Using Vocabulary to Increase Reading Comprehension

Written (November 2012) and Edited (November 2013) by Anne Hernandez

Research topic

To what extent does using fill-in-the-blank or cloze vocabulary strategies impact reading comprehension?

Literature Review

Kamhi (2009) defines comprehension by saying that it "is not a skill with a well-defined scope of knowledge; it is a complex of higher level mental processing that includes thinking, reasoning, imagining, and interpreting" (p. 172).   Therefore, the behaviorism theory with its memorization of vocabulary is no longer viewed as the correct way to teach reading and vocabulary. The linking of vocabulary with reading comprehension was noted by Thorndike (1917) and Davis (1944) (as cited in Longo & Curtis, 2008, p. 23) and theorized by numerous researchers since then. In the last twenty-five years, Second Language Acquisition (SLA) has had a number of studies by such researchers as Alderson (2000), Laufer (1997), Nation (1990, 2001), Nation and Coady (1988), and Tozcu and Coady (2004) (as cited in Atkinson, 2010) that have "shown an undeniable link between vocabulary size and reading comprehension" (p. 16). Various researchers including Rott (1999) (as cited in Atkinson) focused studies on the number of times that a vocabulary word needs to be in a text or encountered before a person learns it. Rott's study indicated six times and Nation (2001) (as cited in Lightbown & Spada, 2006) reviewed a few studies to determine that the learner may have to see and use the word in a meaningful way numerous times. Lightbown and Spada reported that the number could be as high as sixteen times. They also wrote "that it is difficult to infer the meaning and learn new words from reading unless one already knows 95 per cent or more of the words" (p. 100). Thus,

vocabulary has a tremendous impact on reading comprehension, and new words must be used by the learner a number of times to be acquired.

The research by Beck, McKeown, and Kucan (2002) (as cited in Longo & Curtis, 2008; as cited in McCollin, O'Shea, and McQuiston, 2010) discussed three word tiers. The first tier is "basic words" (Longo & Curtis, p. 23) that is common knowledge. The second tier contains the academic high frequency written words and is the focus of vocabulary teaching. The third tier includes specialized words with limited usage. When selecting the words to teach, Longo and Curtis advised the teachers to choose relevant words.   Words are relevant when they are used in more than one content area and are easier to learn if they relate to a previously acquired word. They recommended that the vocabulary words be taught directly and in the teacher's own terminology with appropriate examples. The recommendation further noted that students need to practice in multiple ways.

Atkinson (2010) noted that low-level students increased vocabulary knowledge by translating the words into their first language, finding the definitions and their various meanings, reading the words in text, and then incorporating them into their speaking and writing (p. 17). As students begin using new vocabulary, two methods are identified for this paper. One is the cloze format where a missing word has been removed by counting and removing every 5th word or such, where there is random removal of words, or where another word removal format has been chosen (Sadeghi, 2007). In testing situations, Sadeghi's research indicated that student-centered cloze tests had positive results; whereas, Ren (2011) had different results with another cloze process. Ren's results showed no difference in reading comprehension between the control group and the experimental group. Recent research focused on testing situations rather than non-testing situations for both cloze and fill-in-the-blanks, the second method. Montelongo, Berber-

Jimenez, Hernandez, and Hosking (2006) incorporated fill-in-the-blank sentences or sentence

completion into science activities for students and wrote that "teachers regularly use the sentence

completion worksheet to reinforce new vocabulary learning" (p. 29). These sentence

completions or fill-in-the-blank sentences have limited research although they are widely used

(p. 29). Both the cloze and fill-in-the-blank sentences provide vocabulary practice in meaningful

ways.

Edited Summary

The research results were discussed with my colleagues as Burns (2010) recommended.

During one of these conversations, I disclosed finding a previously undefined low area. The

students could memorize the vocabulary words and how to spell them. They could do vocabulary

matching. However, they had trouble with fill-in-the-blank. The one sentence fill-in-the-blanks

were much easier than a paragraph with them. In my analysis, the students were not encountering

"a word many times in order to learn it well enough to recognize it in new contexts or produce it

in their own speaking and writing" (Lightbown & Spada, 2006, p. 98).   Since fill-in-the-blanks

are somewhat like words in context, I voiced my concern that there were other words in the

passage that the students truly did not understand. I shared my thoughts with the colleague in the

form of a question: if a student needs to know 95% or more of the context to determine a new

word (Lightbown & Spada), then would it also be true that a student should know all the words

that are not blank? This was a completely different twist on reading comprehension than I

originally considered.

The test results were inconclusive and were impacted by situations beyond this project's

scope. To me, the researcher, the inclusive results were highly disappointing since I expected the

scores to be markedly higher. They were not. Yet, I believe that focusing on student generated

cloze or fill-in-the-blank sentences provided the students with more meaningful ways to use the

words as Lightbown and Spada (2006) recommended. I plan to incorporate more student

generated multi-fill-in-the-blank exercises within the regular classwork. In addition, I plan to

research Montelongo, Berber-Jimenez, Hernandez, and Hosking's (2006) idea of using fill-in-

the-blank sentences to reinforce expository text structures for main idea and sequencing.

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