

# 11 Teaching Vocabulary Using Shared Reading and Flashcards

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

One issue that concerns me in my teaching is that learners seem to have difficulty remembering the vocabulary I teach them using flashcards. In this study I would like to explore an alternative way of teaching vocabulary – shared reading. Pidgeon (1990:2) defines shared reading as “a text that is shared among the participants for their mutual pleasure and understanding”. Shared reading is a widely recognized tool for promoting not only literacy but also broader forms of social development in children. It is a technique which involves all the children reading together with the teacher scaffolding their reading. Many teachers of English in Oman do shared reading using big books. Many others rely only on flashcards to teach vocabulary. My goal here is to compare these two strategies.

## 2 LEARNING L2 VOCABULARY

### 2.1 Vocabulary Knowledge

According to Hatch & Brown (1995), vocabulary is the list of words that speakers of a particular language use. By ‘words’ in this context, we do not mean only items consisting of one word but also strings of words which together form one lexical item, such as idioms.

Nation (2001:27) distinguishes between receptive and productive vocabulary knowledge: “Essentially, receptive vocabulary use involves perceiving the form of a word while listening or reading and retrieving meaning. Productive vocabulary use involves wanting to express a meaning through speaking or writing and retrieving and producing the appropriate spoken or written word form”. In this study my focus will be on learners’ receptive knowledge of vocabulary.

Discussions of what it means to know a word (e.g. Cameron, 2001) also commonly refer to three aspects of vocabulary knowledge: form, meaning and use.

Form refers to spelling (written form) and pronunciation (spoken form). Knowing the meaning of a word means knowing what objects or ideas it refers to. It also means knowing what other words are associated with it. Knowing vocabulary use implies an understanding of the situations where the word occurs and can be used.

## **2.2 Teaching Vocabulary**

Much has also been written about the strategies teachers can use to help learners develop their knowledge of vocabulary (e.g. Gairns & Redman, 1986; Schmitt & McCarthy, 1997). Strategies commonly discussed are:

- Using objects: teachers can use real objects to introduce new vocabulary. This can help learners because they not only hear the word but also receive visual reinforcement (Hunt & Beglar 1998).
- Mime, expression and gestures: many words (e.g. angry, happy) lend themselves to being taught through movement and gestures.
- Guessing from context: learners will always meet words which are new to them, so it is important for them to know how to work out their meaning from the context.
- Translation: the teacher explains the meaning of the new words using the learners' mother tongue.
- Illustrations and pictures: most concrete vocabulary can be taught using illustrations and pictures made by teachers or found in stories and other resources.
- Contrasts: this technique involves explaining a word by contrasting it with an antonym, very often an antonym which is known to the learners.

Furthermore, best practice in teaching vocabulary is determined by factors such as the age of learner, the context, the school curriculum, the second language syllabus and its goals.

Apart from these specific strategies, two general approaches for teaching vocabulary can be mentioned here. The first is incidental learning, where it is hoped that learners will pick up new vocabulary through exposure and without conscious explanation by the teacher. The second approach recognizes that some vocabulary needs explicit instruction. Schmitt (2000) points out that explicit learning focuses learners' attention directly on the target vocabulary and improves the chance that the vocabulary will be learned.

## **2.3 Shared Reading**

Shared reading is a technique which involves all the children reading together with the teacher scaffolding their reading. Hyland (2005) mentions some keys to the success of shared reading in an ESL context. It should be fun, simple, interactive, efficient and skills-based. Her study in Kuwait showed that children always looked forward to their shared reading period and enjoyed it. Shared reading is therefore a practice that teachers can use regularly in the youngest grades and which can establish reading as a life-long and meaningful habit. Mooney (1994) also believes that "children who share books with an adult are on the threshold of a life long love of reading". A number of other benefits of shared reading have been identified:

- Big books and shared reading promote language input. As Scott & Yterberg (1990:34) say, “when children start learning English, they obviously need to be given language before they can produce it themselves”. The big book is a tool which provides many opportunities for language input.
- Big books and shared reading are valuable because children are interested in learning using something other than their course books.
- Children begin to recognize through shared reading that language works in chunks of meaning not only while speaking but also on the printed page.
- Big books and shared reading create social interactions among the teachers and learners. This happens when teachers ask learners to sit on a mat around them; this may help to break the normal classroom routine and enhance the social relationship between the teachers and learners, and among learners themselves.
- Shared reading and big books encourage positive attitudes towards literature.
- Big books can be used to highlight features of language and hence to enhance learners’ awareness of these. By using them, teachers can draw children’s attention to vocabulary, spelling, punctuation and grammar. As Pidgeon (1990:4) says, “it’s easy, for example, to point out question marks or to talk about another way of saying “he went”, i.e., to talk about linguistic features.
- Stories are a rich source of natural repetition. They contain patterns that are repeated throughout the narration. This natural repetition encourages children to participate actively.

### **3 METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1 Research Questions**

My main research question was: Is shared reading more or less effective than using flashcards (FCs) for learning vocabulary?

This question is divided into three sub-questions:

- What vocabulary knowledge is learnt when using FCs and big books?
- What are the benefits of doing shared reading?
- Can we identify these benefits in Omani learners?

#### **3.2 Data Collection**

I worked with two Grade 1 classes (6-7 years old) in Basic Education cycle one. Learners in these classes were in their first year of learning English. Each class contained 20 learners.

According to Swetnam (2000), this is an evaluative study because it measures the effectiveness of two teaching methods - shared reading and flashcards. I chose the experimental method because I wanted to compare the effectiveness of these two different methods on learning vocabulary. I selected two sets of vocabulary on two topics. Each set included eight lexical items. Each class was taught the same two sets of vocabulary using the two methods. The first set of vocabulary were animals: rabbit, snake, cat, duck, horse, bird, donkey, and mouse. The second set were colours: blue, yellow, pink, white, red, orange, green, and black. In the shared

reading lessons I used two different big books. The stories were 'I went to school this morning' (for animals) and 'where is my baby?' (for colours). I adapted these stories to include the vocabulary I wanted to teach.

Table 1 summarizes which classes studied with the flashcards and with shared reading. Each class thus studied same two sets of vocabulary, one using flashcards (FCS) and one through shared reading.

Table 1: Classes and activities for the study.

Vocabulary sets	Animals		Colours	
	FCS	Shared reading	FCS	Shared reading
A	✓			✓
B		✓		✓

Immediately after each lesson I administered a vocabulary test to the learners. This consisted of a matching exercise. For the animals, learners had to listen to the names of the animals I read out and to write the corresponding number on their test paper. For the colours, they had to listen and draw lines between numbers and colours. I administered a second test to all learners three weeks after the lessons too to see how much vocabulary they remembered.

## 4 FINDINGS

### 4.1 Immediate Post-Test

Figure 1 presents the results of the first test completed by each class. One test was completed after each lesson. The figures given are the mean scores for each group. This figure shows very clearly that the immediate test scores were much higher for both classes following the shared reading lessons.

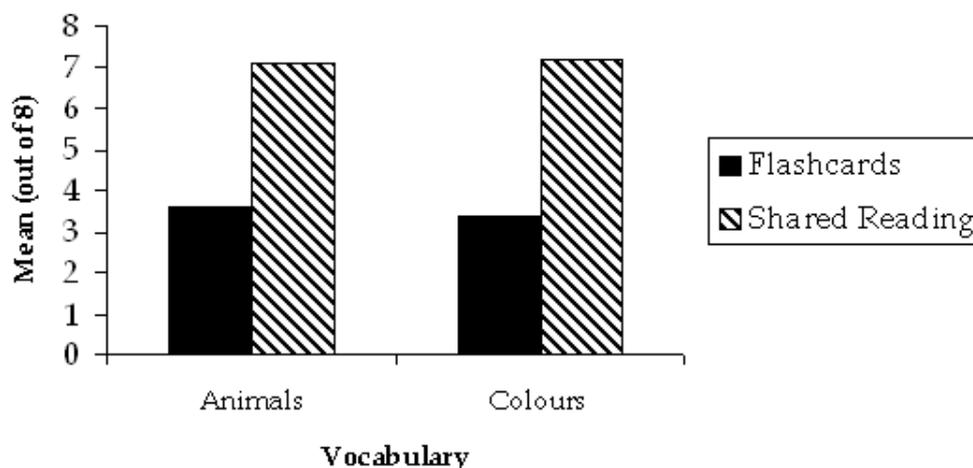


Figure 1: Immediate post-test results

## 4.2 Delayed Post-Test

Figure 2 presents the results of the test completed by each class three weeks after the vocabulary was taught. The figures given are once again the mean scores for each group.

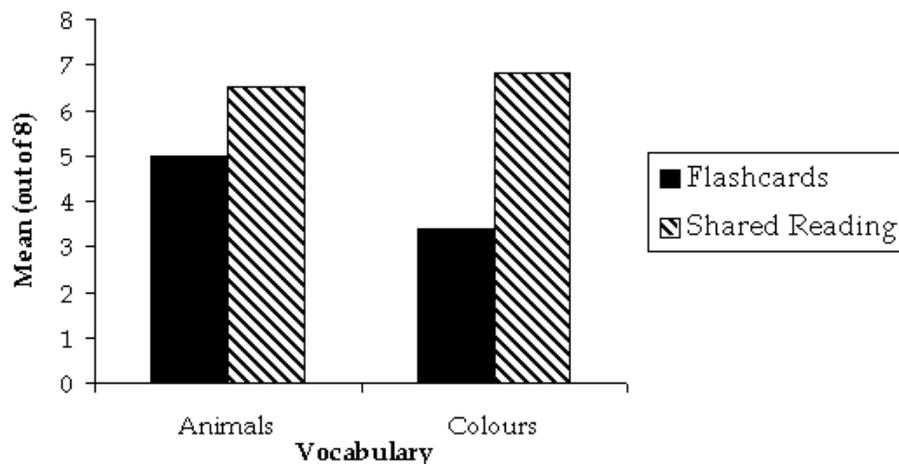


Figure 2: Delayed post-test results

Although the differences are not as pronounced as they were on the immediate post-test, it is still clear that scores were higher for the vocabulary sets that were studied through shared reading. Overall, then, shared reading had a more positive impact of learning vocabulary in both the short and long term.

## 5 DISCUSSION

The results of this study suggest that the use of shared reading supported the learning of receptive vocabulary more effectively than teaching the same vocabulary using flashcards. On the immediate tests, a total of 22 learners in the two classes scored full marks after shared reading while none did following the flashcard lessons. On the delayed tests, 18 scored full marks following the shared reading lessons while only nine did on the flashcard lessons.

There may be a number of reasons for the greater effectiveness of shared reading. It provides learners with opportunities to encounter vocabulary repeatedly and in a meaningful context, whereas flashcards often lack any context. Shared reading is also more memorable because learners are motivated by stories and they are able to form stronger associations between the story, pictures and the target vocabulary. This allows them to learn and recall this vocabulary more effectively than with flashcards alone. Stories also engage learners in ways that flashcards alone cannot; for example, by asking learners to predict what would happen in the stories I was able to create interest and attention, and this would have facilitated the learning of the new vocabulary too.

## 5.1 Limitations

The findings of this study apply only to the particular lessons and Grade 1 learners studied. More support for my conclusions here could have also been provided if the experiment had been repeated with different additional lessons and sets of vocabulary. In addition, in the three weeks between the first and the second tests, learners will have had many experiences which may have affected how they performed on the delayed tests (this may explain why the results related to the flashcard lessons were better on the delayed than on the immediate test).

## 6 CONCLUSION

The results of this study show that using big books and shared reading can help children learn vocabulary more effectively than just using flashcards. My experience of using big books suggests that learners find them motivating and enjoyable, and this is a key reason why learning through big books is more memorable. I hope that teachers who read this work will be motivated to explore the use of big books in their classrooms, not just to support vocabulary learning but to develop their learners' ability in English more generally.

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