

Special Extended Teaching Note

Text Sets in the ESOL classroom

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Abstract

National and state-wide assessments indicate that approximately 60% of k-12 English Learners' reading comprehension is below grade level. Research indicates that reading comprehension and vocabulary are developed up to four times faster by spending extended time on reading and listening to texts on the same topic. The use of Text Sets in the ESOL classroom appear to be an effective strategy for increasing Els reading comprehension.

Introduction

Throughout the United States, English Learners (EL) are reading significantly below their native English-speaking peers in the three grade levels tested nationally by the National Assessment for Academic Progress: 4th, 8th, 12th, (NAEP 2019), a phenomenon I observed in my (ELD) classroom. This is concerning for ELs, as their struggles with reading will be compounded as they enter high school and are expected to be able to learn through reading and can impact their post high school options. Proficient level reading comprehension for all ELs is critical for their academic and future success.

One of the most persistent findings in reading research is that students' oral vocabulary knowledge relates strongly to their reading comprehension and to their overall academic success (Beck, I. L., McKeown, M. G., & Kucan, L. 2013; Carlo, M. S., August, D., & Snow, C. E. 2005; Calderón, M., et al ,2004; Cervette, G.N., et al 2016; Graves, 2006). An effective approach to building students' oral and reading vocabulary and their background knowledge about the world in my classroom has been utilizing "text sets" as a core component of curricula.

Text sets are collections of texts, and other media, focused on a specific topic or theme that are presented in an increasingly complex order with a focus on building vocabulary and background knowledge through class discussion and writing activities that incorporate the texts vocabulary. Research indicates that reading comprehension and vocabulary are developed up to four times faster by spending extended time on reading, and listening to texts on the same topic, and discussing the facts and ideas in them (NRP, 2000; Shanahan, Fisher, and Frey, 2012).

Design and implementation of text sets

The practice of using text sets begins with students reading a series of 3-5 articles on a topic of interest. Vocabulary is explicitly pre-taught and used with each article, which provides repeated exposure and use of new vocabulary in context with each successively more complex article. Accompanied with building a student's knowledge base through the use of articles, videos, news clips, and other media. Students use their new vocabulary each day in discussions, reading, writing, and listening.

To implement a text set unit, choose topics that are of high interest to English Learners, as you students engaged in whole class, group, and partner discussions. For example, a unit on Immigration. NewsELA, ReadWorks and Scholastic magazines are great sources for articles, as their articles' Lexile levels can be adjusted to the students/class' Lexile range. Choose three articles on immigration, each article's Lexile level successively increasing, and for each article select five to seven vocabulary words to explicitly teach. In successive articles students will usually come upon the vocabulary words learned in prior articles. Students learn a little from the first encounter with a word and then more and more about a word's meaning as they meet and use it in new and different contexts. (Carrell, P. L. ,1984; Graves, 2006).

The first day of a text set unit is a focus on building background knowledge, vocabulary, student interest, and eliciting what students already know. Units start with a class conversation about the topic. Students engage in think/pair/share discussions then share out as a class. Using immigration as an example, present news clips on immigration issues occurring at the Mexican/USA border and then discuss the news clips. Provide students with a vocabulary graphic organizer in a table format with three columns and 6 rows. Each row has a vocabulary word, the definition, and a column for students to draw an image of what the vocabulary word means/represents. Arwood and Kaulitz's research into the neuroscience of reading and writing (2007) indicates that when students can draw an image of the meaning of a word, they own the meaning of the word. The graphic organizer is used as a vocabulary slideshow is presented, and it then gets pasted in the vocabulary section of their notebooks.

Each slide in the vocabulary slideshow contains one vocabulary word, the part of speech, images associated with the meaning of the word, and a sentence or two using the word. After each slide students are given a moment to think about the image they want to use, then students turn and share with a partner what they are going to draw and why. Once the 5-7 words for the week have been selected, ensure they are each the focus of attention, especially oral language, at least 10 times during the week (Beck, I. L., McKeown, M. G., & Kucan, L.,2013). You can have students do oral vocabulary drills in partners, create word walls, class spelling bees, warm-ups where they write sentences

using the vocabulary words, play kahoots and other strategies for students to use their new vocabulary in the four modalities.

The second day, review vocabulary and start reading the first article. Incorporate clozed reading. Read out loud, and in each paragraph, choose one word to stop before and the whole class has to say the word--this ensured students are paying attention. As you read, stop after each section and discuss what was read. Depending on the functions being practiced i.e. cause/effect, explain/describe, discuss what were the facts, what were causes and effects; what claims were made and how they were supported incorporating the target vocabulary into the discussions.

The third day the students reread the article on their own and perform an activity like hi-lite facts or look for cause/effects in each section or answer comprehension questions, orally in group activities, and in writing, incorporating targeted vocabulary. Have students do vocabulary drills with partners and then have a short vocabulary quiz afterwards.

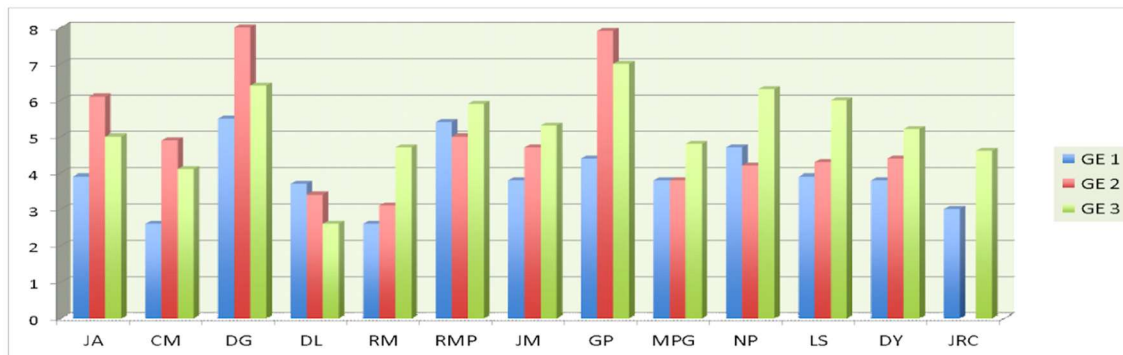
The fourth day students write sentences using the studied vocabulary words. The last day of the week they write a summary of the article using all five-seven vocabulary words studied and read their summaries to partners. Repeat this process for the next two or more articles changing some of the interaction strategies. At the end of a text set unit, have a summative activity that involves the topic studied, such as a Socratic Circle, a debate. or writing an informative pamphlet.

Results

I used text sets throughout the year as the main curricula, interspersed with mini units on grammar and writing, with various topics such as food, natural disasters, and sports. During this time period students were explicitly taught and interacted with, through oral and written activities, close to two hundred new vocabulary words. Throughout the year students in the class took the STAR reading assessment three times, and by spring term most of the students' reading comprehension scores increased significantly. Figure 1 shows the result of three testing events between October and March of the school year for the thirteen students in a 7th/8th grade high intermediate ELD class. The x-axis are students' grade equivalent scores. The y-axis represents grade level. The first column on the graph is the first test, then the second test, and third test scores for reading comprehension per student; GE in the key stands for "Grade Equivalent" All but one student, a student with a reading disability, experienced growth in their reading comprehension equivalent to a years' growth in their reading scores within a five-and-a-half-month period.

This class was one of six classes a day that students took, hence it is not possible to broadly claim that their increase in reading proficiency is solely due to the use of text set units. However, according to their prior school records from middle and elementary school, their reading scores had stagnated for several years. The increase in reading scores was experienced by students in other classes that I taught as well. It appears that having intensive and explicit oral and written instruction in new vocabulary, and building students' knowledge about world topics made a significant contribution to an increase in students' reading comprehension

Figure 1.
STAR reading scores Grade Equivalent



There is a dearth of research on the impact of using text sets in ESOL classrooms as a vehicle to increase ELs' oral vocabulary and reading comprehension. Considering that throughout the U.S over 60% of ELs' reading comprehension is below grade level, as teachers we need to be explicit and intentional in building vocabulary and knowledge to support students' reading comprehension. Text sets appear to be an impactful tool to accomplish this goal in the ESOL classroom.

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