Moving ESL Students from the Concrete to the Abstract: Deriving Meaning from Words

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Submitted June 2001

Abstract

Using morphemic awareness, kinesthetic learning, and creativity to teach and aid students, I looked at a variety of activities to help students with limited English proficiency reference text for answers, infer meaning from key words within the text, and move from concrete and literal explanations of literature to a more figurative and subsequently abstract understanding of literary works. Focusing on methods to help students learn vocabulary with greater success and to improve students' referencing and inferencing abilities through Cloze reading and Directed Reading-Thinking Activities, students learned to view words morphemically, breaking down words based on meaning of prefixes, roots, and suffixes. As part of a push in reading, the ninth grade team created new quizzes and tests using sentences with greater significance and meaning for the students. I created worksheets for each unit that stressed repetition of particular words, word meaning, and synonym and antonym pairs for those words.

Introduction: You mean that we are going to have to read AND think?

In February 2000, I was face-to-face with two classes of 9th grade students and three sections of 10th grade students. I soon found that almost all students detested vocabulary work, seeing it as mundane, difficult, and meaningless to them even if deemed important as preparation for the Scholastic Aptitude Tests (SAT). Because vocabulary work accounts for 20% of students' grades in the 9th grade in our school, students who worked hard were doing poorly. I assumed they would because of something as simple and paradoxically difficult as words. I vowed to make it more meaningful and easier for students to work with words the next year.

The average reading level for my freshman classes at J.E.B. Stuart High School during the 2000-2001 school year was below grade level. These same students are expected to read and understand a majority of the 9th grade curricula in Fairfax County: a variety of multicultural short stories, Homer's *The Odyssey*, Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, and 300 Vocabulary words, not to mention a variety of secondary texts and literature. This says nothing of the writing and project-based learning that I expect of students as practitioners of and participants in the English language. How then, can I help recently-exited limited English proficiency (LEP) students achieve the best work that they are capable of producing, and help them learn at the same rate as native English speakers in such a disparate classroom?

Using morphemic awareness, kinesthetic learning, and creativity to teach and aid students, I looked at a variety of activities to help students with limited

English proficiency learn to reference the text for answers, infer meaning from key words within the text, and move from concrete and literal explanations of literature to a more figurative and subsequently abstract understanding of literary works. I decided to break up my research into two separate but connected parts: helping students with vocabulary acquisition and usage, and implementing specific reading strategies as a catalyst to stimulate higher order thinking and unlock second level meanings of classroom literature.

Background: The "411" on My Students

Students at J.E.B. Stuart High School face a myriad of learning and environmental challenges. Stuart's student population is the most linguistically, culturally, and ethnically diverse in Fairfax County, Virginia: 32% Asian, 33% Hispanic, and 12 % African or African-American. 50% of the students were born in one of 82 different countries, representing more than 30 different languages. 60% of Stuart's students speak a language other than English as their primary language. Half of our students receive a free or reduced-priced lunch.

At the beginning of each year, and as students gradually matriculate from elsewhere, J.E.B. Stuart High School's reading specialist provides each teacher with a list of his/her students' reading scores. During the spring, students within the Stuart Pyramid (two feeder middle schools) take the Gates-MacGinitie Reading Test to determine their reading levels. The average reading level for my entering and repeating 9th grade students was 7.9[i], meaning that the students were reading at the 9th month of their 7th grade year. Of the 80 students for whom I have information, 3 left school, 6 entered after school had begun, and 5 were chronic absentees. I have included all students' information nonetheless. 42 of 80 students were identified as having been enrolled in English as a Second Language (ESL) at some point in their education. 11 students had exited from ESL within the past 2 years, 26 students had been exited for more than 2 years, and 4 students' records were incomplete as to when they stopped receiving services.

Two of the five sections taught were designated as "structured English" classes, indicating that these students were reluctant learners or learners who had recently exited ESL courses. After separating the past ESL students' reading levels from those of non-ESL students, I found that the average reading score for former ESL students was 7.2, while the non-ESL students were reading at 8.8. This disparity accounted for a difference of more than 1.5 years in reading levels. While the Gates-MacGinitie Test is not a hard-and-fast determinant of students' abilities, it does give teachers a good idea of the average reading levels of his/her classroom and a notion of what students' present performance levels are, if not ability levels. I had to face the difficult notion that a large proportion of my students were not reading at grade level. How could I help different students in the same classes, which included students reading at 2.6, 4.4, and 5.1, and students who were reading at 11.7 and 13 (post high school)? What could I do to help these students achieve the same degree of success, if not the same grades in reading, literary analysis, paraphrasing,

vocabulary work, and writing? How could I help students improve their skills, while preparing them for the rest of high school and their lives?

Looking at my student population, I found that 53% of the young men and women in my classroom were the products of some form of ESL program. Assuming that reading was the main difficulty for my second language learners, I set out to help students improve their reading abilities. I thought that if I helped students look at their reading by using certain referencing and inferring skills, I could help them analyze literature instead of just being exposed to it. The difficulty in trying to combine working with my students' reading levels and working on their critical and second level thinking skills was that there were multiple factors that contribute to students' success in these two learning arenas.

Methods: Part I – Let's Look at the Long List of Words

Due in part to second language learning and in part to learning difficulties, students seem to dislike reading and their frustration detracts from their sense of efficacy and their willingness to try to improve their reading level and vocabulary acquisition -- to say nothing of their difficulty with higher order thinking skills. Basing the majority of this action research study on methods to help students deal with the myriad of words they are to learn by the end of the year, I focused students' attention on strategies to use when studying words for words' sake. Starting in the beginning of the year, students learned to view words morphemically, breaking down words based on meaning of prefixes, roots, and suffixes. As part of a push in reading, the ninth grade team created new quizzes and tests for the students, using sentences with greater significance and meaning for the students, while I created worksheets for each unit that stressed repetition of words, their meaning, and synonym and antonym pairs.

Stuart High School uses the Sadlier-Oxford Vocabulary Program for all four years of English, including the Structured English and Transitional English programs. This program, while beneficial to your diligent and motivated high school students, does have some drawbacks. The words chosen for the program come from the ever growing and difficult to manage list of possible Scholastic Aptitude Test vocabulary words. The chosen list for Level D, or the equivalent year for 9th grade students includes words such as: pliant, pertinacity, dissolute, spasmodic, hew, extemporaneous, erroneous, juxtapose, etc. While some of these words do have recognizable roots, unless I am to teach Latin, I need to stick with the most efficient and easiest method for inculcating my students with new vocabulary words. Luckily, there is method in the madness of the Sadlier-Oxford text. As students and teachers progress through the units, newly introduced words appear that are synonyms and antonyms for previous selections.

Some of these words have different meanings -- which complicates things for students who are not used to looking beyond the obvious, and in this category I include all of my students. It is easy to understand how a ballerina's body could be pliant, but how do I explain to my second language learners that most of these vocabulary words have other, separate meanings. I include this example from the Sadlier-Oxford text: "Far from being the pliant figurehead that many

politicians expected, Lincoln as president firmly proved himself to be his own man." This sentence is a part of a vocabulary review entitled, "Shades of Meaning." In it, students are expected to choose what the specific meaning of pliant is: a. elastic, b. flexible, c. weak, or d. easily influenced. For my second language learners, they not only need to know who Lincoln was, but they need to differentiate between four likely choices based on clues within the sentence.

 The main skill my students lacked in problem-solving new vocabulary words was referencing and using context clues to aid comprehension. We worked on reading sentences and highlighting the context clues that helped students choose the correct word. For instance, in the aforementioned example, I guided students to the clue in the sentence that stated that the president "proved himself his own man." Students saw that Lincoln was not pliant, but was his own man, so therefore he was not easily influenced. This simple method of teaching, and in many cases, re-teaching context clues served to help all of my students, not just the second language learners. As I considered students' responses to their vocabulary work, I reflected on this subject before moving directly into higher order thinking skills: If students were having difficulties with the clues that could help them understand a simple sentence, how would they fare when they needed to develop a second level of meaning from literature?

 The beginning of the Sadlier-Oxford text describes and reviews certain key ideas that students need to comprehend in order to understand how words work as tools and conveyers of information. We looked at the meaning and importance of understanding homonyms, homophones, prefixes, suffixes, bases or roots, denotation and connotation, literal and figurative usage, analogies, and finally, and most importantly, context clues. This was difficult because I saw these issues as too simplistic to be reviewed in a high school classroom. I forgot that these were not all motivated students, and in many cases, students who did not have a lot of experience in a non-sheltered English classroom: *independent academic thought was a stretch for many of the children in my classroom*.

 Many students seemed irritated and disinterested in what I see as the exciting and inspiring universe of looking at the meanings of words. I needed to make these words theirs, and not bludgeon students with academic meaning and usage of these words. I decided to have some fun. Paulo Friere, the eminent educational theorist wrote about the importance of having students take ownership of language:

> I have always insisted that words used in organizing a literacy program come from what I call the 'word universe' of people who are learning, expressing their actual language, their anxieties, fears, demands, and dreams. Words should be laden with the meaning of the people's existential experience, and not of the teacher's experience (Friere & Macedo, 1987, p. 35).

 With this in mind, I changed the ways in which I would assess the students, shifting the students' concept of the words' meanings from an adult or teacher-centered world to their own. With the help of an International

Baccalaureate teacher at Stuart High School, the ninth grade team set out to revamp the assessments for 9th grade students. Rather than using the blackline masters that come with the vocabulary program, we chose to restructure tests and quizzes around important skills for students to recognize and develop: differentiating between synonyms and antonyms, understanding words in context, analogies, and multiple meanings of words.

To help students gain ownership of these words, we changed culturally-biased assessments, ones where students were frequently confronted with very sophisticated syntax and introduced to unfamiliar concepts. I offer these sentences as examples of the problems that students faced:

"The 'robber barons' were a group of 19th century captains of industry who amassed wealth by means that a (**brigand, salvager**) might use."

"It is an unfortunate fact that the _____ attitudes of the Kaiser and his saber-rattling cronies helped make World War I inevitable."

"Calling upon his many years of experience, the retired warden discussed with great _____ the topic of the evening – "Can Criminals Be Rehabilitated?"

Students with difficulty in reading were overwhelmed by the number of words they did not understand within the sentence. They were hesitant to try and choose from the list of vocabulary words when they did not comprehend the meaning of the sentence anyway. I continued to use the book to force students to practice their contextual analysis of the sentences, looking for clues within each sentence that could aid them. Forgiving the fact that a student might not know what a robber baron or a captain of industry was, we focused on parts of the sentence that students could appreciate: who might amass, or gain, wealth by a robber's means? Students began to highlight passages or circle passages within the sentences to guide their comprehension.

Beginning with the End in Mind: Recreating the Assessments

As mentioned previously, the 9th grade team decided to restructure the quizzes and tests as a group so that all students might benefit. With the International Baccalaureate teacher's diligent help, we rewrote the 9th grade assessments, creating 35 questions tests for quizzes that asked students questions about synonyms, antonyms, sentence completions, and analogies. We created 100-question tests, far beyond the tests provided by the Sadlier-Oxford program, and much more involved, asking students a greater number of questions similar to those found on the unit quizzes, but adding double-sentence completions to understand word groupings, etc. We also had students take the quizzes at the end of every unit, which occurred every two weeks, and then take a cumulative unit test that asked equally distributed questions about words from all previous units.

Each test was created with fewer biased sentences, ones where students were the feature of the sentences and the context clues were more evident for all students. I edited each assessment, including the names of my students and those of my colleagues in the sentences. I found that students were excited to see who would be featured in each subsequent assessment and even enjoyed reading about who was described as *incorrigible*, who was *cherubic* that week, or who was *warped* and who had *erratic* behavior. With these tests created and edited each subsequent week, I focused on the methods I could use to impress my students with the denotations and connotations of the vocabulary words.

Signs, Signs, Everywhere There Are Signs: Visual Prompts for Them, and for ME!

One of the best lessons I have learned in life is how beneficial notes are for people when they need to recall information: phone numbers, facts, ideas, theories, equations, etc. With this idea in mind, I quickly created large poster board size signs with all twenty words from each individual Vocabulary unit, laminated them, and posted one at the beginning of each unit. With each subsequent unit that I introduced, I added the past unit to the wall so that students and I could all recall words, and so that I could use them in daily conversation and lecture. These sheets provided students with "small arms fire" when we did review, for memory prompts during assessments, and as a constant reminder of their progress throughout the year.

Worksheets: A Triumvirate of "Real Work" and not Sheet work

Gathering ideas from my former foreign language teachers, I added worksheets to the weekly vocabulary work that made the students accountable for memorizing the words, the first step in Bloom's Taxonomy, a series of educational objectives that stress the cognitive domain of peoples' learning: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation (Milner & Milner, 1993, p. 373-4). In reviewing the research of other LMTIP participants at my school, I found that students unable to overcome issues of knowledge and comprehension of material were also unable to understand and analyze literature or synthesize their own knowledge within the greater context of what I was teaching. I began with the obvious attempt at aiding students in their knowledge of the words we would study during the year.

For their short-term knowledge or recollection of the words, I created fan worksheets much like those I had encountered in my foreign language classrooms where students had a two-sided sheet of paper with four columns on each side. The columns were labeled word-definition-word-definition, and on the other side they were labeled the same. Students had an instant review sheet, due to me as their "ticket to the show." If the students did not have this worksheet completed, then I provided them with time to fill in as much as they could before taking the quizzes. This worksheet provided all students with an overview of the words when they needed it most: immediately before the quizzes. Students also had to fill out a three-column worksheet on the day of the quiz review, usually on the class day before the quiz where they came up with or

copied synonyms and antonyms for each applicable vocabulary word. This afforded students who "forgot" their worksheets the opportunity to review with the rest of the class and create a database of reviews that they could use for the tests. For those students who finished all of this work early, I created crossword puzzles as enrichment activities and extra credit points. The idea of the "ticket out" and the "ticket to the show" proved to be successful for ensuring that students were reasonably prepared for their assessments, by using strategies that helped them to work on their short-term recollection of the words before they arrived in class.

White Boards: We Get to Use Effervescent Markers! What a kick!

As an added review, I purchased four large dry erase boards as a group enterprise activity. Instead of perpetually having students regurgitate the definitions of and synonyms for our vocabulary words, I established the Vocabulary Olympics. Students were grouped into four teams, and rotated as the "Marker Wielders." I posed questions to each group, gradually moving away from definition to application of vocabulary into their own sentences. I incorporated cooperative learning to aid students who had difficulties, having peers with a better understanding aid them and jog their memory in the usage of vocabulary words. In *Those Who Can, Teach*, a pre-service teacher text written by James Cooper and Kevin Ryan, the authors stress the importance cooperative learning:

> Cooperative learning has been found to be a particularly effective instructional tool in teaching at-risk students who required immediate feedback to their learning attempts. It works well because it gives students power. As schools become aware of the need to do away with tracking and to encourage heterogeneous grouping, cooperative learning provides a means by which all students can feel essential to the classroom learning process (Cooper & Ryan, 1995, p. 341).

Of the four groups, I awarded the first team to correctly spell all words and give a legitimate sentence with 100 points, the second team 50 points, and the third team with 25 points. This originally served as a classroom assignment, but eventually ended up as an extra credit review forum that could add as much as 5 points to the students test scores. I had each team tally their total and divide it by 600 or 1000, depending on their work effort. Additionally, Sandy Switzer issued me small dry erase boards so that I could individualize the students' work, assessing their scores based on their own effort. These individual white boards helped me with individual accountability, or "assessing each student's mastery of the content" (Cooper & Ryan, 1995, p. 341). This got rowdy, and I eventually used the small dry erase boards more frequently, but only for review without any points, or for very few (less than 5 points) if ALL students participated.

These white boards were the catalyst for several subsequent ideas that eventually aided my students in editing, spelling, grammatical usage, and more complex syntax in their writing. As the year progressed, I stressed the

importance of writing properly: using adverbs and gerunds correctly; punctuating their sentences correctly; adding sterling adjectives to their writing; and venturing beyond the land of simple sentences by adding commas, colons, and semicolons to their writing. The benefit of the white board work helped students become more accountable for their work, for their understanding, and forced them to think a little more than they had previously.

Causation and Correlation: Can I Prove That I Was a Success?

Our math department chair described the meaning of causation and correlation to me near the end of the year, giving me a pertinent example. He told me that he could prove that ice cream sales rise during the summer months in New York City. He can also prove that the murder rate rises during the summer months in New York City. These numbers correlate to the rising heat index during the summer months, but he would have a hard time proving that ice cream sales have anything to do with the rise in murders in the summer. I had equal difficulty with my numbers. I recorded every student's scores for each quiz and test throughout the year. I found something interesting. I rated every student's reading level and gauged how well he or she did comparatively with the scores of their fellow classmates. Separating the scores of my non-ESL students from those of my past ESL students, I found that the average test scores for my past ESL students were only 5 points higher on average. Overall, I found that the former ESL students took the worksheets more seriously, using them as tools to guide and aid their knowledge and comprehension of the words. While taking the quizzes and tests, a greater number of these students were locating context clues with greater regularity than my non-ESL students.

I cannot prove that my focus on context clues and referencing aided the students more so than their time in the computer lab. As part of Stuart High School's reading initiative, all 9th grade students spend at least one quarter working on the *Q-Review Reading Program* in the computer lab[ii]. Students worked for at least one full quarter on their reading skills, practicing referencing and inferring material during 30 minute reading periods to gain a better skill base in reading.

Method to My Madness: Part II – Incorporating Contextual Clues to Improve Higher Order Thinking Skills

In spending so much time focusing on methods to aid students in using their vocabulary with more legitimacy and power, I felt pulled in two different directions. Each day I helped students work on their reading skills, but what originally began as a second and more intensive part of my project took a back seat to helping students feel empowered by the words they were learning. In order to incorporate their learned vocabulary into their daily lives, I devised and borrowed many ideas from fellow teachers and the reading team at Stuart. So, what I originally intended to be the major focus for my project evolved into a secondary part of my LMTIP research, one without the benefit of scores, but an idea whose genesis comes from my intent to aid students in their quest to think more deeply and to become involved with literature and reading. My second

focus then proves to be more a compendium on strategies and methods that I found useful in helping second language learners and students who have difficulty with higher order thinking skills.

Fractured Fairy Tales

By having students pair up with one another, sometimes based on similar reading levels and other times by having students with disparate scores work with one another, my students created "Fractured Fairy Tales." These were stories where the students had to use a word bank of pre-selected words, a specific unit, or 10 or more words of their choice and write a story where they were the main characters. Students had a good time writing these nonsensical and absurd stories, but ones where they used their growing vocabulary correctly, applying their comprehension to writing. By applying knowledge, they worked on their cognitive abilities each time they attempted to write.

Directed-Reading-Thinking Activities

Students can learn to deal with their reading with greater intensity by focusing their attention on one line of text at a time, making predictions and paraphrasing the entire time, in order to create context from each individual line. I used this method, known as a DR-TA, or Directed Reading-Thinking Activity in a structured environment, excerpting passages of text and asking the students questions based on specific lines then based on the entire passage, relating each subsequent line to another line of text. As the year progressed we practiced our reading techniques orally, having students focus on chosen passages. This method benefited all students, but second language learners, benefited from the slower pace of reading, and the ability it afforded them to compare lines and "chunks" in the desired text they chose to translate.

Reflection: Ending the Madness in My Methods

"Only three things are important to the teacher: First, to have command of your subject; Second, to know how to motivate the different ethnic groups we have in this country in order to preserve the unit -- because the unit, or team, will give you success; And last, to understand your kids and keep a good relationship with them. A good relationship will be a giant step to success."

-- Jaime Escalante

My students' average reading levels rose from 7.9 to 9.5, which translates into an increase of more than 1.7 years. What I am impressed with is that my former ESL students gained in reading level on par with my non-ESL students. The average former ESL student's gain in reading level was from 7.2 to 8.7, a gain of more than 22%. The average gain in reading levels for my non-ESL students went from 8.8 to 10.5, a gain of 20%. This proportionate gain tells me that my students, while not equal in language ability when they enter my classes,

are progressing at relatively equal rates. My former ESL students are moving ahead at a rate slightly above that of my native English-speaking learners.

By helping students achieve equally in my classroom, I am working on lessening the language skills gap between students. This project greatly enhanced my approach to working with students who lack the necessary skills to sufficiently pass the looming S.O.L. tests that await them in 11th grade. Next year, in addition to using what I've found successful through this year's action research, I will focus on mastery learning, helping students who do not achieve a certain predetermined standard to raise their scores before forcing them to move on. I will also focus my attention on ways to help students use their cognitive abilities. I will ensure that students receive instruction in critical analysis instead of mere knowledge acquisition and comprehension assessment.

References and Appendices available upon request (hbooz@fcps.edu).

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[i] I will continue to report students' scores using the Gate-MacGinitie method, indicating the student's year of reading level, followed by the month of reading level.
[ii] For further explanation, see 1998-1999 the research of LMTIP participant Katie Faircloth.