

Direct Vocabulary Teaching: Does it Work With Advanced ESL Students?

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Teaching Context

Assisting students four mornings a week in a drop-in GED setting is my main teaching assignment. The drop-in center is in a large suburban learning center. The GED learners are both American-born and immigrants, ranging in age from 16 to 52. I also teach an advanced ESL class one night a week, most of whom plan to get a GED and/or attend college in the future.

The Problem

With these academic aspirations, the students need to comprehend reading material in the GED subject areas, and I have observed that the vocabulary that students encounter frequently prevents them from understanding reading material and test questions. Many immigrant students state that they are aware that unfamiliar vocabulary keeps them from understanding the material. In spite of their skill in using context clues, word meanings too often just cannot be ascertained.

This struggle with academic vocabulary has been a dilemma not only for my students, but for me. I saw their need to build up their word knowledge, yet I have also been aware that students' study time is limited. I knew that reading in GED content areas or reading in general would expand their vocabulary knowledge, but I doubted that many students had the time to do the amount of reading necessary to expose them to all the words they need. This predicament led me to wonder if it's possible to increase vocabulary by direct vocabulary study. Could students with a GED goal and higher education plans, but lacking the necessary academic vocabulary, augment their vocabulary through designated study times for vocabulary only?

Research Question

Deciding it was worth a try and getting a commitment from students eager to attempt a vocabulary study time, I launched a mini-class. By offering this class, I hoped to answer my research question: **What happens to vocabulary scores of advanced ESL learners when I provide direct vocabulary instruction?**

To address my research question I took the following steps.

Just thinking about the huge amount of English vocabulary (over 500,000 entries in the Oxford English Dictionary!), I wondered if delving into vocabulary instruction was too daunting a task. Also, I felt the pressure of limited class time, since we were beginning our third six-week school session out of four for the year. Still, if there was any change of helping the dedicated students on their way to further academic endeavors, I wanted to try.

In searching out materials and ideas about vocabulary, I decided to focus on the study of root word and affix meanings. Since many English words are related by common roots or bases,

learning the meanings of these could unlock the meaning of many words. Greek and Latin root words are also commonly used in academic writing, so this seemed to be a beneficial area to learn as preparation for students' further academic study. Thus, the approach was to study a group of roots and/or affixes during our class time. I thought this type of direct work on vocabulary could lead to improved scores on adult academic vocabulary tests. One textbook, Developing Vocabulary Skills, divided 34 lessons on roots and affixes into 5 sections. I chose lessons from 4 of the sections in an attempt to introduce the students to a sampling of what I felt were common, useful roots and affixes.

I arranged to meet with five advanced ESL students three times weekly for half-hour sessions. The sessions were scheduled in the morning before the drop-in GED time, so that I could be free to facilitate the class rather than attend to drop-in students. In my night class, six students participated and we used one hour of class time for vocabulary study. I had each student take an ABLE 2, Form E Vocabulary Test as a pre-test. This gave a beginning score for each student. A post-test, using Form F, was given at the end of the project.

Our vocabulary study session always involved learning the meaning of several affixes or roots followed by a study of the meaning of several words containing those affixes or roots. For example, one typical lesson focused on five "roots of action," based on a lesson in the textbook, Developing Vocabulary Skills (Heinle and Heinle). Students could read each root, its definition, and then see three exemplary words derived from that root. Each word was used in a sentence provided for the students, with the intent of making the word's meaning clear. During class we practiced pronouncing the words and sentences, and we discussed meanings. The following morning, students reviewed the root words and their meanings with a quick game of concentration. Then, in pairs, students orally reviewed the fifteen sentences containing the vocabulary words. This second day, as a strategy for remembering the vocabulary words, students answered yes or no to fifteen written questions containing the vocabulary words, and then discussed their answers in order to further practice the words. As a way to help students personalize and remember the vocabulary words, every yes/no question was a "personal" question related to the student's own life. For example, "Did you ever see or hear a commotion somewhere?" Finally, by the third class meeting, the students took a quiz on the fifteen words. (See Appendix for a more detailed description of a typical lesson.) In the night class, it should be noted that we used the same lessons, but had to carry out the process in just one hour of class time.

Data Collection

I collected these data:

- ABLE 2 Vocabulary Test pre- and post-test scores
- CASAS pre- and post-test scores
- Attendance
- A journal of observations and reactions, including unsolicited student comments and reaction
- Notations of students' reactions to the direct vocabulary study

Data Analysis

I compared ABLE vocabulary pre- and post-test scores.
I compared CASAS pre- and post-test scores.

Findings

Test results, combining both morning and evening scores, are provided in this chart.

CASAS and ABLE Pre- and Post-test Scores

	Mean	n	Standard Deviation	Difference in mean and significance
CASAS pre-test	228.90	10	9.09	+7.7, p=.007
CASAS post-test	236.60	10	10.38	
CASAS GLE pre-test	8.0	10	2.36	+1.5, p=.009
CASAS GLE post-test	9.5	10	2.41	
Vocabulary pre-test	14.82	11	4.40	+3.35, p=.007
Vocabulary post-test	18.18	11	4.69	
Vocabulary GLE Pre-test	5.26	11	1.22	+1.39, p=.003
Vocabulary GLE Post-test	6.65	11	1.84	

According to these results, all of the differences between students' pre- and post-tests scores are statistically significant, which indicates growth. However, because the sample size is so small, this significance cannot be stated officially. Also, since there was no control group in my study, the growth shown cannot be positively attributed to the direct vocabulary teaching that took place. Although the students did learn more over this time period in both vocabulary and reading comprehension, the direct effect of the vocabulary study time on that learning can't be proven.

Conclusions

The answer to my research question, "What happens to vocabulary test scores when I provide direct vocabulary instruction?" is that vocabulary test scores increased. CASAS scores also increased. Although I can't prove that the increases were due to direct vocabulary instruction alone, judging from not only the data and from students' positive reactions to studying vocabulary, it appears that direct vocabulary instruction is beneficial. Some students' individual discoveries convinced me that there is a place for at least short-term vocabulary study.

One example was a Slovakian student who was gratified to finally realize why she often had been unable to find specific words in her dictionary. It was because the words had prefixes that were omitted from the word's entry in her dictionary. One Taiwanese student stated that she needed the vocabulary we were studying even more than she needed instruction and practice in writing. Another learner, a GED student from Iraq, often asked for worksheets from the class,

but was unable to come early to attend. She said she never knew there were “number roots.” One other class participant commented that our scheduled class meetings “forced her to study,” which she felt she wouldn’t have otherwise done. Two other immigrant GED students found it helpful to study the vocabulary found in GED practice test questions. They improved their GED practice test scores by focusing just on test questions’ special wording as well as on vocabulary used in GED test multiple choice answers.

Based on the learning shown by the data and by these reported examples of learning, I think it is important for teachers to at least give students an awareness of root words and affixes, and also to provide class discussion of vocabulary needs and strategies for building their vocabularies.

Next Steps

My study has inspired me to find an even better way to offer vocabulary study to ESL and GED students. I would start with opening up dialogue opportunities with classes as well as individual students to find out about vocabulary struggles and strategies students have. Some of my ideas for the future are to:

- Offer a short-term vocabulary class limited to the vocabulary used in GED questions and answers
- Offer a daily or bi-weekly brief study session focusing on only one root word or prefix or suffix per session
- Schedule a brief time during advanced ESL class where we focus on one suffix or prefix, including its meaning and grammatical form that it signals
- Provide, during ESL class, examples of and practice of analyzing words according to roots and suffixes.

A Typical Lesson

One typical lesson focused on “roots of action.” We studied five roots with their varying forms:

1. pos, pon = to put, to place, to stand
Words: dispose, deposit, postpone
2. stru, struct = to build, create; something built or made
Words: construct, destruction, obstruction
3. clos, club = to close, shut, finish; close off by itself
Words: conclude, exclude, include
4. plic, ply, plex, pli = bend, fold layer, entwined, difficult, hard
Words: complex, explicit, complicate
5. fic, fac, fea, fec = to make, create, produce; something made
Words: effect, defect, manufacture

These root words came from a lesson in the textbook, Developing Vocabulary Skills. Students knew they could study all 60 words listed outside of class if they chose, but for our class I chose 15 words (listed above) to concentrate on. So, on a separate worksheet, students could find those root words along with 3 words to study for each root word category. Listed was a definition of the word followed by a sentence using the word. For example:

Dispose = throw away

The bread was very old and dry, so we had to _____ of it.

Students copied the word on the blank left in the illustrative sentence. After this silent reading and writing, we practiced pronouncing the sentences, and discussed the meanings of both the vocabulary words and their sentences.

The next morning, we reviewed the root words and their meanings with a quick game of concentration. In pairs, the students then reviewed the sentences with oral reading. Then we used a “personal questions worksheet,” on which students simply wrote a yes or n answer to each question, and would be prepared to explain and discuss their answers, as a way of practicing and personalizing the vocabulary words. Some questions were: “Can you remember something you didn’t want to dispose of, but you had to?”; “Did you ever see something getting constructed?”; “Do you remember how a good story or movie concluded?”

Finally, by the third class meeting, the students took a quiz on those same 15 words. For this lesson, they saw the same original sentences in a different order, and they had to choose the correct word from the list of 15 words.