The Power of Word Knowledge:

The Impact of Explicit Vocabulary Instruction on Reading Comprehension

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Public School ABC opened in 1995 in a low-income, largely Dominican area in the Washington Heights section of Manhattan, New York City for children in Early Head Start, Head Start, and kindergarten through grade 5. It is a full-service, barrier-free, and handicapped-accessible community school that has a partnership with an on-site community-based organization, The Children's Aid Society. During the school day, we offer an array of programs to our diverse population. These include monolingual classes, transitional bilingual classes, and a two-way bilingual program for grades K-5. In addition, there is a fourth grade ESL (English as a Second Language) self-contained class. We also have a push-in/pull-out ESL program that provides services to many of our English Language Learners (ELLs) who are in monolingual classrooms. There are also services provided for special education students, K-5, by an academic intervention team of teachers. Finally, we have four special education classrooms for grades K-3.

PS ABC Demographic Data on Students								
Characteristic	**Public School ABC**				**City Schools**			
	2002	**2003**	**2004**	**2005**	**2002**	**2003**	**2004**	**2005**
Enrollment	740	735	738	711				
Recent Immigrants %	7.4	9.0	11.2	12.1	7.5	7.6	9.1	8.3
Attendance %	92.7	94.0	93.9	93.5	92.6	92.9	92.9	92.8
Eligible for Free Lunch %	96.1	95.7	93.5	93.6	74.7	75.1	72.2	90.9
English Language Learners (ELL/LEP) %	34.7	32.7	40.6	46.7				

As a school community, we are focused on supporting our ELLs through numerous educational programs including bilingual programs, dual language programs, ESL push-in/pull-out, and self-contained programs. However, despite our many support programs, a strong academic curriculum, a focus on instruction using state and city reading and writing standards, and a school-wide incentive and motivational campaign to read more books, our English Language Learners' progress has been minimal. Over the past five years, the school has consistently been cited as not meeting Adequate Yearly Progress for the New York State English Language Arts (ELA) Exam and the New York State English as a Second Language Assessment Test (NYSESLAT). What can the school do? How does it need to change? More specifically, what can I do?

RATIONALE

The frustration of watching my classes of predominantly English Language Learners work hard, try their best, read their hearts out, and still not meet standards, has been overwhelming and disheartening. In the past, many students entered my classroom years

below grade level in reading. I have tried to address their disadvantages in a number of ways. My students were in a reduced class setting which enabled me to differentiate instruction, especially during reading. They also received external support services including reading and math intervention services, special education services (speech, resource room), and ESL services, where students were pulled out of class for small group or individual instruction. Despite these efforts in my class and across the school, my students were way behind their native English-speaking peers in reading proficiency. What could I do to help my students improve as readers?

I carried these concerns with me into my current role as the Comprehensive School Reform Coordinator for the school. As our school has been repeatedly cited for not achieving Adequate Yearly Progress in English Language Arts for our ELLs, we are now in restructuring and are focused on reforming our school's instructional programs. In my role, I oversee the America's Choice School Design Model, a whole school reform model that our school decided to adopt as part of our efforts to address our restructuring.

The America's Choice model focuses heavily on enhancing five broad aspects of the school in an effort to address student needs and improve student achievement, especially in the area of literacy. These aspects are: High Performance Management, Leadership, and Organization; Standards and Assessments; Aligned Instructional Systems; Professional Learning Communities; Parent/Guardian and Community Involvement. My responsibilities include professional development for teachers in the areas of standards-based planning for instruction and assessment. It is because of my experiences in this role and with ELLs as a classroom teacher that I became interested in studying the effects of vocabulary instruction on reading comprehension.

RESEARCH QUESTION

How does explicit vocabulary instruction, instruction that is teacher-directed, sustained, and implemented daily, impact the reading comprehension of English Language Learners?

Research and Readings

When I began reading research related to the topics of English Language Learners, Reading Comprehension, and Vocabulary Acquisition and Instruction, I found that the challenges my students are facing are not unique to their population or circumstance. In fact, students all over the country are facing similar comprehension challenges:

✶ Students from lower socioeconomic (SES) groups have a significantly smaller word

knowledge base than those of higher SES groups. In fact, a study of first graders has shown that those from high SES groups knew about twice as many words as those from low SES groups (Graves, Brunetti, & Slater, 1982; Braves & Slater, 1987).

✶ The size of a child's vocabulary, based on a study of the language acquisition of 42

children from birth to age three, was most closely related to one factor: the number of words the parents spoke to the child (Hart and Risley, 1995).

When thinking of my students, many of whom are recent immigrants and definitely in the lower socioeconomic group, I found these studies troubling because they suggest that from the start, a student's knowledge of words is affected by their class and economic situation—both circumstances beyond their control. Given my student's home contexts, Hart and Risley's research is compelling considering most of my students come from

households where little or no English is spoken, and therefore English language acquisition is stunted, affecting vocabulary development.

With deficiencies in vocabulary from the beginnings of their education, it seems important to conduct explicit instruction. In turn, this explicit instruction, should build students' word knowledge base, thereby improving reading comprehension (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002; Pearson, 2007). Although in the case of my students the challenge is not only socioeconomic status, but also second language acquisition, the same theories apply.

Gibbons (2002) explains that when teaching reading to ELL students, it is important to create a linguistically and culturally rich reading environment, where they can develop reading strategies to better construct meaning from texts. This includes vocabulary-rich environments. Beck, McKeown, & Kucan (2002) suggest that while some words can be learned in context while reading, such learning occurs in small increments, due to the fact that learning words from context requires reading a wide array of texts, as well as having the ability to infer meaning. I have seen this often: I observe students simply skip over the words that they do not understand and continue reading without ever finding out the word's meaning. This is problematic for two reasons: first, they either did not recognize or did not have a strategy for how to find the word meaning, and second, they most likely did not comprehend the text they were reading.

Explicit vocabulary instruction goes beyond simply exposing students to vocabulary words. It allows teachers and students to engage in activities that encourage use of words and interaction with vocabulary. Students are more likely to internalize and better understand new words when they have multiple, sustained opportunities to interact with

and use new words (Gibbons, 1991). Beck and colleagues (2002) outline various activities

and techniques for conducting explicit vocabulary instruction:

  1 Provide multiple encounters with the same words in order to truly learn and use the

  words at a later time.

  2 Give definitions because this ensures that learners will start their study with a correct

  understanding of the words.

  3 Provide Tier Two words—words that "are likely to appear frequently in a wide array of

  texts and in written and oral language of mature language users" (Beck, McKeown and

  Kucan, 2002).

        In implementing my research, I used their suggested activities as the framework

for my action research.

METHODS AND DATA COLLECTION

As I am an out-of-classroom teacher, I chose to work in a fourth grade ESL classroom of

32 students, where I conduct vocabulary lessons and support his classroom instruction.

The class is comprised of 32 students, whose English language skills range from

Intermediate to Proficient. I chose this class because its students are representative of the

entire school population.

        From December through April, I conducted 20-30 minute lessons (see Appendix

C for lesson examples) for one week each month, for a total of five cycles of instruction

covering approximately 50 words. In May I collected final reading comprehension data

using the DRA. In addition to my instruction cycles with the class, the teacher supported

our vocabulary work by continuing to implement vocabulary instruction during his skills

block time, using the same methods and lesson activities. I also kept a journal in which I recorded observations from the classroom.

Baseline Data

I began my study in November with baseline data collection. I used a word survey (Appendix A) that I created using an excerpt from the book *Ramona the Brave* by Beverly Cleary, and reading data from the DRA, the Developmental Reading Assessment (Beaver, 1999).

Word Survey

Students were given a passage of 122 words from the text and asked to read the passage. As they read, they were asked to underline all words that they did not understand. Students were then asked to answer comprehension questions based on the passage. Based on a survey of 28 students (four were absent), the average number of words that a student underlined was four. The most common underlined words were: fibber, approach, spoiled (see Appendix B). Many students underlined only a few words, but then had little or no comprehension on the meaning of the text. The word survey results confirmed my belief that the students needed grade level vocabulary instruction, i.e., Tier Two words (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002) in order to improve reading comprehension (Pearson, 2007).

First Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA)

The DRA assesses reading fluency, rate, and comprehension through the use of a running record (where the teacher notes how many words out of 100 a student reads without error).
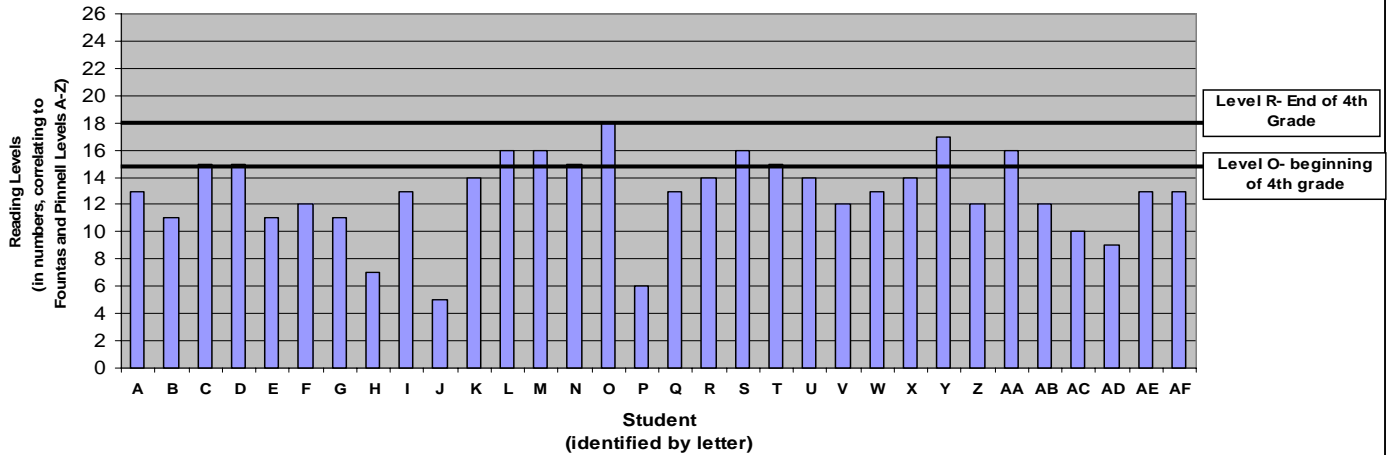
According to New York City Standards, fourth graders should be reading DRA levels 34-40, which correlate as levels O through R (Fountas and Pinnell, 2000). In the class, only 10 students (n=32) were at or above grade level reading (see Figure 1).

Cycle 1

In December, I began the first cycle of instruction. I taught vocabulary as well as strategies for studying and working with vocabulary. The vocabulary was taken from a book that had been read aloud and discussed in class. Drawing on the research of Beck, McKeown, & Kucan (2002), we focused on the same 8-10 words for a full week and provided student-friendly definitions for each word. For example, in Cycle 1, I taught vocabulary from the book *Sky Tree: Seeing Science through Art* by Thomas Locker. One of the words I selected was "huddled." I gave the students a student-friendly definition "for several people to get really close together." I placed the word in different contexts to show how it could be used. After introducing the words and providing students with definitions, we began a four-to-five-day study of the words using various activities to increase opportunities for them to use and develop an understanding of the words. Each day, I utilized different game-like activities to engage the students in the word study. Most of the activities were oral and involved acting out words. At the end of each week, I conducted an assessment to see how well students understood the words.

Figure 1

Reading Levels in Class 4-XXX
October 2006

Reading Levels (in numbers, correlating to Fountas and Pinnell Levels A-Z)

Level R- End of 4th Grade

Level O- beginning of 4th grade

Student (identified by letter)

Cycles 2-5

Between January and April, we continued intensive vocabulary study, using a variety of activities to help students use words, to think about their meanings, and to apply them whenever possible. Gibbons (1991) explains, "Being immersed in language and having access to good language models is of course important, but it is not itself sufficient to develop language competence…Children also need to use language in interaction with other children and adults" (Gibbons, 1991).

One of the class' favorite activities was Can of Words (Appendix D)—a container in the classroom where students collected interesting or unfamiliar words that they found in their reading or other contexts. They wrote the words on slips of paper, and dropped them in the container. Periodically, at the end of a vocabulary lesson, the teacher or I would pull words out of the can and discuss them, sharing the definition and some examples.

The class also was enthusiastic about Word Wizard charts. Each week, the words we studied were listed on a chart. At the end of the week, we tallied the number of times students used or interacted with the words we were studying during the week.

Throughout, I used my journal to record observations and reflections about the progress students were making. Students often shared their excitement about studying new words by "showing off" their new words in my presence. I always tried to record these encounters, as they demonstrated how much the vocabulary instruction was impacting their thinking about words, as well as their excitement about words and reading. My journal was also useful in recording conferences with students, and noting informal assessments about student word use.

Final Assessment

After months of explicit vocabulary instruction, daily classroom instruction in literacy, and an emphasis on daily reading, students made great progress. The year ended with nine students at or above grade level for the end of the year (levels R and above), 15 students approaching and just below grade level (Levels P and Q), and seven students reading below grade level (Level O and below) (see Figure 2). Although all students did not meet or exceed grade level, all students did make reading progress: 50% students advanced at least three reading levels; 31% advanced two reading levels; 19% advanced one level (see Figure 3).
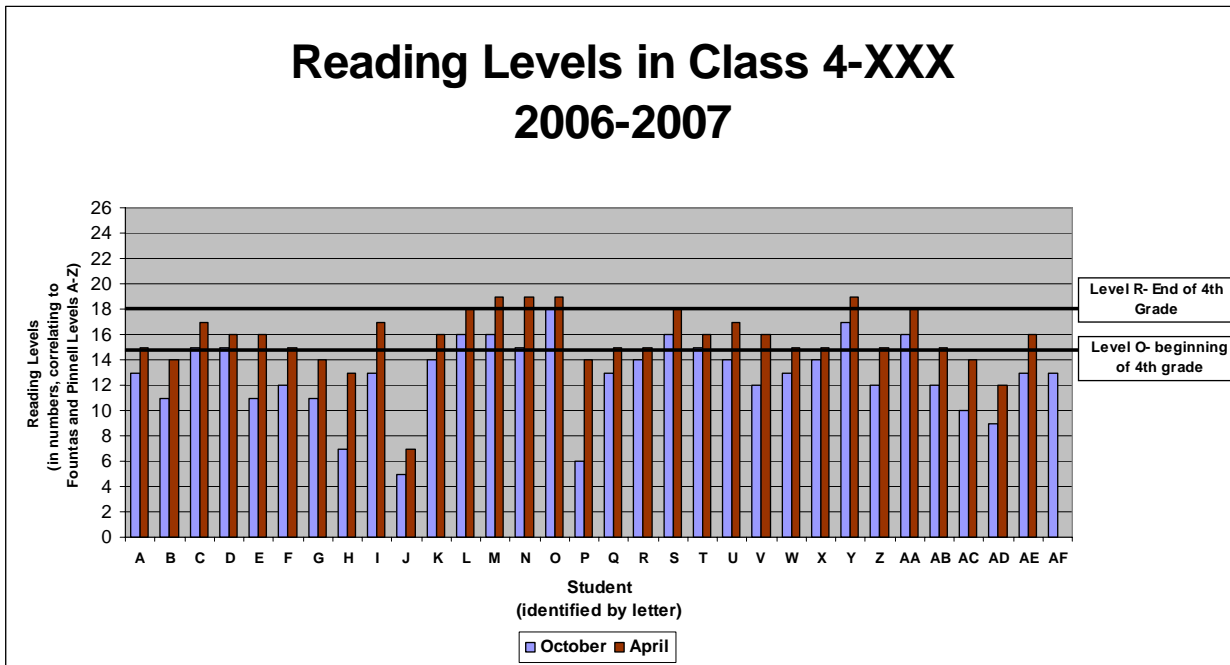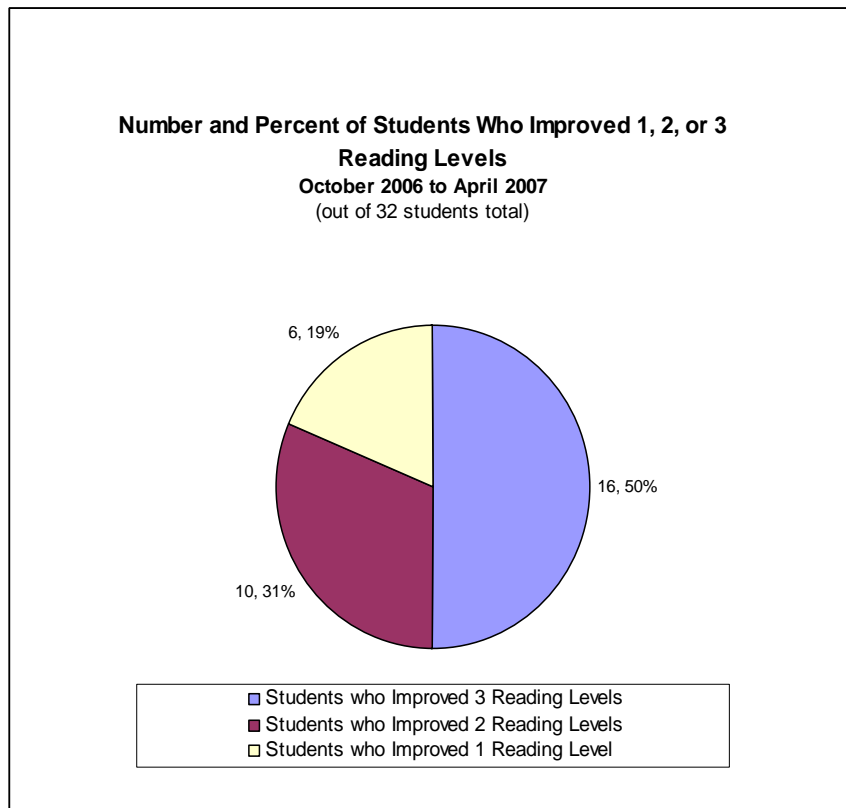
Figure 2

Reading Levels in Class 4-XXX
2006-2007

Figure 3

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

The data I have collected appears to support direct vocabulary instruction and its positive impact on reading and reading comprehension. Students were building a word knowledge base throughout the year, through explicit vocabulary instruction as well as through reading daily and engaging in discussions to develop oral language, and they were able to improve comprehension (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002; Pearson, 2007).

After beginning our vocabulary work together, I noticed that students were becoming more attentive to text, specifically looking for and identifying words with which they were unfamiliar. As we became engaged in the study, they developed strategies to figure out the words that they didn't understand and were more willing to try to find out word meanings. Students achieved deeper, more meaningful understanding of the words studied, and more often noticed, used, and understood the words in other contexts (in oral conversations, television/movie encounters, and in writing). Our intensive focus on words pushed students' curiosity and fascination with words as well. Oral language development eventually led to reading and writing development, as demonstrated by students' improved attention to words in text and their use of words in writing. In keeping with Gibbons research (1991, 2002), the vocabulary activities enabled a type of oral language development that is extremely important for English Language Learners.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Classroom Level Recommendations

1 Teachers should set aside space in their classrooms to display new vocabulary words.

2 Rather than simplifying language, teachers should model the use of high-level vocabulary in the classroom.

3 Teachers should encourage students to ask questions about words that they do not understand.

School Level Recommendations

1 Emphasis should be placed on the importance of daily explicit vocabulary instruction during the literacy block.

2 Opportunities should be created for multiple encounters with words. The schools should be conscious of displaying words all over the school.

3 The school should provide teachers with opportunities for professional development and study groups to learn about methods of explicit vocabulary instruction.

4 The school should utilize school-wide literacy initiatives (e.g., Book of the Month, Million Words Campaign) to engage the school community in vocabulary study and make vocabulary more "present."

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Appendix A • Word Survey

Directions: Read the following passage and underline ALL the words you do not understand.

Ramona began to feel heavy with guilt. Now the whole class and Mrs. Griggs thought Ramona was a fibber. Here it was, the first half of the first morning of the first day of school, and already first grade was spoiled for her. When the class returned to Room One, Ramona did not raise her hand the rest of the day, even though she ached to give answers. She wanted to go to Mrs. Griggs and explain the whole thing, but Mrs. Griggs seemed so busy she did not know how to approach her.

The class forgot the incident. By lunchtime, no one classed Ramona a liar with pants on fire, but Ramona remembered, and as it turned out, so did Howie. (*Ramona the Brave*, p. 73)

Comprehension Questions:

- What do you think happened right before this part of the story?

- Who do you think Mrs. Griggs is? How do you know?

APPENDIX B
Word Survey Results
November 2007

Student (Identified by Letter)	# of Words Underlined	Words Underlined	Question #1: comprehension: full, some, or none (written exactly as students wrote)	Question #2: comprehension: full, some, or none
T	4	fibber, incident,	none; "that Ramona remembered th I think	some; "because I new he was a teacher or

		liar, Howie	her pants got on fire"	principal"
X	2	fibber, ached	none; "I that Ramona will feel shi and not go to school when I frist saw the book in 3 grad."	full
R	5	guilt, fibber, spoiled, approach, incident	none; "I think that Ramona was feeling scared or afraid they was going to make fun of her."	full; "I think Mrs. Griggs is the principal or a teacher because she was bossy."
E	5	guilt, spoiled, ached, approach, incident	none; "I think that before she was feeling well but then she got sick"	none; Mrs. Griggs is busy. I know that because it says that Mrs. Griggs seemed so busy she did not know how to approach her."
Y	3	fibber, ached, incident	none; "Ramona ran to school excited thinking that it will be a good bay. They gave her class to her and then she ran to her class."	some; "I think Mrs. Griggs is a teacher because if it would not de a teacher I would not have a Mrs."
G	9	heavy, guilt, Griggs, fibber, spoiled, ached, incident, liar, Howie	some; "I think the class don't like Ramona."	full; "Mrs. Griggs is a teacher because Ramona went to explain what happened to her."
K	1	spoiled	none; "Ramona began to feel heavy with guilt. Now the whole class and Mrs. Griggs thought Ramona was a fibber."	none; no response
O	3	guilt, fibber, spoiled	full; "I think everyone was calling her a liar with pants on fire."	Full; "Mrs. Griggs is the teacher"
P	6	guilt, thought, fibber, spoiled, raise, though,	none; "The class forgot the incident."	Full

H	3	spoiled, Griggs, approach	some; "I think Ramona was nerves because it was the first day of school"	Full
AC	2	spoiled, Griggs	none, "I think Ramona was feel guilt because she said she feel heavy."	none; I think that Mrs. Griggs is coling the ners."
B	9	guilt, fibber, spoiled, ached, seemed, approach, incident, liar, Howie	none; "Before I read the pasege I that that Romona was going to saiy that she was nervis."	none; no response
V	3	guilt, spoiled, approach	none; no legible answer	Full
D	3	fibber, ached, approach	none; "that she thought there were givin her a presen that means when you are here."	Full; "a teacher who is maried because it says Mrs. that means she is a teacher and married."
Q	5	fibber, spoiled, raise, ached, incident	some; "I think Ramona was in her classroom and she had a problem with something."	some; "I think that Ms. Griggs is married because it is Mrs.Griggs with a s."
A	6	guilt, spoiled, ached, approach, incident, liar	none; "I think that she was getting ready for school and she miss the bus so she had to run fast."	Full; "Mrs. Griggs is a teacher because in the first word it said Mrs."
AD	4	guilt, fibber, ached, approach	none; no response-did not understand question	Full
U	4	guilt, spoiled, ached, approach	none; did not answer question "before-mean something that happens first than anything"	full
S	2	guilt, approach	some; "maybe Ramona was doing lots of work and she was tired."	Full

I	4	guilt, fibber, ached, incident	none; "Mrs. Griggs was happy that Ramona was not teses"	none; "I think Mrs. Griggs happy."
F	2	guilt, fibber	some; "that there were people who were lafing at her"	full
J	9	heavy, guilt, Griggs, fibber, spoiled, approach, incident, liar, Howie	none; "I think she din't feel heavy before but know she is."	full; "I think she is a teacher because her name being Mrs. Grigg."
N	5	guilt, fibber, spoiled, ached, approach	Full; "Everybody started to think Ramona did some thing. Ramona was saying she didn't do that."	Full; "It is a teacher. Why I know because her name begins in Ms, so that why I know she is a teacher."
Z	5	guilt, fibber, ached, approach, incident	full; "that maybe she was a liar with pants on fire."	none; "because if it was mr. it is a man and mrs. means a married women."
AA	4	fibber, ached, approach, liar	Full; "Ramona told her teacher a lie the teacher saw her doing it and she got in trouble they began to call her names	Full
W	4	fibber, spoiled, approach, incident	some; "I think everyone in Ramona's class knows about her."	Full
L	2	guilt, fibber	none; no response/did not understand question	full; "the teacher because of Mrs."
AB	5	fibber, approach, incident, liar, Howie	none; "what happened was that he was on fire."	none; "Mrs. Griggs was sorry because he was busy."

Summary of Data:

✳ Average number of words that students did not understand:

118 (number of times words were not understood)

28 (number of students who took the survey) = 4.2 words

✳ Most commonly underlined words (in order of frequency, most to least):

Word	Number of times selected
Fibber	21
Approach	16
Spoiled	16
Guilt	18
Ached	14
Incident	13
Liar	7
Howie	5
Griggs	4
Raise	2
Heavy	2

★ Number of students who achieved FULL comprehension on both questions: 3
★ Number of students with FULL comprehension of question 1: 4
★ Number of students with FULL comprehension of question 2: 18

Appendix B
Examples of Vocabulary Activities

1. **Introduce** the Vocabulary **after** you have read, discussed, and responded to the book in some way.
    ★ Give the student the word, read the sentence/context of the word, then repeat the word again. Have the students repeat the word to you (this helps them create a phonological representation of the word) **It may be useful to show a picture that demonstrates each word as you introduce them, especially for lower grades and classes with lots of ELLs.**
2. Give the students a **"student friendly" definition**, **and give contextual examples**.
    ★ **flutter-** to move with a quick flapping motion; Ex: Butterflies flutter their wings. Eyelashes flutter. The flag fluttered in the wind.
    ★ **hurry-** to go from one place to another quickly; Ex: The doctor hurried to the hospital to help a patient. I was late for school, so I had to hurry. The animals in the forest hurried away from the hunter because they were scared.

- ★ **glisten-** to shine because of another light; Ex: The girl's hair glistened in the sunlight. The snowflakes glistened as they fell to the ground
- ★ **buried-** hidden or covered beneath another object; Ex: My homework was somewhere in my bedroom, buried under a pile of dirty clothes.
- ★ **gather-** to bring together or come together; Ex: The family gathered around the table for dinner. The class gathered ideas for their math project in a brainstorming web.
- ★ **drift-** to move easily and slowly through water or air; The leaves drifted to the ground as they fell off branches. The boy drifted in the lake on top of an inner tube.
- ★ **huddle-** to get very close together in a group, often to talk something over; The football team huddled together to discuss their next move.

3. **ACTIVITIES to do to continue to build student understanding (you can do these over several days, for short periods of time):**
   - ★ **Have students write the word on one side of and index card, and draw an illustration** that reminds them of the vocabulary word on the other side of the card. For example, for the word huddle, a student may draw a picture of people huddled together.
   - ★ **Ask students questions to help kids contextualize the words on their own.** Ex: When would you need to hurry? When would you need to bury something? When you get together very close, are you gathering or huddling? When you rake leaves, do you gather or huddle them?
   - ★ **Ask students "which would you do questions"** Ex: 1. Which would you do if you and your friends were cold and wanted to get warmer? (huddle or gather?) 2. Which would you do if you were being chased by a shark in the water? (hurry or drift?) Which would you do if you were running in a race? (flutter or hurry?)
   - ★ **Ask students to act out or demonstrate a word**: Can you show me what it looks like when people huddle? Can you show me what it looks like when someone hurries?
   - ★ **Closed Sentences:** Toward the end of your work with these words, give the students sentences to complete using the words they've learned. Use new sentences or examples for students to complete, so that they are again deepening their understanding and ability to apply the word in many different contexts. Give them the word list and have them fill in the blanks. Examples (you can also create your own):
     1. At the sleepover, because we were sharing lots of secrets, my friends and I were _____ together in one corner of the room (huddled).
     2. After we washed the dishes, mom checked if they were clean by holding them under the kitchen light to see if they would _____. (glistened)
     3. To hide her embarrassment after making a mistake in class, Sarah _____ her head under her arms so no one would see her. (buried)

4. Before leaving for school, Jim _____ his school books from around the room and put them into his backpack. (gathered)
5. As she sang, her words _____ through the air and reached the ears of her fans in the audience (drifted).
6. As the storm approached, the family had to _____ to find a safe place to stay dry. (hurry)
7. The bee _____ from one flower to another as it collected pollen. (fluttered)

★ **Word Wizard:** On a chart paper, list all the students' names. Keep track of when they use the words, hear the words (on TV, in the street, at home), or read the words that you have introduced using tally marks. Explain that when they use the words over 10 times, they receive the title of **Word Wizard**.

  o In order to prove that they have used a word, they must explain the context in which the encountered the word, as well as the sentence the heard/read/used, or show you the writing in which they used the word. (Even if they didn't really use the word at home, when they explain it, they are using the word, so you can still count it, as long as they use it correctly.)

Appendix C
Examples of Student Work: Can of Words, Vocabulary Quiz
Can of Words
# of words collected in one month (February 2007): 73 words

crisis
approached
multi-detonator
esquezit (exquisite)
trotter
craft
clan
exporting/export (x 3)
wool
boroughs (x 2)
tics
headquarters
stock exchange
congressional
myth (x 2)
jambo (jumbo?)
scarves
lungwor

fiber-optic
spire
remainder
media
beasting
discriminated
curtain
remarkable
nollage (knowledge)
Trafalgar Square
rattling
judicial branch
anti-security
explorer
bundle
in termenate (entertainment?
intermittant?)
prevention

vaccine
variable
straddled
ion limpet
decency
independently
sarcastic
cucumbers
gymnasium
astronomers
pluto
paralyzed
marinated
catapulted
eased
ethnic
fertile
journalism (x 2)
horizon (x 2)
nozzle
handbook
succession
isosceles
inprofe
convention
lopsided
scampered
acquaintance
determining
gargoyles
courtesy
nolesa/nolega/nollega?

Vocabulary Quiz:
Sky Tree words

Directions: Fill in the blank in each sentence using one of the words below. Each word is used only once.

glisten	**buried**	**huddled**	**gathered**
fluttered		**drifted**	**hurry**

1. At the sleepover, because we were sharing lots of secrets, my friends and I were _____ together in one corner of the room.

2. After we washed the dishes, mom checked if they were clean by holding them under the kitchen light to see if they would _____.

3. To hide her embarrassment after making a mistake in class, Sarah _____ her head under her arms so no one would see her.

4. Before leaving for school, Jim _____ his school books from around the room and put them into his backpack.

5. As she sang, her words _____ through the air and reached the ears of her fans in the audience.

6. As the storm approached, the family had to _____ to find a safe place to stay dry.

7. The bee _____ from one flower to another as it collected pollen.

★ **Bonus:** On the back of this paper, write a story using some of the words from this week. Be sure that the story makes sense and is interesting!