



ENHANCING VOCABULARY LEARNING IN ELEMENTARY LANGUAGE EDUCATION: EXPLORING EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES AND INTERACTIVE APPROACHES

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Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.36713/epra14166>

DOI No: 10.36713/epra14166

ABSTRACT

This study delves into the instructional strategies employed by elementary language teachers for vocabulary teaching. Through in-depth interviews with five experienced educators, their approaches, challenges, and insights concerning vocabulary development were closely examined. The findings underscore the pivotal role of intentional and continuous word exposure in effective vocabulary instruction. The study identifies various strategies encompassing captivating games, collaborative group activities, visual aids such as graphic organizers, images, and labels, alongside consistent repetition of word sets. These techniques collectively bolster reading comprehension, writing proficiency, and oral communication skills among young learners. The research underscores the significance of cultivating dynamic and interactive learning settings that facilitate meaningful and consistent encounters with new vocabulary. The insights gleaned from this investigation contribute to the ongoing endeavor of refining vocabulary instruction methods, with the ultimate aim of fostering academic achievement and language progression in students. The study advocates for further exploration and application of these strategies to fully harness the benefits of vocabulary exposure in language teaching and learning.

KEY IDEAS – *strategies; vocabulary instruction; vocabulary development; learning environment; language instruction*

LITERATURE REVIEW

The expansion of vocabulary holds paramount significance in language acquisition. A substantial and diverse lexicon empowers learners with comprehension, effective communication, and self-expression capabilities. Nonetheless, the acquisition of new terms poses challenges, particularly for language educators.

Hence, this literature review aims to explore the significance of vocabulary acquisition, elucidate the challenges encountered by language teachers in this domain, and present efficacious strategies for successful vocabulary instruction.

Importance of Vocabulary Learning

Numerous research endeavors underscore the pivotal role of vocabulary in nurturing proficient reading skills and enhancing comprehension. Recognized as one of the quintessential constituents within a balanced literacy program, vocabulary assumes its rightful place among the five essential components, as delineated by the National Reading Panel (NRP, 2008). This core facet of understanding stands as a linchpin and demands unwavering attention. A robust oral vocabulary foundation

constitutes a prerequisite for effective text comprehension, as it renders learners ill-equipped to decipher the content before them without this linguistic scaffold. It becomes evident that inadequate vocabulary breadth hinders holistic language prowess, influencing overall language competence.

The centrality of vocabulary extends to the realm of communication, fortifying its significance as a conduit for mutual understanding. Proficiency in vocabulary acquisition equips students to bolster their conversational prowess. This competence fuels precision and accuracy in articulation, thereby refining communication quality. As asserted by Robin & Aziz (2022), vocabulary emerges as the bedrock of proficient communication, a sentiment reiterated by language educators who position it as the focal point of language expertise (Barcroft, 2016) and the very nucleus of linguistic acquisition (Alghamdi, 2019). A voluminous vocabulary repertoire empowers individuals to effectively convey ideas, eliminating the potential for ambiguity and misinterpretation.



Moreover, the reverberations of a robust vocabulary extend to written expression. The capacity to generate cogent and intelligible sentences hinges on a well-stocked vocabulary reservoir, intricately intertwined with the ability to structure language coherently. Proficiency in vocabulary facilitates the creation of comprehensive English sentences, enabling individuals to fathom the nuanced connotations within sentences. Additionally, this broad vocabulary spectrum augments writing proficiency by endowing individuals with the ability to judiciously select words, idiomatic expressions, and phrases that best encapsulate their intended message. This linguistic prowess elevates the tenor of writing, infusing layers of complexity and persuasion into the discourse. A study by Mehmet (2019) attests to this, revealing that an extensive vocabulary foundation significantly enhances the writing capabilities of EFL students.

Challenges in Teaching Vocabulary

Nonetheless, vocabulary instruction within English classes often finds itself relegated to the sidelines. While grammar, reading, writing, speaking, and listening are accorded due attention, vocabulary acquisition frequently occupies a less prominent position. Teachers occasionally assume that students will independently engage in the task of language acquisition, inadvertently relegating explicit vocabulary instruction. Moreover, a prevailing sentiment among students suggests skepticism regarding the correlation between vocabulary learning and English proficiency enhancement. Alavi and Gilakajani (2019) contend that this lack of emphasis from both educators and learners can pose substantial challenges to the effective teaching and acquisition of vocabulary.

This situation is further compounded by the limited exposure of many students to English reading materials, culminating in restricted reading habits and a consequent scarcity of English vocabulary. The dearth of vocabulary proficiency directly translates to compromised comprehension skills, establishing a glaring gap that impedes effective language understanding. The foundational role of vocabulary in comprehension, as highlighted by Lesaux and Russ Harris (2015), underscores its significance as a cornerstone for grasping language nuances. As a result of these linguistic shortcomings, an aversion to reading in English takes root, stemming from difficulties in comprehending reading materials. Moreover, this deficiency in vocabulary usage undermines students' confidence to participate in classroom discussions, as they grapple with an inability to accurately articulate their thoughts.

To summarize, a multitude of factors contribute to the challenges faced in reading proficiency among students. These include insufficient encouragement for reading at home, which curtails exposure to literature and fosters hesitant readers. Additionally, the inadequacy of teachers' knowledge in vocabulary instruction compounds the problem. It is worth noting that a substantial part of the issue lies in the dilemma of selecting which vocabulary to impart. Recent research underscores that vocabulary teaching becomes intricate when educators lack confidence in best

practices, often grappling with uncertainty on where to initiate effective word instruction (Berne & Blachowicz, 2008:315).

Strategies in Teaching Vocabulary

It is crucial to recognize that vocabulary instruction encompasses more than mere exposure to new words. In the realm of language teaching, imparting vocabulary entails an understanding of students' characteristics, enabling the selection of appropriate techniques or methods that foster active and enjoyable learning experiences within the classroom. This tailored approach not only enriches students' specialized vocabulary mastery but also contributes to their overall English proficiency. Therefore, teachers must meticulously and creatively strategize their vocabulary instruction to ensure its effectiveness.

Effective strategies hold the potential to not only expand students' vocabulary repertoire for meaningful learning but also to nurture their autonomy in the learning process. These strategies can bolster self-confidence and self-directed learning abilities. Flannigan & Greenwood (2007) outline four key factors for educators to consider when devising vocabulary teaching strategies: the students' profiles, the nature of selected words, instructional objectives for each word, and the strategies employed for instruction.

Nunan (2003:135) offers four guiding principles for vocabulary instruction: prioritizing the most relevant vocabulary, adopting suitable instructional approaches, emphasizing high-frequency words across the curriculum, and encouraging learners to introspect and assume responsibility for their learning journey. Concurrently, The National Reading Panel (2000) emphasizes that there is no singular research-backed method to enhance vocabulary and bridge knowledge gaps. The panel's analysis advocates for a balanced incorporation of both indirect (incidental) and direct (intentional) methods of vocabulary instruction, thereby enriching learners' language acquisition experience through multifaceted approaches.

Incidental Vocabulary Learning

The acquisition of vocabulary by most students often occurs incidentally through indirect exposure to words in various contexts, both at home and in school. This process unfolds through activities such as conversing, listening, engaging with books that are read aloud, and independently reading a diverse range of materials.

Moreover, the act of independent reading plays a pivotal role in expanding vocabulary. Through the exploration of various literary genres, students encounter new words within sentences and paragraphs, gradually comprehending their meanings through contextual clues. This exposure to a diverse range of written materials, from storybooks to informational texts, cultivates an organic and intuitive understanding of word usage and meaning.

Furthermore, the amalgamation of these experiences—conversing, listening, and reading—creates a dynamic



environment for vocabulary enrichment. The incidental nature of this process ensures that students encounter words in a natural, unforced manner, aligning with the principles of constructivist learning. As students engage with words across different settings and mediums, they form connections between spoken and written language, fostering a holistic grasp of vocabulary that extends beyond mere memorization.

In essence, the multifaceted approach to vocabulary acquisition through interactions at home and school, active listening, shared reading experiences, and independent reading contributes significantly to students' language development. This intricate web of experiences intertwines to build a robust foundation of vocabulary knowledge, empowering students with the tools necessary for effective communication and comprehension.

Intentional Vocabulary Learning

Students require systematic instruction in deliberate vocabulary acquisition techniques. Michael Graves (2000) emphasizes that effective intentional vocabulary instruction encompasses various elements: firstly, imparting explicit understanding of particular words (comprehensive, thorough instruction) to facilitate comprehension of texts incorporating those words; secondly, equipping students with strategies for autonomous word learning; thirdly, fostering the cultivation of word awareness; and lastly, employing word-oriented activities that stimulate and captivate students, thereby engendering a proactive interest in learning novel vocabulary.

Furthermore, the cultivation of word consciousness assumes significance. Encouraging students to develop an awareness of words' meanings, origins, and contexts amplifies their language sensitivity and appreciation. Integrating word play activities into instruction not only infuses an element of enjoyment but also motivates students to actively explore and incorporate new words into their vocabulary repertoire.

Incorporating Graves' principles into vocabulary teaching establishes a multifaceted approach that equips students with the tools and enthusiasm to engage purposefully with language. This method extends beyond incidental acquisition, enabling learners to actively participate in the expansion of their linguistic capabilities and fostering a lifelong affinity for language exploration and acquisition.

Statement of the Problem

The primary objective of this study was to provide a comprehensive description and analysis of the strategies employed by language teachers to facilitate the acquisition of vocabulary among learners. The researcher focused on addressing the following key research inquiries:

1. What are the optimal methods utilized by the participants for teaching vocabulary within the elementary level?
2. What obstacles do the teacher-participants confront when it comes to vocabulary instruction?

METHODOLOGY

With this objective in mind, this paper advocates for the utilization of appreciative inquiry as a framework, coupled with action research as the primary research method. By merging action research and appreciative inquiry, the present study aims to comprehensively explore the strategies and challenges intrinsic to vocabulary instruction within the purview of elementary language teachers.

For this investigation, five elementary language teachers with substantial experience were deliberately chosen. The researcher's deliberate selection of participants is grounded in the belief that their accumulated teaching experience of five years each contributes to the collection of profound and authentic insights, thereby enhancing the precision and depth of research findings. The composition of teacher-respondents includes one Grade 2 English teacher, two Grade 4 English teachers, one Grade 5 English teacher, and one Grade 6 English teacher. These five teacher-participants will be denoted as T1, T2, T3, T4, and T5, respectively (as shown in Table 1).

Table 1. Teacher-participants, including the grade level they are currently teaching English to, and number of years they have been teaching the subject

Teacher	Grade level being taught	Number of years in teaching English subject
Teacher 1 (T1)	Grade 2	12
Teacher 2 (T2)	Grade 4	5
Teacher 3 (T3)	Grade 4	7
Teacher 4 (T4)	Grade 5	8
Teacher 5 (T5)	Grade 6	26

A series of individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant. These interviews were designed to delve into the participants' vocabulary instruction strategies and the obstacles they encounter. Employing the semi-structured interview format offers a significant advantage, as it enables the researcher to follow up on responses and allows the interviewees to elaborate on their answers. To explore successful teaching experiences and positive facets of their instructional methods, the study adopted the appreciative inquiry approach.

Prior to the interviews, the participants were provided with comprehensive information regarding the research objectives, procedures, and their rights as voluntary participants, including the right to withdraw. Notably, some respondents opted for online interviews due to scheduling conflicts stemming from the implementation of the alternative delivery mode within their respective institutions.

The verbatim transcription of the interview data served as the foundation for analysis, which was conducted through thematic analysis. The themes that emerged were rooted in the teachers' strategies and challenges related to vocabulary instruction.



Furthermore, the positive aspects that emerged during the interviews underwent a deeper analysis utilizing appreciative inquiry principles, allowing for the identification of strengths, values, and effective approaches.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings and discussion that align with the primary objective of the study, which is to comprehensively describe and analyze the strategies employed by the participants in the context of teaching vocabulary. Additionally, this section aims to uncover the participants' viewpoints concerning the significance of vocabulary development and their encountered challenges while instructing vocabulary to elementary learners.

Strategies used by the teachers in teaching vocabulary

As discovered from the interviews conducted, the teacher-participants employ diverse strategies tailored to their respective grade levels for effective vocabulary instruction. Teacher 1 (T1), an instructor for Grade 2, adopts an explicit approach by introducing vocabulary words through tongue twisters, a method she employs before commencing a lesson. During reading sessions, contextual clues are utilized to decipher word meanings, focusing on words within the learners' comprehension level. Further, the teacher employs labeling objects in the classroom, ensuring constant exposure to the vocabulary, and incorporates basic sight words with accompanying visuals for enhanced understanding.

Teacher 2 (T2), who teaches Grade 4, incorporates graphic organizers such as the Frayer Model for vocabulary instruction. This model engages students in exploring various aspects of a word, including its definition, characteristics, examples, and non-examples. Visual aids, such as pictures and images, are seamlessly integrated to facilitate comprehension. Repetition is emphasized as an integral aspect of vocabulary retention, aligning with Biemiller and Boote's findings (2006) indicating that increased exposure to targeted words enhances children's understanding and usage.

Similarly, Teacher 3 (T3), also a Grade 4 educator, employs engaging activities like group work, board activities, and a range of games such as "word-in-words" and "head-and-tail." Group activities involve deciphering unfamiliar words within a given context and utilizing them in sentences. Vocabulary retention is assessed through spelling races and creative word formations. Such gamified approaches in language learning align with the findings of Huyen and Nga (2013), who stress the effectiveness of games in enhancing vocabulary classes.

In the case of Teacher 4 (T4), guiding Grade 5 students, a weekly routine is established where two vocabulary words are introduced during Friday reading sessions. These words are consistently integrated into class discussions and assignments throughout the week, ensuring active usage and comprehension. Furthermore, spelling activities serve to measure the students' retention of the words presented over the course of a month.

Teacher 5 (T5), instructing in Grade 6, implements a student-involved strategy using graphic organizers for vocabulary explanation. The teacher introduces the "4-in-1" activity, encouraging students to deduce the part of speech, definition, and usage in sentences through interactive charades. The engagement and retention are augmented as the learners enact the words, reinforcing memory through physical action.

These strategies collectively underscore the educators' dedication to cultivating effective vocabulary acquisition methods tailored to their learners' needs. The varied approaches encompass explicit instruction, contextual usage, engaging activities, and the integration of visuals and repetition. By adopting such versatile methods, these educators enhance students' vocabulary comprehension and retention, fostering a more engaging and effective learning environment.

In summarizing the common strategies employed by the participants for teaching vocabulary, the following recurrent themes emerged:

- Encouraging learners to use new words in sentences
- Repeatedly presenting the same set of words for reinforcement
- Incorporating pictures or images as visual aids
- Utilizing engaging activities, including games
- Implementing graphic organizers

When inquired about the effectiveness of these strategies, all participants exhibited a sense of pride and confidence in their approach. T4 highlighted the lasting impact of these strategies, noting that students continued to use the learned vocabulary even after advancing to higher grade levels. T4 shared, "They would come to me actually and tell me that they have used a vocabulary they learned from my class." This sentiment was echoed by T5, who emphasized the efficacy of the "4-in-1" activity due to the memorable charade component that remains etched in students' minds.

T2 and T3 underscored the broader benefits of these strategies, noting improvements in students' writing and speaking skills. The integration of new words into writing assignments and recitations allowed learners to express themselves more effectively. T4 further emphasized the importance of word choice, stating that a diverse vocabulary provides students with a range of options to articulate their thoughts. The correlation between an extensive vocabulary and improved writing and speaking skills was evident, fostering a more comprehensive understanding and expression of ideas.

T1 emphasized the enhancement of pronunciation skills attributed to the daily use of tongue twisters. Additionally, T1 noted a positive outcome in the form of an improved Mean Percentage Score (MPS) for the English subject during the current academic quarter.



Collectively, the participants' consensus on the efficacy of these strategies showcases the impact of their thoughtful and creative approaches to vocabulary instruction. The participants' shared experiences affirm that the strategies not only contribute to enhanced vocabulary acquisition but also nurture overall language skills and expression.

Challenges encountered by the teachers in teaching vocabulary

Two prominent challenges were identified by the language teachers in their efforts to teach vocabulary at the elementary level. These challenges are as follows:

Limited Availability of Reading Materials: A significant concern raised by the teachers is the scarcity of reading materials within the books or modules they utilize. This shortage hinders learners' exposure to a diverse range of reading materials, which is essential for vocabulary expansion. The respondents collectively shared that the existing texts often lack appeal and fail to captivate learners' interest. In response, teachers actively seek out relatable and engaging stories or texts that align with the learners' comprehension level. This practice aims to compensate for the inadequate reading resources and maintain the students' engagement in vocabulary acquisition.

Insufficient Emphasis on Vocabulary Lessons: A recurrent challenge highlighted by the teachers is the limited presence of vocabulary-related lessons within the Most Essential Learning Competencies (MELC). The curriculum's structure poses constraints, as it allocates few lessons specifically dedicated to vocabulary instruction. Respondents expressed that the reduced focus on vocabulary within the prescribed curriculum poses a hindrance to comprehensive language development. Despite these limitations, some teachers, such as T4, proactively address this gap by integrating lessons on vocabulary that are not explicitly outlined in the MELC. This includes teaching concepts like synonyms, antonyms, and dictionary usage, which are deemed crucial for learners' language acquisition journey. The unanimous consensus among the respondents underscores the need for enriched reading materials and a more comprehensive inclusion of vocabulary-related lessons within the curriculum. These challenges highlight the critical importance of addressing gaps in materials and curricular content to create a more conducive environment for effective vocabulary instruction.

Reflections and Insights

It is essential to recognize that teaching vocabulary goes beyond the mere introduction and memorization of words; it encompasses the aptitude to employ vocabulary accurately. Hence, adopting appropriate and effective vocabulary learning strategies holds great significance for students. Moreover, it constitutes a pivotal component of language teaching, implying that educators must select techniques and methods that cultivate student engagement and enthusiasm towards vocabulary acquisition within the classroom.

As evidenced, elementary language teachers employ a diverse array of strategies and techniques to teach vocabulary. Integrating interactive vocabulary activities such as vocabulary charades, games, and spelling races undoubtedly injects an element of enjoyment and appeal into the learning process. Group activities foster peer collaboration, wherein students participate in group games and competitions to reinforce and apply their acquired vocabulary knowledge.

Utilizing visual aids, including pictures, flashcards, posters, and imagery, serves as a valuable tool to illustrate and reinforce new vocabulary words. Augmenting these visuals with real-world instances further bolsters students' grasp and memory of the vocabulary. Encouraging learners to generate their own visual representations of vocabulary words via graphic organizers, drawings, collages, or multimedia projects deepens their connection with and comprehension of the words, as they actively engage in the process.

Additionally, the effectiveness of exposing students to similar vocabulary words for consecutive days is evident in improved retention and understanding. Designing activities that encompass multiple contexts, such as reading passages, writing prompts, role-playing, and discussions, enables students to encounter and utilize vocabulary words in diverse scenarios. Repetitive exposure to vocabulary words through review exercises, daily usage tasks, or consistent practice sessions further aids retention.

Employing these strategies fosters a dynamic and interactive learning environment that facilitates vocabulary acquisition and retention among students. Thus, continuous evaluation of the effectiveness of these strategies, tailored to students' specific requirements and preferences, is crucial. Active communication and collaboration among teachers can also enhance vocabulary instruction practices by facilitating the exchange of successful approaches.

It's vital to acknowledge that vocabulary learning is a gradual process, not achievable overnight. Furthermore, there is no one-size-fits-all strategy for teaching vocabulary; rather, an amalgamation of different approaches is key. Ultimately, educators bear the pivotal responsibility of instilling in their learners the significance of cultivating a broad and rich vocabulary, which significantly contributes to effective communication and comprehension.

Implications

The implications stemming from the discussed vocabulary teaching strategies hold significant importance for both educators and students. By integrating diverse and captivating approaches, instructors have the potential to establish dynamic learning environments that not only bolster vocabulary acquisition but also foster holistic language skill enhancement. These approaches accentuate the significance of grasping context, active involvement, and motivational aspects, thereby cultivating more effective channels for communication and self-expression.



Educators are encouraged to tailor these methodologies to address the unique requirements and skill levels of each student, facilitating personalized and tailored learning journeys. Consistent self-evaluation and assessment of the efficacy of these techniques ensure a continual evolution of vocabulary instruction. Furthermore, these strategies underscore the incremental nature of vocabulary assimilation and highlight the value of collaborative efforts among educators to disseminate successful practices. Ultimately, the implementation of these strategies has the potential to result in heightened language proficiency, elevated engagement levels, and a more robust groundwork for enduring vocabulary development.

CONCLUSIONS

The strategies employed by teachers to introduce students to new vocabulary terms offer valuable insights into effective approaches for teaching vocabulary. The key to enhancing vocabulary acquisition and retention lies in creating engaging learning environments, integrating relevant contexts, and providing consistent exposure. By utilizing these techniques, educators can stimulate students' curiosity, expand their vocabulary repertoire, enhance their comprehension, strengthen their oral and written communication skills, and foster overall language development.

Adapting and tailoring strategies to align with the unique needs and academic levels of individual students is of utmost importance. Employing practices such as regular reflection, assessment, and soliciting learner feedback contributes to the refinement of these methods. Through continuous efforts to enhance vocabulary instruction, teachers can lay a robust foundation for their young learners, facilitating comprehensive language development.

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