

## **Vocabulary Acquisition through Systematic Instructional Strategies at Early Grades**

Asia Zulfqar\*, Syed Nasir Hussain\*\* and Fakhra Aziz\*\*\*

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### **Abstract**

Vocabulary development is one of the key features to improve reading, writing, speaking and comprehension of a language at early grades. It is usually considered as a major indicator in students' performance at the level of early childhood education. Considering the importance of vocabulary development, this research was planned to explore the current level of vocabulary of students and effects of systematic instructional strategies on vocabulary acquisition of grade-one students. Convenient sampling technique was adopted to involve students in this research. A section of grade-one of 27 students from a model school was selected to conduct this study. A multiple-choice test based on 25 questions was constructed to study the current level of students in relation to their vocabulary. One-group pretest-posttest research design was adopted to conduct this action research. The results of the pre-action test depicted a significant deficiency of students' learning of vocabulary. Based on the pre-test results, an action was planned based on multiple instructional strategies to enhance students' vocabulary. A paired sample t-test was applied on the collected data to identify the improvements in their vocabulary. Post-test results showed significant improvements in students' performance. Next to discussion, limitations of this study and directions for future research also presented.

**Keywords:** Vocabulary development, Early Childhood Education, Action research, instructional strategies.

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\* Assistant Professor, Department of Education, BahauddinZakariya University, Multan

\*\* Assistant Professor, ECE & ETED Faculty of Education, Allama Iqbal Open University, Islamabad (Corresponding author email: nasirhussain99@gmail.com)

\*\*\* Associate Professor, Institute of Education, Lahore College for Women University, Lahore

## Introduction

Words play a major role and are considered as building blocks for effective communication. One of the components of skilled reading is vocabulary which has been highlighted as a major component of language learning (Smith, Spooner, Jimenez & Browder, 2013). Children should have numerous opportunities to integrate new words into their existing vocabulary to improve their language skills during early grades (Carlisle, 2007). Vocabulary acquisition is a crucial tool to learn the second language because shortage of vocabulary could be the major hurdle in effective reading and writing.

Authors Nation (2001) and Takač (2008) consider a complementary relationship between vocabulary and language. Strong and rich vocabulary enables students to use language effectively and efficiently without errors, omissions, pauses and breaks. The use of vocabulary is demonstrated daily inside and outside the school. Research proved the ultimate relationship between vocabulary and comprehension – an increase in vocabulary linked to comprehension. Once students are able to understand the written text on the basis of their prior knowledge – linked to existing vocabulary, they can comprehend the written text or at least infer the meaning of the written text (Lee & Krashen, 2011).

A well-trained teacher can design instructional strategies assessing the requirements of their pupils. At times, when instructors assess the needs of the students, they should make wise decisions to develop an instructional plan to enhance the vocabulary of their students. Such instructional plans should be based or linked to students' content/curriculum to equip them with the working vocabulary in reading and writing. It will also enrich their understanding on their content area (Denton, Bryan, Wexler, Reed & Vaughn, 2007). However, many teachers are not trained and confident in vocabulary teaching and they are least aware of planning and starting such plans in their schools (Berne & Blachowicz, 2008). Vocabulary teaching needs careful planning and techniques. It is the prime responsibility of an instructor to develop students' knowledge and skills by using a variety of strategies and provide them special assistance wherever his students require.

In Pakistani context, much has been improved in recent years from developing school infrastructure to teachers' professional development. But there are still grey areas looking for attention e.g., teachers' training at early childhood level in general and the core areas of ECE in particular (Fatima & Pathan, 2016). Although, teachers are being trained in this field, yet the impact of these trainings could hardly identify in public schools. In contrast to public schools, the performance of private schools is better. The students in public schools are lacking in reading and writing skills which are a major

hindrance in their school performance (Syeda, 2016). Consequently, the majority of them are not good readers and writers. Taking into account the need of this crucial problem at early childhood education, we planned this study to evaluate the current state of vocabulary of students at early grades in the public schools and to plan some strategies to foster their vocabulary acquisition.

### **Literature Review**

Vocabulary instruction in ECE is an important aspect of reading and writing and is critical for developing comprehension. There is a need for thorough professional development of teachers for effective vocabulary instruction. Multiple strategies are available in literature to produce greater results at early grades. Students' poor vocabulary in language could be linked to multiple factors e.g., weak memory, negligence of teachers and parents, less practices and emphasis on language subjects, etc. (Guralnick, 2010). Such students generally require clear teaching strategies and a thorough exercise to improve their vocabulary. Effective strategies for vocabulary acquisition assist learners to better understand the new words and to give them a sense to use the learnt words in varied situations (Harris, Golinkoff & Hirsh-Pasek, 2011).

It is pertinent to understand the nature of vocabulary to select the appropriate instructional strategies that facilitate students to learn the new words with mastery. Basically, vocabulary consists of functional words used to complete a syntax e.g., are, is, that, this and to etc. The next is content words, these words are based on concrete and abstract ideas. Concrete words, such as, van, bus, can be taught by showing an object or a picture. Abstract words, like unity, can be taught by using different examples. To conclude, words may be related to either general or technical vocabulary.

Whatever the type of words is – either concrete, abstract, general or content – an instructor carefully plans the strategies to teach the words to his pupils (Rasinski, Homan & Biggs, 2009). At the next step, an instructor needs to decide the depth or nature of instructional strategy (the level of students matters here), if they required a minimal knowledge in relation to selected words e.g., if the purpose of vocabulary acquisition is to make them learn synonyms or antonyms, then instructional strategies will be according to the need of the given words. However, to develop comprehension about a term, text and a sentence, then instructor must select aligned instructional strategies that help students to define and contrast text or sentence, complete missing sentences, or infer varied meanings from written text, this will be linked to their in-depth insight of particular term or word (Baker, 1995). There are a variety of instructional strategies available which could help learners to foster their vocabulary considering their individual requirements and needs.

## **Instructional Strategies to Fostering Vocabulary**

### ***Read Aloud***

Literature presented sufficient evidence to measure the contribution of ‘read aloud’ in developing students’ vocabulary (McGee & Schickedanz, 2007; Green Brabham & Lynch-Brown, 2002). Children can learn new vocabulary through read aloud technique. It engages students in book reading that develop their motivation and attention to learn novel words in diverse situations (Hiebert & Pearson, 2007). An instructor draws students’ attention towards high frequency words, students learn words incidentally or instructor stresses and elaborates particular words for them, sometimes instructor demonstrates the words to give them an explanation of that word (Bravo et al., 2007). Such explanations assist them to develop connection with the written text.

### ***Semantic Feature Analysis***

Semantic feature analysis is another way to teach vocabulary to student. It helps in creating relationship and concepts between words and categories. It develops the understanding of students about similar and different words (Miller & Veatch, 2011). Following steps can be considered to starting with this strategy in a classroom. Instructor should always start with simple to complex format. For example, students are usually aware of animals, so a teacher can prepare a list of concepts or objects related to this category such as dog, cat, eagle, mouse, lion and horse.

Next, prepare a list of features that students will explore e.g., number of legs, wings, eyes, hairs, tail etc. Draw a matrix to organize the perceived information by the students. Students should be conveyed about the procedures to record their answers on the given matrix by using different signs (Van Hees, Angwin, McMahon & Copland, 2013). This strategy helps students to build deeper understating about vocabulary and add in their comprehension (Jennings, Caldwell, & Lerner, 2014).

### ***The Frayer Model***

The Frayer model assists students to enhance their vocabulary through a graphic organizer (Frayer, 1969). This model enables students to understand the desired vocabulary about a topic or text then apply the learned vocabulary by giving alternative examples or through comprehensive drawing of that text to explain the meaning of the text. The given information is distributed in four parts on a paper or chart to get a visual presentation to students about the text (Graves, 1986; Buehl and Grid, 2007). It helps students to analyze the concepts, characterize the information and then synthesize it

through examples and thinking. It also motivates students to apply their prior knowledge and build connection among the available ideas.

### ***Word Walls***

A collection of multiple words posted on a wall for students is called 'word wall'. It should be displayed in large and clear letters on a wall or any other display in a classroom or outside the classroom where it is visible to all students (Rasinski, Homan & Biggs, 2009). The word wall is a communicating tool in language learning and vocabulary development. Word wall comprises on collection of words that can be used to develop four language skills. An instructor can place words on a wall where it is visible to all students. The written words should be in bold letters to distinguish the variety of words. There can be different background colors to highlight the differences among words. Next to instructor, students can also decide which word will go to word wall, these words should be added on wall on regular basis to intact the interest of the students. Content from the curriculum should be considered to select the words. Moreover, students should be encouraged to visit the wall often (Harmon, Hedrick & Wood, 2005).

### ***Visual Imagery***

Good readers construct mental images during reading that linked to their prior knowledge and experiences. Readers connect the reading material with the pictures forming in their minds. An instructor can teach his students to create mental pictures when they read. In fact, a visual last for longer time to memorize the text or story (Reading Rockets, 2015). This strategy could work individually and in groups as well. Visualization considered as an important contributor in comprehension development. The written text or a picture can help students to build a connection of events in their mind. They can also develop connection based on their prior knowledge which helps them to remind the learned material (WiseGeek, 2015).

Flash cards are the other example of visual imagery, all the letters written on the cards will be in capital form, card can consist on a word or a picture (Baleghizadeh & Ashoori, 2011). Students will be presented with a card to guess the word or the name of the picture.

### ***List-Group-Label***

This is another form of semantic mapping, it encourages students to foster their vocabulary through labelling the picture, diagram or a figure. This strategy supports students to develop their categorization, contrasting and organizing concepts (Reading Rockets, 2015). Boling and Evans (2008) identified that this strategy increases students' memory in learning vocabulary especially in language, arts, math, science, and

social studies. Students would be able to connect the new words with the familiar words, also extend their conceptual understanding of vocabulary. They could evaluate their performance through revisiting their concepts and categories during and after the reading (Miller & Veatch, 2011).

### *Using dictionaries effectively*

Dictionaries are a useful resource for everyone. Every day you come across a variety of words while reading and writing that you do not know, or you cannot guess the meanings of that word. In fact, this is impossible to have knowledge of all words especially in a foreign language. A dictionary facilitates us to know the meaning of difficult words, it defines the words, also gives you its synonyms and antonyms, origin of the word and tells you the correct pronunciation of that word (Kinsella, Stump & Feldman, 2013). An efficient use of dictionaries can add a lot in your vocabulary which can enhance students' performance in all subjects.

### **Research Questions**

Q 1: What is the current level of vocabulary of students at early grades?

Q 2: What is the impact of systematic instructional strategies on vocabulary development of students at early grades?

### **Research Methodology**

The study aimed to improve the vocabulary of students studying in grade one by using multiple instructional strategies in a public school. Action research design was adopted to conduct this research. One-group pretest-posttest design was applied to conduct this research. During the research process, two phases of research were planned systematically. **Phase 1** based on the pre-test where researcher identified the current level of vocabulary through a vocabulary test. At **phase 2**, the identified areas were addressed in a systematic way by using multiple strategies and teaching aids. Finally, the collected data during (Pre-test and post-test) were analyzed to study the impact of action phase on the students' vocabulary acquisition.

### **Study Sample**

Convenient sampling technique was adopted to select the sample of the study. All the students studying at grade-one at University Model School, Bahauddin Zakariya University Multan were involved in this study (N=27).

### ***Measures***

An objective-type test was constructed to collect data from students at pre and post intervention step. The pre-test was conducted to identify the current level of their vocabulary, while post-test was conducted to study the improvement in their vocabulary after the intervention. Pre and post-test were based on multiple choice questions. The test was based on 25 questions; each right answer was given one mark. The test is attached in appendix A.

### ***Action Phase***

Based on the pre-test results, researcher planned teaching strategies suggested in the literature to enhance the vocabulary of grade-one students. Following key strategies were planned to teach the students to improve their vocabulary. First, difficult words were selected from the textbooks they have already gone through in the class.

Next, multiple aids were planned to assist students to learn a word e.g., flash cards, chart, pictures, videos, animations etc. At the start of a session, students were mentally prepared and engaged in multiple brainstorming ideas to make them ready for the lesson. The action phase was lasted for one hour a day for four weeks. An informed consent was obtained from the school principal to implement the action phase. During these sessions the class teacher was not there in the class. Students were encouraged to freely participate in the activities to learn words through different above mentioned strategies. To motivate and appreciate students, candies and chocolates were also given as reward/motivator to their good performance.

### ***Post-test***

The same test was conducted again to study the effects of the action phase. However, the order of the items in the test was shuffled to reduce the chance of acquaintance of the students with the test. The criterion of marking was kept the same which was followed in marking the pretest. Later, the score lists of pre and post-test were compared to identify the difference between before and after the intervention.

### **Results**

This study aimed to improve students' vocabulary at early childhood education. In view of analysis all the collected data during pre and post-test was entered in SPSS (version, 22). A paired sample t-test was applied to identify the difference between the pre and post-test results.

Table 1

*Descriptive Statistics of the Pre-Test and Post-Test Results*

	Mean	N	SD	SE Mean
Pre-test	11.63	27	3.68	.70
Post-test	19.93	27	3.36	.64

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics in view of calculating the t-test results. In order to find the difference between the results of two groups (pre and post-test), a paired sample t-test was applied to identify the difference of performance between two groups of students before and after the action phase.

Table 2

*Correlation between Pretest and Posttest*

	N	R	Sig.
Pair (pre-test & post-test)	27	.54	.003

Table 2 presents the correlation coefficient between the scores of the pretest and posttest. A relatively higher value of correlation coefficient ( $r = 0.54$ ,  $p = 0.003$ ) shows that the students getting higher marks in the pretest also obtained higher marks and vice versa. It can also be deduced that the effects of pretest were least carried over to the posttest.

Table 3

*Paired Sample t-test – Difference of Mean*

	Mean	Std. Deviation	SE Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		t	df	Sig.
				Lower	Upper			
Pre-test	-8.29	3.36	.64	-9.62	-6.96	-12.82	26	.00
Post-test								

$N=27$

Table 3 presents the results of the paired sample t-test, the results identified a significant improvement in students' vocabulary after the post-test phase ( $M = 19.93$ ,  $SE = .64$ ) than to pre-test ( $M = 11.63$ ,  $SE = .70$ ),  $t(26) = -12.82$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $d = (2.35)$  was found to exceed Cohen's (1988) convention for a large effect ( $d = .80$ ).

## Discussion

The study planned to investigate the current level of students' learning in relation to their vocabulary and implemented some strategies to enhance their vocabulary



acquisition at early grades. The results identified a poor state of students' learning in vocabulary at early grades in a public school. These findings are in line with earlier available research conducted in a Pakistani context. Iqbal, Noor, Muhabat and Kazemian (2015) identified the factors affecting students' vocabulary and comprehension in the English language. The study of Fareed, Jawed and Awan (2018) is also in accordance to our findings. They concluded in their research about the performance of Pakistani students in school since English is not the native language, so students are facing problems in learning English. Moreover, the background and schooling of students are of great importance in learning foreign language.

As to the findings of our next research questions, systematic instructional strategies can effectively add in students' vocabulary. This is in line with the earlier research of Malik (2019) conducted in Pakistani context. They have developed the writing skills of students which is one of the dimensions of vocabulary development. They have found a significant improvement in results after post-test results. Next, our findings could also be corroborated with the study results of Jamil, Majoka and Khan (2014), they investigated that private schools are offering more quality book to their students which are very useful to develop vocabulary of students and next to books, they also provide additional sources to their students to give them exposure about new words. However, public schools are only dependent on traditional books which are the only source to learn or develop a competency of students in a foreign language.

### **Conclusion**

This research intended to enhance the students' vocabulary in teaching English. Multiple strategies were used to enhance students' learning. Resultantly, we identified significantly better results in posttest as compared to pretest results. It is evident that multiple teaching strategies along with multiple teaching aids help students to learn better. Furthermore, research proved that this type of learning stays longer as compare to traditional teaching methods.

### **Limitation and Directions for Future Research**

This study focused on a key problem at early grades. We tried to cover multiple aspects of this key problem, however some limitations and recommendations for future research are imperative. This study is conducted in just one school, this limits the analysis and related variance in the data. Future research can increase the sample size by involving more schools in the sample to get a bigger picture of the phenomenon.

This study mainly focused on students to study their current level of vocabulary and improvement of vocabulary, future researches can involve teachers in their research to train them or learn them more teaching strategies to enhance students' learning. Next

to public schools, future research can also involve private schools to compare the performance of teachers and students in their domains. Future research can also involve school leaders in such initiatives to train their teachers and plan some innovative techniques to make classrooms interesting for students since early grades have an important role in students' academic journey.

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## **appendix: A**

University Model School, Bahauddin Zakariya University, Multan

Student Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Total marks: 25

Subject: English

Time: 30 Minutes

Class: 1

**Q1: Write the missing words in the following letters:**

- A\_\_T
- TI\_\_E
- C\_\_T
- G\_\_RL
- CH\_\_IR

**Q2: Complete the sentences by following pictures.**

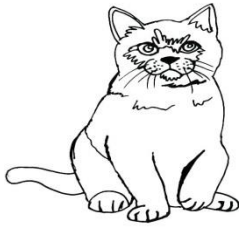
This is a \_\_\_\_\_.



The Boy and Girl are \_\_\_\_\_.



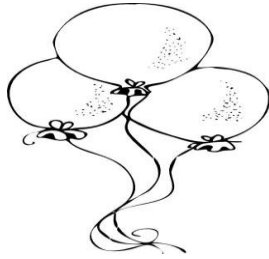
This is a \_\_\_\_\_.



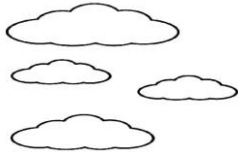
This is an \_\_\_\_\_.



These are \_\_\_\_\_.



**Q3: Label the following pictures:**



\_\_\_\_\_.



\_\_\_\_\_.



\_\_\_\_\_.



\_\_\_\_\_.

\_\_\_\_\_.

**Q4: Find the correct words. The letters are jumbled.**

- Sten \_\_\_\_\_
- Nep \_\_\_\_\_
- Tra \_\_\_\_\_
- Nam \_\_\_\_\_
- Ozo \_\_\_\_\_

**Q5: Match the words in column (A) with column (B).**

<b>A</b>	<b>B</b>
Green	Coin
Pink	Grass
Good	Sky
Blue	Lips
Silver	Bad