Vocabulary and Teaching Strategies in a 4th Grade Classroom

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Abstract

As students engage in the act of reading, they struggle to make vocabulary words authentic and meaningful in their own reading experience. This action research examines how the use of a variety of teaching strategies helps students retain and successfully use vocabulary in an authentic way in their writing. Furthermore, the study considers how teaching strategies affect vocabulary instruction and support students becoming word conscious when reading texts. Results indicate that choice is a key factor within the teaching strategies that allow students interact with vocabulary in authentic and meaningful ways.
In my early years as an educator, there were so many different types of settings that I experienced at various grade levels. Each setting included a variety of student ability levels, some with learning and emotional disabilities. I have been in class settings involving different content areas and curriculums. However, each setting had, as part of its curriculum, some component of vocabulary instruction. Vocabulary instruction is closely connected to so many reading and writing skills; it is one of the foundational elements of reading instruction. When vocabulary is understood, comprehension improves significantly (Harmon & Wood, 2018). Vocabulary words have been described as the “currency to communication” and words have an effect on listening, reading, speaking and writing. As Steven Stahl (2005) said, "Vocabulary knowledge is knowledge; the knowledge of a word not only implies a definition, but also implies how that word fits into the world" (p. 96).

However, educators (including myself) get stuck in what is comfortable and easy in the busy job of being a classroom teacher. In order to engage students in using vocabulary in authentic ways that allow them to be successful, I believe teachers need to tailor instructional techniques to the variety of learning styles. By giving students autonomy over their learning (Ryan & Deci, 2009), instructional activities can be created that are relevant to students’ lives (Guthrie, Mason-Singh, & Coddington, 2012) and allow for collaboration (Parsons et al., 2015). An engaged reader is a better reader. Students’ engagement in reading is an important precursor to reading achievement (Chapman & Tunmer, 1995). A piece of that reading puzzle is finding vocabulary instruction that not only helps students be engaged but also in meaningful ways.

In my fourth classroom, I have watched students come across words in their reading that they simply skip past since they are unfamiliar with the words. They may or may not use context
to figure out the meaning of the word. However, I have never, to my knowledge, had a student in my classroom go to the dictionary or look the word up on their Chromebook to gain a deeper understanding. It is not a common practice. Instead, words are simply brushed over and students quickly move on in their reading. I find this reflected in their writing, as well. Students use words that they are familiar with but do not go beyond those words they know in their repertoire. With this in mind, the focus of this action research is:

- How does the use of a variety of teaching strategies help my students retain and successfully use vocabulary in an authentic way in their writing?
- How does the use of a variety of teaching strategies affect vocabulary instruction and support students becoming word conscious when reading texts?

**Literature Review**

**Vocabulary Instruction Strategies**

Traditionally, vocabulary words are selected based upon the suggested words from a reading or content-specific curriculum. These are typically a list of 10-15 words that teachers are expected to teach and have students memorize during the chapter/lesson. Students may use them in an end assessment or project, but beyond that, the words become a distant memory. There is no real authentic use for interacting with the words as they have been assigned and only used in certain contexts. However, if students are going to truly learn the vocabulary words, meaningful interaction with words must take place, connecting to prior knowledge. Gerri Hixenbaugh (2001) claims, “Learning a word is not an ‘all or nothing’ kind of thing. It is more like a dimmer switch that gradually produces a greater supply of light.”

Therefore, students need to be explicitly taught word meanings and connect the meaning back to their background knowledge and experiences (Harmon & Wood, 2018). This can be
done in a variety of ways including the pre-teaching of vocabulary before reading a passage or even revisiting the words after reading. The previous steps can include a variety of multimodal instructional strategies such as the Frayer model which involves multiple representations, Word Walls, which gives students choice over how to represent a word and its meaning, or a variety of vocabulary games. At the heart of these strategies is student choice, which many articles confirmed was indeed the defining feature of an effective strategy and would also assist in metacognition (Feezell, 2012).

Teachers play an important role in vocabulary instruction in order for students to gain vocabulary knowledge. However, the amount of knowledge that a given teacher has on reading and reading instruction is directly correlated to the quality of support that the students get in their vocabulary instruction (Carlisle, Kelcey, & Berebitsky, 2013). It makes sense that if teachers have a comprehensive understanding of reading and the effect that vocabulary has on comprehension, they will support vocabulary instruction because students will gain in reading skills overall. Teachers know that vocabulary is a part of the puzzle of reading, and the area of vocabulary is often a weak area for students. If students don’t grasp the vocabulary, they will be weaker in reading comprehension. Therefore, instructional strategies must be comprehensive and engaging to connect students to vocabulary in authentic and meaningful ways. This will, in turn, increase the students’ reading ability.

Academic vocabulary consists of specific vocabulary words that pertain to understanding complex texts. However, when these types of words are encountered in a text, explicit instruction is an extremely effective method for increasing the knowledge of those particular words. Archer & Hughes (as cited in Jozwik and Douglas, 2017) state, “Explicit instruction involves stating the purpose and rationale for learning, modeling, explaining, and demonstrating learning targets;
VOCABULARY AND TEACHING STRATEGIES

structuring multiple opportunities for practice with feedback until students reach independent mastery” (p. 237). This does not mean duplicating the explicit instructional strategy every time with a set of vocabulary words, but rather clear and direct instruction of the words as they are introduced in the classroom. When vocabulary instruction is explicit, there should not be incorrect inferences or guesses about the vocabulary words from the students’ perspective. Explicit vocabulary instruction involves proper scaffolding, supporting students in reaching mastery effectively. This whole process is strengthened when used in conjunction with the gradual release model (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983). There are different tiers of vocabulary words, which will be examined in the subsequent section.

**Academic Vocabulary**

Academic vocabulary consists of specific vocabulary words that are critical to understanding complex texts. As mentioned previously, when these types of words are encountered in a text, explicit instruction is an extremely effective method for increasing the knowledge of those particular words. As students move upwards in the grades, the amount of academic vocabulary increases. Academic vocabulary can be sorted into three different tiers as per Beck, McKeown & Kucan (2002). Tier one consists of basic words that are commonly confused if not used in the right context such as table, run, or see/sea. These words rarely require explicit instruction. Tier two are more complex words that occur frequently in content area settings. They include words such as compare/contrast, conduct, or conclude. Tier three are complex words that are encountered less frequently because they are very specialized to the content area, such as biology, adjacent, or diagram. The tier two and three words are integral to vocabulary instruction. These are the very technical words that are important to reading text as
students get older and encounter more complex text in content areas. Therefore, it important that these are explicitly taught.

Another aspect of academic vocabulary involves words called connectives, such as “nonetheless” and “moreover.” These words are needed for students to read and write academic texts (Crosson & Lesaux, 2013). Those students who know the meaning of connectives are more likely to read with increased comprehension. Connectives can be challenging, even more so for English Learners. Therefore, this is an area that needs explicit instruction as well. Often times they are not a focus of vocabulary instruction, but yet they provide a deeper understanding of the structure and comprehension of the text.

**Vocabulary within Literacy Instruction**

Vocabulary provides the learner with another piece of the literacy puzzle. Often times, vocabulary is assumed to be teaching words in isolation. However, vocabulary isn’t simply understanding words, but rather interacting with words in text, writing, listening, speaking, describing visual representations and other formats. Engaging in a holistic literacy framework, the student is supported in making the vocabulary/comprehension connection (Harmon & Wood, 2018).

Vocabulary words are layered with meaning; each different context assigns meaning to the words. Rhodes (as cited in Feezell, 2012) stated, “A word choice isn’t apt merely because a word’s formal definition seems to fit. Words are layered with meaning, and the layers need to fit well.” Students need to have encounters with words in a variety of contexts in order to give support meaningful encounters. Mastery of understanding vocabulary in different contexts should be the goal, but it should not masqueraded by regurgitation of the words (Kinloch, 2009).
Vocabulary words need to be useful for their purpose, which is why Beck et al. (2002) categorizes vocabulary words into the three different academic language tiers, as discussed in the previous section. However, Beck et al. (2002) also discuss how words need to “offer more precise and mature ways of referring to ideas they already know about.” In connection to those very thoughts, vocabulary has the purpose of enhancing and supporting comprehension across all parts of learning. This goes across grade levels, disciplines and research throughout the decades (Haron & Wood, 2018). In the words of Stahl & Nagy (2006), “Having a bigger vocabulary makes you a better reader, being a better reader makes it possible for you to read more, and reading more gives you a bigger vocabulary” (p.13).

**The Effect on Comprehension**

Comprehension and vocabulary are reciprocal forces in the act of reading. When teachers are providing vocabulary instruction to students, they are, in turn, supporting reading comprehension. There are many variables that go into the relationship of comprehension and vocabulary. Harmon & Wood (2018) suggest the following items go into vocabulary instruction:

- Knowing word meanings/definitions
- Background knowledge
- Verbal ability of a student
- Knowing aspects of word meanings

Each variable plays a part in the relationship between comprehension and vocabulary. If a student is missing a variable, the comprehension of vocabulary is at risk for deficiency. The writers, August, Carlo, Dressler & Snow (2005) suggest that lacking breadth and depth in vocabulary knowledge places students at increased risk for reading comprehension difficulties and low reading achievement (p. 51). It is absolutely crucial for all readers to have all variables
in place to gain vocabulary knowledge. When students understand vocabulary, the words have meaning and can be interacted with effectively in readings, discussions, writing and other parts of literacy.

**Metacognition of Vocabulary**

Metacognition can be defined as the reader being aware and understanding their own thought process. Therefore, if we are considering the metacognition of vocabulary, it is about the students’ awareness to think about the word’s meaning. Often times, low-skilled readers will misread a word, but not even realize that they did so. When we ask them comprehension questions about said readings, their understanding of the text is unclear and uncertain. It is important that students have the two parts of comprehension monitoring; calibration and word knowledge. First, calibration involves recognizing when a text does not make sense and students need to calibrate their word knowledge (Connor et al. 2019). Calibrating involves making judgements about if a person knows a word. In this case, if a student does not know a word, he or she would need to seek out more information. Second, word knowledge needs to be increased in a classroom to support comprehension, as Connor et al. (2019) state, “Strengthening word knowledge **without** increasing word knowledge may be an ineffective in improving comprehension” (p.285). Once word knowledge and calibration has been achieved, the reader can then use comprehension reading strategies to repair understandings.

Metacognition strategies additionally allow for the reader to take responsibility for their own learning. In a study complete by Diaz (2015), metacognitive strategies are explored to determine how they affect the student’s learning process, specifically concerning vocabulary. This research study discussed how these strategies allow for more opportunities for processing of student learning. Metacognitive strategies provide a logical understanding of a student’s own
cognitive process and an assumption of responsibility. The readers will continue on in their learning, and if they have the metacognitive strategies, they will be able to continue to pursue knowledge to meet their learning needs at the same time (Diaz, 2015). The behaviors become autonomous and self-managing, which is exactly what all readers should do!

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, the research shows that vocabulary is a key part to comprehensive reading instruction. Teachers need to consider how they are using vocabulary instruction, as well as draw from their own knowledge of reading and reading instruction. Engaging multimodal instructional strategies connect to students interests and background knowledge. In turn, this provides authentic use of the words beyond the text. It is crucial that when experiencing these strategies, students think about the process of learning the words and they become a part of their understanding.

**Methodology**

In this study, my purpose was to examine the affects of teaching strategies in the area of vocabulary and its effect on authentic writing. Additionally, the study explores students’ successful use of the words as well. Furthermore, I questioned if these same teaching strategies have an effect on students becoming more word conscious when reading texts. This action research study seeks to answer those questions above.

**Participants and Setting**

The participants in this study are seven fourth-grade students in my general education classroom (see Table 1) The seven students were selected based upon their mid to upper writing skills using teacher observation of classroom work. The participants were comprised of four girls and three boys. None of the students in this study received services for special education or any
other classroom support. They are all native English speakers.

Table 1: Names of Participants*

| Elaine  
| Keith  
| Roy  
| Rachel  
| Charlie  
| Alexa  
| Abby  

*Names are Pseudonyms

The students attend a school that is located in a rural town in the upper Midwest. There is an enrollment of approximately 650 students in grades K4-12. Over half of the students in the district are economically disadvantaged. When looking at race/ethnicity of the district, it is comprised of predominantly white students with a small percentage of American Indian students. The district is located near a Native American reservation and is located within a large geographical area. These dynamics are also reflected at the elementary school as well. There is a little over 10% of students that are open enrolled into the district. The classroom setting is made up of twenty-one students, comprised of nine girls and twelve boys. There are four students who receive special education services. The study spanned over a 6-week period with a total of four instructional lessons.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

At the beginning of each lesson, the students self-assessed their own knowledge of vocabulary words from the school-selected reading curriculum using the Pre/Post Self-
Assessment tool (see Appendix A). These words were a part of a given text in the curriculum and therefore, they were a focus for a lesson. However, when I handed out this instrument, the students had not read the words in the story and we had not discussed them. On the list of vocabulary words, students were asked to mark if they knew the words. There were three statements that they could choose for each word: *I know this word and can explain/use it, I have heard or seen this word before but do not know what it means, and I do not know this word and cannot define it.* This instrument was used to have students to activate students’ prior knowledge related to the vocabulary words. Before students began each week with this tool, they were informed that the teacher did not expect them to know each word, but rather the teacher wanted them to think about what words they have encountered previously in other texts or conversations.

After students were done with their self-assessment tool, they were asked to complete short writings using the vocabulary words that they knew from the given self-assessment. They were to use them accurately and authentically in a story. The topic and structure of the story was of their choice. This was their pre-assessment for each set of vocabulary words. Students were also given a one-point rubric (see Appendix B) establishing expectations and guidelines for the students. The one point rubric outlined four different expectation categories including: communication (clear and concise writing), vocabulary (correct usage of words), legibility (readable writing and about five sentences/a paragraph) and conventions (correct grammar and spelling). This provided clear and explicit instructions for what was expected in their writing. Students knew what they needed to strive for to meet expectations.

Following the self-assessment tool and pre-lesson writing, the class listened to a read aloud of the text from the lesson. As the teacher was reading aloud and encountered a vocabulary word, time would be taken to notice it in that section of text. This became an opportunity for a
metacognitive think-aloud of what the word might mean in context. Often times, in a discussion format, the class would use context clues to think about the meaning of the word. This would oftentimes spark students’ prior background knowledge guide student thinking about the vocabulary word. This instructional strategy continued for the remaining additional vocabulary words that were a part of the text.

Next, the teacher would lead students to add the vocabulary words that were encountered in the text into a personalized dictionary journal/notebook. The website, dictionary.com and thesaurus.com was projected on the classroom screen, so students could follow the example. This included a kid-friendly definition of the word, the word’s part of speech (noun, adjective, etc.). Using the website, students then wrote a personalized dictionary entry, by choosing synonyms for the word and writing a sentence using the vocabulary word (See Figure 1).

Figure 1. Example of Personalized Dictionary Entry

| discouraged: (verb) to remove courage or hope |
| depressed down |
| After we lost the game, I was feeling discouraged. |

After the words were entered into their personalized dictionary, students were able to interact with the words by different vocabulary teaching strategies were introduced each week. One vocabulary teaching strategy used was a Vocabulary 4-Square (see Appendix C) with a gallery walk. Students were asked to complete a large square modeled after the Frayer Model where each part of the square asks students to represent the word in different ways, such as using the word in a sentence, writing the definition, depicting the word as a picture and writing a synonym and antonym for the word. After these were completed, the Frayer Models were placed
on tables around the room and students experienced a Gallery Walk, walking around the room silently, as if in an art gallery. This provided time for the students to read, think and reflect on the multimodal representations of the vocabulary words created by their peers.

*Figure 2.* Class example of Picture Word Wall.

The next instructional strategy that was used was a Picture Word Wall. Students were assigned vocabulary words from one week’s set of words, and conducted an image search database to find a picture that fit the definition of the word. Students posted these in the classroom to create a large picture word wall (See Figure 2). Another instructional strategy was a Cranium style game in which students spun a digital wheel that had four different categories on it: acting, drawing, describing the word without saying the word and using molding material to sculpt a representation of the word. Finally, another strategy involved students in creating a
Graffiti Word Wall, writing vocabulary words in graffiti style bubble letters with definitions, synonyms, antonyms and sentence examples inside the letters of the words (See Figure 3).

*Figure 3. Example of Graffiti Word Wall.*

After students created these words in their dictionaries and interacted with the vocabulary words using a variety of strategies, they completed a final writing sample as a Post-Assessment using as many of the vocabulary words from the word lists as they could. The post-assessment included a rubric (see Appendix B) to guide their writing as well.

Finally, I interviewed four students at the end of the research period to ask: which vocabulary instructional strategy was their favorite and why, how they understood the words, how vocabulary knowledge affects their writing and how or if participating in the strategies changed what they thought about the importance of vocabulary (see Appendix D).

**Findings and Discussions**

**Teaching Strategies**
In the final interviews of the research period, the first question that was asked to the participants was, “Which way of learning vocabulary was your favorite?” The responses from each of the students was related back to an activity that they enjoy doing in their spare time. Elaine said that her favorite was the Graffiti Wall because it included art, her favorite subject. Roy really enjoyed the Cranium game because it is a game that he plays at home with his family. Another student, Rachel, enjoyed the Picture Word Wall because she was able to take the word “towered,” and use her passion of basketball to show really tall players as her picture for the word. Keith enjoyed the Picture Word Wall as well because he chose a cartoon character that is notoriously stubborn from watching television, and it provided a strong visual of the vocabulary word.

When these students were asked about if these multimodal strategies helped them learn the vocabulary words, each of these students replied that they did indeed help them. They would each reference how these were ways that they could have fun with the words and get a understanding for the word. Rachel said, “...because you aren’t just sitting in a desk.” Without prompting, Roy said that he really enjoyed the Personalized Dictionaries because “it was our own and we could use it to look back at the words.” He went on to talk about how he could go back and look at the words to make sure he knew them or if he forgot.

**Word Consciousness**

Word consciousness can be defined as students being aware and taking notice of words that they do not understand in text. When students needed to explicitly learn a definition of a word, they used the resource of an online dictionary to create a personalized dictionary in their notebooks. It would include the definition, the part of speech, synonyms and a sentence. While the definition and part of speech was the same for every student in the class, they were able to
choose the two synonyms they wanted from an online thesaurus. They also were able to choose a sentence to include the word. There is nothing to report regarding the definition and part of speech for each word because they are all the same, as per the teacher example. However when they got the opportunity to write the synonyms and sentences, they had a choice of which words to select.

When analyzing the choices for these sentences and synonyms, for some of the vocabulary words, they chose different words that still were an accurate use of the word. In Charlie’s personalize dictionary, he choose to write for his sentence, “The kid was stubborn because he did not want to take out the trash,” whereas the class example was “My little brother was stubborn when mom asked him to sweep the floor.” He also choose his own synonyms for the word as “determined” and “persistent.” The class chosen synonyms were “determined” and “rigid.” Even those small choice of a sentence and synonyms makes it personalize to Charlie’s background knowledge and experience. I found that choice was a powerful motivator of learning vocabulary words.

**Authentic Assessments**

The Pre and Post Vocabulary writings provided an authentic assessment for how students used the vocabulary words. The following data was compiled from two complete weeks of using the assessment. Students had been working on vocabulary and doing these types of assessments prior to these results. The results from the instructional strategy of the Graffiti Word Wall are listed in Table 2 below. These results depict how many words the student knew and could explain based on their self-assessment, their pre and post writing and how their word knowledge grew. These stories were of the students’ own choosing regarding the topic and theme, but students were asked to use as many words as possible from the vocabulary word set. They used a
one-point rubric to guide their writing, setting expectations for what was needed to be included. The column in the table identifies how many words they self-identified as words that they knew well and could explain to another person. It is noteworthy to examine the difference between the words students claimed to know initially in their self-assessment and how many they used in the pre-instructional writing story.

Table 2: Week 4 Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Self-Assessment</th>
<th>Pre</th>
<th>Post</th>
<th>Growth</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Elaine</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>+2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keith</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>+8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roy</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>+7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rachel</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>+5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charlie</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>+6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alexa</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>+5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abby</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>+4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When examining the pieces closely, the accuracy in usage of vocabulary words changes from the pre and post writings. In a pre-assessment writing piece by Alexa, she describes some type of destructive event, as she titled the story “Age of Destruction: Part 2, Prologue.” She wrote, “The building is **crushing** more rubble! **Timbers** are falling! Nothing is **constructed**!” The words in bold are the vocabulary words that were in the vocabulary set and that she was to use in the story, but they aren’t used in the most accurate way. In her post-assessment writing piece, she uses the words in a different way that creates a more authentic usage. She wrote, “The buildings were **crushed** and the **timbers** were everywhere! Now everything is being
**constructed** and soon there will be NO more *debris*!” She increased her use of vocabulary words from five words to ten words.

The results in Table 3 below are from the instructional strategy of the game Cranium. Students used these written assessments both prior to and after instruction. Again, they were able to choose their story and theme, but needed to use as many vocabulary words as possible. Students were also given a one-point rubric to help guide their writing and the expectations for their writing. As shown in Table 3, there were four out of seven students who increased the number of vocabulary words used authentically in their writing. However, there were two individuals who decreased the number of vocabulary words and one who remained the same. This might be due to students being distracted during our writing time or feeling “stuck.” It could also be due to not understanding some of the words. The one student who did not change in vocabulary word usage knew all the words from the beginning and appeared as if she did not gain from instruction. However, upon further analysis, in the pre-assessment, Elaine used the word “declared” inaccurately. She wrote, “The next day he **declared** the two loaves of bread.” Whereas, in the final assessment, she wrote, “The next day they **declared** that they **devised** a plan!” So, even though she did not increase the number of vocabulary words used, she changed the accuracy of the word in the context of text.

**Table 3: Week 3 Results**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Self-Assessment</th>
<th>Pre</th>
<th>Post</th>
<th>Growth</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Elaine</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keith</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>-3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roy</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>+2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rachel</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>+2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Charlie 6   6   4   -2
Alexa 3   3   4   +1
Abby 4   4   8   +4

When considering those that did increase their vocabulary usage, Rachel chose the second time to write almost the exact same story from the first assessment. She did use words such as “ceased” and “devised” in her second writing. Rachel also used the word boasting three different times and in two different tenses, whereas the first time, she just wrote, “The one girl started to boasting on how good she was.” The second assessment, she wrote, “When they were playing H-O-R-S-E one girl started to boast about how good she was at basketball… One girl started to boast about how good she is at catching. The other girl gave her a glare and she ceased her boasting.” Her voice not only sounded smoother but she also was using the words at different points in the story and for different purposes.

Discussion and Implications

In this study, I examined the effect that explicit vocabulary instruction and multimodal instructional strategies have on students’ authentic use of vocabulary words in their writing and as a result becoming more word conscious in text. I found that there was some evidence that linked these instructional strategies with the students authentic use of words in text. As students continued to produce pieces of writing evidence, it became clear that if students were motivated to include the vocabulary words, they must have their own choice of topic. “Student choice is perhaps the single defining feature of workshop teaching” (Feezell, 2012). Rachel was writing about basketball and sports, an area of passion that is evident in her life. Elaine and Alexa wrote fantasy stories, which reflect their choice of reading material in the classroom. I could see that
students really took advantage of choice in the multimodal instructional activities. When students could choose to write their own sentences with the vocabulary word, choose their own synonyms, and even personalize their Vocabulary 4-Square or Graffiti Word Wall, vocabulary word usage becomes authentic. I believe choice is a key part of making vocabulary authentic and meaningful for our students. If we want students to use vocabulary beyond a single lesson, it is important that they internalize the meaning by making personal connections to their lives (Harmon & Wood 2018).

Although the research did not directly measure comprehension, students needed to “calibrate” (Connor et al. 2019) their own understanding in order to engage in the instructional activities. I made the choice to explicitly teach the word definitions and have students write those down in their own notebook. It could be easily accessed in a student-friendly manner. After the initial self-assessment and writing, students would be asked to participate in an instructional activity that they would need to metacognitively engage with vocabulary words. Students would also think about the vocabulary words in the context of the lesson story. Each of these parts of the lesson allowed for students to calibrate and check their word knowledge. They were checking their own comprehension of the word and the text. These go hand in hand. Students can not simply read the words and move onward, these metacognitive strategies must be taught and practiced. Students will then know what to do when they encounter unknown words in the future.

One thing that became clear was the importance of having both explicit instruction and Gradual Release Model (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983). The literature had discussed how explicit instruction could be powerful in conjunction with other instructional supports (Jozwik and Douglas, 2017), and it was evident that the same was true in this research. Explicit instruction should be a part of any instructional plan, but in order to make it meaningful, there needs to be
another opportunity to interact with the words. In this case, it was doing a Gradual Release Model. Student were explicit taught the words, given the opportunity to work with the words with synonyms and sentences, and then they engaged in an instructional strategy.

During the research period, there was an initial plan in place, but as the research began, it took my own reflection and knowledge of reading to adjust to what was needed for the students. I believe this was Carlisle et al. (2013) wrote, “The results did suggest that teachers’ knowledge about reading and reading instruction was related to the quality of support they provide for their students’ vocabulary learning” (p.1386). This suggestion was strengthened in this research by my own adjustments. I used small adjustments to differentiate vocabulary instruction and make it meaningful for each student in the classroom.

Limitations

The limitations present in this particular study setting were the frequent snow days which meant students did not come to school on those snow days that occurred in the initial research period. In addition, state testing occurred during the end part of the research period. The snow days and testing interrupted the flow of the study. Another factor to consider is the small sampling size of the representative group, it was not across grade levels or even a large representation of students. There was not a control group to compare and contrast results to in the classroom. If I were to replicate the study, I would include English Learners and students with disabilities to get a more realistic representative sample of the school population. It is important to consider the time frame of this research study. The study was not conducted during a complete school year and so the study had rather a short time frame. Therefore, I was only able to choose a small number of instructional strategies. If I had a longer time period and had the time to choose more strategies to use, then the sampling might have been deeper and provided
more variety.

**Conclusion**

After completing this action research study and considering the problem that was initially identified, there are evident implications for educators going forward. If educators choose multimodal teaching strategies, students will be able to use vocabulary in authentic ways in their writing. It is evident that students that are engaged will, in turn, be able to comprehend the vocabulary in text. Another clear part of this action research study was the importance of student choice. Prior to this study, students were doing the same vocabulary worksheet and engaging in the same instruction weekly. They were just going through the actions. Instead, now the students are making the words authentic to their own prior knowledge and constructing their own meaning.

If there were to be further studies on this particular subset of vocabulary going forward, it would be interesting to consider other kinds of instructional strategies. How would different strategies make the use of vocabulary even more authentic? Do different teaching strategies affect the students learning in different ways? Another idea to consider for future study would be creating a portfolio for the students to include all their work. It could include the personalized dictionary, self-assessments, writings and vocabulary work all in one space. Would this affect their engagement in the instruction and vocabulary knowledge as well?

I want to leave this study with a final research question that I asked during my interviews with the participants. “Why do you think vocabulary is important to learn?” Each student that was asked that question replied with a yes, but their focus of why was noteworthy. A few students acknowledged that if you don’t know what a word means, then you can’t understand/comprehend. Another student focused on the importance that vocabulary allows us to
speak properly and opens the door to more/longer words as we grow older. Educators each have
different philosophical beliefs, but I believe we all want our students to be able to communicate
properly and open doors for further learning.
References


The world's favorite online thesaurus! (n.d.). Retrieved from [https://www.thesaurus.com/](https://www.thesaurus.com/)
Appendix A

Name: __________________________ # ______

**Pre/Post Vocabulary Self-Assessment**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word</th>
<th>I know this word and can explain/use it</th>
<th>I have heard or seen this word before but do not know what it means</th>
<th>I do not know this word and cannot define it</th>
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</thead>
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</table>
## Writing Rubric

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concerns Areas that Need Work</th>
<th>Criteria Standards for this Performance</th>
<th>Advanced Evidence of Exceeding Expectations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Communication</strong></td>
<td>- My words show what I am thinking.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- The thoughts and sentences are clear and concise.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Vocabulary</strong></td>
<td>- I have used vocabulary words from my personalized dictionary</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- I have used the words correctly.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Legibility</strong></td>
<td>- Handwriting is legible and my reader can understand what I am saying.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- There is at least a paragraph (5 sentences or MORE)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Conventions:</strong></td>
<td>- Complete sentences begin with a capital letter and end with punctuation.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Spelling is correct to the best of my ability.</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix D

Student Interview Questions

Interviewee: ________________________  Date: ________________________

1. Which way of learning vocabulary was your favorite?

2. Do you feel like learning this way helped you understand the words? Why?

3. Did you feel like you used these words in your writing? Why? What made it easier or harder to use the words?

4. Why do you think vocabulary is important to learn?