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Effective Vocabulary Instruction and Literacy Levels: An Online Course Provided for Classroom Teachers

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EFFECTIVE VOCABULARY INSTRUCTION AND LITERACY LEVELS:

AN ONLINE COURSE PROVIDED FOR CLASSROOM TEACHERS

by

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Knowing how to reach English Language Learners has become extremely important over the years. I first decided I wanted to teach English language learners (ELs) when I began my student teaching experience in Minnesota. Initially walking into that 3rd-grade classroom was a fairly eye-opening experience for me, with a diverse population of students than I was used to seeing. Following my student teaching experience, I decided to obtain my certification in Teaching English to Foreign Language Learners (TEFL) in Costa Rica. Teaching English in Costa Rica was one of the most valuable experiences of my life because I realized the learners were not being forced to come to class, but they did so willingly. It was in Costa Rica where I ultimately found that I had a new passion for teaching English Language Learners. A few years after having my own classroom back in Minnesota, I realized what I was missing out on by not teaching English Language Learners (ELs), or at least not having the license to do so. I recognized that EL students require special attention and benefit from differing instructional strategies, and I was not providing them with that. This fact ultimately led me to my decision of pursuing my Licensure and Master's degree at Hamline University which brings me to where I am now in this journey.

Teaching in classrooms with more diverse populations has opened my eyes to just how unique English Language Learners really are. My biggest takeaway from these years of teaching language learners is that vocabulary should be at the forefront of instruction. Everything we do, as teachers, involves vocabulary in one sense or another. That is why it is vital that we not only know how to teach vocabulary at the word level, but also at a

meaning level. Without proper vocabulary knowledge, it is unlikely that language learners will be successful with their reading comprehension, which in turn leads to their literacy levels not meeting grade level standards. This problem and line of thinking led me to my research question: *How does vocabulary instruction improve ELs' Fountas & Pinnell (F&P) Literacy Levels?* In an attempt to answer this question, I have designed a project: an online course for teachers which provides them with the tools and support needed to teach vocabulary effectively.

In this paper, I begin by giving you a brief background of my teaching experiences and explain why teaching EL has become a passion of mine. I cover the rationale, reasons and thought processes that I went through in effort to come up with my research question. I briefly discuss questions that I have asked myself in regards to my topic, as well as questions that have come up while beginning to research. I conclude this chapter with my current beliefs on vocabulary instruction and the impact it can have on increasing literacy levels. I finally share my present thoughts on how vocabulary instruction plays a role in my current classroom.

Rationale

When I initially started to think of my research question for this paper, I struggled a bit. There are so many issues and challenges facing ELs and with this being the case, I often have a tough time deciding which avenue to take. The first question I really asked myself, is what topic would better me as an educator? I also thought about my students; where over half my 3rd-grade class is identified as EL, and thought what topic would benefit them the most. This question gave me the idea of classroom teachers instructing ELs through social media, a very current topic at the moment; yet it still did not feel like the one. I finally thought about my other classroom teachers and what I have

experienced while observing them. That's when the idea really struck me! I had observed so many classroom teachers who were not scaffolding instruction to meet the needs of their English Language Learners, particularly in the area of vocabulary instruction. For this reason, I knew vocabulary instruction was one part that I wanted to cover in my research. While coming up with the second part, I asked myself what would improving vocabulary instruction do for our ELs? In my experience, I have seen that my students who have a greater knowledge of vocabulary also have increased literacy levels. As a result, this now became my research question*: How does vocabulary instruction improve ELs' Fountas & Pinnell (F&P) literacy levels?*

Fountas and Pinnell or (F&P) is a widely used program which assesses students' literacy levels and provides teachers with insight on other literacy components such as comprehension, vocabulary, and phonics. Considering this program is used in my district, and is likely familiar to many other teachers I found it appropriate to use for the purpose of this investigation. My hope was for this topic to be as relevant as possible for my students as well as my colleagues.

This topic interested me for a couple of reasons. The first was because literacy is an area our English Language Learners struggle with the most in our school, even more so than math. Given that literacy plays such an invaluable role in education, I want to help my ELs overcome this hurdle and be successful with future academic tasks while using their literacy skills. The second reason I found this topic interesting is that it is completely relevant to the current situation occurring in schools today. ELs are not getting what they need in classrooms, because there are a number of classroom teachers who do not have the background or coursework that teaches them how to provide proper instruction. With such a diverse and growing population of ELs, this is a huge issue and

one that needs to be addressed if we are going to find success for our ELs. Samson (2012) had quite an impact on my thinking when she stated,

> ...at the various stages of teacher preparation, certification and evaluation, there is insufficient information on what teachers should know about teaching ELs. For example: a multi-subject elementary teacher may be required to take courses in math, language arts, social studies, but not in the pedagogy of teaching ELs. Without this coursework specifically connected to the learning needs of ELs, teachers will not be able to teach these students adequately. (p. 8)

As I continued my research further, I thought of more questions such as: how is vocabulary acquired? What types of vocabulary should we be teaching? What are the most effective ways to teach vocabulary? How are vocabulary knowledge and literacy comprehension related? These are all questions that I attempt to answer throughout my review of literature when I looked over what the experts had to say on the matter.

Current Beliefs

I am not an expert by any means, but from what I have noticed, observed and learned thus far in my educational journey is that teaching my ELs vocabulary using specific strategies seems to be an effective way to increase their overall literacy. Strategies such as using visuals and multimedia-enhanced tools to draw on background knowledge seems to greatly benefit my ELs. Whenever I introduce a lesson in this manner, I notice that my students are highly engaged and more willing to participate in our class discussions. During work time, I also use graphic organizers and sentence frames to help my ELs learn the new vocabulary, as well as provide many exposures and opportunities to use the language. Doing this allows my ELs to feel more comfortable and gain a familiarity with the words that I teach them.

Without doing a data collection, I have no way of knowing if my methods of vocabulary instruction have increased my ELs' F&P literacy levels. I can say confidently, however, that my ELs who are reading at grade level do have a far greater range of vocabulary than my ELs who are reading below grade level.

Summary

As I begin my capstone project, I have many thoughts, but even more questions. My questions stem from the need to advocate for my ELs in the area of vocabulary instruction. I believe it is necessary for classroom teachers to know how to properly teach vocabulary to meet their ELs' literacy needs. As such, I am researching the problem and the challenges ELs face with vocabulary acquisition, how the language is acquired, what types of language should be taught, how to teach vocabulary, literacy comprehension and finally literacy levels. I intend to provide insight on all of these components of vocabulary instruction through examples and data collected by literary scholars.

Chapter Two of my capstone informs the reader of what the experts have to say about improving F&P literacy levels through vocabulary instruction. I present my findings and introduce you to many literary scholars who are experts in the field of education, and more specifically EL. I cover the experts' theories starting with some startling statistics about ELs and how the gap between ELs and non-ELs is continuing to increase. I cover the experts' theories behind vocabulary acquisition and why academic vocabulary is so difficult for ELs to comprehend. Additionally, the scholars provide knowledge and insight on the most effective methods of vocabulary instruction, and finally they speak to reading comprehension and the challenges ELs may face while trying to build literacy skills to meet a certain literacy level.

In Chapter Three of my capstone, I explain the specifics of my project in detail and answer the questions of what I did and why. The setting in which I completed my project is discussed as well as the timeline in which it was completed. In addition, I provide the rationale and the reasoning behind why I chose the project and the manner that I chose to complete my project with. Lastly, Chapter Four provides the conclusions and reflections that I came upon as a result of finishing my capstone project while also addressing areas that need further research.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

 While developing this capstone project on ways to Improve ELs' F&P Literacy

Levels, through Vocabulary Instruction, I reviewed literature pertaining to the topics of

English language learners (ELs), vocabulary acquisition, vocabulary instruction, literacy

comprehension and Fountas and Pinnell literacy levels. Every year that I have taught at

my elementary school, I have found that I have an increased population of English

language learners in my classroom. During my first-year teaching, I felt that I lacked

knowledge and general strategies on how to teach my ELs to be successful in their

academics, particularly in the area of reading. Given this fact, and knowing I am

probably not the only teacher out there struggling with vocabulary instruction, I

designed an online course on Schoology for teachers which provides them with the tools

and support necessary to help teach vocabulary to ELs and improve their literacy levels

long term.

 Reading is the area that my ELs have struggled with the most, with the majority

not meeting proficiency on the reading portion of the state-mandated MCA test or are

reading below grade level. Over the last few years, I have tried to determine why many

struggle with reading and have come up with two possible scenarios. One being, EL's find

the text too challenging to comprehend, or two, EL's are limited in the amount of

vocabulary that they know and that in turn impacts their ability to comprehend the text.

In an effort to help teachers better understand why vocabulary instruction is essential

when teaching ELs, I have researched many different strategies to help develop

vocabulary acquisition in hopes of helping ELs improve their literacy levels. In order to demonstrate this research, I have created an online course for teachers that provides them with the tools and methods of vocabulary instruction for ELs

This review of the literature presents an overview of how and why we need to modify vocabulary instruction for English Language Learners (ELs) as it pertains to their literacy comprehension. The first section covers the background of ELs and the struggles that they are facing in schools while trying to acquire vocabulary. The next section discusses how vocabulary is acquired and the types of vocabulary that need to be taught in order for ELs to access academic content. Additionally, I speak to the various ways to provide vocabulary instruction within the classroom according to the experts, and finally literacy comprehension and its relation to vocabulary acquisition is discussed.

Background of English Language Learners

An estimated 25% of children in America are from immigrant families and live in households where a language other than English is spoken (Samson & Collins, 2012). In the decade between 1997-98 and 2008-09 school years, the number of English language learners in public schools increased by 51% while the general population of students grew by just 7%. Given this increase, many U.S. teachers have or can expect to have EL students in their classrooms and therefore must be prepared to best support these children. Therefore, it is essential that schools accurately identify ELs and understand their language proficiency in English as well as their home language (Samson & Collins, 2012).

The continual increase of linguistic diversity in the United States is having a profound effect on the nation's schools. English learners (ELs) constitute the fastest growing school-age population, of which approximately 55% are native born and 45% are

foreign born (Wessels, 2011). Additionally, studies show that children from low income groups tend to build their vocabulary at slower rates than children from high socioeconomic status. Hart and Risley (2003) estimated that the average child from a professional family would be exposed to an accumulated experience of about 42 million words compared to 13 million for the child from a poor family (Lane & Allen, 2010). When we talk about building children's vocabulary, we are not only talking about knowing a high number of words but also about how well they know those words (Samson & Collins, 2012).

Vocabulary knowledge plays an important role in oral language proficiency. ELs require direct teaching of new words along with opportunities to learn new words in context through hearing, seeing and saying them as well as during indirect encounters with authentic and motivating texts (Samson & Collins, 2012). While English speakers from about middle elementary grades and up can be expected to learn by reading, English Learners must be more familiar with the content they are reading if the material is to be comprehensible to them (Nagy et al., 2012). Vocabulary knowledge is essential to students' academic success. If students do not know the words in the text, they will have difficulty understanding the content.

Vocabulary knowledge is the single best predictor of ELs' academic achievement (White, Graves & Slater, 1990). Why does most vocabulary instruction fail to increase comprehension measurably? This is a burning question that will be answered in further depth throughout the remainder of this chapter. Most vocabulary instruction fails to provide in-depth word knowledge. The implication is that teachers should augment traditional methods of instruction aimed at producing richer, deeper, word knowledge. (Nagy, 1989).

There is a great disparity between ELs and non-ELs' knowledge of vocabulary. This disparity leads to a larger gap that we as teachers need to fill for our ELs to be more successful in acquiring vocabulary and improve their overall literacy levels.

Vocabulary Acquisition

For English language learners (ELs), vocabulary development is especially important. The average native English speaker enters kindergarten knowing at least 5,000 words. The average ELL may know 5,000 words in his or her native language, but very few words in English. While native speakers continue to learn new words, ELs face the double challenge of building that foundation and then closing the gap (Colorin' Colorado, 2007). Average children acquire many hundreds of word meanings each year during the first 7 years of vocabulary acquisition. To catch up, children with vocabulary limitations will need to acquire several hundred words in addition to what they would otherwise learn (Marulis & Neuman, 2010). Vocabulary refers to the "knowledge of words and word meanings" (Honig, Diamond, Cole & Gutlohn, 2008, p. 407) and is an obvious area in which to focus instruction for ELs because it emphasizes teaching the meaning of words (August, et. al., 2005)

According to Kamil and Hiebert (2005), there are four types of vocabulary: oral, print, receptive and productive. Oral vocabulary refers to those words we understand when we communicate orally or when someone reads aloud to us. Print vocabulary refers to words we know when we read or write. Receptive vocabulary refers to words we understand when we listen or read. Productive vocabulary encompasses words that are used during speaking and writing. Words in the receptive vocabulary are "less well known" and "less frequent in use" when compared with productive vocabulary. Receptive vocabulary is larger than productive vocabulary and plays a key role in the early years

when children learn to read. As they encounter text and decode words, they use their knowledge of words to understand what they read. If the words they encounter are not part of their vocabulary, the readers will not comprehend their meaning (as cited in Lane & Allen, 2010). A simpler way to look at receptive vocabulary is the more words the reader knows, the easier it will be to read and understand what is read (Oulette, 2006).

Some researchers suggested that knowing fewer words well is more important than knowing many words superficially. According to Beck et al. (2002), teachers should strive to help students use the words they have learned not only during reading but also during writing and speaking. This means that they need a deep kind of knowledge (Lane & Allen, 2010). Other researchers promoted breadth of vocabulary knowledge acquisition. Those who emphasize breadth assert, realize that having the knowledge of many words is critical to understanding a variety of text. No matter which they emphasize, most researchers would agree that both breadth and depth of vocabulary knowledge are important (Lane & Allen, 2010).

Researchers agree that building vocabulary is more difficult than it might seem. There is a large body of research indicating that EL learners have difficulty with how words are formed. Laufer (1988) studied words with similar forms and found that some commonalities were confusing for students with an emphasis on words that were similar except for suffixes (*comprehensive*/*comprehensible*) as well as for vowels (*adopt*/ *adapt*). Bensoussan (1984) agreed and found that a mis-analysis of word forms led to misinterpretation as in the compound *outline*, but learners interpreted it as 'out of line' (as cited in Schmitt, 2008). Vocabulary signifies more than just a list of words-it is a proxy for content knowledge (David, 2010). Vocabulary knowledge is emphasized throughout the highly influential Common Core State Standards, with the word

vocabulary occurring more than 150 times in the document. Specifically, the standards

make the requirement to "Acquire and use accurately a range of general academic and

domain-specific words and phrases" an anchor standard at both the elementary and

secondary levels (Manyak et al., 2014). Although recent research tells us more about how

to teach words, determining which words to teach remains a challenge (Lane & Allen,

2010).

Types of Vocabulary

Teaching in today's classrooms can be challenging on many levels. Students need

instruction in comprehension strategies, vocabulary and learning the English language to

name just a few. Many English learners lack sufficient academic language in both their

home language and English to be successful with complex academic tasks (Marulis &

Neuman, 2010). Academic vocabulary is perhaps the most obvious aspect of academic

language, and lack of vocabulary knowledge has consistently been identified as an

obstacle to student success (as cited in Nagy et al., 2012).

By using the expression academic vocabulary, we are referring to word knowledge

that makes it possible for students to engage with, produce, and talk about texts that are

valued in school (Flynt & Brozo, 2008). In order for students to engage in texts, teachers

must have a working knowledge of academic language and of a particular type of

language used for instruction as well as for the cognitively demanding tasks typically

found in textbooks, classrooms, assessments, and those necessary for engagement in

discipline-specific areas (Samson & Collins, 2011). ELs tend to struggle with academic

language because it is decontextualized, abstract, technical and literary and requires

skills in multiple domains not limited to vocabulary, syntax/grammar and phonology

(Samson & Collins, 2011).

As previously stated, academic vocabulary falls under the realm of many different types of words. Academic vocabulary words are typically broken down into two categories; general and discipline-specific (Hiebert & Lubliner, 2008). General academic words are used in academic language with greater frequency than in nonacademic language, but they are used across disciplines. General academic words are often abstract words, and their dictionary entries tend to include many definitions (Nagy et al., 2012). Table 1 below shows the many different labels researchers have given to "academic vocabulary" (Baumann and Graves, 2010).

Table 1

Academic Vocabulary Labels

Fisher & Frey	Heibert & Lubliner	Beck, McKeown, & Kucan	Harmon, Wood & Medina	Jetton & Alexander
technical vocabulary	*content-specific*	*Tier 3 words*	*technical terms*	*language of the "academic domains"*

Nagy (2012) agreed and claimed that academic words are tools for communicating and thinking about disciplinary content. Domain specific academic vocabulary is probably the most common type of academic vocabulary. Marzano and Pickering (2005) placed this type of academic vocabulary within the context of academic domain knowledge: "Teaching specific terms (academic vocabulary) in a specific way is the strongest actions a teacher can take to ensure that students have the academic background knowledge they need to understand the content they will encounter in school" (as cited in Baumann & Graves, 2010).

Considering academic vocabulary can be defined in so many ways, it is imperative that teachers know which words to teach as well as when to teach them. Most researchers agree that academic vocabulary should not be taught before more basic vocabulary, but others believe that struggling students should be introduced to more sophisticated vocabulary early to engage their interest and catch up to their more advantaged peers (David, 2010). Beck and colleagues (2002, 2008) argued that not all familiar words in a text should be the focus of classroom instruction. They developed a three-tier model for selecting words to teach, based on each word's level of utility. The first tier included basic words that most children already know and that seldom require direct instruction in school. Words like *house, mom, car* and *toy* are examples of these words. Tier 2 included words that are key to comprehension and are frequently used by "mature language users". Examples of tier 2 words include *curious*, *gazing*, *mysterious*, *stingy*, *scrumptious*, and *drowsy*. Tier 3 encompassed low-frequency words that are associated with specific domains or content areas; words like *peninsula*, *similes*, *nucleus* and *protons*. Tier 3 words should be taught as they are encountered usually during the content-area instruction. However, the focus on most vocabulary instruction should be on tier 2 words- those words that adults use with ease in everyday conversation, reading and writing (David, 2010).

One of the biggest barriers to vocabulary growth in school is the simplistic way many teachers talk to children (Lane & Allen, 2010). We have all been guilty at one time or another of using words beneath our students' level of understanding. Simplistic vocabulary may be appropriate for initial instruction, as a support for students' understanding of a new concept. But once students develop a basic understanding, it is time to elevate instructional language to enhance students' vocabularies. Continuing to

use the simplistic term limits our students' vocabulary growth. Likewise, using phrases such as *take away* in place of *subtract* or *same as* in place of *equal* beyond initial instruction is limiting (Lane & Allen, 2010).

Non-intensive vocabulary instruction has not been found to reliably increase comprehension, but there are times when simple exposure to definitions or explanations of words can have a positive impact on word learning (Nagy et al., 2012). Some studies (eg; Penno, Wilkinson & Moore; 2002; Silverman & Crandell, 2010) have indicated that students with larger initial vocabularies are more able to benefit from exposure to definitions. Students might profit more from limited instruction if they already knew a word with a similar meaning in their first language (as cited in Nagy et al., 2012).

Learning the meanings of new words is an essential component of early reading development. Vocabulary is at the heart of oral language comprehension and sets the foundation for domain specific knowledge and later reading comprehension (Marulis & Neumann, 2010). Vocabulary knowledge has long been identified as one of the best predictors of reading comprehension, reading performance in general and school achievement (Lane & Holly, 2010). While knowing which types of words to teach is important, knowing how to teach the vocabulary so that it is comprehensible to ELs is equally important.

Vocabulary Instruction

Recently, Scott, Jamieson-Noel, and Assein (2003) found, in their observations of 23 ethnically diverse classrooms, that only 6% of school time was centered on vocabulary development, and in the core academic subject areas only 1.4 % of instructional time was spent developing vocabulary knowledge (as cited in Flynt & Brozo, 2008). These facts underscore that a limitation in vocabulary knowledge represents a key obstacle to

long-term academic success for many students and point to the urgent need for teachers and schools to improve the quality of vocabulary instruction across grade levels (Manyak et al., 2014).

Not all vocabulary instruction increases reading comprehension. Some believe that if students are taught more words, they will understand the text better. According to several studies, many methods for vocabulary instruction fail to increase comprehension (Nagy, 1989). In order to find out why traditional methods of vocabulary instruction were failing, the MCVIP (A Multi-Faceted Comprehensive Vocabulary Instruction Program) was founded by Baumann, Manyak and Blachowicz (2014). The essence of this study was to incorporate and create comprehensive vocabulary instruction methods in mixed (EL and non-EL) fourth and fifth grade classrooms over a period of three years. The program was based on the belief that Grave's (2006) four-part framework for vocabulary instruction gave a starting point for these four components: a) providing rich and varied language experiences, b) teaching individual words, c) teaching word learning strategies and d) developing word consciousness (as cited in Manyak et al., 2014).

The instructors of MCVIP planned instruction knowing that research has shown that teaching carefully chosen words through rich instruction benefits students' vocabulary knowledge (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002). The teachers purposefully taught 12 words a week, 4-5 of them are less familiar or high frequency words and the remaining 7-8 words stemmed from content and materials from the text being read. The students were first introduced to the word in a meaningful context, then provided a definition using student-friendly terms, next given many examples of how the word is used, and finally asked to come up with other examples on how to use the words. After these methods were thought out, the vocabulary word was placed on the word wall for

students to consistently access. The use of visual images/pictures and a word wall proved very effective for enhancing vocabulary instruction of ELs. Teachers drew on background knowledge when introducing a word to the class and then showed the visual as it connected to the word's meaning (Manyak, 2010). In this study, the findings suggested that students found a new enthusiasm for learning new words and playing with the language. They felt more confident to use the word because they were more familiar with how the word was used. Finally, there was a newfound power and feeling of self-efficacy in the students (Manyak, 2010). Overall, quantitative findings were very positive, as students in all three years of the project showed more than expected growth on a standardized test in general vocabulary knowledge and very large positive effect sizes on specifically taught words (Graves et al., 2014). In addition to using word walls to activate background knowledge and teach context, there are other techniques that have proven effective in teaching vocabulary to ELs.

Building Background

The very first thing teachers should do after considering which words to teach is plan how to build on ELs' background knowledge. This step is also called activating schema or activating background knowledge. Wessels (2011) clearly defined background knowledge as what students use to develop, expand and refine word meanings. When ELs bring their experiences to the surface, they are given opportunities to share their connections and teachers can then assess ELs' level of vocabulary knowledge and plan for further instruction if needed. Goldenberg (2013) added to this notion and stated that teachers connect to students' past experiences with new content. Students' comprehension of vocabulary is key to understanding the content. Examples may include content vocabulary such as *ecosystems*, *coastal nations* and *exploitation*, words that are

specific to the content being taught. Saunders, Goldenberg and Tharp (1982) provided one more definition of background knowledge: previewing key vocabulary through definitions and context-rich sentences and also questioning students throughout the reading to help connect new text with the students' experiences and to clarify students' understanding of the meaning of the passages. After students have accessed their existing knowledge, they can make connections to words and images they know and store them in their long-term memory. As a result of these connections, ELs have a higher chance to construct meaning from text and take ownership of the new vocabulary they acquired (Wessels, 2010).

One effective way for ELs' to learn vocabulary and learn content purposefully is by previewing vocabulary through multimedia enhancements or technology. Kamil (2004) agreed, but added that several encounters with targeted words are needed. The quality of encounters is essential when thinking about how students will use the target words in the domains of writing, speaking, listening and reading. Researchers found that "multimedia" enhanced instruction (videos used as parts of lessons) helped make read-aloud vocabulary instruction more effective for ELs in Pre-K to second grade. The videos in the lesson were chosen based on a topic in books that teachers read aloud to their class as part of the science curriculum on habitats (for example, *coral reefs* or *deserts*). The ELs who saw the videos linked to the vocabulary lesson, learned more of the target words and made greater gains on general vocabulary than those who did not see it (Goldenberg, 2013). Another study performed by Tucker, (2016) an English language arts teacher in California, showed similar findings. She noticed that every time she introduced the vocabulary list, some students complained that she was moving too fast and others sat impatiently waiting for her to continue. In order to remedy this, she

now records short vocabulary video slides for the students to watch at their leisure online. The slides have an image on one side, and the definition on the other. Tucker believes "she may sit teaching vocabulary in this light every single day, and the fact remains that it may take years for ELs to learn a wide range of vocabulary and become fluent in academic literacy" (p. 87). Research indicates that academic literacy can take from 4-7 years to acquire (Homes et al., 2009). Neuman (1997) stated that some critics argue that multimedia could distract children from their learning and the focus would no longer be on verbal content. To remedy this, she suggested a theory of synergy, that is combining verbal information with multimedia enhancements and that could provide students with new tools for accessing content and processing new information (as cited in Silverman & Hines, 2009).

With there being so many words in the English language, an estimated 1 million vocabulary words, Goodwein, Hein and Rutledge (2016) found that many of these words have multiple meanings which may require a certain amount of background knowledge depending on the context. Another effective way of teaching vocabulary is by teaching words within context and having multiple encounters or experiences with the word. Armbruster et al. (2001) believed teachers need to provide children with multiple encounters of a word and allow them to make connections to their prior knowledge. Being able to identify or produce a correct definition of a word is not enough, this does not necessarily mean that one will remember the definition quickly during reading. Vocabulary instruction must ensure that learners not just know what the word means but also have sufficient practice to make its meaning through context (Nagy et al., 2012). Nagy (1989) found that context is simply a teacher writing a sentence or two on the board and asking students to figure out the word's meaning. Teaching students through

context also promotes children to develop word-learning strategies to use independently. A drawback to this approach however, is that context when used as an instructional method on its own, can be ineffective as a means of teaching new vocabulary as it often does not give the reader enough information about the word. This becomes difficult for an English Language learner who may not have any other knowledge about that particular word.

Holmes (2009) proved this point and showed that many topics have their own specialized background knowledge and different meanings. Consider the topic of baseball with its specialized vocabulary. The words *steal*, *plate*, *out*, and *strike* have multiple meanings and nuances that can lead the listener/reader to misinterpret the text or what is being said. For example: "stealing" a base does not mean in a literal sense that they have taken the base and are running away with it; rather it means that the player is attempting to get to another base without being seen by the other team. In addition, the word *plate* would probably be most recognized as an object that food is placed on, however in this context it means the square mats that are placed around a baseball diamond. If an EL learner does not have that background knowledge of what happens in baseball, he/she is unlikely to interpret the true meaning of the vocabulary word. They conclude that because they do not have the background knowledge, English Language Learners may be challenged by the grammatical structures and vocabulary of the new language and therefore transfer their grammar and vocabulary of their first language incorrectly. This becomes a challenge in all aspects of language acquisition: listening, speaking, writing and especially reading. During reading learners apply up to four cues to help them glean meaning: semantics, syntax, phonics and pragmatics (Holmes et al., 2009). They further noted that another challenge English Language Learners may face

with reading is pragmatics, the social contexts of literacy use in their first language. For

instance, if an English Language Learner reads "if you don't close your mouth a fly might

fly in." Without the proper background knowledge of the *fly* being a noun and insect and

to fly being a verb how will he/she know how to comprehend the sentence? Furthermore,

if the learner lacks the contextual knowledge that things can fly into mouths if they are

open, how will they make sense of it? A teacher has to make certain to teach vocabulary

in a contextual sense, using visuals and many different examples. Flynt and Brozo

(2008) find the more meaningful and authentic the context a teacher uses, the greater

the impact on students' ownership of the targeted word. Students need to be shown how

meaningful the context of a vocabulary word can be through contextual analysis (Graves,

2000).

Another way for ELs to contextualize words is through scaffolding processes such

as semantic mapping or graphic organizers. Both of these options allow ELs to visualize

the language being used as well as practice its function before storing it in their memory.

With semantic mapping or "brainstorming" the teacher puts a theme word on the board.

She then asks students to come up with other words relating to that theme. Consider the

theme fear: students might think of words such as *terror*, *ghosts*, *monsters*, *dark*,

goosebumps, and *scream*. Next, the teacher makes a composite list on the board

grouping or has the students group the words into plausible categories or creating new

categories when necessary. The teacher can then discuss how the new words relate to the

familiar words and concepts, asking students to draw from their experiences about a

time they were frightened and scared. A rich vocabulary has now been created and

students are able to relate their own background experiences with the theme (Nagy,

1989). This approach is mainly to be used for vocabulary that is related in some way so

students can draw connections easily. Flynt and Brozo (2008) found that using semantic maps promotes in depth word knowledge. When students associate and manipulate words through group activities, categorizing, or semantic analysis, content terms are better understood.

Mr. G, a first grade teacher featured in the article *Words as Tools: Learning Academic Vocabulary as Language Acquisition* (Nagy, 2012), showed a solid lesson using a combination of all these methods in the following example. Mr. G has the class gather on the rug before reading a story about the beach. He has decided he wants his students to know the following vocabulary words: *beach*, *castle*, *tunnel*, *sea*, *dig*, *build*, and *sand*. In order to activate his students' background knowledge, he asks his students if they have ever been to the beach and what things might they see there. He also asks them if they have ever seen a movie about the beach (such as *Finding Nemo* or *Little Mermaid*). In addition, to build on background knowledge, he shows them photographs of the beach and the sea. He also presents a jar filled with sand that he has the students pass around.

Using these pictures and his students' prior knowledge as support, he wrote "Things I can see at the beach" on a chart. During this time, students name things that they might see at the beach and he records their responses under the heading. He then did a "picture walk" with the book, allowing students to preview the vocabulary and pictures, asking them what they see. He adds these suggestions to the word chart. If the target words are not identified, he points to their location in the story.

He has sentence frames on the board that say, "What is this?" "This is an_____." Ex: Holds up a picture of sand and asks "what is this?" The students then respond "this is sand." Mr. G then asks what the boy is doing in the

picture. The students respond "he is digging." He does this with all of the target

vocabulary.

Finally, he asks students, using the pictures in the story and the vocabulary words

to tell their partners what they think will happen in the story. Mr. G gives a few examples

of using the vocabulary and writes the sentence frame, "I think they

will_____" on the board (Nagy et.al., 2012). The use of sentence frames helps

students create oral or written responses with new vocabulary words. In a study

performed by Manyak (2010), teachers from MCVIP asked students "would you like to

go on an expedition?" Several ELs replied using that frame and offered accurate

responses with the word *expedition* (2012).

Vocabulary acquisition can take up to seven years to acquire. There are four types

of vocabulary: oral, print, productive, and receptive. Receptive vocabulary plays a key

role when children learn to read. When focusing on vocabulary instruction, teachers

should promote breadth and depth of vocabulary knowledge. The common core

standards make the requirement to acquire and use accurately a range of general

academic and domain specific vocabulary an anchor standard at the elementary level and

secondary levels. Many English learners lack sufficient academic language in both their

home language and English to be successful with complex academic tasks. Researchers

use different terms to describe academic vocabulary. Beck, McKeown, and Kucan

developed a three-tier model for selecting words to teach. They believe the focus should

be on Tier 2/Tier 3 words. Vocabulary knowledge has been identified as one of the best

predictors of reading comprehension.

Literacy

Before discussing more of the research behind literacy comprehension, it is crucial that the terms *literate* and *illiterate* are defined, as the concept of literacy stems from that. *Literacy Partners* presents that there are "approximately 775 million adults who are considered "functionally illiterate", with only basic or below-basic literacy levels (reading levels) in their native languages." By definition, the term "illiterate" means not being able to read or write; whereas "functionally illiterate" refers to reading and writing skills that do not meet the current standard of literacy. That is, that the current literacy level is not meeting beyond a basic level. Ohio Literacy Resource Center defined "functionally illiterate" further and states that it's defined as a person who can read between a fourth grade and sixth grade level. That is a startling fact, considering there are billions of people populating the world, and 12% may fall into the category of being functionally illiterate. Of this 775 million adults, more than 94 million adults in the U.S. can speak, but not read the English language. In fact, Ohio Literacy Resource Center shows that 50% of adults are unable to read at an eighth grade level. What does that mean for our increasing population of English language learners? Reading is an integral part of the education system, not only for native speakers but especially for learners acquiring the English language. In addition to being able to read, determining literacy levels (reading level) is equally important. Just because a language learner is able to decode "alphabetic print" (Tarone & Bigelow, 2006) on a page, this ability does not represent his/her literacy level. Literacy includes many components such as comprehension, vocabulary, and fluency. This next section shows why and how vocabulary knowledge and literacy comprehension go hand in hand.

Studies surrounding the literacy development of ELs suggest that language

knowledge and skills acquired through the native language can be transferred to English,

however, degrees of language vary depending on proficiency in the native language

(Goldenberg, 2008). Even in a first language, increasing vocabulary knowledge through

explicit instruction has been shown to increase the number of texts students will be able

to understand (Marulis & Neuman, 2010). Cunningham and Stanovich (1997) found that

there is a direct correlation between vocabulary size in first grade and reading

comprehension later on. The development of ELs' literacy skills are attributed to not only

vocabulary instruction, but many other components including phonemic awareness,

phonics, reading comprehension, reading fluency, and writing (August & Shanahan,

2006). Before discussing how vocabulary instruction attributes to literacy

comprehension, it is critical that the terms *phonemic awareness* and *phonics* be defined

and briefly discussed.

Phonemic Awareness

Phonemic Awareness is the ability to focus and manipulate individual sounds

(phonemes) in spoken words. Acquiring phonemic awareness is vital because it becomes

the foundation for spelling and word recognition skills. Robertson (2009) noted that

knowledge of the alphabet and phonemic awareness is one of the best indicators of how

children will learn to read throughout the first two years of school. This becomes a

challenge for ELs however, because they may experience difficulty hearing and saying

the sounds they are learning in English. She experiences this first hand while trying to

learn Sinhala at her time in the Peace Corps.

> There was a "th" sound that seems to be a combination of "d" and "th" and no
>
> matter how hard I tried, I could not hear or produce the sound correctly. I knew

which words it belonged in, but I couldn't say it. The native Sinhala speakers

struggled to make sense of my pronunciation. ELs may have similar difficulties

with sounds that are not a part of their native language. (Robertson, 2009, p. 2)

The development of phonological awareness skills occurs in a predictable pattern; which

is the same from one language to another. Even when one language skill is in the process

of being developed, other skills can still be transferred. Gottardo (2002) further

explained this correlation between native language phonological skills and second

language reading with 92 first graders who spoke Spanish. She found that the greatest

indicators of English word reading ability were L1 (Spanish) and L2 (English)

phonological processing, L1 reading, and L2 vocabulary. There are times however, when

a transfer can deem negative effects. Sometimes ELs mispronounce their native

phonemes or misinterpret them and a negative transfer then happens, which can in turn

have a negative effect on literacy acquisition (as cited in Ford, 2005). While phonological

awareness is a must, phonics is also necessary before reading comprehension can

happen.

Phonics

Phonics is the relationship between a sound and the written letter. Reading is

dependent on the understanding that letters and letter patterns make up the sounds of

the spoken language. The ultimate goal of phonics instruction is to help the reader

quickly determine sounds in written words. For ex: If a reader encounters the word *cat*,

and does not recognize it, they would sound out each letter of the word /c/ /a/ /t/ and

then blend the sounds together to say the entire word *cat*. When teaching phonics, it's

important to reinforce concepts of letter recognition, beginning and ending sounds,

blends, rhyming words, silent letters, and homonyms. These are all skills that ELs' need to know in order for reading comprehension to start to happen (Robertson, 2009).

Reading Comprehension

Reading comprehension is the ability to understand and make meaning from a piece of written text. Studies have shown that in the early stages of learning to read with attention on the sounds, letters, and how the letters combine to form written words, ELs' progress might be expected to be somewhat measurable to that of English speakers. Challenges may start to arise for ELs when reading requires a higher level of language skills such as interpreting academic texts (Nagy et al., 2012)

> Language and Literacy are inextricably woven together. Reading comprehension requires not only the skills of reading-accurate and fluent word recognition, understanding how words form texts that carry meaning, and how to derive meanings from these texts-but it also requires fundamental language proficiency-knowledge of vocabulary, syntax, and conventions of use that are the essence of knowing a language. Learners who know the language can concentrate on the academic content. (Nagy et al., 2012, p. 6)

Reading comprehension is the ultimate goal of reading. Skills such as decoding, vocabulary knowledge, and general language ability are dependent upon it (August et al., 2014). Many researchers agree that vocabulary knowledge and instruction are the basis of reading comprehension. Marulis and Neuman (2010) believed that a vital component of young reader's development is learning the definition of new words, and that vocabulary is at the heart of oral language comprehension and lays the foundation for content knowledge and later reading comprehension. Vocabulary is a crucial component in the development of reading skills. Vocabulary knowledge has been known to be one of

the highest indicators of performance in regard to reading comprehension and overall school achievement. Beck et al. (2008) stated that one way for vocabulary instruction to have an effect on reading comprehension is to make sure there are many opportunities for students to practice with the word, teaching the definition in context and then motivate students to think critically. Studies of approaches to improving comprehension for EL students vary, some research highlights the importance of instructional strategies that center around meaning and language development, including books to support comprehension (August et al., 2014).

One very well-known strategy for increasing vocabulary comprehension and in turn text comprehension is through read-aloud books or shared readings. Silverman and Hines (2009) found that in a research study containing the same vocabulary intervention through a read aloud with both Kindergarten ELs and non-ELs that ELs increased their general vocabulary knowledge at a faster speed than their non-EL peers. In addition, Samuels (1997) believed in the value of repeated readings of these short texts or read aloud books and stated that when there is less focus on decoding, there becomes more focus on comprehension of the text, therefore repeated reading of a text creates fluency and comprehension gains (as cited in Kesler, 2010). Nagy (1989) agreed and found that in order to produce more vocabulary growth, more reading needs to happen. Wessels (2010) believed that having a conversation about new vocabulary in many contexts is very important for ELs and that during reading two features need to occur, the first is that there are multiple opportunities for purposeful use of the vocabulary and second; there are multiple exposures to the words. Considering the amount of challenging vocabulary words found in texts, it remains imperative that vocabulary instruction is implemented thoughtfully as a means to improve ELs literacy or reading levels.

Literacy Levels

There is limited research on this particular topic of actual literacy levels, and even less on the Leveled Literacy Program Fountas and Pinnell. According to the *Leveled Literacy Intervention Program Guide* by Fountas and Pinnell, Leveled Literacy Intervention (LLI) is a scientifically-based system that is designed to eliminate challenges with literacy rather than correct failure in the long-term. It has been highly successful in cutting across the path of literacy failure and bringing children to grade level performance in hundreds of schools (Fountas & Pinnell, 2009). LLI has been developed over a period of five years and implemented in 70 districts within 15 different states. In Greenwood South Carolina, 105 2nd graders received LLI in 2006. Pre-LLI scores showed that none of the 2nd graders were reading at grade level. After eighteen weeks, scores showed that 66% of students were reading at the 2nd grade level. In Atlantic City, 337 K-2 students received LLI between the years of 2005-2006. The study involved 64 English Language Learners. Pre-LLI scores only showed 3% of the students reading on grade level. Post-LLI scores showed 45% reading on grade level. The students also showed improvement and growth in phonological awareness, letter naming, word recognition and decoding (Fountas & Pinnell, 2009, p. 4).

The lessons incorporated in Fountas and Pinnell's LLI system teach students skills to help them be successful in all aspects of literacy. One vital component to LLI is their design to help develop and expand vocabulary knowledge through oral language. In having conversations with other "experts", teachers and other adults, children's oral skills and critical thinking skills are challenged (Vygotsky, 1998). These discussions are particularly important for students who are struggling with reading, including English Language Learners. Teachers then use the discussion to show the academic vocabulary

and complicated grammar, providing students with experiences to use the new language and structures that come up in the books they read.

There is one additional component that makes up the program, and that is that the lessons are leveled. The systems are color coded and vary in difficulty levels There is an Orange system, Green system and a Blue system. Leveled Literacy Intervention is founded on Fountas and Pinnell's idea of gradient of text difficulty (2009).

> Each level of text makes increasing demands on the reader, but the change is gradual. By engaging in intensively supportive lessons on each level, young readers have the opportunities to expand their reading and writing abilities. With the support of instruction, they stretch themselves to read more complex text with accuracy, fluency and comprehension and to write more complex messages. (Fountas & Pinnell, 2009, p. 3)

The blue system is found helpful to second and third graders who are reading below grade level. The main focus of this system is on phonics, word work, comprehension and writing. The Orange system is designed to help Kindergarteners learn the functions of letters and sounds. The Green system is designed to help first graders who are reading below grade level and adds the component of shared reading and interactive writing. The program wasn't designed to peg students on a certain level, but has since become that as many teachers have "leveled" their students according to where they are reading in respect to where they should be at their current grade level. When asked the question by Parrott (2017) from the School Library Journal, "How is the approach of teachers giving students a level and labeling classroom library by level, different from how you intended the system to be used?", the founders had an interesting response:

Levels have no place in classroom libraries, in school libraries or on report cards.

It was certainly not our intention that levels be used in these ways. We designed

the F&P Text Level Gradient to help teachers think more analytically about the

characteristics of texts and demands on the reading process and the A-Z levels

were used to show small steps from easiest to most difficult. The goal was for

teachers to learn about the characteristics of each level to inform their teaching

decisions-how they introduce a book, how they discuss it and how they help

children problem solve as they process a book. (p. 15)

Even so, in many of today's classrooms students are provided a reading level based on

reading comprehension, vocabulary knowledge and word recognition and are expected to

meet grade level requirements. There has been extensive research that has shown the

benefits of using vocabulary instruction with English Language Learners.

Reading is an integral part of the education system, not only for native speakers

but especially for learners acquiring the English language. Literacy includes many

components such as comprehension, vocabulary, and fluency. Robertson (2009) noted

that knowledge of the alphabet and phonemic awareness is one of the best indicators of

how children will learn to read throughout the first two years of school. When teaching

phonics, it's important to reinforce concepts of letter recognition, beginning and ending

sounds, blends, rhyming words, silent letters, and homonyms. These are all skills that

ELs' need to know in order for reading comprehension to start to happen (Robertson,

2009). Many researchers agree that vocabulary knowledge and instruction are the basis

of reading comprehension. Studies of approaches to improving comprehension for EL

students vary, some research highlights the importance of instructional strategies that

center around meaning and language development, including books to support

comprehension (August et al., 2014). One very well-known strategy for increasing

vocabulary comprehension and in turn text comprehension is through read-aloud books

or shared readings. In many of today's classrooms students are provided a reading level

based on reading comprehension, vocabulary knowledge and word recognition and are

expected to meet grade level requirements.

 Summary

With a continuously growing population of English Language Learners, it is vital

that classroom teachers are provided with the resources and tools needed to effectively

teach vocabulary to their ELs. The vocabulary knowledge disparity between non-ELs and

ELs remains a challenge in today's schools and without action, there will continue to be a

gap. Studies show that acquiring vocabulary is slow and more difficult for ELs and one of

the reasons for this is due to the tremendous amounts of academic vocabulary they are

needing to understand. Academic vocabulary has many different meanings, but one of

the most common definitions is content or domain specific vocabulary, that is the

vocabulary that ELs need in order to help make the content more comprehensible to

them. Scott, Jamieson-Noel, and Assiein (2003) underscored the importance and need

for vocabulary instruction time to be implemented into the classroom. There are

differing views on how vocabulary should be taught, however the MCVIP teachers found

their methods to be successful when the ELs were introduced to word in student friendly

terms, given many examples how to use the word in different contexts and asked to think

of other examples how to use the word.

One of the most effective methods of vocabulary instruction according to the

experts, is to build background knowledge in the form of visuals, multimedia

enhancements, and teaching words in contexts. When vocabulary is taught in context in

the form of read aloud, and sentence frames, reading comprehension can start to happen with words now associated with meaning. Cunningham and Stanovich (1997) found that there is a direct correlation between vocabulary size and reading comprehension. Although Cunningham found this to be the case, there are other experts that weigh in and say that there are many components such as phonemic awareness, phonics, reading fluency and writing that impact literacy comprehension. The idea of literacy comprehension now takes us to the rising question: how do we improve our ELs reading levels. The Fountas & Pinnell Leveled Literacy System is one that is seen in many states and districts across America. Teachers who have used the program have found good growth in their students' reading levels. Many lessons within the program are designed to expand vocabulary knowledge and allow students to hear, see and use the language on a daily basis (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012).

All things considered, it seems that vocabulary instruction does play a tremendous role in ELs' literacy comprehension. That being said, it remains to be seen whether or not that is the only factor at play. It seems that vocabulary instruction is only one piece to the puzzle. Reading comprehension of ELs is largely dependent upon how well students can read, their word knowledge and how well they can use the language. For this reason, we cannot say for sure that an increase of vocabulary instruction will improve literacy levels, however we can say that it is definitely a big help toward reaching that goal.

The next chapter of this capstone identifies the project and online course that will be used to address my research question: *How does vocabulary instruction improve ELs' F&P literacy levels*? The following chapter provides a description in which an online

course for classroom teachers will be designed in effort to help them provide more

effective vocabulary instruction to their ELs.

CHAPTER THREE

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Introduction

In designing this project, I found a unique way to help other teachers provide effective vocabulary instruction to ELs in order to improve their literacy levels. I initially thought I would do this by providing a workshop to my colleagues, but in the spring of 2020, a world pandemic occurred and everyone; including teachers, were forced to learn from home. In light of this, and the uncertainty of times, I created an online course that covers the content of this capstone. Knowing how to teach vocabulary effectively is so vital in today's classrooms with our increasing populations of English Language Learners. Many of the classroom teachers in my school are not certified to teach ELs, and as a result our ELs are falling through the cracks and there remains a huge gap between ELs and non-ELs. You have heard of the expression "we have to close the achievment gap," it has never been more true than it is now. Our populations of English Language Learners are seriously behind academically, and it is up to us as teachers to help remedy this. Literacy is one area that ELs have struggled to reach grade level standard and a major reason is the ineffective vocabulary instruction they are receiving. This online course attempts to fix this problem as it instructs teachers how to provide effective vocabulary instruction. It is guided by the question: *how does vocabulary instruction improve F&P literacy levels?*

Overview

In the previous chapter, I reviewed the literature surrounding the topic of vocabulary instruction and literacy levels. According to the experts and literary scholars,

this has been an ongoing challenge for many years. The consensus is that vocabulary knowledge and instruction do correlate to increased literacy skills. There are instructional methods which are more effective than others. In this chapter, I present the framework of an online course that I will create in order to help guide classroom teachers with effective methods of vocabulary instruction for their English Language Learners. This chapter will present an overview of the project, targeted audience, the framework that was used and rationale behind that, and the project description. Lastly, I will provide the timeline for the project detailing what I will do and when I expect to complete the project.

Rationale

The purpose of this project is to create an online course for classroom teachers in an effort to help them provide more effective methods of vocabulary instruction to their English Language Learners. I believe that creating an online course versus a workshop is a creative and innovative way of presenting the information. I intend on asking my colleagues to take this course and reflect on what they learned after putting a few methods into practice. The course covers types of vocabulary mainly focusing on Tier 2, and Tier 3 words leading to the topic of academic vocabulary and why it is imperative we teach our Els how to use that academic language. It also provides many different instructional methods such as building background knowledge through visuals/realia (real-life objects)/multimedia enhancements, sentence frames, and read alouds. Lastly, the course covers how vocabulary knowledge plays a vital role in reading comprehension and what teachers can do in effort to increase learners' reading comprehension. The course is laid out in sections and organized effectively so my colleagues are able to find everything and complete the course work in a timely manner.

Audience and Setting

This project targets the staff and classroom teachers at a suburban elementary school. I am starting a new profession in the fall as a K-5 EL teacher, and as an EL teacher I want to be sure my colleagues know the most effective ways for vocabulary instruction. Although there is not a large population of language learners in this district, 323 EL students from a total population of 8,860 with Hispanic and Asian as the top two spoken languages, I believe the content to be beneficial even for non-ELs. The majority of the classroom teachers at this school do not have additional certification in the area of EL, so this will help them become better informed. Literacy is an area that everyone can probably agree needs a great deal of attention. At this school in particular, reading scores are low in comparison to other neighboring schools. It is recognized as a high-needs school by the school district where over 50% of the school's population are enrolled in free and reduced lunch. Additionally, many students just need their basic needs met, however it is essential that their academic needs are also met. Depending on if school is in session in person during the fall 2020, the online course could be completed from home. This is an important reason why I decided to create an online course in the event that school will be taught through distance learning.

Framework

The theory behind why I chose this online course stems from Clive (2020) on *Goodreads*: Ten years from now it won't really matter what school you attended, whether online or offline education, free or paid, widely known or not, what will matter most is what you learned, the skills you acquired and how you leveraged it. Use every opportunity to better yourself.

During a world pandemic, in the spring of 2020, educators had to teach online from their homes. Students had to face the difficult challenges of navigating through learning platforms that they did not know. Regardless of the circumstances, we always need to be prepared and willing to teach students the skills they need to be successful for the next grade. We hope that everything they have learned this past spring follows them into the next grade and we continue to see growth. Personally, I have grown so much as an educator in the spring of 2020 from watching my students learn in new and challenging ways. This is what ultimately drove me to my project method of creating an online course for teachers to participate in.

According to Andrus and Bray (2019), there are many benefits of asking teachers to learn online versus an in person workshop. One advantage is course variety: with more course options, educators can better personalize their learning to their own interests, needs and student populations. An additional benefit is the continuous support that teachers will receive: in a workshop setting, it is very difficult to follow up with attendees, on Learning Management Systems (LMS) however, participants are able to receive ongoing support and create relationships over time. There is a collaborative relationship that is achieved and teachers learn from other teachers creating a community. Similarly, Hunzicker (2011) found that traditional workshops lack connection to the classroom and are becoming less effective in our busy society. Lovett and Cameron (2011) discovered that learning from other teachers has been a productive approach for PD (as cited in Meijs et al., 2016).

The online learning platform that I am using in order to facilitate this course is Schoology. Schoology is an online learning platform that allows educators to organize curriculum, create lesson plans, design assignments and have peer-collaborated

discussions. Schoology is widely used across districts and has become even more well-known after the last few months of distance learning. It is known as one of the most popular and easy to use eLearning platforms. One reason for this is because of its extreme resemblance to Facebook social network; very accessible especially for young people that use the network excessively (Croitoru & Dinu, 2016).

I chose Schoology as a platform to create my course because it is a platform that many teachers including those at my school are likely familiar with. It is easy to find the course once logged in, and the components and folders that are implemented make the platform organized and easy to follow along. I have recently taken a few courses for Professional Development through means of Schoology and found them to be enjoyable and interesting to do. I hope that my colleagues will feel the same way about participating in this online course.

Project Description

This project is an online-course designed to help classroom teachers provide more effective vocabulary instruction for their English Language Learners. The course will provide teachers actual researched methods and examples in order for them to feel better prepared to use these strategies with their learners in the classroom.

The course will begin with an introduction page which will answer why the teachers are taking the course, in other words what they should be acquiring. They will also see a list of learning objectives or goals that they will attain by the end of the course. According to Pappas (2016), learning objectives should be aligned with Bloom's Taxonomy six levels of learning: *Remember*, *Understand*, *Application*, *Analysis*, *Evaluation*, and *Creation*. Lastly, there will be a link to a pre-assessment by means of a

Google Form that they will submit prior to taking the course or implementing any of the strategies in their classrooms.

The next part will be educating teachers on Tier 1, Tier 2 and Tier 3 vocabulary words, with a more specific focus on Tier 2 and Tier 3 vocabulary words. The teachers will sort the words in a table or T-chart and following that, will submit their own examples of Tier 2 and Tier 3 words. They will also be asked how they go about teaching these types of vocabulary to their EL students. If they have not taught them, hypothetically how would they teach them. Lastly, they will be asked why it is important for our EL students to know how to use academic vocabulary.

Following the vocabulary lesson, teachers will be shown a number of strategies on how to build background knowledge, researched as one of the most effective methods of vocabulary instruction. They will be presented with methods such as using visuals/realia/multimedia enhancements or technology to pre-teach vocabulary. There will be many different examples connected to the various instructional strategies so that there is no confusion on what to do. Two other strategies that will be discussed are the use of sentence frames and read alouds both to increase vocabulary knowledge and later reading comprehension. Teachers will be asked if they presently use any of these methods or others for vocabulary instruction in their class.

Lastly, there will be a folder on how to connect vocabulary knowledge to reading comprehension effectively with activities such as contextual clues, shared readings and using think-pair-shares to allow students to practice the target language further.

Project Timeline

The implementation of this project entails an online course. Depending on the setting of the actual project, will also depend on the time frame. Since this is an online

course that teachers will be taking, they are free to take this at their leisure from the comfort of their own home. I believe the opportune time for teachers to participate in this online course is the last week of August when the school will be back in session, whether from home or in the classrooms. Andrus and Bray (2019) noted that online courses are convenient: teachers can learn at their own pace and at times that fit their schedule. I will ask teachers to take the pre-assessment in the form of a Google Questionnaire to see what they already know or are implementing in their class. Following the course, they will be asked to immediately implement at least 2 strategies in their own classrooms and note what impact that had on their ELs' literacy skills or levels. After implementing two strategies, they will fill out an additional Google Form by the initial six weeks of school from which I will collect data. Additionally, teachers will be responsible for tracking their ELs' pre/post literacy levels in an Excel spreadsheet within the online course. The purpose of doing this is to assess how effective the instructional methods were toward improving their ELs' literacy levels.

Summary

The majority of classroom teachers at the school I will be working with do not hold certifications to teach English Language Learners. Vocabulary instruction is not seen as a significant problem with ELs but is in fact increasing the gap between our ELs and non-ELs. Thus, the purpose of this project will be to create an online course for staff and classroom teachers at my elementary school. Through the online course, I hope to help my fellow teachers provide effective methods of vocabulary instruction thereby increasing literacy levels or skills as well. In taking this online course, teachers will gain more experience and become more comfortable with the LMS when using it in the classroom to enhance learning and address student needs (Andrus & Bray, 2019). In

assessing my teachers and viewing the progress they make through participating in this course, I will be able to reflect on answers to my question: *How does vocabulary instruction increase F&P literacy levels?*

In this chapter, I have provided an overview of what my project will look like, including details surrounding the make-up of the online course in the project description. I have described the target audience and why it is important to include them with my project. I have given a description of how, what and when the project will take place under certain conditions as well as when I expect to complete the project. In the next chapter, I provide a summary and reflection of the capstone process creating this online course and looking at my research question *How does vocabulary instruction improve F&P literacy levels* in depth.

CHAPTER FOUR

REFLECTION

With a rising population of English Language Learners (ELs), it is imperative that classroom teachers have the tools and knowledge that is necessary to help these learners be successful especially in the area of reading. It was for this reason as well as my desire to better myself as an educator that led me to the research question for my capstone project: *How does vocabulary instruction improve ELs' F&P literacy levels?* In an effort to answer this question, I designed an online course through Schoology which provides teachers with the tools and supports needed to help ELs further develop their literacy skills and improve their literacy levels. I chose this topic because as I embark on my new journey as an English Language Teacher in the fall of 2020, I want to advocate for my learners by providing their classroom teachers with researched methods proven to improve literacy skills.

In the first section of this chapter, I describe what I learned about myself as a researcher, writer and a learner. The next section points out which literary scholars had the largest impact on my thinking during this process and creation of my online course as well as connections that I have made during my research. Vocabulary instruction takes time and a great deal of effort which is a possible implication of this research. A further implication discusses potential biases against language learners and families' feelings toward their child meeting grade level standards. The following section covers any limitations that vocabulary instruction may pose to English learners. This leads into recommendations for future research and the last section describes how the results of my research will be used and shared to benefit other teachers.

Learning from the Capstone Process

In reflecting back on my endeavor through this capstone process, I am overwhelmed by how much I have learned as a researcher, writer and a learner. I have always been intimidated by the idea of research even as a high school student enrolled in AP English classes. The reading is usually rather dense and I find that I have to reread articles many times before understanding the gist of what is being said. Reading comprehension was always something that I struggled with and as such I found myself avoiding longer pieces of texts unless the topic really interested me. My attitude toward research changed quite a bit as I began to search for sources relevant to my capstone topic. I began to understand how to focus on the individual themes of my topic and find relevant information on just those as time progressed. This brought me to the next step in my capstone which was to begin writing the paper.

Organization is something that has never been my strong suit, especially organizing my thoughts and ideas as a writer. The biggest critique from my professors was always to keep my thoughts organized. I knew for this capstone, keeping my ideas organized and concise would be paramount. Once I found my excerpts from the sources that I researched, I typed them and placed them under the proper themes they belonged to. Next, I began to write the Literature Review portion of my capstone which suddenly was not as daunting as it once was. As I typed, and made adjustments my thoughts became more organized and eventually it all came together. After completing this part of the capstone, I can honestly say that writing longer papers or reading lengthier texts do not intimidate me as they did before. Although I have learned so much from researching and writing my capstone, I find that I gained even more insight into who I am as a learner.

As life throws many challenges our way at times, I found this to be true during my journey in this capstone process as well. The one takeaway that has really stood out to me from writing this capstone is that I persevere through all obstacles. I always knew that as a person I was tenacious. I have had experiences in my life that have truly tested my determination and will power. Completion of this capstone was no different. I had many challenges that occurred which were out of my control and at times I was not certain if I would be able to complete my capstone. I have found that since having my son earlier this year, he is the reason for everything I do. Whenever I felt like giving up during this process and when it seemed impossible to keep going, I pictured him and asked myself: *would he be proud of me?* He was my motivation for completing this capstone and continuing my journey as a lifelong learner. Not only do I want to instill that value in my future language learners, but also in my son.

Throughout this process, I deepened my understanding of vocabulary knowledge and incorporating methods of vocabulary instruction into my practice as an English Language teacher. I researched ways to build upon my ELs background knowledge in hopes of increasing their vocabulary knowledge and in turn improving their literacy levels. In creating my project, the online course through Schoology, I built confidence in myself as a facilitator for both students and teachers alike. Creating content based on my research, allowed me to learn about tiered vocabulary and the extreme importance of teaching ELs academic vocabulary not only for the purpose of reading comprehension, but also for academic tasks.

The next section discusses which literary scholars impacted my thinking in the creation of my online course.

Connections to the Literature Review

While running a trial assessment for teachers on how they currently instruct vocabulary for ELs, the number one question that was raised during the questionnaire was *how do I know which words to teach*. This idea then became paramount in my research. While there are a few theories on which vocabulary words to teach, Beck, McKeown and Kucan (2008) developed a tiered system for teaching vocabulary words based on the word's level of utility. The first tier consisted of words that were at a more basic level that children already know and seldom require direct instruction in school. Words like *house, mom, car* and *toy* are examples of these words. Tier 2 included words that are key to comprehension and are frequently used by "mature language users." Examples of tier 2 words include *curious, gazing, mysterious, scrumptious*, and *drowsy*. Tier 3 words encompassed low-frequency words that are part of a domain or content area. Words like *peninsula, nucleus* and *protons*. Tier 3 words should be taught as they are encountered, usually during content instruction. The first section of the online course that I designed focuses on what Tiers of vocabulary there are and why teachers should primarily center their instruction on Tier 2 and Tier 3 words. These tiers are particularly challenging to language learners because they are words of lower-frequency and are not always taught explicitly. ELs tend to struggle with academic language because it is decontextualized, abstract, technical and literary and requires skills in multiple domains not limited to vocabulary, syntax/grammar and phonology (Samson & Collins, 2011). In light of this, I wanted teachers to know what academic vocabulary is and how to differentiate between the tiers. Having a knowledge of which words to teach to ELs is crucial and becomes a stepping stone to which methods of vocabulary instruction to use.

The second part of my online course that I created discusses types of vocabulary instruction. These instructional methods surfaced from Baumann, Manyak and Blachowitz's (2014) MCVIP (A Multi-Faceted Comprehensive Vocabulary Instruction Program). The essence of this program was to incorporate and create vocabulary instruction methods in fourth and fifth grade EL classrooms. The program was based on Grave's (2006) four-part framework for vocabulary instruction covering these four components: a) providing rich and varied language experiences, b) teaching individual words, c) teaching word learning strategies and d) developing word consciousness (as cited in Manyak et al., 2014). Two methods that the MCVIP used were demonstrated effective for enhancing vocabulary instruction of ELs. These were drawing on background knowledge and using visuals to help connect to the word's meaning (Manyak, 2010). The MCVIP highly influenced the methods that I chose to represent in my online course. Wessels (2011) clearly defined background knowledge as what students use to develop, expand and refine word meanings. When ELs bring their experiences to the surface, they are given opportunities to share their connections and teachers can then assess ELs' level of vocabulary knowledge and plan for further instruction if needed. Using methods such as multimedia enhancements, semantic maps, read alouds and sentence frames are all mentioned strategies of activating background knowledge.

I personally connected to this MCVIP study and the ideas that these literary scholars asserted. While pursuing my Teaching English to Foreign Language Learners Certification (TEFL), I was taught to incorporate many of these same strategies to introduce new vocabulary to language learners. For my lessons, I chose to use visuals such as multimedia enhancements and realia. I noticed that when these strategies were

implemented, my learners were much more successful at making meaning of the new words they were introduced to. I notice this in my classrooms in MN as well. My students seem to benefit the most from lessons which begin with building on their background knowledge. I plan on taking this knowledge going forward and incorporating more vocabulary driven lessons for my ELs and encouraging that of their classroom teachers as well.

This section has reviewed which researchers had the biggest impact on my thinking and overall development of my online course. The next section suggests possible policy implications from findings in the literature review.

Implications

Recently, Scott, Jamieson-Noel, and Assein (2003) found, in their observations of 23 ethnically diverse classrooms, that only 6% of school time was centered on vocabulary development, and in the core academic subject areas only 1.4 % of instructional time was spent developing vocabulary knowledge (as cited in Flynt & Brozo, 2008). This could be because effective vocabulary instruction can be very time consuming, and we know that as teachers time is limited. In asking teachers to implement at least two methods of vocabulary instruction every time new vocabulary is introduced, it is taking away from other subject content or activities that the students could be learning or doing. There should be a balance between vocabulary instruction and content instruction so that students are not only obtaining that vocabulary knowledge but also the content from the academic piece as well.

Another possible implication stems from knowing that there is already an opportunity gap among ELs and Non-ELs. Reporting to ELs that they are not meeting grade level standards while discussing their literacy levels could create feelings of

self-doubt or resentment. As a result, these learners may not put as much effort into their academics or literacy. Furthermore, the families of ELs might feel a certain way about their child not meeting grade level expectations. Teachers should approach this topic with a positive attitude and work in a partnership with families when setting academic goals for their child. Families should feel that their children are supported and cared for regardless of their academic ability.

This section discussed possible implications for implementing vocabulary instruction. The next section addresses limitations and thoughts for future research based on these limits.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

The way that this course is designed through Schoology could be a limitation for teachers. If there is one thing that I have learned this past spring, it is that Schoology or online platforms in general can be complex. I spent countless hours watching how-to videos so that I could participate in the courses that were offered by my school and instruct my students from home. After speaking with my colleagues, many of them had a similar experience. It is unlikely that every teacher will be able to navigate this course given its format. When I created the course, I did so with the mindset that I wanted it to be informative and concise, yet simple. Even taking these steps, online courses can still be difficult to follow. Given this limitation, a recommendation for the future could be to present the online course in the form of a workshop. It would be very beneficial for teachers to return after implementing methods of vocabulary instruction to share their findings. This online course is limited to specific methods of vocabulary instruction: activating prior knowledge, multimedia enhancements, use of realia, semantic maps, sentence frames and read alouds. Although these research methods are proven effective

in developing vocabulary for ELs, incorporating these methods is not the only factor in increasing reading comprehension.

Phonological awareness, phonics, and reading fluency play a large role in reading comprehension. In my experience if my ELs do not have these basic foundational skills laid out, it does not make a difference how much vocabulary I teach them; their literacy levels tend to remain the same. Teachers should spend time developing these foundational skills in addition to vocabulary. My ELs are more successful when there is a balance between all of these components in their literacy instruction.

This section addressed limitations of this online course and using solely the above methods of vocabulary instruction. The final section reviews how my results will be communicated and the benefits they could bring to other teachers.

Communicating Results and Benefits to the Profession

Given the format of this online course, it is more challenging to communicate the results to my colleagues. After collecting data from classroom teachers on implementing methods of vocabulary instruction and tracking ELs' literacy levels, I plan to conduct an all teacher workshop in November at my school. Doing this will allow us to see which methods different teachers used and how to adjust our future instruction based on that data. I plan to communicate the findings in the form of a presentation showing a graph of the different methods that were used and how many ELs improved their literacy levels based on those methods.

I believe classroom teachers will find this workshop beneficial to gain perspectives from other teachers who implemented different or the same methods. Given that ELs are unique and there are skills required to teach them, it is necessary for classroom teachers to have as much professional development pertaining to them as

possible. In addition to classroom teachers, as an EL Teacher I would benefit from seeing the results of this study. This information would tell me how I can further help my classroom teachers improve their ELs' literacy levels.

Summary

This chapter described my learnings and thoughts following the investigation of my question: *How does vocabulary instruction improve ELs' F&P literacy levels?* I have grown tremendously as both a researcher and writer; especially a learner over the past few years at Hamline. Researchers Beck, McKeown and Kucan (2008) had the largest influence on the creation of my online course in respect to Tiered vocabulary and which words to emphasize when teaching ELs. The MCVIP study was the foundation for the methods of vocabulary instruction that I represented in my project. While there were certain limitations to the online course, they led to suggestions for further research. This work can be shared with classroom teachers as well as EL teachers to help benefit and understand how to improve literacy skills and levels of language learners.

I learned more during this process than I ever thought possible. I feel grateful for the opportunity and feel much more confident in my profession as an English Language teacher. When I began my journey at Hamline, I wanted to reach language learners in a way that would help them not only be successful, but feel successful. I believe researching this one area and providing teachers with this tool to help their ELs feel more successful with literacy is a step in the right direction.

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