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The Use of Humor In Vocabulary Instruction

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We investigated the effects of humor on vocabulary instruction in a study with 84 seventh grade students from an ethnically mixed, middle-class, Northeastern, suburban school district. The experimental group received a series of lessons for vocabulary words for which we provided humorous contexts. The control group received a series of vocabulary lessons for the same words in typical, non-humorous contexts, based on guidelines from a standard reading textbook. Following each lesson, we administered identical assessment tests to each group. An examination of pre- and post-test scores revealed that students in the experimental group significantly outperformed their control group counterparts on tests for which we provided humorous vocabulary lessons. The study is examined in light of engagement theory within a motivational theoretical perspective.

THE INSTRUCTION OF VOCABULARY is critical in literacy education. Students' vocabulary knowledge is closely related to their ability to comprehend what they are reading (Foil & Alber, 2002). Furthermore, the depth and breadth of word knowledge help sharpen individuals' communication skills so that they may render their messages with clarity, precision, and eloquence (Johnson, 2001). As educators, our responsibility to our students is to look closely at the process of vocabulary instruction. How we impart word knowledge should not only ensure a sound understanding of vocabulary, but should inspire a curiosity about words. Such curiosity, once implanted in the minds of children, may motivate a lifelong passion for the central component of communication and language, our vocabulary. The importance of vocabulary instruction and the consideration of words are made more compelling by the understanding that, ultimately, it is the skill with which we use words that draws listeners closer and leads them to consider the messages we have to impart.

Given the importance of vocabulary to reading proficiency, it is surprising to learn that there has been a dearth of inquiry into effective vocabulary instruction over the past thirty years, and that only recently have educators begun to re-examine methodology and theory in this realm (Blachowicz and Fisher, 2000). The primary areas in which recent research has been conducted studies (Foil & Alber, 2002; Harmon, 1998; Rupley, Logan, & Nichols, 1999; Smith, 1997; Yeung, 1999; Mckeown, 1993; Miller & Gildea, 1987; Misulis, 1999; Rhoder & Huerster, 2002; Johnson, 2001; Nagy & Scott, 2000) include:

- the effectiveness of direct versus indirect dictionary-based vocabulary instruction;
- the role of scaffolding in vocabulary instruction;
- vocabulary instruction based on structural analysis;
- vocabulary instruction based on analogies;
- the role of context in vocabulary instruction, and
- the role of computers in vocabulary instruction.

The primary findings from these studies indicate that there is no single best method of vocabulary instruction, and rather, that students seem to achieve best when a variety of instructional methods are used (Burns,

Roe, & Ross, 1999). Furthermore, it appears that vocabulary instruction in the classroom is most effective when both direct and indirect instructional techniques are used, and when students are actively involved in constructing meaning in a variety of contexts (Smith, 1997). A thorough approach to vocabulary instruction is one that supplements direct instruction with a variety of printed materials and that provides students ample time to read them (Davis and McDaniel, 1998).

Humor

With regard to the concept of humor, aside from the identification of humorous literature as a popular genre for students' reading, the role of humor in literacy instruction has not been widely recognized. A review of the literature regarding vocabulary instruction, for example, reveals that humor has not been a variable that has been previously studied. In contrast, a review of the literature on the topic of humor suggests that this variable may very well be an important one with the potential to affect many areas of teaching and learning.

The role of humor has been investigated in studies of physiological, emotional, social, and cognitive functioning. An activity that is colored by humor often produces a physical response of some form, be it a smirk, smile, giggle, or outright laughter. This stimulates a physiological response that decreases stress hormones such as serum cortisol, dupac, and epinephrine, as well as growth hormones in the blood (Berk, 2000). Additionally, "laughter diminishes stress and pain and can increase antibodies that help fight disease and combat anxiety" (Clarke, 2002). Clark also reports that laughter, "can change and lower heart rate, lower blood pressure, and decrease stress hormones."

Physiological responses to humor and laughter are linked to emotional responses. For example, several studies note that humor and laughter are linked to decreases in stress responses. Moran's (1996) study looked at a sampling of college health science students. The subjects in the study viewed three separate videos, each representing a different theme. After viewing the videos, subjects' moods were evaluated. Results indicated students' scores on measures of anxiety and depression decreased significantly after exposure to a humor stimulus

(Moran, 1996). Similarly, Goldman and Wong (1997) examined a body of work that supports the idea that students' self-perception is a direct correlate of the level of stress they experience in their daily pursuits. Amongst the reported findings were that the amount of humor students reported in their daily lives was inversely related to the amount of stress that they experienced. Berk (2000) examined the injection of humor, in various controlled ways, into tests administered to undergraduate and graduate students of a statistics course over a six-year period. He reported that the injection of humor reduced anxiety, stress, and tension during test taking. He suggests that the infusion of humor in to the classroom is a viable means of reducing anxiety and improving student performance. A humorous touch in the classroom may also be instrumental in helping motivate an otherwise reluctant learner. Such students often lose inhibitions they may bring to the learning process when material is presented in such a way that their attendant stress is alleviated (Pollack and Freda, 1997).

The social benefits of humor-infused instruction have also been investigated. Specifically, the use of humor by teachers can help establish a positive classroom environment and an atmosphere that is conducive to learning. Humor may imbue students with a feeling of control, in that when teachers show their humorous side, it helps minimize the differences between educator and student and engenders within students a sense of kinship with the teacher (Pollack and Freda, 1997). Kinship is further strengthened when teachers show their students that they can laugh at themselves. Consequently, humor has been found to be an effective means by which teachers can establish rapport with their students. In a similar vein, timely and strategic use of humor can be an effective way to defuse an angry or hostile student.

Finally, we have investigated the role of humor in students' cognitive functioning. In our research, the use of humor promoted creative thinking in children. Our work suggests that when children are confronted with absurd or humorous contexts for the material at hand, they learn to see things from an altogether different perspective. The ability to view situations from multiple perspectives promotes creative thinking and overall cognitive functioning.

In light of the above information it appears that the use of humor is a worthwhile strategy to investigate in the context of vocabulary instruction.

Engagement Theory

A theoretical rationale for the examination of humor as a variable worthy of investigation in literacy research is generated from engagement theory (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000). Engagement theory, created to explain children's motivation for the task of reading, falls under the wider umbrella of motivation theory which suggests that motivation is a multifaceted construct containing (but not limited to) values such as personal goal-setting, the desire and willingness to pursue a goal in the absence of external reinforcement, and "curiosity, social interchange, emotional satisfaction, and self-efficacy" (Anderson & Guthrie, 1996, p. 1). Like motivation theory, engagement theory has a variety of descriptions (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000) but generally includes a vision of students who are eager to pursue the task at hand, actively involved in their work, and enjoy what they are doing. Guthrie and Wigfield (2000) propose a definition of engaged readers as "engaged readers in the classroom or elsewhere coordinate their strategies and knowledge (cognition) within a community of literacy (social) in order to fulfill their personal goals, desires, and intentions (motivation)" (p. 404). While this description is helpful in visualizing how engaged students of vocabulary instruction might appear, it is not directly applicable since Guthrie and Wigfield's definition is specific to engaged readers rather than to engaged students in general.

In reviewing the literature on motivation and engagement, Guthrie and Wigfield (2000) write that "motivation is crucial to engagement because motivation is what activates behavior" (p. 406). They describe elements of literacy instruction that have been found to increase motivation for literacy learning such as learning goals that are co-created by teachers and students, the use of meaningful, real-world activities in the classroom, and the importance of choice, social collaboration, and high-quality texts in educational tasks. Other variables that have been found to increase student motivation include success on tasks, and a stimulating, literacy-rich environment in the classroom (Morrow, 2001).

The variable of humor has not been previously examined in literacy research as one that might lead to increased student motivation or engagement, however, the previously cited review of the literature on the topic suggests that humor may be a very motivating factor for students. From a physical perspective, laughter creates biochemical changes in the body that may enhance one's ability to concentrate and learn (Berk, 2000). From an emotional perspective, humor decreases stress and increases feelings of well-being and happiness (Moran, 1996). From a social perspective, student-teacher relationships may be improved when humor is infused into the classroom (Pollack & Freda, 1997). From a cognitive perspective, humor may increase creative thinking in students. When humor is infused into vocabulary instruction the combination of these factors may well allow students to become more motivated about, and more engaged with, the literacy tasks at hand. Theoretically, increased motivation and engagement should be associated with increased vocabulary acquisition performance.

Present Study

In light of the above information, the present study sought to examine how the injection of humor into standard classroom vocabulary lessons would affect students' performance. The hypothesis was that humor-laced vocabulary instruction would have a positive impact on students' learning of vocabulary due to students' higher engagement during this type of instruction.

Method

Participants

The participants consisted of 39 boys and 45 girls aged twelve, in four seventh-grade reading classes. The classes were heterogeneously mixed with regard to reading ability and ranged from two years below to one year above grade level. We chose two classes to comprise the experimental group (N=44) and two classes to comprise the control group (N=40). A pre-test, based on students' average performance on three vocabulary tests, indicated no significant difference between the

experimental and control groups with regard to students' vocabulary test achievement ($t=.684$, $p<.496$).

The public, middle school in which we conducted the study is located in a middle-class, ethnically diverse, northeast suburb of New York City. The ethnic mix of the participants was approximately fifty percent Caucasian, fifteen percent African American, fifteen percent Hispanic, fifteen percent Middle Eastern, and five percent Asian. The socio-economic makeup of the sample ranged from middle to lower-middle class.

As first author and the 7th grade teacher, I implemented all of the described vocabulary instruction in this investigation. At the time of this study I had been a teacher of reading at the 7th grade level for 17 years, during which time my views and approaches to literacy instruction had evolved. My primary belief in teaching reading is that teachers need to help students find connections between what they are reading and their own life experiences, and that if this is well done, ultimately, an appreciation for reading can be nurtured. An additional important dimension of my literacy instruction is the belief that students like to be entertained. Consequently, I strive to create an environment in which my students feel that they are being entertained. Among the many practices that contribute to this end is my daily reading of high quality literature to students. I was completing a Master's degree program in the area of Reading at the time of this study.

Materials

We used those materials stipulated by the curriculum guide for the seventh-grade developmental language skills program at the school, the Heath Middle-Level Reading Program. In two classes, the control group students received vocabulary instruction as is recommended in the Heath Middle-Level Reading Program Teacher's Guide. The other two classes, the experimental group, received humor-enhanced instruction for the same vocabulary words. Examples of lesson plans for the traditional and humor-laced instruction are found in Appendix A.

Following the vocabulary lessons, instructors administered weekly, traditional vocabulary tests to the students. The vocabulary tests, the identical forms of which were administered to all students, were the standard test forms provided in the reading program. All passages on the tests were similar to the contexts provided the control group, i.e., they were straightforward and of a sober nature. The format on the vocabulary tests consisted of close-type questions, requiring the students to choose among their vocabulary words for completion. An example of a vocabulary test is found in Appendix B.

Procedure

Intervention

Following the pre-test period, vocabulary lessons and assessments during the intervention proceeded on a weekly basis, as is the norm for the program. The classroom teacher introduced words in either their traditional contexts, as recommended by the program teacher's guide, or in humorous contexts created by the teacher. The humorous contexts were often developed around two characters, Mr. Aria, the students' real-life classroom teacher and first author, and fictitious girlfriend, Mildred Fleener. Many of the humorous vocabulary contexts were built around the escapades of these two characters as Mr. Aria, for example, took Mildred on a date to a bottle cap museum in Scranton where their accommodations were a lean-to.

After completion of each lesson, the instructors gave students a vocabulary study guide in which each word was couched, again, in either a traditional (i.e. straight-forward and serious) context or a humorous passage. The definition of the word followed each passage. Students in both groups then used the review sheets as a guide to compose their own contexts for each target word. Furthermore, immediately prior to the administration of the vocabulary test, instructors gave these study guides again and allowed the students to read through them a final time, to refresh the meaning and usage of each word.

We administered vocabulary tests weekly at the conclusion of the lessons for each group of words. As stated previously, we administered identical, traditional vocabulary tests to all students.

We implemented the humor-laced versus traditional vocabulary instruction intervention for four weeks. Following each week of instruction we gave a vocabulary test.

Data Analysis

Vocabulary test scores that had been collected weekly following four weeks of humor-laced versus traditional vocabulary instruction were pooled and examined using a t-test.

Results

Comparing the vocabulary test scores from four weeks of instruction, the mean for the control group was 77.53 (SD=14.74) and the mean for the experimental group was 83.19 (SD=12.51). The effect of humor on vocabulary instruction was statistically significant, $t(326) = -3.76$, $p < .01$, with higher achievement associated with the humor-laced vocabulary instruction.

Discussion

The present work examines the use of the variable of humor, a little investigated topic within the field of literacy research, and its impact on middle-school students' vocabulary achievement as measured by traditional vocabulary test performance. The research reveals that students in the experimental group significantly outperformed their control group counterparts on tests for which humorous vocabulary lessons were provided.

The current investigation extends the existing knowledge base in the field of vocabulary instruction in that research on the relationship between humor-laced vocabulary instruction and students' vocabulary achievement has not been previously published. The work complements, rather than refutes, presently accepted practices in vocabulary instruction, such as the use of semantic webs, analogies, and structural

analysis, by offering a possibility for making these widely accepted practices more exciting to students, i.e. by adding a humorous dimension to such instruction.

We framed the present study from an engagement theoretical stance within a motivational theoretical perspective, which suggests that the students receiving the humor-laced instruction achieved higher vocabulary performance scores because they were more engaged, and therefore more motivated, during their vocabulary lessons than were the students who received the traditional, non-humorous classes. Although we did not use formal measures of engagement in the present study, indications that the students were highly engaged during the humor-laced instruction were visibly noticeable. Humor appeared to decrease stress and apathy in the classroom, diminish the emotional distance between students and the teacher, and create an environment in the classroom that was not only conducive to, but encouraged, academic endeavor. Beyond this, humor in the classroom helped make learning just plain fun. Once the "funny vocabulary lessons" became routine, the experimental group came to anticipate and eagerly await them. For students in the experimental group we perceived a heightened enthusiasm in the classroom on vocabulary days. Those in the experimental group would invariably respond with a measure of anticipation, asking if they were going to do "those funny sentences again." Additionally, from those in the experimental group we noticed, to a large degree, an animated enthusiasm when it came to practicing the words they had learned. When the lesson called for the kids to compose their own sentences, those in the experimental group exhibited an eagerness to not only try and generate sentences even funnier than the teacher's, but to share them with peers. Hence, one may see some additional and unforeseen benefits resulting from the research, namely, the students' motivation to employ their own imaginations and sense of humor in what they might ordinarily have viewed as an exercise in drudgery. Using engagement theory it is suggested that students in the experimental group may have outperformed their control group counterparts because they, by virtue of the funny and fun instruction they received, actively engaged in their vocabulary lessons.

After having planned, constructed, and executed this study, some limitations come to mind. The first is that the present research design, although of a widely accepted quasi-experimental nature, does not allow the researchers to determine that the observed results were not an artifact of the Hawthorne Effect, in which any novel intervention leads to improved performance. To eliminate this concern, a research design that compared two novel interventions rather than one novel intervention and a control situation would have been superior. Additionally, future investigations on this topic could significantly extend the length of the experimental treatment, for example, to that of the entire school year rather than just to a few weeks of one semester. Also consider gender effects that might have contributed to students' performances. Another design revision that could potentially strengthen the work would be to reverse the treatments after a determined period of time, providing the control group with the humorous instruction and the experimental group with the traditional instruction. One would expect to see the trend in vocabulary achievement correspond to the change of instruction for the two groups. A design amendment that added measurable aspects of the engagement dimension of the work would have further strengthened it.

Another limitation to consider is the development of the humorous lessons themselves. Although it is reasonable to expect that most, if not all, children possess a sense of humor, one should not assume that all children find the same things funny. Contexts for new vocabulary which, upon initial consideration we thought worthy of outright prolonged laughter, did in fact receive only the barest ripples of mirth, or were misunderstood by the children altogether. Conversely, contexts thought to be only mildly amusing were, in a word, arresting when the students encountered them in a lesson. As a note of caution for anyone considering further efforts in this area, one would do well, in constructing humorous contexts, to try to place himself on the level of his intended audience.

Despite the noted limitations, it appears that the present study may have shed preliminary light on an exciting, yet under-researched variable with the potential to meaningfully improve many areas of literacy instruction. The fact that we conducted this work at the middle-school level, at which students historically demonstrate decreased levels of

motivation for literacy learning, (Guthrie and Wigfield, 2000) further underscores its relevance. Future research with this variable as it applies to many areas of literacy research is recommended.

Conclusion

The pursuit of the effective teaching of vocabulary is a noble one. What greater gift can we give to our students than the tools to enable them to communicate effectively? When we help children amplify the depth and scope of their word banks, we deepen that resource that they will draw from to communicate with others and to impart their messages with precision, clarity, and grace. Ultimately, communication through language is the glue that bonds us together. Without it little else is possible. To a large degree, the quality of our interactions with each other is enhanced by the richness of our vocabulary. Moreover, the English language, when used deftly by one who is attentive to the nuances, subtleties, and evocative power of its words, can be powerful. To help students along the path that will someday lead them to comfort, ease, and command in their use of words is a worthwhile endeavor, and certainly deserving of our attention.

The technique of creating vocabulary lessons laced with humor seemed to succeed on two levels. First, as evidenced by the test scores gleaned in this study, such an approach appeared beneficial in affecting students' short-term retention of meaning and usage of new vocabulary. Beyond this, however, we observed that the students in the experimental group enjoyed their vocabulary lessons. We heard laughter and lightness in the classroom on vocabulary day, which the children came to eagerly anticipate. It appeared evident that the students in the experimental group thought that they were having fun in the classroom, without necessarily realizing that their achievement was being facilitated. This is the kind of instruction, one might argue, that is, especially for children on the middle school level, the very best kind.

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Appendix A

Vocabulary Review- Week 1 Traditional

Charley Trippi, a Hall-of-Fame halfback who played for the Chicago Cardinals in the 1950's, had his career ended by a vicious hit – an elbow to the jaw by another Hall-of-Famer, John Henry Johnson. These were the days before facemasks, and Trippi's jaw was broken in five places, and his nose was shattered. (nasty, savage, fierce)

The empty canoe drifted down the river, past the rocks and the rapids and under the overhanging tree limbs. It came to the crest of a waterfall, teetered for a moment on the very edge, and then went over. (rocked, wavered, balanced)

The football team was clearly inferior to the team it was about to play. The players, however, were inspired by the words of their coach. The powerful, emotion-packed speech given by their head coach motivated them to go out and play beyond their abilities. Not surprisingly, they won the game. (inspired, filled with emotion)

After the rainstorm, the usually crystal-clear waters of the bay became so murky that a person swimming underwater and wearing goggles would not be able to see two feet in front of him. (cloudy, unclear)

During WW II, the allied forces made good use of amphibious landing craft when storming beaches in the Pacific and during the invasion at D-Day. These boats, which could be launched from troop carriers and could navigate deep waters, could actually drive up onto the beachheads. They were called Higgins Boats, named for the New Orleans ship-builder who developed them, and many believe they turned the tide of battle to the allies' favor. (adaptable to both land and water)

The burglar triggered the alarm while trying to slip into the rear window of the jewelry shop. In a flash, police surrounded the shop, and the would-be jewel thief was apprehended. (set off, activate)

The man took his worn-out billfold from the back pocket of his jeans, and from it plucked his last dollar bill. Then, with trembling fingers, he handed it to the clerk to buy a lottery ticket. (wallet)

As a young man, my grandfather traveled extensively through the south. He worked, for a time, on a tobacco farm in North Carolina. He picked oranges in a grove in central Florida. He managed hotels in Mississippi and Alabama, and finally he worked as a brakeman on the Georgia-Southern railroad. I'm surprised he doesn't have a southern accent. (at great length)

Vocabulary Review - Week 1 Humor-Laced

"For your information," said Otto to his friend Mort as the two sat dropping water balloons out a second-story window on unsuspecting passersby, "I did NOT need training wheels on my bicycle until I was 14. That's nothing but a vicious lie." (nasty, savage, fierce)

Carla was teetering on the brink of a nervous breakdown. Consequently, when Milton dressed up in a Howdy Doody costume and came leaping out at her from her bedroom closet late one evening, it pushed her right over the edge. (rocking, wavering, balancing)

"Mr. Aria is all excited about taking me on a date to one of his favorite places, the bottle cap museum in Scranton," explained Mildred Fleener to her sister Bernice. "He thinks it'll be a great time, but somehow I just can't get too motivated about looking at a bunch of old bottle caps. To me, it's about as exciting as watching paint dry." (inspired, filled with emotion)

Mr. Aria reached into the murky depths of his fiendish, evil, sinister, and diabolical mind to produce the killer homework assignment of all time. (cloudy, unclear)

Carlton looked fondly upon his younger days when he used to torment his sister, Irma. Ah, yes, there were those happy occasions when he'd put a snake into her lunch box. Nothing could top the times, however,

when he'd put some amphibious animal, like a frog or a salamander, under her pillow. (adaptable to both land and water)

Mr. Aria smelled the aroma of fresh fish as he strolled past the seafood market one fine April morning, and it triggered in his mind the romantic dinner he had prepared for his beloved Mildred the previous Saturday: sardine sandwiches on rye toast with onions and spicy brown mustard. What a guy! (set off, activate)

Curtis found a billfold in the middle of the 7th grade hallway, and when he looked through it and saw that it was bulging with ladies' phone numbers, he knew that it couldn't possibly belong to Mr. Aria. (wallet)

Don't let those thick glasses fool you. Myron is quite a fascinating fellow. You'd never know it to look at him, but he is a leading expert on the history of shoelaces. He's read extensively on the subject—just about every book he owns deals with it. Got a question about shoelaces? Myron is your man. (at great length)

Appendix B

Vocabulary Test - Week 1

Although I have traveled _____1_____ in the United States, having visited just about every single state, my favorite place to visit is still Oregon. I spent four unforgettable years at the University of Oregon in Eugene, and whenever I drive along those coast roads and smell the fragrance of the fir and cedar trees in the misty rain, it _____2_____ memories in my mind of my college days.

A single piranha fish attacked a calf standing in knee-deep water in a tropical stream. This _____3_____ a _____4_____ attack by dozens of others swimming nearby, and as the fish attacked in a violent frenzy, the shallow water became _____5_____ with blood, flesh, and fragments of bone.

Mike lost his job and, after months of being unemployed, was _____6_____ on the edge of poverty. He was about to give up all hope, when he remembered the words of his grandfather, who once told him that it's okay to get knocked down, as long as you get back up. These words helped _____7_____ him to begin a lengthy search for new employment. His _____8_____ efforts paid off and he was ultimately rewarded by acquiring a much better job than the one he had been fired from.

While most people seem to like carrying a wallet, I find this to be a bit bulky, so I prefer instead to use a _____9_____. Oh, sure, I can't carry my driver's license or credit cards around with me, but I usually just leave those in my car.

I am always _____10_____ to do well in school by the thought that if I earn good grades, I'll someday be admitted into a good college, which will enable me to one day enter the profession of my choice.

The criminal psychologist probed into the deep and _____11_____ depths of the serial killer's mind to try to determine what _____12_____ his _____13_____ attacks on his victims. After months of

_____14_____ studies, however, the doctor could find no _____15_____ for the crimes.

Jill told everyone in the school that Barbara was being unfaithful to her boyfriend Tom, since she was supposedly seen at the movies with Mark. Since Tom was well-liked by just about everyone in the school, this _____16_____ an angry response among the kids, and people began saying cruel things about her behind Barbara's back. The only problem was that the story Jill told was a complete lie, and I can't understand what would _____17_____ her to start such a _____18_____ rumor about Barbara.

I've read lots of detective stories, and if there's one thing I learned about solving a crime, it's this: No matter how _____19_____ the investigation is, the one thing the detectives need to determine is a _____20_____ for the crime. Once they can discover a reason for the deed, the guilty person is not hard to find.

Answers

- | | |
|----------------|---------------|
| 1. extensively | 11. murky |
| 2. triggers | 12. triggered |
| 3. triggered | 13. vicious |
| 4. vicious | 14. extensive |
| 5. murky | 15. motive |
| 6. teetering | 16. triggered |
| 7. motivate | 17. motivate |
| 8. extensive | 18. vicious |
| 9. billfold | 19. extensive |
| 10. motivated | 20. motive |