

New Literacies and Non-Traditional Strategies for Vocabulary

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In a hot, stuffy room where air conditioning is nonexistent, a large amount of laughter fills the room. It is the second week of school on an eighty-five degree day in August. Students in my classroom are viewing videos made by my co-teacher and myself. Education is filled with many activities and strategies to engage students. We have taken student engagement to the next level by integrating technology, entertainment, and comedy into our vocabulary development. Our plan is to increase the amount of technology and “non-traditional” methods to instruct vocabulary.

### Statement of Purpose/ Rationale

In today`s climate of education there is a wide spectrum of external influences fighting for our students attention. Finding ways to engage students has become half the battle. Vocabulary development and acquisition has become an endless wasteland for students on every level to get stuck in a rut. That rut is usual tactic of writing definitions from the back of the book and then memorizing for a test. “Traditional vocabulary instruction for many teachers involves having students look words up in the dictionary, write definitions, and use words in sentences” (Basurto, 2004). Vocabulary is meant to be acquired, not memorized. This is why it is called vocabulary acquisition, not vocabulary memorization. “While the dependence of both general achievement and reading achievement on vocabulary growth has been clearly established for decades, those findings do not appear to have been put into practice.” (Pikulski and Templeton, 2004). Strong literacy skills are built on a foundation of vocabulary knowledge and recognition. Not only is vocabulary acquisition essential for meeting state standards and succeeding on state tests, but it is also influential for continued success with reading and writing. “Different students, different words, and different instructional goals call for different strategies used at different points of instruction for differing amounts of instructional time.” (Flanigan &

Greenwood, 2007). I will aim to answer the following questions:

1. What are some effective strategies to increase student acquisition of vocabulary?
2. How are teachers of reading using technology and media to motivate readers?
3. What will I do as an educator to integrate technology into my vocabulary instruction?

#### Literature Review of Non-Traditional and Media Driven Vocabulary Instruction

To gain a more comprehensive understanding of this topic, a review of relevant literature was conducted. Various publications of journal articles were examined to determine the place and effectiveness of vocabulary strategies in middle school curriculum, with particular attention paid to language arts.

Flanigan and Greenwood (2007) proposed a strategic framework that guides content teachers in choosing vocabulary words and methods that match their students and their purposes. They provided this framework for teachers to practice the “art” of effective vocabulary instruction. The authors observed a 7<sup>th</sup> grade civics class in which the teacher feels helpless in teaching proper vocabulary. These feelings are caused by constant pressure of state proficiency tests. The teacher wishes he could use more effective strategies, but feels he does not have enough time to do it. The authors suggest a four level framework based on Graves’s (1984; 2000) and McKeown and Beck’s (1988) three tier system. Flanigan and Greenwood (2007) built this framework by taking into account the goals of the lesson, the amount of teaching time and depth of knowledge a word would require, and when in the lesson it would be most profitable to explore the word. They provided a chart with simple strategies that should be used for each level or tier. The strategies provided seemed to be effective. The authors

specifically told how the teacher implemented these proposed strategies in his class; however, they did not give direct results or if they had become successful in boosting student assessment scores. It would be interesting to see data that showed what improvements had been made.

Keehn, Harmon & Shoho (2008) conducted a quantitative study with eight-grade students the majority of whom were reading below grade level. The study lasted six weeks and involved one class of students participating in Reader`s Theater and a comparative class using more traditional literary text. The researchers, in collaboration with the classroom teacher, selected six short stories to use in the study. Selection of the short stories was based upon student interest, suitability for Readers Theater format, and readability levels. The texts used were between fifth and seventh grade reading levels. The results showed that the Reader`s Theater class made significant growth in reading level as compared to the comparative class. There was no significant difference in comprehension, but the greatest improvement was with the vocabulary acquisition of the Reader`s Theatre class. The students nearly doubled the vocabulary acquisition of the comparative class. While reading this article, I was reminded of an activity mentioned by Dr. Kist. “Visual literacy skills should be included if we truly want to prepare students for this new kind of reading. I think many teachers approach this by looking at paintings and visual art, and I have done this also.” (Kist, 2010). He is referring to a visually represented performance called “Tableaux Dramas”. The classroom in the article would also benefit from these “Tableaux Dramas”. It would be interesting to see what kind of scores of produced if he students were incorporating these quick dramas to lead into their Reader`s Theater.

Ruddell and Shearer (2002) shared what they learned about the effects of using the

Vocabulary Self-Collection Strategy (VSS) in seventh and eighth grade language arts classrooms. The study used students that were all reading 2 to 4 years below grade level. Ruddell and Shearer (2002) were engaged in the Vocabulary Self-Collection Study, to intervene in their vocabulary development. The researchers analyzed the data by using the following three sources: list of words collected, end-of-week and 3-week-interval tests, and journal entries. Test results for the VSS words translated into a 94% correct average over the 9-week period. Student journal entries revealed how sophisticated the students were in seeking out vocabulary learning opportunities. The results showed the VSS as an effective strategy for increasing student vocabulary knowledge and their ability to be independent learners.

Bromley (2007) discussed nine things teachers may have forgotten about words and word learning to be effective teachers of vocabulary and their content. She stressed the importance for teachers to remember these as she suggests ideas for classroom practice. These nine ideas are listed as follows:

1. English is a huge and unique collection of words.
2. The rules of English are simple and consistent.
3. Language proficiency grows from oral competence to written competence.
4. Words are learned because of associations that connect the new with the known.
5. Seventy percent of the most frequently used words have multiple meanings.
6. Meanings of 60% of multisyllabic words can be inferred by analyzing word parts.
7. Direct instruction in vocabulary influences comprehension more than any other factor.
8. Teaching fewer words well is more effective than teaching several words in a cursory way.
9. Effective teachers display an attitude of excitement and interest in words and language.

Bromley (2007) suggests that the goal of vocabulary instruction is to build student strategies so they may become lifelong learners. For this to be successful she stresses how important it is for the teacher to be passionate about words and that enthusiasm will excite the

students. “This requires teachers who are passionate about words and language, who immerse their students in language, and who provide direct instruction that is thoughtful, intentional, and varied.” (Bromley, 2007).

Hoffner, Baker, and Quinn (2008) discuss a new innovative technology known as, “Descriptive Video.” They describe how they were able to use this technology in a 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> grade classroom to enhance writing and vocabulary. Descriptive video (also known as described programming) is a technology that allows individuals with visual impairments to hear a described narration of the given television program or movie. “Described programming can enhance reading and writing ability as well as provide a motivating educational stimulus in today’s entertainment culture” (Hoffner et al., 2008). Vocabulary, concept development, background knowledge, language precision, and descriptive writing are just some of the ways descriptive video can be used to enhance classroom instruction. Hoffner, Baker, and Quinn (2008) began the study by having the students watch the standard version of the opening “circle of life” segment of *The Lion King*. They were then instructed to write a description of the scene they saw. As the students were writing, their teachers also wrote. Although the students’ descriptions were accurate, their teachers found that their writing lacked content-specific vocabulary and colorful terms. The teachers and students then watched the same film segment with description and were again asked to write a description. While the teachers expected a second viewing to produce better writing samples, they were amazed to see that the students included content terms such as *savannah*, *gazelles*, and other words that had not previously been part of their speaking vocabulary but were included in the descriptive version of *The Lion King*. “Effective teachers can use television programs and films to enhance learning in their classrooms. Limited studies have suggested that Descriptive Video has the potential to enhance

comprehension and build vocabulary for students of various ages and abilities” (Hoffner et al., 2007).

#### Support for Implementation of Strategies

The literature that I have reviewed has shown the effects of “non-traditional” methods for vocabulary instruction. It has also validated the importance of vocabulary. “Vocabulary is a principle contributor to comprehension, fluency, and achievement.” (Bromley, 2007).

Vocabulary should have a strong presence in the language arts classroom, but they need to be taught with new and engaging instruction. “Word lists, teacher explanation, discussion, memorization, vocabulary books, and quizzes often are used in an effort to help students learn new words. But these methods ignore what research and theory tell us about word learning and sound vocabulary instruction.” (Bromley, 2007).

#### Strategies Currently Being Implemented

To ignite that enthusiasm and ease their reluctance to write, I have implemented a classroom activity called, “Vocabulary Story Writing Musical Chairs”. This activity is done at the beginning of each week and involves each student taking out a piece of paper. They begin to write a story about anything they choose while using a vocabulary word that I have picked from our list. As they begin writing their stories, I begin playing a song. Students are instructed to write until the music stops. Once the music stops, they get up and rotate to the next desk and continue writing where the last person left off. This continues until the every word has been used. Students gain fluency development and comprehension they are writing their stories. It allows them a chance to get up and move around and it allows me to assess their writing conventions and proper context and usage of the vocabulary word. At the conclusion,

students enjoy reading their hilarious and entertaining stories aloud to the class.

Hoffner, Baker, and Quinn (2008) gives further proof how types of media and technology can be used to implement proper classroom instruction and home instruction of vocabulary. My co-teacher and I have found a way to combine both of these types of instruction. We have taken the weekly vocabulary words and recorded ourselves performing skits that address the meaning and vocabulary. We then play a review activity with the words every Thursday to reinforce vocabulary meaning and context. We show video skits based on that week`s vocabulary words. The students group up into teams of three to guess which word we are acting out in our videos. This is treated as a review activity for an end of the week test. . The skits help the students to make a visual connection with the videos and the actions they see on the screen. We have even seen an increase in our vocabulary scores since we started the vocabulary skits. The website “YouTube” has been a great asset to our cause. We have been able to upload our videos to the website as a reference for the students. It is a great tool for independent review and entertainment. If students are entertained they are learning. The first four weeks of vocabulary our mean average was an 84%. The next three weeks with video usage saw the average increase to 86%. Towards the last few weeks of school we were at a 90% class average. In addition to our videos, we assign student-selected groups 3 words to videotape on their own for that week. As a result, they have created some very intelligent and impressive videos. It is important that they have taken ownership in their learning and are independently creating their own strategies to learn from.

#### Conclusion/Future Implementation

Technology, music, and direct interaction help to engage students in this current culture of media. Gaining student interest and attention is the most important and challenging part of

education. If we can vary our approach and change the way vocabulary is taught, we can meet students where they are and stimulate interest that goes beyond the classroom and can transcend into their home life as well. Student ownership and engagement is the first step in securing independent learning.

In addition to vocabulary musical chairs and vocabulary skits, I am looking to use descriptive writing in my classroom. The research shows that students vocabulary development and writing skills with increase. Just as Hoffner, Baker, and Quinn (2008) describes, I will begin by activating background knowledge and asking students if they have ever seen *The Lion King*. For those who have I will ask students to share what they remember about the story. Students will then share their thoughts and memories. This should familiarize those who have not seen the film with some of its content. Next, show students the opening segment of the movie and then write a descriptive retelling of it to share with the class. After viewing the film segment, write a descriptive retelling while students also write one. Next, I will show the same segment, but this time with descriptive video. Students will be told they are going to watch the same scene as before from *The Lion King* but this time they will watch it with description added.

After viewing this version, students will write another descriptive retelling of the scene. They will be invited to share what they have written and compare this version with their first version. Students will look for more specific terminology, more descriptive words and phrases, and more elaboration of detail in their second versions. If they do not see any differences between their first and second versions, students will be asked to share their writing with a peer and ask for advice. Then have students view the described version again now that they know where they should focus their attention. Use a Venn diagram on the board, chart paper, or overhead to fill in the similarities and differences between the two writing samples. I may also have students work in pairs using an interactive Venn Diagram or Compare & Contrast Map.

Finally, I will distribute Self-Assessment questions to encourage students to reflect upon their work during the lesson.

I have also thought of a way to review with my students online in addition to YouTube videos. By taking the vocabulary lists from books such as *The Hunger Games*, *The Outsiders*, *Tears of a Tiger*, *The Lightning Thief*, *Out of My Mind*, and *Milkweed*, I can host an online webcast review via Twitter. Students can log on to their accounts and become a follower of my professional Twitter account, “MrJSchwendiman”. At a prearranged time, students can follow me as I “tweet” real-time updates of review questions and YouTube links to vocabulary skits. They will be able to review from home using their computer, using twitter, and growing content knowledge all at the same time. Most of them are already using this technology, why not use it to our advantage to increase their vocabulary development and fluency. My passion and favorite things to teach in language arts content is vocabulary acquisition and development. The research show the importance of vocabulary instruction and time dedicated to it. “The goal of vocabulary instruction should be to build students’ independent word learning strategies that can empower them for lifelong learning. This requires teachers who are passionate about words and language, who immerse their students in language, and who provide direct instruction that is thoughtful, intentional, and varied.” (Bromley, 2007)

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### Additional Resources

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