

A teaching method to help improve vocabulary retention in students

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This paper is an exploratory classroom study that investigates how to improve students' retention level of vocabulary learned in a classroom setting. I compared a teacher-led teaching method and a peer-led method. The results showed an overall improvement in scores when a peer-led teaching method was used.

Introduction

Over the years educators have tried many different ways to help English language learners learn and remember vocabulary. Moutal (1999) believes that having the teacher be the source of learning for students is the best way for them to learn. This, of course, is teacher-led learning and, “generally refers to an instructional style in which the teacher takes an active and central role in providing information and instructions to a class” (Moutal 1999: 1). Another school of thought believes that students learn and remember more when they have more to say in the teaching process, what we may call peer-led teaching. Educators such as Bruffee (1999) have done substantial research on peer-led learning and the type of content needed for English learners. In his book *Collaborative learning: Higher education, interdependence, and the authority of knowledge*, Bruffee outlines the benefits of peer-led teaching. He concludes that when students take a leadership role in the classroom their grades improve. It is interesting to see what some of the advantages and disadvantages of each method are from the teacher's standpoint. The question as to which method would help students learn more vocabulary and improve vocabulary retention levels in my students also played a vital role in this research. I suspected using the peer-led teaching method would help English language students learn and remember vocabulary better than the teacher-led method. With this in mind, I set up an exploratory study detailed in this article. In this paper I will first give the background to this study, which includes teaching methods, classroom context, and the participants. Second, I

will explain the study design including how I collected the data and then analyzed it. Finally, I will discuss the implications of the findings.

Teaching Methods

Peer-led teaching

For the purpose of this project, peer-led teaching refers to the process of students sharing information with their partner to help learn and retain new vocabulary. Educators such as Boud, et al. (2001) have done extensive work on peer-led teaching. In their book titled *Peer learning in higher education: Learning from and with each other*, they conclude that students have enhanced motivation and improved cognition and social outcomes when this method is used. Other authors, such as Bruffee mentioned above went further and added that peer-led teaching also helped students improve their metacognitive skills and increased the sense of responsibility for their own learning. For these reasons I decided to implement the peer-led teaching method.

Teacher-led method

The objective of teacher-led learning is for the teacher to dictate what and how ideas are presented to the class. Mauigoa (2008:2) asserts that, “The role of questions and how they are processed in a classroom in promoting open discussion is vital because of the encouragement of divergent thinking that is achieved through continued dialogue and critical thinking”. The teacher-led method in this study involved the teacher sitting in front of the class with students taking turns reading parts of the story out loud until it was completed. Individual students were asked the meaning of specific words and phrases. A teacher-led discussion about the meaning of the story and reactions the students had on the story followed. The emphasis was on the use of the specific vocabulary words that were found in the pre-test.

Peer-led and teacher-led lesson sequences

The students in this study were second-year university students who were majoring in a foreign language other than English (either Chinese, German,

or French) and enrolled in my second-year reading and writing English comprehension course. The participants could be considered intermediate in English speaking ability. The ratio of women to men for both groups was 73% female and 27% male.

The peer-led method features problem-based small-group discussions alternated with periods of self-directed learning. This method was created to teach problem-solving skills, self-learning skills, and enhance motivation and knowledge retention. One of the bases of this method is cooperation with a classmate to achieve the desired goals. The amount of time given to read the stories was based on the length of the particular piece. The use of a dictionary was encouraged to help them with words or phrases they did not understand. The next step was for each student to make clear the story to his/her partner without reading it verbatim. The partner who was listening to the explanation of the story was allowed to take notes if he/she so chose (students had been informed that a test would be given afterwards). Every student was paired with a partner, when both students had explained their story to their partner a test was given to the class. Each test had ten words based on the story they had read. Pairs worked together to complete the test, and then as a class the quiz was corrected. The tests were not collected, and the students were able to take the tests home.

In the teacher-led method the teacher guided students in their understanding of the story. Teacher-led discussions usually followed a pattern in which the teacher introduced vocabulary with the students responding to the questions. I then evaluated their answers. This basic pattern was facilitated by having pre-made vocabulary word cards with multiple-choice definitions that were placed on the blackboard. A student was selected and asked to choose the correct definition, and then verbally use the vocabulary word in a sentence. Overall this method promoted the leadership of the teacher while limiting the opportunities for the student to respond to questions.

Study Design

The participants were divided into two classes. The first class A had 29 students and the second class B had 30 students. Each week class A and B would rotate with regards to the way they were taught. Class A used the peer-led method for the odd numbered weeks and the teacher-led method on even numbered weeks. Class B followed the opposite rotation so that every week each method was taught to one of the classes.

The study consisted of three main phases:

1.Pre-test

All students were given a pre-test based on the story they would read in the class that day. The pre-test was used to test vocabulary knowledge prior to the treatment. The test consisted of ten vocabulary words that would be used in the stories for that day. The students were asked to write sentences using the words in their correct form. Each sentence was worth one point and the sentences were based on two criteria to get full marks. The meaning of the word had to be clearly illustrated, and the sentence had to be grammatically sound. Examples of what were given full marks and half marks follow:

Selected word: Quietly

Full marks

*I closed the door **quietly** because the cat was sleeping.*

Half marks—grammatically incorrect

*This house is empty, so it's very **quietly**.*

2.Teaching approach

- a. Students using the teacher-led method listened to the teacher and answered the specific questions given to them based on the story that was just read.
- b. Students using the peer-led method formed pairs and were asked to read

their particular story and figure out the meaning of the vocabulary words and pass on that information to their partner.

3. Post-test

After the completion of the story, the students were given five days to review the information before the post-test. The post-test consisted of five vocabulary words from the list of ten on the pre-test. The goals were to see how much information was retained and to see if there was a difference in test scores based on the teaching method that was used in the class.

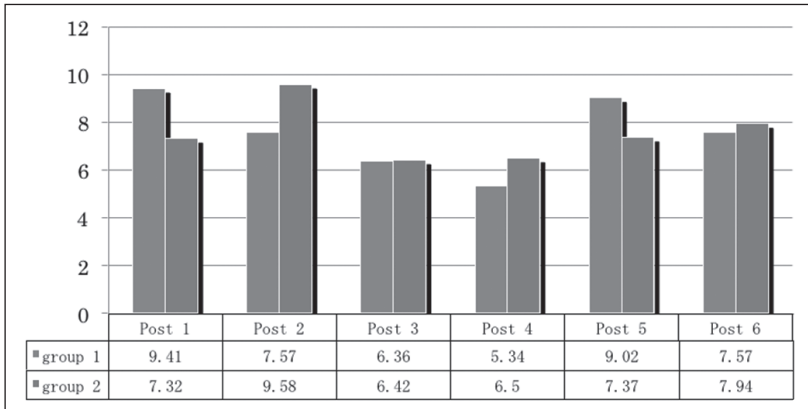
Data collection

The period of data collection was six weeks. Prior to each class all students were given a pre-test no matter what teaching method that was being used. Before reading the story the test answers were verbally given by the teacher. The students corrected any mistakes and wrote their score on the bottom of the test paper. The test papers were collected and the scores were recorded. Following the pre-test the classes were taught using one of the two methods. The next week students were given a post-test to determine what the students had learned. The scores of the post-test of both teaching methods were compared to see if there were any differences.

Analysis

Group A used the peer-led teaching method for weeks 1, 3, and 5, while Group B used the peer-led teaching method during weeks 2, 4, and 6. In all cases students who used the peer-led teaching method had higher scores on the post-test compared to the teacher-led method scores.

Table 1.0



One possible reason for the results is that by giving the students more direct responsibility, they became more motivated in the learning process.

The purpose of this research has been to have a better understanding of two popular teaching methods, and how they affect vocabulary retention levels on my students. The teacher-led approach shows promise in that it was easy to isolate words that were difficult for the class, and assist individual students who were having difficulties. By having the teacher lead the discussion, the conversation was directed in ways that could be clearly beneficial for the class. One aspect of the teacher-led method that I did not find appealing was that when the teacher would ask questions, few, if any students, would answer the questions. In the peer-led method students stayed focused to the task at hand. There were little to no silent moments during the class. The students were talkative and were interacting with each other on a consistent basis. The disadvantage of this system was that even though the students were steadily interacting with each other there was no way to know for certain that they were discussing the story.

Conclusion

The results showed that over the six-week period of the research the peer-led teaching students consistently outperformed the teacher-led students. I should

point out that I did not do a statistical check of my results, and the differences between the two groups are more than likely not significant. Nonetheless, I believe my findings should help provide a better understanding of two popular teaching methods and how they affect student vocabulary retention levels. The teacher-led approach shows promise in that it was easy to isolate words that were difficult for the class, and assist individual students who were having difficulties. By having the teacher lead the discussion, the conversation was directed in ways that could be clearly beneficial for the class. One aspect of the teacher-led method that I did not find appealing was that when the teacher would ask questions, few, if any students, would answer the questions. In the peer-led method students stayed focused to the task at hand. There were little to no silent moments during the class. The students were talkative and were interacting with each other on a consistent basis. The disadvantage of this system was that even though the students were steadily interacting with each other there was no way to know for certain that they were discussing the story. I have found that using the peer-led teaching method on English language learners helps in their retention of vocabulary learned during the lessons. Although everyone may have a preferred teaching style, some types of information dictate instruction in a specific manner. Learning how to accommodate your teaching style to the challenges that your students are facing will help you be successful in many different classroom situations.

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