

SPECIAL INTEREST ARTICLE

Using Picture Books for Implicit and Explicit Teaching of Vocabulary, Comprehension, and Literacy Skills

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Abstract

Memorizing spelling lists and looking up words in the dictionary and then using the words in a sentence is a traditional strategy used for vocabulary acquisition. However, because the students do not learn words in context, their application of knowledge and understanding from this method is uneven. Because picture books may be used for pleasure reading and instructional purposes, picture book instruction may be a valuable instructional tool for the explicit and implicit teaching of vocabulary, comprehension, and other literacy skills. In this paper, the author asserts that picture book instruction may assist vocabulary development, meaning making, and knowledge acquisition.

Understanding, analyzing, and synthesizing words, sentences, and ideas are components of comprehension. Since the early 1900s, memorization of spellings of words and their meanings has been the preferred instructional method for teaching vocabulary, rather than teaching words in context. Because students do not learn words in context, they often are not able to apply their knowledge in other situations (Fresch, 2007). Using picture books for explicit and implicit teaching of vocabulary comprehension and literacy skills is an instructional approach that develops critical visual literacy, meaning making, and knowledge acquisition. Students can apply their learned vocabulary to various learning experiences (Cooper et al., 2020; Mantzicopoulos & Patrick, 2011).

Studies show that vocabulary comprehension and literacy skill acquisition increases while using picture books for vocabulary comprehension instruction as part of a balanced literacy program (Button & Johnson, 1997). The pictures, design, and words tell the story. Readers often look at the pictures and words to make meaning of the story. The combinations of these two features help readers remember and retain information (Al Khaiyali, 2014; Stoltz & Strittmatter, 2017). "Picture books offer the possibility of presenting pictures and text at the same time, which allows students to process the information through the visual and the verbal channel" (Larragueta & Ceballos-Viro, 2018, p. 81). Read-alouds, text talk, shared reading, and instruction help students build on their background knowledge, make connections, and transfer their vocabulary comprehension to other situations.

A Traditional Approach to Vocabulary Instruction

The traditional vocabulary instruction approach of getting a word list, looking up the word in a dictionary, and then using the word in a sentence does not include continued practice of the word in context; therefore, minimal retention or comprehension of the words occurs (Cobb & Blachowicz, 2014). Many words have more than one definition which makes it difficult to use some words in context correctly. With this approach, the prior knowledge of students is not taken into consideration, making it difficult for students to make the necessary connections. Meaningful opportunities for using new words are required to develop vocabulary and comprehension (Cobb & Blachowicz, 2014).

Critical Visual Literacy

Critical visual literacy is how the text and images interact and how ideas are conveyed on the page (Papen, 2020). The way the author and illustrator convey the message brings the reader's attention to the pictures and in turn make connections with the text. Critical visual literacy enables students "to make meaning from images that is an essential twenty-first century skill" (Moreillon, 2017, p. 18). "The illustrations in picturebooks often contain the details regarding setting, tone, characters and so children need to be able to use the visual elements as well as the literacy elements to create meaning and analyze a text" (Moreillon, 2017, p. 18).

Picture books are used for pleasure reading and instructional purposes in literacy and curricular concepts. In content areas, picture book instruction often enhances the text and gives accurate knowledge based around a theme (Mantzicopoulos & Patrick, 2011). A preservice teacher study noticed the following when using math content picture books during instruction: quality picture books "enhance instruction and build positive and meaningful connections that enable students to visualize and engage in mathematics" (Cooper et al., 2020, p. 111). The discussion from the picture books promoted oral language skills, mathematical vocabulary, and enhanced students' mathematical communicative skills.

Preservice and experienced teachers require instruction and modelling on using picture books. Over time, picture books have become more complex. Teachers require textual knowledge of picture books to provide explicit instructions for scaffolding concepts for students as they interact with picture books (Martinez & Harmon, 2015). It is important for teachers to understand the features and purposes of various genres for literacy skill development of students, because picture books of different genres serve different purposes and have different features (Mantzicopoulos & Patrick, 2011). Additionally, O'Neil (2011) commented on teachers' use of picture books:

They want to guide us in how to feel, and they use a number of pictorial elements including size, color, shape, and line as well as varying media and artistic styles to enhance the feeling. From the very first look at a book, you get a message about its content. (p. 214)

The evolving complexity of picture books "requires greater attention by the reader to picture-text relationships and the intended meaning of the picture book creator" (Martinez & Harmon, 2015, p. 302).

It is suggested that the basic design elements in illustrations be explicitly taught to students so that they gain a deeper understanding of the relationship between text and pictures (i.e., visual literacy). There are four basic types of picture and text interactions: reinforcing, description, reciprocal, and establishing (O'Neil, 2011). The reinforcing interaction is how the pictures support the text, prompting recall of new vocabulary or decoding skills. Description pictures further inform the reader about the text. Reciprocal interaction is how the pictures add to the story; without the pictures, the story would lack meaning for the reader. Establishing interaction occurs when the pictures and the story have minimal text. Because a breadth of knowledge is required on the part of the student to make connections from the text and pictures, explicit instruction is needed to give students a deeper meaning and understanding (Button & Johnson, 1997). Shared readings, read-alouds, and text talks are three instructional approaches to incorporate implicit and explicit vocabulary comprehension and literacy skills.

Shared Reading

Teachers model literacy strategies to groups of students during shared reading for pleasure or curricular instruction. In 1994, an early literacy framework was devised by Pennell and McCarrier (Button & Johnson, 1997). Shared reading was one part of the framework. Shared

reading supports the development of knowledge acquisition and meaning making skills and is part of a balanced literacy program (Button & Johnson, 1997). “Explicitly teaching word meanings within the context of shared storybook reading is an effective method for increasing the vocabulary of young children at risk of experiencing reading difficulties” (Kesler, 2010, p. 272). Students understand that there is a relationship between text and pictures (Martinez & Harmon, 2015).

In content areas, students’ prior knowledge connects to the pictures and the text. Through explicit instruction and strategic processes, the text and pictures help students identify key concepts, synthesize and summarize information, and make inferences and predictions (Mantzicopoulos & Patrick, 2011). Through text-embedded dialogue, teachers can scaffold learning strategies for students and monitor students’ understanding, giving prompts and strategies as the lesson is occurring.

When choosing picture books for shared reading, the books should be large print or enlarged so all can see. They should contain repetitive text and clear pictures, and have relevancy for the students. Many concepts and strategies can be explicitly taught through the shared reading process. Through implicit and directive teaching practices, readers are guided to discover that pictures align with text, directionality of reading, predicting, questioning, and letter-sound linkages. A study by the New Zealand Department of Education in 1985 showed that the purpose of shared reading was to introduce students to “the riches of book language, and be given shared reading opportunities to develop the strategies of sampling, predicting, confirming, and self-correcting for future independent use” (Button & Johnson, 1997, p. 266). Teachable moments arise out of shared reading, and a teacher needs to adapt instruction to take full advantage of those teaching moments.

Read-Alouds

Read-alouds are purposely planned by the teacher to promote and encourage discussion and active thinking for students. As teachers read picture books, their gestures and intonation, along with the illustrations, aid in their students’ understanding the meaning of the text. Teachers need to ensure the picture book is understandable and meaningful to the students, in turn increasing the interest and motivation of students (Larragueta & Ceballos-Viro, 2018). With implicit and explicit instruction, students develop strategies to increase vocabulary, understand the general meaning of the text, predict what may happen next, and hypothesize why events occurred as they did.

An objective of a read-aloud is to build word knowledge without detracting from the story. Explicit instruction should occur before, during, and after reading the story. Prior to reading the story, setting the purpose for the story and introducing new or difficult words will help students understand the story. After reading the story, the teacher should have a discussion regarding the topic with questions from students and teacher to ensure comprehension. During the reading, incidental vocabulary learning occurs when the teachers give a synonym or brief definition as they continue reading (Kindle, 2009).

A study completed with preservice teachers demonstrated a “strong correlation between comprehension and vocabulary knowledge” (Holmes & Thompson, 2014, p. 39). The focus of the study was on vocabulary learning. Students were read books that had rich vocabulary and a variety of genres. They followed a process of pre-, during-, and post-reading. Prior to reading the book, the teachers discussed words that students may not have known but were needed to understand the story. During the reading, the teachers gave brief definitions as needed. After the reading, discussions and activities around the story occurred. Short picture books with rich vocabulary were the preferred text.

Text Talk

Text talks are based on open-ended questions posed by the teacher during reading, which aids in guiding students to make connections and find meaning from the text. Text talks have two main objectives, to advance students' vocabulary and enhance their comprehension. Text talks are usually used with picture books in the primary grades. When choosing a book for a text talk, a teacher needs to consider "links to background knowledge and the pictures as sources of information to enhance comprehension" (Conrad et al., 2004, p. 188). The text should make connections to students' lives and background knowledge. Prior to reading, teachers define stopping points to ask initiating questions that will deepen students' vocabulary and comprehension. The teacher then chooses vocabulary words to discuss after the story is read, highlighting how the words are used in the story and explaining the meaning. Conrad et al.'s (2004) study determined that illustrations promoted students' vocabulary comprehension.

At the junior high level, a text talk instructional sequence was adapted from the primary format. The following was the instructional sequence: read the story, contextualize words within the story, have students say the word, provide a student-friendly explanation of the word, present examples of the word used in context, plan activities to interact with the word, and say the word. Explicit vocabulary instruction followed the reading of the picture book, making real-life connections. Students had a deeper understanding of the concepts and were introduced to relevant vocabulary (Linder, 2014). Explicit instruction and modelling are important for meaningful dialogue and for students' understanding of critical visual literacy. Linder (2014) found that with explicit teaching using the adapted form of text talk, picture books expanded vocabulary, fostered an examination of literary elements, supported knowledge acquisition, and developed literacy skills of the students.

Limitations

There are some limitations to using picture books for vocabulary comprehension and literacy instruction. A wide variety of materials is needed to provide rich learning opportunities for students. Limited budgets will determine the quantity and quality of picture books and training available to teachers. Teachers require professional development and time to learn how to incorporate the instructional approaches that use picture books into their literacy program, and how to determine programming. They also need time to determine which picture books are the most relevant for their students.

A study completed in the United States compared literal and interpretive responses of students to picture book instruction. The study was a qualitative, interpretivist study completed in a grade 3 classroom with 18 students over a three-week time span. Three picture books were used for the study. Final analysis showed that 79% of responses to the questions tallied were literal responses and 21% were interpretive responses. "A primary concern raised by our analysis of students' responses to the picture books was the relatively small percentage of interpretive responses when compared with the literal responses" (Serafini & Ladd, 2008, p. 16). Teachers tend to ask factual questions. Serafini and Ladd (2008) added, "In order for classroom teachers to support students' development of 'metalinguage' to understand multi-modal texts, they must first be able to read, analyze and comprehend these texts on a more sophisticated level themselves" (p. 17).

When using picture books, readers may sometimes look at the picture to determine a word. Readers may guess at the word without making connections to the printed text. An example is the difference between rabbit and bunny. "The complete lack of visual similarities between rabbit and bunny implies that the reader guessed the word by only looking at the picture" (Stouffer, 2021, p. 772). Using appropriate strategies, such as redirecting the student to look at the word rather than only guess at what makes sense, is one strategy to redirect the student to first look at the word.

Concluding Thoughts

Choosing the right picture books for explicit and implicit teaching of vocabulary comprehension and literary elements increases students' vocabulary comprehension and development of literacy skills. However, teachers require professional development to choose relevant picture books, and teaching strategies and techniques to incorporate picture books into their balanced literacy program. By incorporating authentic materials and researched practices such as shared reading, read-alouds, and text talks, teachers can help build students' vocabulary in order to connect students' prior knowledge and help them make meaning, building on their background knowledge toward better understanding.

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