Action Research Study:

VocabularySpellingCity®

Fluency Instruction to Increase Vocabulary Retention and Improve Reading Comprehension

VOCABULARYSPELLINGCITY®

Fluency Instruction to Increase Vocabulary Retention and Improve Reading Comprehension

Mackenzie Eikenberry

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Teacher Mackenzie Eikenberry conducted this action research study with her third and fourth grade students who were part of the school's dual language program. Most of her students were English Language Learners (ELLs).

Dr. Tim Rasinski provided guidance over the course of this action research study. Dr. Rasinski is a professor of literacy education at Kent State University, and best-selling author of articles, books, and curriculum programs on reading education.

Ms. Barbara Kruger supported Ms. Eikenberry with incorporating VocabularySpellingCity into the the fluency lessons. With 30+ years of educational experience, Ms. Kruger is director of professional learning at VocabularySpellingCity.

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Fluency Instruction to Increase Vocabulary Retention and Improve Reading Comprehension

VocabularySpellingCity® (VSC) helps teachers meet the challenge of providing meaningful, intentional, and extended vocabulary practice for elementary school students through a supplemental word study program. The research described here examined the effects of word study/word instruction via a high fidelity implementation of VocabularySpellingCity, versus comparable time spent on other traditional word study approaches such as looking up a word in the dictionary and writing its definition.

This report was written from the perspective of Ms. Mackenzie Eikenberry, the third and fourth grade dual language teacher who implemented the fluency/vocabulary instruction in her classroom.

While conducting the action research in the fall of 2017, Ms. Eikenberry had the guidance of Dr. Tim Rasinski, author of the Fluency Development Lesson instructional model. Dr. Rasinski is a professor of literacy education at Kent State University and director of its award-winning reading clinic. Ms. Barbara Kruger, director of professional learning at VocabularySpellingCity, supported Ms. Eikenberry with incorporating VocabularySpellingCity into the the fluency lessons.

Rationale

My third and fourth grade students were part of the dual language program. I was responsible for teaching all subjects in English, while my partner taught them in Spanish. In the morning, I taught 19 third graders, and in the afternoon, I taught 24 fourth graders. Most of my students were English Language Learners (ELL), and all of them qualified for free or reduced lunch. Many of their parents spoke limited or no English.

Dr. Tim Rasinski visited Ms. Eikenberry's class and gave guidance in this action research study. He is a professor of literacy education at Kent State University and best selling author of articles, books, and curriculum programs on reading education.

An area of concern for me was that many of my students did not read fluently. Some students stopped or hesitated too frequently when decoding words, which made it difficult for them to extract meaning from the text. Other students could read most or all of the words, but lacked the appropriate automaticity (as measured by reading rate) or expression. In both situations, reading comprehension was compromised.

When reading, I saw that many of my students needed to improve in word recognition accuracy, automaticity, and prosody (expression) to become fluent readers. When readers invest too much time and energy on individual words, they have less cognitive energy available for text comprehension. I knew that if my students could recognize words in text automatically, they could focus much more of their cognitive energy on the text's meaning. Through my classroom experience, research, and guidance by Dr. Tim Rasinski, I saw a strong correlation between prosodic/expressive oral reading and silent reading comprehension. It made so much sense to me that providing practice reading aloud with expression would encourage students to reflect and elaborate on the meaning of the text, especially when given engaging materials to work with. For this reason, I incorporated authentic materials for reading aloud in my instruction, such as poetry, reader's theater scripts, and songs that can be performed orally and with expression, rather than experienced silently. Performances are also part of the Language Arts Florida Standards, and this was an engaging way to incorporate the standards into my lessons.

Students need repeated exposures to words over extended periods of time to move vocabulary words from short-term to long-term memory. Spaced, independent practice is essential for long-term retention because practice over time provides students with the opportunity to repeat, restate, refine, and reflect on their own learning.

The instructional approach for fluency instruction I implemented during this study was based on Tim Rasinski's Fluency Development Lesson (FDL). This approach could be used with all my students. The questions that guided my project were:

- Will daily FDL improve my students' fluency and comprehension?
- Will daily use of VocabularySpellingCity (VSC) within the FDL improve students' vocabulary retention and reading comprehension?

Fluency Development Lesson Plan

I implemented the FDL for 40 school days and introduced a new short text each day.

Preparation for the Project

1. Select text and identify 5 words from each text
2. Make 2 copies of each poem for each student
3. Create word lists in VocabularySpellingCity
4. Create Pre- and Post-test
5. Create Student Survey
6. Create Teacher Observation/Reflection Journal
7. Get binder or folder for students to keep their collection of texts

FDL Daily Routine

1. Introduce and display copy of the text (usually a new poem each day). Teacher reads text twice while students follow along silently. (3 minutes)
2. Discuss text (meaning, structure, illustration), selected vocabulary, and oral reading performance (expression, pauses, etc.) (3-5 minutes)
3. Choral reading text—teacher leads once or twice (1-2 minutes)
4. Choral reading text—students lead once or twice (2-3 minutes)
5. Students break into groups of three or four, to choral read together two or three times (2-3 minutes)
6. Students perform for another group (3 minutes)
7. Students use VocabularySpellingCity to play with and explore selected vocabulary words - to be done as a center rotation
   - Day 1: FlashCards
   - Day 2: Which Initial Sound? Which Final Sound? or Sound It Out
   - Day 3: Word-O-Rama, WhichWord? Definitions, or WhichWord? Sentences
   - Day 4: SillyBulls, Word Search, or HangMouse
   - Day 5: MatchIt Definitions or MatchIt Sentences
   - Day 6: Word Unscramble or Crossword Puzzle
   - When Finished with Assignments and have free time - Free Choice
8. Students place the text in their binders and a copy is sent home for students to continue practicing their fluency. Students are encouraged to read the new text at least five times at home to a family member, friend, or even a pet.

Data to be Collected

- Student Surveys
- Teacher Observation/Reflection Journal
- VocabularySpellingCity Pre- and Post-test
- i-Ready® Student Growth Report
- i-Ready® Class Norms Report
- VocabularySpellingCity Usage
- Fluency Assessment using Fluency Rubric for expressive reading
- Fluency Assessments (words correct per minute on a grade level passage)
- Student Fluency Video, Pre- and Post-Study (optional)

The classroom helpers handed out two copies of the daily poem - one to keep in school and the other to practice reciting at home. The students put one copy in their binders and the other went directly into their homework folders. By providing the additional copy for students to share with their families, I heard from students and parents some unexpected benefits such as:

"My whole family read the poem together."
"You should have heard the way my father read this poem."
"My child FaceTimed his grandmother just to read her the poem."
"My mom read one part, and I read the other."
"My child is not only reading her poems, she is also reading books."
"I wrote my own poem last night."

The FDL routine was easy to follow, and implementation felt natural. Students looked forward to that day's poem and enjoyed reciting it as a group, reading it to a partner, and reading it independently. I enjoyed stepping back and listening to my students as they helped each other with phrasing or offered each other advice.

At first, I thought that teaching five vocabulary words found in the daily poems would be overwhelming for the students and me. However, this part of the lesson only took about five minutes. I introduced each of the preselected words, discussed its meaning, and gave some examples or made a connection to help students understand how the words were used in the poem. The real magic for getting students to own these words came later when they completed the VocabularySpellingCity assignments, which will be noted below.

During the lesson, I took a few minutes to discuss something special about the poem. This opportunity provided a teachable moment where I pointed out poetic and literary devices, such as word choice, syntax and structure, figurative language, and author's voice.

By the end of the lesson, students had read the poem at least five times, gained enough confidence to read the selection on their own, and felt comfortable using the new vocabulary.

Here are two of my students' favorite poems:

The Grump!

(1st Voice)	(2ng Voice)
Perfect day!	
	I think not!
Warm weather	
	Sticky hot
Smell the flowers	
	Makes me sneeze
Pet a kitty	
	No, I'll wheeze
Feed some birdies	
	Hate their litter
Pat a bunny	
	Nasty critter
Gentle clouds	
	Feels like rain
You´re so gloomy	
	You're a pain
So much joy	
	So much rot
I think positive	
	I think not!

© 2009 *Partner Poems for Building Fluency* Scholastic Professional

Waiting At The Window

by A. A. Milne

These are my two drops of rain
Waiting on the window-pane.

I am waiting here to see
Which the winning one will be.

Both of them have different names.
One is John and one is James.

All the best and all the worst
Comes from which of them is first.

James has just begun to ooze.
He's the one I want to lose.

John is waiting to begin.
He´s the one I want to win.

James is going slowly on.
Something sort of stichs to John.

John is moving off at last.
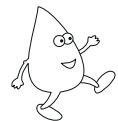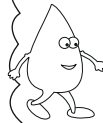James is going pretty fast.

John is rushing down the pane.
James is going slow again.

James has met a sort of smear.
John is getting very near.

Is he going fast enough?
(James has found a piece of fluff.)

John has quickly hurried by.
(James was talking to a fly.)

John is there and John has won!
Look! I told you! Here´s the sun!

Before the implementation of the action research, providing the necessary vocabulary practice to my students proved difficult, particularly for my ELL students who needed more exposure to words compared to native English speakers. The use of VocabularySpellingCity served as a solution to this problem. With VocabularySpellingCity, I was able to provide vocabulary practice with the words of the week, while also helping my students review previously learned words. I accomplished this by assigning games and activities on VocabularySpellingCity that students could pair with new word lists or lists containing words pulled from prior poems. Students had the opportunity to play word games at least six times throughout the week. My students' exposure to words more than doubled, which especially benefited my ELLs and struggling readers.

With the help of VocabularySpellingCity, my students actively engaged in the practice they needed to retain new words in long-term memory, learning all the new words they encountered during the course of study. Many of them chose to use VocabularySpellingCity to practice their vocabulary words at school when they completed daily assignments or at home after finishing their homework. I noticed that during free choice selection, students elected to play the spelling games. Over time, I started to see vocabulary words appear in their writing, which I certainly was not expecting, but was thrilled to see.

Even though the study has concluded, the students still treasure their poetry notebooks filled with the FDL poems, and they often reread them without prompting. There are even times when one student calls out the title of a poem and the whole class joins in. I see the value in FDL and plan to continue this instructional practice for the remainder of the school year. In fact, I plan to repeat this with my future classes, regardless of what grade level I am teaching.

The combination of FDL and VocabularySpellingCity has changed the way I teach. It is a simple yet powerful method to increase vocabulary retention, fluency, and ultimately reading comprehension. One of the biggest unexpected surprises was the increase in student confidence and success.

Poetry Slam

The study culminated with a poetry slam. Students could either select a poem from the study, find one on their own, or write their own. After selecting a poem, students chose to perform their selection by themselves, with a partner, or in small groups. Even though most of the students had memorized their poem, they held a copy in their hands just in case they forgot a line. As there were no props or costumes, students had to use just their voices to convey the meaning of their poem.

To give the ambiance of a cafe, desks were pushed together and covered in black tablecloths with fake candles and flowers on top. Lights were dimmed, a microphone and speaker were set up, and soft jazz played in the background until the slam began. All of the students were dressed in jeans and black shirts. Parents and support staff were given a poetry slam program. I served as the MC, welcoming guests to the event and introducing each act. After each performance, the audience snapped their fingers in approval.

It was evident from the confident and joyful looks on my students' faces that they were proud of their accomplishments and knew they read their poems fluently. The adults were impressed by the students' performances.
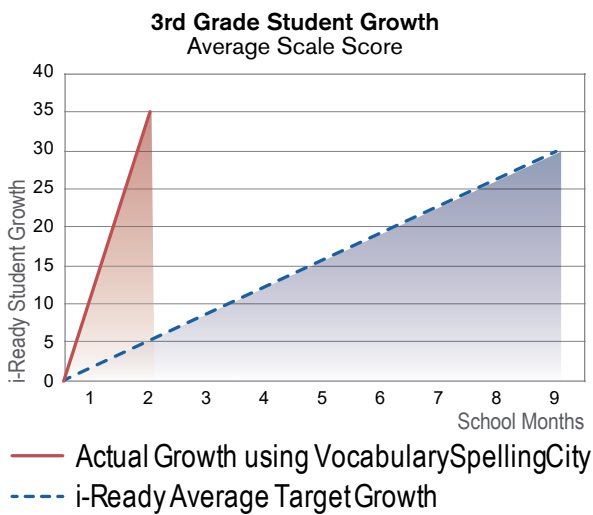
Data & Data Analysis

The data collected confirmed significant improvement in fluency, vocabulary retention, and reading comprehension. Also, the student survey signaled a positive shift in student attitudes towards reading and word study.

The i-Ready assessment consisted of reading passages followed by questions based on the text. Since the assessment is adaptive, the passages became more difficult as students correctly answered questions from previous passages.

The data was used to determine student performance in terms of grade level expectations.

i-Ready Class Norms Report

The i-Ready test provided information about each student's performance (scale score) relative to a group of nationally represented i-Ready students who were in the same grade and who took the test at the same time of year as my students.

3rd Grade Student Growth
Average Scale Score

— Actual Growth using VocabularySpellingCity
- - - - i-Ready Average Target Growth

Student Growth Report

The student growth report was used to measure student improvement during the time between the two diagnostic assessments, and measure progress towards end-of-year growth targets. On average, both the third and fourth grade students achieved the target growth for one year in a half a year's instruction, which included 40 school days of FDL and VocabularySpellingCity. Ten of the third grade students exceeded the Average Yearly Target Growth by mid-year with six of them having a Growth Score of +50. Six of the fourth grade students exceeded the Average Yearly Target Growth by mid-year as well.

Grade	Overall Scale Scores			Student Growth
	Pretest Average Scale Score Checkpoint 1 August 2017	Post-Test Average Scale Score Checkpoint 2 January 2018	Average Scale Score Achieved	i-Ready Expected Target Growth for One Year
3	504.16	539.47	35.32	30
4	544.63	561.83	15.46	19

i-Ready Percentile Scores at Pretest and Post-test

When analyzing scores by percentile, the third grade gains of 18 percentile points from the beginning of the year to mid-year are impressive. Fourth grade made on average a 3 percentile gain. One reason they may not have shown as much growth is because their pretest scores were already above average (59th percentile). Nevertheless, both third and fourth grade students made gains in relation to their relative standing in reading achievement with the norming group of third and fourth grade students.

Grade	Pretest Average Scale Score Score by % Fall August 2017	Post-Test Average Scale Score Score by % Winter January 2018	Percentile Gain from Pretest to Post-Test
3	45%ile	63%ile	18%ile
4	59%ile	62%ile	3%ile

Oral Reading Fluency

Using the 3-Minute Reading Assessment Expressive Reading Rubric, students showed impressive gains in prosody. Students improved significantly in their expression and volume, phrasing and intonation, smoothness, and pace. Word recognition accuracy (words correct per minute) indicated that students made statistically significant gains that were within normal expectations. These students were generally fluent readers to begin with, so I was not expecting anything more than normal gains.

Oral Reading Fluency Fluency Rubric				
	1	**2**	**3**	**4**
Expression and Volume	Reads in a quiet voice as if to get words out. The reading does not sound natural like talking to a friend.	Reads in a quiet voice. The reading sounds natural in part of the text, but the reader does not always sound like they are talking to a friend.	Reads with volume and expression. However, sometimes the reader slips into expressionless reading and does not sound like they are talking to a friend.	Reads with varied volume and expression. The reader sounds like they are talking to a friend with their voice matching the interpretation of the passage.
Phrasing	Reads word-by-word in a monotone voice.	Reads in two or three word phrases, not adhering to punctuation, stress and intonation.	Reads with a mixture of run-ons, mid sentence pauses for breath, and some choppiness. There is reasonable stress and intonation.	Reads with good phrasing; adhering to punctuation, stress and intonation.
Smoothness	Frequently hesitates while reading, sounds out words, and repeats words or phrases. The reader makes multiple attempts to read the same passage.	Reads with extended pauses or hesitations. The reader has many "rough spots."	Reads with occasional breaks in rhythm. The reader has difficulty with specific words and/or sentence structures.	Reads smoothly with some breaks, but self-corrects with difficult words and/or sentence structures.
Pace	Reads slowly and laboriously.	Reads moderately slowly.	Reads fast and slow throughout reading.	Reads at a conversational pace throughout the reading.
Scores of 10 or more indicate that the student is making good progress in fluency. Scores below 10 indicate that the student needs additional instruction in fluency.			Score:	

Rubric modified from Tim Rasinski – *Creating Fluent Readers*

Vocabulary Pre- and Post-test

Vocabulary retention increased more for the third graders than the fourth graders, but both groups did show notable gains. One observation worth mentioning is that I noticed a confidence in my students as they began using these vocabulary words when speaking and writing.

| Grade	Beginning	End	Increase
3	53.03%	79.74%	26.71%
4	65.89%	83.85%	17.97%

Conclusion

Both my third and fourth grade students made significant gains in fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. In 40 school days, the third grade students made over a full year's growth, while fourth grade students achieved almost a year's growth. Third grade increases were higher than fourth grade, which might be due to the fact that the fourth graders began the study already with a high level of performance. The data showed students had significant growth in:

- Reading Comprehension (i-Ready Scale Scores)
- Oral Reading Fluency (3-Minute Reading Assessment)
- Vocabulary Retention (VocabularySpellingCity Pre- and Post-Test)

The clear increase in student confidence is cause for celebration. Students are no longer hesitant to read aloud or perform in front of others, discuss texts, and use newly acquired vocabulary in their speaking and writing.

The burden of providing meaningful and accountable vocabulary practice was lifted with the support of VocabularySpellingCity. Students were eager to complete their assignments because they enjoyed the multitude of learning activities and games.
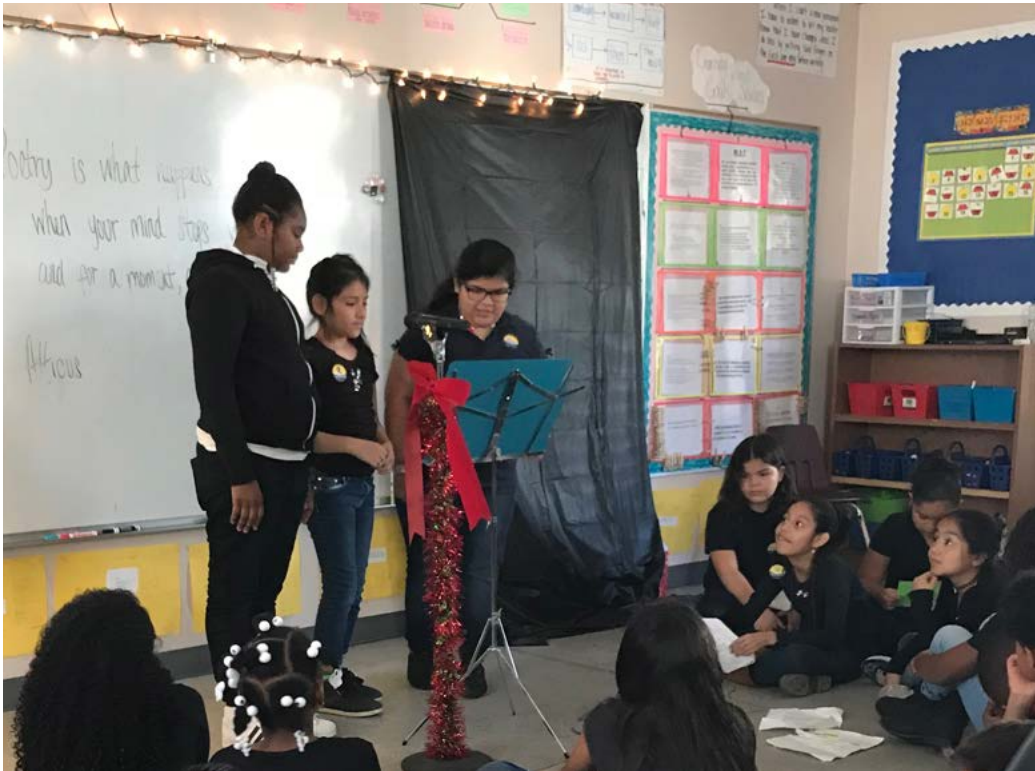
Reflections

As a teacher of the dual language program, time is precious because I have a split day. I am mindful of my classroom management and strive to ensure my instruction is effective and time efficient. At first, I was nervous that the Fluency Development Lessons would take up too much of my instructional time. Actually, it didn't take long to realize that I was not giving up time at all. Instead, I was enhancing and enriching the curriculum I already had in place. The Fluency Development Lesson made it easy for me to use poetry as a vehicle for teaching vocabulary ELA standards. The beauty of VocabularySpellingCity was that it supported my explicit instruction of vocabulary by providing students with multiple exposures to words, which I did not have the time to implement effectively. Students enjoyed their VocabularySpellingCity assignments, which saved me time because I did not have to constantly remind them to complete their independent practice. Without that distraction, I was able to concentrate on my small group reading instruction.

Before I used the Fluency Development Lesson plan, I struggled with delivering the fluency practice my students needed. Now they are becoming proficient readers sooner, compared with the way I previously provided fluency instruction. I know my students are more confident readers and writers. I not only see their fluency improving; I also see changes in their comprehension and academic writing. I believe all students can benefit from this plan, and intend to share this experience with other teachers. ∎

VOCABULARY SPELLINGCITY®

VocabularySpellingCity® is a K-12 game-based productivity tool that engages students with integrated word study practice, supporting the teacher. Powerful interactive activities engage students while supplementing instruction with your current reading program.

To learn more, please visit:
VocabularySpellingCity.com