English Language Learner’s Difficulty with Social Studies Vocabulary

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Introduction

English Language Learner (ELL) populations have more than doubled in the past two decades across the United States and classroom teachers are faced with the challenges of educating students in English, which is not their native language (Weisman & Hansen, 2007). Academic language is more difficult for ELLs to master than conversational language because of its complexity. The most basic building block of academic language and content comprehension is vocabulary. ELL students have challenges with vocabulary skills in most or all content areas but social studies vocabulary appears to often be the most difficult among my students. The purpose of this action research project is to determine if the use of student drawings that relate to the definition of a concept identified by a vocabulary word will increase the student’s understanding and sense of the word and the concept it represents. Because the majority of ELLs struggle with vocabulary skills, the significance of this action research project is to find a strategy to help ELL students improve their vocabulary skills with the social studies vocabulary words for the current lesson.
Literature Review

Reading in social studies is particularly difficult for ELLs because of their lack of prior knowledge of the concepts, deficiency in grade level understanding of vocabulary and content knowledge, and the awkward style in which the texts are written (Brown, 2007). Examples of difficult texts are given by Brown along with specific strategies that are offered to assist the teachers with ELLs. The strategies included are content maps, outlines of units, guiding questions before reading, and allowing the student to read a simpler version (lower grade on the same concept). Taking an active approach to assisting ELLs in building their English language is the goal for implementing these strategies. Brown confirmed, with research and examples, my proposal that social studies vocabulary is difficult to grasp for ELL students. Although the strategies were related to content area and concepts, they made the connection between vocabulary and content material.

A synthesis of research findings by Cisco and Padron (2012) showed a relationship to instructional practices and reading comprehension with monolingual and ELL students along with the implications for classroom instruction. The authors stated that data showed that ELLs’ reading comprehension was at a limited factual level. Eleven studies were included in this analysis with three distinguishing ideas: (1) the role of the student’s first language in relation to ELLs reading comprehension, (2) the essential role of vocabulary knowledge in ELLs reading comprehension, and (3) the role of effective instruction in enhancing ELL students’ reading comprehension. The authors included concerns and future research ideas.

One of the studies, discussed in Appendix B, relates directly to improvements in vocabulary and reading comprehension for ELL students. Some of the classrooms were assigned to vocabulary intervention while others were assigned to a control group. According to the pretest and posttest, the intervention group showed greater growth than did the control group in regards to word knowledge, depth of vocabulary knowledge, and reading comprehension. This research is relevant to increased vocabulary knowledge with ELL students. Two other studies included showed that direct and precise instruction for vocabulary knowledge and resolving unknown academic language in ELLs has a positive impact on gains in reading comprehension. Of course, my ultimate goal for increased vocabulary knowledge with my students is greater understanding of the text.

Many ELLs lack adequate academic language necessary to be successful in content areas (Donnelly & Roe, 2010). This article discusses English-language development (ELD) and how the ELD lesson should match the student’s proficiency in the English language and be an important aspect of daily core instruction. Using structured language practice as a way to introduce and practice vocabulary content is discussed in the article. Utilizing visual aids prior to the lesson for vocabulary words, using compare and contrast sentence frames and word banks, and student friendly explanations and examples are strategies used to assist ELLs in building academic language. According to Donnelly and Roe students must be actively engaged in using academic language in order for them to build content vocabulary knowledge. Examples of the strategies are a good visual for understanding sentence frames and the development of the definition of a word from the book’s definition to a student friendly definition. This study is important to teachers who are interested in finding sound strategies for the success of ELLs in all
content areas. There was little research associated with this study; it was more of a methods article.

Two case studies were conducted with English language learners using pedagogical principles that are important to their success in school. The four principles are: (1) creating varied and frequent opportunities to talk and write in their second language, (2) connecting the curriculum to the student’s lives inside and outside the classroom, (3) engaging in activities that are high interest to the students, and (4) working towards a material improvable outcome. The first study was in a seventh grade world history class and the second was in a fourth grade inclusive class. In both classes, the ELLs participated and contributed to an intellectually challenging task. In history and social studies, the improvement on an improvable object was harder to obtain than through science but was still accomplished through reenactments and role playing.

This research conducted by Haneda and Wells is supportive of my action research project because the four pedagogical principles addressed are relevant to the issue that English language learners have difficulty with vocabulary skills in the social studies curriculum. If the students do not understand the meaning of words, they cannot connect them to the larger concept. By allowing the students to talk, write, and draw about the word and its meaning, the students are able to make a personal connection with their lives and interests, therefore enabling the student to “own” the word and its meaning.

Social studies curriculum should prepare students to become active and knowledgeable citizens of society but because of the lack of content prior knowledge, inability to comprehend texts, and poor knowledge of the English language, ELLs need extra support (Weisman & Hansen, 2007). Vocabulary development is essential to the student’s success and without this adequate development social studies curriculum presents a challenge for ELLs. The strategies used by Weisman and Hansen are appropriate for elementary school students. The first strategy is to make the content more comprehensible through graphic organizers, visual aids, and student interaction. Second is vocabulary development through frequent exposure to words, using graphic aids, and high interest activities that promote oral and written language practice. Included are three case studies: a fifth grade class studying immigration, a fourth grade class studying Native Americans, and a sixth grade class studying Ancient Egypt.

The study of the sixth grade class was informative concerning the teacher’s strategies for vocabulary instruction. By dividing the vocabulary for the unit into smaller chunks, introducing vocabulary words for each lesson as she teaches it, using pictures and drawings to relate to the word, utilizing a word wall, and playing games with the vocabulary words, the teacher facilitates students’ development of English-language skills and promotes active engagement from the students. This article provided a great deal of support for my action research project concerning social studies vocabulary instruction with ELLs through the use of pictures and student drawings.

**Method and Analysis**

The setting is a fourth grade elementary classroom that includes 17 English as first language students and 9 ELL students. The school is in a rural area of XX County and is a Title I
school with 93% of students receiving free and reduced lunch. This class was chosen because of its familiarity with the researcher. The participants included: one 10-year-old female from Nepal, one 10-year-old Hispanic male (twin to one of the females in the group), two 10-year-old Hispanic females (one is the twin to the male in the group), one 9-year-old Guatemalan female whose native language is a mixture of Spanish and Mayan (dialect of the northern mountains according to the ELL teacher at our school). The lessons were 30 minutes per day for five days.

The procedures and methods were as follows:

- **Pre-assess the week before the lesson begins:**
  - Interview the five ELL students to determine prior knowledge and present knowledge of subject matter.
  - Give an oral pretest on four chosen vocabulary words for upcoming lesson to the five ELL students.
  - Review student portfolios.

- **The week of the lesson:**
  - Show and read each of the four vocabulary words to the five ELL students.
  - Have students echo read each vocabulary word.
  - Ask each student to look at the word and repeat it back to the teacher.
  - Explain that the teacher will be showing them pictures and that the pictures will help them to relate to, and interact with, the vocabulary words.
  - As the picture and correlating word are shown, ask the students what they see in the picture.
  - As the picture and correlating word are shown, explain to the students how each picture relates to the vocabulary word.
  - Allow the students to have “talk” time concerning each picture/word pair and what they see in each picture and how it relates to the vocabulary word.
  - Orally model using the vocabulary word in a sentence relating to the picture.
  - Repeat the procedure each day for five consecutive days.
  - On days four and five, allow the students to choose a picture/word pair and draw their own picture depicting the definition of the vocabulary word in their journal.
  - In their student journal, each day, have the students jot down their thoughts or reactions to the lesson, pictures, vocabulary words etc.
  - Have students choose the samples of their work to include in their portfolio.
  - During the week, keep anecdotal records to include:
    - observations
    - reactions
    - student progress

Instruments and resources used are as follows:

- Teacher made pretest and posttest
- Questions for student interview concerning subject content
- A list of four vocabulary words.
- Pictures that relate to each of the four vocabulary words.
- Drawing paper
- Pencils
Data Analysis included the following steps
  o Analysis of themes found in drawings for accuracy of representation of the concept in the vocabulary word
  o Level of accuracy on the posttest as a score of 80%
  o Level of accuracy in matching picture/vocabulary score as a score of 85%
  o Analysis of themes found in student interview for 85% accuracy of understanding of the concept of the vocabulary word

Findings

Research shows that ELL students struggle with vocabulary in all content areas, especially in social studies, and that pictures or student drawings related to the vocabulary word will increase the student’s understanding of the word (Weisman & Hanson, 2007). The purpose of this action research plan was to find a strategy that would successfully aid ELLs in understanding and comprehending social studies vocabulary. The strategy was to use student drawings that related to the meaning of the vocabulary word to increase the student’s understanding and sense of the word. The findings are reported below.

First, the five ELL students in the focus group completed the task of matching the vocabulary word and the related picture with 97% accuracy. Second, four out of five of the ELL students’ drawings were 100% accurate in the representation of the concept of the vocabulary word with their first attempt. One ELL student’s drawings were not an accurate representation of the concept of the vocabulary word, but this student was able to achieve 90% accuracy with re-teaching from the teacher. In the student interview at the end of the week’s lesson, five of the ELL students achieved 95% accuracy in understanding of the concept of the vocabulary word. The students were able to draw a relating picture and use the word correctly in a sentence. Four out of five of the ELL students completed the posttest with 100% accuracy while one out of five of the ELL students completed the posttest with 85% accuracy.

Conclusion

The findings of this action research project are consistent with the information found in the literature review. The strategy of involving students in creating drawings in relation to the social studies vocabulary word enabled the students to better understand and comprehend the concept of the vocabulary word. This is a successful strategy to help these struggling students in the area of vocabulary, especially social studies. Because of the success of the strategy with the students in the sample, I will continue to use this strategy in social studies with possible extension to other subject areas and with other struggling students. This action research project has yielded encouraging results in the area of vocabulary words and concepts for ELL students.
References

Donnelly, W., & Roe, C.J. (2010). Using sentence frames to develop academic vocabulary for English learners. Reading Teacher, 64(2), 131-136. doi:10.1598/RT.64.2.5