Increasing Vocabulary Retention of English Language Learners

by Utilizing Interactive Word Walls

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the effects of utilizing an interactive word wall with English language learners in regards to academic vocabulary retention. The six-week study included twenty sixth grade students who are experiencing their first year in the United States and have had limited levels of exposure to the English language. A total of thirty academically relevant words in the current sixth grade Social Studies curriculum unit were chosen for the word wall with five introduced each week. An interactive word wall activity was implemented each school day. A pre-test was conducted on Mondays and a post-test on Fridays with a summative assessment three weeks after the end of the six weeks of all thirty words. The tests included spelling, recognizing the definition, depicting an illustration of the word, and the creation of a context sentence using each word. Results from other studies varied. Most indicated success when using word walls to teach vocabulary and others did not show a significant difference in immediate post testing. Other research showed a difference in post-assessments that there were a few weeks later, indicating long term retention was achieved when utilizing word walls.
Introduction

Need for the Study

There are many reasons students need to be successful at vocabulary words. Adams (2014), in Forbes Magazine, shares that one of the top ten skills employers are seeking in their staff is good communication skills. So, the importance of improving vocabulary skills is clear for both the students’ immediate and long term future. Raising student vocabulary levels will help in comprehension of academic content and classroom success as well as provide increasing skills in communication through reading, writing, speaking, and listening that are marketable for them later in life as they seek out their careers as young adults.

Statement of the Problem

Martin & Yankay (2014) from the Department of Homeland Security report that in 2013, sixty-nine thousand nine hundred and nine people were admitted to the United States as refugees. Krogstad and Passel (2015) report that eleven million three hundred thousand illegal immigrants entered into the United States in 2014. And Cohn (2015) predicts that these numbers will continue to rise and by 2065, there will be no ethnic or racial majority group in the United States. With these rising numbers, we will continue to have more and more students in our classrooms who have English as a second, third, or fourth language, as many of my students from the Democratic Republic of the Congo share that English is often their fourth or even fifth language. All of these young immigrants will be learning English while trying to navigate the core subjects of English, Reading, Math, Science, and Social Studies – all in English, too.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose for increasing student vocabulary is expressed well by Dunn, Bonner, and
Huske (2007), who explain that a student’s knowledge of a meaningful and varied vocabulary is in direct proportion to a student’s level of reading comprehension. Marzano and Pickering (2005) point out that the more terms students comprehend, the better they are at comprehending the material they are learning in class and will have a higher level of retention as they continue to work with the subject matter.

**Statement of the Hypothesis**

Consistently using an interactive word wall in classroom instruction will increase English Language Learners’ retention of academic vocabulary.

**Literature Review**

When reviewing literature for this research project, three domains were taken into consideration. The first one is the pedagogical use of word walls in education. The second is how to increase the vocabulary of students who are first year English language learners. The third is how physical movement affects learning. A variety of literature was utilized for this review.

The Ontario Ministry of Education (2015) describes a word wall as a continual display of organized words that are essential to the students’ study in regards to a curriculum unit the class is learning. Throughout numerous physical activities, these words are consistently used by both teacher and students. They also express that word walls should be utilized to foster reading and writing independence through the building of vocabulary. Useful cues and connections for any language learner are vital for success in retaining the information.

Jackson and Narvaez (2013) define word walls as visual scaffolds that are also a classroom strategy used for the reinforcement of reading and writing skills. They further define the word wall as large words in black on the wall, with a definition of the word, and an image of
it. Jackson, Tripp, and Cox (2011), believe a word wall should provide the word and visual aids, while the definition of the word is optional. Hooper and Harmon (2015) indicated that the word, an image and a definition were optimal for creating a word wall.

Marzano (2009) shares that while there are many successful strategies to teach vocabulary, there is no one true way for every student to learn. What may work in one teacher’s classroom, may not necessarily work in another’s and a variety of strategies should be utilized, especially for English language learners. Cisco & Padrón (2012) explain that learning vocabulary and reading comprehension is more challenging for English language learners because they have limited ability, if any, to use context clues in reading. They further explain that the challenge of teaching English language learners also rests with the fact that each student comes to the classroom with widely varying knowledge and experiences in their lives and in language. One child may have hardly heard any English up to this point while another may have had some exposure and another may know how to speak French and Swahili, but have never written a word of any language on paper. And then there’s the fact that none of these students may speak the same home language.

Physical movement plays a key role in the classroom and is an integral part of working with word walls. Gardner (2003) says that people and in particular, children, become fully engaged with a topic when working with it on a physical level. Word walls foster student involvement that is active, which facilitates the learning process for all students, according to Eyraud, Giles, Koenig, and Stoller (2000). During their research, Hwang, Shih, Yeh, Chou, Ma & Sommool (2014) tested two groups: one using physical responses with learning and the other not. In a post-assessment, there was no significant difference between the two groups’ scores.
However, in a delayed assessment of three weeks, the group utilizing physical responses scored higher, indicating they had retained more information in long term memory. Corso (2000) also recommends using the body to teach, in particular, reading skills and shows in her work that such activities increase retention and use of new words by students.

**Methodology**

**Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to examine the effects of utilizing an interactive word wall with English language learners in regards to academic vocabulary retention.

**Variables**

In this study, the independent variable was the word wall itself, which included the vocabulary word from the current academic content in the social studies classroom, a definition of the vocabulary work from the textbook, and one to two images of the vocabulary word from the textbook or publisher’s online content. The dependent variable was mastery of the vocabulary on the word wall.

**Selection of Students**

The participants were twenty sixth grade students who are English language learners in their first year of attending a school in the United States. There were thirteen boys and seven girls. Their ages ranged between eleven and thirteen years old.

**Intervention**

Each Monday, the ESL class would take a pre-test on ten content words related to the current unit curriculum. Five words were then taught put on the classroom word wall and each day of the week, a word wall activity was implemented using only those words. Physically
interactive word wall activities utilized from Cronsberry (2004), were used. These were:

- Students created a picture of the word and other students guessed the meaning.
  
  Student images were then added to the wall.

- Students played charades with the words.

- Students created total physical response (TPR) actions for the word.

- Students moved the words and placed them in categories that they created individually and in small groups.

- Students decided what relationship two words from the wall could have in common.

- Students underlining the word parts: prefix, suffix, or root word and discussing the meaning of each part.

- Students hitting the right word on the wall with the definition hidden or vice versa with a ball or fly swatter.

- Students created a story from the words on the word wall, then stood and shared it with other students.

Each Friday, a post-test was conducted on the same ten content words: those taught with the word wall and those not. This continued for six weeks. Words were not removed from the word wall, but added to it every Monday. Three weeks after all thirty words had been taught and student retention assessed, there was a cumulative assessment designed similarly to the weekly one with all academic content words tested.

**Validity Measures**

Each Monday, students were pre-assessed on ten words: five words being taught that week with the word wall and five not being directly taught. The assessment included spelling,
recognizing the definition, depicting an illustration of the word, and the creation of a context sentence using each word. Each area was scored separately, then an overall score was given.

Each Friday, a post-assessment was given, with the same components of the pre-assessment and scored in the same manner. A cumulative test with the same components was then given, three weeks after the thirty words were taught.

**Reliability Measures**

Students were also tested on academic content words that were in the current unit but not taught using the word wall in the same manner with weekly pre and post assessments and a cumulative one three weeks later. The tests of the words taught using a word wall to the words not taught using a word wall were then compared to evaluate the progress students have made in retaining the academic vocabulary.

**Conclusion**

This study was designed to determine if a classroom word wall would increase the retention of academic vocabulary for English language learner during their first year in the United States. Twenty sixth grade students were participants. Weekly and cumulative tests were graphed to determine the results. All students increased at least ten percent or greater on their weekly and cumulative scores while others increased as high as one hundred percent. The scores were then compared to results of academic vocabulary that was introduced in the unit and tested but not directly taught. These scores varied from no improvement to improvement as high as seventy-five percent greater on post-assessments. I believe these scores indicate that the hypothesis is correct and word walls are a vital addition to the classroom. As other researchers indicated and as I observed, a word wall cannot just be words attached to a wall. They must be
utilized in an interactive method that engages students. The words themselves don’t seem to matter as much as the interaction occurring between students and with the words. Being an English language learner also isn’t a prerequisite for success with word walls; however, they are an effective way to help ELLs as they are often those students struggling the most with academic content. Word walls are a successful classroom strategy for vocabulary instruction and can be utilized in conjunction with many other strategies to reach all learners.
Reflections and Action Plan

Using a word wall in instruction proved to be successful in retention for English language learners of academic vocabulary in social studies. The amount of growth demonstrated in this study indicates that a word wall is effective in a social studies classroom and should continue to be used. The activities are a positive way to get students up and using the words that they may not ever use outside the walls of a social studies class.
As department chair, I’ve set forth that word walls will be a required part of the social studies department at my school and consistently utilized throughout the year in interactive ways. Teachers will also determine as a department, which words will be posted and directly taught with a short vocabulary component in every lesson. This research project will also be shared with our district content coordinator to encourage continued and consistent use of word walls in the district at all grades in all schools. I will also submit a proposal to the Texas Council for Social Studies (TCSS) and offer a workshop presenting this material and findings with an interactive section that offers time and opportunity for teachers to create some of their own word wall media during the session.
References


