Will systematic, explicit vocabulary instruction impact the vocabulary acquisition, reading comprehension, and overall reading level of third grade English Language Learners?

Kari Tucker
Hawthorne Elementary

Keywords
English Language Learners (ELL), incidental word awareness, intentional word awareness, tier two vocabulary, academic vocabulary, word consciousness

Abstract

Research indicates that purposeful, direct, and authentic vocabulary instruction can increase English language learners’ acquisition of vocabulary and reading comprehension. For example, Carlo, August et al. (2004) concluded “that new words should be encountered in meaningful text, that native Spanish speakers should have access to the text's meaning through Spanish, that words should be encountered in varying contexts, and that word knowledge involves spelling, pronunciation, morphology, and syntax as well as depth of meaning.” (p. 188)

English Language Learners who experience slower vocabulary development are not as likely as their English only classmates to comprehend grade level text. The gap in ELL students’ vocabulary acquisition and reading comprehension will continue to grow unless deliberate and robust vocabulary instruction is delivered to meet each diverse learner’s needs. The purpose of this study was to investigate whether intentional and explicit vocabulary instruction would increase the vocabulary base of six third grade English Language Learners. I used three sources of data to monitor the vocabulary growth of my English Language Learners: Quarterly Fountas and Pinnell (2008) reading benchmarks, Study Island Vocabulary, and the Independent Reading Level of the STAR diagnostic assessment. I compared the reading growth of the six ELL students with the reading growth of my non-ELL students. Results indicated that the implementation of systematic explicit vocabulary instruction had a positive impact on my English Language Learners.
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Introduction

English Language Learners (ELLs) are the fastest growing demographic of the U.S. school age population. Fry and Gonzales (2008) reported that there were about ten million Hispanic students in our nation’s public schools, making up about one in five public school students in the United States. The U.S. Department of Education reports that one in nine public school students in K-12 comes from a home where English is not the only spoken language. In 1990 that statistic was 1 in 20, and by 2025 that statistic is projected to be 1 in 4. The ELL population has increased from two to five million since 1990, a 150% increase. The ELL population of some states has increased as much as 400%. (NCELA) Of the 55.2 million children who are school age, more than 21 percent or 10.9 million speak a language other than English in their home (Aud et al., 2010).

Recent findings indicate that one in six students who are not reading proficiently in third grade do not graduate from high school on time. These rates are even higher for low-income below level readers. The rate is highest for Black (31%) and Hispanic (33%) students; in fact, graduation rates for Black and Hispanic students who were not proficient in reading were behind those of white students with similar reading skills (Hernandez, 2011). Given these statistics, it is critical that we examine ways to improve reading instruction for English Language Learners. Much of the research done on this population has pointed to vocabulary development as one of the most vital components of instruction (Hoff, 2003).

For English language learners (ELLs), vocabulary development is especially important. The average native English speaker enters kindergarten knowing at least 5,000 words. The average ELL may know 5,000 words in his or her native language, but few words in English. While native speakers continue to learn new words, ELLs have the double challenge of building that foundation and then closing the gap. A new ELL student can communicate verbally with peers, but there is a big difference between social English and
academic English. Reading, writing, speaking, and understanding academic English happen in the classroom. (August & Calderon, 2002)

My graduate capstone assignment gave me the impetus to examine and develop, then analyze the impact of, an explicit vocabulary intervention for the English Language Learners in my third grade class. I have been teaching third grade for over fifteen years. I have seen the first-hand impact that the demographic changes documented above have had on my third grade students. Perhaps the most striking academic gap between my English Language Learners and their English speaking peers is in the area of vocabulary. It is not that English Language Learners (ELL) are lacking in rich vocabulary overall, but they are challenged by academic vocabulary in their second language. Therefore, addressing vocabulary gaps means addressing vocabulary acquisition in every subject area and this idea has been overwhelming to me. Every student comes in with a different base of vocabulary, depending on what their experiences have been.

**Literature Review**

To address the gap in vocabulary, I decided to investigate how a more deliberate and explicit vocabulary program might impact the vocabulary acquisition and reading achievement of my English Language Learners. Specifically, I wanted to find out: To what extent will systematic, explicit vocabulary instruction impact the vocabulary acquisition, reading comprehension, and overall reading levels of third grade English Language Learners? To address this question, it was first necessary to review existing literature in the area of vocabulary acquisition and instruction. Below I draw on existing peer-reviewed sources to address a) the history of vocabulary research, b) research on effective vocabulary instruction, and c) evidence-based best practices in vocabulary instruction.

**The History of Vocabulary Research**

According to Beck and McKeown (1991), five and six year olds entered school with a wide range of vocabulary: vocabulary poor children possessed around 2500 words, whereas vocabulary rich children possessed closer to 5,000 words. They recommended intense instruction to close the gap between vocabulary rich and vocabulary poor students. Nagy and Anderson’s (1984) research provided evidence that, once a child passes the fourth grade, the number of words he or she knows is positively correlated with how much he or she reads, lending support to increasing the number of opportunities students have to read in school.

![Image](image.jpg)

It is possible to infer from Nagy and Anderson’s (1984) and Beck and McKeown’s (1991) work that the ELL population would be at an immediate disadvantage, not having the vocabulary base or the English reading experiences that they need to succeed in the U.S. academic world. Furthermore, Mancilla-Martinez and Lesaux (2010) stated that ELLs must not only learn vocabulary but must simultaneously learn.
linguistic structures to make meaning of text. The huge number of vocabulary words students must know cannot all be taught directly. English Language Learners are behind from the day they enter an English-speaking school—both in number of English words known, and in number of English texts read. They need access to the most effective possible strategies if they are to have any success in catching up with their English-speaking peers. In addition to providing them with multiple speaking and writing experiences and teaching some words explicitly, teachers must also teach ELLs strategies for figuring out word meanings on their own.

**Research on Effective Vocabulary Instruction**

All students, no matter what country they come from, bring a rich linguistic background from social interaction in their homes (e.g., Teale and Sulzby, 1986; Heath, 1983). One way to encourage students to draw on these linguistic strengths and experiences is through open-ended, authentic discussion. Beck and McKeown (2001) suggest that, when discussing text with students, there should be more open-ended questions that do not call for simple one word retrieval. Students need questions that will encourage them to reflect and think more deeply about why something is happening. The more authentic the conversation, the more engaged the learning will be.

Based on Beck and McKeown’s (1991) investigations, it is clear that opportunities for rich discussion are critical for the vocabulary development of English Language Learners. One way to develop these opportunities is to find and share books that connect to children’s diverse lives (Meier, 2003). Students need to see characters with their skin color and books that value and share their vocabulary.

Michael Graves (2006) also supports the idea that students learn vocabulary through authentic, meaningful and literature-based experiences. He asserts the need for encouragement and support of wide reading, including a well-stocked classroom library with enough leveled books to meet all children’s reading levels, a well-stocked school library, and an independent reading program for students to practice reading on their own.

While asserting that vocabulary be developed through rich, open-ended and authentic discussion and ongoing exposure to literature, Beck and McKeown (1985) also found that getting word meaning from context is not automatic and teachers must model this rich vocabulary strategy. In their 1983 study, Beck and McKeown identified two contexts for learning and understanding vocabulary words: pedagogical (directly taught) and natural (found in print). Their later work (2001) expanded on pedagogical strategies for moving vocabulary instruction beyond the discussion level. They delved more deeply into the read aloud process and pointed out the importance of the teacher managing the book discussion to make sure the connections were truly deepened and to help students make better sense of the text. They defined the teacher’s goal as extracting background knowledge and encouraging meaningful discussion so students can connect and build meaning within a story.
In line with Beck and McKeown’s assertion for pedagogical (vs. natural) approaches, Kamps and her colleagues (2007) found that explicit, small group instruction also benefited English Language Learners. Drawing on themes from their research, Kamps et al. recommend that small-group ELL vocabulary instruction should be (a) evidence based, (b) explicitly taught, and (c) guided by a scope and sequence of fundamental reading skills.

Graves (2006) also advocates for more explicit instruction within the context of literature. He recommends daily interactive read alouds to introduce students to tier-two vocabulary (see Table 1) and promoted daily guided writing to encourage the practice and use of new vocabulary words. Similarly, Kucan and Beck (1997) advise thinking aloud as a way to promote and practice vocabulary instruction in the form of teacher-led and peer-led discussions. These practices encourage students to take on more authority and responsibility in classroom discussion (including pairs, small group, and whole group discussion). Teachers can model the use of new vocabulary words while providing a safe place for students to practice using new vocabulary. This also requires students to focus their attention and spend more time thinking about what they are reading.

### Table 1 Beck, McKeown, & Kucan's Word Tiers (2002)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tier 1 Words</th>
<th>Tier 2 Words</th>
<th>Tier 3 Words</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Basic Words</strong>-Most cannot be demonstrated and do not have multiple meanings and need no instruction.</td>
<td><strong>High Frequency Words</strong>-Used across many domains (English, history, science), helps build precise language, important for comprehension.</td>
<td><strong>Low Frequency Words</strong>-Limited to specific domains. Content area words.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How many?</td>
<td>How many?</td>
<td>How many?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Sight Words</td>
<td>• 7,000 word families or 700 words per year</td>
<td>• 400,000 words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Examples:</td>
<td>Examples:</td>
<td>Examples:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. keep</td>
<td>1. asphalt</td>
<td>1. igneous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. much</td>
<td>2. benevolent</td>
<td>2. economics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. never</td>
<td>3. tend</td>
<td>3. Revolutionary War</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Beck, et al. 2002; Graves, 2006)

The work of Gersten and Baker (2000) addresses the importance of combining the natural and the pedagogical approaches, but acknowledges that both require careful examination and thoughtful planning. While researching four teachers of English Language Learners, they found that quick vocabulary drills were only marginally useful for helping students to comprehend the nuances of a book. In addition, while teachers made efforts to teach vocabulary in the context of books, they sometimes chose words that were unfamiliar but not important to the overall understanding of the story. These teachers had moved away from the richness of a literature-based curriculum and had moved toward a more grammar focused curriculum. Their reasoning was that English Language Learners came in so far behind that the teachers felt pressured to simply “cover the material.” As a
result, they gave up on engaging students in more complex activities that might promote discussion and deeper meaning of the text. What these teachers did not realize was that, based on the research discussed here, isolated and explicit instruction of specific words is minimally effective whereas prolonged engagement in reading and meaningful discussion are highly effective strategies for developing student vocabulary. Most of the authors in this literature review agree that there is no specific right way to teach vocabulary but that instruction must be varied to address all students’ needs and interests and to keep the study of words fresh and enjoyable. Teachers, often pressured by state mandates and the need to raise test scores, must empower themselves by staying current with the research on effective approaches to vocabulary instruction, including both natural and pedagogical contexts.

**We must provide students time to play with and use vocabulary in discussion, to reinforce meaning.**

In a 2007 study (Beck & McKeown) the discrepancy in vocabulary knowledge from different socioeconomic groups was addressed. While acknowledging that diverse literature was a critical component to vocabulary development, they emphasized that just listening to read alouds does not increase vocabulary; read alouds need to be combined with “rich, robust instruction” (p. 253). For example, they suggest that vocabulary can be taught using picture books that are above the students’ reading level. They assert that 400 words could be added to students’ vocabularies using rich, robust instruction, which would increase students’ vocabulary understanding to 4,000 words from grades three to twelve in addition to explicitly enriching reading experiences and opportunities. Rich instruction includes explaining word meanings in student-friendly language, providing multiple examples and multiple contexts, and asking students to process the words deeply by identifying and explaining suitable and unsuitable uses (thus creating multiple contexts). It was discovered that children as young as kindergarten could add sophisticated words to their vocabulary using rich and explicit instruction. Students must interact with new words and make decisions about their use in several contexts. Beck et al. called these tier 2 words. They are sophisticated words for mature language users that are more “refined labels” for concepts that the learners are already familiar with. For example, the word *meal* would be taught with the word *feast*, the word *big* would be taught with *enormous*. Students often acted out words like *lively* or *clutching*.

**Evidence Based Best Practices in Vocabulary Instruction**

The previous section outlines specific research-supported components of effective vocabulary instruction. These components can and should be thoughtfully integrated into the classroom; that integration begins with the classroom environment itself. According to Blachowicz and Fisher (2009) and The National Reading Panel (2000, April 13), teachers must first build a word-rich environment. To be effective, word learning should be enjoyable and meaningful. Because of the massive number of words our ELLs must learn, students must be immersed in both incidental and intentional word awareness. Second, teachers must motivate students to expand as independent word learners. Next, teachers must use instructional strategies that not only teach new vocabulary but also
model good learning behaviors. In addition, teachers must provide clear instruction for content and concept vocabulary. Finally, an effective vocabulary teacher uses assessment that drives instruction. According to Scott and Nagy (2009), teachers can meet all five of these goals by reading good literature, talking about rich words in context, talking about the language that good authors use, and providing opportunities for students to experiment with new language.

Study after study emphasize the importance of vocabulary growth in a child’s literacy journey. Scott and Nagy (2009) eloquently wrote and investigated about word consciousness. Researchers August et al. (2005) expressed concern that ELLs may be at risk of being incorrectly diagnosed as learning disabled, because of their limited English vocabulary and difficulties with reading comprehension. Given the clear connection between vocabulary and comprehension and the knowledge that our English Language Learners are at a disadvantage when it comes to reading and writing, we have no choice but to address the vocabulary gaps through rich and meaningful discussions, making picture books come alive, and using activities that increase word knowledge in the classroom and beyond.

There is a relationship between morphological awareness and vocabulary learning. Morphological awareness is the understanding of how complex words are formed from meaningful smaller parts, Kieffer and Lesaux (2012) concluded in their study that by equipping language minority students with a better understanding of morphology, you can begin to close the gaps in learning outcomes between these learners and native speakers.

Kottler, Kottler, and Street (2008) write of the considerable agreement among researchers that all students add approximately 2,000 to 3,500 distinct words to their reading vocabularies each year. They calculate that this would mean teaching 17 words each school day (an impossible task!). These authors note the power of incidental learning, when coupled with exposure to and interaction with increasingly complex and rich oral language. Acquisition of new vocabulary happens through students’ own reading or being read to. Kottler et al. emphasize that vocabulary acquisition is a long-term process, and involves many encounters with both spoken and written words in varying contexts. New words must be integrated into everyday classrooms and students must be provided opportunities to use the words in meaningful ways.

Marzano (2004) has proposed a very useful six-step instructional process for teaching vocabulary. His six steps synthesize the research on vocabulary teaching using direct instruction. Each step is accompanied by concrete instructional examples. I used Marzano’s 6-steps as a guide to knowing where to begin and to keep myself on track with delivering meaningful instruction.
Table 2 Marzano’s Six Steps for Teaching Vocabulary (2004)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Marzano Step</th>
<th>What this Step Can Look Like</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1. Provide a description, explanation, or example of the new term.          | • Provide a context for the word  
• Introduce direct experiences that provide examples for the word  
• Tell a story that integrates the word  
• Use video to help with understanding the word  
• Ask students to investigate the word and present the information to the class as a skit, pantomime, poster, etc.  
• Describe your own mental picture of the word  
• Find or create a picture that explains the word  
• Provide a context for the word  
• Introduce direct experiences that provide examples for the word  
• Tell a story that integrates the word  
• Use video to help with understanding the word  
• Ask students to investigate the word and present the information to the class as a skit, pantomime, poster, etc.  
• Describe your own mental picture of the word  
• Find or create a picture that explains the word  
• Monitor and correct misunderstandings  
• Students must use their original ideas  |
| 2. Ask students to restate the description, explanation, or example in their own words. |                                                                                                           |
Conclusion

Addressing the needs of English Language Learners is crucial and must be immediate as the diversity of classroom populations continues to increase exponentially every year. As teachers we want these new students to feel safe and successful in acquiring and using new vocabulary. This, in turn, helps to increase reading comprehension and, most importantly, create successful readers and writers.

In order for students to learn the vast number of words necessary to be successful in school and in life, teachers must be intentional and deliberate in their instruction of vocabulary. While there is no one program or way of teaching that will ensure the full potential of vocabulary acquisition, teachers can make sure their instruction is robust and layered across the entire curriculum. Vocabulary must be taught in a way that makes sense to students. In addition to integrated explicit teaching, students must be given opportunities to practice using new words during classroom discussions and in their writing. A teacher must provide a word rich environment, including a literature-rich program; encourage independent word learners through explicit instruction of strategies; model good use of vocabulary in reading, speaking and writing; and use literacy-based assessments to drive appropriate instruction. In this study I sought to integrate these components of vocabulary recommended by research as I examined the impact of a systematic, explicit vocabulary program on my third grade English Language Learners.

Methodology

Participants

This research took place in my third grade classroom in the Westerville City School district, a suburban district just outside of Columbus, Ohio. Of the students that attend Hawthorne, 91.9% are economically disadvantaged and 21.8% have disabilities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Building Demographics</th>
<th>Classroom Demographics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multi</td>
<td>Multi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>Asian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36%</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Participants in the study were six English Language Learners; all six entered my third grade classroom reading below grade level. Ages ranged from eight to ten years. Three of the students were boys and three were girls. None of the students were on IEPs but one had been retained in third grade last year. All students were on free and reduced lunch.
Instrumentation

During the first week of school I assessed students with a STAR diagnostic test. This helped to give me one data point to know where students could begin to be placed in guided reading groups. At that time students also began the independent reading program, Accelerated Reader, which is a reading program as well as a system that administers quizzes after students finish reading books they have chosen. There are also occasional vocabulary quizzes to check student understanding of words from the books they have read; this provided a second data source for the study. There is not a vocabulary quiz for every test. The quizzes come up randomly depending on which books are selected by the students and which ones have a test to go along with the text. The second assessment was The Fountas and Pinnell Reading Benchmark System (2008). This program keeps track of fluency, accuracy, and reading comprehension on a quarterly basis. The third assessment was Study Island. Study Island is a web-based instruction, practice, assessment, and reporting system built from Ohio’s standards. All three assessments have established reliability and validity criteria through pilot studies.

Guided Reading Group
Instructional Procedures

I used the results of a STAR reading test, a spelling inventory, and the Fountas and Pinnell (2008) Benchmarking Program to create my guided reading groups. I had six groups in all. Two focus groups included three English Language Learners and two non-Ells. The rest of the class I used as my control group. My ELL groups had guided reading four out of five days every week except for shorter weeks. We met for 20 minutes every time (see Table 2). When choosing guided reading texts I alternated between fiction and non-fiction to ensure that I was including as many words as possible on as many topics as possible. When listening to students read aloud, I became aware that some of them could read the words smoothly but didn’t understand the meaning. They were decoding without comprehension. During guided reading I pretaught the vocabulary so students knew the

*Student Working with Morphemic Elements Sort*

new words when they came to them. Sometimes this meant bringing in an example from home (a thimble, for example). Sometimes it meant asking students if there was a similar word from their home language.

As a group we played vocabulary games to reinforce the words (http://www.fcrr.org/). Some of the games students played were 1. Contraction Bingo, matching the words (they have) with the contraction (they’ve); 2. Morphemic Elements Sort, students identify the relationship among words and place them on a gradient (e.g., laugh, giggle, chuckle, whimper, cry, sob); 3. Homograph Hitch, students study words with multiple meanings like bat (mammal and tool to hit a baseball); and 4. Vocabulary Spin Sort, a game that addresses academic vocabulary. Students had to decide if the word cards showed contractions, abbreviations, homophones, homographs, antonyms, or synonyms. Students searched for words in their books during their independent reading time and later shared their findings with the class. Many days students made a special point to use the new words in place of a more common tier 1 word (see Table 1) in their speaking and
writing. I wanted to keep our vocabulary discussions as fun as possible in lieu of the more traditional and arguably duller drill and practice. Although I know the pressure of the OAA (Ohio Achievement Test) is always out there, I did not want my students to feel it. I set a goal for all students to read at least two Accelerated Reader (AR) books of their own choosing each week. One had to be fiction and one non-fiction. There are vocabulary tests attached to some of the Accelerated Reader quizzes and the computer keeps track of these words and the number of total words read. This was in addition to guided reading, independent reading and interactive read-aloud. I also addressed vocabulary gaps through whole group instruction. In mini-lessons (10-15 minute quick lessons), I explicitly taught students the strategy of using context clues to figure out the meanings of unknown words. During spelling instruction I reinforced word meaning by including, for example, themed word focuses. One week the study was *oi* words like *avoid* and *oy* words like *annoying*. Another week we focused on the words *succumb* and *devious*.

_Set-up for Semantic Gradient Activity_

_Sample of Student’s Work with “devious” Using Frayer Graphic Organizer_
Every week there would be a few words on the list that were unfamiliar and we would discuss, act out, or practice using the words in sentences. During Word Study time I instructed students to observe and sort words (Bear, 2000) in a way that made sense to them, to find similarities and differences in words. These words came from their weekly spelling generalizations. One week it would be *tion* and *sion* words. Another week it would be *hard and soft g*, or *hard and soft c* words. Students kept a journal of all of these Word Study lessons. I posted the main concepts of the lessons on the classroom walls as well. During interactive read-aloud, students kept a response journal that also had the Frayer Model (Frayer & Klausmeir, 1969) graphic organizer to keep track of tier two vocabulary (see Table 1). The Frayer model shows a definition, a sentence using the word, an illustration, and synonyms for the word (pictures of two student examples are elsewhere in this article). On another wall I kept charts of “Words to Use Instead Of.” This chart challenged and supported students’ efforts to use tier 2 words in their writing in place of tier 1 words. Math vocabulary word postings spilled out into the hallway. We were running out of space! As an added bonus, posting so many words enabled students to see how words are shared by more than one subject. Many of the math measurement words were also used in science. Sometimes an interactive read-aloud word would come up again in independent or guided reading. Since all third grade students enter the school year with varying levels of vocabulary, depending on their background knowledge, I decided to immerse the entire class in vocabulary and to draw their attention to the connections of words across all subject areas (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002, 2008). Children need to make sense of vocabulary through listening and discussion. (Beck & McKeown, 2001). My classroom is already set up for wide reading. I have a well-stocked classroom library with both fiction and non-fiction books. The books vary in difficulty from pre-primer to level Z (Fountas & Pinnell, 2008), to match the wide range of readers in my classroom. Wide reading was intended to encourage and increase incidental word learning.

**Data Analysis**

The guided groups (which included the 6 ELLs) began the year significantly behind their peers. I compared October scores for the guided groups (M=1.28, SD=0.82) with the non-intervention students’ scores (M=2.34, SD=1.40). These scores were significantly different from each other. At the beginning of the year, these students (“guided group”) were significantly under-performing their peers in reading levels. I then compared March scores (for the “guided group”) (M=3.08, SD=0.68) with the non-intervention students’ scores (M=3.79, SD=0.60). These scores were not significantly different. Although the non-intervention groups’ scores were still higher overall, the difference was not statistically significant. On the measure of reading level, the intervention students are “catching up” to their peers.

Limitations were that I had some outliers in my non-intervention group. I had three students with very low scores (0s or 1s) and one student with a very high score (11). If I take out the outlier students’ scores, the mean reading level of my non-intervention group increases to 4.03, and a t-test with the intervention group indicates that their levels are still significantly below those of their peers.
Neither the Study Island Benchmark nor the Word Count component of the Accelerated Reader tests proved to be very helpful. On the Study Island computer program, students sometimes clicked randomly to be finished early and didn’t really take the assessment seriously. The AR program kept track of the number of words read for each AR book. Since every student read two AR books and took two AR quizzes weekly, their gains across the two groups were similar. In summary, my strongest quantitative results pertain to the students’ reading levels.

![Reading Levels](image)

**Figure 1. Changes in reading level of control vs. intervention groups.**

In addition to the quantitative results, my day to day observations reinforced, for me, how effective explicit vocabulary instruction could be. I was surprised at how much fun vocabulary instruction could be and if it’s fun it will be more likely to “stick.” Furthermore, I learned that a really good vocabulary program has a blend of intentional and incidental instruction. Students began to question words with multiple meanings, words with affixes, and just words in general. They also over questioned at times, asking about words like *Mecha-Monkeys* and *Voodoo Vultures* from Dav Pilkey’s books. But students also asked about rich vocabulary like *piteously*, *delegates*, and *skeptic.* While reading *The Tale of Despereaux*, the word *gnaw* came up. There was quite a bit of discussion and we added it to our Frayer model in the response journal. Later *gnaw* came up again in a student’s independent reading and he shared it with the class. There was more discussion about both books and the meaning of *gnaw*. We also studied *gnaw* in spelling when the generalization of the week was consonant digraphs (gn, mb, ck). This happened many times as students became more aware and interested in words.
When the vocabulary word was “vacancy,” (after much discussion) we hung a sign up on our classroom door. If we were in the classroom, it said “No Vacancy.” When we left for lunch, we turned it around to say “Vacancy.” I tried to get the students to use their new words as much as possible. If they were hungry for lunch they had to use the word “famished” instead of hungry. Students giggled at first but eventually it became their word and there was no more giggling.

**Discussion**

My goal as an educator is to make sure students understand that the purpose of reading is to make sense of text. The amount of vocabulary words students need to know at each grade level is astounding. While student gains as a result of these interventions were encouraging, much of the benefit of this investigation comes from my own reflections on teaching and learning. I realized, for example, that over my teaching career, I have made several assumptions about English language learners. One of these assumptions is that they already understood particular words, contractions for example. In the past I had spent almost no time on explicitly teaching contractions. I knew I had so many other words to teach and contractions were quickly skimmed over. As I delved more deeply into the study of words I realized that not only did my ELL students not understand how contractions worked but most of my students did not. If this was true about contractions, it was possibly true about other words and word forms as well.

I also found that I could no longer really separate spelling, grammar, and word study. All of these studies seemed to flow together at times and all were, in the long run, the study of the English language. I am still overwhelmed by the amount of tier two vocabulary words my students need to know to be successful learners.

Qualitatively, students began to share, unprompted, when they found a previously studied word in their daily reading. I saw students getting up and walking over to the synonym bulletin board to choose more interesting words to put in their writing. Quantitatively the
students who entered third grade with less exposure to vocabulary did increase their vocabulary base and the ability to figure out unknown words but so did the rest of the class according to AR (Accelerated Reading) Words Learned data.

I know that my English Language Learners need more time and support to catch up to their peers and based on this study, a deliberate model of systematic and explicit instruction is a helpful antidote for the support need. At the same time, it would be helpful for me to examine ways of getting them extra reading time. Having a book club during recess, once or twice a week, would give these students more time to read independently and build up vocabulary. Looking at the bigger picture, as the ELL population continues to grow and external mandates call for school reform, I think year-long school makes a lot of sense.

The study of vocabulary instruction raised my awareness to the enormity of the endeavor so there is no going back. My next step will be addressing academic vocabulary in a more aggressive way. The task of learning vocabulary for the average student is huge and for the English Language Learner, it’s even larger. Only robust, well-planned instruction that includes rich and diverse language experiences can help all learners achieve this goal.

References


Florida Center for Reading Research [http://www.fcrr.org/](http://www.fcrr.org/)


Study Island [https://www.studyisland.com/](https://www.studyisland.com/)

