

Vocabulary Instruction and English Language Learners: Does Culturally Relevant Teaching Increase Retention?

Jenna Digiacomio
University of Mary Washington

Vocabulary plays a central role in not only the acquisition of early literacy skills, but ultimately, the overall academic success of English Language Learners in the classroom and beyond. Students who speak English as a second language and who do not receive sufficient or culturally relevant vocabulary instruction are unable to comprehend most, if not all, forms of grade level reading (Beck 2002). According to Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995), culturally relevant teaching possesses three major components: “(a) Students must experience academic success; (b) students must develop and/or maintain cultural competence; and (c) students must develop a critical consciousness through which they challenge the status quo of the current social order” (p.160). Gloria Ladson-Billings (1992) also claims that Culturally Relevant Teaching or CRT is a “term used to describe the kind of teaching that is designed not merely to fit the school culture to the students’ culture but also to use the students’ culture as the basis for helping students understand themselves and others, structure social interactions, and conceptualize knowledge.”

The goal of culturally relevant teaching is to bridge the gap between what students experience at home and what students experience at school in order to create instruction that is meaningful for the student. If culturally relevant teaching does not take place in the classroom, English Language Learners’ struggle with vocabulary can snowball, transcending into all content areas and become a discouraging, frustrating, and demotivating issue. For young English Language Learners, Tier 2 vocabulary words can present an exceptional challenge, as these are high frequency words that occur across content and are essential for comprehension. According to Beck, McKeown and Kucan (2002), Tier Two words can be identified by three main characteristics: “importance and utility, instructional potential, and conceptual knowledge” (p.19). English Language Learners must be properly supported by educators in order to polish their foundational language skills that they will build upon.

The purpose of my research was to answer the following question: What happens to a kindergarten English Language Learner’s vocabulary retention when she is presented vocabulary in a culturally relevant form versus a non-culturally relevant form? As sole researcher, I conducted a qualitative comparative case study on these two different vocabulary instructional styles to help to determine if

culturally relevant teaching could aid an English Language Learner within a kindergarten classroom in developing the Tier 2 vocabulary words she needs in order to learn to read, comprehend texts, and succeed academically.

Methodology

I conducted an action research study during my fourteen-week student teaching internship which took place within the 2016-2017 academic year. I was simultaneously instructing my students (to help them succeed academically) while also collecting data for my research. This meant that I served as both a researcher and participant in the classroom.

Participants

This research study was a case study of a student t in a kindergarten classroom. This student will be referred to as Mia (pseudonym) for the purpose of this study. Mia is a five-year-old female. She speaks Spanish at home, but her family is also proficient in English. Mia is currently on grade level for all subjects and is reading at a level A according to Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening, or PALS, testing. PALS is a researched-based assessment tool for early literacy skills. Because she is proficient in English, she was not being tested to determine her WIDA level. Although Mia will not be tested for WIDA, she exhibited codeswitching when speaking to her teacher and peers.

Setting

I conducted my research at a fully accredited Title I elementary school located in Central Virginia where all students are eligible for free and reduced breakfast and lunch. According to the Virginia Department of Education (2015), this school had a population of 870 students during the previous academic year. The school demographics indicate a diverse population where approximately 35 percent of students identify as black, 33 percent of students identify as white, 21 percent of students identify as Hispanic, 6 percent of students identify as Asian, 3 percent of students identify as two or more races, and less than 1 percent of students identify as American-Indian. More specifically, I conducted this research in a kindergarten inclusion classroom.

Data Collection

This action research project took place during the spring semester of the 2016-2017 academic year over the course of six weeks. For this case study, I collected data in the form of observations, pre-tests and post-tests, and a formal summative assessment. All pre-tests, post-tests, and the formal summative assessment were performed verbally while the researcher wrote down the responses of the participant. Prior to beginning my research study, I received written consent from the student's parents or guardians.

During this time, I helped to improve the vocabulary of an English Language Learner in a kindergarten classroom through one-on-one instruction where the student learned three new words each week through books that I read to her. I instructed the student using non-culturally relevant teaching for one week and culturally relevant teaching for the next week. The instruction was implemented in an alternating fashion so the data to be properly compared, an AB, AB, pattern. Weeks of non-culturally relevant instruction featured learning words through books that were required reading that the entire grade level worked with, as recommended by the language arts and reading specialist. The vocabulary words that I taught Mia were selected according to the school-wide teacher's manual for language arts, titled *ThinkCentral* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2007). These books did not relate to Mia's life, experiences, or interests.

Weeks of culturally relevant instruction featured learning the words through books that were chosen by the researcher and were selected because they were culturally relevant to the specific student. They included families from similar cultural backgrounds, bilingual characters, codeswitching, and focused on her likes, interests, and personal experiences. The words taught utilizing culturally relevant instruction were chosen according to Isabell Beck's text *Bringing Words to Life* (2002) and were classified as Tier 2 words. Tier 2 words are high frequency words that that are used by mature language users across content areas. These words may have multiple meanings and can therefore be difficult, but essential for English Language Learners. Examples of Tier 2 words include: patience, avoid, and inspect. In addition, these words were selected in correspondence with the current units and lessons that all students in the classroom were learning. This was to ensure that the vocabulary words utilized were taught in context and were not taught in isolation without relationship to the student's academics.

During week one of my research project, a week of non-culturally relevant teaching, Mia and I read the book *Home for a Tiger, Home for a Bear* by Brenda Williams and Rosamund Fowler (2007). The vocabulary words that we worked with were: burrow, lodge, and patient. I first began with a pretest. In this pretest, I dictated one word to the student and asked the student if she knew what that word meant. If the student responded with a no, I inferred that this was an appropriate word to teach the student. If the student did not know the word, I asked the student if she had ever seen or heard the word before. If the student responded with a yes, I then asked the student to define the word. If the student's definition was incorrect, I knew that this was an appropriate word to teach the student. If the student responded that she knew the word, but gave the incorrect definition, I asked the student if she knew something about the word or if she could relate it to something else. If the student's definition was correct, there was no purpose in teaching the student this word, and a new word was selected. This process continued for all three words at the beginning of each week.

After the pretest was administered and all three vocabulary words were chosen, I presented the student with the three vocabulary words in a non-culturally relevant form, meaning the texts used were not relevant or meaningful to the student's life. Prior to reading, I dictated each word to the student. I then provided the student with the definition of the word and discussed the word with the student. As we read the book together, I paused when the vocabulary word appeared in the text. I discussed with the student how the vocabulary word functions in the text.

At the end of each week, I administered a post-test, similar to the pretest the student completed at the start of the week. For this posttest, I dictated each of the three words that the student has learned that week one at a time. After I dictated the word to the student, I asked the student to define the word. Once the student defined the word, I asked the student to provide an example of the word. I also asked the student what helped her to learn or remember the word.

In week two of my research project, a week of culturally relevant teaching, I repeated the pre-test procedures and then taught the student three new vocabulary words. These three new words were presented to the student in a culturally relevant form, meaning the texts used were relevant or meaningful in the student's life, interests, and experiences. At conclusion of the week, I repeated the post-test procedures. These first two weeks served as session one of the vocabulary instruction and allowed me to compare the student's retention of the vocabulary through my observations and the pre-tests and post-tests. I compared the data from week one and week two—as I had collected the student's response to vocabulary presented in a non-culturally relevant form, versus the student's response to vocabulary presented in a culturally relevant form. The vocabulary words that the student was able to remember and recall better aided me in discovering the effects that culturally relevant teaching may have on vocabulary retention. At the conclusion of session one, I reviewed the data that I collected. I compared week one of non-culturally relevant teaching to week two of culturally relevant teaching to determine what words the student retained and if that retention may have any correlation to the instructional method that was utilized.

During week 3 of the study, the student and I read the book *Turtle Splash* by Cathryn Falwell (2008). The words we studied were: timid, lounging, and idle. During week 5 of the study, the student and I read the book *How Many Stars in the Sky?* by James E. Ransome (1991). The words we studied were distance, dazzling, and gazing. All books used for non-culturally relevant vocabulary instruction were selected according to the school's current pacing guide and books that all other students we will be reading according to the curriculum. All vocabulary words used for non-culturally relevant vocabulary instruction were selected according to the school-wide teacher's manual, titled ThinkCentral. This manual outlines the Tier 2 words found in each of the books.

During week 2 of the study, the student and I read the book *I Love Saturdays and domingos* by Alma Flor Ada (1999). The words we studied were: nibbling,

difficult, and pier. During 4 of the study, the student and I read the book *Abuela* by Arthur Dorros. The words we will studied were: flock, harbor, and glide. During week 6 of the study, the student and I read the book *Chato's Kitchen* by Gary Soto and Susan Guevara (1995). The words we studied were reassure, dismayed, and vibrated. Books from each of the three sessions possessed common themes. For example, session one books included a theme of home, session two books include a theme of family, and session three books include a theme of animals. For culturally relevant texts, all Tier 2 words were selected according to the books corresponding manual, which indicates Tier 2 words.

At the conclusion of my action research project, the student studied eighteen different vocabulary words. These eighteen vocabulary words were then tested a final time using a formal summative assessment. For this formal assessment, I dictated each word to the student in the order that they were learned. After I dictated the word, I asked the student to provide a definition. This final and formal assessment allowed me to determine what the student has retained over the course of the entire research study. From the student's responses of this formal assessment, I was able to speculate if the vocabulary instructional styles played a role in how the student retained the information.

Results

During my action research study, my goal was to answer the question: What happened to a kindergarten English Language Learner's vocabulary retention when she was presented vocabulary in a culturally relevant form versus a non-culturally relevant form? In order to answer this question, I collected four types of data during my study: informal observations, pre-tests, post-tests, and a final summative assessment.

Out of all eighteen words, Mia was able to recall and define all of them correctly, except one—the word timid. The word timid was learned during week three, a week of non-culturally relevant instruction.

Discussion

According to the results of my study, specifically the summative assessment which evaluated the student's ability to retain the vocabulary, the answer to this question is: Presenting vocabulary in a culturally relevant form did not affect retention of vocabulary for my kindergarten student—at least directly. I suspect this is primarily due to the way in which I instructed the student utilizing the context/key word method. This method requires students to infer the meaning of a word based on the situation in which it is used and the words that surround it. It also requires students to find the meaning of a word based on words that are related to it. The student only gained vocabulary knowledge by constructing the meaning through utilizing the words around it and through words that she already knew for both culturally relevant and non-culturally relevant texts. Perle et al.

(2006) propose that the context/keyword method is proven to produce better learning and retention outcomes because it aids in transferring short-term memory to long-term memory. The results of this study are supported by Perle's findings. According to the student's summative assessment this method of vocabulary instruction proved to be quite effective, another finding of this study.

Another discovery involves the examples that the student provided when prompted during the post-tests. At the end of each week, the student was administered a post-test that involved three tasks: define the word, provide an example of the word, and state what helped you to remember the word. While defining the word indicated the student's vocabulary acquisition and stating what helped her to remember the word informed me of her retention—having the student provide an example added a layer to the study I did not expect. For vocabulary words that were presented in a non-culturally relevant form, the student was only able to provide examples that took place directly in the text. For vocabulary words that were presented in a culturally relevant form, the student first provided an example directly from the text, and then added an example not from the text, but from her daily life. For example:

Ms. DiGiacomo: Flock. Define the word.

Mia: A big group of birds.

Ms. DiGiacomo: Good! Provide an example of the word.

Mia: Like our class—it's a flock. It's a big group of kids.

Here, the student references the book, *Abuela*, where the granddaughter and her abuela go to the park in New York City and watch someone feed a flock of pigeons. Next, she adds that her class is also a big group, so it is like a flock. Below is another example:

Ms. DiGiacomo: Great! What about difficult? Define the word.

Mia: Well, it means that something is really hard.

Ms. DiGiacomo: Provide an example of the word.

Mia: To drive to Florida, when we visit Nana, we like to fly there—not drive. Or like tying your shoe.

Here, the student refers to the drive the main character must make in order to see her family. Then she connects the vocabulary knowledge to another event she deems as difficult that is relevant to her life—tying her shoes. These patterns continued through the entirety of the study. Below is a comparison from a non-culturally relevant week:

Ms. DiGiacomo: Burrow. Define this word.

Mia: It means an underground hole.

Ms. DiGiacomo: Provide an example of the word.

Mia: Bunnies live in burrows.

Ms. DiGiacomo: What helped you to remember the word?

Mia: The book.

Here, the student demonstrates retention of the word, however, the example she provides stem directly from the text, and she does not elaborate further than that event, as she did during weeks when vocabulary was presented in a culturally relevant form.

This finding shows that when the kindergarten student was presented vocabulary in a culturally relevant form, she was better able to connect the vocabulary knowledge to her own life. This finding directly relates to research from Islam & Park (2015), who write, “Obstacles to comprehension for ELLs are decreased when teachers use purposeful tasks that use language productively and meaningfully and identify cultural links to texts” (p.1). The way in which the student was able to better explain her knowledge beyond just events that occurred in the text demonstrated increased comprehension or understanding of the word. This is because the student was given a more purposeful task in order to learn the word—by reading a story that was directly related to her life and her culture.

While retention of vocabulary is of immense importance for ELL students, rote memorization does not give a student a true grasp on the words’ meaning, which may translate into the student memorizing a word’s definition, but not being able to utilize the word effectively because they are not understanding the words meaning. In my study, vocabulary words that were presented in a culturally relevant form could be used effectively in conversation because the student understood the meaning of the word outside of the context of the book.

Conclusion

In my future classroom, I will continue to instruct vocabulary using the context/keyword method because of its effectiveness. I will also continue to teach vocabulary through the context of stories that prove meaningful to the student and connect directly to their daily lives. I would like to further this research by investigating what vocabulary words the student was able to retain over a longer period of time. At the end of the six weeks, the student was able to retain the vocabulary, at least on the surface. I would be interested to see if the student was able to still recall the words that were presented in a non-culturally relevant form over a longer period of time. In time, Mia is likely to forget the texts we read together. I predict that when she does, Mia will also forget the meaning of the words instructed in a non-culturally relevant form, for her, knowledge of these words lives

only within the fictional, disconnected stories on page, and not within her own life.

References

- August, D. (2014). Developing literacy in English language learners: Findings from a review of the experimental research. *School Psychology Review*, 43(4), 490-498.
- Beck, I. L., McKeown, M. G., & Kucan, L. (2002). *Bringing words to life: Robust vocabulary instruction*. NY: Guilford.
- Braker, J. (2013). Linking vocabulary acquisition with word knowledge to improve reading comprehension for ELLS. *Illinois Reading Council Journal*, 42(1), 28-39.
- Chung, S. (2012). Research-based vocabulary instruction for English Language Learners. *The Reading Matrix*, 12(2).
- Estes, T., Mintz, S., Gunter M.A. (2011). *Instruction: A models approach*. (6th Ed.). Boston, MA: Pearson Education.
- Gass, S. & Selinker, L. (2008). *Second language acquisition: An introductory course* (3rd ed.). NY: Routledge.
- Ge, Z. G. (2015). Enhancing Vocabulary Retention by Embedding L2 Target Words in L1 Stories: An Experiment with Chinese Adult e-Learners. *Educational Technology & Society*, 18 (3), 254–265.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (1992). Reading between the lines and beyond the pages: a culturally relevant approach to literacy teaching. *Theory into Practice*, 31(3), 312-320.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (2014) culturally relevant pedagogy 2.0: aka the remix. *Harvard Educational Review*, 84(1), 1-11.
- Nagy, W. E., Anderson, R. C., & Herman, P. A. (1987). Learning word meanings from context during normal reading. *American Education Research Journal*, 24(2), 237-270.
- Phythian-Sence, C., & Wagner, R. (2007). Vocabulary acquisition: A primer. In R. Wagner, A. Muse, & K. Tannebaum (Eds.), *Vocabulary acquisition implications for reading comprehension* (pp. 1-14). New York: Guilford Press.
- Sousa, D. (2007). *How the special needs brain learns* (2 ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Wallace, G. (2007). Vocabulary: The key to teaching English Language Learners to read. *Reading Improvement*, 44(4), 189-193.