The Importance of Activating and Building Knowledge

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The Importance of Activating and Building Knowledge

Abstract
Introduction: The following exchange occurred in a third-grade classroom:

"I thought grit was a food. It doesn't make sense," Saida commented. "Yes, there are grits that people eat. Grits are ground corn, however, in this story the word is grit. Do you remember when it was really windy outside and dust and dirt got on you? That was grit," Mrs. Henning explained.
Table 2. Course Objective Reflection Rubric - Aggregated Results reveals that students in the virtual section of the course outscored the students in the face-to-face section on all six objectives. The most significant difference in the two sections' scores was the fifth objective at 15% followed closely by the third objective at 13%.

Limitations of the Project

A definite limitation in this project is the low total number. Due to a change in class assignment, the investigator has not taught a face-to-face and virtual section of the course in the same semester. Another limitation of this project is determining if the COR results were directly related to the course format or if other factors impacted the results.

Future Questions and Implications

The results suggest other questions should be examined. When looking at the aggregated results, were the virtual students' scores higher because the COR was writing intensive? Since the average age of virtual students enrolled in the course was higher than the average age of students taking the class face-to-face, was the chronological age of students a factor in virtual students' higher scores? A future implication of this project is to collect data in future courses to increase the data set. A second implication is to examine the disaggregated results for score trends on each objective. For example, scrutinizing an objective with the lowest overall score in both sections may indicate a need for additional instruction on that topic by the investigator. In conclusion, the project results appear to correspond to the review of literature cited in the paper suggesting that self-reflection leads to more positive online learning outcomes.

References


The Importance of Activating and Building Knowledge

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Introduction

The following exchange occurred in a third-grade classroom: “I thought grit was a food. It doesn’t make sense,” Saidam commented. “Yes, there are grits that people eat. Grits are ground corn, however, in this story the word is grit. Do you remember when it was really windy outside and dust and dirt got on you? That was grit,” Mrs. Henning explained. “That was gross. It got in my hair and teeth,” replied Saidam. In this exchange, the grade-level teacher made a meaningful connection between a recent experience and the new vocabulary word. This connection allowed the teacher to clarify the student’s existing understanding of the vocabulary word grit which was affecting her comprehension of the story. For vocabulary instruction to be effective, students must relate new words to their existing background knowledge (Author, 2008). The purpose of this article is to explain the importance of teachers’ activating and building students’ background knowledge as a way of enhancing their culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students’ vocabulary development.

A student’s background knowledge is ever changing by academic experiences, social customs, facts, or emotions that are encountered and learned (Marzano, 2004). Background knowledge plays a significant role in a student’s understanding of the new vocabulary being introduced as well as their retention of the word’s meaning for later use. Background knowledge is what students use to develop, expand, and refine vocabulary word meanings (Rupley, Logan, & Nichols, 1999). By activating students’ background knowledge, information is brought to the surface where it is ready to be applied, used to stimulate questions, and build interest in the targeted vocabulary throughout the lesson. Educators are able to use this knowledge to guide learning and to help clarify students’ misconceptions about specific vocabulary terms.

Activating Students’ Existing Knowledge

Activating students’ background knowledge about vocabulary involves teaching students to access the information they have stored in their permanent memory. For educators, the ultimate goal of vocabulary instruction is to have students store their understandings of vocabulary words in their permanent memory to be accessed, consciously or unconsciously, whenever needed (Stahl, 1999). Such activation is important for both native and non-native English students, but is particularly critical for CLD students who may struggle with new and unfamiliar vocabulary. CLD students need more than just a brief introduction of the vocabulary to help alleviate their comprehension difficulties because of their English language proficiency limitations. They need numerous opportunities to discuss and reflect on the relationships among concepts as well as connections between the content and their background knowledge. These meaningful interactions enable CLD students to
deepen their understanding of the vocabulary concepts throughout the lesson. Meaningful instruction that meets the needs of all students starts by building a solid foundation by tapping into their existing knowledge.

Educators must be mindful that all students have background knowledge; however, some students may not have the academic knowledge of the English language necessary to be successful in an academic setting. Even in classrooms where all the students have similar backgrounds (e.g., culturally, linguistically, economically), the students do not have identical prior and background experiences to draw upon. Within any particular cultural group, there are considerable differences between students. Students come with different prior experiences, values, and knowledge unique to their ethnicities and personal backgrounds.

CLD students’ experiences may be very different culturally and linguistically from those of their peers (Rea & Mercury, 2006) and teachers. Educators must beware of these mismatches in background knowledge; otherwise, such circumstances can have a negative impact on students’ learning opportunities and academic success. Additionally, educators must consider that the educational system is based on European American cultural norms and values (Gay, 2000), which can be very different from those of CLD students.

According to Moll, Amanti, Neff, and Gonzalez (1992), the knowledge that CLD students bring with them to school is known as their funds of knowledge. This knowledge is often related to family, home, religion, and the workplace. These sources of knowledge are usually untapped resources in the classroom. When educators create opportunities for CLD students to make meaningful connections between the new vocabulary and their funds of knowledge, their prior experiences are validated and their cultural knowledge is affirmed. The CLD students feel personally connected to the vocabulary and have an increased chance for developing ownership of the new vocabulary.

Brock and Raphael (2005) found that teachers who successfully teach students whose backgrounds differ from their own have several characteristics in common. First, such educators understand that good teaching is not transcendent (an inborn talent to teach). Rather, “good teaching is a contextual and situational process” (p. 5). This process takes into account students’ prior experiences, community settings, cultural backgrounds, and ethnic identities (Gay, 2000). Second, effective educators understand that each student has a personal history that shapes his or her individual viewpoints.

CLD students’ background knowledge is the underlying force in second language acquisition (Swain & Lapkin, 2006) and a motivating factor in their learning vocabulary and academic English. By allowing the students to tap into their rich cultural linguistic knowledge base and relate to their experiences in their native language and culture, the teachers can integrate this information into the lesson which helps the students’ understand of the vocabulary and the English language (Krashen, 2005). Activating background knowledge brings students’ knowledge to consciousness and facilitates their learning of the new vocabulary, while also increasing their engagement and motivation to learn (Author, 2008). Engaged students continually build on their previous background knowledge and extend it by learning new information.
References

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Student Perceptions of Undergraduate Research
At Fort Hays State University

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Abstract

Undergraduate Research is becoming an increasingly important aspect of all academic areas in universities today, and as a result an effort must be made to understand how students feel about conducting undergraduate research. Literature suggests that students are aware of the benefits to be gained from conducting research, but there are a variety of factors holding them back from actually doing so. This particular study aimed to examine the benefits students feel they receive from conducting research as well as examine how the students feel about the availability of research opportunities at a Midwestern, predominantly undergraduate institution, Fort Hays State University. Five hundred seventy-six students responded to an e-mail survey. Results reflected that the majority of students have conducted research in some capacity. Students who had conducted research felt overwhelmingly positive about the benefits they received with regard to an increase in their understanding, an increase in their skills/abilities, an increase in their awareness of various aspects of the research process, and an increase in their confidence and qualifications in conducting research. Students seemed very satisfied with their research opportunities. Also, students recognized that a variety of personal qualities are impacted through the process of research. Similar to the literature, though, a majority of students did not feel research was for them. Further understanding the motivations for student research will help mitigate this, and provide insight into what can be done to influence students to conduct more research. Furthermore, as a university, FHSU must strive to maintain and increase research opportunities. FHSU must research why faculty engage in research with students, and try to utilize this to further enhance the experiences for both students and faculty.

Key words: Research, Undergraduate Research, Student Research, Student Scholarship, Undergraduate Research Participation