The Effectiveness of Vocabulary Study for High School Students

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**Abstract**

The purpose of this research assignment is to test the effectiveness of vocabulary instruction for high school students. When students are encouraged to use complex vocabulary in the classroom, they are able to take true ownership of those words. The conversations between student and student, and student and teacher take on a new form. When words are used correctly, the problem with colloquialisms—misconceptions and slurs—become less frequent.

The lessons I taught varied greatly each week for my study subjects, but the patterns and purpose remained the same. There were many questions I had in mind when I began this research assignment in the fall, but only one that functioned as the integral part of my research: Will integrating active vocabulary lessons into the curriculum enable students to retain and master complex vocabulary easier, resulting in improved grades on quizzes and assignments? When I first began researching this question, I didn’t believe teaching vocabulary was as important as teachers and administrators made it out to be. I assumed that students would inherently build their vocabulary just through reading texts and participating in class discussion. Needless to say, by the end of this research assignment, I came to a very different conclusion.

**Vocabulary in Schools**

Glossy-eyed students pantomime retention while they dutifully copy down dictionary definitions. The unspoken requirement at the Austere Academy (names and locations of schools, faculty, and students have been changed to protect their identity) is that teachers provide daily vocabulary words for students to learn and memorize. Supposedly taken directly from old standardized aptitude tests, the theory is simple: *if they know these words, they will pass standardized tests*. Although sound in thought, this method for mastering national tests has not been readjusted to partner with new testing formats. Prior to this year, this application of study partnered well with the state’s current means for testing mastery and grade-level proficiency. Students were required to identify synonyms and antonyms, determine definitions and origins of complex words based from roots and suffixes, and surmise meaning from labyrinthine sentences; however, starting this year, standardized tests are vastly different from anything students have seen before. Students must determine meaning from elaborate prompts, and write well-developed, organized responses. Often these prompts are near paragraph length, and contain complex vocabulary that can deter a student’s performance if understanding is not present.

For the longest time, I was against teaching vocabulary in schools. Watching teachers assign vocabulary words that were only seen on testing day, then to disappear from the classroom, bewildered me. If the students are never asked or shown how to use them, then why assign vocabulary? But now, after extensive research and collaboration

n with students and fellow staff members, I have seen how the teaching of vocabulary (when done well) in the classroom will help students develop precision in their daily communication with peers, teachers, and on assignments.

**Who Gains From Vocabulary Taught Well?**

Described by some as athletic, slightly whiny and feeble minded by other teachers—Klaus Baudelaire is the perfect example of the average performing student. His slightly vivacious sense of humor makes him standout amongst his peers, but, in my opinion, this is to compensate for his C-average academic performance. Klaus was one of those students lost in the cracks; he was neither failing, nor high achieving. He would have greatly benefited from extra help in the classroom, but by no means would it have been necessary to create an IEP or assign him to special education. Unfortunately, in a classroom with 33 other students, it can be near impossible to provide him with the individual time it would take to master many of the concepts being taught. It was for this reason that I decided to investigate new lessons plans that allowed for reciprocal teaching to occur daily; Socratic seminar to fuel conversation; and the incorporation of technology that would create connections for each individual student. For this to occur, I spent a great deal of time researching lesson plan strategies posted on Pinterest by elementary school teachers, (I refashioned them so they were age-appropriate for my high school students, and aligned to Common Core) and from NMSA’s 28th Washington, DC Conference: Get Movin’ With Grammar: A kinesthetic Approach to Language Arts.

Deemed popular by association with the basketball team, Klaus would often turn academic conversations and daily tasks into an opportunity to discuss his most recent performance on the team; this often resulted in some kind of argument with another student about shooting statistics. This would carry on for a while, resulting in incomplete assignments being turned in. The work submitted often portrayed a sense of disinterest. At first, I thought this was because he was one of the many students punching the metaphorical time clock, filling a seat until it was time to go home; however, the more I examined his work, the sooner I realized that it was not a lack of interest in his assignments that was creating these average grades, it was a lack in understanding of complex vocabulary, and the inability to completely comprehend the requirements for the assignment. This was when I realized he would be the perfect candidate for my research on implementing vocabulary integration into the classroom.

During many department meetings, the general conversation was always about the students not performing well on standardized and state tests. Several teachers compared Austere Academy students to those in other districts. Unwilling to share the blame, they accused the students of being lazy and ignorant. Obviously there tends to be a degree of apathy amongst students; it is inevitable. However, I did not believe that is was the students not taking the questions and exams seriously that was resulting in such low grades; I believed it was because they were unable to comprehend the prompts due to the vocabulary and complexity of each question. Several teachers agreed with me. With the introduction of Common Core, test formats have drastically changed. Unless teachers change their teaching style to align with Common Core, students will be ill-equipped to pass these exams.

In class one day, I had a conversation with Klaus about his academic standing. I asked him why he was doing so poorly on the homework assignments that I had been handing out. He informed me the he was often confused with the questions on the assignments, and didn’t know how to respond. Tackling one of the questions together, I was able to guide him through the key parts of each question. Through this support, he was able to fashion an answer that aligned directly to the question. My elation was short lived. I realized even though Klaus was able to provide a well-developed response this time, I knew when it came to his next encounter with a test, he wouldn’t have anyone guiding him through it; he would still end up “failing”. It was then I began to postulate: If I were to begin teaching lessons that allowed students to learn skills that would help them master complex vocabulary, then maybe they would be able to decipher the prompts on the new tests, and more importantly, allow for them to take on an entirely new view of education and learning.

**Why Should We Teach Vocabulary?**

That is an excellent question, posed by many teachers and students alike: “Why, indeed, teach vocabulary?” According to research conducted by Monique Senechal and Edward Cornell,

Even one exposure to a new word in a story as it is read aloud can sometimes be sufficient for young learners to recognize the word later. However, to really *know* a word means to move it from our receptive vocabulary, where we recognize a word and can accurately identify its correct meaning in a multiple choice situation, into our productive vocabulary, where we come to use the word knowingly and flexibly in a variety of situations. [The] students’ productive vocabularies grow when we help them develop precision in their definition and usage (Barton, 2001, p. 1).

The only way to make the transition between receptive vocabulary, to the ability to use it in multiple choice situations, as mentioned in the quote above, is to teach vocabulary in a meaningful and interactive way. Unfortunately, many teachers and students do not know how to do this or what it looks like. Esmé Gigi Geniveve Squalor, principle of the Austere Academy, only requires teachers to incorporate vocabulary into a weekly routine. There is no assessment—neither formative, nor summative—on the students or teachers for the effectiveness of the vocabulary integration. The English department at the Austere Academy met and decided that each teacher would be able to select a different word from the old SAT list for that day’s word. This practice became known to the students as the “SAT word of the day.” Although this introduces the possibility for the teachers to collaborate lessons with each other, that was not a result I witnessed. After discussion with Madam Lulu, my lead teacher, I found out that the words where often not selected from old ISAT tests as I was led to believe, but randomly compiled from the personal dictionary of the teacher who’s turn it was to select the word for the day. These are the words from week four of my teaching placement shown to demonstrate discombobulation:

1. Monday—Scrutinize
2. Tuesday—Chauvinism
3. Wednesday—Proclaim
4. Thursday—Etiquette
5. Friday—Discrepancy

As you can see from the week’s list, none of these words can be related to each other or the daily lesson. During an early morning meeting one Thursday, I had a discussion with Fernald, a fellow sophomore English teacher, about the word he choose. He informed me that his word was something decided last minute. Fernald had forgotten Thursday was his day, and he quickly needed one at the last minute. Upon investigation with the other teachers present in the meeting, I quickly surmised that none of the words selected from the previous weeks had been incorporated into any lesson or in-class reading. When asked how they assess the students’ memorization of the words, and how they are incorporated into homework assignments and curricula, the majority of them told me they have an SAT word quiz every couple of weeks or so. To say I was shocked would be a lie. Clearly vocabulary was treated as a quick bell ringer, providing teachers the opportunity to take attendance before they began each lesson. It was reasons like this that I had planned on forgoing teaching vocabulary all together when I had my own classroom; however, rather than do that, I decided to further investigate what the experts had to say about vocabulary in the classroom. I quickly learned that the method employed by the staff at the Austere Academy went against everything conventional wisdom suggests:

…[T]he major means for developing students’ vocabulary should focus on learning words in context. This position is based on three assumptions: First, words are learned from context. Second, school-age youngsters are successfully adding words to their vocabularies. And, third, instruction must focus on learning vocabulary from context because there are just too many words to teach to get the job done through direct instruction (Beck, McKeown, Linda, p. 3).

What this quotes does not take into account is the context in which students learn vocabulary. During a child’s early years, all their learning takes place through oral context. As they get older and mature, this is no longer the prominent context for learning new vocabulary. Mastering new words shifts to written context, that is, what the students are reading. This becomes a significant problem for male students primarily, because studies show that they are far less likely to read than females. Gender statistics aside, both parties suffer under this learning process. “Studies estimate that of 100 unfamiliar words met in reading, between 5 and 15 of them will be learned” (Nagy, Herman, and Anderson, 1985; Swanborn and de Glopper, 1999). When students read unfamiliar words, they fail to encounter the features provided by oral context: intonation, body language, and shared physical surroundings. Furthermore, students need to be reading a wide range of complex text sets. Glancing at the book titles in my classroom, students are not reading the required level for vocabulary learning to take place. I realized my students needed to be provided with more than just interesting articles to read. I had to create an environment that incorporated intonation, body language, and a shared physical surrounding. (Beck, McKeown, Linda, *Bringing Words to Life*)

After brainstorming ideas with Madam Lulu, I came up the idea of sidewalk chalk wuzzles. Wuzzles are word games that require you to morph one word into another by changing one letter at a time. For example:

Rough

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

**C**ough

Cou**c**h

**P**ouch

Po**a**ch

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Poach

I broke the students up into six small groups, and gave each group a piece of chalk. There was a competition to see which group could make the change in the fewest amount of words; however, each group member was required to know/learn the definition of all the words used before I would consider them completed. With the remaining class time, I had students draw picture definitions for each of the words.







The activity mentioned in the paragraph above was only performed by my two freshman classes. For my four sophomore classes, I just provided them with a vocabulary list to study from. Two weeks later, I tested all six periods on the words. The freshman scored higher than the sophomores on the quiz, and when it came to using the words in the sentences, the freshman reached higher levels of vocabulary integration.

**“Rationale for Robust Vocabulary Instruction”**

During the fifth week of school, my lead teacher and I decided to educate the class on the proper usage of the words “retarded” and “gay”. Both of us were becoming increasingly frustrated with how loosely these terms were being thrown around. We didn’t believe the students were doing this out of hate for the marginalized groups society had inadvertently targeted with these words, but we did want it to stop from occurring in our class. With permission from my lead teacher, I had decided the SAT word for that day would be changed from *gangly*, to *colloquialism*. We spent the first 15 minutes of class having students talk about different colloquialisms they knew and have heard. This Socratic seminar transformed greatly once several students began mentioning examples they have seen in famous works of literature from authors like Mark Twain and John Steinbeck. We spent the rest of the class discussing how colloquialisms can shape society and vocabulary speech patterns.

The next day, I wanted to try an interactive lesson that would lead up to the banning of the words “gay” and “retarded” from conversational use among my students; however, I knew we had to start small. My teacher and I decided that we wanted to get rid of the word “good” as well. It has become too commonplace in oral communication. I provided the class with an interesting non-fiction article about various trees and plants. The same species of trees and plants mentioned in the article grew in the nearby park. As a class, we all went outside one sunny day after having read the article, and they collected leaves from the trees in the park behind the school. I had them all write the correct scientific name of the leaf selected in sharpie on top of the specimen, and then below it, I had them write the word “good”. The remainder of the class was spent outside, and I talked about how we are no longer going to use the word “good” in the classroom. *Good* could not be used to describe their day, lunch, weekend, etc. Students had fun brainstorming and expanding the vastness of their vocabulary. No longer was *good* used to describe the weekend, but instead adjectives like *fulfilling, adventurous*, and *lacking* echoed across the grass.In celebration of ridding the world of this overused word, we walked to the canal that cut through the back of the campus, and threw all the leaves into the slow running water. I mentioned how the canal could be a possible metaphor for society: even though progress was being made, it is a long time before something can be swallowed and completely disappear from how society sees and tolerates something.

The next day, we introduced the words *retarded* and *gay*. We began by assessing prior knowledge, asking questions like: Who knows what the word *gay* originally means? Several students were able to answer the question correctly, whereas others just shrugged their shoulders and portrayed a demeanor of ignorance. We asked them why we should be careful about loosely throwing around these two words. The common answer was that is could be offensive to people. And, although they were one hundred percent correct with their response, Madam Lulu and I wanted them to go further in their answer. I informed them that not only does it create offense, but also it fosters laziness. When we use words like this, we rob them of their meaning, and lack the thoughtfulness to provide a truly meaningful answer. We discussed how these words are flippant, and carry a whole series of possible negative connotations.

This lesson was not a fix-all solution towards improper vocabulary usage. Many students still throw the words *good*, *gay*, and *retarded* into their daily conversations; however, we have seen many of them hesitate for a second after, as if they were thinking there was a better, more accurate word to use instead. And in the case of Klaus Baudelaire, I noticed that one assignment had been resubmitted for a better grade with this lesson in mind. In this revised comic strip assignment, he had the words *gay* and *retarded* omitted from his characters’ dialogue bubbles, and replaced them with words that correctly conveyed a true definition, and not some vague reference. His conscious revelation in vocabulary usage was a direct result of this lesson, and enabled for him to score higher on his resubmitted assignment.

**Conclusion**

Frequency is paramount when it comes to learning and memorizing vocabulary. At the Austere Academy, frequency was absent in the learning process. My goal, derived from Isabel Beck’s book, was to see if students who saw vocabulary words 8-1o times throughout the week, supported by rich, engaging lessons would perform better on tests, daily assignments, and during Socratic seminars. It was also important to incorporate words from previous lists and lessons so that these words would be maintained. I found through close study and research on two freshman classes and one student, that those who received vocabulary-engaging lessons performed better on assignments that introduced unfamiliar words and ideas. For the students who did not receive these lessons, they often missed reappearing words on the vocabulary tests, even though they had scored correctly the first time.

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