

Running head: EXPLICIT VOCABULARY INSTRUCTION

Effective Explicit Methods of Vocabulary Instruction

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## Abstract

Vocabulary and word recognition are the foundation for all learning in all areas of education. These skills must be taught in the classroom, which brought the question to surface, “How can explicit methods of vocabulary instruction be taught effectively in a third grade classroom?” The purpose of this action research project was to explicitly teach methods of vocabulary instruction and see which methods provided the most effective instruction. An elementary school teacher implemented the study, in a public school, in a third grade classroom, over the course of 12 weeks. The classroom consisted of 24 students who had ranging academic achievement level, socio-economic statuses, and ethnicities. The study was implemented from October 2009 until February 2010. Students were exposed to three different methods of vocabulary instruction during the classrooms literacy instructional block. Qualitative and quantitative data results showed that the study was successful, as all students showed academic improvement in the area of vocabulary in literacy.



## Action Research Proposal

### Chapter One – The Introduction

Surrounded by an upper/middle class neighborhood with wooded areas, wetlands, parks, nurseries, and fields is a relatively new elementary school holding students in grades kindergarten through sixth grade. This school is one that would be considered desirable. With new classrooms, tables, and desks, and plenty of natural light, it is truly a sight to be seen and one that tends to be awed at by those who enter its doors. Not only is the inside appealing, but the exterior as well. The custodians work countless hours during the school year and summer to keep the school sparkling from inner carpet and tile to the outer sidewalk and landscape. The grass never goes brown and all bark chips are raked back into place at the end of every day. One half of the outer building is corralled by a wetland preserved during construction to keep the natural habitat intact. If one was to walk the perimeter during a quiet afternoon he or she would hear the call of crickets, an orchestra of frogs, and would be most sure to see one of the many varieties of ducks, finches, swallows, or even red winged black birds roosting in the trees.

The school has been in the neighborhood for seven years and has gained a positive reputation for the district in which it serves. Many of the children who attend the school live in the upper/middle class neighborhood and are within the walking distance of less than a mile to the front doors of the building. However, there is approximately less than half of the students who do not live in the surrounding neighborhood but are still a part of the school's boundaries. These children primarily live in apartment complexes less than five miles away. This makes for a unique dynamic of student population where

slightly over half of the students come from more affluent families, and slightly less than half come from lower income families with seemingly more transitory lifestyles. This significant shift in lifestyle does not pose problems for the students or staff in the building. There is an immense sense of community within the school and a level of respect given and received by most of those children and adults within the school.

There is a great deal of parental involvement within the school and the Parent Teacher Association (PTA) has had a large impact on the success of the school. The PTA added a Volunteer Coordinator position to its executive board two years ago to help keep up with all of the parents that wanted to come and volunteer their time and services for the school. The PTA has helped raise countless dollars for the school and students, given teacher grants to purchase materials for classrooms, and hosted extra curricular events that are typically highly attended by the students and staff.

The staff works very hard modeling and teaching lifeskills that will help the students become more tolerant of one another and works even harder modeling mutual respect of one another's differences and diversities. All students strive daily to follow the only three rules of the school: be safe, respectful, and responsible citizens.

The staff is made up of a principal, 21 classroom teachers, two learning specialists who work in Special Education (SPED), and half-time specialists in Physical Education (PE), Music, and Library. There is also one full-time Title I teacher, one staff member whose job is split as half-time literacy coach and half-time EBISS coordinator, one full-time and one part-time English Language Development (ELD) teachers, one full-time speech pathologist, one full-time counselor, and one half-time time psychologist. Also included in the staff are the eight certified Educational Assistants (EA's). The EA's

primary role is to assist students with special needs or students on Individual Education Plans (IEP). The school also hosts one of the three district classrooms for Functional Living skills for students with substantial impacting disabilities.

The licensed teachers range in years of experience from three years to 29 years. Twenty-two members of the staff hold master's degrees and two members of the staff are currently in progress of getting a master's degree. Four staff members have ELD endorsements and three have reading endorsements.

The teachers at the school are very dedicated to their profession and are highly motivated to reflect on their current teaching practices. Many of the teachers attend professional development workshops and seminars, and participate in school-wide book studies looking at professional literature in the field of teaching. The teachers have professional development time set aside every other Wednesday morning for one hour and have grade level Professional Learning Community (PLC) planning time every Wednesday for an hour and a half. This time is set aside for teachers to especially plan in the areas of creating and implementing specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, and time bound (SMART) goals and to evaluate student progress, plot and analyze student data, and determine interventions that will be implemented to help struggling students within that grade level.

The school has been working on a three-year cycle model where it focuses on one content area to improve instruction for three years. The first three years were spent working in the area of literacy. It was intended that the second phase of the three year cycle was going to be spent focused on math; however, it was the decision of both the math and the literacy teams that the school, staff, and students needed to continue with a

focus in literacy until state test scores reflected improvement. So after surveying the staff, the school has determined that the focus of the year will be in writing. The school is choosing to maintain a focus in that until higher reading and writing results are seen from the students. Over the past six years the school has continually met Adequate Year Progress (AYP). However, even with meeting AYP, there has been a slight dip in state test scores over the last two years.

During the last two years there have been many changes to the building. One significant change is in the leadership of the school. A new principal and new literacy coach were added to the staff last year. Last year was also the first year the school received Title I funding and was able to add a Title I position through targeted assistance. There has been an adjustment of 15 different new staff or grade level change positions. All of these changes make for an interesting sense of community. It is because of this though the staff is determined come together to attack with fidelity improving state test scores. With the focus of the school being literacy instruction in the area of writing the researcher has chosen to do their Action Research project in the area of explicit vocabulary instruction.

The researcher is an educator in the school, who has been working in the district for five years. Four of those years working in the same grade level, and most currently now working one grade level above in the same building. The researcher is active on many of the school committees such as, the site council and the school improvement reading committee.

The researcher will do this research in a third grade classroom. This classroom consists of 24 students; twenty-one of which are returning students, who attended the

school last year. One student is currently on an IEP for reading and language. This student gets assistance in small group reading instruction by the learning specialist four times a week for a half-hour each day. Another student also receives speech assistance from the speech pathologist two times a week. Six students are currently receiving additional support in English Language Development (ELD) by the ELL teacher and assistant. One of the students was determined as talented and gifted (TAG) last year.

Five students are currently under review for academic difficulty in the classroom. All of these students are having difficulty demonstrating academic progress and one is having difficulty in showing academic progress, as well as, having difficulty with behavior. All of these students are receiving additional interventions in and out of the classroom through targeted assistance, small group instruction, and extended day boost groups two times a week. It is because of the literacy focus of the school and the current student scores in reading the researcher is asking the question, “How can explicit methods of vocabulary instruction be taught effectively in a third grade classroom?”



## Action Research Proposal

### Chapter Two – The Issue

The question to be researched is: “How can explicit methods of vocabulary instruction be taught effectively in a third grade classroom?” Explicit vocabulary instruction is an issue that is occurring currently within the school and the researcher’s third grade classroom. Vocabulary development has long been considered important for reading comprehension (National Reading Panel, 2000). Vocabulary instruction is not something that is currently being explicitly taught within this third grade classroom. It is the researcher’s desire to implement an action research study to find which methods of teaching vocabulary instruction will be most effective.

This issue of explicit vocabulary instruction is school wide. State reading scores at the third grade and fifth grade levels could be improved. Although the school has continued to meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), a requirement of the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB), teachers would like to see more growth in reading scores at these levels. In addition, the fourth grade writing scores could be improved. It has been decided that improving statewide assessment scores is a school wide problem, not just the responsibility of the third, fourth, and fifth grades. In response, teachers in the primary grades are currently reviewing instructional methods and trying to find ways to improve instruction so that students will be more prepared when reaching the third, fourth, and fifth grades. One way they are looking at doing this is by implementing methods of explicit vocabulary instruction.

The school district, in the last few years, has also begun the implementation of Power Standards. Power Standards are the concepts to be taught over the course of a school year. To obtain the Power Standards the district, along with a committee of teachers across all grade levels K-12 came together to analyze the Oregon State Curriculum Standards developed by the Oregon Department of Education. The district gathered the standards that they felt were “most critical” to be taught in a school year and then aligned them across all grade levels. It is the intention that these are the standards that will be taught and taught deeply. The third grade language arts vocabulary power standards is:

*Students will infer word meanings from context while reading text.*

*-antonyms (opposite)*

*- synonyms (similar)*

*- homographs/homophones (double meanings for words)*

The school district has also re-adopted the revised Rigby Reading Program. Rigby is the reading adoption that has currently been in place for the past six years, and the district chose to adopt it again two years ago. A new feature of the revised Rigby program is teaching a set of vocabulary words that correlate with each unit of study. A method for how to teach these words is included in the materials; but, the district is leaving it up to the teacher’s discretion to use the Rigby method for implementation or one that they find works well.

The rises in the ELL population and the population of students on IEPs are considerations in improving student reading assessment scores. There is currently an ELL population of 20% at the school. The researcher’s classroom currently has 24

students, six of which are receiving English Language Development (ELD) services, two of which are on IEPs, one for a learning disabilities and one for speech and language, and five more are under review for lack of academic progress. The explicit teaching of vocabulary and strategies that enable struggling readers to make connections between past experiences and new concepts is critical to their reading development (Rupley & Nichols, 2005). In this study the researcher will implement methods for explicitly teaching vocabulary instruction and see the effect it has on student's reading skills.

### *Literature Search*

With the implementation of language arts power standards, reading test scores, a new reading adoption, and a rise in struggling readers at the research site, the researcher has been motivated to analyze the question, "How can explicit methods of vocabulary instruction be taught effectively in a third grade classroom?" The subject area of reading and the importance it has in language development has led to vast amounts research in the United States. According to Lyon and Chhabra (2004), failure to read by nine years of age portends a lifetime of illiteracy for at least 70% of struggling readers. This is a powerful statement. Statistics such as these are what drives teachers to become better instructors of literacy. The National Reading Panel (NRP) compiled a report (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000) identifying and analyzing vocabulary as one of five prominent components in the reading process (Cohen & Byrnes, 2007).

In framing the research question the researcher has explored and investigated issues related to the topic of explicit vocabulary instruction and has collected related literature by other authors. The literature search will center on the following topics:

- What is vocabulary instruction?
- What makes an effective vocabulary instructor?
- How is vocabulary learned?
- What are effective methods of implementing vocabulary instruction?
- What effect does vocabulary instruction have on student reading achievement?

The researchers will discuss these five categories in the following section.

*What is vocabulary instruction?*

To distinguish how explicit vocabulary instruction can be taught effectively in a third grade classroom, vocabulary instruction must first be defined. According to Armbruster, Lehr, and Osborn (2001), vocabulary can be defined as the words we people must use to communicate effectively. It is the opinion of the researcher that words are the basis of everything that we do, not just in spoken language. Words appear everywhere; in speech, in text, and in technology. Research regarding vocabulary instruction and its place in the classroom has long been studied, along with this area of research comes investigations regarding vocabulary instruction and reading.

Traditional vocabulary instruction for many teachers has involved having students look words up in a dictionary, write definitions, and use words in a sentence (Bromely, 2007). Research regarding this as a definition of vocabulary instruction is conflicting. Many researchers do agree that although this is an appropriate definition of vocabulary

instruction, it is not necessarily the most engaging method for all students. Over time research in the subject of vocabulary has evolved and has taken on many definitions, each being unique to what the instructor finds as being most effective. In contradiction of Bromerly, Richek (2006) finds that, an example of vocabulary instruction that is not engaging (and not much fun either) is asking students to look up words in the dictionary and write sentences for each one. Richek continues to say that when we make vocabulary learning fun, creative, and foster a sense of competence in students, they want to learn and use new word meanings.

Typically, when finding information leaning toward vocabulary instruction as a definition, findings most often come with an attachment to an activity. When addressing the term vocabulary instruction Gambrell, Morrow, and Pressley (2007), found that vocabulary instruction can encompass a number of activities that occur in a classroom. Although vocabulary instruction is typically found as a process in learning words, there is no one clear agreement as to which definition is always appropriate. What is apparent is that vocabulary instruction is what the instructor makes it. For that reason the researcher must look at what makes an effective vocabulary instructor.

*What makes an effective vocabulary instructor?*

Vocabulary occurs all the time in classrooms. Gambrell, Morrow, and Pressley (2007), state that words are the currency of education. However, classrooms in current day America are faced with many challenges and diversities. At the research site there is a multitude of differences in ethnicity, socioeconomic status, language, ability, and gender. Gambrell, Morrow, & Pressley, also find the following: “Teachers are increasingly faced with a diverse group of learners in terms of current word knowledge,

linguistic background, learning styles, and learning abilities. It is up to teachers to make word learning enjoyable, meaningful, and effective.” (p. 179).

How can a teacher meet the diverse needs of all learners and be an effective vocabulary instructor? Research has suggested some guidelines that apply to most classrooms in most situations of vocabulary instruction. With the findings of the report compiled by the National Reading Panel in 2000, Balchowicz and Fisher (2000), conducted a study and found five guidelines that apply when defining an effective vocabulary instructor:

- *Guideline 1.* The effective vocabulary teacher builds a word rich environment in which students are immersed in words for both incidental and intentional learning and the development of “word awareness.”
- *Guideline 2.* The effective vocabulary teacher helps students develop as independent word learners.
- *Guideline 3.* The effective vocabulary teacher uses instructional strategies that not only teach vocabulary but also model good word learning behaviors.
- *Guideline 4.* The effective vocabulary teacher provides explicit instruction for important content and concept vocabulary, drawing on multiple sources of meaning.
- *Guideline 5.* The effective vocabulary teacher uses assessment that matches the goal of instruction.

These guidelines are evidence-based and have been proven to be effective. It is these guidelines that will be the principles on which the researcher will base their action research study. These guidelines are important to the researcher because in order to

implement explicit vocabulary instruction effectively, the prior five guidelines must be in place in order to make sure that the instruction is the most powerful it can be. Once the researcher has evaluated and concluded that these guidelines are present they can then continue to examine how vocabulary instruction is learned.

*How is vocabulary learned?*

Research has shown that vocabulary is best learned through exposure to high quality environmental language (Richek, 2006). This process starts as early as infancy. There have been many research studies to determine language development in young children. There is often varying degrees to which children develop language and vocabulary. Many studies often compare parental influences and the effects parents have on language development. A research study referenced in Gambrell's book found that:

The variance in vocabulary knowledge of young children is well established. On average professional parents talked to their toddlers more than three times as much as parents of families on welfare did. Not, surprisingly, that difference resulted in a big discrepancy in the children's vocabulary size. The average three-year old from a welfare family demonstrated an active vocabulary of around 500 words, whereas a three-year old from a professional family demonstrated a vocabulary of over 1,000 words. (2006).

This study is important to the researcher because at the research site students are coming to the classroom from all socioeconomic backgrounds. Coyne, Simmons, Kame'enui, and Stoolmiller (2004), also state that some children enter school with thousands of hours of exposure to books and a wealth of rich oral language experiences; other children begin school with very limited knowledge of language and word meanings. It is valuable

information to know that students from various economically challenged or economically advantaged families will be coming to the research site with varying levels of prior vocabulary knowledge.

Knowing that children are coming with different background knowledge in vocabulary what else can one do to ensure that vocabulary is learned? Richek (2006), goes on to say "...reading is important for vocabulary learning" (p.19). Studies have shown that written materials, including children's books have many more varied vocabulary words than the spoken language of even high educated people (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1998). This stands out and highlights that even though students may not be receiving the most vocabulary rich environments at home; reading aloud to students is providing them with important vocabulary development. Research also indicates that vocabulary is learned gradually (Baumann, Kame'enui, & Ash, 2003). Students need to be given time to process, hear words, and use them in context to their meaning. Lastly, students learn best when they are actively engaged with and process deeply (Richek, 2006). This statement seems self-evident, but many times students are left disengaged with the delivery of the content and then left with holes in their vocabulary expansion. Teachers must create engaging methods of delivering instruction to further assist in students retaining the words.

*What are effective methods of implementing vocabulary instruction?*

With all of the literature and research studies available the researcher has chosen to focus on four specific methods of implementing vocabulary instruction. These four methods were chosen for the following reasons: they came from evidence based research studies, they seemed to be the most engaging for students, they were time effective for

the teacher, and they seemed to be the most applicable in an elementary grade classroom. Also, each of these methods seemed to align with the research site's balanced literacy philosophy. The four methods that the researcher will investigate are shared storybook reading, the four square vocabulary instruction strategy, the use of a concept definition map (a specific form of a graphic organizer), and an activity titled word-of-the-day.

Most research backs the fact that students need to be read to, with, and by themselves in order to be engaged in learning vocabulary. Bukowiecki (2006), states "...reading is a natural way to increase vocabulary knowledge" (p. 29). Likewise Bromerly (2007), also finds that teachers need to "read aloud to students, stopping to explain and talk about words they may not know" (p.529). A study concluded by Coyne, Simmons, Kame'enui, and Stoolmiller (2004), discovered that findings suggest that the explicit teaching of word meanings within storybook readings may help to narrow, or at least halt, the widening vocabulary gap among students. Similarly, Biemiller (2003) suggests that the primary way for young nonreaders to be exposed to new vocabulary is within the context of oral language experiences such as shared storybook reading. One method the researcher will be implementing is the explicit teaching of words in a shared storybook setting. In order to fully implement this method one needs to first define what shared storybook reading is and its connection to teaching vocabulary words.

In applications of shared storybook readings in the study concluded by Coyne, Simmons, Kame'enui, and Stoolmiller (2004) they found underlining principles to help define shared storybook reading. In summary the researchers found first, that storybooks chosen needed to be engaging and interesting for students, discussions needed to take place before reading the story to help activate student's prior knowledge and after the

story readings. They also determined that there needed to be multiple readings of the storybooks with prompted connections to the illustrations. Within each text three to five target words were chosen and taught directly from each story; “words were selected because they were important to the understanding of the story and likely to be unfamiliar to the students” (Coyne, Simmons, Kame’enui, & Stoolmiller, p.151). Teachers then use the target words and provide students with a simple definition in context to the story; and also provide opportunities for students to use the words in the framework of discussions and opportunities for discourse over target words (such as asking open ended questions). Gambrell, Morrow, and Pressley (2007) also found that discussions after shared storybook reading give students opportunities to use new vocabulary words in a more decontextualized setting. Obviously, books chosen for the method of shared storybook reading will be used over the course of a few days, with multiple books being read over the action research time of 12-18 weeks.

In a study conducted by Cockrum & Markel (2007), a vocabulary implementation strategy was developed known as the “Four Square” strategy. Cockrum & Markel determined:

...this approach was demonstrated to be effective with all students, ‘especially for those students designated as being less able.’ The less able students included students labeled as having special needs. The vocabulary instruction technique may also be effective with students learning English as a second language (ESL) (p. 99).

This strategy is designed to help students activate their prior knowledge and link this to words they are learning, in turn increasing vocabulary. Students are given a vocabulary word and asked to write a meaningful definition and then use the word in a context that is personal to them.

In this strategy students are given a piece of paper divided into fourths. In square one students are asked to write the word being taught. In square two they write personal experience that helps define the target word. In square three they will use the word in a sentence in context of which the word was being taught. Lastly, in square four students will be asked to draw a picture that is representative of the word. Cockrum & Markel (2007), found:

Spending time making sure each student thought of a personal experience that defined the target word with vivid details of the experience was essential in providing the cognitive link to insure they learned and remembered the meaning of the target word (p. 98).

Cockrum & Markel also determined that the strategy was effective when teachers implemented simplified versions, as long as the basic components remained. Shippert (2005) developed a simplified version of this model to implement in her first grade classroom. Using the target word from the read aloud, Schippert, wrote the word in one square and had students draw a picture matching the word to an illustration from the text in another square. In the last two squares she had students brainstorm other words they previously knew that had the same meaning as the target word and then had students draw a picture of themselves in connection to the target word.

Graphic organizers are used as methods to help students “organize their thinking, so they can independently demonstrate their understanding of new concepts” (Brand, 2004). Graphic organizers are a visual display of information that can be used effectively before, during, and after text reading (Bukowiecki, 2006). One model of a graphic organizer that will possibly be implemented is a “concept definition map.” This model was chosen on the basis that this research study is looking at vocabulary instruction in correlation to reading. This form of a graphic organizer has been found to be effective in students comprehending a particular concept. Cooper and Kiger (2003) state, to help grade-one through six readers comprehend a particular concept; a concept definition map can be employed.

The purpose of a concept definition map (Cooper & Kiger) is to define a concept and the characteristic of a concept. This form of a graphic organizer would be used following the reading of a fiction or informational text. First, the teacher or student writes a word in a box in the center of a paper. Lines are then drawn to connect the word to other boxes, which contain the word’s simple definition, characteristics, and concrete examples. Cooper and Kieger suggest that although students in grades three through six may be able to complete independently, students in kindergarten through grade two may require teacher support.

Bukowiecki (2006) goes on to advise teachers that “organizers should have relevance to the learning situation, be fully modeled by the teacher, and practiced by the entire class before being used independently by the students” (p. 35). It is the belief of the researcher that this gradual release of responsibility could possible enable the students

to take this strategy and use it independently in learning situations that occur in the classroom.

In “word of the day” the teacher or the students present a word for the entire class to ponder, learn and employ in a variety of novel contexts (Graves & Watts-Taffle, 2002). Sources of words for “word of the day” can include books, magazines, newspapers, or heard in context such as a television program. Discussions occur early in the day around the “word” and then throughout the duration of the school day students are encouraged to find the word in other contexts or use the word in other discussions if possible.

To implement this strategy the researcher will begin to include the “word of the day” on the morning message board that students are asked to read each morning. Then as part of the morning circle time a discussion generated around the “word” will transpire. Then, as students set out to conquer the rest of the activities of the school day they will be encouraged to use the word. It is the researcher’s intention to implement the strategy for the first few weeks and then give students an opportunity to choose the word for the “word of the day.” The researcher will do this by assigning each student to a specific day of the week where they get to choose the word as part of the nightly homework. Then the following school day the word chosen by that student will be the “word of the day.”

*What effect does vocabulary instruction have on student reading achievement?*

An article written by Rupley, Logan, and Nichols (1999) states, “ as children’s vocabulary grows their ability to comprehend what they read grows as well; furthermore,

as their comprehension skills grow so do their abilities to learn new words in context” (p. 336). It is the interpretation of the researcher that from this statement it is crucial for teachers to implement effective vocabulary instruction, due to the fact that it has direct links to student reading achievement. Children with broad vocabulary knowledge are better able to infer meanings of unfamiliar words in the texts that they read (Rupley, Logan, & Nichols, 1999). In a study conducted in 2000, the NRP found a direct link to vocabulary development and reading comprehension. From that study the NRP concluded that vocabulary should be taught directly and indirectly to help student reading achievement. They also found, “reading comprehension is a complex cognitive process that cannot be understood without a clear description of the role that vocabulary development and vocabulary instruction play in the understanding of what has been read” (NRP, 2000). From this we know that vocabulary instruction is a critical element in not only language development but also in students maintaining high levels of reading achievement.

#### *Summary*

In summary, there is research to support that direct vocabulary instruction and reading achievement are connected. Engaging children in explicit methods of vocabulary instruction is crucial in student reading achievement. There is evidence and scientific based research to support the use of vocabulary instruction in the classroom as a means to improve student reading achievement. By implementing effective methods of vocabulary instruction the researcher has the potential ability to increase student reading achievement.

## Action Research Proposal

### Chapter Three – The Goal of the Action Research Project

The goal of the action research project is to discover ways to effectively implement vocabulary instruction in a third grade classroom. As discussed in the review of literature there is a distinct link to students reading abilities in connection to their exposure to specific vocabulary instruction. In this study, the researcher aspires to implement explicit and effective methods of vocabulary instruction and in turn see if it has an impact on student reading abilities.

The researcher will meet with the school principal and obtain permission to conduct this action research project in the classroom. The researcher will also obtain informed consent from parents, allowing their students to take part in the action research study. All student's names and identities will be kept confidential throughout the research process. Once permission has been given the researcher will proceed to implement three of the researched methods of vocabulary instruction throughout the research study time frame.

Three main methods of explicit instruction will be used in implementing effective vocabulary instruction in a third grade classroom. One strategy is shared storybook reading where the researcher will use vocabulary words important to the meaning of a story. Another strategy is a four square vocabulary instruction strategy, where the student link prior knowledge to help retain and learn vocabulary words. Lastly, the research will explicitly teach vocabulary words using a "word of the day." It was decided by the researcher after deep reflective thought to not implement the use of the concept definition map as a method of instruction. It is the opinion of the researcher that although

this form of graphic organizer is used to teach vocabulary, for the purpose of this action research study, it may not be the most effective method. Concept definition maps are used more often to teach vocabulary that is a focus in a particular concept or content, which the researcher sees more applicable to reading words in math, science, or social studies contents.

Over the course of the action research study, the researcher will use a variety of methods for data collection purposes. One technique that will be used is observation. This will be one of the primary data methods. The researcher will be looking to see if the vocabulary words explicitly taught during the course of the research study are being used by students in their conversations with teachers and peers. After an observation has been made the researcher will make anecdotal and reflective notes on what was observed.

Another data collection method used will be individual student's scores on a pre and post assessment. Although many words will be taught over the course of the action research time frame, five words will be pre selected from each method taught and will be assessed prior to the action research study and then post assessed once the research phase has concluded. It is the goal of the pre and post assessments that the researcher will be able to document student growth, and to see which methods were more effective than others.

A survey will also be given to students to see which method of instruction was preferred. One of the key elements found through the literature search was that students perform better and retain more information when involved in instruction that is engaging and personal. The purpose of the survey will be to get student opinions to which method they found the most engaging and see if those methods correlate to scores on the methods

assessed on the pre and post test. With all of these data collection methods the researcher will be able to analyze the information to see if students have made progress and to find a method of vocabulary instruction that is explicit and effective.



## Action Research Proposal

### Chapter Four – Action Plan

The goal of this action research project is to determine how explicit vocabulary instruction can be effectively implemented in a third grade classroom. The review of literature offered many insightful methods and strategies that may assist the researcher in determining effective methods for implementing vocabulary instruction. In chapter four, the researcher will consider and investigate certain strategies for implementation in a third grade classroom, which will be possible solutions. The researcher also will outline a plan for meeting the specific goal of this project.

#### *Possible Solutions*

One study found on vocabulary instruction was conducted in 2004 by Michael Coyne, Deborah Simmons, Edward Kame'enui, and Michael Stoolmiller. These researchers studied the effects of vocabulary learning during shared storybook readings directed towards at-risk readers in a Kindergarten classroom. This was an experimental study that compared students in a control group with no additional vocabulary instruction, to students in a dependent group that received the receptive vocabulary instruction within the context of shared storybook readings. The findings from the study concluded that... “the explicit teaching of word meanings within storybook readings may help to narrow, or at least halt, the widening vocabulary gap among students” (Coyne, Simmons, Kame'enui, & Stoolmiller, p.145).

Though this research study was found to be successful in the dependent group, this as a solution to the present research site will only be determined as a partial solution.

The researcher needs a solution that will benefit all of the students, as they are not ethically able to seclude students from possible success in developing higher levels of vocabulary. This study was conducted in a kindergarten classroom, and the action research project will be taking place in a third grade classroom. For these reasons, the researcher will partially accept the method explicit vocabulary instruction during shared storybook reading. The researcher will implement the method, but, will deliver the instruction to all students; not just struggling readers. The researcher will also deliver words that seem to be based around third grade outcomes, as opposed to kindergarten outcomes.

The second possible solution comes from Ward Cockrum and Sherry Markel. In a study they conducted in 1985 they determined using a Four-Square technique to be very effective in teaching new vocabulary. This strategy is designed to help students activate their prior knowledge and link this knowledge to words they are learning, in turn increasing vocabulary. They found this technique was demonstrated to be very effective with all students, but especially those students considered being “less-able” (Cockrum & Markel, 2007).

Students are given a vocabulary word and asked to write a meaningful definition and then use the word in a context that is personal to them. In this strategy students are given a piece of paper divided into fourths. In square one students are asked to write the word being taught. In square two they write personal experience that helps define the target word. In square three they will use the word in a sentence in context of which the word was being taught. Lastly, in square four students will be asked to draw a picture that is representative of the word.

The researcher found this study to be a possible solution at this researcher site. Considering that all students are included in the activity and it was found to be effective, especially for struggling readers the researcher accepts this method as a possible solution. This technique is one that the researcher will include in their action research study as a method of instruction. This method is practical and is something that can be done in a timely manner in the classroom setting.

The third possible solution is the use of a kind of graphic organizer identified as a concept definition map. The purpose of a concept definition map (Cooper & Kiger) is to define a concept or word and the characteristics of a concept or word. This form of a graphic organizer would be used following the reading of a fiction or informational text. First, the teacher or student writes a word in a box in the center of a paper. Lines are then drawn to connect the word to other boxes, which contain the word's simple definition, characteristics, and concrete examples. Cooper and Kieger suggest that although students in grades three through six may be able to complete independently, students in kindergarten through grade two may require teacher support.

This method of instruction although found to be effective in the cases of Cooper and Kieger, may not be the best method in the context of this classroom. Considering that the study found this method to be effective in student's reading abilities in content specific words the researcher is looking for explicit vocabulary instruction that does not necessarily need to be integrated through content like, social studies, science, and math. Even though graphic organizers are found to be effective instructional resources for students, when further thought was put into the concept definition map the researcher was unsure of that fact that this would be the best form of a graphic organizer for the context

of this action research study. Only parts of the concept definition map could be used for some of the words intended to be taught over the course of the study, and in some cases parts of the map would have to be left blank. If the students were to not complete the map in its entirety they would not be getting an explicit form of vocabulary instruction. It is because of these determining factors that the researcher has chosen not to implement this method as a form of vocabulary instruction.

The last possible solution is a method of introducing vocabulary words identified as “word of the day”. In “word of the day” the teacher or the students present a word for the entire class to ponder, learn and employ in a variety of novel contexts (Graves & Watts-Taffle, 2002). Sources of words for “word of the day” can include books, magazines, newspapers, or heard in context such as a television program. Discussions occur early in the day around the “word” and then throughout the duration of the school day students are encouraged to find the word in other contexts or use the word in other discussions if possible.

It is the opinion of the researcher that considering the class, that the students would find this method to be creative, fun, and engaging. This method is one that takes minimal prep and can be completed quickly. The other interesting point in “word of the day” is that eventually the students can take on some of the responsibility of choosing the word for a given day. This gradual release of responsibility aligns with the research sites philosophy of the gradual release of responsibility model. It is all of these factors together that incline the researcher to accept the method into their action research study.

*Action Plan*

The researcher will begin by meeting with the elementary school principal to receive permission to conduct this research study. After receiving permission the researcher will send an informational letter home to parents giving them information explaining the research study, as well as describe how information will be obtained and used to better serve their students. The researcher will do all of this at the beginning of the 2009-2010 school year, in October.

During the rest of September the researcher will continue to organize materials needed in order to complete the research study. A list of books will be made to use during the shared storybook reading portion of the action research study, also a word list of possible vocabulary words to be taught during word of the day will also be compiled. The researcher will also make a vocabulary journal containing all of the sheets needed to complete the vocabulary four-square. Once all of the organizational aspects of the research have been completed the researcher will then begin to use the methods determined in the possible solution portion in November 2010.

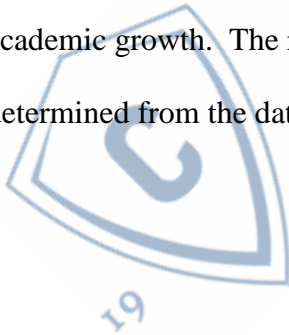
The pre assessment will be given at the beginning of the action research study prior to any explicit teaching. The post assessment will be given at the conclusion of the 12 week study. Results from these assessments will be collected and analyzed to determine student's growth of learning vocabulary words. A survey will also be given at the end of the conclusion of the research study to allow the researcher to see first hand which methods of instruction students found to be the most engaging and effective.

During the course of the 12 week research time frame the researcher will be recording and journaling field notes. In these notes the researcher will attempt to capture

moments demonstrated by the students as being important to the action researcher study. These may be times where students make connections to learned vocabulary words, using them in conversation or in writing. Observations may also include when students use vocabulary words in the retelling of a story to help them better comprehend what they have read.

The specific methods of vocabulary instruction will be delivered in a varied time frame, as the researcher see needed. Word of the day will be implemented every day of the 12 week study, but shared storybook reading and four-square technique will be delivered at various times, depending on the weekly lesson plans and the words needing to be learned. As much as possible after each lesson the researcher will journal successes and challenges to have a record of the method's implementation.

At the conclusion of the action research study in February of 2010, all data will be collected and analyzed to determine if vocabulary instruction was explicitly implemented in a third grade classroom. The researcher will look for patterns and successes to see if there was any correlation to student learning specific vocabulary words explicitly and academic growth. The researcher will compile all data and make a conclusion that can be determined from the data and observations in their completed action researcher project.



Action Research Proposal

## Chapter Five – Results and Next Steps

The purpose of the action research project was to determine how explicit methods of vocabulary instruction can be effectively implemented into a third grade classroom. The results of the methods of instruction were documented by the researcher in a qualitative format including a reflective journal, a survey, observations and anecdotal notes, and through conversations with students. Quantitative data was also compiled and included pre and post assessment data. These forms of documentation showed that two methods were found to be more effective methods of explicit vocabulary instruction than others and the results will be further shared and explained. The classroom in which the research was conducted showed signs of increased student use and understanding of oral, written, and reading vocabulary.

*Analysis of Methods**Shared Storybook Reading*

Shared storybook reading was one of the methods of explicit vocabulary instruction that the researcher found to be effective. During the duration of the action research implementation phase the researcher used various texts from various genres during the reading and writing instructional blocks. These texts were used during the mini-lesson portion of the reading workshop model. Before each mini-lesson the researcher would pre-read the texts and pick out specific vocabulary words that were important to the understanding and comprehension of the story or information being read.

Prior to reading the text, the researcher would model a “think-aloud” about the book based on the pictures or illustrations. During this time the researcher made sure to

insert the specific vocabulary words during her think-aloud as a way to highlight the words and to get the students used to hearing them. During the reading of the story the researcher would then pause after having read the specific vocabulary words and engage in a discussion with the students about the meaning of the words. These discussions often involved the researcher speaking directly to the students, as well as, the researcher facilitating student-to-student discussions. Open ended questions were asked to guide the discussions like, “What do you think the word \_\_\_\_\_ means?”, or “What clues in the rest of the text help us to figure out why the author may have chosen to use the word \_\_\_\_\_?”, “Where could we look to find out the meaning of the word\_\_\_\_\_?” The researcher would also make sure when facilitating and engaging in these discussions to repeat the specific vocabulary word as many times as possible, while also encouraging the students use and repeat the words several times.

At the end of reading the text the researcher would again, return to discussion with the students and ask questions like, “Why do you think I chose to highlight those specific words?”, and, “How were those words important to your understanding of what we read?”, and, “What did you learn about these words and how does this help you be a better reader?”, and lastly, “When could you see yourself using these words as a reader or a writer?”

The researcher found this method of vocabulary instruction to be one of the most engaging for students. The practice was authentic and was directly tied to what they were learning about then and there. Students were actively participating in explicit vocabulary instruction and using rich words in conversation and discussion without even really realizing what they were doing. This form of instruction allowed the researcher to

actively engage all students at one time. The researcher knows all students were engaged through observation and discussion.

Many students were able to comment on the use of words and how understanding these words helped them be better readers. Some of the comments made by students included quotes such as, “Knowing the meaning of the word *treasure* helped me understand how special the baby must have been to the father and mother. A treasure is something so special that you never want to give it away or lose it, EVER. That how the dad and mom must have felt...that they never wanted to give there baby away, EVER!” Another comment made by a student demonstrating how to use words to help them understand was, “When you read the word *atmosphere* I wasn’t sure what the author was trying to say. But once we talked it out and looked at the clues to figure out what the meaning probably was, I was able to get that they were talking about a layer of air in the sky. Once I understood that, I was able to read on and understand the rest.”

Not only did the observations and discussions with students prove that this was an effective method of instruction, but student scores on the post-assessment proved that most students retained the words and their meanings from the vocabulary words taught explicitly from the method of shared storybook readings. This is a practice that researcher will continue to implement during their literacy time.

*Vocabulary Four-Square*

The vocabulary four-square method of vocabulary instruction was one that the researcher found to be effective in the classroom. This technique allows students to link the learning of a new vocabulary word definition with their individual prior knowledge and make a personal connection to the word. The researcher added a synonym component to the four-square graphic organizer, in order to help align with the school district's third grade vocabulary power standard. Students were also asked to write a synonym for the new word being taught. This was simple for most students as they already had to make a connection from prior knowledge with the new word. All students were able to participate in this method of vocabulary instruction.

With this method of vocabulary instruction, the researcher designed vocabulary journals with numerous blank vocabulary four-square graphic organizers for students to use during the instructional time (see Appendix C). Students were assigned to complete one four-square page per assigned vocabulary word. The words selected to include in the four-square journal came directly from texts read aloud in class or in groups. The post-assessment showed that this method of instruction was successful in students learning the word meanings and retaining the information. Most students were able to recall words taught through this explicit method and give the proper definition on the post-assessment. Observations proved that students were more apt to use these words in the context of their writing.

The researcher saw many students experimenting with the use of the vocabulary words during their free-write time. When asked by the researcher why they chose to use this specific word in their writing a student responded, "When you taught us this new

word and I was able to use my schema to make a connection it got me thinking about that time. We had writer's workshop next and I had that memory in my head and I decided I wanted to write about it. So, I made sure I used that new word in my writing because I thought it would make my writing sound more interesting." Students seemed to enjoy learning new words in the context of using the four-square method. Through a conversational survey with most students the researcher was able to find that the majority of the students enjoyed this method particularly because of the personal connection component and because students liked being able to sketch a picture that was a representation of the word.

The only draw-back to this method that the researcher found was that a specific amount of time had to be set aside in order for students to complete their vocabulary assignment. With this came a slight loss of authenticity. For the purpose of the action research project, this did not matter because the researcher was looking at "explicit" methods of instruction. However, it is the opinion of the researcher that although this method of instruction was found to be successful; in the context of the researchers teaching, another method where words could be taught in the context of actual reading would suit their teaching style and philosophy better.

#### *Word of the Day*

The word of the day method of vocabulary instruction was one that the researcher found to be least effective. With this method students were assigned a day to teach a new word and its meaning to the rest of the class. The initial idea was that this method would be an easily manageable method that required little or no prep outside of the teacher modeling when the method was first introduced. However, it ended up being more

difficult to manage that originally anticipated. Some of the issues that surfaced were, students not completing the task on their assigned day. For example, when students were reminded that their day was coming and they needed to have a word prepared to share, on the day they were supposed to be teaching a new word, some students forgot or didn't have the proper supports needed to be ready to teach a new word and its definition. Other observations made by the researcher showed student's lack of engagement when being taught a new word by their peers. It was difficult to actively engage all students when the responsibility of teaching new words was shared with the students.

Survey results showed that this method of vocabulary instruction was one that students liked the least and post-assessment results showed that although most students still retained the words taught through this method, this was the method where students showed the least amount of improvement. This method of instruction is one that the researcher will probably choose not to continue in their instructional methods, or if they do choose to do something similar it would be for the purpose of student enjoyment and fun, not as a method to teach important educational vocabulary.

### *Analysis of Data*

#### *Pre- and Post Assessments*

The pre and post assessment was designed so that there were five vocabulary words tested from each method taught. The first five words were from shared storybook reading, the second five words were from vocabulary four-square, and the last five were from word of the day. All students showed an increase in percentage from the pre assessment to the post assessment (see Appendix A). Students showed the most growth in the first two methods and the majority of students who did not score 100% on the post

assessment made errors in word definitions taught through word of the day. However, all data showed an increase in students retaining and comprehending word meanings.

### *Observations and Discussion*

As stated above in the methods sections of analysis the researcher was able to see students using and experimenting with new words being taught through explicit methods of instruction. Students were attempting to use and learn new words through peer dialogue, discussions with the researcher, and through their own personal writing. Overall all, the researcher observed students being the most engaged through shared storybook reading and vocabulary four-square methods of instruction. Although students enjoyed the word of the day method, the researcher was able to observe greater numbers of student participation and more of a lasting effect when engaged in the other two methods. These observations correspond with the data collected on the pre and post assessments.

### *Survey*

The student survey was a simple analysis of which method the students seemed to be the most engaged in and learn the most from. Students were asked to rate the three methods of instruction by placing a 1 next to the method they preferred the most, a 2 next to the method that would be their second choice, and a 3 next to the method that they felt taught them and engaged them the least. There was also a place for students to write a response explaining why they scored the methods the way they did (see Appendix B).

Results from the survey showed that the majority of students preferred the shared storybook method and four-square method the most. Student responses for shared storybook reading included, "I liked being able to talk about what the word meant with

my partner.”, and “I liked seeing how the authors used the words in their stories. That helped give me ideas for my story.” Student responses for vocabulary four-square included, “It was easier for me to remember the word when I could think of a synonym for the word.”, and “ When I could use my own schema or background knowledge it helped me remember the word and get a picture in my head of what the word meant.” Some students did vote word-of-the-day as being their preferred method, with explanations ranging from, “It was fun to get to pick a word by myself.”, and “I liked being able to share my favorite word with the class and teach them what it meant.”

There seemed to be a direct link between a student's preferred method of explicit vocabulary instruction and their retention of words and word meanings. Student engagement seems to be a huge indicator of whether or not students are able to use the new words in reading and writing and recall a word's definition.

#### *Next Steps*

The researcher plans to continue to implement effective explicit methods of vocabulary instruction in their classroom. It has become more of a natural practice for the researcher to highlight three to five key vocabulary words in a text being shared with the class. The researcher would like to possibly differentiate the use of the vocabulary four-square journals and have students apply the strategy and skill of learning vocabulary words through this method in small group guided reading instruction. This way students would be able to include new words in their journal that are coming from texts shared in guided reading groups, as opposed to only including words that are taught to the whole class.

The researcher would also like to develop, through collaboration with colleagues or the grade level team a list of vocabulary words that could be potentially important to reading achievement in third grade. It would be so helpful to have a list of words to focus on that could be collaboratively instructed and assessed. These words may be words that align with the district's third grade reading vocabulary power standard, are important vocabulary on the third grade state reading test, or meaningful vocabulary words that occur in the grade level developmental reading assessment (DRA) passages and text that students read to assess fluency, accuracy, and comprehension.

The researcher might consider spending some time evaluating how vocabulary is taught across the content areas. There is reading and writing involved in all content areas, and although the researcher did not focus on vocabulary explicitly taught in content areas through this study, it would be interesting to see if using these methods to teach vocabulary in science, social studies, and math would show an improvement of student's academic achievement.

Overall, the researcher found the action research to be a successful study and an important tool in gaining improvement in teacher instruction and student learning. The students proved that they learned and the researcher gained valuable insight into effective methods of vocabulary instruction.

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Appendix A

Pre and Post Assessment & Data



## Results of Pre/Post Vocabulary Assessment

<b>Student</b>	<b>Number of Word Meanings Correct Fall (Pre-Assessment)</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Number of Word Meanings Correct Winter (Post-Assessment)</b>	<b>%</b>
A	7/15	46%	15/15	100%
B	12/15	80%	15/15	100%
C	10/15	66%	15/15	100%
D	6/15	40%	15/15	100%
E	8/15	53%	14/15	93%
F	7/15	46%	14/15	93%
G	11/15	73%	15/15	100%
H	4/15	26%	12/15	80%
I	12/15	80%	15/15	100%
J	10/15	66%	13/15	87%
K	12/15	80%	15/15	100%
L	8/15	53%	13/15	87%
M	7/15	46%	13/15	87%
N	11/15	73%	14/15	93%
O	6/15	40%	15/15	100%
P	12/15	80%	15/15	100%
Q	8/15	53%	13/15	87%
R	7/15	46%	14/15	93%
S	10/15	66%	Moved	Moved
T	12/15	80%	15/15	100%
U	6/15	40%	12/15	80%
V	11/15	73%	15/15	100%
W	13/15	87%	15/15	100%
X	8/15	53%	15/15	100%
Y	9/15	60%	14/15	93%

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

## Vocabulary Pre &amp; Post Assessment

Please match the vocabulary word to the correct definition.

Write the letter of the definition in the space next to the word it belongs to.

\_\_\_\_\_ armor

\_\_\_\_\_ cycle

\_\_\_\_\_ devote

\_\_\_\_\_ grief

\_\_\_\_\_ skeptical

\_\_\_\_\_ treasure

\_\_\_\_\_ shudder

\_\_\_\_\_ hibernate

\_\_\_\_\_ protect

\_\_\_\_\_ transport

\_\_\_\_\_ season

\_\_\_\_\_ atmosphere

\_\_\_\_\_ equator

\_\_\_\_\_ investigate

\_\_\_\_\_ resource

A. To keep something safe

B. A way to divide a year

C. To sleep or become less active through a season

D. To carry or move something

E. A precious object or something valuable

F. To commit yourself to a purpose

G. Protection or covering

H. Air or Climate

I. Shiver violently or vibrate

J. Intense sadness or sorrow

K. A repeated sequence of events

L. To look or see what happened

M. Doubtful or not being convinced

N. A source of help or information

O. Imaginary circle around Earth

Appendix B

Survey and Survey Results



## Results of Survey

Student	Shared Storybook Reading	Vocabulary Four-Square	Word-of-the- Day
A	1	2	3
B	1	3	2
C	2	1	3
D	1	2	3
E	2	1	3
F	1	2	3
G	3	1	2
H	2	1	3
I	1	2	3
J	2	3	1
K	1	2	3
L	2	1	3
M	1	2	3
N	3	2	1
O	1	2	3
P	1	2	3
Q	1	3	2
R	1	1	3
S	Moved	Moved	Moved
T	1	2	3
U	3	1	2
V	1	3	2
W	2	1	3
X	1	2	3
Y	1	3	2

Shared Storybook Reading:

1= 15 votes, 2= 6 votes, 3= 3 votes

Vocabulary Four-Square:

1= 8 votes, 2= 11 votes, 3= 5 votes

Word of the Day:

1= 2 votes, 2= 6 votes, 3= 16 votes

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

### Vocabulary Survey

Please rate the way you liked learning new vocabulary.

1= I like this way the most; I learned a lot and was engaged!

2= This way was ok; I still learned but was dutiful when learning new words.

3= I like this one the least; it was hard for me to stay engaged or dutiful.

Place a score next to the three methods we used to learn new vocabulary.

\_\_\_\_\_ Shared Storybook Reading

\_\_\_\_\_ Vocabulary Four-Square Journal

\_\_\_\_\_ Word of the Day

Please explain why you chose the scores that you did.

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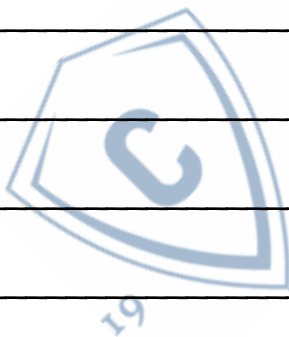
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Appendix C

Vocabulary Four-Square Template



Name:	Date:
WORD	SCHEMA
<p>SYNONYMS:</p> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>	
SENTENCE	SKETCH
