

Using literature as a context for teaching vocabulary

This research investigated the use of literature as a context for teaching unfamiliar vocabulary to high school students. Two methods of instruction were compared.

After my students have been given a test on the assigned words, they seem to quickly forget these words without developing the skills needed to use these words in their writings. My students' inability to use their vocabulary words in their speaking or writing is a frustrating and puzzling problem.

(A ninth-grade teacher)

This statement was an excerpt from a conversation I had with a graduate student in reading who asked how to improve vocabulary instruction in her classroom. The teacher related her concerns about how memorizing definitions is central to classroom vocabulary instruction. As our discussion progressed, I suggested taking a mediational approach to analyzing the vocabulary teaching problems she identified. First, we needed to clarify her intended *purposes* for vocabulary learning and then employ instructional *strategies* that match those intended purposes (Dixon-Krauss, 1996b). She acknowledged that an important underlying purpose for students to learn word meanings was to increase their reading vocabulary in order to facilitate comprehension. But her intended purposes in the secondary school classes focused on older students' vocabulary acquisition for use within the contexts of oral discussions and written composition.

The classroom research study described here emerged from that collaborative discussion. A "mediation model design" for classroom

research was used to address the question of how to improve vocabulary instruction in ninth-grade English classes. This design has been used in elementary classroom studies investigating the integration of children's literature with social studies instruction (Dixon-Krauss, 1992), multiage partner storybook reading and dialogue journal writing (Dixon-Krauss, 1995), and the use of Internet collaboration for science and literacy instruction (Dixon-Krauss & Peters, 1996).

The mediation model design is based on Vygotsky's cultural-historical theory, particularly his use of dynamic research methodology and the zone of proximal development to integrate cognitive development with instruction (Vygotsky, 1986). The task of the teacher and researcher in applying the zone concept to classroom research and practice focuses on determining the amount and type of mediational support needed while learning progresses. The mediation model is dynamic; the teacher's observations, analyses, decisions, and actions continuously evolve as the research study cycles and recycles through the three-step design: (a) identification of the problem, (b) implementation of instruction, and (c) evaluation (Dixon-Krauss, 1996a, 1996b).

Identification of the problem

The secondary school classroom teacher and I, the university researcher, collected classroom observations, related them to the professional literature, and analyzed them to identify the action research problem. With this process, not only did we become more knowledgeable on the research topic of vocabulary acquisition, but we also interpreted and applied that knowledge within the classroom instructional context.

Classroom observations. The study was conducted in two homogeneously tracked ninth-grade English I classes. Participants were 12 male and 31 female students. The teacher described these students as ranging from low-average to high-average achievement in language arts on the basis of her evaluation of students' class performance, grades, and previous testing record. Classroom observations revealed students' ability to memorize definitions of their vocabulary words for tests. But when they used their words in writing assignments, they

produced restatements of the definitions; incorrect usage of the words; or stilted, unnatural, and illogical sentences and paragraphs.

These observations were related to the literature on vocabulary growth and concept development and how instruction affects that development. The following current vocabulary research topics and theoretical issues were reviewed: (a) concept and vocabulary development (Dixon-Krauss, 1996b; Vygotsky, 1986), (b) the effects of vocabulary instruction on reading comprehension and writing (Anderson & Nagy, 1991; Duin & Graves, 1987; Pearson & Gallagher, 1984), and (c) incidental versus direct instructional approaches to vocabulary acquisition (Beck & McKeown, 1991; Nagy & Herman, 1985).

Literature review. Vygotsky's idea of how school-age students move from early development of everyday *spontaneous* concepts to mature, systematically structured *scientific* concepts provided a good theoretical basis for understanding the entwined process of vocabulary growth and concept development (Vygotsky, 1986). Words are labels for concepts, and younger children initially learn words and form categorical knowledge through direct experience with concrete objects and events in the environment. Older students operate at a more abstract level of *potential* concepts, learning things they cannot directly see or experience. Scientific concepts are "worked out" as teachers or peers provide mediational support through social interaction during school instruction. In this type of verbal interaction, the word is both the means of communication and the focus or object of communication. Words are explained, compared, and reflected on while they are used to share ideas. Through this process, the students learn to consciously regard and voluntarily manipulate concepts and relationships as they detach the word from practical experiences and then apply it across various contexts (Dixon-Krauss, 1996b).

Blachowicz and Lee (1991) suggested that vocabulary acquisition was a continuous process from students first recognizing the word and applying a superficial meaning to later understanding the various meanings and uses of that word. Beck and McKeown (1991) tracked vocabulary knowledge from no knowledge, to a general sense of the word, to narrow context-bound knowledge, to

having knowledge but being unable to access it quickly, to rich decontextualized knowledge. The ninth graders with whom we worked displayed the same characteristics identified within these progressions of vocabulary development, including knowing superficial meanings, having context-bound knowledge, and being unable to access meanings for written or oral use.

Reviews of the literature indicated that the most effective vocabulary instruction includes multiple exposures to words in a variety of oral and written contexts, with the average estimated rate of vocabulary growth approximately seven words per day (Anderson & Nagy, 1991; Beck & McKeown, 1991). A vast amount of word knowledge is acquired incidentally through wide reading, discussion, or dialogue with parents and peers external to the classroom, while learning words one at a time is relatively ineffective (Nagy & Herman, 1985; Miller & Gildea, 1987).

The relationship between extensive vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension has been well established; however, the effects of teaching unfamiliar vocabulary prior to reading a particular selection to increase comprehension were negligible (Pearson & Gallagher, 1984; Pikulski, 1989; Stahl & Fairbanks, 1986). In contrast, it has been suggested that comprehension of a story can provide the conceptual base for understanding new vocabulary (Nagy & Herman, 1985; Weir, 1991). Teaching vocabulary and word study within the context of a text, both during and after reading, were effective in increasing vocabulary (Brett, Rothlein, & Hurley, 1996; Dole, Sloan, & Trathen, 1995; Hennings, 2000).

Teacher modeling of unknown words in social discourse with students and using those words to elaborate on comments made by students during story discussion were other instructional methods recommended (Haggard, 1980; Weir, 1991). The teacher's use of vocabulary in class discussions of literature (LaFlamme, 1994) and students' written use of vocabulary in literature response journals (Wollman-Bonilla, 1989) reinforced word meanings in both oral and written contexts. An underlying goal of all these strategies was to help students see the value of word study when new words were used in intelligible contexts.

Instructional strategies selected by the ninth-grade teacher for use in the classes included

teaching vocabulary words within the context of literature study after the selection was read, rather than vice versa, and students' use of the vocabulary words in written responses to the literature. Teacher-researcher collaboration at the midpoint of the study resulted in adjusting instruction to focus on a mediational perspective using teacher-student social interactions. The teacher's and students' oral use of the vocabulary words in discussions of the literature was added.

Implementation of instruction

Instruction was conducted in 10 sessions over 4 weeks. Students met every other day for 90-minute classes. A pretest consisting of a list of 52 words from the novel *Animal Farm* (Orwell, 1946) was administered prior to the study. Students were told to write a definition for each word and were prompted to use their background knowledge and their understandings of root words and inflectional endings as clues. From this list, 40 target words that were unknown to *all* of the students were identified as vocabulary for use in the study.

Instructional materials and activities. In the first session, two lists of target vocabulary words, consisting of 20 words from Chapters 1 through 5 and 20 words from Chapters 6 through 10, were distributed to the students. They were told that there would be two vocabulary tests, one on the first list of 20 words and another on the second list. The novel *Animal Farm* was introduced with a discussion of the political aspects of Orwell's writing. The literary elements of character and plot were discussed, and an information sheet on keeping a literature response journal was distributed and explained.

Instruction included six episodes of reading, written response, and discussion. First, the students silently read assigned chapters of the novel. Next, students wrote individual responses to the readings describing the characters, their actions, or the plot in their literature response journals. Finally, the teacher discussed the vocabulary words contained in the chapters read and the events of the assigned chapters. An outline of the lesson plan for instructional episode three (Chapter 5) is found in Figure 1.

FIGURE 1
Lesson plan outline: Chapter 3

In the first three episodes, the vocabulary words were taught using direct instruction as outlined in Figure 1. The words were defined with a word structure, origin, or meaning cue added and then used in a sentence by the teacher. Next, students were called on to make up a sentence using the word or to give a synonym for it. The words were then located in the context of the assigned novel chapters. The definitions and sentences used by the teacher were listed in the Holt, Rinehart and Winston text *Elements of Literature: Third Course* (Crimmins & Obermiller, 1989, pp. 810–825). The following were two examples used:

1. *articulate* adj. able to express oneself easily and clearly. This word is based on the Latin root meaning “to speak distinctly.” The students chose Carmen as their spokesperson, since she is the most *articulate* member of the group.
2. *blithely* adv. in a carefree or unconcerned manner. *Blithe* has remained a part of the English language virtually unchanged for approximately 800 years. Marilyn *blithely* walked to the edge of the cliff and peered over.

Students were directly prompted to use any of the words on their vocabulary lists in their journal entries. The assigned chapters of the novel were discussed with the teacher focusing open-ended questions primarily on characters or plot.

Following the third reading, writing, and discussion episode, the first five chapters of the novel were discussed. Vocabulary Test 1 on the 20 words from Chapters 1 through 5 was then administered. The test included a list of the words with 15 items of matching words with definitions and 15 items of selecting a word to fill in a blank in a sentence. At this point, the teacher and researcher collaborated to identify adjustments to instruction.

In the last three reading, writing, and discussion episodes, the vocabulary was taught using a mediational form of instruction within the context of the story discussion (see Figure 2). The students read the chapters silently. The teacher *did not prompt* students to use their vocabulary words in their written journal entry responses. The words were located within the context of the novel. Index cards scripting the target words within the story context were prepared prior to class discussion of the assigned chapters. The script cards served as a model for the teacher to use as need-

- I. Silent reading
 - A. Quickly summarize Chapters 1–2
 - B. Assign text, “Read Chapters 3–4 silently”
 - II. Written response
 - A. Assign entry to literature response journal
 1. Provide writing reflection prompts:
 - a. “Think about what is happening in the story.”
 - b. “Think about how the animals’ thoughts and actions were changing.”
 - III. Class discussion
 - A. Summarize chapter
 1. How were the animals surviving?
 2. How were the animals developing human-like thoughts (e.g., learning to read) and actions (e.g., civic “barnyard” duties, government, war)?
 - B. Vocabulary study (Crimmins & Obermiller, 1989)
Parasitical, shirked, cryptic, maxim, tractable, irrepressible, ignominious
 1. Definition
 2. Sentence context
 3. Locate in text chapter
-

ed during discussion. The teacher referred to the cards as she used the words and embedded comments to clarify word meanings during the natural flow of class discussion of the chapters read. The following were two examples of these scripts:

1. When Napoleon sold the hens’ eggs to humans, the hens began dropping their eggs from the rafters. Then Napoleon gave the hens less food as *retribution* for smashing their eggs. He was getting back at them by taking away their food. (Chapter 7)
2. Almost all of the animals and humans were wounded or killed in the Battle of the Windmill. Even Napoleon did not go *unscathed*, as he was wounded in the tip of his tail by a pellet. (Chapter 8)

After the final three instructional cycles were completed, the teacher led a class discussion reviewing the last five chapters and administered

FIGURE 2
Lesson plan outline: Chapter 8

- I. Silent reading
 - A. Quickly summarize Chapters 6–7
 - B. Assign text, “Read Chapter 8 silently”
- II. Written response
 - A. Assign entry to literature response journal
 - 1. Provide writing reflection prompts:
 - a. “Think about what is happening in the story.”
 - b. “Think about how the animals’ thoughts, actions, and relations with the people were changing.”
- III. Class discussion
 - A. Summarize chapter
 - 1. How was Napoleon’s role as leader changing?
 - 2. Why did the animals question whether or not they had won the war?
 - B. Vocabulary study
 - Wistful, conciliatory, unscathed*
 - 1. Read script cards—within context of discussion of chapter event
 - 2. Locate in text chapter

TABLE 1
Vocabulary definitions test scores (percentage)

	Vocabulary Test 1 (Chapters 1–5)	Vocabulary Test 2 (Chapters 6–10)
Mean	73	82
Range	33–97	27–100

Vocabulary Test 2 on words from those chapters. The format for this test was the same as the first test. The students wrote a final journal entry reflecting on the entire novel.

Evaluation

The data sources evaluated included the pretest used to identify the unknown target words, Vocabulary Test 1 and Test 2 administered following the instructional cycles, and the journal

entries. After each class session, the teacher recorded her observations about students’ use of the words in their writing, class discussions of the novel, and students’ comments and attitudes concerning the instruction. The data and observations were discussed each week in the teacher-researcher collaboration sessions.

Test results. Inspection of students’ incorrect definitions of the words on the pretest showed that these students were able to use their knowledge of root words and affixes to assist them in defining words they did not know. Examples were the definitions “being smart” for *witticism* and “got mad” for *tempered*.

Results of Vocabulary Test 1 and Test 2 are reported in Table 1. The class means increased from 73% on Test 1, in which direct instruction of word definitions was used, to 82% on Test 2, which focused on a mediated instruction approach with the teacher using the words within discussions of the literature. When converted to grades, the class averages of D on Test 1 and C on Test 2 were low for these average and above-average students. The teacher’s observations revealed that the students were concerned about their low scores on the first test, and several admitted they had not spent enough time studying because “it was matching, and we thought we could guess the answers.”

Journal writing results. Inspection of the journals revealed an increase in the number of vocabulary words students used in their entries as they progressed through the chapters of the novel. Table 2 shows this increase, from 57 words used in journal entry 1, to 78 in journal entry 4, to 210 words used in entry 6. The percentage of words used correctly also increased from 65% in the first entry to 93% in the final entry responding to the entire book. Also, students averaged 1 or 2 words (1.0–1.9) used in the first entries with the direct instruction of definitions method versus an average of 2 to 5 (1.8–4.8) words in the entries when the instructional mediation method was used.

Further analysis of the teacher’s recorded observations revealed four trends related to how adjusting instruction to fit the practical ongoing classroom context affected students’ use of words in their written entries and discussions:

1. When the teacher stopped directly prompting students to use their vocabulary words in journal

TABLE 2
Target vocabulary words used in each journal entry

	Direct instruction			Instructional mediation			Summary
	Journal 1 Chapters 1–2	Journal 2 Chapters 3–4	Journal 3 Chapter 5	Journal 4 Chapters 6–7	Journal 5 Chapter 8	Journal 6 Chapters 9–10	Journal 7 Entire book
Number of words used	57	92	44	78	126	210	175
Percentage of words used correctly	65	79	82	67	71	80	93
Average words per student	1.3	1.9	1.0	1.8	2.9	4.8	4.0

entry 3, the number of words used decreased by more than half but correct usage of the words increased.

2. Although the words for Chapters 1 through 5 were the focus of direct instruction, they were also used orally by students during discussions of Chapters 6 through 10 when instructional mediation was the focus. Use of the words for Chapters 1 through 5 increased from 153 in journal entries 1 through 3, written during the direct instruction cycles, to 183 in entries 4 through 6, written during the instructional mediation cycles. Table 3 shows the unknown target vocabulary words from each chapter and the number of times each word was used across all journal entries. As shown in Table 3, the total use of words from Chapters 1 through 5 was greater than words from Chapters 6 through 10: 409 and 331 respectively.
3. The words used repeatedly by students in discussions were *cynical*, *benevolent*, *apathy*, *parasitical*, *stupefied*, and *stratagem*. These words were also used most frequently (32–45 times) in the journal entries (see Table 3).
4. The words *apathy* and *blithely* were used incorrectly 13 and 7 times in the first three journal entries. The teacher concentrated on using these words in discussion during the instruction mediation cycles, but students continued to use them incorrectly in later entries for a total of 27 and 10 times incorrectly used. These two words were the

most difficult for students to change to the correct parts of speech for use in their writing. Also, the word *faction* was repeatedly misspelled as *fraction*.

Students' affective responses. In the weekly teacher-researcher collaborative analysis sessions, the teacher reported several interesting trends that emerged related to how the integration of reading and responding to literature with vocabulary instruction affected both the performance and attitudes of students. These trends were associated with the text (plot) and with the type of instruction (direct or mediational). In Chapter 5, several changes were occurring in the plot of the novel, and students expressed confusion about the book in both their journal entry and in the class discussion. The teacher observed that students were focusing on the events in the novel instead of using their vocabulary in their journals, and the number of words they used decreased by more than half compared with the previous entry. Several students also commented on being frustrated because they "could not find the right word" to express what they wanted to say about the reading.

In contrast, students responded emotionally to the conclusion of the book in journal entry 6. In this entry the number of target words they used almost doubled. Several students commented they had a "feeling of accomplishment," and they were



TABLE 3
Vocabulary words used in journal entries

Chapters 1-5	C/I	Total	Chapters 6-10	C/I	Total
ensconced	4/5	9	procured	19/4	23
cynical	38/0	38	repose	8/8	16
benevolent	38/2	40			
expounded	17/3	20	emboldened	16/4	20
preeminent	20/3	23	capitulated	20/0	20
apathy	21/24	45	stupefied	36/0	36
			pervading	1/2	3
parasitical	40/1	41	retribution	21/0	10
shirked	27/2	29			
cryptic	14/2	16	wistful	9/3	12
maxim	9/4	13	conciliatory	6/3	9
			unscathed	20/2	22
tractable	22/2	24	complicity	13/5	18
irrepressible	19/2	21	stratagem	26/6	32
ignominious	24/2	26	professed	14/0	14
			demeanor	19/0	19
blithely	4/10	14	tempered	7/3	10
ratified	6/7	13			
aloof	4/0	4	frugally	10/1	11
faction	1/9	10	deputation	7/2	9
sordid	24/1	25	dispelled	21/2	23
articulate	13/3	16	witticism	1/5	6
disinterred	0/0	0	intimated	3/4	7
Total	331/82	409	Total	277/54	331

Note. C = Words used correctly I = Words used incorrectly

able to use words that adequately reflected their emotions and opinions. The teacher also observed that students were correctly using more of the target words that had been used in class discussions.

The teacher also noted how students' perceptions of the role of the tests in their vocabulary learning shifted as instruction took on a combined oral and written mediational approach. In the direct instruction of definitions focus, low performance on the first test was important to the students to the point of motivating them to try using the words more in their writing and class discussions. Although students' scores on the second vocabulary test improved, many commented that the test was "not very helpful" or "just an exercise for a grade."

The final journal entries were written on the entire novel, and several improvements beyond the numerical increase in words used correctly were also noted by the teacher and the students. The teacher reflected,

Students' selection of words and the manner in which they used the words improved tremendously. They used their vocabulary words in detailed sentences to state their opinions about the novel. Most expressed satisfaction in completing the novel and confidence in their ability to now use words which adequately expressed what they thought.

A follow-up evaluation was conducted to determine if students sustained their feelings of self-

confidence and satisfaction in their ability to use their vocabulary words in their writing. Another novel, *Great Expectations* (Dickens, 1942), was read 12 weeks after this study. In the final evaluation of their reading of *Great Expectations*, students were given the opportunity to select either writing subjective short essays or summaries containing 15 of the 20 target vocabulary words used with that novel. In this evaluation, 80% of the students selected the more difficult task of writing summaries using the vocabulary words, and only 20% chose to write the subjective essays.

Implications of the study

This study was based on common-sense research-based ideas about vocabulary instruction. Vocabulary words for instruction should come from texts students will read in the classroom, and students should be given multiple opportunities to use new words in their speaking, listening, reading, and writing (Blachowicz & Fisher, 1996; Blachowicz & Lee, 1991; Hennings, 2000; Rupley, Logan, & Nichols, 1999). Vocabulary instruction should allow students to discuss, elaborate, and demonstrate meanings of new words (Beck, Perfetti, & McKeown, 1982). In the final collaboration sessions, the teacher's comments showed how results of this classroom research study reaffirmed these ideas for her: "Although this project only lasted 4 weeks, I gained tremendous insight to the need to offer students numerous reinforcement opportunities if vocabulary acquisition is to occur."

The study also addressed some current ideas that are not common sense or well established in practice, but that do intuitively make sense. Developing word knowledge should occur after reading a selection rather than vice versa, because the story can provide a broad conceptual base for understanding unfamiliar words (Anderson & Nagy, 1991; Stahl & Vancil, 1985; Weir, 1991). As the students progressed through the novel chapters and gained more story context, they accessed and used more words correctly. Vocabulary discussed as it directly ties into the plot, theme, and characters of the story would provide contextual meaning beyond isolated definitions (Dole, Sloan, & Trathen, 1995).

In this study, discussion and writing went beyond how the words were tied to the story to include use of the words in oral discussions about

the story and in written responses to it. The teacher related,

In their journals my students showed significant improvement using their vocabulary words after these words were reinforced in class discussions through teacher talk and open-ended questions. Likewise, when I omitted specific words from these reinforcement discussions, students either incorrectly used or chose not to use the omitted words.

More research is needed to clarify how teachers can use discussion to adjust mediational support for students' learning. Classroom studies using a variety of literature with other populations ranging from struggling to high-achieving students are needed.

The mediation model design for classroom research provided a dynamic, collaborative framework for developing our knowledge about teaching vocabulary and transferring that knowledge to the teacher's classroom practice. The teacher's summary comments during our final collaboration session included the following:

I believe this project has been my most successful. Although traditional tests do have a purpose, I found that in my classes the coordination of writing and discussion provided a much better measurement of what my students actually knew. Also my students have continued to use in their writings and in class discussions some of these vocabulary words.

These comments illustrate how the knowledge she gained through this action research study reshaped the teacher's classroom instruction and assessment practices. She shifted her vocabulary instruction from a traditional approach that included defining words, memorizing definitions, and assessing with matching and multiple-choice tests. Instead, the teacher encouraged use of the vocabulary during class discussions and in student literature response journals, and she integrated vocabulary instruction with oral discussions and written responses to the texts.

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