A synergy between storytelling and vocabulary teaching through TPRS

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Abstract

Reading comprehension is a complex undertaking that involves many levels of processing. One of the most fundamental aspects of comprehension is the ability to deal with unfamiliar words encountered in text. Readers who struggle with word-level tasks use up valuable cognitive space that could be allotted to deeper levels of text analysis. It is not enough to rely on context cues to predict the meaning of new words, since this strategy often results in erroneous or superficial understandings of key terms, especially in content-area reading (Paynter, Bodrova, & Doty 2005). This paper examines the interrelationships of vocabulary and TPRS as they impact reading comprehension, and focuses on instructional approaches that foster word-level knowledge. 44 secondary school students joined a pre-post test designed study. The results corroborate the success of TPRS on vocabulary teaching competence.

Keywords: *Storytelling, vocabulary teaching, TPRS*

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Vocabulary Instruction

Vocabulary knowledge is one of the best predictors of reading achievement (Lewis, 1996; Richek, 2005). Bromley (2004), in a comprehensive review of research on vocabulary development, concludes that vocabulary knowledge promotes reading fluency, boosts reading comprehension, improves academic achievement, and enhances thinking and communication. Stanovich (1986) describes the cumulative effect of poor reading and vocabulary skills. Children who are poor readers usually also lack a wide vocabulary. When young children struggle with reading, they quite naturally read less than their more able classmates, and therefore are exposed to fewer new words. This restriction on their vocabulary growth, in turn, makes progress in reading even harder. The effect of these deficits makes learning in general more difficult, and as children progress through the grades, the gap between skilled and less skilled readers becomes increasingly pronounced.

Skilled language users display "word consciousness" (Blachowicz, Fisher, Ogle, & Watts-Taffe, 2006). They have a metacognitive understanding of how words are built, and can articulate the strategies they employ as readers to solve unfamiliar words. Cognitive developmental research (Beers & Henderson, 1977; Templeton, 1983) has shown that most children acquire an understanding of word structure in a progressive, stage-like manner. Through oral language, an exposure to written texts, and their own writing, they begin as young children to explore the patterns of sound, or graphophonemic concepts.

There is a general consensus among researchers concerning instructional principles underlying effective word study. Rather than supporting rote learning and a reliance on a narrow range of instructional strategies, current research calls for instruction that meets the needs of the diverse learners in each classroom, and that encourages higher level thinking about language. Applying these principles in elementary classrooms is, however, challenging. These approaches rely upon teachers who have a deep knowledge base in language and who possess a range of instructional skills related to word study in reading, spelling, and vocabulary. Vocabulary instruction has not been given high priority in pre-service, in-service, or graduate courses until very recently (Manzo, Manzo, & Thomas 2006).

The following characteristics of good vocabulary instruction are listed as follows:

- o It takes place in a language and word-rich environment that fosters "word consciousness."

- o It includes intentional teaching of selected words, providing multiple types of information about each new word as well as opportunities for repeated exposure, use, and practice.

- o It includes teaching generative elements of words and word-learning strategies in ways that give students the ability to learn new words independently.

Storytelling

One method of sharing multicultural literature is through storytelling. This article describes the benefits of storytelling, activities which foster storytelling, and techniques of storytelling for teachers and students. Traditionally storytelling is defined as "the oral interpretation of literature and folklore" (Rubin 1990, p. 94). Based on this definition, all that is needed is the storyteller, the story, a place to tell the story, and a receptive audience. However, some people today combine storytelling with creative drama or use puppets or other props to help them convey their story. Whatever technique of storytelling the storyteller uses, the key is in finding a story that is just right —a story that the storyteller enjoys (Rubin 1990).

The following is a summary of benefits derived from hearing or telling stories (Newell 1995, p. 424):

o   Storytelling is entertaining and stimulates children's imaginations (Hoskisson and Tompkins, 1987).
o   It conveys information that will be essential in the development of their understanding of the world in general and literacy in particular (Rubin, 1990).
o   Storytelling promotes understanding of the oral tradition in literature. In many societies, young children have been initiated into their literacy heritage through storytelling.
o   With regard to literacy, storytelling conveys the structure or form of narratives and the forms and rhythms of effective language (Peck, 1989).
o   Storytelling motivates children to read, and can introduce them to the values and literacy tradition of different cultures (Cothem, 1992; Templeton, 1991).
o   It expands their language abilities and helps them internalize the characteristics of stories (Morrow, 1989). Development of vocabulary and of syntactic complexities in oral language is enhanced as children become storytellers (Strickland & Morrow, 1989). As children prepare a story, they practice reading skills and various oral language abilities.
o   Storytelling extends children's enjoyment of literature and helps them develop poise and linguistic fluency (Tiedt, 1979).
o   Storytelling provides the opportunity to involve children actively in the literacy experience. An adult storyteller can use gestures and action that involve children in the story. Seeing an adult tell a story provides the stimulus for children's storytelling. Seeing a teacher engage in storytelling helps children understand that storytelling is a worthwhile activity, and motivates them to try telling stories themselves (Norton, 1993).

Total physical response storytelling (TPRS)

One of the recent storytelling techniques, TPRS, created in 1988 by Blaine Ray, is an approach to language teaching which stems from Krashen's Natural Approach (1982, 2000) and Asher's Total Physical Response, known as TPR (1975, 1982). Grounded in the use of sensory and kinesthetic comprehensible input from these methods, TPR*s* adds an additional component to take it one step further; storytelling. TPRS begins with the teacher presenting

three to four words, or chunks of language, using gestures and mnemonic devices. These chunks can be nouns, verbs, phrases, or any unit of language, not limited by grammar. The teacher then begins to use the new chunks of language in comprehensible speech through TPR commands, personalized questions and answers (PQA), and/or telling personalized, made-up situations (PMS). The type of practice depends on the words for the day, but the goal at this point is to get in as many repetitions of the words as possible while keeping it totally comprehensible. If students do not understand the material at this point, it will only become more difficult to follow later in the process. The process then continues with a mini-story, the means by which the teacher is able to provide even more comprehensible input for acquisition. Presented through drawings or actors, often with props, the story is a silly tale that grabs students' attention and is just slightly above their comprehension level. Although grammar is not the focus, it is certainly a factor in comprehending a story. Concise explanations in the mother tongue give students the information they need without taking away from the flow of the story in the target language. A conjugated verb, for example, is analyzed in terms of its meaning in a quick and simple manner.Grammar is not discussed explicitly in TPRS.

Roof and Kruetter (2011) report that studies comparing TPR and TPRS methods with traditional teaching methods indicate that students score significantly higher on vocabulary retention tests when TPR or TPRS methods are used. It is intuitive for experienced teachers that teaching vocabulary out of context is not the most efficient way learners acquire language; hence the consideration for enhancing pedagogy with storytelling is vitally recommended.

Method

Participants

Two groups of 22 students in a secondary school situated in Izmir participated in the pre-post test design study. The intervention lasted for 3 weeks and students were taught 20 vocabulary items. In the TPRS group, the vocabulary was taught through story telling and personalization whereas the control group learned the same vocabulary in the text of their books.

Procedure

In the intervention, the students aged 11-12 in the sixth grade studied 3 stories by Nasreddin Hodja and were taught 20 vocabulary items through the following lesson plan that was adapted to each story whereas the students in the control group studied these vocabulary items in no relation with the story telling but through repetition, substitution and personalization techniques.

STEP 1:   Introduce and personalize the vocabulary
              Write vocabulary word in target language and English
              Gesture / Mnemonic devices / memory aids
              Ask the students personal questions utilizing vocabulary
              Ask students about each other

Seek responses that make the students look good
Seek liars
Encourage unusual responses
Watch barometer students ensure 100% comprehension

STEP 2: Ask the Story
Three main skills: Circling, Parking and Personalization
1. Circling
Statement
Question that gets a "YES!"
Either/or question
Question that gets a "NO"
No... there isn't... there is…
Circle the subject and the object. Aim for 14 reps in order and then practice circling out of order.

Examples:
Who is lying under the tree?
Where is Nasreddin Hodja lying?
Is he lying under the walnut or chestnut tree?
Is he lying under the cherry tree?
Under which tree is he lying?
2. Parking
Who?
What?
Where?
When?
Which?
How?
How much?
How many?
Why?
3. Personalization
STEP 3.Dramatization
Volunteers act out
Students overdramatize or do melodramatic acting
Students overact to the sentences in the story.

Result

When the students' pre and post test results are compared, the students in the intervention group score higher than those in the control group.

Table 1
Vocabulary Achievement Results

Groups	N	Pre-test Means	Post-test Means	SD (for the post –test)	T	Sig
Control Group	22	4.112	5.325	.6413		
Intervention Group	22	4.225	6.013	.7319	7.15	.03

Conclusion

The results show that vocabulary instruction through TPRS has a significant impact on the lexical knowledge level. The TPRS method points out that learners of a foreign language can eventually express themselves fluently and accurately and it presents storytelling as a suitable means for communication. Ray and Seely (2012, p. 18) state when teachers teach for fluency, the teaching time needs to be devoted to working with high frequency vocabulary. Establishing meaning of a grammatical feature or a lexical item at the beginning of a TPRS lesson is important since it supports understanding of the story and the reading part. A new lexical item can be introduced and practiced trough TPR activities, personalization, chants or even translations.

One of the most widely known techniques of TPRS, personalization, is another vital component in enhancing the lexical items in the minds of the learners. Including details and experiences of students' lives into the lesson attracts the attention of the students, who are eager to listen to the teacher and feel appreciated and included. Personalization helps to establish interest, curiosity, motivation and stimulation to make the input comprehensible (Ray & Seely, 2012, p. 178). Personalization, expanded through the TPRS technique of PQA, gives the teacher the opportunity to recycle personal details through repetitive questions and to establish interest.

TPRS also encourages and emphasizes the creativity of both the teacher and the students, making it entertaining for many teachers an d students. Language teachers should consider that no single method or framework is ideal for all instruction and that tailoring their approaches to individual situations may yield the best results. Teachers who prefer to use TPRS as their primary type of instruction may help students improve in receptive abilities and production of difficult forms by incorporating structured input-style activities and explicit grammar instruction that cautions students against using non-optimal processing strategies. Practitioners of TPRS could improve their methods by not shying away from explicit grammar instruction and by considering learners' processing strategies in instruction (Foster 2011, p. 47).

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