Viridis Schools

How can a vocabulary display impact children's vocabulary, especially in writing?

Hoxton Garden Primary School, Upper Phase

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine the impact of a vocabulary display on the acquisition and application of vocabulary in children, with a focus on use in writing. For two terms, vocabulary displays were created in classrooms within the Upper Phase, which incorporated a number of different elements, including opportunities for children to research the definition of a 'word of the week', search for antonyms and synonyms and finally use the word in a sentence. All teachers within the phase found that vocabulary displays had a positive effect on the learning and use of vocabulary by children thus improving oracy.

Introduction

Hoxton Garden Primary School is a multi-cultural primary school situated between three estates in Hackney, London. The proportion of pupils eligible for the pupil premium is higher than average and a significant number of children enter Nursery and Reception below the expected level for their age across a number of areas of learning. The proportion of pupils from minority ethnic groups and those who speak English as an additional language are much higher than the national average.

Following conversations throughout phase meetings, it became apparent that vocabulary was a key development point across Key Stage 2. This was further supported by Year 6 teachers, who discussed that children found the vocabulary questions in the KS2 SATs papers particularly challenging. Duke and Moses (2003) discussed the effectiveness of raising word consciousness and encouraging children to recognise when they have encountered new words.

At the time of the action research beginning, there was no specific way to teach vocabulary across the school. Teachers would visit vocabulary during Literacy lessons, but found that this had little impact on the use of vocabulary in writing over time. Schmitt (2010) emphasised the importance of how teaching vocabulary helps pupils understand and communicate with others more effectively in English. In a school where the percentage of pupils with English as an additional language (EAL) is much greater than the national average, we felt that a more specific teaching strategy for vocabulary was important.

The aim of the National Curriculum (2014) is for children to acquire a wide vocabulary and understanding of grammar. In reading, children are required to have an increasingly wide knowledge of vocabulary and opportunities must be provided for teachers to enhance pupils' vocabulary and teach them to work out and clarify the meanings of unknown words. It is a statutory requirement for Key Stage 2 in schools to use relevant strategies to build vocabulary, emphasise pupils' enjoyment and understanding of language to support reading and writing, to develop children's' confidence in choosing appropriate academic vocabulary and to promote the use of dictionaries to check the spellings and meanings of words.

As a phase team, we discussed the different ways in which we could meet the requirements of the National Curriculum and foster of a love and enthusiasm for learning new vocabulary. Newton, Padak and Rasinski (2008) discussed that visual vocabulary is useful for increasing word recognition and understanding and that it is also a good way of promoting vocabulary development. This is also supported by Duke and Moses (2003) who discussed the importance of creating a language rich environment, where displays are created that can capture new, exciting and unusual vocabulary to use. Fisher and Blachnowicz (2005) further supported this and stated that learning environments should be word-rich.

The basis of the research was to examine the effects that a vocabulary display had on the children's use of vocabulary. To investigate this, teachers created a vocabulary display within the classroom. Along with the children, the class teacher chose a 'Word of the Week' which was then displayed.

Children were then given opportunities to discuss the meaning of the words and find synonyms and antonyms. Finally, in partners, children were given the opportunities to use the word/words in a sentence. The words chosen for 'Word of the Week' were based on links to Literacy lessons, class novels or topics. Beck, McKeown and Kucan (2012) discussed that words chosen should be based on pupil interest and opportunities for numerous exposures to the words in multiple contexts. This was supported throughout the action research, as the school currently has a curriculum that allows for many cross-curricular and creative links. Duke and Moses (2003) also reiterated the importance of repetition in the learning of new vocabulary; children must engage with a word several times in different contexts before it is learnt.

Research Process

The project was co-ordinated by the Phase Leader and supported by four teachers within the Upper Phase. At the beginning of the research project, the Phase Leader met with class teachers to discuss the learning and application of vocabulary inside the classroom. Assessment grids (appendix 1) and Literacy books were looked at across the phase to get an initial understanding of the different levels of vocabulary within the year group. In year 6, writing portfolios and gap analysis were looked at, to get an initial assessment of vocabulary use.
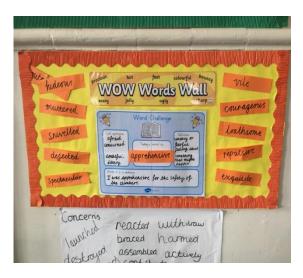
Next, through discussions during phase meetings, teachers discussed what elements would be useful on a vocabulary display. As a collective team, the following components were decided:
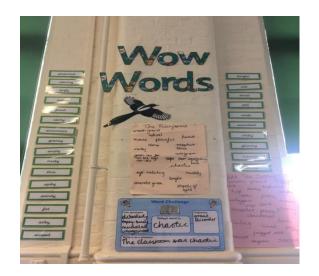
- Word of the week
- Antonyms
- Synonyms
- Definition
- Using the word in a sentence

Once the vocabulary displays (Fig. 1 and 2) were created in classrooms, children and teachers began choosing words for the display and children were given

opportunities to search for definitions in dictionaries and synonyms/antonyms in thesauruses. Schmitt (2010) discussed that learning vocabulary is more meaningful and beneficial when pupils have opportunities to interact with their teachers and vocabulary. We therefore placed emphasis on the fact that using the vocabulary wall was a process for both teachers and children to benefit from.

Fig. 1 and 2

Children were encouraged to use the vocabulary display throughout the week and were given opportunities to add words to the wall as the week progressed. When marking books and discussing work with children, teachers were able to identify whether the vocabulary used on the vocabulary display had been used throughout the week in a variety of different lessons and activities. Teachers also used the assessment grids to examine whether criteria related to vocabulary were being achieved. Teachers in Year 6 monitored the gap analysis closely to assess whether there was any improvement in questions involving vocabulary in reading and antonyms and synonyms in SPaG.

Weekly feedback during phase meetings provided an opportunity for dialogue between the professionals who were undertaking the project. This provided essential insight to how well the project was working in different classrooms and how children were responding to the vocabulary display.

As the programme developed, it became apparent that the vocabulary displays in classrooms were improving the provision during Guided Reading; teachers began further exploring how vocabulary displays can affect Guided Reading lessons.

At the end of the project, the Phase Leader met with teachers to discuss their thoughts, feelings and effectiveness of the vocabulary displays. Teachers provided a wide range of books to showcase evidence following the end of the project.

Findings

The children responded very well to the vocabulary displays within the classrooms and there were a number of quick noticeable differences. Children's' engagement and enjoyment in the process of learning new vocabulary increased and teachers expressed that the displays promoted a love of learning vocabulary. Children also became more confident in their ability to use dictionaries and thesauruses. In all classes, teachers said that children were using dictionaries and thesauruses more often.

As a result of looking through books when marking and during phase meetings, it became apparent that children were using the new vocabulary from the display frequently in their writing. For example new words such as 'zealously' and 'nonchalant' were often found recurring in year 5 books.

Teachers used assessment grids to provide an insight into whether children were emerging, developing or secure in meeting the assessment criteria for vocabulary in writing. The assessment grids showed that children were secure in modifying adjectives for emphasis, using a wide range of powerful verbs and using technical and precise vocabulary in non-narrative writing. (Fig. 3)
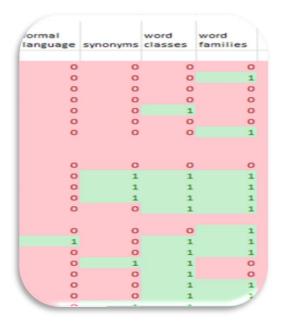
Fig. 3

In Year 6, teachers found that children were confident in making vocabulary choices which were imaginative and words were used precisely and appropriately to create impact across a range of narrative genres.

After discovering links between the vocabulary display, teachers stated that the when clarifying during Guided Reading lessons, children were able to understand the meaning of words quicker and were able to provide examples of synonyms and antonyms. Examining the gap analysis in Year 6 showed that the percentage of children answering questions related to vocabulary correctly was increasing over time. (Fig. 4 and 5) Teachers expressed that they felt this was as a result of using and championing the vocabulary display in the classroom.

Fig. 4 and 5

October Gap Analysis   January Gap Analysis

Teachers found that the vocabulary display was a fantastic resource inside the classroom. Unlike Science and Topic displays, the vocabulary display was a working display that was constantly changing and used by the children as an interactive learning tool. Teachers felt that it showed the children the importance of using powerful, appropriate vocabulary and learning new words.

After discovering the continued use of new vocabulary throughout Literacy books, teachers began to explore to use of vocabulary in Science, Topic and homework books. Although there were clear benefits in relation to writing in Literacy and then in reading, teachers found that the vocabulary displays didn't have a direct impact to the use of vocabulary in Science and sometimes in Topic. They expressed that the vocabulary on their display had a greater focus on the use in writing during Literacy lessons and at times Topic lessons. In Homework books, teachers provided evidence to show that vocabulary used on the vocabulary display had been used in homework tasks and activities. Again, teachers felt the children had thought more carefully about the vocabulary that they were using in their writing.

Impact and Conclusion

Following the application of the vocabulary display strategies teachers felt that, in order to improve vocabulary across the phase, children need to understand the importance of learning new vocabulary and foster an enjoyment in doing so. Teachers expressed a desire to continue to use vocabulary displays in their teaching practice, as they found huge benefits. As a result of the vocabulary displays, children are enjoying the learning of new vocabulary and are being careful with their word choices in writing. Children are also more confident when using and engaging with dictionaries and thesauruses. Further research how vocabulary displays can be used to positively impact vocabulary acquisition and application in non-core subjects would be an interesting focus of new projects.

The findings of this project are based heavily on teacher judgements and opinions. Next time greater consideration of how to best measure the impact of the project and decide on a clearer baseline of evidence would provide a more objective measure perhaps by using a smaller sample when exploring evidence in books and assessment grids.

References

Beck I and McKeown M (2007) 'Increasing your low income children's oral vocabulary repertoires through rich and focused instruction' *The Elementary School Journal Vol 107, No 3*

Blachnowicz, C. and Fisher, P. (2000) *Teaching Vocabulary in all classrooms.* Columbus, Ohio: Merrill Prentice Hall.

Blachnowicz, C. and Fisher, P. (2005) *'Vocabulary Instruction in a Remedial Setting.'* Reading and Quarterly, 21:281-300

Department for Education (2013) *The National Curriculum in England: Key Stages 1 and 2 framework document.* Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-curriculum-in-england-primary-curriculum

Duke, N. and Moses, A. (2003) *10 Research Tested Ways to Build Children's Vocabulary.* New York, NY: Scholastic Inc.

Appendices

Appendix 1

	Emerging		Developing		Secure	
Sentence Structure						
I can compose and rehearse sentences orally including dialogue						
I can use a range of simple and complex sentences						
I can discuss modelled writing and show an understanding of structure						
Vary sentence structure, using different openers						
Punctuation						
I can use capital letters, full stops, question marks and exclamation marks accurately						
I can use commas after fronted adverbials						
I can use speech marks and other punctuation e.g. The conductor shouted, "sit down!"						
I can use apostrophes to mark singular and plural possession						
I can proof read my work for punctuation errors and edit my work						
Vocabulary						
I can use specific noun phrases to add detail (e.g. biting cold wind).						
I can use adverbs and adjectives to create variety and add interest						
I can modify adjectives for emphasis						
I can use a wide range of powerful verbs						
I can use technical and precise vocabulary in non-narrative writing						
Sentence Structure						
I can compose and rehearse sentences orally including dialogue						
I can use a range of simple and complex sentences						
I can discuss modelled writing and show an understanding of structure						
Vary sentence structure, using different openers						