledge is a predictor of academic success for English Language Learning students. If a student cannot construct meaning from the words they read, their comprehension will be lacking, which leads to academic difficulties. English language learners are trying to learn a new language and content simultaneously (Wessels, 2011). This is challenging for both

students and teachers. This study will focus on direct vocabulary instruction and reading comprehension in third grade students who are English Language Learners.

Statement of the Problem

This study will examine the relationship between direct vocabulary instruction and reading comprehension in third grade students who are English Language Learners and are reading below grade level. The main goal is to determine if direct vocabulary instruction has a significant impact on the reading comprehension of third grade students who are reading below grade level and are English Language Learners.

Hypothesis

The null hypothesis is that there will be no significant relationship between direct vocabulary instruction and reading comprehension in third graders who are reading below grade level and are English Language Learners as measured by the Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment (2017).

Operational Definitions

The independent variable in this study was direct vocabulary instruction. Students received targeted vocabulary instruction through the use of instructional strategies. These strategies included being presented a word, it's meaning, examples of it, context for the word and multiple exposures to the word in text as well as through the use of discussions. The Elements of Reading Vocabulary Kit and Vanilla Vocabulary Books were both used as intervention tools to target increasing vocabulary in English Language Learners who struggle with reading comprehension. The Elements of Reading Vocabulary toolkit was developed by Beck and McKeown (2005) and comes with picture cards and read aloud anthologies, as well as student and teacher resources. The Vanilla Vocabulary book was developed by Bell and Lindamood

(2007) and focuses on creating meanings for words through imagery and discussion. Imagery and pictures have been used to assist students who are English Language Learners develop deeper meanings of words that are unfamiliar to them. Instruction using tools from both of these programs will be given to students in the intervention group.

The dependent variable in this study was reading comprehension. Reading comprehension will be measured using the Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment System. This assessment finds a student's independent, instructional, and frustrational reading level. Students begin by reading aloud and then they finish the book silently. After they are finished reading, they have a discussion to assess comprehension. Comprehension is scored based on a rubric and is based on ideas within, beyond, and about the text that the student has read. The comprehension score is then given by the administrator (a teacher or special educator) and then is used to determine a child's reading level. This assessment comes with fiction and non-fiction books. Students are given this assessment three times a year in third grade. Explicit instruction in vocabulary may be beneficial to students so that they have a larger bank of words that they know and understand when given the Fountas and Pinnell Assessment.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Overview

This literature review examines the relationship between vocabulary and reading comprehension in students who are English Language Learners and are reading below grade level. There is a strong correlation between vocabulary and reading comprehension. The more words a reader knows and understands, the better they are able to comprehend what they have read. English Language Learners do not have the same vocabulary as native English speakers. Therefore, it is critical to the academic success of ELL students that they receive vocabulary instruction. The first section of this review will provide background information on the rising number of English Language Learners in classrooms around the country The next two sections will define vocabulary and reading comprehension, and the final section will examine the challenges facing English Language Learning students in the area of vocabulary, as well as strategies to help students overcome those challenges and improve their reading comprehension.

English Language Learners

The number of students who are English Language Learners in classrooms across the country is growing, and educators are faced with the challenge of finding best practices for teaching these students how to read and comprehend what they are reading. Non-English speaking children, are the fastest growing subgroup of children in the public school system, increasing annually at a rate of ten percent. There are a variety of over 400 different native languages represented in English Language Learner students in the United States (Nixon, McCardle, & Leos, 2007). Educators should consider a child's cultural background and language abilities, and adapt instruction to meet the needs of the learner. Students who are English

Language Learners face the challenge of learning both academic vocabulary and learning to communicate with others. Research has shown that it can take a student up to ten years to acquire academic vocabulary. Students who cannot read and comprehend English cannot be fully engaged and active participants in the American education system. Rigorous Common Core State Standards, accompanied with high levels of literary and informational text expand the gap in vocabulary between ELL students and native English speakers. The number of ELL students is growing rapidly in schools across our country, from 3.5 million to 5.3 million from 2008 to 2009 (Martnez, Harris, & McClain, 2014). As of 2000, there were 28.2 million people in the United States who spoke Spanish. In 2004, the National Center for Educational Statistics reported that Hispanic children are the largest minority population in our public schools (Lugo-Neris, Jackson, & Goldstein, 2010). There is a push for all students to be reading on grade level by third grade, and vocabulary is a difficulty that ELL students face in meeting that goal.

Reading Comprehension Defined

Reading comprehension can be defined as the ability to construct meaning through spoken or written communication. Reading comprehension is the goal of reading instruction. Readers must be able to construct meaning and make connections based on what they know and what they are reading. The more knowledge readers have about a topic before reading, the more they are able to form connections between what they know and what they read. Making connections is a key element to reading comprehension. Engaging students in discussion can increase their level of comprehension by actively engaging students through making connections and engaging discussion (McLaughlin, 2012). Good readers use a variety of strategies to help them construct meaning from the text.

There is a relationship between vocabulary development and reading comprehension. Word knowledge supports reading comprehension. Limited vocabulary knowledge or limitations of being able to effectively use vocabulary strategies result in poor reading comprehension because children are not able to understand what they have read. Vocabulary knowledge is one of the best predictors of reading comprehension (Quinn, Wagner, Petscher, & Lopez, 2015).

Vocabulary Instruction Defined

The National Reading Panel has identified vocabulary as one of the five components of reading instruction. Research indicates the major impact vocabulary has on reading comprehension. Vocabulary knowledge is critical for students to be successful readers. If students do not understand the words in a text, they will not be able to comprehend what they are reading (Wessels, 2011).

The goal of vocabulary instruction is for students to develop and apply vocabulary skills, to connect new vocabulary to their experience and knowledge, to help students understand text, and to provide students with strategies to determine the meaning of unknown words. Students should be actively engaged in the vocabulary process so that they can construct meaning of new words for themselves. In addition, students should be given definitions and context for new words, as well as multiple exposures to words so they can be mastered (Tam, Heward, & Heng, 2006).

Fostering vocabulary is an effective strategy for increasing comprehension in readers. The National Reading Panel (2008) states that reading comprehension cannot be fully understood without having knowledge of how vocabulary development and vocabulary instruction impacts one's understanding of what they have read. Learning new concepts and words are an essential part of comprehension. Vocabulary development refers to the strategies taught to students and

the students' knowledge of words and their meanings. Vocabulary development is impacted by the amount of texts a child reads, which should be a mixture of informational and narrative forms (McLaughlin, 2012). Students must learn the meanings of more words than teachers can explicitly teach them, so students must be taught strategies to help them acquire meaning of unknown words on their own. All learners do not learn in the same way; therefore, teachers must use a variety of strategies during vocabulary instruction. Educators should carefully target the words that they are teaching and make sure they are teaching words that are critical to comprehension of the lesson or text. Students must be active participants in constructing word meanings and be given multiple exposures to words (Manyak, Gunten, Autenrieth, Gillis, Masstre-O'Farrell, Irvine-McDermott,& Blachowicz, 2014).

Impact of Vocabulary on Students Who Are English Language Learners

A major challenge that faces English Language Learners who are learning to read is lack of vocabulary development, which impacts ability to read and comprehend on grade level text. Research supports the need for vocabulary knowledge and direct instruction for students who are ELL's. Explicit instruction can help English proficiency and vocabulary skills. There is a link between vocabulary and reading comprehension, and there is a large gap in reading comprehension between students who are ELL's and students who are not ELL's (Wallace, 2007). Vocabulary knowledge is the best predictor of an English Language Learner's academic success. Vocabulary instruction must be part of reading instruction for all students. Educators need to provide students with before, during, and after reading activities that relate to vocabulary to fully immerse students in word acquisition (Wessels, 2011).

English Language Learners face the challenge of needing vocabulary knowledge to be able to understand what they read. Reading a variety of texts has been proven helpful to acquire

vocabulary, but how does an ELL student read to acquire words if they do not understand what the words they are reading mean? ELL students need to be taught basic vocabulary to help them understand texts. They need to be taught words that native English speakers may not need to be explicitly taught. Sight words and high frequency words should be taught to ELL students, and then reading material with a high percentage of these words should be given to them to create multiple exposures. Creating a word notebook or personal dictionary is one way for English Language Learners to create personal connections with the new words that they are learning. The more personal something is, the more likely it will be remembered (Tran, 2006).

Strategies for Vocabulary Instruction to Increase Reading Comprehension in English Language Learning Students

Students who are English Language Learners need direct vocabulary instruction and reinforcement to help them acquire new words. Research has helped identify best practices for vocabulary instruction with ELL students. Teaching vocabulary is one strategy that can be used to increase reading comprehension in students who are struggling in reading and are English Language Learners. Vocabulary instruction includes choosing words to explicitly teach readers before they read a text, highlighting the meaning of the words during reading, and revisiting the words after reading. Strategies include using the words in sentences and using reading aloud to expose children to new words. Additionally, educators should use vocabulary words in context and provide readers with the meanings of new words instead of dictionaries to learn words. Students must be actively engaged in processing new words by using techniques such as acting them out, creating illustrations, and roleplaying (Mahdavi & Tensfeldt, 2013).

English Language Learners need more exposures and more visual support to new vocabulary words in comparison to their native speaking peers. Students should be given

encouragement to make words personal to them, as well as extra time to practice the meaning of these words. Less emphasis should be put on memorizing the meaning of words, and more emphasis put on multiple exposures, meaningful vocabulary, and comprehension instruction through the use of graphic organizers and strategy instruction. Pictures to prompt discussion into the meaning and context of vocabulary words have also been effective tools in expanding the vocabularies of English Language Learners (Townsend, 2009). The use of cognates has been successful in teaching English Language Learners new words. Cognates are word pairs in two different languages that help students form connections with new words. ELL students need to be taught the meanings of basic words, and be able to label objects. Educators should provide students with pictures or images to represent new words. The use of teacher read aloud time to model reading fluency and oral language skills is also a strategy to help develop vocabulary (Wallace, 2007).

A vocabulary quilt is a strategy that can be used by educators during the before, during, and after reading stages as part of vocabulary instruction. Before reading, the teacher should choose a vocabulary word that the students will encounter in the text. Then, in groups the students use pictures, personal experiences, and words to create their own connections and definitions of the word on chart paper in quilt boxes. As the lesson progresses, the teacher and students revisit the quilt often. This allows students to be engaged and create a product they can use as a study guide to help them remember the word, as well as what it means, and examples or personal connections with that word (Wessels, 2011).

McLaughlin (2012) identifies best practices to increase comprehension in readers. The use of teacher read alouds contributes to vocabulary development because they expose children to a variety of texts.

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A classroom environment should support 'word consciousness' and encourage interest in learning new words and being able to use those words, which leads to an increase in vocabulary. Vocabulary should be used throughout the day in all curriculum areas. Educators should intentionally teach certain words critical to the comprehension of specific texts and activities. Teachers need to teach word structures such as prefixes and suffixes and use technology to make experiences more rewarding (McLaughlin, 2012).

Summary:

In conclusion, direct vocabulary instruction is beneficial to all students, but is especially important when teaching English Language Learners to read. Providing students with strategies to use when they get to unknown words allows them to better figure out unknown words when reading, which leads to an increase in reading comprehension. Vocabulary instruction should be meaningful, engaging, and allow students multiple exposures to words. Vocabulary has a large impact on the reading comprehension of ELL students and vocabulary development should be a focus of all educators working with students who are English Language Learners.

CHAPTER III

METHODS

Design

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between direct vocabulary instruction and reading comprehension in third grade students who were English Language Learners and were reading below grade level. The study used a quasi-experimental design to compare the reading comprehension of ELL students who received an increased amount of direct vocabulary instruction, compared to ELL students who did not receive an increased amount of vocabulary instruction.

Participants

The focus group participants in this study were four students in the researcher's third grade class. The control group consisted of three students from another third-grade class. Both groups of students were English Language Learners who read below grade level and struggle with reading comprehension. The participants consisted of two girls and two boys in the focal group and one girl and two boys in the control group.

Instrument

The instruments used were a combination of teacher-created materials, in addition to Elements of Reading Vocabulary Kit - Level B (Beck & McKeown, 2005) and the Vanilla Vocabulary Book- Level 1 (Bell & Lindamood, 2007). Vanilla Vocabulary was created based of the ideas of using visualizing and verbalizing strategies. The Elements of Vocabulary book includes twenty-four lessons that include seven words each. These words are taught to students through the use of teacher read alouds, picture cards, and graphic organizers.

Words that the students were exposed to through direct instruction were chosen from grade level material, the Vanilla Vocabulary book, or the Elements of Reading kit. When using the Vanilla Vocabulary Program, students are told the word and its definition. Then, they are read four sentences using the word that provides context of that word for students. After each sentence, the students engage in discussion where they create visual images of the sentence and word in their minds. After the fourth sentence, students are asked to come up with their own sentence. After the student visualizes imagery to describe the word based on the meaning from the sentence they verbalize their own sentence using the word. Vanilla Vocabulary lessons focused in depth on one word each day.

The Elements of Reading Program exposes students to seven words a week. The second grade level of this program was used with students because that is their current reading level. During these lessons, students had multiple exposures to the words throughout the week. Students were provided picture cards to illustrate the meaning of the words, graphic organizers to construct meaning, and sentences or short passages to provide context for these words.

Vocabulary words were recorded on a teacher created dictionary page. Each day, students wrote the word, it's meaning, a sentence using the word and a drawing of the word. These vocabulary lessons were provided in addition to the vocabulary that the students received during whole group instruction. Fountas and Pinnell benchmark system (Fountas and Pinnell, 2017) were used as pre-and post-assessments for the students.

Procedure

The children in this study were identified as at risk during the beginning of the year Fountas and Pinnell reading assessments. These four students were reading 12 to 13 months behind grade level expectations at the beginning of third grade. Prior to beginning the vocabulary

intervention, students were administered a pre- assessment using the Fountas and Pinnell benchmark system. The texts children read were non-fiction. Students read a passage and then asked questions to assess their comprehension. Students were asked to demonstrate their understanding by having a conversation about important events, genre, character's actions, inferences, and main ideas. Comprehension was assessed through the use of a rubric provided by Fountas and Pinnell. Both the pre-and post-assessments were administered and graded by the same teacher. All students in both the control and treatment groups had unsatisfactory reading comprehension.

Students participated in explicit vocabulary lessons at the back table in a small group setting. The teacher used strategies from the Vanilla Vocabulary book and Elements of Vocabulary kit to teach new words. Students were given multiple exposures to words in oral conversation as well as reading material. Students listened and created imagery as the teacher read sentences, and students collaboratively created visualizations for the words being taught. Students also came up with their own sentences and drawings. New words were recorded in their personal dictionaries. Multiple meaning words, synonyms, and antonyms for vocabulary words were also explored during instruction.

Small group instruction took place most days. Data tracking included keeping a chart of the date, time spent on the vocabulary lesson, word(s) taught, and students absent. These students also participated in an after school program run by the teacher where additional vocabulary support was given. This data was also tracked on the chart. Data tracking lasted for nine weeks.

The control group consisted of three students who were also English Language Learners in another third grade class at the same school. These students received whole group vocabulary instruction, but no other explicit support in the area.

At the conclusion of the nine-week long intervention, students were asked to read the same book from the Fountas and Pinnell system and their reading comprehension was assessed again to determine if the intervention had caused improvements in the area of reading comprehension.
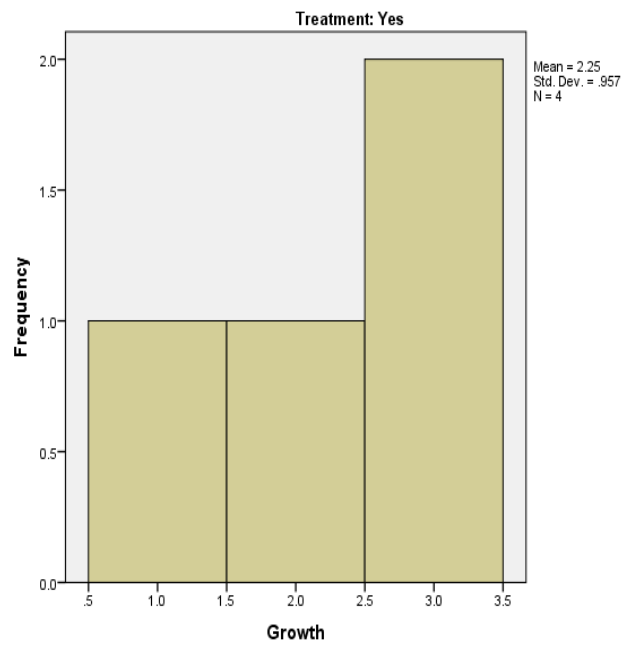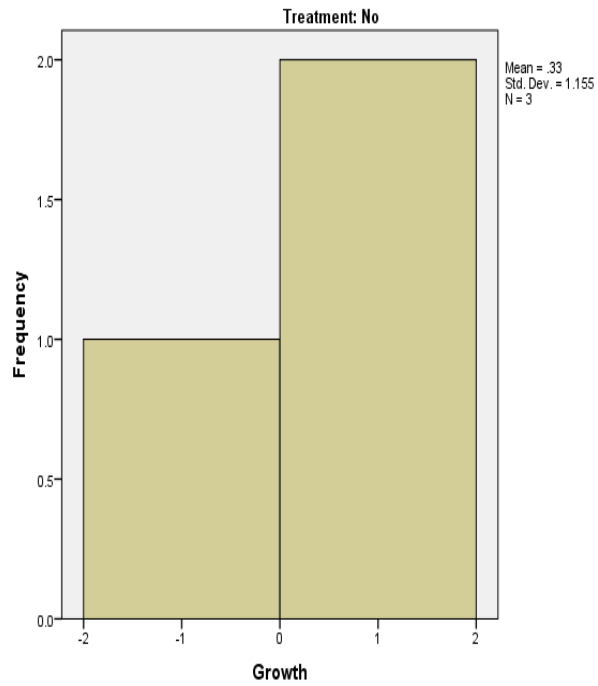
CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to determine if direct vocabulary instruction would increase the reading comprehension in third grade students who were English Language Learners and were reading below grade level. The null hypothesis tested was that there will be no significant relationship between direct vocabulary instruction and reading comprehension in third grade students who were English Language Learners and who were reading below grade level as measured by the Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark System.

To test this hypothesis, students were administered a pretest and posttest. The treatment group originally consisted of five students, however, so the results only show four students. The control group consisted of three students in another class who did not receive the vocabulary treatment. Due to the small sample size and non-normality of the growth distributions, a Mann Whitney U Median Test was run instead of the traditional t test. The test compared the growth of the treatment group to the non-treatment group, using median. The data in Table 1 will indicate that the mean and median growth for the treatment group was higher than the average growth for the control group. The control group had an average of .33 of growth and the treatment group had a growth of 2.25. The bar graphs also serve as a visual to represent the differences between the mean of the control and treatment groups.

Table 1

Statistics for Participants Mean Test Scores and the Median Growth Between Them

treatment	Student Count	Average (Mean) Growth In Raw Score	Standard Deviation	Median Growth
no	3	0.33	1.155	1
yes	4	2.25	.957	2.5
Grand Total	**7**	**1.43**		**1**

Treatment: No

Mean = .33
Std. Dev. = 1.155
N = 3

Treatment: Yes

Mean = 2.25
Std. Dev. = .957
N = 4

Although the treatment group had a larger median growth than the non-treatment group, the median growth difference is not statistically significant enough to negate the null hypothesis. Table 2 illustrates the hypothesis tested.

Table 2

Hypothesis Test Summary

	Null Hypothesis	Test	Sig.	Decision
1	The medians of Growth are the same across categories of treatmentCode.	Independent-Samples Median Test	.143[1,2]	Retain the null hypothesis.
2	The distribution of Growth is the same across categories of treatmentCode.	Independent-Samples Mann-Whitney U Test	.114[1]	Retain the null hypothesis.

Asymptotic significances are displayed. The significance level is .05.

[1] Exact significance is displayed for this test.

[2] Fisher Exact Sig.

Both male and female students in the treatment group experienced higher levels of growth when compared to the control group. Table 3 depicts the higher growth rate of both genders when compared to the control group.

Table 3

Gender Differences in Growth Between the Control and Treatment Groups

Gender/Treatment	Student Count	Average of Growth
Female	**3**	**0.67**
no	1	-1
yes	2	1.5
Male	**4**	**2**
no	2	1
yes	2	3
Grand Total	**7**	**1.43**

Table four depicts the growth levels of students receiving the treatment compared to those in the control group per their pre-test reading comprehension score. One student from the control group scored in the 'limited proficiency' range and two scored in the 'not proficient' range. All four students in the treatment group scored not proficient on the pre test. This table

depicts the higher average growth rate the treatment group had when compared to the control group for students scoring "not proficient" on the pre-test.

Table 4

Growth Rates Compared by Pretest Comprehension Score

Pretest prof level/treatment	Student Count	Average of Growth
Limited Proficient	**1**	**-1**
No	1	-1
Not Proficient	**6**	**1.83**
No	2	1
Yes	4	2.25
Grand Total	**7**	**1.43**

The total time that students participated in the treatment group was recorded throughout the intervention. Table 5 depicts the total time that each student received the treatment and the amount of growth that was seen from pre to post test. The student who had the least amount of treatment time had the highest growth. However, the sample size is very small and a future study with a larger sample size would be beneficial to analyze the effect of treatment time on the growth rate.

Table 5

Treatment Time

Gender/Treatment	Student Count	Average of Growth
No	**3**	**0.33**
No	3	0.33
Yes	**4**	**2.25**
425	1	3
495	2	2
500	1	2
Grand Total	**7**	**1.43**

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

The results from this study support the null hypothesis that there would be no significant relationship between direct vocabulary instruction and reading comprehension in third grade students who are English Language Learners and are reading below grade level. The treatment group had a higher average growth rate compared to the control group, but because the value of .143 is below .05, the results are not statistically significant at the 0.05 level.

Implications of the Results

The results show that direct vocabulary instruction can support the reading comprehension for third grade students who are English Language Learners and are reading below grade level. Students in the treatment group experienced an average growth rate of 2.25 comprehension points, compared to the control group that experienced a growth rate of .33 comprehension points. When the teacher explicitly taught vocabulary words in addition to the students' regular reading instruction, students achieved an increased comprehension level. Teacher observations also indicated that students in the treatment group were excited and eager about the new words they were using, and enjoyed the small group setting to practice words they were unfamiliar with. Students were given multiple exposures to the new words, as well as many opportunities to develop their oral language skills through the discussion of new words. Students were also better able to create visuals and meaningful sentences, or examples of words, at the end of the treatment compared to the beginning. The teacher also observed students using the new vocabulary words appropriately (without prompting from the teacher to do so) with other students in the treatment group, as well as classmates who were not part of the treatment. It is also critical for success that the vocabulary instruction be consistent and well planned.

Threats to Validity

A possible threat to validity could be the small sample size involved in this study. A way to improve on this threat would be to increase the sample size by including students in multiple classes, or strategically choosing grade levels or schools with a larger number of students who are English Language Learners, as well as reading below grade level. The larger sample size would give a greater chance that the design would lead to statistically significant results.

Additionally, since the study used a one group pretest and posttest design, it is possible that students learned or remembered something during their first reading of the pretest book that helped them with their reading of the posttest book. To improve this possibility the researcher could chose a different text for pre and post-test. If the texts were the same reading level and genre, choosing a different book would not be a problem.

Connections to Previous Studies and Existing Literature

There are many strategies suggested for teaching vocabulary to English Language Learning students. When students are taught new vocabulary words, their reading comprehension increases. The use of strategies such as saying new words, writing new words, using word walls and word maps, using pictures, and providing context are recommended when teaching students who are English Language Learners new vocabulary words (Swanson & Howerton, 2007). The researchers' study included these methods using the *Vanilla Vocabulary* and *Elements of Reading-Vocabulary* programs, in addition to personal dictionaries the students maintained throughout the treatment.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study indicates that explicitly teaching vocabulary words can lead to enhanced reading comprehension in below level readers who are also English Language Learners. When

students are told the meaning of the word and then provided context and multiple exposures to the word, they can construct their own meaning for the word and are more likely to remember and use it accurately in conversations and writing. Students also were highly engaged in oral language activities using the vocabulary words and enjoyed sharing their personal connections and examples of the word. The use of graphic organizers to provide meanings, pictures, examples, and non- examples of new words was also beneficial. A larger sample size would be beneficial for future researchers to analyze the effects of the amount of time spent on direct vocabulary instruction and the growth rate of reading comprehension.

Summary

This study found that students who received direct vocabulary instruction had a higher growth rate in reading comprehension when compared to students who did not receive direct vocabulary instruction. English Language Learners face the challenge of learning to read while they are learning a new language and vocabulary instruction can support the reading comprehension of these students.

The teacher said the word, wrote the word, and defined the word for students prior to the students beginning any activities with the words. Next, students used visual clues or created mental images to construct a personal connection and attachment to the word. Then, the students were given multiple chances to use the word in dialogue with the teacher and each other. The teacher observed excitement and an interest in new words that transferred to the students reading and writing activities. Students were provided multiple exposures to words using graphic organizers, creating illustrations and sentences, examples and non-examples, and keeping a personal dictionary.

Students who are reading below grade level and are English Language Learners do not have as large of a vocabulary compared to their native speaking peers: therefore, direct vocabulary instruction can help foster reading comprehension in these students, because the more words they understand the meaning of, the more that students will comprehend what they have read.

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