

A First Year ESOL Teacher's Reflection on Vocabulary Learning and Teaching

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Abstract

For ESOL students, studying United States History at the middle school level can be particularly difficult because their understanding and success in the subject is primarily based on prior background knowledge of American culture. Some ESOL students also arrive in the U.S. with a limited knowledge of their native country's history, making it difficult to transfer their knowledge to an American setting. The vocabulary in social studies also tends to be based on abstract concepts (i.e., democracy or economy) and is therefore difficult to learn for many students. In response to these difficulties, the researcher attempted to engage struggling students by supplementing traditional vocabulary instruction with various vocabulary-building activities

Introduction

This project involves eighth grade intermediate-level (B1) English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) students at Ellen Glasgow Middle School (Glasgow) in Fairfax County, Virginia. Glasgow is an ethnically diverse school of approximately 1157 students from 71 countries of origin. In all, about 36 different languages are spoken by its students. Of the total population, approximately 388 are ESOL students and these students are served by 18 ESOL teachers. At the intermediate level, B1 level students are required to take one "content" ESOL class along with their ESOL Language Arts class and other core classes. At Glasgow, the content class is focused on United States History and I teach this class to most of the eighth grade ESOL students at the school. Like many intermediate level classes, the students' abilities in English vary. While some students are relative newcomers (less than two years), others have been classified as ESOL students since first or second grade.

The students in this class have been studying the second half of U.S. history (after the Civil War/Reconstruction Period) with me since the beginning of the year. Although I was a new teacher, I soon realized that it would be extremely challenging to teach U.S. History when at least half of my students had a limited background in U.S. History while the other half had grown up in the United States. In looking through their textbook, I could quite easily pick out many words that my students would not understand. As such, I decided that it was crucial for my students to learn as much vocabulary as possible.

Focus of My Project

But how do you teach vocabulary? It seemed that the easiest way would be to pick out the words that I thought the students would not know and type them on a handout for the students. During class, I would have students be responsible for

looking up one or two words in the dictionary and then have them write the definitions on the board to share with the entire class. After all the words were written down, I would explain the words in the context of what we were about to read and also try to relate the new vocabulary words to anything that they might already know. This method seemed to be a big success. My mentor from the Great Beginnings (new teacher induction) program thought it was a great way to engage students because it allowed students to have some control in their learning. The students also seemed to like it. They would ask me from time to time when we would do the “vocabulary sheets” again. At first, I also thought it was a moderately successful way to teach. Some students memorized the definitions and could regurgitate them back to me on demand. Other students, however, continued to struggle with the definitions of words and performed poorly on quizzes and tests.

As I reflected upon how I could change this problem in my class, I attended a conference led by reading expert Janet Allen and was told that having students look up words in the dictionary was the worst way to teach vocabulary! It was at this point that I realized that academically successful students would always figure out a way to learn new vocabulary no matter what method a teacher uses. It was the students who were struggling who needed me to use other methods of vocabulary teaching so that I could meet their needs.

Literature Review

For ESOL students, social studies can be a particularly difficult subject, depending on their academic background and prior background knowledge. According to Chamot and O’Malley, “The social studies curriculum requires a high level of literacy because the concepts developed often deal with abstract ideas rooted in philosophy, anthropology, political science, and economics” (1994, pg 258). Students with a weaker academic background from their native countries may have more difficulty learning social studies because “while some ESL students may come with a rich understanding of the history, geography and culture of their native country, others may have only a superficial familiarity with their country’s story and physical setting.” Without this prior knowledge of their native country’s historical foundation, these students will struggle in trying to learn social studies in the American context. Teachers, therefore, need to be aware of this fact in order to bridge this gap in their students’ prior knowledge. The importance of learning the abstract concepts and vocabulary in social studies is crucial to learning for ESOL students. Current research on vocabulary learning shows that

The key to increasing vocabulary development is ensuring that students with poor vocabularies not only learn the meaning of words but also have the opportunity to use them frequently. Definitions alone do not provide enough support for readers to be able to transfer those definitions to reading contexts (Allen, 1999, pg 35).

In other words, teachers can no longer rely on definition lookups as the model for vocabulary instruction. Students need to interact frequently with the new words in order to reach a deeper understanding of the words. In fact, “new words need to be integrated into the learner’s prior knowledge, repeated in multiple contexts and used in

meaningful ways” (Allen, pg. 35). “Meaningful” interactions are essential for students to go beyond the memorization of word definitions.

Methods

For this project, a variety of data gathering methods were used. In response to the predictable patterns of achievement I found in my classroom (certain students received the highest scores and lowest scores on every quiz or test), I tried to vary my instruction with other activities. First, I started a word wall with all of my students and had students choose a set of words from each section we studied to put up on the wall. Second, I created word bingo cards and had students choose 8 words from their vocabulary lists to write on their cards. As the teacher, I would read out the definition and the students would have to match the definition with a word on their bingo cards. Finally, I also began to explore new ways for my students to demonstrate their understanding of vocabulary words through drawing. For vocabulary words we studied related to World War I (trenches, landmines, dogfights) I had the students draw a battle scene. For words dealing with the Roaring Twenties (flappers, organized crime, Harlem Renaissance, Prohibition) I had students draw pictures of their words along with a definition and write a sentence using the word in a vocabulary chart.

Along with a change in instruction, I also checked understanding of new vocabulary words by giving a pop quiz a day after I introduced different sets of words. I made it as fair and as simple as possible by creating matching-type quizzes. Although these quizzes only took about 5-10 minutes to take, they were early indicators to me of whether my students were understanding the new vocabulary words and helped show me which words I needed to reinforce before the unit test.

Finally, I also administered a survey (see Appendix A) to my students in order to gauge their opinions about learning social studies vocabulary. The Likert Scale survey asked them to rate the methods that I had used to teach them new vocabulary in relation to their understanding of new words or ideas. After reading over their answers to the surveys, I also spent time in class to further discuss their comments from the survey.

Findings

When I began to implement the change in teaching methods, the students seemed to miss the dictionary look-up/write on the blackboard activity. They were disappointed when I told them I was going to try to teach the vocabulary differently. Prior to the change, students had made comments such as “Are we doing the vocabulary words today?” and “Yes!” when they saw I had a list of their names on the wall which was an indication that they were going to be assigned new words. Their enthusiasm for learning vocabulary in the “traditional” way perplexed me and forced me to question why I was instituting a change. When surveyed later, some students thought that using the dictionary was a good way to learn how to use the dictionary and writing on the blackboard helped them memorize the meanings of words. One student said writing on the blackboard gave her “spelling practice.” The two students who made the most positive comments about dictionary look-up were also the most academically successful students in the class. Other students, who thought that the dictionary was

confusing due to the fact that there were often multiple meanings of the words, tended to be the more “average” students.

One of the most effective changes I made in my teaching involved drawing. Although I had always heard that drawing pictures was an effective way for many students to learn vocabulary, I had no idea how insightful the method was for *the teacher*. Having students draw pictures of the new words gave me a quick and easy way to assess their understanding of new words. In one incident, when a student started drawing religious crosses for the word “Prohibition,” I quickly realized that a few of the students were confusing the words “Prohibition” with “Protestant.” I was able to correct this error in their learning by giving a quick individualized explanation of the word. When surveyed about drawing pictures of new vocabulary words, some students thought drawing “helped us remember” the words and to have an “image” of the word. Others, however, thought it was a “waste of time” and would rather study the words and read the definition.

Unfortunately, both Word Bingo and the Word Wall were not as successful in my classroom. It did not have much effect in my classroom because I did not use either of them effectively. In particular, when surveyed, the students felt that the word wall was placed in a bad location (behind most students’ seats) and that the definitions of the words should be included with the words. One student did not like the alphabetical arrangement of the words and would rather have the words in sections according to the unit we studied. Upon reflection, I realized that I needed to have the vocabulary words in a place where the students could access them often. While the wall space in my room is limited, I should have thought creatively to place the words more strategically in the room. As for Word Bingo, I did not use the game consistently enough and the students, when surveyed, said we did not play it often enough.

One method that I used consistently was the matching-type vocabulary quizzes which I gave after I introduced a new set of words. They were not only easy to administer and correct but also gave students more opportunities to show me whether they understood the words. Similar to the drawing method, I was able to correct any misconceptions of words that the students had in the early stages of learning and it also gave me yet another opportunity to reinforce the meanings of the words for the students. Surprisingly, even struggling students did well on these quizzes since most students scored as least a B on every quiz. It was my hope that their scores would give the struggling students more confidence for the unit test.

Analysis and Conclusion

In developing the survey I gave to the students, I began to question my notion of what I meant by “learning” or “understanding” new vocabulary. As an ESOL teacher, my goal is to teach language through the content of social studies. Because many of my students have lived in the country less than two years, learning U.S. History was actually an introduction to American culture for them. While native speakers of English had been learning bits and pieces of U.S. History since Kindergarten, my students may not know who the Pilgrims were or the two sides of the Civil War (what I used to consider to be common American knowledge). Although my primary goal as an ESOL teacher should be focused on language learning, I also needed to provide them with enough background information so that they can succeed in high school U.S. History.

I also began to fully appreciate how difficult many social studies vocabulary terms were because they were often abstract ideas such as “democracy” or the “Harlem Renaissance.” Social Studies vocabulary terms are not words which can easily be explained or given a synonym. They were terms which needed to be made as concrete as possible for students and ones which needed to be revisited and re-taught again and again. The frequency of the interactions as well as a connection to any prior knowledge the students already held from their native countries or from previous study seem to be key to their understanding new terms.

In surveying and then discussing the results with my students, I was surprised by some of their insightful and often candid answers. Some students even gave me some interesting suggestions (flashcards, mini-book of vocabulary, drama activities) about how else I could teach vocabulary. I was surprised (and comforted) by comments that the students thought that my explanation of new words was helpful because I explained words in “easy ways.” Some students complained that some other teachers were not helpful when they had questions about words and would refer them to their textbook. The fact that I received such varied opinions to my survey confirms the idea of different learning styles and the need for me to vary my teaching as much as possible with different types of activities to promote learning.

Summary

Like most first year teachers, I came into teaching with idealistic expectations of how the year would go. I was filled with fresh and innovative ideas from the many methods courses I took in graduate school and I was eager to implement all the ideas that I had been taught. As the year progressed, however, I began to realize that no graduate school professor had ever told me that the best way for ESOL students to learn vocabulary was to have students look up new words in the dictionary, define them and write sentences for them. I soon became aware that I was teaching my students the same way my own teachers had taught me in school. Of course, this is not to say that the way I taught was “wrong.” I just became more curious about how other teachers taught vocabulary in their classrooms. As I started to experiment with my own teaching, I became more aware of how my students were learning in my classroom and whether they were learning at all. I also became more sensitive to how difficult the task of learning new social studies vocabulary was for my ESOL students. As such, my experiment in the classroom, pushed me to institute positive changes and forced me to find ways to help my students be successful.

References

- Allen, J. (1999). *Words, Words, Words. : Teaching Vocabulary in Grades 4-12*. York, Maine: Stenhouse Publishers.
- Chamot, A.U. & O'Malley, J.M. (1994). *The CALLA Handbook: Implementing the Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach*. White Plains, NY: Pearson.

Appendix A

Survey: *Think about how you have learned new vocabulary in this class this year. What has helped you to understand the new words or ideas? Rate the statements below from 1 to 5. Tell me whether you agree or disagree.*

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly Agree
<u>Looking up new words</u> in the dictionary helps me understand.	1	2	3	4	5
<u>Writing the definition</u> on the blackboard helps me understand.	1	2	3	4	5
Having Ms. Shum <u>explain</u> the new words before I read them in the book helps me understand.	1	2	3	4	5
<u>Drawing pictures</u> of the new words helps me understand.	1	2	3	4	5
<u>Writing sentences</u> for the new words helps me understand.	1	2	3	4	5
<u>Studying for more quizzes</u> for the new vocabulary words helps me understand.	1	2	3	4	5
<u>Using the Word Wall</u> helps me understand.	1	2	3	4	5
<u>Playing Bingo</u> and other games helps me understand.	1	2	3	4	5

Are there other ways that help you to understand new vocabulary words?