Teacher Perceptions of Define-Example-Ask Vocabulary Routines for Elementary Students

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Abstract
Vocabulary is a set of familiar words within a person's language. Typically developed with students' exposure and age, the focused instructional routine of Define, Example, Ask (DEA) is used for Wonders K-5 Curriculum from McGraw Hill. This routine serves as a fundamental tool for acquiring knowledge through vocabulary in real-life methods. This article assesses teacher efficacy and perceptions of the DEA routine in year one of curriculum resource implementation with data collected from grade-level focus groups in fall 2018. The research question focuses on teacher efficacy in implementing the DEA routine.

Keywords
vocabulary instruction, teacher efficacy, Wonders K-5 Curriculum

Introduction

Vocabulary is knowledge of the meaning, use, and pronunciation of individual words used in speaking or recognized in listening (oral) and words used or recognized in print (reading and writing). Vocabulary is a key component of many aspects of literacy, including listening, expression, comprehension and writing (Wonders, 2017). As one of the main pillars of literacy instruction recommended by the National Reading Panel through the "Putting Reading First" report, vocabulary knowledge comes from multiple exposures to new words in context (NRP, 2000). Using the Define, Example, Ask (DEA) instructional routine, students gain opportunities to efficiently absorb and 'own' new vocabulary. Direct instruction in vocabulary with the DEA model has a positive impact on students' language development (Wonders, 2017).

Kansas English language arts (ELA) standards emphasize the need for students to expand the breadth of their vocabulary knowledge and acquire a healthy, always-expanding stock of words. Standards emphasize that instruction should guide students to extract word meaning from the context in which it is used. Wonders by McGraw Hill was adopted as the main curriculum resource for the district in fall 2018, and the DEA routine is part of the instructional expectation of this curriculum. Routines like DEA provide support for students unlikely to determine word meaning from text alone (Wonders, 2017). For example, English language learners may require support in mastering high-frequency words that are essential (Snow, Burns, & Griffith, 1998). Teachers' perceptions in their efficacy of the DEA routines support research that direct vocabulary instruction results in an increase of specific word knowledge and future performance on summative assessments (Snow, et al., 1998). This study and research question will report on teacher perceptions of efficacy and highlights specific ways to build confidence with DEA, not student results but rather educator level data. Qualitative data was collected from grade-level focus groups in fall 2018.

Define, Example, Ask (DEA) Routine

The steps for the routines include *define*, to share the meaning of words in student-friendly terms; *example,* where common experiences are shared; and *ask*, where questions are formed from the word in real-life context. Approximately eight selected focused vocabulary words are linked to the weekly theme, and students talk about and review words many times throughout the week (Wonders, 2017).

Students are given opportunities to learn new words in a variety of ways. Pre-instruction, context-based instruction, and restructuring are all used to teach vocabulary with DEA. Students are also taught to use context clues to figure out the meaning of unknown words with sentence and paragraph clues, definitions and restatements, synonyms and antonyms throughout (Wonders, 2017).

For example, in grade four during one sample week, students are introduced to vocabulary related to money and economics with vocabulary including *entrepreneur* and *currency*. Students begin the week by discussing the concept "Money Matters," which connects to the main text selection. They use a concept web or graphic organizer to generate words and phrases related to money. With DEA, students discuss and write academic vocabulary throughout the week, with additional scaffolding for the vocabulary words (e.g., *scarcity* and *opportunity*).

On day one, students practice using the new vocabulary definitions provided by video or picture examples. On day two, they are asked to generate new forms of the words by adding, changing, or removing inflectional endings with several examples. Students complete sentence stems using the words on day three. On day three or four, students may write sentences using the words in word study notebooks or personal journals. On day five, they complete a Frayer model or word square for each vocabulary word: in the first square of the model, they write the word; in the second square, they write a definition; in the third square, they draw an illustration that will help them remember the word; and in the fourth square, students write antonyms for the word (Wonders, 2017).

Review of Literature

DEA routines ask students to use multiple modalities of reading, writing, speaking and listening. The research connected to these areas is strong. Vocabulary development shows that comprehension gains are results of vocabulary learning (NRP, 2000): "More complex aspects of oral language, such as vocabulary, had more substantial predictive relations with later conventional literacy skills" (NIL, 2008, p. 78). Beginning in grade one and up, higher level tier two or three vocabulary words are selected from main text selections. In addition, domain-specific words are also introduced in context through selections. In-text scaffolding helps students with specific vocabulary in selections. Students continue to build on this vocabulary throughout the week.

With direct DEA instruction, even students in primary grades can acquire sophisticated vocabulary (Wonders, 2017). In order for students to understand a word once it has been decoded, it must already be part of their vocabulary (NRP, 2000). Before students can read independently, direct methods for building oral vocabulary contributes to students' ultimate success in reading. Snow, et al. (1998) argue that "learning new words is essential for comprehension development" (p. 217). Rich oral language-based instruction is a key part of reading. Using self-talk, parallel talk, expansion and praise are all parts of developing oral language, which transfers to understanding written words when decoded. Additional examples include the following:

1. With guidance and support from adults, students explore word relationships and nuances in word meanings (Define)
2. Students use words multiple times acquired through conversations, reading, being read to, and responding to texts with several examples (Example)
3. Students acquire and use accurately grade-appropriate conversational, general academic and domain specific words with questions to plug them back into their existing schemas (Ask)

One highlighted DEA aspect, nonlinguistic representation, comes in many forms with visual photos, videos, graphic organizers, sketches, pictographs, concept maps, flowcharts, or computerized simulations. The type of representation selected is a function of student abilities, type of content addressed, and amount of time available. Nonlinguistic representations must focus on

crucial information or the practice may have no positive effect on student learning (Haystead & Marzano, 2009). Representation helps students deepen their vocabulary understanding because it requires them to think about content in new ways. Asking students to explain their representations promotes even greater understanding. Nonlinguistic representations are a form of note taking in that they represent a student's understanding of crucial content at a specific point in time (Haystead & Marzano, 2009).

Vocabulary should be taught both directly and indirectly with DEA, with both explicit instruction in vocabulary and methods of decoding word meanings and more contextual approaches to exposing students to vocabulary on the other (NRP, 2000). Instruction with DEA includes a combination of different strategies, both direct and indirect, for building vocabulary, rather than relying on only one method or strategy (NRP, 2000). Honoring teacher personalities for strong student relationships and relevant always-updated content, DEA allows for learning new words in a variety of different ways, such as providing sample sentences or examples along with definitions (NRP, 2000).

Method

The district serves two communities and outlying rural areas in north central Kansas. In grade-level focus groups scheduled on a professional learning day of staff development, teams of teachers shared their perceptions of DEA routines in grade level groups. More than 100 kindergarten to grade five teachers participated in a one-time focus group arranged by grade levels with about 10-15 teachers in each group facilitated by a lead teacher or administrator. A predetermined short list of question stem prompts helped guide the 30-60 minute conversation. This focus group session took place in October 2018. Data was recorded, and notes revealed trends of efficacy in the routine.

Findings

Teachers commonly shared that vocabulary routines have strong efficacy when taught through active, visual student participation with frequent nonlinguistic representations on the visible vocabulary cards. Educators feel confident when exposure to new words begins with direct oral vocabulary development. Teachers shared that they feel most confident using a blend of both digital and print options to support students' vocabulary growth. Lesson openers, essential questions, and connections to other curriculum areas help develop oral vocabulary and build background knowledge. Teachers shared a favorable perception with flexibility for cooperative learning and choice in each step. Teachers increased their efficacy and confidence with vocabulary with themes in the following areas: nonlinguistic representation methods, print and digital options, active student participation, cross-curricular connections, timing and lesson flow, and clarity.

Nonlinguistic representation methods. Thanks to the visible vocabulary cards and videos, DEA provides students with information about the words' definitions and examples of the words' usages in a variety of contexts. Teachers reported stronger confidence in students' learning vocabulary with these visuals. "I love the vocabulary cards. Kids are recognizing and using these words in outside content," said a first-grade teacher. DEA helps usher in the large gains in both vocabulary and reading comprehension, which supports research encouraging limits on drill and practice (Snow et. al., 1998). Teachers felt confident about the student-friendly definitions, examples, and sample questions to connect back to students' lives. "I like the cards with the pictures for vocabulary, and the online projection tool with pictures and video to help them connect," said a third-grade teacher. Words are present in classrooms all week on the focus wall, and DEA is repeated throughout the week to provide multiple exposures and understanding in context. DEA lessons incorporate active student participation throughout, often with students creating their own

graphics of the words in their notebooks. "I love the pictures, word forms, and videos. They help us focus on the key ideas and concepts," said a second-grade teacher.

Print and digital options. Teachers said DEA increased confidence to allow for a wide range of inputs including blended learning with technology. Some teachers preferred the online versions and videos rather than the print cards because students could see the visuals. "I use digital for whole group and [print] cards for small group," said a second-grade teacher. Another teacher felt more confident with the actual print materials because she posts them for students to use in their writing throughout the week. There are times that teachers noted a need for technology support, such as: "[The] video component on the vocabulary doesn't always work, causing a black screen. [There is a] lag time with the teacher is clicking around." Overall, most K-5 teachers shared favorable methods of the DEA technology components: "The online resource is great, and I love having it available. The student version makes it so nice for centers," said a third-grade teacher. Technology also helps with the DEA model of personalized, independent student work. "Vocab routine gets monotonous doing the same exact thing every week, so I try to pull in other ways to introduce vocab in more engaging and student-led or student-involved ways. Some lessons have a technology-based activity like Kahoot, Quizlet or Quia vocab activity available," said a fourth-grade teacher.

Active student participation. With DEA, teachers shared increased confidence in keeping students active and significantly more engaged when asked to come up with real-life examples of the words in context. "Students love the [vocabulary] questions that are asked each week. They are really engaged with cooperative learning like 'stand up, hand up, pair up,' rally robin or shoulder partners used to help them answer the questions," said a second-grade teacher. A third-grade teacher reported, "I have students in [cooperative learning] groupings to do a variety of activities with vocabulary, like using examples of them in new sentences. I often have a designated student help lead each group." After several units, one kindergarten teacher noted student growth: "Students are able to share and interact with the vocabulary. Students are thinking about the drawing activities during centers."

Cross-curricular connections. DEA allows for ELA vocabulary to support many other content areas. "I like how the vocabulary ties well to essential questions. It helps with understanding the stories and themes," said a first-grade teacher. "They are making connections across all areas and pull out examples in other areas of their learning during the week. They get excited when they see their words used in non-ELA places and connect these words in other areas of instruction throughout the week. I use the words as much as I can to get that exposure," said a second-grade teacher. Teachers noted benefits when knowledge is gained in multiple disciplines, and they expressed their belief that they teach better with these connections. A fourth-grade teacher said, "Students are recognizing vocab words within the [other] text, and many vocab words are found within other curriculum areas like science and social studies."

Timing and lesson flow. Pacing for the DEA routines can create a challenge due to the sheer volume and rigor of the curriculum packages and standards requirements, hindering some teachers' confidence levels. A kindergarten teacher said, "I've found there's not enough time to incorporate all of the [DEA] activities. I do a few at a time, even though there is way too much offered to get done during the allotted time." Forcing to choose from competing values, teachers must prioritize their DEA routines. "There is a ton to our curriculum with not enough time to get to it all. I don't feel pressured to get through it all since the vocab is in every story throughout the week and in their leveled readers," said a second-grade teacher. Spreading the DEA components throughout the week, rather than a single time, is also a strength teachers found to help their pacing. "It's hard to spend time on the vocabulary and still introduce everything on Monday. So I infuse it in small bits throughout the week," said a fourth-grade teacher.

Starting with clarity. Instead of guessing at definitions, teachers appreciated that DEA starts with the true meanings as defined by the text in student-friendly and grade-level appropriate terms, resulting in reliable gains in incidental word acquisition. The DEA connections also help with intervention groups. "[Intervention] groups work well when teachers are following the [DEA instructional routine] for the vocab cards because the kids know expectation. These mini-lessons are quick, and I note discussions throughout the day centered on those vocab words," said one first-grade teacher. Assessments are a key part of ensuring DEA is effective in each setting, and teachers noted a need to gain flexibility in their summative data. "Vocabulary tests were way too similar in an unfair way, and it was hard to find the correct answer. So, I accepted either answer," said a second-grade teacher. Also, teachers noted the need to turn the work back to students, rather than making DEA an adult centered show. With the student-friendly tools and clear modeling, teachers noted ways to support students in peer-level discussions and work. "Teachers may be doing most of the work, but I try to give it back to students as much as possible [to give them the DEA tasks to complete]," said a third-grade teacher. For example, a teacher brought Fortnite Battle Royale game references into a fifth-grade classroom to help students understand key terms thanks to student interest and timely relevance.

Conclusion

With new vocabulary introduced using DEA, teachers reported feeling high efficacy and confidence to ensure student understanding with these methods. The DEA routine uses visual vocabulary cards to define each word, give examples and ask students about ways to use the word in their context. These cards are posted each week for reference as visible reminders on the focus wall. After the vocabulary has been introduced, teachers believe in their ability to find specific activities within the routine for students to discuss new words or write using the words. Teachers said they appreciated these types of active student participation that continues throughout the week to lock in a deep understanding.

Students build vocabulary indirectly by listening to, reading and discussing fiction and nonfiction texts. DEA vocabulary instruction is present with key vocabulary words taught to students during reading and in reflection of the text. Students learn vocabulary strategies to help them decode word meanings, including identifying inflectional endings, root words, prefixes and suffixes, as well as Greek and Latin roots. Teachers also help students learn to use print and online reference materials, including dictionaries and glossaries. With DEA, teachers shared that students can learn to recognize word study elements like homophones, homographs, and figurative language with the examples section of DEA.

Educators using DEA found they could support students' interpretation of the meaning of words in context and use new words appropriately in real-life ways. From these qualitative examples, teachers shared high efficacy and confident perceptions of the DEA routines with nonlinguistic representation methods, print and digital options, active student participation, cross-curricular connections, timing and lesson flow, and clarity.

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