

Got a Context Clue? Vocabulary Development in Middle School

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Abstract

The purpose of this project was to determine whether incorporating student-created context clue sentences into an already extensive vocabulary curriculum would yield a higher vocabulary acquisition for my special education students. I began this project by modeling good context clue sentences.

Through the use of cooperative learning groups, weekly practice, and continuous feedback, students were able to make personal connections to their weekly target words. This

yearlong project assisted all of my students, not just my special needs students, to make positive gains in vocabulary development. Acquisition was evident in their conversations, writing, and scores on vocabulary tests.



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Background

I teach eighth-grade Language Arts in a rural [district](#) in Central Ohio. I have always stressed vocabulary development in my teaching, so I assumed that all of my eighth graders would pass the vocabulary section on the Ohio Achievement Test (OAT) in reading. Yes, I believe that all students can acquire vocabulary. No, I do not just teach the “advanced” students; in fact, during the 2005-2006 school year, all of the special education students (18% of the total population) were included in one of my three blocked classes. This just seemed like such a “doable” goal after all of the skills we had worked on throughout the year pertaining to vocabulary. I felt that my students should, at the very least, have been “proficient” in vocabulary acquisition...and according to the 2006 OAT in reading – 87% of my students were. It was the other nine students that concerned me – for me, even this small percentage was too much. What more could I have done to help this 13% - half of whom had IEPs (Individualized Education Plans)?

When schedules came out for the 2006-2007 school year, I looked at how my new eighth graders performed on their seventh grade OAT tests in reading. Surprisingly, the exact same percentage as last year’s group passed the vocabulary section of their reading achievement tests...that left me with a new 13% that were once again labeled as “basic” or “limited” in vocabulary. Six of these eight students were on IEPs; this lower achievement may be explained by Simmons and Kameenui’s 1990 research that suggests that adolescents with learning disabilities had less extensive vocabularies than matched-aged peers without disabilities (as cited in Baker, S.K., Simmons, D.C., & Kameenui, E.J., 1995). I didn’t want this new group of students to end up in the same place as my last year’s eighth graders – still failing the vocabulary section, so I knew that I needed to try something more to help this particular population acquire vocabulary. I began looking for a way to personalize instruction because it was evident that effective vocabulary instruction needed to go beyond simply knowing a word by sight and sound and knowing its dictionary definition (Miller & Gildea, 1987). I knew I was on to something, when I came across an article by Grubaugh (1985), where he outlined a concept that he referred to as “Spoken Words”. In “Spoken Words,” the focus is on personalizing vocabulary instruction: one’s language reflects school subjects, employment, family life, reading, viewing, and other interests. Therefore, vocabulary instruction should also reflect these personal interests. Unfortunately, no data were provided in the article to support the validity of this notion. Using this concept of personalization, I came up with having the students write context clue sentences with their weekly target words, which is supported by Sternberg’s research (1987), that in order for vocabulary learning to be effective, it must occur in context. I hoped that this method, in conjunction with the methods I was already using, would aid in vocabulary acquisition and would yield 100% proficiency on this year’s OAT in vocabulary.

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I began the 2006 school year by enlisting the help of the seventh grade language arts teacher. Together, we assigned my students into heterogeneous mixed-ability groups of five. Using Jean Schumaker’s conceptual acronym “HALO” (as cited in Lenz, B.K. &

Deshler, D.D., 2004), I made sure that I had at least one *High* achiever, one *Average* achiever, one *Low* achiever (IEP student), and one *Other* type of achiever (for example, students for whom English was a second language or those with low motivation). Groupings were done this way to encourage peer assistance and to ensure that all members in the class were learning.

Procedures

My classes began the year with an in-depth discussion and notes regarding context clue sentences. In their guided notes, I intentionally chose a word (obstreperously) that I knew the students would not know. I first had the class guess at its meanings, and we wrote all of their ideas on the board. I then used the word in a sentence: *The boy acted obstreperously*. As a class, we were able to determine that our target word was an adverb, and we went back and erased any words on our original list that were not adverbs. We talked about the model sentence and how it really did not give the readers an idea of the word's meaning, or even if the word had a positive or negative connotation. I then used the word in a second model sentence: *The boy acted obstreperously, yelling and screaming down the aisles of Wal-Mart until his mom gave him candy*. With this sentence, the students were able to get a clearer meaning of the word and refined their list to the following definitions: bratty, out-of-control, obnoxious, loud, and crazy. Finally, we looked the word up in the dictionary to ensure the meaning was correct (it was). I then proceeded to repeat this process both verbally and on the board for the next two weeks to demonstrate how context clues within a sentence could enable the students to uncover meaning. Student participation was encouraged in creating sentences, and much dialogue ensued in determining why a sentence was considered an "all-star" context clue sentence or just a sentence. As the research of Beck,

McKeown, and McCaslin (1983) indicated, cues that used synonyms were more helpful than cues requiring an inference, and cues that were closer in proximity to the target word were more helpful than those farther away in the sentence. Using this research, the other language arts



teacher and I adopted the following criteria for what our "all-stars" context clue sentences should look like: 1) sentences using a synonym of the target word; 2) sentences where the definition is embedded; or 3) sentences where one or more descriptive words adequately describes the target word (see Table 1 for examples of students' sentences).

By week three, I felt that my students understood the purpose of context clue sentences and were ready to try and write their own. Nagy, Anderson, and Herman (1987) suggest that students need multiple opportunities to interact with the targeted vocabulary words. Another vocabulary study by Rupley, Logan, & Nichols (as cited in Bromley, 2007) suggested that retention of target words would be greater if students were able to make connections to their existing schemas. With these studies in mind, I adopted Isabel L. Beck and Margaret G. McKeown's (2001) "[Text Talk](#)" program. I first introduced the students to that week's words through the reading of a short story and we also made flashcards with the dictionary's definitions and part(s) of speech of the ten target words. For homework, the students had to choose five of the week's words and write a context clue sentence for each. I graded these only on effort. The following day, I had the students break into their pre-determined cooperative learning groups and share their sentences with one another. The groups then chose their five best sentences, made any revisions and / or additions necessary, and turned these in to me for a closer inspection.

Table 1. Samples of Students' All Star Sentences

The milk was <i>conveniently</i> placed in the middle of the counter so we could easily access it.
Texas was a <i>sovereign</i> nation until it became a part of the United States in the 1800's.
At the bank, a criminal tried to cash a <i>counterfeit</i> check, but the teller knew better than to cash this phony check and called the police.
As an extra safety <i>precaution</i> , the construction workers had to wear hard hats to protect them from falling debris.
My mom is the <i>secretary-treasurer</i> of the book club because she keeps the records and handles the money.

I wanted to minimize subjectivity as best as I could, so that the choice of "all star sentences" was consistent. I was fortunate to have in my classroom an educational aide for eighty-four minutes, and I trained her on what an "all-star" sentence should look like. Because the aide had been in my classroom during the instructional time and had participated in the creation of model sentences, it was easy for me to train her on the "all-star" criteria that were to be used in assessing group sentences. Beginning with the aide, then the other language arts teacher, and finally myself, we each reviewed the groups' sentences independently. Using the standards that we had predetermined to be indicators of a good context clue sentence, each of us read the sentences and placed a checkmark by any that fit one of the criteria. For each sentence that received at least two check marks, the group was awarded a sticker on the Vocabulary All-Stars bulletin board. Groups were then asked to write their "all-star" sentences on sentence strips, present them to the class, and hang their sentences in the hallway for other students to read. This repetitive interaction and exposure to the various target words is supported by Beck, McKeown, and Kucan's (2002) research. This process was repeated on a weekly basis for an entire year, with ten new target words being introduced each time. If and when a group reached

ten stickers during a nine-week grading period, the group was rewarded with an ice-cream sundae party.

Each nine weeks, I reduced the group size. During the first nine weeks, the students were in groups of five. I then reduced group size to three students (still heterogeneous, mixed-ability) for the second nine weeks, moved to pairs for the third nine weeks, and ended with individuals for the last nine weeks. I should note that tests were given periodically to determine that each individual student was acquiring not only the new vocabulary, but the skill of writing good context clue sentences as well.

Results

The first nine weeks proved to be very labor intensive, and I felt like I was constantly “pulling” the students along. While there were a few groups that were excelling, many of the groups required a lot of explicit instruction, encouragement, and examples from me before they found success. At the end of the first nine weeks, 55% of the students had been rewarded for their efforts by reaching their goal of at least ten stickers on the All-Stars’ board and receiving an ice cream sundae party, of course! However, by the end of the second nine weeks, the majority of the students had gotten it. All but 14% had reached the target goal – many groups were close to reaching the goal twice! The third nine weeks showed a slight decline in success, which I attribute to the reduction of group size down to pairs and several lost opportunities due to inclement weather. This was the first time my students were not necessarily exposed to higher ability peers. The special education population found this to be the most difficult; on average, each of them only received 2.5 stars on the bulletin board (29 stars / 12 students.) I have two hypotheses on why this may have occurred. My first thought is that the earlier groupings actually hindered my special education students; I am left wondering if those early “all-star” sentences are only reflective of my higher ability students? Or, even worse, did I not create an environment where each group member’s thoughts and ideas were respected? As Grubaugh (1985) writes, “Students should feel they have something worthwhile to offer, no matter what their academic standing. As a suitable classroom climate is developed...the class should come to appreciate their differences as rich veins of information to be explored” (p. 65). In the future, I may need to spend more time modeling good group behaviors and sit with each and every group on a weekly basis to ensure that each student’s thoughts (and sentences) are being heard. My second thought has to do with my special education students’ working vocabularies. As Baker, S.K. et al. (1995) suggest; “The critical framework that helps pave the way to successful independent word learning skills is established early through exposure to written text and development of strong skills in reading and writing.”



Special needs adolescents' vocabulary foundations may be compromised due to their specific learning disabilities, and as Anderson and Nagy (1991) suggest, a more systematic approach to vocabulary instruction may be needed to make these students independent word learners (as cited in Baker, S.K. et al., 1995).

By the fourth nine weeks, when the students were working independently, the majority had mastered the goal of writing good context clue sentences. There were only a few students that I remained concerned about – two students with significant intellectual challenges and two students with motivational issues. **In the end, 94% passed the vocabulary acquisition portion of the 2007 OAT in reading. While my intervention did not yield the 100% that I was aiming for, it was successful. Six of the eight students that I was concerned about did make gains on the vocabulary section of the reading test (see Table 2).**

Table 2. OAT Vocabulary Scores for My Special Needs Students

Student	7 th Grade OAT Vocabulary Section % Answered Correctly	8 th Grade OAT Vocabulary Section % Answered Correctly
A	38%	63%
B	38%	63%
C	50%	25%
D	50%	75%
E	50%	38%
F	50%	63%
G	17%	25%
H	25%	63%

While my purpose for this study was to ensure success on the OAT, another purpose emerged. At the beginning of the study, students were only using the words when they were required to use them – even though they were encouraged to use them in their writing with the incentive of extra credit. Sure, I had random moments when a student would use a target word in conversation (and occasionally in writing), but these were few and far between. However, once the third nine weeks began, the most wonderful change occurred. Students were using their words on a daily basis and using what they had learned about context clues. I had a teacher tell me that Cody should be the Star of the Day on 1/31/07 because he used a sentence's context to figure out the meaning of *tendered* in math class that day. Students came to class to tell me that Dana should be Star of the Day on 2/1/07 because in physical education she had told Mary that she was being *malicious* when she ripped the ball out of her arms, and Leila should be the Star of the Day on 3/1/07 because she noted how *emaciated* a cow looked in a picture in the history textbook. Being Star of the Day simply meant that I put the student's name on the board and called them a Star. Then I told all of the other classes why that person was that day's Star. Who knew that would motivate eighth graders? Students started pointing out vocabulary words in their readings, and I even had one student bring in a box of Fruit

Loops because one of our target words, *colossal*, was on the box! Unfortunately, these daily connections with words were happening for my average and higher ability students only. My special education students were not using or at least sharing their use of the target words. Again, is this due to classroom climate...a weak vocabulary foundation...a desire not to share by this group of students, or something else? Since this instructional method did increase six of my special education students' OAT vocabulary results, I feel that this instruction was beneficial to all students; as McKeown & Beck (1988) suggest, comprehensive vocabulary development program should include goals for learning *many* words at the level of *verbal association* and *fewer* words at the level of *partial* and *full concept knowledge*. It is probable that the instructional method I employed this year did enable my students on IEP's to learn how to read words in context for the purpose of the OAT, but did not allow them to gain full conceptual knowledge and to make these target words part of their everyday vocabulary.

Discussion

Teaching language arts in an inclusion setting can be challenging. I have often wondered if I meet all of my students' needs. While my original purpose dealt mainly with my special education population and their performance on the vocabulary section of the OAT, I actually achieved something far greater. Adding context clues sentences to my students' learning strategies for vocabulary affected not only those eight students I was targeting, but my average to higher achieving students as well. This finding is supported in the research literature. Many authors have demonstrated positive outcomes for students placed in inclusion settings (e.g., Stainback & Stainback, 1992; Haager & Klingner, 2005).

With explicit instruction and numerous examples, all students were able to develop an understanding of how context informs the reader about word meanings.

There are many reasons why I believe *all* students were able to benefit from the addition of context clue sentences to my usual vocabulary teaching routines. The first reason was that I provided direct instruction and modeling. With explicit instruction and numerous examples, *all* students were able to develop an understanding of how context informs the reader about word meanings. By using a scaffolding method, *all* students were able to learn with and from one another how to write good context sentences. Together, the students were able to share both failures and successes. The higher-achieving students were able to "teach" their lower-achieving group members, while *all* students worked toward a common goal. With constant repetition and practice, each and every student made growth.

I am still left wondering why my lower-achieving students did not make the personal connections that I would have hoped that they would make. Beck and McKeown (as cited in Baker, S.K. et al., 1995) concluded that, "Even if some students are learning as many as seven new words a day, many others may be learning only one or two" (p.795). If this group of students had had additional practice and greater frequency with their target words, would their acquisition have increased? Experts believe that in order to learn words in context, students need to be exposed to the target words at least six times

(Jenkins, J.R., Stein, M., and Wysocki, K., 1984). Another study by Devine (1981) suggests that students benefit from keeping written records of oral presentations because these records enhance listening comprehension (as cited in Grubaugh, 1985). Next year, I may try having the students keep vocabulary notebooks to record target words and their meanings when groups present their “all-star” sentences. I may also try decreasing the amount of weekly target words for my special education population, as well as providing additional opportunities for this group to interact with their words. Maybe the additional exposure will assist students in developing the confidence to use target words in a manner that is personally meaningful to them. And yes, I am still shooting for 100%.

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