Preservice Teachers' Development of Children's Vocabulary

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Abstract

The purpose of this research was to examine preservice elementary teachers' knowledge of vocabulary instruction and their success in implementing it in their partner teachers' classrooms. Study participants were three preservice elementary teachers student teaching during the first of two student teaching blocks. One preservice teacher taught kindergarten, one taught in a fourth grade classroom, and the other taught in a combined fourth and fifth grades classroom. Results indicated that preservice elementary teachers' vocabulary knowledge existed on a continuum: one preservice teacher provided almost no vocabulary instruction during observed lessons, the second preservice teacher demonstrated a developing ability to provide competent vocabulary instruction, and the third preservice teacher provided consistently extensive and expert vocabulary instruction for the children in her classroom. Based on qualitative data from the case study observations, interviews, document analysis, and the investigator's reflective journal, four findings emerged. Two of the three preservice teachers provided both explicit and incidental vocabulary instruction. Their instruction promoted the development of children's vocabulary. The two preservice teachers who provided quality vocabulary instruction utilized sources from both their teacher educational programs and their partner teachers. The effect of the preservice teachers' own knowledge of vocabulary words and meanings did influence their instruction.

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Introduction

Words are concept labels, and the more directly children experience the meaning of the word, the easier it is for them to understand it (Cunningham, 2006; Dale, 1965). Vocabulary instruction that is repetitive, dull, and boring will not engage children in the learning of vocabulary words. Teachers often fail to provide stimulating vocabulary instruction because of time limits, lack of knowledge of vocabulary strategies, or lack of materials. They frequently resort to traditional vocabulary instruction that usually involves copying definitions from dictionaries or using the words in a written sentence (Brabham & Villaume, 2002; Bromley, 2007; Phillips, Foote, & Harper, 2008; Richek, 2005). Other common vocabulary instructional practices include the use of vocabulary word lists, teacher explanation, discussion, memorization, vocabulary books, and quizzes (Bromley; Shin, 2004). Teachers know they need to do a better job of teaching vocabulary to students, and are concerned about what strategies to use, what materials are available, how to foster and measure transfer, and collaboration on shared practice (Berne and Blachowicz, 2008).

The vocabulary instruction provided by preservice teachers (*preservice teachers* and *student teachers* as identifiers are interchangeable in this paper) is of particular interest because it is either a reflection of the knowledge gained from partner teachers with quality vocabulary instructional practices or from quality teacher education programs. However, researchers have documented the scarcity of innovative vocabulary instruction in school classrooms (Berne & Blachowicz, 2008; Blachowicz & Fisher, 2000; Brabham & Villaume, 2002; Bromley, 2007).

As Berne and Blachowicz commented,

> our informal conversations with classroom teachers suggest to us that they aren't
>
> confident about best practice in vocabulary instruction, and at times they don't know
>
> where to begin to form an instructional emphasis on word learning or to change one that
>
> they feel is ineffective (2008, p. 315.)

One of the purposes of student teaching is for preservice teachers to learn about existing quality instructional practices from an experienced partner teacher; partner teachers also can learn innovative instructional ideas from their student teachers. This is the ideal situation if the relationship is such that each is willing to learn quality instructional practices from the other; the student teaching experience can serve as a conduit for best vocabulary instructional practices. However, as the above research indicates, partner teachers often lack confidence in their ability to provide quality vocabulary instruction. Evidence of preservice teachers providing quality vocabulary classroom instruction may be attributable to strategies learned during teacher education programs. The purpose of this research was to examine preservice elementary teachers' knowledge of vocabulary instruction and their success in implementing it in their partner teachers' classrooms.

Theoretical Framework

The importance of vocabulary instruction has waxed and waned over the years, and not until recently has there been a focus on vocabulary instruction in today's classrooms (Berne & Blachowicz, 2008; Blachowicz & Fisher, 2000). One can determine the growing importance of the topic by browsing through the most recent years' editions of *The Reading Teacher*.

Vocabulary instruction is of two types—incidental and explicit (Blachowicz & Fisher, 2000, Berne and Blachowicz, 2008; Rupley, Logan, & Nichols, 1998-1999). Incidental

vocabulary instruction includes learning of words from experiences such as read alouds, independent reading, word play, games, and an exposure to a rich vocabulary environment. Anderson and Nagy concluded that "for enhancement of children's vocabulary growth and development, there can be no substitute for voluminous experience with rich, natural language" (1991, p. 722). Explicit vocabulary instruction includes instruction that focuses on the use of graphic organizers (Phillips, Foote, & Harper, 2008; Rupley, Logan, & Nichols, 1998-1999) and etymology, synonyms and antonyms, prefixes and suffixes, and root word study (Baumann, Ware, & Edwards, 2007; Berne & Blachowicz, 2008; Bromley, 2007). Instruction in power words, using richer words rather than tired, common words, would also be explicit instruction (Baumann, Ware, and Edwards, 2007; Bromley, 2007; Caswell, 1990). In addition, Phillips, Foote, and Harper (2008) recommended instruction in categorizing or sorting words.

Both incidental and explicit vocabulary instruction are useful types of instruction. As Rupley, Logan, and Nichols (1998-1999) pointed out, "teaching vocabulary versus incidental learning of words through wide reading should not be viewed as competing philosophies" (p. 346) because students are individuals who benefit from different kinds of instruction—no one method or strategy will provide quality vocabulary instruction for all students. Furthermore, what one individual considers explicit instruction could become incidental vocabulary instruction, depending on how the teacher implements the strategy. For example, teaching morphemic analysis and breaking words into base words and suffixes, usually considered to be explicit instruction, could be taught in a game format.

Blachowicz and Fisher (2000) suggested four principles for vocabulary instruction:

1. That students should be active in developing their understanding of words and ways to learn them.

2. That students should personalize word learning.

3. That students should be immersed in words.

4. That students should build on multiple sources of information to learn words through repeated exposures (p. 506).

Blachowicz and Fisher reported that "personalization through student self-selection of words for study has not been extensively investigated" (p. 506). They commented that students who have choice in choosing words to learn will better retain the words and meanings than they will words that are selected by the teacher. Lastly, Blachowicz and Fisher suggested that "surely encouraging and allowing students to be active in their learning and to personalize it should result in better learning" (p. 508).

Method

This research was part of a larger qualitative case study that explored preservice elementary teachers' reading content knowledge and their application of that knowledge while student teaching (Lilienthal, 2006/2007). For this research paper, I examined the coded vocabulary strands from the larger study to specifically investigate participants' vocabulary instruction.

Participants. The participants were three elementary preservice teachers who volunteered for the study. They were all student teaching for ten weeks in the first of two student teaching blocks. One preservice teacher, Jan (all names are pseudonyms), taught in a kindergarten classroom. Cathy taught in a fourth grade classroom. Barbara taught in a combined fourth and fifth grades classroom. Barbara's partner teacher team taught with another combined fourth and fifth grades teacher, who also had a student teacher.

Jan and Cathy taught in the same elementary school. Barbara was teaching in an elementary school in another city. Both schools were located in small cities in a mountain state. In addition, Jan and Cathy had the same reading methods course instructor and the same student teaching supervisor, one individual who filled both positions. Cathy's partner teacher had more than 10 years of teaching experience. Jan's and Barbara's partner teachers each had over 20 years of teaching experience.

Data collection. The case study involved classroom observations, interviews, document analysis of lesson plans and other teaching materials, and my investigator reflective journal. Data collection occurred during a two-month period. I conducted nine observations and ten interviews for each participant, for a total of 27 observations and 30 interviews. Interviews took place immediately following each observation. There was also an exit interview at the end of the case study data collection period.

Data analysis. I analyzed the data using the constant comparative method (Glazer & Strauss, 1967), with strand codes in the left margin and investigator analysis comments in the right margin (Miles & Huberman, 1994). I transcribed each interview transcript as soon as possible following the observation interview and used the interview transcript codes as guides for the analysis of the observation field notes, teaching documents, and my investigator's reflective journal. Case study data analysis was a process of pulling data apart and then reassembling it into meaningful understandings (Creswell, 1998). Triangulation (Patton, 2002) was through multiple data sources.

Results

Of the three preservice elementary teachers, two (Cathy and Barbara) successfully taught vocabulary to the children in their classrooms. The three preservice teachers' expertise in

vocabulary knowledge and in vocabulary instruction existed on a continuum, with one individual, Jan, exhibiting very little vocabulary instruction, a second preservice teacher, Cathy, demonstrating a developing ability to provide competent vocabulary instruction, and the third preservice teacher, Barbara, providing consistently extensive and expert vocabulary instruction for the children in her classroom.

Jan's vocabulary instruction. It was apparent from the data coding that Jan, student teaching in a kindergarten classroom, provided almost no vocabulary instruction during the nine observed lessons. I observed and documented the instruction of only three or four instances of momentary vocabulary instruction during my observations in her kindergarten classroom. The vocabulary instruction that Jan gave was explanation only and was usually rushed, misleading, or incomplete. For example, Jan was leading the children through the pictures on a phonics worksheet where students were to identify the two pictures that began with the same sound, "The next row is a wig, a pig, and a pail" (observation field notes, p. 31). One student identified the *pail* as a *bucket*. Jan replied, "No, it's a pail." She did not explain that *pail* is another word for *bucket*. Her focus was on identifying the beginning sound of the picture, rather than on the vocabulary that the pictures represented.

Jan also missed many opportunities to explain vocabulary that children introduced. For example, in one lesson, she read a book about animals to the children. One page had a picture of a turkey.

A student raised her hand and said, "They have feathers because they have wings and a wattle" (observation field notes, p. 42).

Jan did not respond to the child's remark. She missed the opportunity to clarify the student's comment and to explain what *wattle* meant. Most of Jan's classroom instruction did not include vocabulary instruction.

Cathy's vocabulary instruction. The second preservice teacher, Cathy, student taught in a fourth grade classroom. She taught vocabulary in some way during almost every observed lesson, and vocabulary instruction was the focus of the lesson in the majority of the nine observed lessons. Cathy developed extensively in her ability to provide quality vocabulary instruction during the two months of the study.

Her first lesson in vocabulary instruction was not very successful. The lesson consisted of the more traditional vocabulary instruction. To begin this lesson, Cathy and the class discussed the following five vocabulary words displayed on the overhead screen: ancestors, environment, generations, hesitated, and pollinate. She provided explanations of the words and had students verbally define the words by reading context passages on the overhead for each vocabulary word. At the end of the lesson, Cathy asked students to write what they thought the words meant.

Many students were off task during this instructional session. At the end of the lesson, several students indicated that they did not know many of the words. Cathy asked a student, "You don't know any of them? You should know some of them because we just went over them" (observation field notes, p. 2).

During the observation interview following the lesson, Cathy told me, "A lot of them just put, 'Environment is a place,' or 'Pollinate is when you pollinate stuff.' I'd say at least 25% of them just put [incorrect] definitions—I don't think they had any clue what they were doing" (interview transcript, p. 4). Although many of the students did learn from Cathy's vocabulary instruction during this lesson, by her own evaluation Cathy was not as successful as she wanted

to be in teaching her students to understand vocabulary words from context clues. Phillips, Foote, and Harper (2008) also concluded that the use of context clues to teach vocabulary is not that helpful because it does not always transfer to other contexts.

For her second observed lesson, Cathy decided to try a different type of vocabulary strategy using power words (Baumann, Ware, & Edwards, 2007; Berne & Blachowicz, 2008; Bromley, 2007; Caswell, 1990) and a game format that included pantomime. Cathy introduced the lesson by asking if the students remembered how the author of *The Great Kapok Tree* (Cherry, 1990) chose powerful words to describe how the animals talked and moved. She modeled and demonstrated for students how to use powerful words to improve their writing. Cathy then explained to the students that they were going to play a game. She divided students into two groups. Using the book, *The Great Kapok Tree*, one group wrote a list of power words that the author chose in place of the word *said*. The second group developed a list of power words the author used instead of the word *moved*. Each student had a copy of the book to facilitate the activity. After students made their lists, each student from each group acted out a word at the front of the room, and the students from the other team had to guess the word. The active participation and strong visuals helped students stay on task as they looked for words in groups and then acted them out through pantomime. Students came up with great power words to use instead of tired words like said and moved. At the end of the lesson, Cathy put all of the words on a semantic web graphic organizer to remind students how the words were related, such as that suggested by Phillips, Foote, and Harper (2008).

During the observation interview immediately following the lesson, Cathy commented, "I felt like [this lesson] was very successful. I feel like they all got something out of it, whether it was from looking them up or whether it was from acting them out" (interview transcript, p. 22).

This game helped most students to be actively engaged and immersed in vocabulary learning—

looking for words in the story and selecting their own words, choosing favorite words from their

self-constructed lists to act out, conferring with group members on how to pantomime words,

and then working as groups to guess the other team's words. Cathy's vocabulary instruction in

this lesson follows the four guidelines that Blachowicz and Fisher (2000) suggested.

　　　In a third lesson, after working with different suffixes, Cathy used both explicit

instruction on morphemic analysis with suffixes and base words, as well as incidental instruction

through the use of a partner game activity. Cathy created a partner activity on suffixes using

words that were both examples and non-examples from students' reading. The review words on

the cards were from prior lessons and from the students' reading. Students had to work on the

cards with a partner and find any base words and suffixes. Then they had to explain suffix

definitions and how they changed the meaning of the base word. Students were engaged with

their partners when working through the partner activity. Cathy explained this activity as a game,

and students responded accordingly. Pairs competed against other pairs to see who could

successfully finish first. It was the week of Halloween, so Cathy was also passing around candy

as prizes.

　　　Evaluating the lesson during the observation interview that followed, Cathy explained, "I

think that having the base word and the suffix, they'll be able to say the words and be able to add

that on there and know the word [recognize the word and know the meaning of it through

morphemic analysis]" (p. 56, interview transcript). Her use of explicit instruction for teaching

suffixes, and base word study is an effective vocabulary strategy as identified by past researchers

(Baumann, Ware, & Edwards, 2007; Berne & Blachowicz, 2008; Bromley, 2007). Combining

her explicit instruction at the overhead projectors with the incidental instruction through the

partner game activity increased the quality of Cathy's vocabulary instruction and her students'

ability to learn from it. To some extent, the partner activity was explicit instruction, because

students reviewed base words and suffixes through examples and nonexamples. Yet it was also

incidental learning because of the game format.

Barbara's vocabulary instruction. Barbara, the third preservice elementary teacher,

taught in a combined fourth and fifth grades classroom. She wove vocabulary instruction

seamlessly into almost every lesson I observed. Barbara's instruction consistently contained

competent vocabulary instruction involving thorough explanation, excellent examples based on

her own vocabulary knowledge, and she demonstrated a love of words that was infectious. Her

personal vocabulary knowledge was incredible. For example, one student asked Barbara what

lively meant. She replied without a moment's hesitation, "It means you move around a lot" (field

observation notes, p. 39). Her instruction, regardless of the main lesson focus, immersed students

in rich vocabulary (Anderson & Nagy, 1991).

To build students' vocabulary in a lesson that focused on power words (Baumann, Ware,

& Edwards, 2007; Berne & Blachowicz, 2008; Bromley, 2007; Caswell, 1990), Barbara directed

students to think of power words, positive descriptors (adjectives) they could use to describe

themselves. She gave each student an alphabetic graphic organizer (Phillips, Foote, & Harper,

2008) with a box for each letter of the alphabet. Barbara explained that students had to write at

least three creative words to represent each letter of their name. This was a two-day assignment,

so they could ask family members or friends for help. One student suggested the word *bubbly* to

describe Barbara (observation field notes, p. 36).

Students were so engaged in this vocabulary activity that they were bringing words from

home, conferring with classmates, and looking through dictionaries for interesting words. As

students completed their graphic organizers, they circulated throughout the classroom giving

help to and receiving help from classmates. They formed groups of two or three students,

completed a task, and created new groupings with other students based on the vocabulary they

were working on. For example, a student looking for a *z* word joined two other students looking

for a *z* word. The three students worked together to find three words for the letter box on the

graphic organizer, then that group broke and the students moved on to other letter box groups.

These fourth and fifth graders found words such as *eloquent, exquisite,* and *zany* to describe

themselves. They were actively participating, choosing their own words, personalizing the words

by finding words to describe themselves, and using multiple sources—dictionaries, parents, and

classmates—to find interesting words (Blachowicz and Fisher, 2000). After students completed

their alphabetic graphic organizers, they wrote an acrostic poem based on the letters of their

names and using their power words. One example on the overhead contained these power words:

beautiful and *energetic* (observation field notes, p. 39).

Barbara frequently used graphic organizers to help students with vocabulary instruction,

comprehension, and writing. Many of her lessons involved more than one focus, but almost all

lessons included vocabulary instruction. Barbara included authentic children's literature in read

alouds and also taught reading with literature circles. Student choice and student self-selection

of vocabulary words was evident during most lessons. Thus, Barbara utilized both explicit and

incidental strategies to provide quality vocabulary instruction.

Conclusions

Based on the analysis of observations, lesson plans and other teaching documents,

participants' interview transcripts, and my reflective journal, four findings emerged from the

case study data regarding preservice teachers' vocabulary instruction and their success in

implementing it during this study: the kind of vocabulary instruction they provided or did not provide, such as explicit or incidental instruction; whether or not the preservice teachers were successful in providing quality vocabulary instruction that promoted the development of children's vocabulary knowledge; the source of the strategies that preservice teachers utilized when they provided quality instruction; and the effect of the preservice teachers' own knowledge of vocabulary words and meanings.

The first finding from the research concerns the type of vocabulary instruction that the preservice teachers' provided, which focused on the method of vocabulary instruction. Jan provided almost no vocabulary instruction. Evidence of any vocabulary instruction was mostly teacher verbal explanation, which would be explicit vocabulary instruction. Cathy and Jan provided both explicit and incidental vocabulary instruction, using a variety of instructional activities to develop children' vocabulary (Rupley, Logan, & Nichols, 1998-1999).

The second finding from the research is whether or not the three preservice teachers were successful in providing quality vocabulary instruction that promoted the development of children's vocabulary knowledge. Contrary to what researchers (Bromley, 2007; Phillips, Foote, & Harper, 2008) report is typical classroom vocabulary instruction—copying definitions and other uninspiring vocabulary instruction—two of three preservice teachers successfully taught vocabulary lessons that assisted children to expand and build their vocabulary knowledge. For example, both Cathy's and Barbara's students learned that they could replace many common, tired words with more powerful verbs or adjectives that not only expanded students' vocabulary banks but also added creativity and clarity to their writing. Active participation in the lessons through game and pantomime activities, vocabulary self-selection, ownership and personalization of words, and using multiple strategies for explicit and incidental vocabulary

instruction increased student engagement and learning, which was frequently demonstrated through vocabulary graphic organizers or student writing at the end of the lessons. From the data, it is evident that Cathy and Barbara taught quality vocabulary instruction that was successful in developing children's vocabulary knowledge.

The third finding from the research identifies the sources of the vocabulary strategies from whom the preservice teachers borrowed ideas for their instruction. Jan's instructional focus was on phonics and sight word instruction, rather than on vocabulary instruction. This also seemed to be the focus of her partner teacher's instruction. Although Jan and Cathy had the same university reading methods instructor, who was also their university student teaching supervisor, Jan seemed to favor the reading instruction promoted by her partner teacher.

Cathy, on the other hand, utilized instructional ideas from both her university methods instructor and her partner teacher. She commented that her instructor was the source of the power words idea (interview transcript, p. 18), but the suffix lesson was supported by her partner teacher who asked her if she wanted to teach a lesson on suffixes (interview transcript, p. 33) and provided her with some materials, such as worksheets. Cathy gathered ideas from multiple sources, but then she added her own adaptations, for example, actively involving students through student self-selection of words, pantomiming of words, and using game formats. She also revised or adapted teaching materials that her partner teacher gave her, such as worksheets, so that they were more appropriate for the lessons she taught. She reduced the number of words on worksheets and combined ideas from different worksheets.

Similarly, Barbara used ideas from multiple sources. Her partner teacher team taught with another combined fourth and fifth grades teacher. The team teacher also had a student teacher. Barbara commented that all four of them—the two team teachers and the two student teachers—

met weekly to plan lessons. Barbara used ideas from all three of these individuals in her own teaching, usually adapting them in some way to fit her own instructional style. She did not mention her university reading methods instructor as a source of information, but she did mention using a visualization strategy from a textbook that was required in one of her other reading courses (interview transcript, pp. 30-31). Barb's partner teacher and her team teacher had used this strategy during literature circles, Barb remembered that the strategy was in that textbook, so she went back and referenced it to use it in her own instruction during a visualization activity.

Finally, the fourth finding from the research data concerns the effect of the preservice teachers' own knowledge of vocabulary words and meanings. Enthusiastic vocabulary teachers do not necessarily have to have a rich vocabulary word knowledge of their own, but they do need to demonstrate and model a love of words and to provide a vocabulary-rich environment in order to promote and develop vocabulary knowledge in their students. Both Cathy and Barbara demonstrated enthusiasm for building vocabulary and a love of words by providing a vocabulary-rich environment and by including vocabulary instruction in most of their lessons. In addition, it was evident that the preservice teachers' own vocabulary word knowledge influenced their vocabulary instruction. Cathy stated that she frequently looked up the meaning of words; it was apparent that she was interested in words and interested in building her own vocabulary knowledge, as well as that of her students. Barbara, on the other hand, demonstrated a broader and deeper personal vocabulary word knowledge that allowed her to paraphrase definitions in terms that children could comprehend, assisting children to develop an understanding of the subtle nuances of vocabulary that less knowledgeable teachers would not be able to effectively explain without recourse to a dictionary or thesaurus.

The point here is that, as noted by Brabhame and Villaume (2002),

commercial programs fall short in their attempts to package the experiences, supply the

print, script the conversations, and generate the fascination. . . . our greatest challenge is

to become spirited teachers who are captivated by words and delighted by the insights

that are revealed as we lead students to wonder about the words of our language (p. 267).

There is a need for teachers who put the acquisition of vocabulary knowledge at the fore of their

instruction, who provide vocabulary-rich classrooms where children discover new and

interesting words through innovative vocabulary instruction, who are knowledgeable about

words themselves, and who initiate children into their own love of words. It is the teacher, not

the program, who makes the difference in children's vocabulary development.

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