



UMEÅ UNIVERSITET

Ordförrådsutveckling i klassrummet

En fallstudie om aktiviteter och resurser i engelska i åk 4–5

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Akademisk avhandling

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Title

Vocabulary development in the classroom: A case study examining activities and resources in English in grades 4–5

Abstract

This thesis examines vocabulary instruction in English as a foreign language within a primary school classroom, providing insights into how textbooks and other resources are used when teaching young learners. The research aims to deepen our understanding of vocabulary instruction in the middle years of primary school by observing a class of 10–11-year-old pupils and their teacher over nine weeks of English lessons. The research addresses the following questions: 1. What conditions for vocabulary development are provided by the pedagogical materials used? 2. How are different aspects of vocabulary addressed in English teaching activities in the middle years of primary school? The theoretical foundation of the study is a usage-based approach, which conceptualizes vocabulary development as emerging from linguistic experience and usage. The analysis is based on Nation's model of aspects of vocabulary knowledge (Nation, 2022) and a framework for vocabulary learning conditions (Nation, 2022; Webb & Nation, 2017). A mixed methods case study design is employed, combining video-based observations, interviews, a questionnaire, and corpus analyses of classroom materials.

An analysis of lexical coverage showed that the most frequent 1,000 word families were well represented in the materials. However, it became clear from the results that only a small proportion of words from the largest lexical word classes (adjectives, nouns, verbs, and adverbs) were recycled at least 10 times in the textbooks, suggesting insufficient exposure for effective vocabulary learning. Classroom activities primarily focused on vocabulary form and meaning, such as practicing spelling and pronunciation, with a greater emphasis on grammatical usage than on aspects such as word forms, collocations, and constraints on use. The instruction was characterized by diverse, multimodal methods, such as images, talk, text, video, audio, music, movement, and role-play, creating conditions conducive to vocabulary learning. Language-focused exercises primarily emphasized individual words and translation between Swedish and English, with some attention given to multi-word sequences. Vocabulary activities and exercises provided numerous opportunities for both oral and written retrieval of words and phrases, in whole-class settings and peer interactions. Common word-focused activities included choral reading of word lists, discussions, cloze texts, translation, and vocabulary tests, with most presented in isolation or limited context and fewer involving free, meaning-focused production of words or phrases or communicative use. The study discusses key factors in vocabulary instruction, such as recycling, repetition, and retrieval, decontextualized vs. contextualized learning, communicative language use, and adaptations to individual differences in vocabulary knowledge. The findings suggest a more systematic approach to vocabulary in teaching materials and highlight the importance of recognizing its central role in language development within the syllabus for English and the design of educational materials. The results have implications for developing elementary foreign language instruction, informing teacher education, and guiding the development of teaching materials.

Keywords

vocabulary instruction, young learners, English as a foreign language, pedagogical materials, video-based classroom observation, vocabulary test, qualitative content analysis, corpus methods, usage-based approach

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