

THE EFFECTS OF EXPLICIT VOCABULARY INSTRUCTION ON STRUGGLING
MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS' READING COMPREHENSION SKILLS

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine whether explicit vocabulary instruction affects the reading comprehension skills of sixth grade students with academic difficulties. The study compared the students in two social studies classes. The control group (n = 21) was taught the Economics unit using the traditional packet and instructional activities while the experimental group (n = 23) participated in the traditional activities but also participated in a typically 7-10 minutes of additional explicit vocabulary instruction daily over a 5 week period targeting the words from the Economic unit. The vocabulary instruction replaced some independent and group work. The teacher used a variety of explicit vocabulary instruction strategies including semantic mapping to connect meaning and purpose to the Economic unit, repetition of definitions using context in the Economic unit, Around the World and other vocabulary practice games, and flashcards to practice vocabulary at school and at home. The mean percentage correct on the Economics assessment of the Control group (Mean = 55.29, SD = 15.86) was not significantly different from that of the Experimental group (Mean = 63.57, SD = 16.82) [$t(42) = 1.68, p = .10$]. Although the two groups did not differ significantly on the outcome variable, there were validity limitations that likely impacted the study's findings. Observational data suggested increased academic engagement among the children receiving explicit vocabulary instruction.

CHAPTER 1

Overview

Many students in the middle school setting demonstrate difficulty with reading comprehension and are struggling with vocabulary as part of the increased rigor and the content specific instruction of the middle school academics. For students who struggle with reading comprehension, vocabulary and its immediate connection to the content is often an additional burden for students who are already delayed in their reading skills. Good readers incorporate five elements for reading success; phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension. For a good reader, these skills are automatic. They ‘see’ a word, decode it, know its meaning and are able to understand the word within the context of the sentence and the subject.

For readers who struggle, their skills with decoding and fluency in the middle school may be average or even slightly below but their deeper understanding of what they are reading is severely limited for a variety of reasons. Struggling readers may have a true reading disability based on a cognitive deficit, a language deficit as an English as a second language student, they may have limited opportunities to build background knowledge due to socioeconomics or culture or they have had limited exposure to the content from which to build the vocabulary sense. Students who are fluent in their reading and decoding skills but who lack the basic vocabulary will demonstrate difficulties with reading comprehension because their true ability to make sense of the text is limited by their understanding of the content specific words.

Within the middle school model, students shift from content to content throughout their day. The curriculum, which is often heavily laden with content-specific vocabulary and

without specific explicit instruction in the vocabulary. Students who have demonstrated difficulty with reading comprehension and low vocabulary sense will not infer or ‘just get’ the meaning of the words for a deeper understanding of the content and ultimately will not demonstrate proficiency in the content on classwork or assessments. Specific activities must be incorporated for students to work with, use or practice the content specific vocabulary. These activities are vital to their skill development and may possibly help students experience greater success with the higher level of questioning and learning that is required from current instructional practices.

Statement of Problem

This study was developed to investigate whether explicit vocabulary instruction within a content area in a cooperative/collaborative sixth grade classroom will positively impact student’s reading comprehension skills within the unit of study on their overall understanding of the content and on the final unit assessment.

Null Hypothesis

The null hypothesis is that there will be no statistically significant difference between the mean scores on the sixth grade Economics assessment between the experimental group that receives explicit vocabulary instruction and the control group that receives traditional instructional.

Operational Definitions

Reading Comprehension is operationally defined as students’ percentage correct scores on the sixth grade Economics unit test. The student’s ability to read a question or passage is directly connected to their ability to gain meaning from the passage using the vocabulary within the sentence(s) and to respond accordingly. Within the parameters of the Economics

unit, the vocabulary is rich and content specific. The students will be required to take an end-of-unit assessment on the content. The Economics unit is rich in vocabulary and requires a deep knowledge of the words in isolation for definition and in context to each other as a part of the whole word acquisition process.

Content word vocabulary knowledge is operationally defined as the score on the Unit 5 Economics Vocabulary Survey, which is based on the number of content words, ie. producer, manufacturer, opportunity cost, defined correctly.

Explicit vocabulary instruction is operationally defined as a variety of explicit vocabulary instruction including semantic mapping to connect meaning and purpose to the Economic unit, repetition of definitions using context in the Economics unit, Around the World and other vocabulary practice games, and flashcards to practice vocabulary at school and at home.

Traditional method of instruction is operationally defined as using the instructional practices already determined by the seasoned general education teacher- activities in which instruct and allow the students to work with the information through the use of videos, the unit packet, select vocabulary practice, and group activities and stations.

Cooperative/collaborative classrooms are operationally defined as two people, typically the general educator and a special educator but may also include a para-professional assistant, inclusion helper or instructional assistant who provide services and instruction to the students in the classroom who have been identified with specific needs and require accommodations, modifications and support for academic access and success. Teachers and assistants co-plan, co-teach and are co-responsible for the students in their classroom.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This literature review explores the issues of vocabulary acquisition, specifically among middle school students, and presents research and information to support explicit and strategic instruction in the acquisition and application of vocabulary in the content areas as well as for building individual reading comprehension skills. The research indicates that explicit and direct instruction will provide the student with a better level of understanding which will in turn, increase their overall comprehension for reading. For all readers, “Comprehension is the ultimate goal of reading and comprehension failures can lead to school failures” (Lipka & Siegel, 2012, p.1874). Comprehension is the corner-stone of learning for students and for those students who struggle with reading and vocabulary, their struggles in the classroom are compounded by their reading deficits which, in turn, affect their ability to gain meaning in the vocabulary.

Research has found that explicit instruction in vocabulary will increase student ability to construct meaning from words, which increases their ability to read for individual or content specific comprehension. “Academic vocabulary has been characterized as general academic or discipline-specific, and students’ general academic word knowledge has been shown to contribute to achievement across content areas above and beyond overall breadth of vocabulary knowledge” (Townsend, Filippini, Collins, & Biancarosa, 2012 as cited in Townsend, 2015, p. 378). Vocabulary instruction that targets individual student knowledge, specifically in the content rich vocabulary of middle and high school, will build the foundation of content knowledge and will provide the student will an increased chance at participating in the information in a content area or to be fully engaged in their reading activities. The purpose of reading is to gain knowledge and the roadblocks in reading acquisition impact many channels for

students to become a proficient reader. “Because vocabulary and comprehension are so inextricably linked, instruction in both, using narrative and informational texts, is a critical part of a well-balanced reading program” (Block & Mangieri, 2006, p. 20). Access to a variety of texts, teacher instruction, student engagement and individual motivation are incorporated to allow students opportunity to become strategic readers while developing their vocabulary skills.

Reading Comprehension and Vocabulary

Good reading skills include a variety of individual and sequential activities that are completed automatically by a good reader. Necessary and important reading skills were identified by the National Reading Panel in 2000 and are utilized as the cornerstone in reading instruction across grade levels for beginning, continuing and struggling readers alike. As a reader reads a text, they apply their individual skills in these five areas: *phonemic awareness*, the identification of sound that makes up a word, *phonics*, the connection between the sounds and a specific letter/letters to make up words, *fluency*, the rate and speed at which a reader decodes a word/words, *vocabulary*, the meaning of the individual or collective words, which ultimately provide a reader with *comprehension*, the knowledge gained from the reading. Early readers utilize their phonemic awareness and phonics skills to begin to develop a foundation for becoming a proficient reader while more advanced readers utilize their skills to decode, read and understand the text from narrative to expository texts in the classroom and for pleasure.

“Vocabulary, which supports the development of these critical early reading skills, become strong predictors of reading comprehension in the later stages of reading development” (Vadasy & Nelson, 2012, p. 2). From an early age, it is pivotal and required for students to be exposed to reading and oral language to later demonstrate fewer difficulties with vocabulary and comprehension.

As readers improve in their skills using their initial knowledge in decoding and fluency, they are then able to gain and develop their reading skills to include higher level skills incorporating their knowledge of the text by using strategies in; *connecting* their reading to what they already know (prior knowledge and vocabulary), *visualizing* what they read with pictures in their mind (vocabulary), *summarizing* the text for main points (comprehension using the vocabulary), *inferring* about the characters or text (comprehension using vocabulary), *asking questions* before, during and after reading (comprehension) and they can *monitor* their own understanding and knowledge from the text. The regular and appropriate use of these strategies increases student access to at-grade level or higher reading material, and content level books in the higher grades and allow students to be independent readers.

Vocabulary is first introduced through oral language; speaking within their community and home, based on their culture and language. “In early childhood and preschool, children rapidly develop their oral vocabulary through interactions with parents, family, and other adults. These early language experiences play a major role in literacy development” (Vadasy & Nelson, 2012, p.2). Children begin to speak, using sounds and simple words in the first year or two and graduate to simple sentences and eventually full sentences through practice and exposure to language. Children mimic what they hear and they make a connection between the words they speak and the object or person they see. This is a form of very early vocabulary but a crucial beginning for vocabulary acquisition because this early vocabulary is the beginning of their foundation in prior knowledge for making connections to words and context as they grow. “Oral vocabulary is a key to learning to make the transition from oral to written forms, whereas reading vocabulary is crucial to the comprehension processes of a skilled reader” (National Reading Panel, 2000, p.4-15). As students grow using their oral language, they will begin to progress

towards success in reading and writing, unless there is an underlying concern in reading acquisition that will lead to a reading deficits through cognitive or environmental issues.

Challenges in Reading Comprehension and Vocabulary

Deficits in reading caused by a cognitive or environmental influence will impact a student's ability to access and gain knowledge in the elementary grades. It will also impact their ability to read in content areas in the middle and high school levels for text and content specific vocabulary. "Students who enter school with comparatively small vocabularies continue to lag behind peers with average vocabularies in their rates of vocabulary acquisition" (Beimiller as cited in Vadasy & Nelson, 2012, p.3). As students mature, the demands placed upon them to relate and respond to text increases. Their vocabulary and capacity to connect prior knowledge to learning must also progress with the demands. This ability may be impacted by internal or external factors which leads to decreased comprehension, motivation, engagement and overall academic success for students who are beginning to become too familiar with failure due to their reading skills in the classroom. "Personal interests and motivation also become increasingly important factors and language arts instruction must reflect an awareness of students' development as young adolescents and as language users while also taking into account the increasingly complex demands of text in English classes and other disciplines" (Many, Ariail, & Fox, 2011, p.1). The demands increase and the level of access must match the rigor and expectations. Students with deficits in vocabulary will be less likely to connect or relate to the topics or information, affecting their motivation to be engaged in the classroom.

Some students have internal deficits due to cognitive issues which affect their ability to learn how to read, including low or limited intelligence, processing deficits, physical issues or

dyslexia. These areas are targeted and instruction is provided inclusively but specifically based on their learning needs. These issues may affect student vocabulary acquisition and students should be provided additional instruction and support for their reading progress. They may also have the access and prior knowledge based on exposure that allows them to build necessary and exact strategies for learning.

Other students may have external deficits which impact their ability to access and demonstrate progress in reading comprehension and vocabulary. Students who are delayed in speech, who are English Language Learners (ELL) or who have limited avenues for gaining speech through observation or conversation in the home due to parent/family or socioeconomic concerns will be affected in their process of vocabulary acquisition. Children need to hear language to make connections to the objects, people and culture in their environment. Without this oral and visual language from adults through conversation and access to print through books, they are at risk for delays. “Experts in primary grade literacy instruction, supported by research evidence, recommended that intense, explicit teaching to be a regular component of the reading instruction delivered to students with or at risk of reading difficulties” (Nelson-Walker, Fien, Kosty, Smolkowski, Smith & Baker, 2013, p.216). This delay or deficit which causes a student to be viewed as at-risk in reading may be affected in their ability to fully comprehend the text throughout their school and adult years without specific interventions to remediate the deficits and expose them to the words in context and as word parts for building words in their future.

Students begin pre-school and early elementary school with direct instruction in phonemic awareness and phonics within the academic instruction of their reading programs. It is presumed that those students who are in these reading programs learn and participate in the process of looking at a word and decoding the word to then, read a sentence. It may also be presumed that

students who master the skill of decoding with automaticity and accuracy will therefore read fluently, with automaticity and accuracy. However, “a prominent yet veiled problem among students in upper elementary, middle and high schools is that while they can read (i.e., they can decode words accurately and fluently), many do not understand what they read” (Mokhtari & Velten, 2015, p.23). Students who can decode and read fluently may not be expert readers because the final outcome of reading is not just to decode but also to gain knowledge from the text. Research has shown that “vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension are correlated making vocabulary a leading predictor of reading comprehension among children and young adults” (p.24). The prior knowledge from early exposure and direct instruction in vocabulary through specific experiences and knowledge of word parts to breakdown or build up words in context increases student comprehension and acquisition of facts or information from the text.

Students also fall through the cracks of instruction due to limited time and resources for instructing students with deficits in vocabulary. Based on research completed by Nitzkin, Katzir and Shulkind (2014), teachers are stretched thin in their daily schedules and struggle to find time to teach without any extra time to reteach. In the middle school setting, students are grouped ‘heterogeneously’ and as teachers, “we face a shortage of academic explorations of the different profiles of readers in middle schools who are typically, and often inaccurately, clustered into high, medium, or low groups” (p. 26). Instruction is tailored to the many and not to the few who need additional instruction or strategies to gain the knowledge for the vocabulary in the content areas of middle and high school.

“Middle school teachers know all too well that middle school readers exhibit characteristics that defy simple categorization; students possess strengths and weaknesses in the realms of vocabulary, accuracy, motivation and higher order thinking” (Nitzkin, Katzir & Shulkind, 2014,

p.26). Students with deficits in the area of vocabulary may not receive the attention they require to build their knowledge in a higher level class, or they will be placed in a low class, for their reading deficits, but may be gifted in math or in other areas outside of reading and will remain with the group because their reading levels are below grade level expectations. Middle school models may not meet the needs of individual students based on the classroom hierarchy and limiting expectations for students. “Although some evidence shows that students employing comprehension strategies (i.e., questioning, predicting, and summarizing the text) perform better on reading tests than students who do not use those strategies (Rosenshine, Meister & Chapman, 1996 as cited in Feldman, Feighan, Kirtcheva, & Heeren, 2012, p.5), instructional time spent on mastering the strategies is often minuscule in middle and secondary classrooms” (Ness, 2007 as cited in Feldman, Feighan, Kirtcheva, & Heeren, 2012, p.5). Students in the middle and high school setting require continued instruction and practice in identifying and utilizing reading comprehension specific strategies for building their own understanding and developing their vocabulary.

Explicit Vocabulary Instruction

Research shows that instruction in reading strategies including vocabulary help students to increase their level of reading comprehension and allow students to be more independent as they read. Vocabulary, as a vital component of reading, is often overlooked or glanced over once students reach middle and high school. Teachers may assume that students should have the skills in place to break down words to determine the meaning, even in the content areas where the vocabulary is specific and often unfamiliar to students. “Middle grade teachers often focus more on content than on developing reading comprehension skills and subskills” (Nitzkin, et al., 2014, p.27). Testing, content pacing, class sizes and general overwhelming expectation of today’s

teachers remove their ability to be creative and restructure lessons to accommodate for student needs in the area of vocabulary. Specific vocabulary instruction and oral language skills provide students with the overall sense of proficiency in communication and understanding of content related topics for discussion and response.

Research completed by Falk-Ross and Evans (2014) using a yearlong process of professional development, language/literacy strategies, visual and graphic organizers and oral language activities demonstrated improved student achievement on ‘student reading competencies and state achievement tests’. Direct and target instruction along with professional development and teacher monitoring along with the students’ involvement in their learning increases student overall achievement. “It becomes important to consider literacy factors, specifically oral vocabulary knowledge and the resulting reading comprehension, that impact achievement in the content area classrooms with a specific look at the roles that language plays (i.e. through discourse routines, syntactic elements, and semantics for word use) in student’s vocabulary and deeper concept development” (Burns, & Helman, 2009; Fecho & Botzakis, 2007, as cited in Falk-Ross & Evans, 2014, p.86). Vocabulary instruction, including oral, written and content specific is required for students to engage, achieve and progress in the classroom setting and explicit instruction provides students with purpose in their learning.

“Research in urban middle schools has found that academic vocabulary, the specialized and sophisticated language of text is a particular source of difficulty for students who struggle with comprehension” (Kelley, Lesaux, Kieffer, & Faller, 2010, p.5). In the urban areas, students in schools are often from low socioeconomic backgrounds or are English Language Learners (ELL) and have a limited vocabulary based when compared to their peers. These limitations will follow the students through their school careers and will continue to discourage them as the gaps continue

to grow from year to year. “Many students in these underperforming setting require significantly more support in the domains of academic language and vocabulary development (Nagy & Townsend, 2012 as cited in Lesaux, Harris, & Sloane, 2012, p.232). Students require a specific and explicit form of instruction to assist them with making progress with their vocabulary development as it applies to improving reading comprehension.

Students may be born with or environmentally affected and present with difficulty in reading and vocabulary. These students, including those who are English Language Learners and socioeconomically challenged, display increase progress on their vocabulary acquisition with specific instruction in vocabulary, which, in turn, effects their reading comprehension and engagement in reading. “High quality academic language and vocabulary instruction, by its very nature, lends itself to increased student collaboration, autonomy as learners, and opportunities to respond to and engage with materials that promotes critical thinking” (Kame’enui & Baumann, 2012 as cited in Lesaux, et al, 2012, p.232). Students who are provided explicit instruction in vocabulary and are allowed input into their instruction may increase their motivation to learn and progress. Explicit instruction for students who require intentional and purposeful vocabulary practice should include “the teaching of some key words explicitly (directly) by using different techniques such as giving definitions, using synonyms and antonyms, word collections, etc. before asking students to read the assigned texts silently, and then to teach independent word-learning strategies which mainly depend on the included contextual clues” (Al-Darayseh, 2014, p.1112). These strategies, along with other explicit instructional activities, will allow students to be immersed in and exposed to the vocabulary in the content areas and allows them to explore and eventually, begin the process of generalizing word knowledge for higher level reading skills.

Summary

Students face many obstacles in their pursuits for academic success including the effects of limited exposure to language and print materials in their early development years, which effects their ability to build and utilize prior knowledge through the use of good, content specific vocabulary for reading comprehension. This area of deficits impacts their overall ability to access and gain meaning from the text and to develop a true sense of the variety that language holds for its users and readers.

Explicit instruction in vocabulary including content related words for middle and high school students as well as oral and written language, and instruction in word parts using roots and bases to gain word part meaning and is required to remediate deficit in vocabulary to allow students and eventually, adults, engage in appropriate interactions though conversation, writing and reading for college and career readiness. “When students struggle with literacy activities, teachers struggle alongside them as they search for solutions. Taking time to build students’ language can help teachers support their students’ strengths” (Falk-Ross & Evans, 2014, p.94-95). Teachers continually seek opportunities to teach with fidelity and to all students in their classroom. Research shows that the specific and targeted intervention of reading for acquisition of vocabulary directly influences the overall progress a student makes, specifically in the content rich subject areas of middle and high school. This explicit instruction for intervention is directed at assisting students with learning strategies and developing background information to assist them with understanding the content area and with their engagement in the instruction as partners and equals in their learning.

CHAPTER III

Methods

The purpose of this study is to determine the effects of explicit content word vocabulary instruction on reading comprehension in a sixth grade content specific subject. The study used a quasi-experimental design with a convenience sample of two pre-existing sixth grade social studies classes. The independent variable for this study was the type of instruction during the Economics unit; traditional instructional or traditional instruction supplemented with explicit vocabulary instruction. The dependent variable for this study is the student's percentage correct score on the sixth grade Economics unit tests which is considered a measure of reading comprehension.

Participants

The two groups of students came from two pre-existing sixth grade cooperative/collaborative (C/C) classrooms. Cooperative/Collaborative classrooms consist of students who require assistance with reading, writing, math, organization, behavior, additional instruction or any combination of these needs in the general education setting. This additional support is provided by either a special educator in the classroom or an instructional assistance who is assigned to the classroom. For the sixth grade level, there are three C/C classes, one per sixth grade team. Before school begins, the students are identified as qualifying for the C/C classroom based on state assessment data, elementary school recommendations, consideration of personalities, and equal pairing of special education students in the classroom with students identified as at-risk or below performing and would either benefit from or could require additional adult support for instruction and progress. School administrators assign the eligible

students to one of three C/C classes before the beginning of the school year.

Cooperative/collaborative classrooms have two adults to provide the instruction; the general educator, and either the special educator or an instructional assistant. For this study, only two of the three classes are involved as this researcher is a co-teacher on the experimental and the control team and has little or no contact with the third C/C team in sixth grade.

One of the pre-existing classes is the experimental group with 23 students, made up of 11 boys and 12 girls, which are instructed by a general education teacher who is certified in social studies and a special educator. As the special educator in this class, this researcher chose to make this class the experimental group based on access to the students and cooperation of the general educator to have her class instruction incorporate typically 7-10 minutes of vocabulary instruction each period. Of the 23 students, six students, four boys and two girls, are classified as having special education needs. Three students-two boys and one girl, are identified as having Other Health Impaired, two students-one boy and one girl, are identified as having Specific Learning Disability in reading and math, and one student- one boy, and is identified as having Autism with only needs in self-management.

One of the pre-existing classes is the control group with 21 students, made up of 13 boys and eight girls, which are instructed by a general educator who is certified in social studies and the instructional assistant. As the special educator on this team as well, this researcher chose this class as the control group because the teacher was willing to share assessment data and to make the students available for vocabulary testing as a control group but was not interested in incorporating alternative instruction to an already planned unit of instruction. This researcher is assigned to this group of students in their Language Arts classroom and has three students; one boy identified as having Autism, one girl identified as having Specific Learning Disability and

one boy identified as having Other Health Impaired on her caseload for the current school year. Of the 21 students, seven students, three boys and four girls, are classified as having special education needs. Three students-two boys and one girl, are identified as having Other Health Impaired, three students-three girls, are identified as having Specific Learning Disability in reading and math, and one student- one boy, is identified as having Autism with needs in reading, writing, math and self-management.

Of the 44 students in the study, three students are considered minority, with one student of Asian descent, one student of Middle Eastern descent, and one of African-American descent. The African-American student was in the control group while the Asian and Middle Eastern student were in the experimental group. The remaining 39 would be considered white/Caucasian. All of the students speak the English language as their primary language. The majority of the students come from a predominantly middle or upper middle class background.

Instrument

The pre-intervention vocabulary survey used 25 vocabulary words from upcoming unit and required the students to identify which words were familiar to them and if the vocabulary word was familiar, to then define the word. The 25 words were chosen from the Unit 5 economics unit. The words were chosen and this activity completed by the students in the experimental group and the control group to screen prior knowledge of the vocabulary. To determine what prior vocabulary knowledge the students brought to the new unit, the survey was scored giving each student 1 point for a close or accurate definition of the word. The vocabulary test was developed by this researcher and this is no reliability or validity data. This pre-intervention data provided insight into the level of the student's ability to demonstrate prior

knowledge of the economic words in isolation and if possible, to define the words prior to explicit instruction. After the administration of the unit test, students were given the same vocabulary test they had taken prior to the intervention. However, the results are not being reported here since the vocabulary test is not a measure of reading comprehension, and reading comprehension was the outcome variable of interest in the study.

The dependent variable data come from the county school system developed sixth grade Economics unit Assessment. These assessments cannot be altered or modified as stated by the county social studies department. Each multiple choice, fill-in-the-blank and short answer response questions included words from the explicit vocabulary instruction which allows the students to demonstrate their understanding of the vocabulary within the unit and their ability to apply their knowledge of the concepts from the Economics unit.

To assess whether or not the groups differed in their social studies Unit test performance prior to the intervention, the percentage correct from the Unit 4 test on a Political Systems unit were compared. The total number of possible points is 45. The mean percentage correct of the experimental group (Mean = 54.35, SD = 16.39) did not differ significantly from the mean percentage correct of the control group (Mean = 49.71, SD = 12.63) [$t(42) = 1.04, p = .30$].

The unit 5 Economics unit test consists of 18 multiple choice questions, 24 fill in the blank using a word bank, and 2 short answer constructed responses. The 18 multiple choice questions each consist of four possible choices with one correct answer. The 24 fill in the blank questions consist of 5 paragraphs leaving four to seven blank spaces within the paragraph for the student to fill in the blanks using the word bank at the top of the assessment page. Each question is worth one point each. The two short answer constructed responses require the students to apply their

understanding of the economics unit and to use their vocabulary to respond to the question prompts. Prompt 1 is worth four points and prompt 2 is worth three points. The total number of possible points is 49. The data is scored using a county generated rubric, using a standard bubble sheet that the students fill in which is scanned for tracking the scoring and uploaded into the Performance Matters program which collects the data for right and wrong answers in table format. The data for the correct answers are pre-set by the county prior to the beginning of the school year and is not teacher controlled and has no other function other than to collect the data for a full picture of a student, to compare test scores and to maintain records for assessments in the county.

The unit test was selected as the measure of reading comprehension for multiple reasons. First, although there is no reliability or validity data for the test, it is developed at the county curriculum level and is used as a measure of performance across the school system. Secondly, this researcher considers it to be a useful measure of reading comprehension when taking into account the instructional strategies in teaching the unit and the characteristics of the test. Reading comprehension relies heavily on the level of vocabulary of the reader. The students in this study were provided with explicit and meaningful instruction in the Economic vocabulary to enhance and engage their level of understanding of the subject. This level of understanding is posited to lead to a deeper level of communication and interaction with the subject and allows the student to participate in their learning with success.

Vocabulary is connected to reading comprehension because without the meaningful understanding of the words, the reader cannot develop the meaning for comprehension of the reading activity. For good readers, comprehension is the end result of all reading activities and the purpose for reading at higher level, including in the sixth grade content areas.

The Economics unit assessment relies heavily on vocabulary and reading comprehension. Of the 18 multiple choice questions, 12 questions are a direct application of the vocabulary and require understanding of the text through reading comprehension, to determine the correct answer. The six remaining questions include a direct connection between the definition in the question and the correct vocabulary word in the multiple choice. Of the 24 Fill in the Blank questions, reading comprehension is necessary for students to both understand the incomplete statement and then, to fill in the blank with the vocabulary word that makes the most accurate sense. The students are required to process the meaning in the sentence to then process which word in the word-bank would complete the sentence. Without the knowledge of both comprehension and vocabulary, the students will be unable to make a logical or accurate choice.

The two short answer prompts give the students a scenario in economics. For a student to answer the questions well, they will need to use their strategies for reading comprehension to read and process the question as well as a deep understanding of the vocabulary to fully participate in the rationale of the prompt.

Procedures

The experiment took place during the Economics unit which is a component of the social studies curriculum. The unit lasts approximately four to five weeks. The social studies class meets daily for 55 minutes. The curriculum is designed by the county; however, the teachers have discretion in selecting instructional activities.

The first step was to determine the student's overall knowledge of the content vocabulary (i.e., economic terms) before they began to study the unit. Content vocabulary differs from standard vocabulary because it is specific to the subject and for many students, these words

would be unfamiliar, and therefore, they have little or no prior knowledge from which to build their understanding.

The students were given a teacher created worksheet titled, *Unit 5: Economics Vocabulary Survey*, with 25 vocabulary words from the unit. The students had to read the words independently and decide if the word was ‘familiar’ or ‘unfamiliar’. Each word was chosen from the Economics unit list of vocabulary words and would be used regularly in the unit including – *goods, -services, -wants, -needs, -import, -export, -monopoly, and –competition*. The students were then asked to write what each word meant/define the word, in their own words. The students in the experimental and the control group were given 15 minutes at the beginning of the unit to complete this activity, which was ample time for both classes, even for those who require additional time in completing work. The students completed the worksheet as a part of this experimental activity and is not typical for the beginning of a sixth grade unit in social studies.

The purpose of this initial activity was to determine student prior knowledge of Economic unit words and to make sure the groups did not differ in vocabulary knowledge prior to the intervention. Reading comprehension requires and utilizes student knowledge of the words in the text or in context. This researcher decided to obtain information about vocabulary knowledge prior to the intervention because if the students had been successful in identifying or defining all or the majority of the words on the pretest, the explicit vocabulary instruction would have been unnecessary. After reviewing the pre-intervention data for both the experimental and the control groups, it was apparent that the students in both groups did not either know the majority of the words at all or well enough to define them in the context of the Economics unit. The number correct per student of the experimental group ranged from zero to six and the number correct per student of the control group ranged from zero to five. Therefore, instruction on the

vocabulary words in the new unit would be appropriate. The mean raw Vocabulary score of the Control group (Mean = 2.57, SD = 1.63) did not differ significantly from the mean raw Vocabulary score of the Experimental group (Mean = 2.17, SD = 1.77) [$t(42) = 0.77, p = 0.45$].

The control group received the traditional method of instruction throughout the study. Traditional method of instruction includes using the instructional practices already determined by the seasoned general education teacher- activities which instruct and allow the students to work with the information through the use of videos, the unit packet, select vocabulary practice, and group activities and stations. The school created social studies packet includes vocabulary words, concepts related to the unit, and activities to learn and practice the Economics content.

The experimental group also received the traditional instruction using the packet and activities as prescribed by the curriculum and practiced by the general education teacher. However, they also received typically 7-10 minutes of daily explicit instruction and activities using the content-specific vocabulary to assist students with connecting the terms with the concepts and with daily practice of the definitions as they applied to the Economics unit.

The experimental group began their instruction on day one with an explanation of what they would be doing together and by introducing the semantic map, which was a large piece of yellow construction paper taped to the side board with the words, ECONOMICS UNIT across the middle. A short five minute verbal discussion about what vocabulary words would be discussed in the unit and their responsibility to listen, learn and connect the meanings of the words as a class took place, providing the students with a plan for their learning activities. These vocabulary lessons would begin each class and would be in conjunction with the activities already planned

within the unit. The vocabulary activities enhanced student learning rather than replace a specific instructional practice. The use of co-teaching in the Economics unit provided the students with a variety of instructional activities. During the additional seven to ten minutes of the explicit vocabulary instruction in the experimental group instructional activities, the control group participated in a variety of independent and group work activities that are a component of traditional instruction.

In traditional instruction, students have many opportunities to work independently or in groups at stations. The time spent in these activities were reduced by a minute or two as compared to previous years' instruction therefore, allowing for the extra time spent on the vocabulary and still allowing for the full emersion into the unit as set-up by the county and the middle school teachers. The students did not lose instruction or opportunity to learn the material of the typical curriculum with the addition of the vocabulary instruction.

On day 2-13, the students continued to be introduced to the new words as the unit began and progressed. The students began each lesson with volunteering to share what vocabulary words they had worked with or learned the day before and together, the students determined the meaning of the words as they applied to a previous lesson. A set of pre-written index cards were used to monitor what words the students learned the day before, and these words were added to the semantic map once the students collectively determined a meaning for the word. As the words on the semantic map grew and after the students added their new words to the map, beginning after class 3, the teacher began to choose words at random on the semantic map and asked the students to work with their table groups to again define the words and to make connections/relationships to other words on the map (see Appendix, picture 1). As the students worked with and became familiar with the vocabulary words, the definitions began to become

automatic within the content. The students would connect words such as *-consumer* to *-producer* and *-distribution* and *-human resource*. The words became familiar and were learned not as a word in isolation but as a necessary part of the Economics unit as a whole. New words were added to the map until the end of the economics unit and eventually grew to 47 words in week 5. The vocabulary discussion began at seven minutes in class for the first 3-4 days and eventually utilized up to 10 minutes at the beginning of class, as the list of words grew longer and the students became more proficient at the identifying, defining and connecting the words. The teacher set a timer and the vocabulary discussion ended at 10 minutes after the 4 day regardless of the direction of the discussion.

Beginning in the fourth week, or day 14, games and specific activities were introduced to allow students with an opportunity to practice more with the words and move around. At this point, the students had learned and defined 40 of the 47 words on the semantic map for the Economic Unit. The last 7 words were added to the map as they came up in the unit and would take 1-2 minutes as needed before the students got into their activity for that day. The students had read and worked with the Economics words for three weeks as individual words and in connection to the unit and were ready to ‘play’ with the words for increased learning and engagement.

The first game was a partner game. The students were given a laminated paper with an Economic vocabulary word and were asked to form two circles- one large outer and one inner circle facing a partner. If there was an odd number, one group had three partners. Each partner took time to define their word and then, using their partner’s word they could either orally share how the words were related or worked together in the economics unit, they could make a sentence using their word and their partner’s word or they could describe how their words were

used in the lesson previously. A couple of random partners were asked to share and then, the inner circle moved one way while the outer circle moved the opposite way to give the groups new words and people to work with. The students moved two to three times in the game and using Popsicle sticks and random selection, each student generally had an opportunity to share their knowledge. The students did this activity on day 14, 15 and 17 for 10 minutes at the beginning of the class.

As the students developed more automaticity of their definitions in the economics unit, the students began to practice using the specific vocabulary definitions. The students made flashcards with each of their words on one side and the simple definition on the other side. The flashcards were teacher generated, based on the vocabulary definitions the students had determined in the class discussions. The students cut the words and definitions, glued them to either side of the index cards and looped them together for a study tool, (see Appendix, picture 2). The students began the activity in class, using 20 minutes of class 16 and then, finishing at home for homework. The students brought the cards home to work with their parent/guardian to make a home-school connection and each night that they studied and got a parent signature for working with the vocabulary cards, the student earned a school coupon for incentive and positive reinforcement. A piece of their nightly homework was to practice their words together.

Day 18-22, the students could choose activities to practice their words. The students chose “Around the World”, a quick thinking game where the teacher gives either the definition or the word and two student’s pair against each other to give the definition or the word first. The word, *-competition*, was one of their vocabulary words and was put into practice during the last days of the unit. The students worked well together and if a pair could not get the word or definition, the class could also participate to “over-throw” the champions so listening and knowing which word

was being worked through was important to continue the challenge. The game allowed the students to hear the words, to make connections to the definitions to continue to develop their automaticity and allowed them to move around and have fun while learning.

Due to circumstances beyond the researcher's control, the number of class periods spent in direct instruction and instructional activities as well as the spacing of the testing varied between the two groups. Based on teacher instruction and the planning guide for the unit, the explicit instruction in economics was presented to the experimental group for a total of 22 instructional days. The control group had a total of 23 instructional days of actual teacher administered direct instruction with an additional 3 days of extension activities under the direction of a substitute teacher, for a total of 26 instructional/learning days in the Economics unit. Both groups had two days of assessment following the instructional period. However, the experimental group had its test in the two consecutive days following the 22 instructional days. The control group started its test on a Monday with school closures due to snow from Tuesday through Thursday, so the control group was not able to finish the second day of testing until Friday. (The snow days occurred after the experimental group had already taken the test). The experimental group ended its testing 24 school days after starting the unit. The control group ended its testing 31 school days after starting the unit. The control group had 4 more days of instructional/learning activities than the experimental group. The mean percentage correct scores on the Economics unit test were compared by an independent samples t-test.

CHAPTER IV

Results

The purpose of this study is to determine if there is a difference in reading comprehension as indicated on the end-of-unit assessment for the sixth grade social studies Economics unit when explicit instruction in content vocabulary is provided. The study used a quasi-experimental design with a convenience sample of two pre-existing sixth grade social studies classes. The mean percentage correct on the Economics assessment of the Control group (Mean = 55.29, SD = 15.86) was not significantly different from that of the Experimental group (Mean = 63.57, SD = 16.82)[$t(42) = 1.68, p = .10$]. Please see Table 1. Therefore, the null hypothesis that there will be no statistically significant difference between the mean percentage correct on the sixth grade Economics assessment between the experimental group that receives explicit vocabulary instruction and the control group that receives traditional instructional failed to be rejected.

Table 1. *Means, Standard Deviations, and t-Test Results of Percentage Correct on the Economics Assessment*

Group	N	Means	Standard Deviation	t-statistic
Control	21	55.29	15.86	1.68 (NS)
Experimental	23	63.57	16.82	

NS = non-significant at $p < .05$

CHAPTER V

Discussion

The results of this study indicate that there is no statistically significant difference in reading comprehension as measured by the Economics unit test among sixth grade students with learning difficulties between students who received daily explicit content vocabulary instruction in addition to traditional instruction and those who only received traditional instruction. The study failed to reject the null hypothesis.

Implications of the Results

Further research is needed in the middle school setting and in the specific content areas to determine if the use of explicit vocabulary instruction is an effective tool for teaching the content vocabulary and if this instruction makes any difference in the overall reading comprehension skills of the struggling readers in a general education setting. It is the impression of this researcher that the explicit vocabulary instruction had a positive impact on the reading comprehension skills of the children in the experimental group. However, since the two groups did not perform significantly differently on the unit test, this impact is difficult to prove or support, without further data collection. Based on available data and the limitations of the study (to be discussed in detail below), the results cannot be used to advocate for 7-10 minutes of daily explicit vocabulary instruction with additional vocabulary related homework/studying assignments to replace time spent in independent and group seatwork. However, it also cannot be used to argue against the intervention. Unfortunately, due to circumstances outside the researcher's control, the amount of time in direct instruction in Economics and in supplemental Economics learning activities differed between the two groups by four days. In a study

examining the efficacy of a particular instructional technique, the confounding variable of differing amounts of instructional and learning time between the team groups makes it impossible to have firm interpretations of the data. When one considers that the control group actually had four more days of instruction/learning activities yet did not perform significantly better than the experimental control group, it suggests the possibility that the time spent in explicit vocabulary instruction compensated for the additional days of instruction/learning activities. However, based on the confounds in this study, no strong recommendations can be made about whether explicit vocabulary instruction should be used as a strategy to improve reading comprehension/unit test performance.

Although the statistical analysis of the unit test data provides limited information as to the efficacy of the explicit vocabulary instruction, observational information suggests that the intervention has educational benefits. This researcher observed the students in the experimental classroom increase engagement and effort while practicing the vocabulary words. The students looked forward to the instructional activities based on their readiness and involvement. During the data collection period, the students created flashcards with the vocabulary words. The flashcards were sent home to practice with the parents to make a home-school connection and to provide the students with additional opportunity to review the words and their meanings outside of the classroom. The students were also given a tally sheet to record their extra study time, which required a parent signature. Of the 23 students in the group, 16 students returned the sheet, with signatures, indicating that time was spent outside of the classroom. This is a 69.5% return rate which is a high rate for this class. For students in the cooperative/collaborative classroom, motivation and engagement is a daily struggle for both the students and the teachers. The

engagement indicated that the students put forth effort to be successful and other factors may inhibit their academic success.

The theoretical implications of this study should also be considered. In order for a student to immerse himself or herself into instruction, they have to first understand it at a surface level. As they gain the knowledge, their ability to see below the surface increases. The information below the surface is a higher level of thinking and processing. The average student does not have the technical or content specific vocabulary to allow them to access the specific subject areas in the middle school curriculum. In her study of language in the content areas of middle school, Townsend (2015), Associate Professor of Literary Studies at the University of Nevada, determined that, “building technical and abstract understanding of academic vocabulary (in science) allows for students to think about and communicate disciplinary content in ways that would not be possible with lay terms or social, conversational language” (p.376). Theory suggests that students need to be able to speak the language of their current subject and for those students who lack a wide and diverse vocabulary, their ability to connect, communicate and participate in a content specific environment, will be negatively impacted.

Overall, vocabulary impacts the access a student has within the content area. For students who struggle with vocabulary, their output in the classroom and on assessments will be impacted by their inability to gain meaning or to participate in the instruction due to the nature of the specific vocabulary. As students’ progress through the grades, their vocabulary will directly influence their ability to gain meaning from the text in the content specific subject. Regardless of their reading ability, if a student cannot make sense of the words, then the words are just that. Words. Reading comprehension is directly tied to vocabulary. Although current theories emphasize the important link between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension, the

current results, with its significant validity limitations, do not provide evidence that time spent in explicit vocabulary instruction leads to better performance on subject Unit tests than time spent in independent and group work. Observational data, however, supports that explicit vocabulary instruction contributes to increased academic engagement.

Threats to Validity

Many components could have interfered with the validity of the study's results. One very significant threat to internal validity was the unequal length of time the experimental class versus the control class spent on the actual instruction, which was a confound that was not under the control of the researcher. The control group had four additional days of instruction/learning activities when the number of instructional days for the experimental group was only 22 days. The experimental group had only 85% of the instructional/learning time of the control group. The students in the control group had opportunity to work at a slower pace, allowing time for processing and understanding to develop. The control group students had the opportunity to work with, and study the information using the county designed activities, including extension activities, that are generally not used in the regularly allotted period for instruction. It should be considered that the extension activities and the instruction as established by the county for this program are sufficient to provide quality instruction and practice, when utilized in its entirety. As noted above, this degree of variability in days of instructional/learning time in a study that is designed to assess the efficacy of a particular instructional learning strategy limits the validity of the study to such an extent that the results cannot be really interpreted based on the original study design.

An additional internal validity concern was the interruption in the testing of the control group due to three days of school closures secondary to snow. During the three day period between the first day of testing and the last, they had the opportunity to study and/or to forget the material.

Another limitation to this study was the possible reactive effects of the introduction of a different and probably novel instructional practice. The students have worked through the units throughout their sixth grade year. For this unit, an additional activity- explicit vocabulary instruction- was provided. This is out of the norm for the students in social studies to date. For students who are in special education or who have the learning needs that require a cooperative/collaborative classroom setting, a change in routine can be difficult or not well received for student success. For other students, this new type of activity can be a source of excitement that can be distracting and/or motivating. The students were instructed in each activity, using actual practice time with the words, and were engaged in the activities but still needed useful learning time to gain the knowledge and confidence to work together on the activities.

Another concern about the internal validity of the study relates to instrumentation. The assessments are written on grade level and for students who are below grade level readers and who struggle with focus or planning when working. However, the students historically have difficulty completing them successfully. On the Unit 4 test, the mean percentage correct for the experimental group was 54.35 (SD = 16.39) and the mean percentage correct for the control group was 49.71 (SD = 12.63). On the Unit 5 Economics test, the mean percentage correct for the experimental group was 65.37 (SD = 16.82) and the mean percentage correct for the control group was 55.29 (SD = 15.86). Under traditional grading systems, these would be considered failing or D averages. The test may have been too challenging for too many of the students for it

to be a sensitive measure of the impact of the intervention. Similarly, although this curriculum is designed so that all students have the opportunity to learn the concepts expected of a sixth grader, for some students, the concepts may be so challenging that the variation in instructional/learning activities was not sufficient to make a significant impact on their learning of the material as assessed by the test.

Another concern about instrumentation is that the unit assessment that was used as a measure of reading comprehension is not a typical measure of reading comprehension as found in the research literature. Research shows that a higher vocabulary is directly linked to a higher reading comprehension skill but on the social studies unit assessments, reading comprehension is also tied to student achievement and application of the content. The focus of applying pure reading comprehension skills has to be separated from other factors that could have influenced performance on the unit test, including studying and memorization of the content, ability to apply concepts, writing abilities, and test-taking strategies and skills,.

Additional validity concerns are related to the fact that the group size for this study is small; 21 and 23 students. One concern is that the small sample sizes limits the statistical power of the study, making it more difficult to find statistically significant differences. Another concern is that the sample size data inconsequential when compared to the larger population. With this small number of subjects, generalizations to the overall population is limited, particularly when the sample did not include students of a wide range of characteristics. The students in the subject are students with special education needs or who are considered below grade level. The students in this study demonstrate difficulty with all aspects of their education. They are historically low in motivation and as new sixth graders in the middle school setting, they are still working on their organizational skills and time management skills. They are used to being given the study

guides rather than completing them independently; they wait for directions rather than ask for help; and they struggle to work at home on their school work. Most of the students are below grade level in reading. This study does not take into account the possible changes that could impact a student without a reading, math or behavioral disability. The students who are more cognitively able to generalize and memorize may benefit from explicit vocabulary instruction and could demonstrate a greater difference in their overall scores with the instruction. The students in this study are from an upper middle class suburban middle school and were predominantly Caucasian. This data is difficult to generalize across grade level including elementary or high school, across socio-economics or across a school in a more diverse setting. This study is also in only one subject area-social studies and in one topic-Economics. This is a difficult and abstract subject for most students and the explicit instruction may benefit students in another subject or with more background knowledge of the topic.

A related concern is that the study used two convenience samples such that students were not randomly assigned to groups. The two groups also had differing teachers. Although the county has a standard curriculum, there is some variability in the activities within the classroom that can be influenced by a variety of factors including teacher preference and student characteristics.

Connections to Previous Studies/Existing Literature

There is significant research that connects good vocabulary acquisition with higher reading comprehension skills. Students who have the knowledge and deeper understanding of the words in the sentences will have a greater chance of grasping the meaning behind the words and therefore, increase their overall comprehension of the text. Comprehension is the end-result of reading and without a solid foundation in the vocabulary, the words may be read but the reader

as purposeful will not absorb them. As students move through elementary school, the goal for reading changes from the 'learn to read' to 'read to learn' mentality. As students move into middle school, the content becomes increasingly difficult, and subject-focused, and students with limited vocabulary or background knowledge in the subject will suffer in their attempts to not only learn the material but to gain meaning and knowledge from it.

According to a study conducted by Nitzkin, Katzir and Shulkind (2014), students who have poor reading skills, or have limited English knowledge as language learners, demonstrate difficulty in learning the vocabulary for the content subject areas. The researchers looked at middle school students specifically because, as teachers of middle school students in this study, they knew that instruction in vocabulary and reading comprehension “assume(s) a greater sense of urgency because middle school provides the last chance for many students to build the sufficient reading skills necessary to succeed in the demanding courses” (p.26). In the United States, “roughly 6 million secondary students read far below grade level and approximately 3,000 students drop out of U.S. high schools every day” (p. 26). This an alarming rate of students who are ill prepared for the rigors of middle school instruction.

In their study, the researchers, along with middle school teachers in a Los Angeles school, utilized sections of the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children- Fourth Edition, (WISC-IV), developed by Pearson Clinical (2003) and the Gray Oral Reading Test- Fourth Edition, (GORT-4), developed by Pearson Education (2001), to put together reading assessment which would provide the teachers with a summary of a student’s specific reading skill strengths and weaknesses. Through the use of the reading assessments, the middle school teachers determined that a student’s expressive vocabulary and reading fluency are “essential skills which have been found to be highly predictive of reading comprehension” (2014, p.28). Teachers in the middle

school used these assessments and clinical observations of the students to build their profile of the student as a learner and as a reader. Their study found that “vocabulary had the strongest correlation to reading comprehension,” and that “84% of the students struggling with comprehension had issues with vocabulary” (p. 29). The connection between vocabulary and reading comprehension is unmistakable. The Nitzkin et al. study suggests that vocabulary plays a strong and definite role in the level of reading comprehension a student can achieve and must be accepted for any progress in the vocabulary-rich content areas.

The current study did not specifically examine the relationship between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension. However, it did not provide significant evidence that providing vocabulary instruction improves performance on a unit test more so than individual and group learning activities. The current study may have found inconsistent results for a variety of reasons, many of which are related to validity. Another difference between the studies is that the WISC-IV measures knowledge of vocabulary words that are not a component of the GORT-4 reading selections, and the Nitzkin et al. study looked at the relationship between general vocabulary knowledge and classically measured reading comprehension skills. In contrast, the current study involved explicit instruction of vocabulary words that were included in a unit test that, while it has heavy reading comprehension demands, also measures other constructs and differs from what is usually considered a measure of reading comprehension in the research literature.

Implications for Future Research

As a researcher in explicit vocabulary instruction in the middle school setting, consideration of the students in the classroom, subject areas in the middle school model and the

impact to student learning should be included in the results along with the statistical data of the student's output on the unit assessment. The students in this subject were provided the explicit instruction and they did not produce a significant difference in their assessment scores on the end of unit assessment. For some students, the scores improved while others did not, balancing the improvement to negligible. This is a small suburban school with limited diversity and a high number of students with other distinguishing factors that impact their learning. To gather enough data on the effects of explicit vocabulary instruction on reading comprehension, these factors should be teased out and looked at individually to gather a more complete picture of the impact of the instruction.

Future research should take into consideration the population of the students. The majority of the students come from a predominantly middle or upper middle class background and 41 of the 44 students were white. All of the students spoke English as their primary language. Research in the effects of explicit vocabulary instruction should look at students from diverse backgrounds, different socioeconomic and language limitations. This study can be considered as a component of the overall picture.

The current study did not take into consideration the long term effect of explicit instructional practices for the students in the experimental group. The students, based on observational data, were engaged in the activities and the instruction appeared to enhance the learning for the social studies unit. However, the study was conducted over only one unit in one subject. The students were new to the learning of the instructional practices. The students needed to understand the teacher expectations in order to perform the activities. Once the students became familiar with the routines of the instruction, the unit was over. The next social studies unit is Social Institutions followed by the Conflict and Resolution unit. Each of these next units include components of

government, business and people's rights through religion and society. The vocabulary in the Economics unit is not limited to just that unit and with further study of the units in the whole of the sixth grade social studies unit, students with the explicit vocabulary instruction could perhaps demonstrate a higher level of understanding and application of their understanding through higher assessment scores than those who have not been immersed in the instruction from the beginning. The short unit study does not provide a clear enough picture of the whole of the content. Additional research could also consider the impact of the intervention in subject areas other than social studies.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to assess the impact on reading comprehension of typically seven to ten minutes daily explicit content specific vocabulary instruction among sixth graders with learning difficulties. The instruction occurred during a social studies unit on Economics. The students read the words, defined the words, and used the words in sentences through conversation and discussions in the classroom with their peers. The students created flashcards with the words and definitions which were used at home to study with a parent or guardian. The students also played a game, "Around the World" which allowed them to develop their automaticity of the word and definition. The control and experimental group did not differ significantly in their performances on the dependent variable, the Economics unit test that has significant reading comprehension demands.

After reviewing the literature on explicit vocabulary instruction and the connection between higher vocabulary skills and higher reading comprehension skills, the lack of significant group differences was surprising and could be interpreted as indicating that the particular intervention

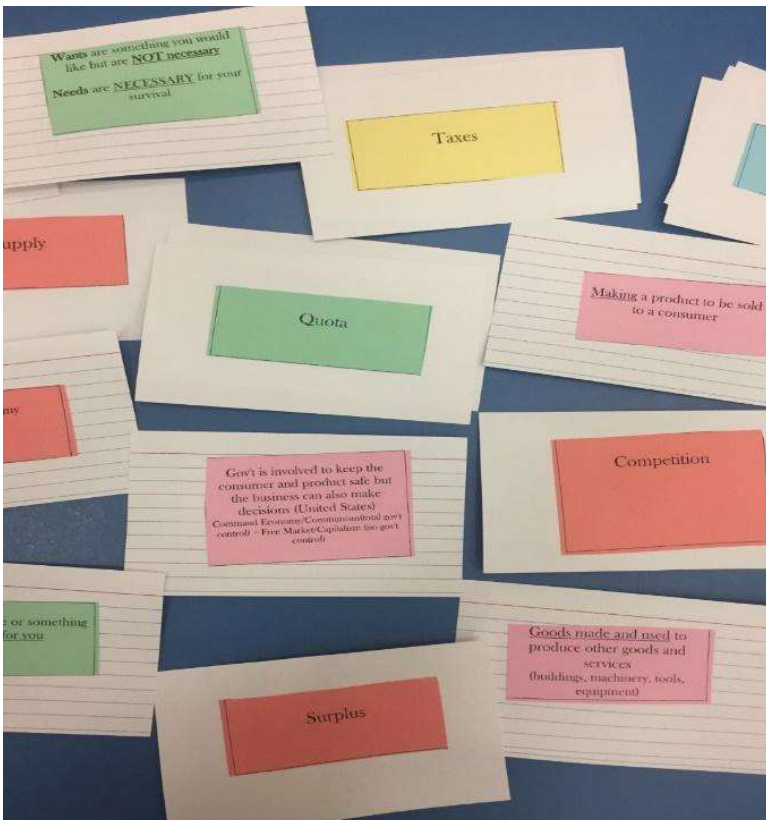
was ineffective. However, there were major limitations to the validity of the study, most importantly a four day variation in the number of instructional/learning activities days between the two groups such that the experimental group had only 85% of the instructional/learning time of the control group. Consequently, it is not possible to make reasonable interpretations about the efficacy of the intervention in impacting reading comprehension based on Unit test results. Observational data suggests that the experimental students were engaged within the school setting and with home studying. This engagement demonstrate a level of success in motivating the students and could produce students who use the strategies taught in the study in other areas of their instruction. Although this study did not provide conclusive findings about the impact of explicit vocabulary instruction and reading comprehension, observational data suggests that it produced students who put forth effort and who have many other factors to overcome for substantial and long-lasting results. It will be important for future research to examine the effectiveness of explicit vocabulary instruction on both reading comprehension and academic engagement and motivation.

Appendix

Pictures of Explicit Vocabulary Instruction Activities

1. Semantic Map

Displayed on chalk board
Reviewed and added words
each day- resulted in
increased student-led
discussions and engagement



2. Vocabulary Cards

Used as a study tool for school and at home.
Utilized a Home school connection and
monitored student motivation and effort

3. Economics Vocabulary Survey: used to determine student knowledge of content specific vocabulary words in the economics unit. Students who have background knowledge in the vocabulary require less explicit instruction in order to access the content.

Name _____ Date _____

Unit 5 Economics Vocabulary Survey

Vocabulary Word	√ Familiar/Unfamiliar Word	If the word is familiar, what does it mean?
Goods	_____ familiar _____ unfamiliar	
Services	_____ familiar _____ unfamiliar	
Wants/Needs	_____ familiar _____ unfamiliar	
Shortage/Surplus	_____ familiar _____ unfamiliar	
Market Economy	_____ familiar _____ unfamiliar	
Command Economy	_____ familiar _____ unfamiliar	
Traditional Economy	_____ familiar _____ unfamiliar	
Manufacturing	_____ familiar _____ unfamiliar	
Capital Resource	_____ familiar _____ unfamiliar	
Human Resource	_____ familiar _____ unfamiliar	

Producers	<input type="checkbox"/> familiar <input type="checkbox"/> unfamiliar	
Import/Export	<input type="checkbox"/> familiar <input type="checkbox"/> unfamiliar	
Capitalism	<input type="checkbox"/> familiar <input type="checkbox"/> unfamiliar	
Non-Democratic Socialism	<input type="checkbox"/> familiar <input type="checkbox"/> unfamiliar	
Monopoly	<input type="checkbox"/> familiar <input type="checkbox"/> unfamiliar	
Laissez Faire	<input type="checkbox"/> familiar <input type="checkbox"/> unfamiliar	
Utopia	<input type="checkbox"/> familiar <input type="checkbox"/> unfamiliar	
Quota	<input type="checkbox"/> familiar <input type="checkbox"/> unfamiliar	
Competition	<input type="checkbox"/> familiar <input type="checkbox"/> unfamiliar	
Investment	<input type="checkbox"/> familiar <input type="checkbox"/> unfamiliar	
Law of supply and demand	<input type="checkbox"/> familiar <input type="checkbox"/> unfamiliar	
Opportunity Costs	<input type="checkbox"/> familiar <input type="checkbox"/> unfamiliar	

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