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## **Engaging Children with Useful Words: Vocabulary Instruction in a Third Grade Classroom**

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*This action research project investigated 2 different instructional procedures used for third grade students' vocabulary acquisition. We researched read-aloud trade books containing targeted vocabulary words with daily direct word learning strategies and compared that to a traditional definitional approach with 12 bilingual and 4 monolingual children. Instruction was limited to 6 words each week for 4 consecutive weeks. Findings suggested that children used more targeted words in oral and written communications when provided literature and word learning strategies.*

The purpose of this article is to describe an action research study conducted by a classroom teacher and a university professor. The classroom teacher was struggling with her use of weekly vocabulary packets while the university professor wanted to put theory to classroom practice. For several semesters the university professor had taught graduate preservice literacy students using Beck and McKeown's (2003) vocabulary techniques. For these reasons we decided to conduct an action research project.

Action research is defined as a systematic, reflective, collaborative process that examines school environments for the purpose of planning, implementing, and evaluating change (Mills, 2007). Good action research integrates theory, practice, and meaningful, concurrent application of results. Action research is an approach to professional development conducted by teachers as they systematically reflect upon their work and make changes in their practice.

On a daily basis, classroom teachers face questions that puzzle and concern them with regard to their interactions with children. It is sometimes difficult for teachers to change when those who promote change are not involved in the day-to-day teaching and learning of elementary students or when an innovation has been imposed from the "top down." Schools of education are filled with professors eager to apply their college textbook knowledge or research design and analysis skills to problems and questions that they consider to be important. The goal of this collaborative study was to explore vocabulary instruction to inform pedagogical knowledge, seek answers to questions regarding classroom curriculum, and improve methods courses at the preservice level.

This article shares the collaborative effort between a reflective teacher researcher and a university professor seeking to answer the question: What is the best method of teaching vocabulary to third grade students? We compared the instructional techniques of two conditions on third grade vocabulary acquisition. All of the children in this study were reading on grade level, although some received support services three times a week to maintain grade level expectancies. One approach used authentic read aloud literature containing target vocabulary (Beck &

McKeown, 2003), as well as teaching word learning strategies. Using this approach children are taught tier two vocabulary words (Beck & McKeown, 2003). Our children were taught vocabulary words connected to their everyday lives, as well as words and concepts they already knew. The second instructional method was a traditional approach which provided the same vocabulary words with a definitional approach with daily worksheets. The traditional form of instruction for vocabulary, having students look up dictionary definitions, is used in many schools with little evidence to support effectiveness. More specifically, we compared Beck & McKeown's (2003) text talk approach and directed word learning strategies with a definitional approach.

This study is informed by action research and guided by the following inquiry questions: Which instructional procedures for vocabulary acquisition support children's use of literacy? Do instructional strategies for teaching vocabulary differ in supporting third grade children in using vocabulary in oral and written communication?

### Research on Vocabulary Instruction

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 of the reading process. Vocabulary can be defined as the words we must communicate effectively (Armbruster, Lehr, & Osborn, 2001). Vocabulary is developed when a child begins to talk, usually between the ages of 1 to 2-years old. There is a relationship between children's language development and literacy achievement in school. To help determine the best instructional program for our third grade children and ensure that they develop the vocabulary knowledge crucial to reading comprehension and perform well on standardized tests, we reviewed the following three approaches to vocabulary instruction: (a) definitional, (b) contextual, and (c) direct vocabulary learning.

#### *Definitional vocabulary instruction*

Traditional vocabulary instruction relies heavily on definitions. Typically, children are given a list of words; they copy the definition

from a dictionary, and write sentences for each word based on the information in the definitions. Although dictionary definitions are used as an instructional tool for vocabulary instruction, there is little research about what makes definitions more or less an effective instructional method for teaching children vocabulary. Some studies (McKeown, 1993; Scott & Nagy, 1997) have documented the limitations of definitions and difficulties in using them. In McKeown's (1993) research with fifth grade children, dictionary definitions were used, and students were asked to generate sentences using the definitions. The results indicated the difficulty children have generating sentences from definitions. Scott and Nagy's (1997) experimental study with fourth and sixth grade students was consistent with McKeown's (1993) research. Students could not provide appropriate words from the definitions when they tried to decide whether or not the defined words were properly used in sentences.

Given what the literature says about the limitations of a definitional approach and knowing weekly packets with content area vocabulary words were used to teach vocabulary, we questioned whether this was an effective method. Is a traditional definitional approach of looking words up in a dictionary and creating sentences an effective approach to vocabulary instruction?

#### *Contextual vocabulary knowledge*

The second type of vocabulary knowledge, contextual, assumes that children will expand their vocabularies as a result of reading many books or having adults read aloud in school or home. With this type of instruction, new words are learned as children learn to read "from the context." Fourth grade students who listened to 2 stories read by the teacher along with a brief explanation of targeted vocabulary words learned significantly more new words and had better recall of the words 6 weeks later than students who did not receive an explanation (Brett, Rothlein, & Hurley, 1996). Elley (1989) conducted two experiments with reading stories aloud with first and second grade students. In the first experiment, when a pre-test was administered, the children knew an average of 9 of the 20 words in the story. A week later, the story was read three times, in 3-or 4-day intervals. No explanation was given, and

there was no discussion of the story. The children now knew 12 of the 20 words or a gain of 3 words over a week. When comparing the ability levels of children, Elley noted that gains were similar for all ability groups at 3 words, except for the lowest group, which gained 4 words over a week of reading. In a second study with second grade students, the importance of explanations and choice of stories were also reported (Elley, 1989).

Studies also show that prior exposure with informal teaching of vocabulary words can result in greater learning when reading passages and better readers can profit more from context than less skilled readers (Jenkins, Stein, & Wysocki, 1984; McKeown, 1985). In our inquiry, students were all reading on grade level, with 5 receiving additional support to maintain grade level expectancies.

Word learning may be more difficult for English Language Learners. Carlo et al. (2004) reported that relying on contextual vocabulary learning is even more problematic for English Language Learners than for English-only students because ELLs are less able to use context to acquire meaning of unfamiliar vocabulary words. Also, the words in text are sometimes unknown to them or they lack the command of English grammar to integrate all cueing systems to figure word meaning (p. 191).

The research does show that children have a fair chance of learning unknown words by reading text or having adults read aloud. Natural reading has the potential to make a contribution to vocabulary growth, particularly if adult scaffolding is provided. This leads to the last type of vocabulary knowledge, direct vocabulary learning.

#### *Direct vocabulary learning*

Direct, explicit instruction of vocabulary with continued support by the teacher is particularly important for struggling readers (Biemiller, 2003). Students need guidance in making associations and accommodations to their experiences. Armbruster, et al. (2001) say direct instruction helps students learn “words that represent complex concepts that are not part of the students’ everyday experiences” (p. 36). The

authors reported two ways vocabulary can be taught directly and explicitly: (a) providing students with specific word instruction, and (b) teaching students word-learning strategies.

From the literature, we know the following:

- there are limitations with definitional vocabulary knowledge;
- students learn vocabulary from reading text or listening to adults read aloud;
- there is variability in contextual vocabulary learning for ability groups and English Language Learners; and
- some vocabulary must be taught directly.

Using this information, we conducted the present study for ten weeks to extend the literature through a study of vocabulary acquisition under practical conditions in a third grade classroom. We wanted to provide our third grade students with instruction that would help them generate sentences using vocabulary words as well as use new words in writing. If our children had opportunities to learn useful words in the context of literature would they use these words in conversations with friends? Write stories about personal experiences with targeted vocabulary words? We weren't sure our children were using vocabulary words taught from worksheet packets so we began this classroom investigation. For clarity in reading we have italicized names of both groups in this study (e.g. *story with instruction group* and *traditional group*).

## Method

### *Participants*

Sixteen third grade students, 6 girls and 10 boys, participated in our action research. Noteworthy, the children in our study were all reading on grade level, ranging from 3.1 to 3.2. Five children were receiving instructional support to maintain grade level reading. This was important for our action research because children who enter fourth grade with significant vocabulary deficits show increasing problems with reading comprehension, even if they are able to recognize and decode words successfully (Biemiller, 1999, 2001). This is also true for children who

may speak a language other than English (Carlo, et al. 2004). In this study, all children were bilingual except for 4 monolingual participants, and they were equally distributed between the *story with instruction group* and *traditional group*. In addition to English, languages spoken were Spanish, Farsi, Hebrew, Korean, and Mandarin. We were interested to learn if our bilingual children in the *story with instruction group* would have a better command of English grammar to use vocabulary words correctly in a sentence on post-tests than our bilingual children in the *traditional group*. Differences in the use of words in the context of writing stories were also important.

### *Materials*

The books selected for the study were *Thank you, Mr. Falker* (Polacco, 1998), *The Name Jar* (Choi, 2003), *Mailing May* (Tunnell, 2000), and *Mirette On The High Wire* (McCully, 1997). These books had not been read to the children during this academic year. Tier two vocabulary words were selected from each trade book. (See Table 1). Beck, McKeown, and Kucan (2002) describe a three-tiered system for teaching words. The first tier consists of words that are high-frequency words or basic sight words. These are words that do not require much instruction. The second tier words are vocabulary words that frequently occur in a wide variety of texts. These are words children use in everyday conversations and are rarely taught through direct instruction. The last tier consists of words that are frequently used in the content areas of social studies or science. Students need to understand these words in order to learn more about the subject matter, but will not use them often in their everyday language. For this study, 6 tier two vocabulary words were taken from each of the pieces of literature. The same words were taught to both *story with instruction* and *traditional groups*.

### *Data Sources*

To see which instructional approach was an effective method for teaching vocabulary, data were triangulated among different data sources to enhance the accuracy of the study. We assessed weekly vocabulary words using audio-taped pre-tests and post-tests. Six weeks later a



delayed post-test was administered on the words to measure retention. All lessons and student conversations were audio-taped. In addition, we had students write weekly stories using the 6 targeted vocabulary words.

Table 1

*Trade Books and Vocabulary Words*

	<u>Week 1</u>	<u>Week 2</u>	<u>Week 3</u>	<u>Week 4</u>
Trade book	<i>Thank you Mr. Falker</i> , Polacco (1998)	<i>The Name Jar</i> , Choi (2003)	<i>Mailing May</i> , Rand (1997)	<i>Mirette on the High Wire</i> , McCully (1992)
Vocabulary words	cunning torture announced longed elegant discovered	pouch pronounced identity graceful gleamed carved	sigh bundle commence flabbergasted permissible scrambled	Devour Hesitate Intense Astonish Stray reclined

*Procedures*

In this ten week study, the instructional approaches between the two groups differed. The first group, known as the *story with instruction* group, was read a trade book throughout the week, given time for student discussion, and three days of direct word learning strategies each week. The second group, known as the *traditional* group, did not participate in the read aloud and was given daily worksheets to complete four days each week. They had opportunities to socially interact and work with partners to complete the weekly packets.

The two groups of children were given daily vocabulary instruction (See Table 2). All instruction was conducted by the classroom teacher. In

addition to daily discussion of the weekly trade book, the *story with instruction group* was given different direct word learning strategies. Stahl and Fairbanks (1986) researched thirty different vocabulary studies and found that successful instruction included not only definitions but also words taught in context. Therefore on the first day we shared the targeted vocabulary words in context by having a discussion about the words as they were encountered in the story. As each word was introduced, we wrote the word and definition on chart paper so the children could see the words as we discussed them. In contrast, the *traditional group* did not read or discuss the weekly trade book. Children worked with packets and we taught and assigned tasks. Each day the *traditional group* was given direct, explicit instruction for the worksheet task. On the first page of the packet the children wrote a dictionary definition for targeted words.

Table 2

*Weekly Plan for Vocabulary Instruction*

	<u>Story with instruction</u>	<u>Traditional</u>
Day 1	Introduce and discuss read-aloud Define target vocabulary words	Write a definition for target vocabulary words
Day 2	Recall words through student-talk Reread story Web words	Write words and definitions on index card
Day 3	Reread story Vocabulary four-square	Write words in sentences
Day 4	Reread story Choose correct synonym	Worksheet with cloze and matching exercises for target words

On day 2, before repeating the reading of the weekly trade book, we allowed the *story with instruction* children to talk about the words from the previous day's lesson. After reading the trade book, they independently supplied 4 definitions by webbing each targeted word. The *traditional group* wrote the word and definition on an index card and placed it in vocabulary card files for future study.

On day 3, the reading was repeated for *story with instruction group* and students completed a vocabulary four-square (Johns, Lenski, & Bergland, 2003). In the first square, children wrote a definition for the targeted vocabulary word. In the next square, they wrote the word in a sentence and drew a picture. The third square required a personal connection to the word. According to Beck et al. (2002), children will recall and use a word if they've been able to relate the word to their lives. Last, the children wrote a synonym for the targeted word in the fourth square.

The *traditional group* was asked to write a sentence using the word. Children are frequently asked by classroom teachers to produce sentences from dictionary definitions. Scott and Nagy (1997) found children select fragments of the definition familiar to them as the word's entire meaning. That is why we explicitly stated the following for this task in the children's packets: "Make sure you write a teaching sentence. A teaching sentence demonstrates your understanding of the word and its definition and uses the word in a new sentence."

On Day 4, we reviewed the words and discussed the trade book with *story with instruction group*. The children were given a list of several words and had to choose the correct synonym for each targeted word. Children in the *traditional group* had two tasks: (a) use the correct vocabulary word to complete a sentence and (b) match the targeted word with dictionary definition. Again, each task was modeled for the *traditional group* and we supported children by allowing them to work with partners to discuss other synonyms for the word.

### *Analysis*

It was important for us to meet weekly to analyze and discuss

student data for this action research study. Data analysis was an on-going process. An informal pre-test measure was orally administered to both groups each Monday, followed by administration of a post-test on Friday after the intervention. Administration of pre-and post-tests was similar. Each of the 6 words selected from each of the 4 trade books were orally presented to the students who were asked to tell a teaching sentence using the word. We totaled scores of the number of words in correct utterances and calculated them for each of the 6 words. The use of the word in the utterance was circled as accurate or inaccurate. We designed a scoring sheet (see Appendix) for weekly pre-and post-testing. Pre-and post-test data gathered through audiotapes were transcribed after each observation. Initial transcriptions were checked against the audiotape for accuracy by the classroom teacher and university professor. Mean scores for both groups were calculated for (a) accurate usage of the 6 weekly targeted vocabulary words and (b) the number of words used in a sentence to describe the 6 weekly targeted words. We calculated mean scores of the delayed post-test six weeks later. These scores would help determine the best instructional strategy for vocabulary acquisition.

A graduate assistant prepared transcriptions from audio-taped lessons as well as student conversations. Student dialogue would provide data to analyze student talk during read aloud lessons and the use of targeted words in peer conversations.

Writing samples were scored for correct word usage in a sentence each Friday (Figure 1). This allowed us to see if one instructional strategy influenced students' ability in making literacy connections in the context of writing more than another. We rated student writing samples numerically, with a value of 6 given to students who used all the weekly words accurately, and 0 for students who did not use any of the word meanings correctly. Mean scores were calculated and reported.

### Findings

An analysis of the pre-test, post-test, and delayed post-test measures, writing samples, and transcribed conversations during read-alouds revealed that at the end of this action research project, the

children in the *story with instruction* group had learned more vocabulary words than the *traditional group*. They were using the words in conversations as well as in story writing.

#### *Vocabulary Word Accuracy*

The gain scores from pre-test to post-test for knowing more words each week showed more progress than the traditional group as shown in Figure 2. The children receiving intervention services in the *story with instruction group* knew an average of 4-5 more words a week, whereas the students receiving intervention services in the *traditional group* knew an average of 2 more words a week. This is consistent with Elley (1989) who found stories with discussions and explanations over 3-or-4 day intervals improve vocabulary acquisition, particularly by children who needed extra support to maintain grade level reading. With regards to the delayed post-test, both groups were able to retain words learned after 6 weeks when the delayed post-test was administered except for week 4 when there was a 1-word difference between the post-test and delayed post-test. The reason could be within this six-week time period the children had a spring recess and they were not receiving vocabulary instruction.

#### *Correct Word Usage in Sentences*

The second important finding is the use of words in sentences. *The story with instruction group* used more words in a sentence to describe the targeted word on the post-test as shown in Figure 3. Students in this group were able to produce meaningful sentences that elaborated and expanded upon the word meaning. As previously stated, the bilingual students were equally distributed between groups. Mean scores for use of words in sentences for most of the bilingual students in the *story with instruction group* were higher than scores for bilingual children in the *traditional group*. Gersten and Baker (2000) examined instructional programs for bilingual students and found students rarely converse in typical classroom environments. We can assume daily opportunities to use language and discuss the six weekly targeted words helped the bilingual children in the *story with instruction group* to elaborate and use

more words in a sentence than the *traditional group* that did not have daily conversations.

Figure 1

*Writing Vocabulary Story*

Friday

Write a story using this week's vocabulary words.

devour	hesitate
intense	astonish
stray	recline

One night I hadn't eaten all day. So when I got dinner, I devoured it all.

When I went to bed I just reclined in it because I had a rough day.

It was the next day already and I was astonished that it was the next day already.

That day when I asked my mom if I

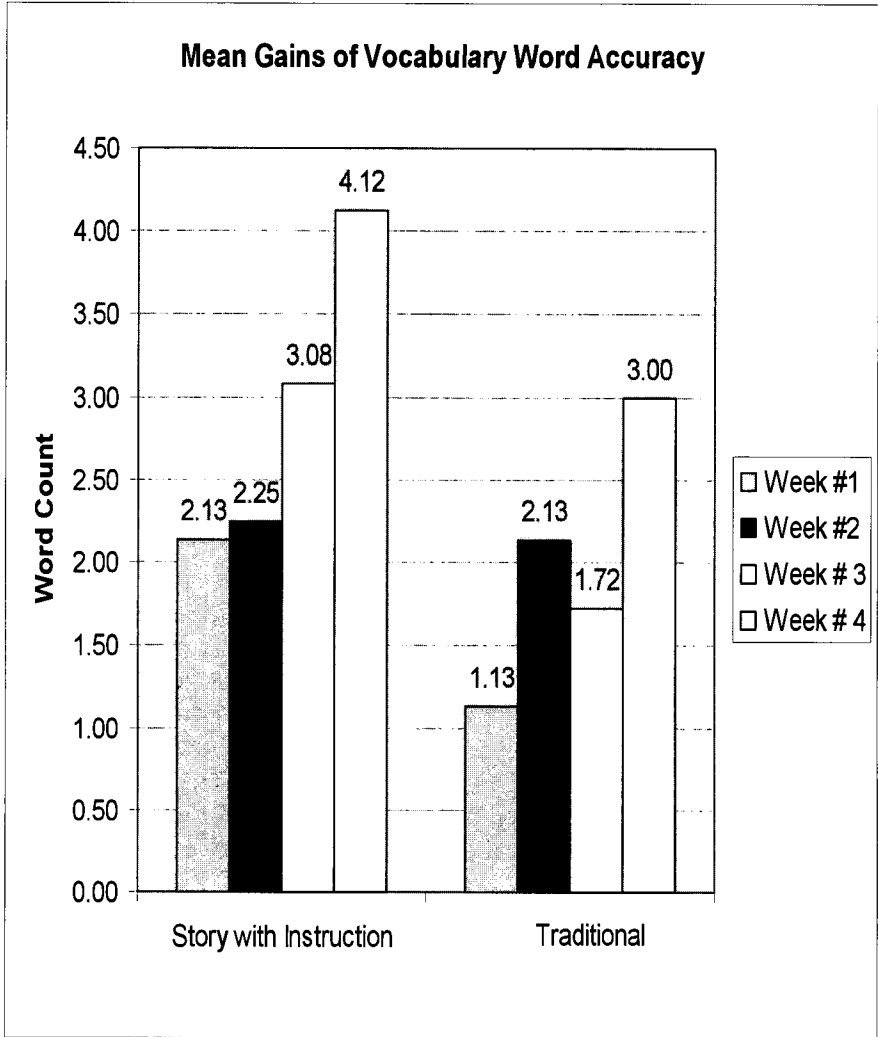
could have a play date she hesitated for a moment.

I knew she said no

so I rode my bike and fell off and I was in intense pain. When I fell a stray cat was beside me.

Figure 2

*Mean Gains of Vocabulary Word Accuracy*



Another finding with regard to use of words in sentences was the *story with instruction group* made connections to the weekly read-aloud. Transcribed post-test data showed evidence the text provided a model

and a common language for the students to use to share their understanding of the words. Even during the post test, several students referred to the literature to use the vocabulary word in a sentence. For example, in the first week of our inquiry one child said, "Like Trish, learning to read was torture for me" (Transcript, Week 1, February 7, 2006). Another used the vocabulary word elegant, "Remember in the story, Mr. Falkner was elegant. He looked very sharp" (Week 1, Transcript, February 7, 2006). In the third week, the word flabbergasted was used, "In the book the person was flabbergasted when the girl was allowed to go on the train with her grandma" (Transcript, Week 3, February 26, 2006). The *traditional group* did not participate in the weekly read aloud and therefore did not make similar connections with targeted vocabulary words when the post-test was administered.

### *Conversation with peers*

A descriptive analysis of transcripts supported findings through discussion and examples of connections to vocabulary words in conversations with peers. The goal of a comprehensive vocabulary program is to expand both receptive and expressive vocabularies, and to continually move words from the receptive level to the expressive level. Knowing a word's definition is not the same thing as being able to use that word in speech or to understand text in which the word appears. The students in the *story with instruction* group consistently discussed the week's vocabulary words. The students in the traditional group would talk to one another about a word while working on their weekly packets, but we did not find evidence of having a rich and sustained understanding of word meaning in conversations with peers. Examples from transcriptions support children's use of targeted words in dialogues with classmates for *story with instruction group* are below:

"Last night, my mom used the word cunning. She was talking about when she had a garage sale and a man put lots of things in a box and told my mom that he would give her \$5 for the box after he filled it with lots of things. My mom said that was very cunning of him" (Transcript, Week 1, February 7, 2006).

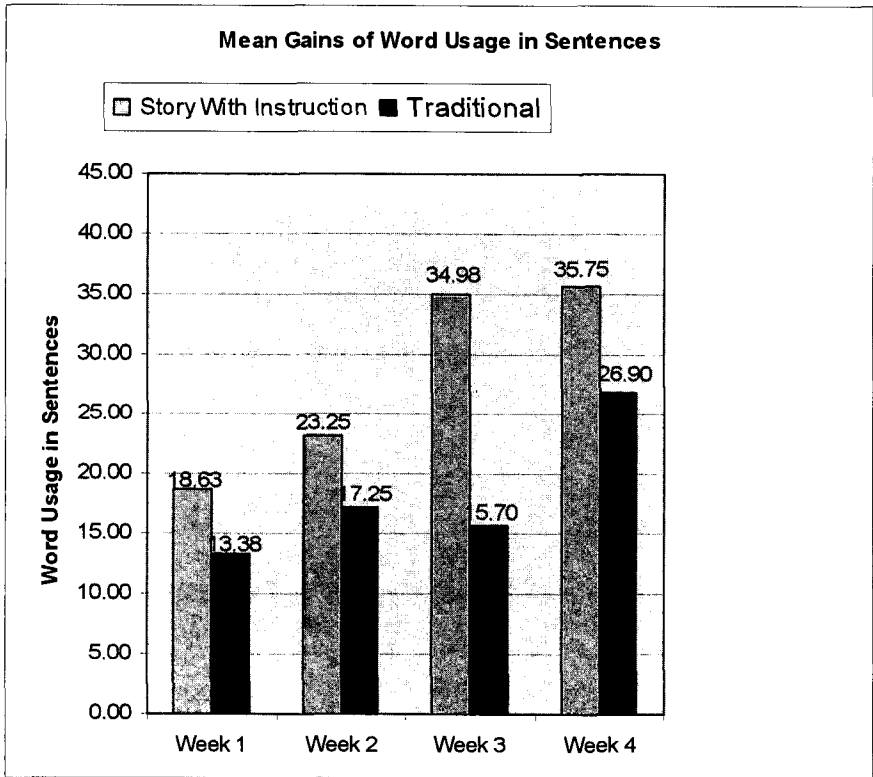


“Hey, we carved those fish in Industrial Arts. We carved them out of wood”. (Transcript, Week 2, February 16, 2006).

“When I was doing animal research last night. I read that a koala has a pouch. That was one of our vocabulary words. But, in the story it was a pouch to hold her name stamp and on the TV it was a pouch to carry a baby kangaroo...a joey” (Transcript, Week 2, February 16, 2006).

Figure 3

*Mean Gains of Word Usage In Sentences*



*Correct Word usage in Writing*

The last important finding involved the use of the targeted words in the context of writing. The *story with instruction group* correctly used about 60 percent of the target words in stories written each Friday over the 4 weeks of the study, as compared to a 20 percent decrease in use of written words by the *traditional group* (see Figure 4). Overall, we found our action research provided evidence of the value of repeated reading of authentic literature to children with direct learning of a few targeted vocabulary words.

Discussion

This study provides evidence of the value of using authentic literature with children to teach vocabulary that they will later use in oral and written communication. We found reading aloud, accompanied by explanations of unfamiliar words as they occur in the story, to be an effective method of teaching children the meaning of words. The use of tier two words (Beck, et al., 2002) and limiting the number of words taught each week also supported vocabulary learning and retention of the words for our third graders. Most tier two words are “likely to appear frequently in a wide variety of texts and in the written and oral language of mature language users” (p. 16). We taught 6 words a week that children would encounter in other reading material. Beck et al. recommend teaching between 5 to 10 words a week. The implications for teachers indicate that by selecting and limiting the number of high utility words from stories read aloud along with conversations about unfamiliar words, students can gain in vocabulary growth.

Our research also revealed that a classroom instructional approach can possibly provide an avenue for closing the achievement gap. Studies have long revealed the vocabulary differences between different groups of children. One of the most compelling findings from recent reading research is that children who get off to a poor start in reading rarely catch up. A child who comes from a literacy rich home environment starts the first grade with a vocabulary of about 20,000 words. A child who comes from a home environment that is lacking literacy rich activities and resources starts first grade with only a 5,000

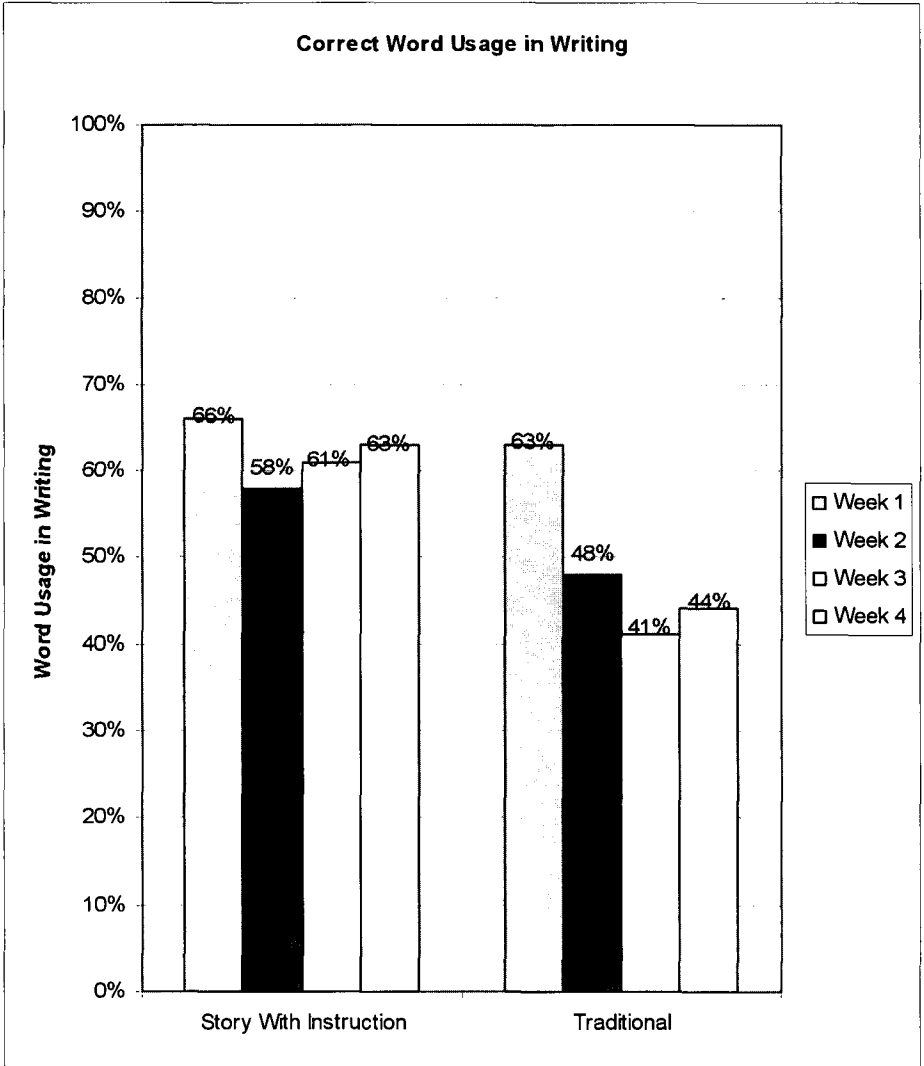
word vocabulary (Juels & Deffes, 2004). As Stanovich (1986) pointed out in his well-known paper on the "Matthew effects" (the rich get richer and the poor get poorer), better readers read more and continue to improve vocabulary and print skills, while poor readers read less and make little progress. The children in our study were all reading on grade level and the *story with instruction group* performed better than the *traditional group*. Even the children who were receiving instructional support to maintain grade level reading made better progress in the *story with instruction group* than the *traditional group*.

Research also suggests that word learning can be difficult for English Language Learners (Nation, 2001). In the *story with instruction group*, it was very important that the students comprehended the targeted vocabulary words in the trade books through conversations and revisiting the words throughout the week. Gersten, Baker, Haager, & Graves (2005) researched effective classroom practices for English Language Learners. Classrooms that made strong growth were taught using a systematic approach and used a variety of writing tasks. Some of these practices were used in our inquiry such as using vocabulary words in writing, working on semantic webs, and making personal connections. In our study direct vocabulary activities were incorporated each day into *the story with instructional* lessons. In sum, our action research supports findings from the National Reading Panel (2000) that teachers can influence the course of vocabulary acquisition and retention for the better regardless of differences in ability and language learning.

Results in this study indicate the value and benefits of undertaking action research projects. The classroom teacher abandoned the weekly packets and used planning time to evaluate and select tier two words from her third graders' favorite trade books. Time was allocated for student dialogue and conversations around targeted words. The teacher educator's practice improved by demonstrating the value of selecting targeted vocabulary words from high interest literature. Examples from this collaborative action research are included in class sessions on vocabulary instruction. More importantly, a framework was established for preservice teachers to use this study as a model for developing similar action research projects in field experiences.

Figure 4

Correct Word Usage in Writing



The challenge now facing teacher researchers is to begin structuring classroom inquiries. By adopting a researcher stance, posing questions that challenge assumptions, and seeking answers for those questions, we have learned how to support the language and vocabulary of third grade students. As poet Rainer Maria Rilke (1934) states, "Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves."

In conclusion, it is evident that this action research yielded important data and valuable findings. Helping students to develop a strong vocabulary requires more than having them look up words in a dictionary. Rather, students need instruction that will help them acquire new word knowledge and develop strategies to enable them to increase the depth of that knowledge over time. This research highlights some of the benefits of using authentic literature to teach vocabulary, provides data to support the use of explicit and direct vocabulary instruction, and paves the way for more in depth research on this topic.

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Appendix

*Pre-and-Post-Test Scoring Sheet*

**Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

Vocabulary words from *Thank you, Mr. Falker* (Polacco, 1998) are listed on the left. Children should use these words in sentences. The column in the center is used to record the number of words and indicate if the word was used accurately or inaccurately.

The column on the right is used to tally the words the child produces in the sentence.

Tier Two Word	Word Accuracy	Tally of Words
cunning	____ A ____ I	
torture	____ A ____ I	
announced	____ A ____ I	
longed	____ A ____ I	
elegant	____ A ____ I	
discovered	____ A ____ I	