My Class

The students are all in a self contained Life Skills Special Education program. They receive the same instruction based on grade level for their core subjects including, Math, English, Social Studies, and Science (except for one student who does not receive science instruction). The students are mainstreamed for electives and Physical Education & Health. Four of the students receive additional reading instruction in the life skills program. There are more students in the program, but the students are somewhat fluid. Consequently there were only 13 who were monitored from start to finish for this project.

My Hopes

I was hoping to show that the students I had for both reading and social studies would learn and use vocabulary at a faster rate than those who were only in my class for social studies.

Procedures

In January and in May, all of my students were given a vocabulary assessment in their Social Studies class. The assessment measured their vocabulary strengths in the areas of inference, grammatical appropriateness, vocabulary development, and broad context. The assessment was consisted of 34 "fill in the blank" items, each with 3 answer choices. The words used for this were not taught in the Social Studies classes.

The Social Studies curriculum included reading and vocabulary components. The vocabulary words were selected from the context of the reading.

Word meanings were taught and reinforced with the use of mnemonic cues; catchy, short definitions; writing the words with the definitions; creating flashcards for practice, reference, and rehearsal; field trips; and pictures of selected words.

The students' vocabulary comprehension was monitored periodically with the use of direct questioning, class discussion, written and verbal comprehension questions, matching exercises, fill in the blanks with the use of word banks, teacher observation of the students' ability to integrate the words into their verbal schema, quizzes, and crossword puzzles.

In addition the students receiving reading instruction spent 30 minutes each class in sustained silent reading to help increase general vocabulary. The reading materials were self-selected. Throughout the year the students worked
on cloze exercises as a group and independently to help build vocabulary comprehension.

Results

The results were not what I expected. I anticipated that the students who were in both social studies and reading would perform significantly better the second time they took the assessment and the students in only social studies would have fewer gains. This was not the case. I did not expect any of the students' results to be lower.

Of the students who participated in both classes, only one showed a significantly higher score while the other three students' scores dropped. Of the students who participated in only social studies, four showed increases, one had the same score, and four students' scores dropped.

What I Learned

My students learn more efficiently when they are directly taught the vocabulary words they need to know. While they did not retain as many words in social studies as one would hope, the students did demonstrate they learned the vocabulary by using it. Some of the words they were taught pop up unexpectedly in their vocabularies, and some they use knowing it was a vocabulary word! They look at me very proudly when the word comes out as if to say, "I did learn something! Aren't you proud of me?" Just last week when I presented a word with an additional prefix and suffix to what had already been taught (uninhabited) one of the students asked if we hadn't learned that word already! And we had in the form of inhabit.

In the Future
1. Any vocabulary my students need to learn will be taught directly using the various learning modalities: visual, kinesthetic, auditory.
2. I will use more mnemonic methods to teach vocabulary.
3. I will offer more reinforcements for the words my students are learning and encourage them to use the words more in different contexts.
4. Since I will be teaching English next year I will reinforce the vocabulary words the students are expected to learn in their other classes.

Appendices available upon request