

An Investigation into the Vocabulary Proficiency of Middle-Level Public School Learners

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Abstract

The study, "investigating the vocabulary skills of public school learners at middle level," explores strategies to enhance vocabulary mastery among middle-grade learners in government schools. Vocabulary is a critical component of language learning, forming the foundation for effective communication, reading comprehension, and academic success. The research identifies common gaps in vocabulary skills and investigates innovative teaching methods to address these challenges. Utilising a mixed-methods approach, the study engaged 120 middle-grade students through both qualitative and quantitative methods. Data were collected via classroom observations, interviews, surveys, and vocabulary assessments. The findings revealed a significant improvement in students' vocabulary when exposed to structured interventions such as the concept attainment model, which encouraged active participation and contextual learning. The study also emphasised the role of socio-economic factors, parental support, and teacher training in influencing vocabulary acquisition. The research demonstrates that integrating vocabulary-building activities into classroom practices, supported by cross-curricular collaboration, enhances learners' ability to acquire and retain vocabulary. It concludes that vocabulary instruction must be a dynamic, continuous process that combines interactive technologies and traditional teaching methods. This study serves as a guide for educators to foster a more engaging and effective vocabulary-learning environment.

Keywords: Vocabulary Skills, Middle-Grade Learners, Teaching Strategies.

Introduction

In recent decades, English language instruction has undergone significant changes in pedagogy, assessment, and learning outcomes (Crystal, 2003). For Pakistan, English is more than a second language; it serves as a crucial tool for communication, education, and socio-economic development (Obaidat, 1997). As the first foreign language introduced in schools, English is a vital component of the curriculum, beginning in the first grade and continuing through higher education (Syed, 2001).

Despite its importance, middle-grade learners in public schools face persistent challenges in acquiring vocabulary skills. These foundational years, typically grades 6 to 8, serve as a critical bridge between elementary and high school levels, laying the groundwork for literacy and advanced language skills. However, a significant gap exists in the vocabulary acquisition process for students at this level, with teachers often relying on traditional methods that fail to address

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learners' dynamic needs (Khamis & Scharer, 1990). This study explores practical strategies to enhance vocabulary mastery among middle-grade learners, focusing on innovative techniques such as the Concept Attainment Model.

Vocabulary proficiency enhances communication, critical thinking, and reading comprehension. It is essential for academic success, as a strong vocabulary improves students' ability to understand complex texts and articulate ideas clearly. Effective vocabulary instruction also supports learners' cognitive development, enabling them to analyse and evaluate critical information.

Research Objectives

1. Assess current vocabulary levels of middle-grade learners.
2. Identify common vocabulary gaps and areas of weakness.

Research Questions

1. What are the current vocabulary levels of middle-grade learners?
2. What are the common vocabulary gaps and areas of weakness among middle-grade learners?

Significance of the Study

This research provides valuable insights for educators, policymakers, and curriculum developers. By identifying effective teaching strategies, the study aims to improve language instruction, foster better learning outcomes, and prepare students for future academic and professional success. Additionally, the findings contribute to the theoretical understanding of vocabulary acquisition and practical applications in teacher training programs.

Literature Review

Vocabulary plays a pivotal role in language acquisition, serving as the foundation for effective communication, reading comprehension, and academic success. Research in this area has explored diverse strategies to enhance vocabulary skills, particularly among English Language Learners (ELLs) in public school settings. This chapter reviews existing literature on vocabulary development, teaching strategies, and challenges, highlighting gaps that this study aims to address. It also situates the study within a broader theoretical and practical context.

Vocabulary is a critical component of language learning, as it encompasses the words learners must understand and use to communicate effectively. A rich vocabulary contributes to improved reading, writing, speaking, and cognitive development (Crystal, 2003). Research emphasises that vocabulary acquisition is an incremental process influenced by factors such as exposure, practice, and socio-cultural contexts (Smith, 2017). Middle-grade learners, in particular, require tailored vocabulary instruction, as their linguistic development lies at a transitional stage between foundational skills and advanced literacy (Brown, 2018). Students with limited vocabulary often struggle with reading comprehension and academic performance because they lack the linguistic tools to engage with complex texts (Nagy & Townsend, 2012). Moreover, integrating academic vocabulary into middle school curricula enhances students' understanding of subject-specific terms across disciplines such as science, mathematics, and social studies (Verhoeven & Vermeer, 2002). Several studies identify common challenges students face in vocabulary acquisition. These include limited exposure to English outside the classroom, inadequate teaching methodologies, and insufficient focus on vocabulary in existing curricula (Freeman, 2002). Learners in public schools are particularly disadvantaged, as they often lack access to advanced learning resources and opportunities for language practice (Fantuzzo & Childs, 2004). Additionally, socio-economic

factors and parental involvement play a significant role in shaping students' vocabulary skills (Harris, 2019).

Research by Laufer and Goldstein (2004) underscores the importance of addressing students' varying levels of vocabulary knowledge. Their findings suggest that traditional methods, such as rote memorisation and translation exercises, are less effective than interactive, contextualised approaches. Similarly, Flewitt (2005) highlights the need for multimodal teaching strategies that engage students through visual, auditory, and kinesthetic activities. Numerous instructional strategies have been proposed to enhance vocabulary acquisition. The Concept Attainment Model, for instance, encourages active engagement by helping students categorise and identify word meanings through guided discovery (Munawar & Sittar, 2022). This model has been shown to improve students' ability to retain and apply new vocabulary in diverse contexts. Interactive activities, such as group discussions, role-playing, and word games, also foster vocabulary growth by encouraging active participation and collaborative learning (Anderson, 2016). The use of digital tools, such as vocabulary apps and online quizzes, further enhances students' motivation and provides personalised learning experiences (Smith & Davis, 2018). Research suggests that combining traditional methods with technology-driven approaches yields optimal results in vocabulary instruction (Arif & Saqib, 2003). Additionally, integrating vocabulary-building exercises across subjects helps reinforce learning and promotes long-term retention. For example, incorporating domain-specific terms into science and social studies lessons helps students contextualise their vocabulary, making it more meaningful and applicable (Nagy & Townsend, 2012).

Socio-cultural factors, including family background, community support, and access to resources, deeply influence vocabulary acquisition. Students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds often face barriers to vocabulary development due to limited exposure to English at home and in their communities (Fantuzzo & Childs, 2004). Parental involvement has been identified as a critical factor in supporting students' vocabulary growth. Research shows that parents who actively engage in their children's education, such as by encouraging reading and conversation in English, significantly contribute to their language skills (Harris, 2019). Sociolinguistic perspectives also highlight the role of regional dialects and cultural contexts in shaping vocabulary. Exposure to diverse linguistic environments enables students to understand and use words in various settings, enriching their language proficiency (Flewitt, 2005).

Vocabulary challenges are prevalent among learners in public schools, posing significant barriers to their language acquisition and academic success. Students often encounter various difficulties in developing their vocabulary, which directly impacts their overall communication and comprehension. This research aims to address this critical gap by focusing on effective strategies to enhance vocabulary development, a topic that has received limited attention in prior studies. Despite its importance, many researchers have overlooked it.

Methodology

The study is grounded in constructivist learning theories, emphasising active engagement and contextual understanding. The concept attainment model serves as the primary instructional strategy, allowing students to actively participate in their learning and develop a deeper understanding of vocabulary (Freeman, 2002).

The population consisted of 120 middle-grade students from three government schools: Government Sir Syed Girls High School, Government High School Kangniwala, and Government High School Behari Colony. Purposive sampling included students in grades 6 to 8, representing

diverse gender, socio-economic, and linguistic backgrounds. Teachers from these schools were also involved to provide insights into existing teaching practices and challenges.

A mixed-methods approach was adopted, integrating quantitative and qualitative methods. Quantitative data were collected through vocabulary assessments, while qualitative data were collected through interviews, classroom observations, and focus group discussions. Pre- and post-intervention tests measured improvement, and qualitative data captured perceptions and contextual factors.

Instruments included vocabulary tests, semi-structured interviews, observation checklists, surveys, and focus groups. Data Collection occurred in four phases: pre-intervention assessment, eight-week intervention using the concept attainment model, classroom observation, and post-intervention evaluation.

Data were analysed through descriptive statistics and paired-sample t-tests for quantitative results, and thematic analysis for qualitative data. Triangulation ensured validity. Ethical approval and informed consent were obtained, ensuring confidentiality and voluntary participation. The study was limited to a small regional sample and some self-reported data, but the methodology provided a solid foundation for exploring vocabulary enhancement strategies in public schools.

Data Analysis

This chapter presents a comprehensive analysis of the data collected during the study. The findings are organised into quantitative and qualitative sections, each focusing on different aspects of vocabulary acquisition among middle-grade learners. The analysis aims to evaluate the effectiveness of the employed teaching strategies, identify patterns in vocabulary learning, and highlight key factors influencing students' progress. Both statistical and thematic approaches are used to ensure a robust and detailed understanding of the findings.

Vocabulary Assessment Results

The primary quantitative data were derived from pre- and post-intervention vocabulary assessments administered to the 120 participating students. The tests measured students' ability to recognise, comprehend, and use vocabulary words in context. The pre-test average score across all participants was 12 out of 20, while the post-test average score increased to 17 out of 20, indicating a significant improvement in vocabulary skills.

Statistical Analysis

A paired-sample t-test was conducted to evaluate the statistical significance of the improvement in test scores. The results demonstrated a significant difference between pre-test and post-test scores ($t = 8.43$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting that the interventions were effective in enhancing students' vocabulary knowledge. Additionally, the effect size was 0.78, indicating a moderate to high impact of the employed teaching strategies.

Gender-Based Analysis

The data were further analysed by gender to examine any disparities in vocabulary acquisition. Female students showed a slightly greater improvement (a mean increase of 6.2 points) than male students (a mean increase of 4.8 points). This finding suggests that gender may influence the effectiveness of vocabulary-building strategies, potentially due to differences in study habits and engagement levels.

Study Habits and Vocabulary Acquisition

Data from student surveys revealed that time spent studying vocabulary correlated positively with test performance. Students who reported studying vocabulary for more than three hours per week had an average post-test score of 18.5, compared to 15.2 for those who studied less than two hours per week. Preferred study methods, such as using flashcards and engaging in group discussions, also emerged as significant contributors to higher scores.

Teacher Interviews

Interviews with teachers provided valuable insights into the challenges and successes of implementing new vocabulary teaching strategies. Teachers highlighted that the Concept Attainment Model encouraged active participation and improved students' ability to understand and use new words. However, they also noted challenges in maintaining consistent engagement among all students, particularly those with lower initial vocabulary levels.

One teacher remarked

"The concept attainment model has been transformative for some students, especially those who struggle with traditional rote-learning methods. However, ensuring equal participation in group activities remains a challenge."

Student Feedback

Focus group discussions with students revealed their perspectives on the interventions. Most students found the activities enjoyable and engaging, particularly the group discussions and vocabulary games. However, some students expressed difficulty in adapting to the new methods, citing unfamiliarity with collaborative learning as a barrier.

A student shared

"I liked learning new words through games and group discussions. It made learning fun, but sometimes it was hard to keep up when others knew more words than I did."

Classroom Observations

Classroom observations provided real-time data on student engagement and the implementation of teaching strategies. Teachers were observed using a variety of methods, including flashcards, contextual learning exercises, and digital tools. Students showed higher levels of participation during interactive activities, and their confidence in using new vocabulary improved visibly throughout the intervention.

Effectiveness of the Concept Attainment Model

The Concept Attainment Model proved highly effective for vocabulary acquisition. Students engaged actively in categorising and identifying word meanings, which enhanced their understanding and retention. The model was particularly beneficial for low-achieving students, who demonstrated significant improvement in their ability to use new words in context.

Role of Technology

Digital tools, such as vocabulary apps and online quizzes, played a crucial role in motivating students and providing personalised learning experiences. These tools allowed students to practice independently at their own pace, reinforcing the vocabulary learned in class.

Cross-Curricular Integration

The integration of vocabulary-building exercises into subjects like science and social studies helped reinforce learning. For example, students were asked to identify and use domain-specific terms in their assignments, thereby improving their ability to contextualise and retain new vocabulary.

Parental Involvement

The data highlighted the significant role of parental involvement in supporting vocabulary development. Students whose parents encouraged reading and facilitated conversations in English showed greater improvement. However, in some cases, the lack of parental support emerged as a barrier to sustained progress.

Socio-Economic Factors

Socio-economic factors also influenced vocabulary acquisition. Students from higher-income families had better access to resources, such as books and digital tools, which contributed to their success. Conversely, students from disadvantaged backgrounds often relied solely on classroom instruction, limiting their opportunities for independent practice.

Limited Resources in Public Schools

Teachers reported that limited resources, such as a lack of technology and supplementary reading materials, hindered the implementation of some strategies. These constraints were particularly evident in underfunded schools, where students had fewer opportunities to engage with diverse learning tools.

Resistance to Change

Some teachers and students initially resisted the new methods, preferring traditional approaches. Overcoming this resistance required additional training for teachers and consistent encouragement for students to adapt to the innovative strategies.

Time Constraints

The eight-week intervention period posed challenges in achieving long-term vocabulary retention. Teachers expressed the need for extended programs to ensure that students could fully internalise and apply the new vocabulary.

Key Findings

1. The concept attainment model significantly improved students' vocabulary skills, particularly among low-achieving learners.
2. Female students demonstrated slightly higher gains compared to their male counterparts.
3. Digital tools and interactive activities were effective in enhancing motivation and engagement.
4. Socio-cultural factors, including parental involvement and socio-economic status, played a critical role in shaping students' vocabulary acquisition.
5. Cross-curricular integration of vocabulary exercises reinforced learning and improved retention.

Conclusion

This study, "investigating the vocabulary skills of public school learners at middle level," examined strategies to improve vocabulary acquisition among middle-grade learners in public schools. Using a mixed-methods approach, the research revealed that targeted interventions, such as the Concept Attainment Model and interactive learning activities, significantly enhanced students' vocabulary skills.

Quantitative analysis showed a marked improvement in students' test scores after the intervention, with female students performing slightly better on average. Qualitative findings highlighted students' enthusiasm for engaging methods like group discussions and word games, while teachers reported increased participation and confidence among learners. However, challenges such as limited resources, resistance to change, and insufficient intervention duration hindered sustained improvement.

Socio-cultural factors, particularly parental involvement, played a significant role in shaping vocabulary outcomes. Students with supportive home environments and access to resources showed greater progress, emphasising the need for equitable opportunities in public schools. Cross-curricular vocabulary integration also proved effective in reinforcing learning and retention. The study underscores the importance of innovative, context-driven teaching strategies in vocabulary development. To address challenges, recommendations include sustained programs, teacher training, and investment in educational resources. By fostering active engagement and providing equitable support, educators can empower students to achieve academic success and develop essential language skills.

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