

**The Impact of Student-Centered Strategies on Vocabulary Learning in a
Foreign Language Classroom**

By:

Mandy J. Cummings

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Abstract

The traditional middle school foreign language classroom typically has the teacher imparting the knowledge and vocabulary of the unit to the class. The students are unmotivated to take ownership of their learning with this methodology and are highly dependent on the teacher for the information. They do not view themselves as capable of finding and or sharing vocabulary in the secondary language. The author of this study felt that this mentality needed to shift from the “sage on the stage” to the students becoming empowered learners. The question that arises is how to achieve this. Could student centered vocabulary learning have an impact in a foreign language classroom? What are the best ways to implement the shift of power? The author facilitated this shift by utilizing student created word expert cards that emphasized the new, unfamiliar vocabulary from the next unit of study within a curriculum textbook. When students had control of one of the new words, they were then in charge of teaching each other the new vocabulary through peer tutoring as the teacher acted as a mediator. This effectively reversed the power roles. The teacher also shifted control by implementing semantic mapping activities of the vocabulary words with the students, justifying their reasoning for word placement and usage with each other; the teacher once again acted as a mediator. Data was collected through student interviews, student surveys, and end of the unit vocabulary tests. The results of the study show that students felt they were in control of their learning, took pride in both knowing a word in the target language before everyone else and sharing that knowledge with their peers. Vocabulary comprehension and maintenance improved through the use of the semantic mapping activities versus the traditional call-out review. The conclusion of the study is that student-centered

vocabulary instruction improves the motivation and ownership of students. The implementation of the vocabulary learning strategies not only assisted with the retention of the second language vocabulary but it also instilled within the students a sense of pride that they could learn a foreign language and not be dependent upon the teacher.

Introduction:

Throughout my teaching career I have found the dump method of pouring knowledge into a student's "empty" head lacking. Being the "Know it All" in class, imparting my knowledge about the Spanish language with just some constructivist activities thrown in because I could get my co-workers to join me was going against my desire to create independent thinkers and learners. I wanted to change my students. I wanted them to go from being dependent on me for all the answers, to willingly looking at each other for the information. I knew that such a radical change would not happen overnight nor that it was the best idea for such a change to happen quickly, but I wasn't sure how to start the process.

After venting my frustrations, a professor suggested that maybe changing just a single component of how I teach could have a great impact on my students' frame of mind. I was intrigued by this idea and decided to look into which aspect might have the farthest reach. Vocabulary is one of those areas of foreign language instruction where the students always look to the teacher first. I began to wonder if there were ways to shift this dynamic from the teacher onto the students. What were other teachers using to teach vocabulary in their classes? Could it work in my classroom? Questions like

these intrigued me enough to look for the answers. I had come to a crossroads and I was ready to see if I could turn my teacher dependent students into empowered, independent learners.

My first foray into researching the best practices of vocabulary instruction took me to many online journals. The first thing that caught my eye was an article about eVocabulary strategies (Dalton, 2011). The idea of using the internet and all of its website splendor including Wordle, web quests, online vocabulary games, and dictionaries intrigued me. I thought here was something I could use in which the students already had an interest. The idea of finding an online article with graphics, animations, and sound, would certainly engage them... for a while anyway. Alas, with less than dependable wireless and a short supply of computer time, there was no real way of applying this on a day-to-day basis. I returned to the research world where I explored many vocabulary strategies highlighting word walls, context clues, word-part clues, and classifying words. Although very effective for the English language classroom, second language is a little different. It became apparent that I needed to scale down, to hone into some specific vocabulary strategies.

During my research, two strategies came up far more often than others as having an impact on not only the acquisition of the English language but also a secondary language as well. These strategies were semantic mapping and graphic organizers. I then wanted to investigate which parts of these strategies would best benefit my students and how I could use them within my classroom.

What the Research says about Vocabulary Instruction.

Walking into a foreign language classroom, you would generally see the teacher imparting to the students the required unit vocabulary and grammar that a textbook dictates. The teacher is seen as the holder of the knowledge and the students are busily scribing their notes as the teacher introduces the new words. For many, this is the normal routine for the acquisition of a second language in the middle and secondary levels. Fortunately, as research continues, perspectives change, and vocabulary instruction is starting to trend towards teaching the students to be responsible for their own learning and independent of the teacher (Larrotta, 2011).

Students who are taking a second language have a high desire to learn the language (Morin, 2001). Although true in many cases, this idea does not take into account the students whose parents signed them up because they thought it would be good for their children. These students are in foreign language classrooms by force, not by choice. If teachers are bestowing upon the students the knowledge of a second language, how can one engage a child who really isn't there for him or herself? They write the words, but don't show any true interest. By changing our positions and giving the students more control and more ownership, would these students find within themselves the joy of a second language? What would the impact of student-centered strategies be on their vocabulary learning? Could the vocabulary strategies utilized within the regular classroom be brought into a foreign language classroom? Would those strategies enhance vocabulary instruction or hinder it? In order to find this out, I decided to research the various methods of vocabulary instruction. Fortunately, the

research on vocabulary learning strategies is vast and the choices are almost endless. (Larrotta, 2011).

The Art of Scaffolding Semantic Mapping in a Foreign Language

Time and again, during my research, authors mentioned the vocabulary learning strategy of semantic mapping. Some mentioned it as being used with sentence gradients to complement the use of context clues (Greenwood, 2007). The technique of sentence gradients involves structuring sentences in such a way that the context of the sentence must be considered in order for a choice an appropriate vocabulary choice to be made. For example, in the sentence *Sandy _____ to the store*, almost any verb could be used to complete the sentence, the context clues are very open. However, with the sentence *Sandy _____ to the store and parked her car by the door*, the context clues point to a specific verb.

Another popular semantic mapping strategy is linear arrays (Baumann, 2007). This strategy suggests placing words in an order of intensity to assist students with their comprehension of new words and to expand what they know about familiar words (ex. puny -> frail -> weak -> sturdy -> strong). Other researchers describe using semantic mapping by building a map of words and concepts that revolve around a theme (Morin, 2001).

With these strategy ideas, the question became, “How do I get students to go from being heavily reliant on the teacher to independent?” The answer came from Vygotsky through the idea of scaffolding. Just like with other aspects of teaching

reading, second language vocabulary learning can benefit from the gradual release of task ownership from teacher to students. Scaffolding “enables a teacher to keep a task whole, while students learn to understand and manage the parts” (Clark & Graves, 2004, p.571). The teacher modeling the steps to the class is step one. Then as a whole, the class tries the process themselves. Gradually the teacher does less and less until the students are in total control of the activity’s components. By utilizing this gradual release process, semantic mapping could allow students the freedom to take their learning into their own hands, thereby allowing them to feel some ownership and pride of the knowledge they are acquiring. I was on the right track to getting my students independent of me and helping them to realize they have the ability within to learn a language. Unfortunately, I was still left with the challenge of how to introduce new vocabulary.

Graphic Organizers... More than just Pictures.

For many people, graphic organizers are an excellent way to put one’s thoughts down on paper in a systematic way. Circles with branches off help create a semblance of order in chaos. Graphic organizers also provide the visuals to assist with difficult concepts such as cause and effect, and character analysis. Could they be used to both introduce vocabulary and develop a sense of ownership and pride within a group midlevel students? Clarena Larrotta used personal glossaries made from index cards with adult ESL learners (Larrotta, 2011). The index cards had to have a picture representation of the word with both the definition in the target language and the word in

English on the front. On the back the student drew a mind map of the word with bubbles relating to the chosen word. The final component was a sentence in English and then that same sentence rewritten in the student's first language. A key idea was that the glossaries were words that the students chose for themselves and had an interest in learning based on their personal needs (Larrotta, 2011). The Iranian carpenter learning English had a different reason for his word than the Guatemalan mother whose main goal was to communicate with teachers.

Margaret Ann Richek, in her "Words are Wonderful" article (2005), presents ideas that can be used to foster ownership and pride within students who are talking a foreign language by force rather than choice. Ms. Richek introduced the graphic organizer idea of *Word Expert Cards* (Richek, 2005).

The cards are pieces of paper folded in half. On the outside is the word that was chosen from a story by the student along with a picture representation of the word. Inside the organizer, is the sentence from the story in which the word is used, a



Appendix F - Student work examples

sentence created by the student using the word, the part of speech, and a student-created definition of the word. After everyone completes their cards, peer tutoring occurs so everyone can learn the vocabulary from the story. The cards themselves are very empowering tools because they represent student choice, and the peer tutoring should help students to develop mastery of the chosen word and a sense of ownership (Richek, 2005).

Methodology - Participants

Participants in this study were seventy Spanish 1 students in the 8th grade. The school in western Wisconsin has a population of 1,301 students grades 6-8, primarily a Caucasian population with some African American, Hmong, and Latino ethnicities deriving from a middle to high socioeconomic status. The primary language of the students is English and students have had limited exposure to the Spanish language. The author is a traveling teacher who doesn't have a permanent room to teach in and therefore classes generally take place in rooms around the school in which the main teacher is having a prep time. Spanish class is taught in a Tech Education room, Math room, and the Family and Consumer Education room each for a 45 minute period.

Methodology - Materials

- ◆ *Realidades* textbook that is the school mandate curriculum
- ◆ *Las Aventuras de Miguelito* which is a 62 page, beginning level Spanish Reader
- ◆ Teacher compiled vocabulary list (Appendix E)
- ◆ Individual word walls to record vocabulary from unit
- ◆ End of unit vocabulary tests
- ◆ Vocabulary Attitude survey
- ◆ SMARTboard presentations to review and practice the vocabulary
- ◆ SMARTboard presentations to record discussions and aid understanding
- ◆ *Las Aventuras de Miguelito* Reading booklet
- ◆ Final project menu list

- ◆ Computer paper for creating the word expert cards
- ◆ Personal whiteboards for vocabulary review
- ◆ Whiteboard markers
- ◆ Vocabulary word sorts

Methodology - Procedure

The action research plan was explained to all of the students as well as the reason for conducting the research. Each student was given a permission slip for his/her parent/guardian to sign that explained the research being conducted and what the student created work was going to be used for. (See Appendix A) Students who did not return the signed slip giving permission still participated in the activities but their work and test results were not included in the study. Over the course of a four week study that included two curriculum units, students were expected to choose a vocabulary term from the current unit of study and create a word expert card based on this word. The cards contained the word in Spanish on the outside as well as a picture to demonstrate the meaning of the word: on the inside were two student created sentences utilizing the word, and the definition of the word in English. The students were then responsible for sharing their vocabulary term with their classmates. The vocabulary terms were used in a variety of semantic sorting activities and semantic sentence practices. The vocabulary strategies were used extensively the first few days as the students became familiar with the new words, but as the unit of study continued, grammar and cultural

components came into play and the strategies were more student-directed with the teacher taking more of a monitor role.

Day 1: Students shared their word expert cards with a partner and recorded their partner's word. Students were assigned to be in group "one" or group "two." Ones walked around from desk to desk gathering the words, while twos stayed seated in their desks. After the ones shared with all of the twos, the ones then converged in a corner of the room to share their words with each other and the twos met in the opposite corner. Any significant words not chosen by students were then introduced by the teacher in order to complete the vocabulary list.

Day 2: The teacher shared a list of nine vocabulary terms from a previous unit and asked the students how they would group these terms. The teacher invited the students to walk her through their classification of these words and their assignment of names to the word groups. Students were then given a vocabulary sorting packet that contained nine words from the current unit. Students were requested to sort the words into three groups and assign a name to each of their groups. They were allowed to work in groups of two. After the words were sorted, they justified their choices to another group, and listened to the other group's rationale as well.

Day 3: Students were given another nine words from the current unit to sort into two groups, assign a name, and justify with their rationale. The Spanish diminutives, nouns

ending in -ita or -ito, were introduced because of their use as terms of endearments or demonstrating a smaller or younger version of the original word. (Ex. perro vs perrito.)

Day 4: The word sorting activity was conducted individually rather than as a group activity and justification was written up on a post-it note that was placed on the door as the students exited the classroom. Grammar was reviewed and practiced through the use of conjugation activities where students wrote the appropriate verb form that matched the subject of the sentences.

Day 5: The teacher introduced a semantic sentence strategy by writing a sentence in the target language on the board with a verb from the new unit missing. (Ex: Pedro _____.) The teacher listed the verbs from the unit underneath. Students wrote their verb choice on their personal whiteboards, showed a partner, and explained why. The teacher then revealed another sentence with a verb missing but this time only a few of the verbs could complete the sentence because it was not as general. (Ex. Pedro _____ el regalo.) The students again wrote their choice and shared their reasoning. The teacher revealed the last sentence and this time there was only one verb that could work within the context of the sentence. (Ex. Pedro _____ la luz y tiene que comprar otra. Pedro _____ the light and had to buy another.)

Day 6: The teacher showed the sentences from the day before to reintroduce the strategy. The teacher and students wrote class semantic sentences deciding on the verbs to use from current or previous chapters and the subject. The class discussed

the features of the sentences and how they went from general to specific. Students were then requested to write three of their own sentences and exchange them with a partner.

Day 7: Students wrote two semantic sentences to share with a partner and completed a word sort using twelve of the unit vocabulary terms.

Day 8: Students participated in a cultural study day and a verb conjugation review.

Day 9: Vocabulary was reviewed with Pictionary and Hangman. Students participated in a verb conjugation practice activity.

Day 10: Students took the Unit Test on vocabulary, grammar, and cultural components. Students chose a new vocabulary word from the next unit of study for their word expert cards. The process started over with the new unit of study and its new vocabulary terms.

The Next Steps: From Textbook to Chapter book

After four weeks of initial research, I am excited with the results of my research thus far. Students were engaging each other for vocabulary meaning instead of looking

to me for the answers. They were also having hearty discussions during the semantic sorting strategies to justify their choices. The vocabulary tests were also showing an improvement in retention for my struggling students. For the next few weeks we will be continuing with the word expert cards and the semantic sorting activities, but this time they will be applied to a Spanish reader written for first year Spanish students. I am excited to see how the strategies that we have practiced within the context of our textbook will transfer into reading a chapter book in another language. The strategies applied well to the units from the textbook because each unit was set around a theme, with the appropriate vocabulary to enhance the theme already pre-chosen. This time the vocabulary wasn't pre-chosen and more student input was needed in order to make the unit as non-threatening as possible.

Upon being told their next task was going to be reading a book that was entirely written in Spanish, several students blanched at the idea. I was taking them out of their comfort zone and thrusting them into the unknown in their eyes... how could I? Even though we had already read paragraphs and letters that were entirely written in Spanish, in their minds, I was being unrealistic and too demanding. This new format was a daunting task to them. I had anticipated some resistance when I had first planned this unit, so I was prepared for their questions and concerns. Before I even handed the book out to them, I spent a class period answering questions and explaining how we were going to accomplish this task, what the requirements were, and to assure them that we were going to take our time. I made sure to emphasize that I was MORE interested in what they understood versus how quickly they finished. Finishing quickly without comprehending wasn't going to impress me. Being able to explain the story

was what I was after. They seemed calmer and more accepting of the idea after this session, so I felt it was well worth the time to allow them to voice their opinions instead of simply handing the book out and saying have at it.

When I had started planning this unit one of the questions I had facing me was what would be the best way to have students continue their work with the vocabulary words. The textbooks had basically done this for them with a pre-chosen set of words from which they were allowed to choose. With the Spanish reader there was no set theme or list. It was a book. This then presented the questions of: How would the words be chosen? Do I let them choose at random? Should I give them a list?

To answer these questions, I actually felt that the students needed to have input on this since they were the ones going to be impacted the most. I still wanted to offer them a choice but was curious how much freedom they felt comfortable with given this new format. I assembled a group of students with a variety of backgrounds. Some had learning disabilities, others were considered gifted, while the rest were just considered the norm and were not receiving any additional services. I asked them their thoughts about being provided a pre-chosen list of vocabulary word card options or having the complete freedom to choose which new Spanish words would be presented as word cards. They were very candid and honest with their responses. The general conclusion though was that a pre-chosen list would help make the task less daunting. They could simply concentrate on reading and not wonder if their chosen word was a good enough choice or if they had chosen too easy of a word.

I took their input and began applying it to my planning for the word expert cards in this unit of study. I quickly realized this was an arduous task even for a fluent

speaker, and I couldn't believe I had entertained the idea to have the students try this on their own for their first time with an all-Spanish book. After some thought, I came up with an idea about how to break down the vocabulary. Before beginning the book, each student would choose two vocabulary terms from two different chapters, thereby requiring them to complete two vocabulary cards. Once we came upon the chapter from which their vocabulary word originated, they were responsible for teaching their term to the entire class.

The reason for each completing two cards was because after going through the book and deciding which vocabulary to utilize, there were simply too many options and I really felt the bulk of them should be introduced. Since this was going to be roughly a 3-4 week unit, I didn't hesitate to require two word cards. The criteria I used in choosing the vocabulary terms included:

1. Term wasn't already used within the previous units of study.
2. Appeared repeatedly within the current reading.
3. Context clues within the sentence didn't readily make term known.

After the list was compiled, I then looked at the layout of each chapter and the length of each chapter. I had to determine if chapter could be read within the hour or if I had to split it between two days. I wanted to leave some time for discussions of what was happening at the end of each day to either clarify or further their understanding. Talking about what was being read was going to be as important, if not the most important component for understanding this unit of study. Once the vocabulary was determined, planning done, and materials assembled, reading partners chosen by the students, the *Miguelito* unit could begin.

Day 1: A *Las Aventuras de Miguelito* book is handed out to each individual. The class reads the book title and discusses its meaning. Class also makes predictions about who Miguelito is, what type of an adventure he is going on, and where he is going to. The discussion continues with a picture walk utilizing the few illustrations within the book. Teacher records all of the class predictions and inferences on a SMARTboard page. Teacher explains how the Word expert cards will be shared during this unit versus the previous ones. Students select vocabulary terms from the pre-chosen list and gather the materials necessary to complete their individual word cards.

Day 2: Students with Chapter 1 vocabulary terms share their words with the class. As a whole group predictions are made based on the title of Chapter 1, teacher records these predictions on SMARTboard page. Students read Chapter 1 with their reading partner. As they read the chapter, each student started to fill in the Miguelito Character Guide with preliminary information gathered from text. Students also started to fill in Miguelito's travel timeline, so they will have a record of when events take place. The whole class comes back together to discuss the events of Chapter 1 and how the chapter words impacted their understanding.

Day 3: Students revisit Chapter 1 vocabulary and warm up with a brief discussion of what had happened in yesterday's reading. Teacher introduces the city of Bangor, Maine and Mount Desert Island, Maine since these are the places where the story is set and most students haven't visited these locations. Students with Chapter 2 vocabulary

terms share their words with the class and the title for Chapter 2 is read. As a whole group predictions are made based on the title of Chapter 2, teacher records these predictions on SMARTboard page. Students read Chapter 2 with their reading partner. As they read the chapter, each student continues to fill in the Miguelito Character Guide and Miguelito's travel timeline with information gathered from text. The whole class comes back together to discuss the events of Chapter 2.

Day 4: Students revisit Chapter 1-2 vocabulary and warm up with a brief discussion of what had happened in yesterday's reading. Students complete a vocabulary word sort individually and then discuss with their reading partner their placement choices.

Students with Chapter 3 vocabulary terms share their words with the class and the title for Chapter 3 is read. As a whole group predictions are made based on the title of Chapter 3, teacher records these predictions on SMARTboard page. Students read Chapter 3 with their reading partner. As they read the chapter, each student continues to fill in the Miguelito Character Guide and Miguelito's travel timeline with information gathered from text. The whole class comes back together to discuss the events of Chapter 3.

Day 5: Students revisit Chapter 1-3 vocabulary and warm up with a brief discussion of what had happened in yesterday's reading. Students complete a vocabulary word sort individually and then discuss with their reading partner their placement choices.

Students with Chapter 4 vocabulary terms share their words with the class and the title for Chapter 4 is read. As a whole group predictions are made based on the title of

Chapter 4, teacher records these predictions on SMARTboard page. Students read Chapter 4 with their reading partner. As they read the chapter, each student continues to fill in the Miguelito Character Guide and Miguelito's travel timeline with more information gathered from text. Students will also work with a partner to compile Miguelito's school schedule based on the reading. The whole class comes back together to discuss the events of Chapter 4.

Day 6: Students revisit Chapter 1-4 vocabulary and warm up with a brief discussion of what had happened in the previous day's reading. In groups of two, students write three semantic sentences and share these sentences with another group. Students with Chapter 5 vocabulary terms share their words with the class and the title for Chapter 5 is read. As a whole group predictions are made based on the title of Chapter 5, teacher records these predictions on SMARTboard page. Students read Chapter 5 with their reading partner. As they read the chapter, each student continues to fill in the Miguelito Character Guide and Miguelito's travel timeline with information gathered from text. Group comes back together to discuss chapter.

Day 7: Students revisit Chapter 1-5 vocabulary and warm up with a brief discussion of what had happened in yesterday's reading. Students complete a vocabulary word sort individually and then discuss with their reading partner their placement choices. Students with Chapter 6 vocabulary terms share their words with the class and the title of Chapter 6 is read. As a whole group predictions are made based on the title of Chapter 6, teacher records these predictions on SMARTboard page. Students read

Chapter 6 with their reading partner. As they read the chapter, each student continues to fill in the Miguelito Character Guide and Miguelito's travel timeline with information gathered from text. Students work with their reading partner to compile a list of guests and what they bought for Miguelito's birthday for the "Thank you card List." The whole class comes back together to discuss the events of Chapter 6.

Day 8: Students revisit Chapter 1-6 vocabulary and warm up with a brief discussion of what had happened in the previous day's reading. In groups of two, students write three semantic sentences and share these sentences with another group. Students with Chapter 7 vocabulary terms share their words with the class and the title for Chapter 7 is read. As a whole group predictions are made based on the title of Chapter 7, teacher records these predictions on SMARTboard page. Students read Chapter 7 with their reading partner. As they read the chapter, each student continues to fill in the Miguelito Character Guide and Miguelito's travel timeline with information gathered from text. Students work with their partners to recreate Susana's family tree. Group comes back together to discuss chapter.

Day 9: Students revisit Chapter 1-7 vocabulary and warm up with a brief discussion of what had happened in yesterday's reading. Students complete a vocabulary word sort individually and then discuss with their reading partner their placement choices. Students with Chapter 8 vocabulary terms share their words with the class and the title of Chapter 8 is read. As a whole group predictions are made based on the title of Chapter 8, teacher records these predictions on SMARTboard page. Students read the

first half of Chapter 8 with their reading partner. As they read the chapter, each student continues to fill in the Miguelito Character Guide and Miguelito's travel timeline with information gathered from text. The whole class comes back together to discuss the events of Chapter 8 that have taken place so far.

Day 10: Students revisit Chapter 1-8 vocabulary and warm up with a brief discussion of what had happened in the previous day's reading. In groups of two, students write three semantic sentences and share these sentences with another group. Students finish reading Chapter 8 with their reading partners. Each student continues to fill in the Miguelito Character Guide and Miguelito's travel timeline with information gathered from text. Students work with their reading partner to complete "Susana's shopping bag" activity. This activity requires students to draw the clothing choices and colors that Susana made during her shopping trip with Miguelito. The whole class comes back together to discuss the events of Chapter 8.

Day 11: Students revisit Chapter 1-8 vocabulary and warm up with a brief discussion of what had happened in yesterday's reading. Students complete a vocabulary word sort individually and then discuss with their reading partner their placement choices. Students with Chapter 9 vocabulary terms share their words with the class and the title of Chapter 9 is read. As a whole group predictions are made based on the title of Chapter 9, teacher records these predictions on SMARTboard page. Students read Chapter 9 with their reading partner. As they read the chapter, each student continues to fill in the Miguelito Character Guide and Miguelito's travel timeline with information

gathered from text. The whole class comes back together to discuss the events of Chapter 9.

Day 12: Students revisit Chapter 1-9 vocabulary and warm up with a brief discussion of what had happened in the previous day's reading. In groups of two, students write three semantic sentences and share these sentences with another group. Students with Chapter 10 vocabulary terms share their words with the class and the title of Chapter 10 is read. As a whole group predictions are made based on the title of Chapter 10, teacher records these predictions on SMARTboard page. Students read the first half of Chapter 10 with their reading partner. As they read the chapter, each student continues to fill in the Miguelito Character Guide and Miguelito's travel timeline with information gathered from text. Group comes back together to discuss chapter.

Day 13: Students revisit Chapter 1-10 vocabulary and warm up with a brief discussion of what had happened in yesterday's reading. Students complete a vocabulary word sort individually and then discuss with their reading partner their placement choices. Students finish reading Chapter 10 with their reading partner. As they read the chapter, each student continues to fill in the Miguelito Character Guide and Miguelito's travel timeline with information gathered from text. Students work with their reading partners to complete "Miguelito's Dream House" activity. The whole class comes back together to discuss the events of Chapter 10.

Day 14: Students revisit Chapter 1-10 vocabulary and warm up with a brief discussion of what had happened in the previous day's reading. In groups of two, students write three semantic sentences and share these sentences with another group. Students with Chapter 11 vocabulary terms share their words with the class and the title for Chapter 11 is read. As a whole group predictions are made based on the title of Chapter 11, teacher records these predictions on SMARTboard page. Students read Chapter 11 with their reading partner. As they read the chapter, each student continues to fill in the Miguelito Character Guide and Miguelito's travel timeline with information gathered from text. Group comes back together to discuss chapter.

Day 15: Students revisit Chapter 1-11 vocabulary and warm up with a brief discussion of what had happened in yesterday's reading. Students complete a vocabulary word sort individually and then discuss with their reading partner their placement choices. In groups of two, students write three semantic sentences and share these sentences with another group for the final time. The teacher wraps up class with an introduction of the final project option choices and the rubric that will be used to grade those choices.

Day 16: Students complete an end of unit vocabulary quiz based on the vocabulary learned in *Las Aventuras de Miguelito*.

Day 17-18: After having a weekend to work, students share their final projects with their classmates. Teacher collects all of the books and bookmark packets from the students.

Findings and Results:

The quantitative data (See Appendix B, C, and D) shows that the semantic sorting activities and the word expert cards did have an impact on the vocabulary tests for most of the students. While the students whose test scores averaged between the middle to high end of the grading spectrum experienced little to no growth, most of the struggling students showed relative improvement. Only three out of the twelve students who have found learning Spanish consistently difficult this year, did not show improvement in their test scores. The other nine showed slight improvement. These results demonstrate that for those students who are already “getting the language,” semantic work neither hinders nor advances their capabilities. These students just continue the foreign language learning process adapting to the instructional strategies with ease. For most of the students who struggle, the semantic sorting and word cards have helped them to get a better handle on the language and assist with their ability to maintain the knowledge of what the words mean.

When these strategies were applied to a Spanish chapter book, most of the students maintained their previous performance levels. This simply shows that the strategies once again neither helped nor hindered their understanding. Some students' scores improved once the strategies were applied to the chapter book, while other students saw a decrease in their performance when it came to the Spanish chapter book. The quantitative data doesn't really answer the question of why the sudden increase or drop in performance. For those answers, data of a different variety was needed.

The Vocabulary Attitude Survey and student interviews showed a much more affective aspect to learning vocabulary. Most of the high functioning students found that being required to sort the vocabulary and then justify those choices challenged their word knowledge and made them think “outside of the box,” especially when they were given slightly different themes in which to place the vocabulary words. The struggling students also found this to be a challenge but an enjoyable one because as one student said, “I could put them anywhere as long as I could give the reason why I put that word in that group, and nobody thought my ideas were wrong.”

Class observations and student interviews demonstrated that the word expert cards did in fact give the students a sense of ownership over their chosen word. The struggling students especially took pride in sharing their vocabulary knowledge with the students who always seemed “to get the language so easily.” For some of the students it became a competition to choose the weirdest word on the list and then create the most imaginative picture representation of the word. The students also enjoyed the familiarity of the activities during our unit of study that revolved around the Beginning Spanish reader *Las Aventuras de Miguelito*. During the initial onset of the final unit for this study, there was some fear of the unknown amongst the students. The familiarity with the word cards, semantic sorts, and semantic sentences, however, did seem to not only help ease their fears but also helped them get a handle on the book. The book discussions were lively, and students were amazed at what they had accomplished after the *Miguelito* unit. I overheard on several occasions students saying, “That wasn’t as bad as I thought it was going to be.” This made me smile because I have more faith in their ability than they do at times, it seems.

For some of my struggling students though, the idea of reading a book in Spanish was a daunting task. Upon further questioning, it came out that some of them don't consider themselves to be very good readers, and they approached the book with more trepidation and dislike than others in the class. This internal opinion of their skills may have impacted how effective the strategies were with helping them learn the vocabulary. They may have become so bogged down by just the idea of reading that they lost focus on the vocabulary learning. Other external factors may have had an impact on them as well, such as the weather was starting to get nice after a cold winter.

Conclusions and Implications: What The Future Holds:

Although the strategies didn't seem to have a large impact on students' test scores, they did help my students engage in the learning process and instill in them a sense of ownership and pride. Their "I can" attitude grew with each new word they learned and shared with their peers. This was the ultimate goal of the study. Could vocabulary strategies used within a regular education classroom enhance the vocabulary instruction of a foreign language classroom? The answer turned out to be "Yes." I was so delighted in watching my students take control and engage in their learning of a foreign language that I am determined to include these strategies in the upcoming years.

However, as I was conducting this study another area that could benefit from improvement came to light. I had a great desire to address this area while the primary study was taking place that I almost dove right in. Alas, I knew I had to quell the urge, because it wasn't the main goal. The realization that a future research area was just presenting itself made me smile and tip my hat to my professors. We were warned that

this may happen. As I was wandering around my classroom, making my observations about the student engagement with the vocabulary and writing the semantic sentences, it dawned on me that lengthier writing in a first year foreign language classroom could be done as well, perhaps a compilation of simple stories. Could their vocabulary expertise be pushed to the next level, if they were guided to write simple stories of their own in the target language? I do believe I am curious enough to find out.

Appendix A

March 7, 2012

Dear Parent/ Guardian:

My name is Mandy Cummings and I am one of the Spanish 1 teachers at the Hudson Middle School. I am also currently a student at the University of Wisconsin River Falls pursuing an additional Master's Degree in Reading. As a part of the program, I am performing an action research study in order to gain a better understanding of best practices for vocabulary instruction.

If you and your student agree, I would like to gather work samples, vocal recordings, classroom pictures, and video clips of your child during classroom activities to be used as data for my research paper and final presentation.

Once I receive your permission, I will implement student-centered vocabulary strategies in hopes of creating greater engagement, usage, and maintenance of the Spanish language vocabulary. This study will impact both the way your student interacts with the vocabulary and the way that I introduce it. We will be doing more writing and reading in class, and the students will be assuming more responsibility for their own learning.

It is my hope that change of instruction will help support your student not only in his/her current Spanish course, but will build his/her confidence level for future classes as well. Please take the time to fill out the permission slip attached and return it to me. If you have any questions and/or concerns, please feel free to email me at any time.

Thank you for your support in your son or daughter's academic success!

Sincerely,
Ms. Mandy Cummings
cumminmj@hudson.k12.wi.us
715-377-3820
Please sign and return...

Parent Permission

I _____ give my son/daughter _____ permission to partake in the action research project and allow samples of my child's work, voice, and picture to be used in the study .

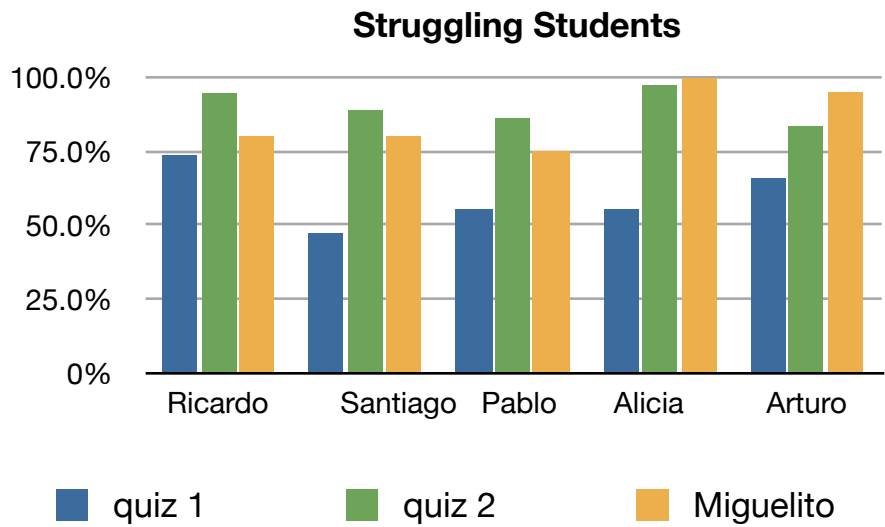
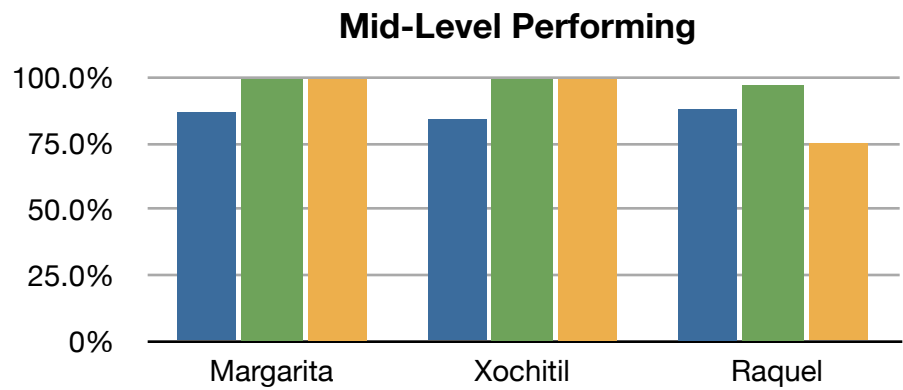
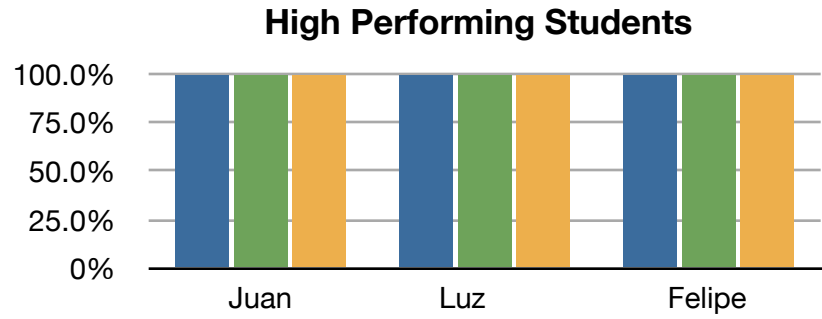
Parent Signature: _____

Student Signature: _____

Date: _____

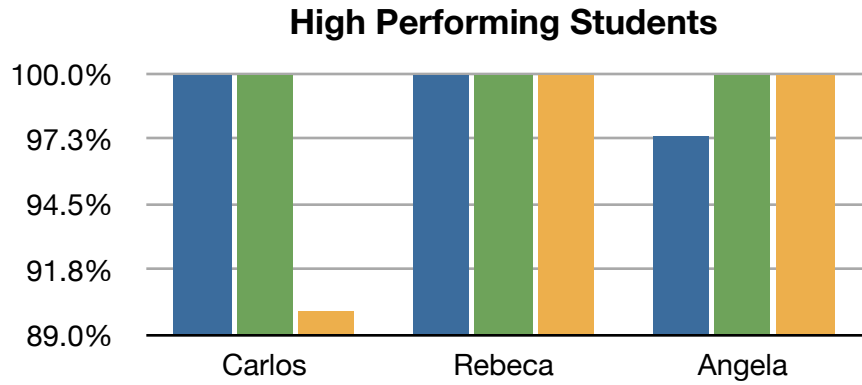
Appendix B:

4th hour Students

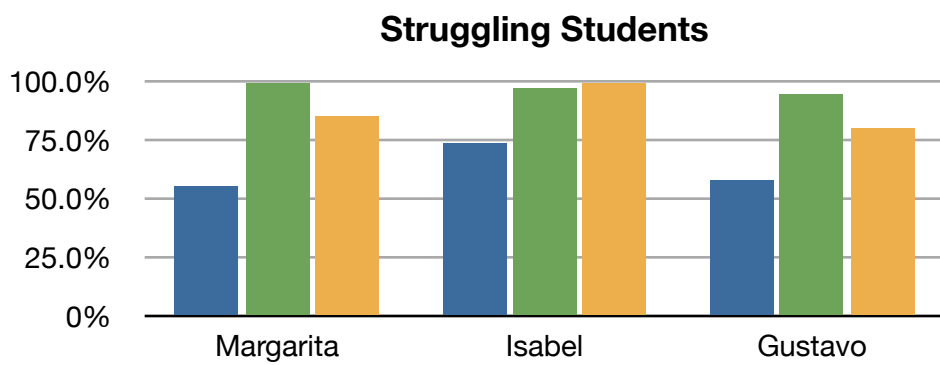
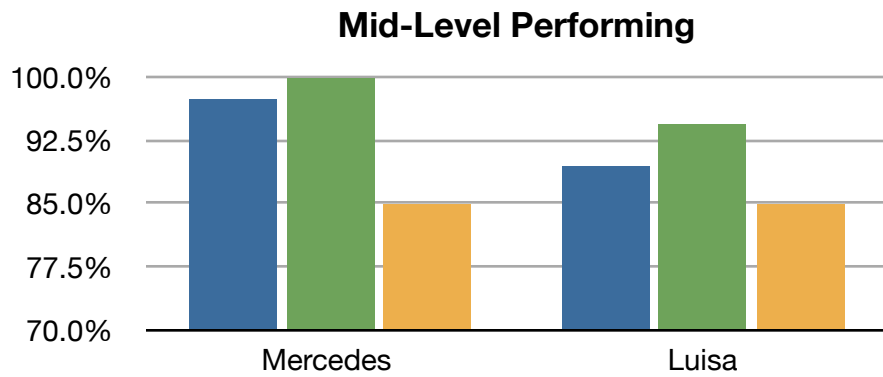


Appendix C:

5th Hour Students

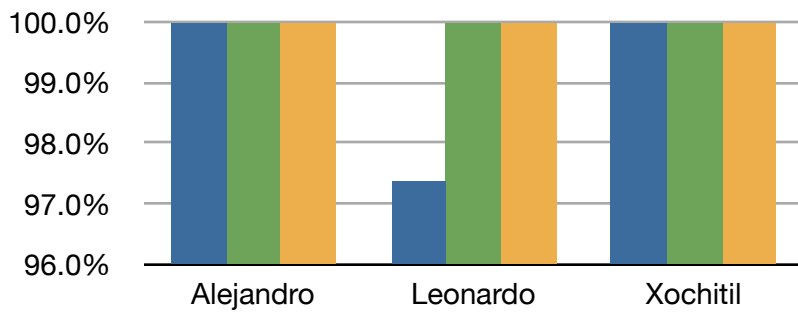


Note: These are grades above 89%



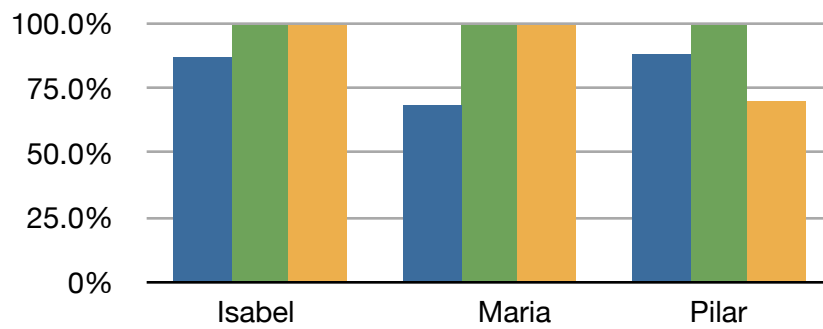
■ quiz 1 ■ quiz 2 ■ Miguelito

High Performing Students

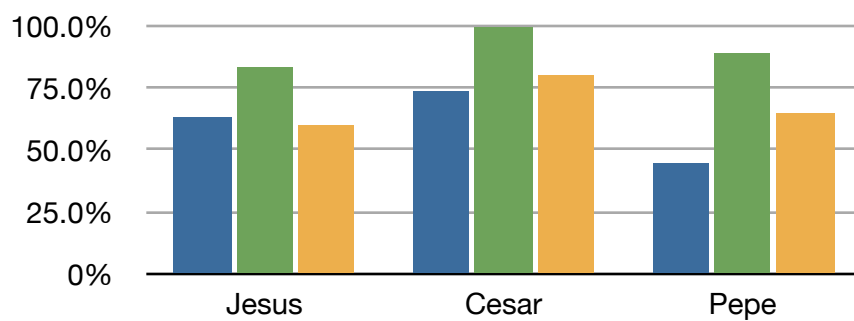


Note: These are grades above 95%

Mid-Level Performing



Struggling Students



■ quiz 1 ■ quiz 2 ■ Miguelito

Appendix E: Miguelito Vocabulary Words

Word Expert Cards



Defenition: to take photos

Sentence#1: Me gusta sacar fotos de gatos.

Sentence#2: Te gusta sacar fotos de cupcakes?

Chapter 9:

el recuerdo

regresar

Chapter 10:

el piso

la cama

Chapter 3:

dormir

la carta

tan

mejor

camiseta

la arena

el horno

Chapter 7:

doler

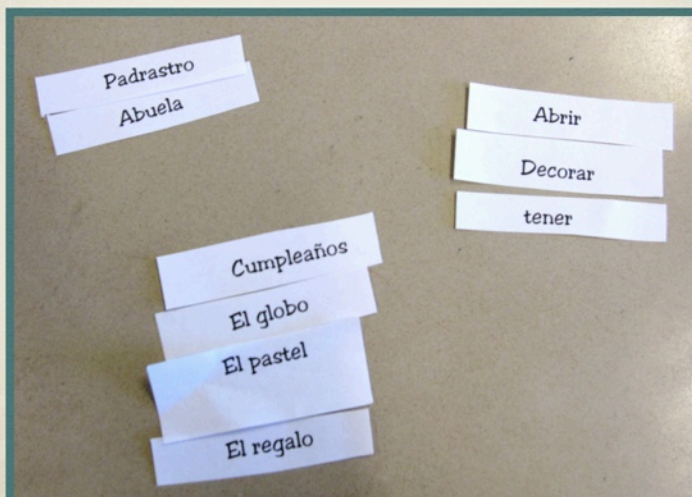
Word Expert Cards



Long.
La salchicha esta largo. femenino
noun
Tu tienes un servilleta largo.

cocina

Semantic Sorting Examples



Chapter 11:

oír

viaje

extraña

sonar

el avion

Appendix F: Student Work Examples

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