A Case Study: Theatre as a constructionist tool for helping 6th graders build their own word meanings

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Abstract

Constructionism puts forth the idea that individuals make sense of their world by building their own descriptive and meaning-making models of it. Most of the work done under the label "constructionist" is, of course, based on the use of tools that are computer-based or use some kind of technology. Probably, most of the papers at this conference will be of that nature. But, I believe that constructionist methods need not necessarily be technologically based.

Constructionists, I will argue, can use model-construction-tools from a variety of sources: written and spoken words, poetry, images, body movements, costumes, character roles, theatre sets, etc. In fact, I am going to present a constructionist example using theatre as the environment to encourage reading-disabled children to explore the meanings of new vocabulary words. I will describe how students construct their theatre world, the roles, the scripts and the action.

My paper describes my work at the Carroll School in Lincoln, Massachusetts. All students at the Carroll School are severely learning-disabled. All are dyslexic. I want to describe to you how constructionist techniques can be useful to students with special learning needs. I will suggest at the end of the paper that my activities with my students can offer lessons to those who work with students who are less handicapped.

Seven 6th grade students in a Language Arts classroom were participants. They were introduced to ten vocabulary words using a regular vocabulary textbook and then they were divided into three groups. Each group was assigned three vocabulary words and had to come up with a theatrical skit incorporating the words. Each group presented its skit to the class. The outcomes of this activity were that students: 1) Were able to construct their own meaning the words – one that made sense to them, 2) Were engaged in the activity since they had to create something, 3) Learned from each other since they were working in groups and, 4) Developed interpersonal skills since they had to work with one another. This case study shows that using constructionist approaches to work with students with learning disabilities is a valuable approach because it engages them in the learning process.

The study suggests that active student involvement in the learning process is key and seems to be more effective than traditional instructional methods. My hypothesis is that the success of this activity can be carried into the traditional classroom and that a constructionist approach can work well with students across the spectrum, not just students with learning disabilities.

Introduction

Constructionist Approach

I work in a school for children who have severe reading disabilities and often attentional challenges. Due to their learning challenges, school has often been a torturous path for them. Sitting and listening to teacher speak for 45 minutes in a regular classroom can be painful for them. These students need hands-on activities, they need to participate in the learning and be active learners. For this reason, the constructionist approach is vitally important for these students. Constructionism stresses the importance of the artifacts, or tools, that we build, use and manipulate in our personal construction of knowledge. Theatre is a medium that that brings all the senses into play, (sight, touch, sound, smell and taste). For this reason, it is a wonderful media through which to build knowledge. In this paper I will give a specific constructionist example of how I encourage learning-challenged students to understand and use words through theatre.

Vocabulary Instruction

We live in a world where literacy skills are crucial to be able to function as a human being. Robust vocabulary instruction is vitally important to foster language and literacy skills in children. Reading disabled students struggle with all aspects of language, (reading, spelling, writing), except for speaking. Beck (2002) states that a common notion is that students naturally acquire vocabulary through context. She states that at an early stage words are learned orally when a child is young, but later as the child gets older the vocabulary learning is through written context – what a child reads. It is much harder to learn words through a written context since text lacks many of the supports of oral language such as intonation. Therefore, all children, (especially those with reading disabilities), need direct instruction in school to foster their vocabulary. Beck also debunks the myth that that students need to learn so many words to be successful in school that it is simply impossible to teach them all, therefore learning through context is the only way to go. Beck counters this argument by explaining that not all words need to be taught. She explains that only certain words need instructional attention. She divides words up into three categories: Tier I, Tier II and Tier III words. Tier I is made up of the most basic words such as *clock, baby, happy, sad, walk*, and so on. Children will most often learn these words in their home life, outside school and just through listening. Thus, these words do not require direct instruction. Tier III is made up of domain-specific words, meaning words whose frequency is quite low and are related to a specific subject. For example, *isotope, peninsula,* and *refinery* are all Tier III words. Beck explains that in general a solid understanding of these words is not of high utility for most students. These words are best learned when a specific need arises for them, such as in a science or social studies lesson. Tier II contains words that are of high utility for students and are found in many domains. For example, the words *coincidence, absurd, industrious* and *fortunate* are all words that can be used in many different contexts. Once a student knows the definition of these words, he/she can use them in many arenas and thus his/her verbal repertoire is greatly enriched. For this reason, it makes sense to focus on Tier II words when teaching vocabulary.

Since vocabulary instruction is key to fostering literacy skills in students with reading disabilities and these students learn through 'doing', this paper outlines a constructionist approach to teach vocabulary to students with reading disabilities using theatre.

Method

Student Profile

I taught this vocabulary activity as part of a Language Arts class to a group of 6th graders at the Carroll School. The Carroll School, located in Lincoln, Massachusetts, just outside of Boston, is

dedicated to meeting the educational needs of children diagnosed with language-based learning disabilities, such as dyslexia, and to supporting the constituencies that serve them. At Carroll, all teachers adhere to the following principles, in all subject areas, in all classrooms, and in all instruction: cognitive approach, direct and explicit, structured and sequential, cumulative, multi-sensory, and alphabetic-phonetic. Grades kindergarten to 8th grade are taught and class sizes range from 6-8 students.

There were seven students in the class I taught. The range of scores for these students in each of the following categories was as follows:

Word Recognition: 3-5th grade. This ranged from students who needed to sound out each word to students who were good decoders.

Oral Reading: 3-5th grade. This ranged from students who needed to sound out each word to those who were strong decoders but had poor fluency.

Word Meaning: 4-7th grade. The students had uneven vocabulary knowledge. Most of them lacked Tier II words.

All the students had a much higher oral language comprehension than reading comprehension. For this reason, the unit was designed to teach to their oral vocabulary, (teach vocabulary at their cognitive level), to improve their comprehension.

Vocabulary Instruction

Students had a vocabulary book called Groundwork for A Better Vocabulary (3rd Edition). Each chapter in the student's vocabulary book contained ten words. For each chapter the following steps were taken:

1. Activator: Students' prior knowledge of the words is activated.

2. Meanings of words are directly taught

3. Fill in the Blank Activities

4. Yes/No Why questions

5. Theatre Skits (constructionist piece)

6. Application of words in their writing

7. Quiz

The following was done for Chapter 1 in the book. (see chapter 1 list attached at end).

1. Activator:

Words were shown on board. Students were asked to raise their hand if they could read a word. Once all the words were read, students were then asked if they could give one (or more) of the following for each word:

§ a definition
§ an example of the word
§ give the word in a sentence
§ part of the speech of word

This allowed me to gage what the students already knew.

2. Meanings of Words Directly Taught:

Any words that the students did not know were directly taught, followed by a discussion of the contexts in which the word and meaning could be applied.

3. Fill in the Blank Activities:

Since I begin with a set of isolated words, I know that I need to provide students with opportunities to use them in a variety of contexts and to receive feedback about their success in doing so. One of the ways in which I do this is via **fill-in-the-blank sentences**. Students are instructed to use each word only once in this activity, which can present them with much difficulty. This is especially true when more than one word could fit into a sentence. Through teacher modeling and small-group discussion, however, students quickly figure out the best ways to fill in the blanks. This format also provides students and I an opportunity to discuss inflectional endings (e.g., *-ed, -er,-s*).

In addition to the sentence task, each chapter includes two fill-in- the-blank paragraphs, which I have found most students with reading difficulties see as even more of a challenge than the sentence task. Their difficulty in recognizing clues about meaning in a text accounts for why their efforts to use context to figure out the meanings of unknown words helps so little. In working on the paragraph fill-ins, I show students how to complete the activity in stages, and model for them the kinds of decisions that skilled readers make as they process text. For example, to introduce the task, I first read the whole paragraph, showing students how to get an overall sense of the topic. Then, using a think-aloud procedure, I work through the blanks, drawing attention to the context clues that help narrow the possible choices. I also show how to skip blanks that are difficult to fill the first time through, cross out words as they are used, and pencil in possibilities when they aren't sure which choice is best.

4. Yes/No Why Questions:

This activity is modeled on one designed by Beck, Perfetti, and McKeown (1982). Yes/No/Why questions are constructed by pairing the words in the chapter, and students are asked to answer each question as well as to provide a reason for their answer. There are no right or wrong answers, and I provide a model for students of how to give support for their answers. By encouraging students to make their thinking explicit, additional relationships among the words and concepts can be discovered and discussed.

5. Theatre Activity or "Skits"

The seven students are divided up into three groups, (one group has three students). Each group picks 3 vocabulary words from the chapter, (words are chosen from a bag, they cannot see them), and one group, (the larger one), picks 4 cards. The students are given about 10 minutes to come with a skit that incorporates the vocabulary words. For the groups that have a hard time getting started, I tell them to pick location, (ex. a supermarket), and then choose characters that will be in their skit, (ex. salesperson, a customer, and the store manager). Students come up with a plot quite easily on their own. If I do this activity on a Monday, I ask students to pick an event from their weekend and make this the setting of their skit. With three in a group, each student might bring in their own weekend event into the skit and the skit can get quite wild! The 'weekend plot' also gives students a chance to learn about each others' weekend.

They have specific guidelines:

§   In their skit they must show that they understand the meaning of the word (for example, they cannot have a skit's location be spelling class and just ask each other to spell the vocabulary words).
§   They cannot use inappropriate language (swear words) in their skit.
§   The location of the skit must be appropriate.

While the students are preparing their skit, I walk around to check that the contexts of skits are decent.

Presentation of Skits

To set the mood for the skits, the lights in the classroom are turned off and stage is created, (desks pushed back). The actors in the first group to present take their places. I tell the students who are not presenting that they need to listen for the vocabulary words in the skit and be able to tell the actors at the end what they were and in what context they were used. This way the students watching are active audience members versus passive. The students not presenting also introduce the skit by saying: 'Lights, Camera, Action" (there is a gesture that goes with each of these words). A student who is not presenting first is the lights person. He/she switches on the lights in the classroom after he/she hears "Action!"

The skit is presented, (it usually lasts about 2-3 minutes).

After skit has been presented:

Actors stay up on stage and the following happens:

1) Audience members raise their hands to say what words were used in the skit and how they were used. Actors pick on these people. They let the person know whether or not he/she was right.
2) Audience members ask questions to actors if they were confused by something in the skit.
3) I give immediate feedback to the actors regarding whether or not they used the words in the correct context.

6. Application of words in Writing:

Writing is one of the primary ways in which students are encouraged to process word meanings in an active and generative way (Curtis & Longo, 2001). Every other week I assign at one topic for students to write about, using at least 5 of the vocabulary words for the unit, along with any words from previous weeks they can incorporate. This encourages students to think about how to correctly use the words.

Conclusion

This theatre experience I had with my students taught me six important facts:

1) By making up the skits the students had to build their own method of understanding exploring the meanings of the words they were given. By doing this they gained a sense of ownership of the material. A month later, they would recall the meaning of the word by going back to their skit, which they remembered since they had created it.
2) Those students who lacked confidence in their vocabulary began to feel that they could make sense of difficult words. They gained confidence in their learning and they began using words these words in their oral language and in their writing.
3) The students learned from each other for two reasons: 1) as they created the skit together they had to talk about the words and refine their own meaning to make sure they really understood the words 2) students in the audience who watched each skit got to see how words were used and were able to ask the actors questions after the skit, for example if a word was used in confusing way.
4) I was able to see immediately if my students understood the meanings of the words and give them immediate feedback.
5) Students developed interpersonal skills because they had to work with each other.
6) For my students who learn in a non- traditional way, this is a wonderful way for them to access knowledge and to express their acting talents! Thus, to feel successful!

Summary

This paper describes a specific constructionist example of how I encourage learning-challenged students to understand and use words through theatre. I describe a classroom activity in which seven 6th grade reading disabled –students were taught a 10 vocabulary words using theatre. Once the meanings of the words had been discussed and understood in the classroom, the students had to apply the words in theatre skits that they made up. They were divided into 3 groups and each group was given three words. They were given ten minutes to prepare their skit. Once all the groups were ready, each presented. After each skit the students in the audience had to identify the vocabulary words that were used by the actors, and could ask clarifying questions to actors.

This study shows that using constructionist approaches, with theatre as the medium, engages students in ways that instructionist techniques do not. I've used both, by the way!

Finally, I would like to say that helping dyslexic students stay on topic every minute of the day helped me to interact with them in ways that might not happen in standard school environments. I had to stay on topic and watch and listen and talk with them about what they were doing and why. Teaching methods are never taken for granted at the Carroll School. Everyone must be on their toes and aware of what is going on, what is being said. The entire classroom becomes a theatre of learning and talking about learning. This surely relates to the public place that Papert described, where much of the meaning making of the constructionist project takes place. I hope that my experience, therefore, might be seen to be useful to those using other constructionist media and in other more teaching institutions.

References

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Addendum

Chapter 1 Words from Groundwork for A Better Vocabulary:

challenge

dependent

fertile

perculiar

preference

principal

solitary

suitable

surplus

transform