



How To Turn Vocab Acquisition into Student Empowerment

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Abstract

Vocabulary acquisition is a crucial aspect of language learning and development for all students but even more significant for students aged between 10-18. It has been established that vocabulary knowledge correlates positively with academic success and reading comprehension. This presentation explores the importance of actively teaching vocabulary to students during their adolescent years to support their language growth and academic achievements. One of the benefits of explicit vocabulary instruction is that it builds the foundation for better communication and critical thinking skills. As a result, students can better articulate their ideas in both oral and written expression. Research shows that effective vocabulary instruction includes multiple approaches such as explicit instruction and teaching context clues, context building, repeated opportunities for practice, and exposure to a wide range of words in diverse contexts. The explicit teaching of vocabulary, such as the recognition that language operates at three levels, and an understanding of the value or worth of words within texts, empowering the student with the confidence to control the creation of meaning within their own texts. Ultimately, it is necessary to address vocabulary development as an ongoing process by creating a language-rich environment that encourages constant interaction with various forms of reading materials. Through this approach, students not only acquire new vocabulary easily but also learn how to use language effectively in their academic, personal, and professional lives.

Keywords: *learning, students, empowerment, vocabulary acquisition, explicit instruction*

Introduction

The development of literacy skills among students has played a crucial role in shaping societies, expanding knowledge, and promoting social mobility. Over the past 30 years, literacy development in education systems has undergone significant evolution and transformation. The recognition of diverse learning styles along with changes in teaching methodologies catalysed by the inevitable march of progress in technology have merged to create a flexible pedagogical paradigm. This in turn has attuned to a multiplicity of literacies within the cauldron of today's classrooms. This period witnessed a shift from traditional methods of instruction, where the teaching of literacy was generic in nature, to the teaching of literacy being more student-centred, interactive, and technology driven. These more advanced approaches aim to foster critical thinking, creativity, and digital literacy skills. The teaching of vocabulary, however, has had less intensive change and consequently, remains a barrier for adolescents to access effective instruction in the development of both reading and writing.

Context of teaching literacy in high schools

In the high school setting, literacy approaches traditionally focus on the development of reading comprehension and writing. These approaches aim to equip students with the fundamental abilities necessary for academic success and future endeavours. The initial literacy approaches commonly employed in the high school environment to improve student's reading comprehension skills were developed through exposure to a variety of literary genres, including fiction, non-fiction, poetry, and plays, usually situated within the English or literature studies classroom. The development of vocabulary is considered crucial for effective communication and comprehension, however, high school teachers often incorporated simple vocabulary building exercises, such as word lists and



vocabulary quizzes, in an effort to expand vocabulary repertoires. Historically, a strong link exists between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension, dating back to factor-analytic studies (Carroll, 1971; Davis, 1944; Singer, 1965; Spearritt, 1972). This link created the illusion that problems in comprehension could be addressed by promoting learning word meanings, mostly in the form of definitions (Beck & McKeown, 1991). Research has now shown that these traditional methods, while having some merit, lack the substantial long-term effect of retention required to succeed outside of the school context, to meet the evolving work skills required for the 21st century. There has been a concerted change, however, in the last few decades to recognise the importance of teaching literacy across all subject disciplines or curriculums. Positioning literacy as a whole-school responsibility in a school policy is responsive to the need to give close consideration to the fostering of student's literacy skills and attitudes across learning areas. In Australia, literacy beyond the subject of English is an Australian curricular expectation (Merga, 2023).

Low adult literacy impacts

Low literacy levels in adults have far-reaching impacts on individuals, communities, and societies as a whole. These impacts can be seen in various aspects of life, including personal, social, economic, and health-related domains. The Survey of Adult Skills, a product of the OECD Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), defines literacy as the ability to understand, evaluate, use and engage with written texts to participate in society, achieve one's goals, and develop one's knowledge and potential. Across the 24 countries that participated in a survey administered by PIAAC in 2012 reported that around 15.5% of adults aged 16 to 65 were assessed as having low literacy skills: they scored at or below Level 1 on the scale that measures literacy proficiency. The proportion of adults who scored at or below Level 1 ranged from 5% in Japan to 28% in Italy. In an Australian context, there is a relatively large gap between the most and least proficient adults in literacy and numeracy, as was the case among 15-year-olds in PISA (OECD, 2017). In Tasmania, 46.9 per cent of women have the lowest levels of functional literacy in all of Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013). There are many researched impacts of low literacy levels in adults, including but not limited to lack of access to educational opportunities, where adults are often restricted access to further education and training, or acquire new job-related skills, limiting their career prospects and opportunities for personal growth. Economic disadvantage associated with low literacy levels can significantly contribute to adults facing challenges in finding and retaining employment, as many jobs require adequate reading, writing, and communication abilities. This can lead to lower wages, limited job options, and a higher likelihood of unemployment or underemployment. Adults with low literacy proficiency may feel embarrassed or ashamed of their limited abilities, leading to avoidance of situations that require reading or writing, and consequently, social isolation.

The place of explicit instruction in teaching vocabulary

In high school settings, teachers principally use simple or straightforward strategies to teach vocabulary such as word banks and spelling tests. These are mostly performed in isolation and witnessed at the beginning of the teaching unit or as part of preparation for a formal summative test/assessment. While comprehension is complex, involving the coordination of multiple cognitive processes and knowledge, the lynchpin of deep comprehension is word knowledge (Perfetti & Stafura, 2014). Word knowledge and reading comprehension are intimately linked as abundant high-quality lexical representations characterize skilled readers relative to less skilled readers (Perfetti, 2007). To make the understanding of words malleable for students, explicit instruction that focuses on understanding word usage appears to have more impact. Research on effective vocabulary teaching has clearly shown that teachers who directly and explicitly teach students what they need to know (Rosenshine, 1995, Taylor e. al, 2002), have better results than those who do not explicitly teach the meaning of words, and their value across multiple contexts. Nation (2001) added to the body of work in the explicit teaching of vocabulary by identifying high frequency, academic, technical, and low frequency categories. Academic words are words common across domains of academic texts, as exemplified by Coxhead's (2000) Academic Word List. Nation's technical words are those related to a specific topic or subject area but not common beyond it. Nation's academic category roughly corresponds to Tier 2 words, which are described as general words that appear across domains and



that characterize text rather than conversational language (Beck et al., 2013). Extensive research in this area has revealed that an intensive and sustained focus on teaching vocabulary meaning in academic terms yields greater results in developing comprehension and improving written expression. Students need to know the meaning of a word, across various contexts, as well as the word's value or impact in making meaning. They require consistent exposure to the process of learning that word. It requires more than being able to spell or define the word. Research conducted across decades and grade levels has supported the consensus that vocabulary instruction that is likely to support comprehension is based on multiple encounters with words in varied contexts and encouraging active processing (Beck et al., 1982; Bos & Anders, 1990, 1992; Carlo et al., 2004; Coyne et al., 2010; Margosein, et al., 82; McKeown et al., 1983; McKeown et al., 1985). The key to explicit instruction is the active communication and interaction between teacher and student. This style of teaching can be well structured or less structured in nature but at the heart of the method are explicit explanations, modelling, and guided practice. Modelling is an explicit teaching strategy that effective teachers use to help students conceptualise skills and strategies and how to apply them. As Dole et al. (1991) noted, modelling varies in relation to how much information is explicitly provided. The modelling of words into academic categories helps students understand not only their value in the singular, but also their place, purpose/form/audience, in the plural. The explicit teaching of vocabulary builds a student's confidence in reading comprehension and writing, and overall sense of empowerment in communication.

What is the gap?

Recent research in New Zealand and Australia highlights teachers' lack of a knowledge base about the fundamental role of spoken and written language in learning. It has been established that high school teachers are unable to address, overtly and deliberately, the specific language and literacy demands of their varied teaching and learning contexts and the related texts and textual practices they use with their students (May & Smyth, 2007). There are fundamental gaps in binding the teaching of literacy, with teacher confidence and skill level in effectively teaching literacy. For instance, there are challenges centring on teacher confidence in differentiating between Tier 2 and 3 words (Hiebert, 2020). This gap may stem from the crowded curriculum during initial stages of teacher training, while others from continued lived practice teaching in isolation from the margins (Stewart, 2021). There is a distinct need for greater teacher collaboration across learning disciplines more frequently to breakdown perceived barriers of insecurity through the establishment of structured professional learning communities to facilitate dialogue about literacy challenges.

Empowerment

Research has consistently shown that having to thrive in the adult world an individual needs to have access to a wide vocabulary in order to effectively read and write within various situations. Having access to a broad vocabulary can empower individuals enhancing their communication skills and enabling individuals to articulate their thoughts and ideas with precision. Furthermore, a rich vocabulary helps individuals understand nuances, evaluate arguments, and express their own opinions thoughtfully. In essence, access to the correct word or words instils confidence and self-expression. When students have a wide range of words at their disposal, they feel more empowered to express themselves in various situations, whether it's in class discussions, presentations, or written assignments. This confidence fosters a positive self-image – something they will take into their adult life.

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