# Language Arts Textbooks for Vocabulary Instruction in Primary Classrooms: Why are they Good, but not Enough?

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## Abstract

*Despite the growing interest for vocabulary instruction in primary education, few studies have focused on the pedagogical content put forward in Language Arts textbooks on that matter. Yet, it has been shown that many elementary school teachers rely heavily on those textbooks for vocabulary instruction [1], [2]. As such, an examination of these materials could give an overview of the strategies put into practice to support students' vocabulary development. The purpose of this study was to conduct an in-depth analysis of a Language Arts' textbook collection that is used extensively in French primary classrooms in the province of Ontario in Canada. We wanted to know to what extent the strategies found in this commercially prepared material are aligned with current scientific knowledge on vocabulary instruction. A content analysis was conducted on all the teachers' guides, students' manuals and activity books. We concluded that in this particular collection of textbooks, vocabulary instruction is infused in most lessons, which is profitable. Nonetheless, many lexical activities that are suggested are incongruent with current knowledge on vocabulary instruction.*

**Keywords:** *Vocabulary instruction; Primary classrooms; Textbooks collection; Teaching practices*

## 1. Introduction

Vocabulary knowledge of young students has a major influence on their reading success as well as on their general academic achievement [4], [6], [7]. Therefore, from the very beginning of schooling, teachers should focus on the vocabulary development of their students. However, studies carried out in various settings are showing that in primary school, little time is devoted to vocabulary instruction [8], [5], [9]. This might be explained by the fact that for many teachers, vocabulary instruction does not seem to be necessary. They tend to think that their pupils simply need to be informally exposed to new words. Also, it appears that they rely almost exclusively on the lexical exercises found in language arts textbooks for vocabulary instruction [8]. If textbook collections are guiding teachers in this important task, it is worthwhile to know more about the way it is conveyed in such materials, which are often develop commercially.

Neuman and Dwyer [1] analyzed ten language art textbook collections intended for preschool students in the United States. They found very few contents related to vocabulary instruction, except for a couple of randomly chosen words that were to be explained to the students. They also demonstrated that the effectiveness of some vocabulary learning activities that were suggested were inefficient. In another study, Anctil and Desrochers [10] conducted an analysis of workbooks from seven collections used in elementary schools in the province of Quebec in Canada. They also observed that the study of vocabulary was scarce. Also, the few lexical exercises that they found in those workbooks did not lead the students to use the targeted words in meaningful contexts. The exercises were decontextualized, without any regard to inferential strategies or morphological analysis that are sustainable to vocabulary development.

Those studies suggest that language arts textbook collections are lacking in regard of vocabulary instruction. However, one focused only on student workbooks [10], and the other, on a few lessons taken from the teaching guides [1]. Both studies have the advantage of covering several collections. However, there is the possibility that the researchers did not succeed in capturing all of the pedagogical elements related to the vocabulary instruction that could have been found in the entire collections. The present study also aims to analyze some language arts textbooks to highlight the elements related to vocabulary instruction. However, a single collection is scrutinized. Indeed, it seemed relevant to consider a single collection in order to make an in-depth analysis of all aspects related to vocabulary instruction. In this brief article, we are presenting some highlights of our study.

## 2. Research goals

We analyzed a collection titled *Collection Départs*, which is used in the first three years of primary schooling in Francophone schools in the province of Ontario, Canada. A distinctive aspect of this collection is that in each and every sequence, a section is specifically dedicated to vocabulary instruction. But the question that remains is whether the pedagogical proposals in that collection are aligned with current scientific knowledge regarding the teaching of vocabulary.

Our first goal was to do an inventory of all the target words of the entire collection to analyze them in light of the criteria that should guide the words' selection to be taught explicitly to students [1]. Our second goal was to analyze all the pedagogical proposals related to vocabulary instruction. An in-depth exam of all the teaching guides, textbooks and students' workbooks was conducted to verify the congruence with the current knowledge on vocabulary instruction.

## 2.2 Words selection

Since it would be inconceivable to explicitly teach all the words of a language to students, those that are targeted must be chosen carefully in light of their frequency. According to the theoretical *Three tiers vocabulary model* [3], it should be those that can be classified in the second tier: frequently used in written texts, but less often used in conversation. Therefore, we retrieved all the targeted words in all the sequences of *Collection Départs*. In all, 495 words were listed. To estimate the frequency of each word, we used an on-line interactive tool developed by the Ministry of Education [11]. It consists of a classified list of about 19 000 words that are the most frequently found in children's books. This exercise led to the observation that 70% of the target words of the collection were indeed some words that primary grade students might have the opportunity to encounter when reading children's literature.

## 2.3 Pedagogical proposals

A review of the literature highlights several principles to be taken into account in vocabulary instruction [1],[2],[4],[12]. We grouped them into six categories: defining words within reach of comprehension for young students; introducing words in a meaningful context; memorization of the words' meanings; assessing word comprehension; promoting usage of the words; promoting lexical awareness. In light of these general principles, we classified the pedagogical proposals put forward in the teaching guides of the *Collection Départs*, which are carried out through students' textbooks and workbooks.

In all, 147 sequences were distributed between first, second and third grade. For each sequence, we methodically noted all guidelines related to vocabulary instruction, which enabled us to associate them to the general principles mentioned above. This classification is not mutually exclusive since certain sequences could be associated with more than one principle. Table 1 summarizes our classification.

Table 1 Sequences associated to the principles of effective vocabulary instruction

| General principles of effective vocabulary instruction | Number and percentage of sequences associated to principle ( N = 147 sequences) |
|---|---|
| Defining words within reach of students' comprehension | 138 (93.9%) |
| Introducing words in a meaningful context | 146 (99.3%) |
| Memorization of words' meanings | 20 (13.6%) |
| Assessing words comprehension | 0 (0.0%) |
| Promoting usage of the words | 4 (2.7%) |
| Promoting lexical awareness | 41 (27.9%) |
| No guidelines | 9 (6.0%) |

In nearly 94% of the sequences, the definition of the targeted word is stated in such a way that elementary school students should be able to grasp their meaning. For example, there are no complex definitions such as one might find in classic dictionaries. Rather, the context in which the words are used contribute to the comprehension. For example, the word *navigate* is defined as such: " *to use the Internet to search for information or to have fun".* In fact, in almost 100% of cases, the words are introduced in a meaningful context, such as short stories.

However, the other pedagogical principles leading to effective vocabulary instruction doesn't seem to be taken into account as much. Very few interventions aim to the memorization of the words' meanings. Also, teachers are never instructed to assess students' understanding of those words. Moreover, less than 3% of the sequences are prompting students to use the targeted words. Finally, guidelines aiming at promoting students' lexical awareness are somewhat apparent in certain sequences, but only if we consider activities such as games or riddles.

## 3. Implications for vocabulary instruction

Our analysis suggests that it would be difficult to support the development of students' vocabulary by relying solely on collections of textbooks intended for teaching language arts. In the analyzed collection, despite a thematic approach that could possibly allow students to better grasp the meaning attributed to the words, the pedagogical proposals are not supporting in-depth vocabulary learning. We noted the absence of teaching strategies aimed at genuine construction of lexical knowledge. For example, for teaching the meaning attributed to the words, in most sequences, it is simply indicated that the teacher must "explain the vocabulary". It is therefore a transmissive approach that is favoured to the detriment of an inductive approach that would allow students to develop learning strategies leading them to understand new words on their own. Also, like other researchers [10], we find that students rarely have the opportunity to reuse learned words, which reduces the chances that they will be memorized.

For such reasons, we argue that teachers should not rely solely on textbooks to offer vocabulary instruction. Rather, they should be trained in a more rigorous way in that domain. Such training should lead them to understand that well-orchestrated vocabulary instruction can have a significant influence on their students' academic success. In addition, this training could be geared towards the general principles that have guided our analyses, which echo most of the components of effective lexical teaching also recommended by Graves [13], namely the use of children's literature to offer varied language experiences that foster authentic exchanges; the teaching of methodically chosen words, emphasizing not only their meaning, but also their memorization and reuse; teaching lexical strategies and lexical concepts that promote autonomous vocabulary learning and finally, supporting the development of lexical awareness that awakens interest and curiosity for words through fun and stimulating activities.

## 4. Conclusion

This analysis of the *Collection Départ* reveals a viewpoint of vocabulary instruction that can take place in primary schools in Ontario, Canada. But our analytic process could be useful anywhere to guide teachers who wish to evaluate the relevance of the lexical component in language arts textbooks that they are using. Our results corroborate the knowledge that has already been presented by others [1], [10]. Such knowledge should guide the publishers who are producing pedagogical materials aiming to support students' vocabulary development.

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