Examining Students' Strategies for Promoting Word Knowledge and Reading Competence in French Immersion Students

JENNIFER CHU

Abstract
In this research study, students in a Grade 2 French Immersion classroom of all non-native French speakers were observed for an ongoing four-week period. Observations examined what children use and do to decipher new vocabulary in a French Immersion program. Findings showed that students’ scores increased from Reading Activity 1 to Reading Activity 2 as a result of increased exposure to vocabulary instruction, activities, and practice opportunities for deeper processing of word meanings.

Introduction
Currently, many French Immersion teachers recognize the difficulties that arise in both reading and writing due to poor vocabulary knowledge. The lack of word knowledge in a second language impedes a student's understanding of a text and slows down the process for creating and writing texts. French Immersion programs in Ontario public schools are given limited time for literacy instruction (100 minutes a day), which often makes it difficult for teachers to balance instruction of Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing strategies, styles, forms, activities, and assessments, let alone explicit vocabulary instruction. However, the negative effects of poor word knowledge on reading, writing, and oral communication, have led me to believe principles of vocabulary are a much needed area of research and implementation if we are to improve our students’ literacy learning in a French Immersion program.

This research article will examine principles of vocabulary instruction in an observational study conducted in a Grade 2 French Immersion class. I will first present a brief background of the context and the teacher in the study. Next I will present a review of existing research on vocabulary instruction in the literature. I will then discuss the methods used for the observational study and findings from the data. Finally, I will conclude with future implications for research in this area.

Literature Review
Over the past decades, a growing body of research has indicated that vocabulary instruction and learning play a key role in developing reading competence (Baumann, 2009; Chall, Jacobs, & Baldwin, 1990). As such, literacy researchers and teachers are showing an increased interest in effective and practical teaching strategies for promoting word knowledge to develop reading comprehension. Many researchers (Manyak et. al, 2014; Bromley, 2007, 2013; Stahl, 1986; A'lipour & Ketabi, 2010; Amiryousefi & Dastjerdi, 2010; Behlol & Dad, 2010) have examined the challenges, debates, methods, practical techniques and implications for explicitly teaching vocabulary in the classroom. Manyak et. al (2014) provide four pragmatic principles for enhancing vocabulary instruction in the classroom: 1) establish efficient yet rich routines for introducing new target words; 2) provide review experiences that promote deep processing of target words; 3) respond directly to student confusion by using anchor experiences; 4) foster
universal participation and accountability (16). Similarly, previous research done by Stahl (1986) encourages teachers to apply three principles in their vocabulary instruction: 1) provide balanced exposure of both context and definitions of new words; 2) encourage deep processing through associations, comprehension, and generation of ideas; 3) give students multiple exposures, both in the number of times a word is exposed and in the amount of time devoted to vocabulary instruction (663-665). Other researchers such as Bromley (2007, 2013) and Alipour & Ketabi (2010) suggest tried-out techniques for infusing the entire day with vocabulary instruction and practice through play-based learning, games, and peer interactions.

Now, since the introduction of the French Immersion (FI) program in 1965, there has been much research on the effects of immersion on student achievement, particularly with regards to reading (Genesee et. al, 2008). Many studies (Geva & Clifton, 1994; Cashion and Eagan, 1990; Malicky, Fagan, and Norman, 1988; Genesee, 1981; Romney et al, 1995) comparing literacy development in French immersion programs versus English programs have revealed that immersion students seem to struggle more than English students with reading fluency and reading comprehension. It has been widely understood that challenges in vocabulary knowledge present further academic obstacles for students in critical areas such as reading comprehension (Manyak et al., 2014).

Purpose & Rationale

As such, in an effort to better understand what exactly children use and do to decipher new vocabulary, an observational study was conducted over a four week period that looked at children's learning as a result of context and activities provided in a Grade 2 French Immersion classroom. The following research question guided the observational study: What principles of vocabulary help to guide children's (both at-risk and those performing at grade-level) vocabulary knowledge in a French Immersion program?

The purpose of this observational study was to learn more about the effective and practical principles of vocabulary instruction that help to support the development of reading comprehension in French Immersion classrooms.

Methods

Participants

The observational study focused on examining students' abilities to learn vocabulary through the use of multifaceted and varied vocabulary activities in a Grade 2 French immersion public school classroom in a multicultural community of Ontario. The class consisted of 20 non-native French speakers with a large diversity of ethno-cultural backgrounds. For the observational study, 10 students were selected ranging from performing below grade level (4 students), at grade level (3 students), and above grade level expectations (3 students).

Teaching Context

My Grade 2 class had been working on a unit that compared the similarities and differences between traditional fairy tales and fractured fairy tales, which are traditional fairy tales in which the perspective, plot, setting, characters, or theme may have changed. Prior to the diagnostic reading activity, students had read the following fairy tales: Boucles D’Or, Cheveux bouclés et queues en tire-bouchon, Les trois petits cochons, and La vérité sur l'affaire des trois petits cochons. As such, students were familiar with some common vocabulary words and phrases found in both traditional and fractured fairy tales.
Prior to beginning the observational study, literacy instruction included daily cycles through Les 5 au Quotidien (Daily 5 Literacy Centres), in which students rotate through five literacy centres: 1) Lecture à soi/Read to self; 2) Lecture à un autre/Read to a partner; 3) Travaux d'écriture/Work on Writing; 4) Écouter la lecture/Listen to reading; 5) Étude de mots/Word work, as well as mini-lessons that focused on reading strategies and writing forms. So far students had learned the reading strategies Predicting, Questioning, Visualizing, and Making Connections and they were familiar with Journal Writing, Retells, Letters, and Riddles. Explicit vocabulary instruction and activities were not frequent, as most of the literacy time was spent focusing on Reading and Writing strategies.

In October 2014, the school as a whole established a School Improvement Plan that focused on Writing. Many teachers in the school noticed the same recurring problems related to generating and developing good ideas in writing. This problem appeared to be consistent from Grades 1-8. The staff at the school decided to create individual Theories of Action for how they could help improve their students' abilities to generate and develop good ideas in writing. The Grade 2 teachers decided to focus on including more vocabulary study through a multitude of ways. By December 2014, the Grade 2 teachers created the following Theory of Action: If we provide students with increased exposure and practice to vocabulary activities, then students will have a wider range of words to access when generating and developing good ideas in writing. As of January 2015, the Grade 2 teachers, including myself, tried to implement more explicit vocabulary instruction and practice throughout daily literacy instruction.

Data Collection

Data collection came from two main sources: 1) one-on-one student interviews and scores from 10 questions (Reading Activity 1 before increased exposure and practice of word study and Reading Activity 2 after increased exposure and practice of word study), and 2) observations and anecdotal notes over the course of four weeks throughout added practice of vocabulary instruction and activities.

It was important for me to gather data, not just on the significance or definition of the word, but on students' ability to explain the meaning of the word as it relates to context (both given in the story, and new contexts). It was critical to gather data on students' explanations and discussions of the words to ensure they had a holistic understanding of the vocabulary word. I wanted to investigate whether students had just memorized the definition or simple meaning of the word, or if they could explain the word in the context of the book or other contexts, as well as discuss connections and associations between the words and content the class had studied. As Manyak et. al (2014) explain, deep processing experiences of vocabulary knowledge and learning include "comparing and contrasting word meanings, teasing out nuances of meanings, using words in writing, or applying target words while analyzing texts, characters, and concepts" (p. 18). I wanted to ensure students were demonstrating deep processing of learned vocabulary words, not just rote memorization.

Reading Activity 1 involved examining 10 vocabulary words from Robert D. San Souci's (2000) Cendrillon Squeleton. This book was a fractured version of the original Cendrillon (Cinderella), and was chosen as it was well received and very much interested students in the class. For each vocabulary word selected from the text, students were asked a series of guiding and probing questions to demonstrate their level of word knowledge. The vocabulary words selected from the readings were chosen as some of them would have been familiar to students due to prior learning of the English related word and others would have required students to
make inferences using pictures and contextual clues. Each word was rated on a scale of 0-4 (0=None of the time, 4=All of the time) for all 10 questions. A final score was given out of 40 by examining the results of each of the 10 questions. The reading activity was audio recorded, and interviews were later transcribed for further analysis. Students were called one-on-one to the classroom Guided Reading/Writing U-Table for the interviews.

Increased exposure and practice of vocabulary instruction and activities began, and observational data were collected through ongoing anecdotal notes of behaviours, learning, and application of new vocabulary. For four weeks, students were observed as they played vocabulary games related to fairy tales, learned how to peer-review work using personal dictionaries, and created word webs to relate new vocabulary to context. Some of the games included Fairy Tales Headbands in which students chose characters, settings, or props, drew pictures of them, and then worked with a partner to ask questions in order to guess the person, place, or thing on their headband. Other games focused more on spelling, such as Fairy Tales Hangman, in which students came up with common fairy tale words, the teacher spelt them on wooden sticks and put them in a brown bag, and then students worked with a partner to decipher words through hangman. Students also learned how to peer-review writing work using colour-coded checklists and their personal dictionaries to help find, spell, and revise words in their Fairy Tale writing tasks. Finally, students practiced vocabulary development through the use of word webs in which students chose a vocabulary word from one of the fairy tales read in class, and wrote word associations to help them connect context to word.

Reading Activity 2 followed the same structure as Reading Activity 1. Ten vocabulary words were selected from Johanne Gagné’s (2005) Les vacances de Petit Chaperon Rouge. Similar to the text chosen for Reading Activity 1, the book selected for Reading Activity 2 was a fractured version of the original, Petit Chaperon Rouge (Little Red Riding Hood) by Charles Perrault and Francesc Rovira (2010). The book was selected, in part, due to class interest, and also because it was one of the last remaining fairy tales to be studied in the Fractured Fairy Tales Unit. The same procedures for marking student word knowledge were followed. Figure 1 (below) illustrates the texts selected for each reading activity as well as the guiding/probing questions that I developed and the 10 vocabulary words for each task.
### Figure 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Story Titles &amp; Authors:</th>
<th>Reading Activity 1</th>
<th>Reading Activity 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cendrillon Skeleton</strong>&lt;br&gt;By: Robert D. San Souci (2000)</td>
<td><strong>Les Vacances de Petit Chaperon Rouge</strong>&lt;br&gt;By: Johanne Gagné (2005)</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Vocabulary Words: | cimetière<br>caveau<br>mince<br>vaniteuse<br>épouvantable<br>corbillard<br>hésitation<br>feu d'artifice<br>gracieux<br>cure-dent | maillot<br>m'ennuie<br>boulangerie<br>pâtissier<br>casque<br>chatouillant<br>hélicoptère<br>assemblée<br>impatience<br>rigole |

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Guiding/Probing Questions</th>
<th>1. Peux-tu me dire ce que ______ veut dire?&lt;br&gt;&lt;i&gt;Can you describe to me what ______ means?&lt;/i&gt;</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Est-ce que tu vois des images ou d’autres mots qui pourraient t’aider à identifier le mot?&lt;br&gt;&lt;i&gt;Do you see any pictures or other words that might help you identify the meaning of the word?&lt;/i&gt;</td>
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<td>3. Vois-tu des autres mots dans ce mot-là?&lt;br&gt;&lt;i&gt;Do you see any words within this word?&lt;/i&gt;</td>
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<td>4. Peux-tu me dire le mot anglais qu’on pourrait utiliser pour décrire ce mot?&lt;br&gt;&lt;i&gt;Can you tell me an English word you could use to describe this word?&lt;/i&gt;</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5. Sais-tu un autre mot français qu’on pourrait utiliser pour remplacer ce mot?&lt;br&gt;&lt;i&gt;Do you know another French word you could use to replace this word?&lt;/i&gt;</td>
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<td></td>
<td>6. Peux-tu utiliser le mot dans une nouvelle phrase?&lt;br&gt;&lt;i&gt;Can you use the word in a new sentence?&lt;/i&gt;</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7. Dans quel autre contexte pourrais-tu utiliser ce mot?&lt;br&gt;&lt;i&gt;In what other context could you use this word?&lt;/i&gt;</td>
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<td></td>
<td>8. Que connais-tu déjà de ce mot?&lt;br&gt;&lt;i&gt;What do you already know about this word? Have you heard it before? If so, where and when?&lt;/i&gt;</td>
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<td></td>
<td>9. Veux-tu/Peux-tu utiliser un dictionnaire ou une autre ressource pour t’aider?&lt;br&gt;&lt;i&gt;Would you like to/Can you use a dictionary or another resource to help you?&lt;/i&gt;</td>
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<td></td>
<td>10. Est-ce que les images vont bien avec le mot que tu me décris?&lt;br&gt;&lt;i&gt;Do the pictures match the word?&lt;/i&gt;</td>
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Data Analysis

In order to understand how my students were acquiring vocabulary knowledge to develop reading competence, I reflected on what I had been reading about the process of vocabulary learning and my observations and anecdotal notes of children’s word study in the classroom, as well as my previously taught instructional strategies to develop vocabulary knowledge questions. I created 10 probing/guiding questions that could be used throughout the student interviews to gather data on students’ word knowledge. A sample of one of the tools used to collect data on students and the ten questions for evaluation can be found in Figure 2.

Since students had had one full year of French Immersion and were only half way through their Grade 2 French Immersion year, I knew many of them still relied heavily on their L1 (English) in order to learn their L2 (French). As such, one of the questions included in the student interview examined whether or not students could provide an English word or explanation for the French word they were being asked about. This proved to be an important question to include for the observations, as many students felt more comfortable continuing part or all of their explanations of the vocabulary word and/or context of the word in English. Finally, 5 of the 10 questions focused on relating the vocabulary word to context – whether they could relate it by picture, by another word, by confirming pictures and words match, by applying the word to a new sentence or context, and by using their prior knowledge of fairy tale words to predict and confirm the meaning of the word in question. The guiding questions are found in Figure 1.

Though the same procedures were followed for Reading Activity 1 and Reading Activity 2, interviews did not strictly follow the same script used for each activity. In Reading Activity 2, students were much quicker to initiate responses describing the meaning of the word and contextual associations than they were in Reading Activity 1. This could have been due to the fact that students were familiar with the types of guiding/probing questions being asked, and as such knew what types of information to include in their responses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reading Activity #1</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Story Title:</td>
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<td>Connected learning prior to this reading:</td>
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Context of delivery of activity:

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<tr>
<th>Time:</th>
<th>Grouping:</th>
<th>Environment:</th>
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Individual factors that could impact engagement in activity (e.g. time of day, student absence for part of prior learning, personal prior knowledge, medical, existing accommodations, behavioural considerations, etc.):

Accommodation given during activity _____ No _____ Yes (Explain):

Observations -- 0=None of the time 1=A few times 2=Half of the time 3=Most of the time 4=All of the time

Was able to identify the meaning of the word

Was able to guess the meaning of the word based on contextual clues (pictures, other

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<table>
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<tr>
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<th>Score</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Was able to identify words within the word</td>
<td>0 1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Was able to replace the word with an English word</td>
<td>0 1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Was able to replace the word with another French word</td>
<td>0 1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Was able use the word in a new sentence</td>
<td>0 1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Was able to explain how the word could be used in another context (i.e. different subjects)</td>
<td>0 1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Was able to use prior knowledge and context to predict and confirm meaning of the word</td>
<td>0 1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Was able to use dictionaries, thesauruses, and glossaries as tools to determine/confirm the meaning of the word</td>
<td>0 1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Was able to use the pictures to confirm the words and pictures match</td>
<td>0 1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Notes:</td>
<td>Score: _____/40</td>
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**Findings**

Upon further analysis of both interviews, it was noted that students were much more communicative in the second round of interviews. This could be attributed to the fact that students were familiar with the types of questions being asked and knew what to expect. Examining the results of the data, I found 8 of 10 students’ scores increased from Reading Activity 1 to Reading Activity 2. Only 1 of 10 students’ scores stayed the same on both Reading Activities, and 1 of 10 students’ scores decreased from Reading Activity 1 to Reading Activity 2. These scores could imply that increased exposure to vocabulary instruction, activities, and practice can contribute to improved vocabulary knowledge. The increased variety of strategies and reinforcement activities available to students might have provided them with opportunities for deeper processing of word meanings.

Other findings were found in Reading Activity 1, in which 5 of 10 students referred to outside resources (i.e. personal dictionary, visual dictionary, and French/English dictionary) to help decipher the meaning of the word; however, of the 5 students, only 2 were successful in finding the word and explaining its meaning. In Reading Activity 2, none of the students referred to outside resources during the vocabulary testing. All students used the book to look for clues in helping them decipher word meanings. Approximately one third of students flipped to other pages in the book to help them confirm meaning of the vocabulary word. In both Reading Activity 1 and Reading Activity 2, all students used pictures to help confirm meaning of the vocabulary word, even when they were incorrect in their word explanations.

Listening to the recordings of student interviews, most students switched in and out of their L1 (English) when trying to process and think through the meaning of the word. When
asked the English meaning of the word, 3 of 10 students would translate the entire sentence that contained the word, in order to provide the English meaning. Once asked to provide the English meaning of the word, 1 of 10 students continued the majority of the vocabulary testing in English. Finally, 1 of 10 students related some of the vocabulary words to their L3 (Spanish) that they are currently learning at home. The student initially related the French word “gracieux” (meaning “graceful”) to the Spanish word “gracias” (meaning “thank you”). However, upon further reflection and cross examining pictures to the word, the student later explained “gracieux” in the context of the story *Cendrillon Squeletton* meant the two characters were dancing “smoothly.” Table 1 illustrates the results for each of the 10 students from Reading Activity 1 to Reading Activity 2. Percentages are based on a score out of 40. Each of the 10 questions shown in Figure 2 were scored out of 4 (0=None of the time; 1=A few times; 2=Half of the time; 3=Most of the time; 4=All of the time). As Table 1 illustrates, the majority (8 of 10) of students’ vocabulary knowledge improved from Reading Activity 1 to Reading Activity 2.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Students</th>
<th>R.A. 1 Result</th>
<th>R.A. 2 Result</th>
<th>Linear (R.A. 1 Result)</th>
<th>Linear (R.A. 2 Result)</th>
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Conclusions & Implications for Future Research

The results of the observational study demonstrate there are critical principles of vocabulary that help to guide children's word knowledge in a French Immersion program. Once the Grade 2 French Immersion classroom was set up to follow three key principles, students were able to use their knowledge of other words, picture associations, and their mother tongue to decipher meaning of new and unfamiliar vocabulary words. I found it important to:
1) Provide explicit vocabulary instruction through mini-lessons while reading aloud and teaching both Reading strategies and Writing forms; 
2) Set aside time in the literacy instructional block specifically for rich and fun word tasks (i.e. games, play, peer interactions); and 
3) Reinforce conscious vocabulary development in students through consistent and ongoing word practice.

The results of Reading Activity 1 and Reading Activity 2 demonstrate that 8 of 10 students improved their vocabulary knowledge of fairy tale words. However, it is also important to note and consider that students’ vocabulary knowledge of fairy tale words could have also improved from Reading Activity 1 to 2 due to repeated and longer exposure to common fairy tale words that would have been talked about during four more read aloud stories (two more traditional fairy tale stories, two more fractured fairy tale stories). Nonetheless, it is evident that increased exposure and practice of vocabulary instruction and activities can help to improve students’ word knowledge, and thus contribute to enhanced reading competence.

Though the observational study initially began by examining effective teaching strategies for promoting word knowledge and reading competence, it evolved to investigating student strategies for improving vocabulary knowledge. I have concluded that a teacher simply needs to provide the context for three key principles within their literacy instruction in order for students to access and use their own toolbox of strategies for improving word knowledge.

In order for teachers to continue supporting vocabulary development in French Immersion students, it is recommended they infuse the three key principles of vocabulary instruction within their literacy program. If teachers take an active approach to preparing activities and explicit mini-lessons on vocabulary development alone, students have a better chance of consciously thinking about words and their meaning (Bromley, 2007). Furthermore, researchers can continue to develop this area of language learning by conducting observational studies of tried-out teacher techniques, as well as observations of students’ strategies for deciphering new word meanings. The following research questions could continue to guide this area of language learning: How can word associations help students to develop better vocabulary and reading competence? How can vocabulary instruction be infused throughout the day (not only during literacy instruction, but in all subject areas) to promote word competence? How can students develop their metacognition around vocabulary acquisition? It is thus evident that vocabulary acquisition and development are critical for deepening students’ reading comprehension in French Immersion, and teachers should continue to focus on students’ learning strategies to help children achieve their goals.

References


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**Author Biography**

Jennifer Chu completed her Masters of Education at OISE, specializing in language and literacies education. She is currently a French immersion teacher in the Greater Toronto Area.