

Going beyond word definitions

TEACHING MULTIPLE-MEANING WORDS IN CONTEXT CAN BOOST COMPREHENSION

By **Carla Thomas McClure**

A study published in *Education and the Treatment of Children* (Nelson & Stage, 2007) suggests that teachers can implement contextually-based, multiple meaning vocabulary instruction with relatively little training. Such instruction especially benefits students with low vocabulary and reading comprehension achievement.

What was the purpose of this study?

Researchers J. Ron Nelson and Scott A. Stage were curious about the effects of explicitly teaching words that have multiple meanings. As they reviewed existing research, they found no studies on such instruction. Yet, they reasoned, this type of instruction should help to improve comprehension. Once students learn to look for contextual clues that affect meanings, they can apply this strategy to new words. The researchers designed a study to assess how contextually-based, multiple meaning vocabulary instruction affects student learning.

How was the study conducted?

The study involved 283 3rd- and 5th-grade students in 16 classrooms in a small Midwestern public school district.

The eight teachers in the control group received no training and continued to deliver the core language arts curriculum. The eight teachers in the experimental group attended a two-hour training session on contextually-based, multiple meaning instruction and learned instructional activities to embed into the core curriculum. The researchers used pre- and post-test scores on the

Gates-MacGinitie Reading Tests (4th ed.) to measure outcomes.

How was the supplemental vocabulary instruction conducted?

Over four months, students in the experimental group received instruction on 36 target words. The words were selected from 80 words that were among the 1,000 most frequently and widely used words in grades three through six. Each target word had two to four meanings and, according to a national inventory, all were words that 4th through 6th graders were likely to struggle with.

Teachers taught each target word over two days. On Day 1, they introduced the word (e.g., accident) and related words (e.g., fluke, mishap, by chance), had students discuss sentences that presented the related words in context, and wrote sentences using the words. On Day 2, teachers presented the target word's history and meanings and had students write sentences illustrating the different word meanings. Students then matched the related words presented on Day 1 to the appropriate meanings for the target word, completed a definition activity for the multiple meanings, read short passages and labeled usage of the target word as "expected" or "unexpected," and wrote brief stories using each of the target word meanings.

What were the findings?

Vocabulary knowledge. Third- and 5th-



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grade students with low initial vocabulary and comprehension achievement who received the supplemental instruction made modest improvements in their vocabulary knowledge, compared to students who did not receive the treatment. Students with average or high initial vocabulary and comprehension, however, showed no significant improvement.

Reading comprehension. Third-grade students, regardless of their initial vocabulary and comprehension achievement, made moderate gains in reading comprehension, as did 5th graders with low achievement in these areas.

What's the take-home message for educators?

Earlier studies (Stahl & Fairbanks, 1986) have shown that providing word definitions but no contextual information has no significant effect on reading comprehension. Although the present study has several limitations (e.g., its

four-month timeframe, the geographic and size limitations of the sample), it suggests that explicitly teaching words with multiple meanings, in context, can boost reading comprehension, especially for 3rd graders. It can also help older elementary students with low achievement in vocabulary knowledge and comprehension.

References

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