

The Effects of Using Storybook Intervention to Enhance Vocabulary Knowledge and Develop
Writing Skills of English Language Learners and students at Risk for Reading Difficulties

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Introduction

Writing is a complex process which requires generating and organizing ideas, goal setting, planning, drafting, and revising of text (Olinghouse & Wilson (2013). In public schools today, little is known about writing instruction in schools. Lee (2003) notes that there is no empirical evidence to show the possible relationship between explicit vocabulary teaching and improvement in the lexical quality of writing. Research indicates that rich vocabulary is a very critical aspect of reading ability. The most important factor in reading comprehension as identified by recent research is vocabulary. There is a strong link between reading and writing since both involve, generating, organizing, drafting and revising ideas into a logical order. Since the writing process is linked to the reading process, it can therefore be inferred that the reading process is dependent upon vocabulary. This means that the writing process is dependent as well. In order to write effectively, adequate vocabulary is needed.

According to Clendon et al. (2013), writing is a complex process that requires a number of skills to be managed simultaneously, such as word choice, spelling, syntax and text organization. Numerous studies have been conducted by prominent researchers on the use of vocabulary in writing. The results revealed that students used majority of the vocabulary taught to them prior to writing and that a significant portion of the writing samples collected were represented by some of the words taught. According to Ma (2012), students use strategies when using vocabulary in writing. Ma (2012) notes that such strategies include metacognitive regulation strategies such as efforts made in initiating learning opportunities and selecting words as well as certain cognitive strategies involving the use of dictionaries or guessing.

Current research indicates that there is an increase in the number of students who are entering school from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. In recent times, some

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Comment [2]: It seems that in writing one needs to emphasize lexical semantics in addition to vocabulary.

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kindergarten students are entering schools with limited vocabulary especially those students who did not enroll in prekindergarten program. Moreover, there has been an increase in the number of English language learners in our schools. Due to lots of families migrating to the United States, our classrooms have children from culturally and linguistically diversified backgrounds. This is a main concern for educators especially because there is the need to meet the needs of all the students in their classrooms. In addition to this, it has become necessary for teachers to be trained and to attend professional development in order to meet the needs of students who are at risk for reading difficulties because these children do have language difficulties or impairments and are not able to communicate well in English as compared to their peers who speak, write and comprehend the language of instruction. The United States Department of Education did indicate that about eight million elementary and middle school students are struggling readers and this makes it even more important to develop vocabulary skills as early as possible since vocabulary can help in developing writing skills in children, especially English language learners (Pullen, Tuckwiller, Konold, Maynard, & Coyne, 2010).

Chlapana and Tafa (2014) indicate that it is alarming to see a lot of children, especially children from homes in which English is not the dominant language at school and that these children come to school with insufficient vocabulary. According to Coyne et al. (2007), it is widely known that when students are exposed to rich literacy environments that foster vocabulary development they are more likely to succeed in school and to understand or comprehend books that they read as compared to their peers who have limited vocabulary. According to Coyne, McCoach & Kapp (2007), young children are at a risk of experiencing reading and learning difficulties and being identified as having a language or reading disability if they fall behind their peers in developing vocabulary knowledge.

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According to Chlapana and Tafa (2014), the ideal way of introducing words to children is to read storybooks aloud for children to hear. Recent studies that have been conducted by prominent researchers on vocabulary development suggests that children who come from low socioeconomic backgrounds and who are poor are more likely to fall behind their peers who are from high income families (citation needed). Children with limited oral and language skills are more likely to be at risk for reading disabilities, especially if they are from families with low socio economic status (Kelley, Goldstein, Spencer & Sherman, 2015). According to Coyne, McCoach, Loftus, Zipoli, & Kapp (2009), children of poverty are more likely to have poor vocabulary skills compared to their middle or high-income peers since initial oral vocabulary skills begin at home based on the interactions and experiences that these children have with their family members (Coyne, McCoach, Loftus, Zipoli, & Kapp, 2009). Nielsen and Friersen (2012), suggest that not all children of poverty lag behind their peers but rather it depends on the language experiences that these children encounter as a result of being exposed to vocabulary words.

According to Wasik and Bond (2001), children learn vocabulary by reading books and also learn about conventions of print. Moreover, children who engaged in higher level conversations and dialogue about the story do perform better on vocabulary and language measures than children who focused mainly on low level utterances such as describing a page or answering questions that required a yes or a no response. Wasik and Bond (2001) also indicate that children who are raised in poverty often enter school with limited exposure to books and have poor language skills. Children from low income families normally have lower vocabulary when compared to their peers from middle and high income homes. Research also indicates that

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children who are engaged in reading a book with an adult learned more vocabulary compared to their peers who listened passively to the book reading (Wasik & Bond, 2001).

Maynard and Coyne (2010), suggest that emergent literacy skills based on alphabetic principle, phonemic awareness and phonics only does not necessarily have an impact on students reading ability and that for students to be fluent readers, there is the need to build a strong foundation on phonics, alphabetic principle, phonemic awareness and vocabulary. Justice, Meier, & Walpole (2005) suggest that in order for vocabulary instruction to be successful, there is the need to emphasize explicit instruction of the words or core vocabulary needed to succeed in the general education classroom.

According to Neilsen and Friersen (2012), there is little research on vocabulary development in the lower grade levels in public schools, especially, in pre-kindergarten and kindergarten. As a result students are at risk for reading difficulties when they get to fourth grade. Research on storybook reading indicates that children who are at risk for language and literacy difficulties and have less vocabularies are more than likely to learn words incidentally while listening to stories. Research also suggests that there is the need to focus on developing the depth of vocabulary knowledge by providing students with opportunities to discuss and interact with the words they hear during storybook reading (Coyne, McCoach, Loftus, Zipoli, & Kapp, 2009). Huennekens and Xu (2010) indicated the importance of family involvement on children's literacy development and suggest that children's vocabulary, phonological awareness, decoding skills, print concepts, and alphabet awareness can be developed when families engage their children during storybook reading.

Webb (2009) indicates that studies that have investigated the effects of different vocabulary learning tasks tend to show that intensive learning tasks that involve both contextual

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and definitional learning may facilitate reading comprehension and writing, while decontextualized tasks that focus on meaning may be ineffective. There is not much research on the effects of prelearning vocabulary on reading comprehension and writing. Research suggest that when students are taught target words through a combination of tasks, they tend to use more of those words in a writing task than learners who did not receive vocabulary instruction (Webb, 2009). Research suggests that it is possible that vocabulary instruction may not improve some aspects of a student's writing and that instruction intended to use increase students use of the words taught should directly encourage them to use the words (Webb, 2009). Duin and Graves (1986) conducted research and found that when students are explicitly taught vocabulary, they tend to make significant gains in vocabulary knowledge and there is an improvement in the quality of writing.

According to Lee and Munice (2006), vocabulary size is an important indicator of general language ability which correlates well with both reading comprehension and quality of writing.

Effectively using vocabulary has been shown to be one of the most important indicators of overall composition quality. Therefore lack of vocabulary is considered to be the factor that makes writing in a foreign language more difficult. According to Duin and Graves (1987), it is necessary to have an intensive vocabulary instruction as a prewriting technique to improve the quality of writing. According to Lee (2003), focusing on vocabulary prior to writing significantly improved the production of higher level recognition vocabulary as well as impressive use of newly learned higher level vocabulary. Olinghouse and Leaird (2009) notes that selection of vocabulary is considered an important part of the writing process. According to Isaacson (1988) vocabulary can be defined as the originality and maturity of a student's choice of words and identifies it as one of the five principle components that emerge from every major

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theory of written language. According to Lugo-Neris et al. (2010), explicit explanations of words, such as providing synonyms of words or using role-playing have been shown to facilitate vocabulary learning in monolingual children, even doubling the number of words they learn. Shared storybook reading has been proposed as a meaningful, naturalistic context that facilitates vocabulary learning by exposing children to new words, specifically for younger children who are nonreaders, both monolingual and bilingual. During this type of book reading, an adult reads a story and provides some additional information to help the child understand the context and words in the story. Research indicates that repeated storybook readings can be useful in teaching children new words.

The purpose of this study is to examine the role of vocabulary in writing for English language learners in kindergarten. The research question for this study is as follows: To what extent do English language learners use target vocabulary that they have encountered through reading into writing composition?

Method

Participants

Twenty two first grade students from a large pool of students in two public elementary schools in Maryland will be selected for this study. Only those with limited English proficiency between the ages of five and six years will be eligible to participate. The twenty two children (twelve boys and ten girls) will be between the ages of sixty months and seventy two months, with a mean age of sixty five months. Fourteen students will be Hispanic and eight students will be Asian. The Hispanic students will be considered Spanish dominant in that they will show

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superior skills in Spanish and their predominant language spoken at home will be Spanish. To be eligible to take part in the study, the students have to be English language learners or must be identified by their teacher as students struggling academically in literacy, specifically in writing. Students who will be eligible to take part in this study must first of all seek parental consent prior to implementation of the intervention.

Design

This study will use a group research design. Two experimental groups will be used to examine the effects of pre-learning vocabulary on writing. The first group will be the treatment group in which twenty two English language learners selected for the intervention will complete a pre-test prior to the implementation of the intervention. The second group will be the comparison group. The comparison group will also receive some instruction from the classroom teacher. In other words the comparison group will also listen to the three storybooks but will not receive vocabulary instruction as compared to the treatment group.

Intervention

Prior to the intervention, a pre-test will be conducted to see whether the participants know all fifteen words which are embedded in the text that were read to them. Upon completion of the pretest, the intervention will be administered. The storybook intervention will involve teachers reading a storybook to the students three times a week. Research assistants will read three books to the students for a period of three months. One storybook will be read continuously for a month. By the end of the three months, the teachers would have read three storybooks. The storybooks that would be used for the study are “Walking through the world of aromas, Hunting the Daddysaurus, and Ten Little Mice.” In addition to research assistants reading the storybooks to the children, the students will also read a passage about the storybooks

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that were read to them by the teachers. This is to reinforce concepts and words that they heard during the storybook intervention.

The researcher selected these books based on the following criteria: First of all the books should be age appropriate. Secondly the books should have lots of colorful illustrations that help narrate the text. Thirdly, the books should contain words in the text that were unlikely to be known by the children. Finally, the books must have challenging vocabulary words. For each book five words will be selected. The targeted words were selected based on the following criteria: The words that were chosen are words that a normal first grade student might not know. Secondly the targeted words will be age appropriate and easily embedded in the story text. The research assistants will write core vocabulary words on the blackboard for students to see and the teacher will spend time introducing these new words to the students and providing explicit instruction in vocabulary. There will be fifteen words in all. The vocabulary words are grooming, underground, gnawing, twitching, thunderstorm, track, escape, footprint, hunting, shedding, twittering, fireplace, furniture, transported, and wildfire. All the target words were chosen from the three books that were read to the students. The research assistants will explain or define the words based on the context in which these words were found in the book. Flash cards will be created with these new words written on it and will be displayed on the word wall for children to have easy access to the words during writing instruction.

The intervention will take place outside the classroom in small groups of eleven. All students classified as English language learners will be eligible to be included in this study. After the intervention, a posttest will be conducted to see whether the students know all fifteen words. After the posttest, students will be given the opportunity to write an essay on one of the three books read. For examples students will get the opportunity to choose a book that had been

read to them and to write about that book. Children will also draw pictures to illustrate what they are writing about. Children will be given thirty minutes to complete this task.

A **picture description test** will be used to measure participant's use of the target words in writing. The participants will be presented with fifteen pictures and will be asked to write about each one using the target words. The criteria for selecting the pictures will be based on the fact that there is an obvious relationship with a target word and that the participants in the study should be able to identify which target word was depicted in the picture. Students will be given thirty minutes to complete the picture description test.

Writing samples will be collected from both the treatment group and the comparison group and the writing samples will be compared based on the type of vocabulary used in writing.

Students who do not meet the 100 word length criterion will be excluded from the comparison.

Data Analysis and Results

Data will be analyzed based on the essays of twenty two English language learners who met the length criterion of two hundred words. The results will indicate that students who were instructed in the use vocabulary when writing will perform better than those students who did not receive vocabulary instruction. The findings suggest that pre-learning vocabulary may be an effective method of improving writing with the focus being on a student's ability to use and understand a word.

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Rema, We found your research proposal interesting and well worth pursuing. We believe you will need to add lexical semantics to vocabulary when considering this study on writing. Throughout you made statements that needed citations. In the future you need to be more careful about that. APA style was not accurate in a couple places.

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