

READING RESEARCH REPORT

Elna May Cooke
cookee@co.st-louis.mn.us

Teaching Context

The class involved in this research project was within the Northeast Regional Community Corrections (NERCC) facility. NERCC is a minimum security community corrections facility. There are 150 residents with sentences varying from a few months to over a year. Part of the philosophy of NERCC is for residents to make positive changes in their lives. Having an education is essential for these positive changes. All residents who do not have a GED or high school diploma are required to attend school 3 hours a day, 5 days a week. Educational programming provides services for 30-40 students per day divided between day and evening sections.

This research was carried out with GED students. Instruction presented challenges. The classroom population was constantly changing in number, abilities, motivation, and length of stay in class; thus making it difficult to find adequate time and a cohesive group.

The Problem

Much of the GED instruction utilized texts which model reading passages on the GED Test. The students also took GED Practice Tests in the five GED Test areas. Students in the GED class demonstrated that they could read and decode reading material in these texts with little difficulty. However, they often experienced difficulty understanding what they read. The lack of vocabulary in the subject area contributed to this lack of comprehending the material.

Another significant problem that was more difficult to address was the motivation of the learner. If a direct result was not seen, such as the ability to pass the GED test, the frustration level grew. A short time frame of 3-4 months to pass all 5 tests was also a factor.

Because lack of vocabulary in the subject area was seen to impede comprehension, a research question was developed in social studies reading instruction.

Research Question

What happens to Social Studies GED Practice Test scores when I directly teach vocabulary from the Steck Vaughn GED social studies textbook from February to May, 3 hours per week?

The following procedures were undertaken to provide instruction in vocabulary development in social studies. It was expected that improved skills in vocabulary development would increase comprehension and an ability to pass the GED Social Studies Test.

To make the direct teaching more meaningful, the class was designed to be learner driven. Several strategies were employed:

- At the beginning of each lesson, important vocabulary words for the lesson were taught.
- The class discussed the meanings of the words.

- Prefixes, suffixes, and root words were discussed.
- Part of the lesson was read together.
- Each student kept a log of difficult words.

At first, much more time was spent on direct teaching of prefixes, suffixes, and root words. It became apparent that this process was too slow for the learners. Group discussion of identified vocabulary words, reading the lesson together to understand context clues, and collectively answering some of the practice questions seemed to be more beneficial.

Working directly with the group of 2-3 students in both the day and evening sections seemed to create positive learning environment.

The initial model for addressing the research question had to be revised to meet the needs of the students. Early in the lessons it was discovered that a lengthy introduction and pre-teaching of selected vocabulary were not holding the students' attention. What evolved was much different from what was anticipated, yet much more rewarding to the teacher and the students.

The redefined process of teaching the lesson consisted of:

- reviewing the previous lesson
- reading the introduction together (students with difficulty reading orally were not required to read)
- working through each reading passage
 - read
 - develop vocabulary when necessary
 - study the comprehensive questions
 - focus on lesson's study skills

Data Collection

Three types of data were collected:

- A record of the daily lessons taught was maintained.
- A practice GED test was given at the time of enrollment and an exit practice test was given.
- An informal interview at the time of enrollment was completed with each learner

Information from intake interviews:

Gary - Gary's length of sentence was only days. In the initial interview, he expressed a desire for the GED and assured the instructor that he had the ability to do well on the test. He was reluctant to take part in the direct teaching; but participated when others read, and he answered orally. After 3 weeks of class he took the post test and passed with a 430. He felt since 410 was passing, he did not need to study anymore. His actual test score was 380.

Alex and Steve- Alex and Steve's interviews paralleled each others. Both explained they could read well but did not retain the information. Their desire to obtain the GED was expressed, but with some doubts especially after the pre-test results. The process of the reading research was explained, and both committed to taking part.

David - David arrived late and spent less time in direct instruction. He was a very active hyper man who would have much rather been doing physical labor. No desk job for him. Since NERCC has a requirement for education if the resident has no GED or high school diploma, his commitment was to get this done as fast as possible.

Data Analysis

At first, analyzing the data seemed a daunting task, yet with the help of the reading research group input, the data began to make sense. The quantitative data were graphed, visually showing the results. The qualitative data, initial interview and ongoing observation, were carefully considered and reported in paragraph form.

Findings

Pre- and post test scores are recorded in the following chart:

Social Studies Practice Test and Official GED Test Results

	<u>Gary</u>	<u>Alex</u>	Steve	<u>David</u>
Pre (Practice GED)	340	320	340	440
Post (Practice GED)	430	480	550	480
Official GED Test	380	590	580	420

Students' scores improved in the post-test; but, even more importantly, their study skills dramatically improved. As the findings show, David and Gary did not do as well in the official GED Test. They were the students who were not in class as long and had a rigid view of what they "needed to do" to pass.

Alex and Steve were able to make sense of the reading passages; and not only with increased vocabulary, but they improved their study skills. The history unit was done together; but as time passed and their skills improved, they were increasingly able to work independently with positive results. This is an amazing accomplishment, when, at the beginning giving an assignment would have left the student "staring at the wall" and then rushing through the assignment with many mistakes. To see their development of the ability to focus on a lesson and ultimately pass the Social Studies GED Test was very gratifying for all.

Conclusions

In this research with four GED students, using direct instruction of vocabulary did improve students' test scores. As there were other variables involved in the instruction, one cannot conclude that the improvement in comprehension and passing the tests were due to direct instruction of vocabulary alone.

As a result of this experience, I realize I must find/take time to:

- build rapport
- group appropriate students
- adjust to student needs

My theories for the improvements are:

- direct instruction
- adjusting to student needs
- student taking charge of learning
- focusing a specific GED lesson from the Steck-Vaughn text.

The students appear to be concrete thinkers and learners needing to see positive results.

Any negative outcomes I feel were because:

- lack of time
- poor basic reading skills
- inability of student to concentrate
- lack of personal desire to learn
- lack of vision for need of the GED
- past negative experiences in school

Some of my pre-conceived ideas were challenged and changed after processing the data. This will be noted and I will be more aware of the need to individualize in my unique ABE classroom to address the many issues.

Next Steps

The entire process of the reading research project was a great experience for me. What stands out is the diversity of the students and how each have individual needs. I will diligently attempt to address each student's needs and listen to their educational goals.