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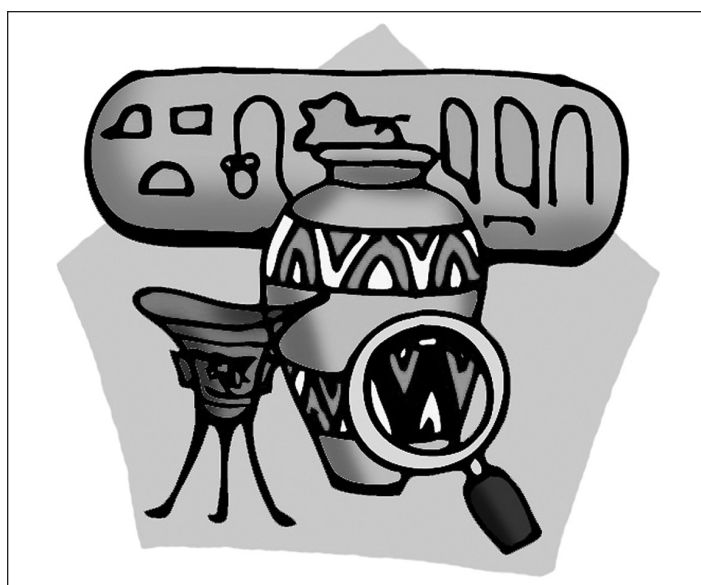
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Translating Vocabulary Research to Social Studies Instruction: Before, During, and After Text-Reading Strategies

Angela Hairrell[1], Deborah Simmons[2], Elizabeth Swanson[1], Meaghan Edmonds[1], Sharon Vaughn[1], and William H. Rupley[2]

Abstract

In the upper elementary grades, content-area text gains increasing importance as a primary source of reading and information. This article focuses on the specialized vocabulary demands of social studies texts and presents a framework of teaching and learning strategies based on vocabulary research. Strategies are introduced before, during, and after social studies text reading, illustrating how to develop and relate vocabulary knowledge to social studies concepts and content.

Keywords

instruction, reading, strategies, comprehension

Around fourth grade, content-area text gains increasing presence and importance in the curriculum and is often used as a primary source of information and presumed learning. For many students, the density of unfamiliar vocabulary preempts their ability to read and construct meaning from text (Armbruster & Anderson, 1988). Harmon, Hedrick, and Wood (2005) described content-area reading as bombardments of unfamiliar concepts and vocabulary that violate the most essential features of

vocabulary learning. When the volume of unfamiliar vocabulary impedes understanding, it both prohibits immediate

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comprehension and places limits on new vocabulary acquisition (Willingham, 2006).

Because of the density of new and unfamiliar vocabulary, teachers face a particular challenge in helping students access and make sense of content-area texts (Armbruster & Anderson, 1988; Harmon, Hedrick, & Fox, 2000). In many cases, textbook recommendations for vocabulary instruction do not consistently align with documented best practices (Harmon et al., 2000). Teachers, therefore, must serve as instructional mediators and be equipped with a variety of strategies that not only foster individual word meanings but also communicate how vocabulary relates to social studies concepts and content. For example, students may learn the meanings of _migrate_ and _nomad_ and have some background knowledge about Native Americans. They may not, however, understand that certain tribes were nomadic or the impact of migration on Native American culture and habitat.

Given the density of unfamiliar vocabulary in social studies and the salience of particular vocabulary to critical content, the issue is not whether vocabulary instruction is important (Stahl & Shiel, 1992) but how vocabulary instruction can be effectively and efficiently integrated into social studies instruction. In this article, a framework for integrating multiple strategies to support vocabulary and content-area learning is proposed.

A Framework to Support Vocabulary and Social Studies Learning

To develop the framework, a review of vocabulary research was conducted to identify teaching and learning strategies that were associated with improved student performance and were applicable to social studies. It is important to note that although there has been considerable vocabulary research, the majority of studies have been conducted with narrative text. Strategies were selected that could be applied to social studies that included (a) teaching strategies (practices a teacher uses to present information) and (b) learning strategies (routines students use to learn; Dole, Nokes, & Drits, 2009). A temporal structure (i.e., before, during, or after text reading) designated when strategies would be used. In some cases, a particular strategy, such as a graphic organizer or semantic map, was used at multiple points. Table 1 presents the strategies organized as they would be used before, during, and after social studies text reading.

Strategies Before Reading

The goals of instruction that occur before reading are (a) to identify and preteach vocabulary that are central to text understanding and (b) to preview the text, strategically

Table 1. Framework to Promote Vocabulary Acquisition and Content Learning

Vocabulary practice	Time of use		
	Before	During	After
Word selection	✓		
Anticipation guide	✓		✓
Chapter overview	✓	✓	✓
Vocabulary map	✓		✓
CLUE strategy		✓	
Practice activities			✓

connecting vocabulary and text content. In the before-reading stage, four strategies are identified that can be used to promote content-area learning.

Critical vocabulary. Prior to reading, teachers should preview the content to identify a manageable number of content-area vocabulary words that are critical for content understanding, not defined in context, and important for later learning (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002; Hiebert, 2005; Stahl & Fairbanks, 1986). For instance, vocabulary words such as _agriculture_, _climate_, _democracy_, and _colony_ may have greater utility than words such as _adobe_, _vaquero_, and _travois_. Nonetheless, depending on the topic of study, these terms of lesser utility may be critical for passage understanding and therefore crucial for instruction. For example, the word _travois_ (i.e., a frame used by Native Americans to move supplies from place to place) may not have much utility outside the study of Native Americans but is extremely important in understanding the nomadic nature of some tribes. Vocabulary selection will always involve some level of professional judgment.

Anticipation guides. The second step in the before-reading process uses _anticipation guides_ to relate vocabulary to prior and future learning. Anticipation guides provide an opportunity to activate prior knowledge and provide background knowledge needed for understanding (Kozen, Murray, & Windell, 2006; Yell, 2004). Anticipation guides can take many forms. In this particular application, teachers embed previously taught vocabulary in statements that assess students' prior knowledge and preview critical content to be learned (see Figure 1). Four statements about the content are presented with target vocabulary words bolded (e.g., _explored_, _explorers_, _exploration_, and _conquistadors_). Students decide if they agree or disagree with the statements. For example, if the majority of students answer _agree_ to the statement "Spain's exploration had little influence on Texas," the teacher would provide information to clarify misunderstanding.

Chapter overviews. The next strategy involves previewing the text to be read and highlighting critical vocabulary using a chapter overview (see Figure 2). The chapter overview is a visual summary of the main idea of the chapter based on

Background Knowledge
Spaniards Settle in Texas

Agree Disagree

Anticipation Guide (Day 1):

☐ ☐ **Villas** were built to protect settlers.

☐ ☐ Signs of Spanish **heritage** can be found in Texas today.

☐ ☐ **Missions** were built by the Spanish and the Roman Catholic church.

☐ ☐ The Alamo was a **presidio**.

What I know:

One Spanish explorer was   La Salle . He explored

the area around Matagorda Bay in the name of France.

Write It NOW
WIN
What I now know:

One result of the Spaniards settling in Texas was

more people wanted to come and live in Texas.

Figure 1. Example of a student copy of an anticipation guide

Spaniards Settle in Texas
| influenced

Case 2
Week 2

the lives and culture of people in Texas today

	Mission	Presidio	Villa
What is it?	religious settlement	forts	town
Who built it?	Catholic Church	People in missions	People from Mexico
What was its purpose?	shelter, food and clothing	Protected people in the mission	Provided goods and services to missions and presidios

Missions were religious settlements started by the
Catholic Church to provide food, shelter, and
religion to the Spaniards who settled in Texas.

Vocabulary List
religious settlements
food   shelter
forts   town
religion

Figure 2. Example of a student copy of the chapter overview

the structural organization of the content to be learned. As students skim the text for headings, illustrations, and highlighted words, teachers may use the chapter overview to scaffold the preview, drawing attention to sections in the text where critical vocabulary occur. The chapter overview is an instructional tool with multiple purposes and is more fully explained in the *during* and *after reading* sections.

Vocabulary maps. Although some vocabulary is learned incidentally, it is generally agreed that explicit instruction of key vocabulary may be necessary prior to reading (Jitendra, Edwards, Sacks, & Jacobson, 2004; Kamil, 2003; Kamil et al., 2008). As recommended by the National Reading Panel (NRP, 2000), multiple methods of instruction are best to provide the rich context and multiple exposures necessary for vocabulary learning. The final strategy teachers may want to use before reading integrates multiple vocabulary strategies into a single vocabulary map. By design, the multiple activities in the vocabulary map acquaint learners with the topography of the word. That is, vocabulary map exercises engage students in learning more about word roots, multiple meanings, and use in context.

Figure 3 illustrates an example of a vocabulary map for the word *mission*. Sections of the vocabulary map are numbered to assist teachers and students in navigating and discussing the individual parts. Students first read the word in Box 1 of Figure 3. In Box 2, the definition can be provided or students can use the CLUE (i.e., check, look, use, extend) strategy to determine the meaning. The CLUE strategy is
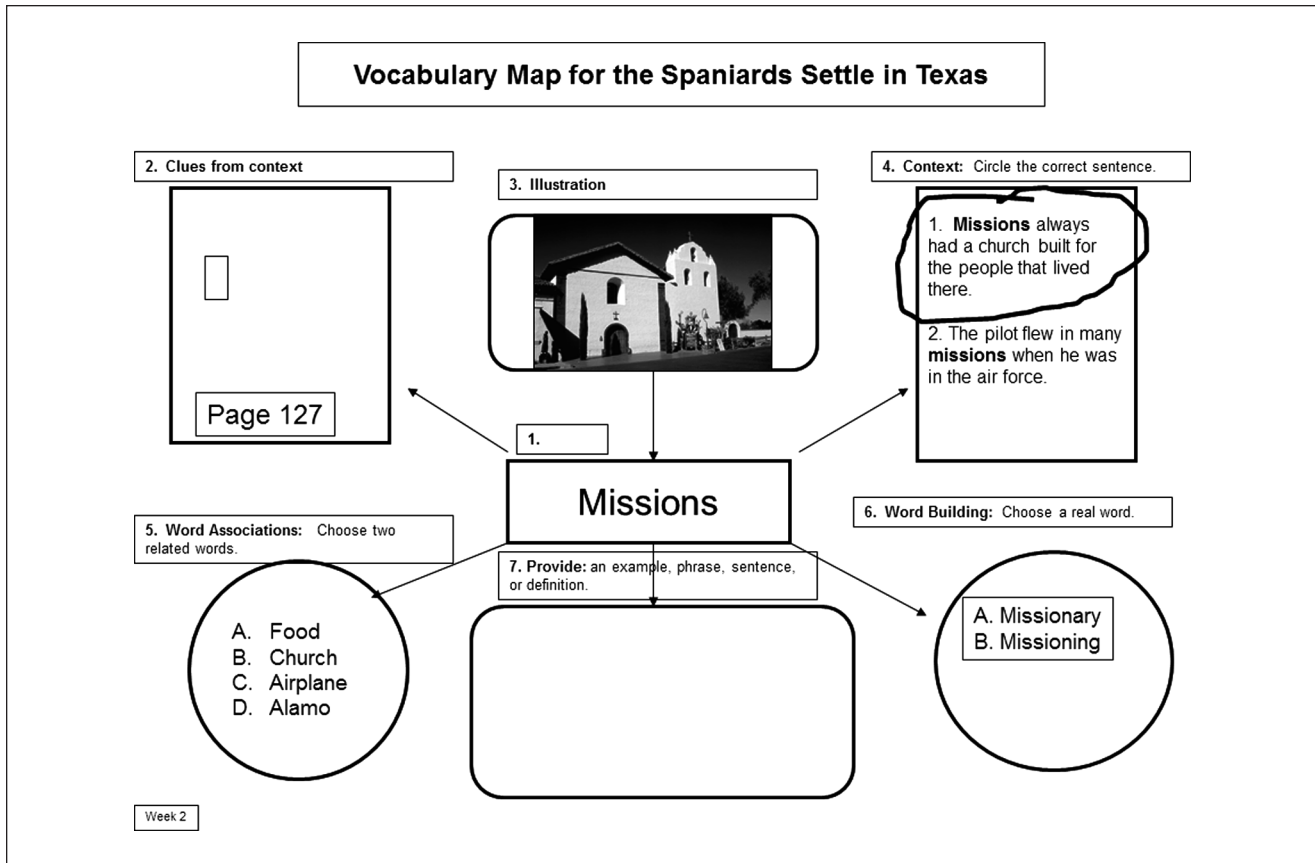
Figure 3. Example of a student copy of a vocabulary map

explained in greater detail in the *during reading* strategy section. Box 3 of Figure 3 presents a visual representation of the word to aid memory. In Box 4, students choose which word is used correctly in context. If the identified vocabulary word is a multimeaning word, such as *legend*, students must discriminate between the relevant social studies meaning and another, more common meaning. These activities provide students with an initial level of vocabulary knowledge to facilitate their comprehension as they read the text. The remaining components are discussed after reading.

Strategies During Reading

During social studies reading, teachers may use different approaches. Two strategies to promote text comprehension (i.e., chapter overviews and context clues) follow.

Chapter overviews revisited. During reading, teachers may use the chapter overview (see Figure 2) that was previously used as a before-reading tool to emphasize connections between new ideas and previous knowledge (Lenz, Bulgren, Schumaker, Deshler, & Boudah, 2005). The chapter overview uses semantic features analysis to allow teachers and students to compare and contrast content. For example, as

students prepare to read the section on missions, they would read with a purpose of answering the three questions in the left column of Figure 2 (e.g., What is it? Who built it? and What was its purpose?). Students would complete the chart to relate using targeted vocabulary. This tool helps students make connections between new vocabulary and content knowledge. Because of the abstract nature of much social studies vocabulary, chapter overviews help not only make abstract ideas more concrete but also show how these ideas connect to prior knowledge. The chapter overview can be used as a note-taking guide to organize student learning. For example, students first read the section on *missions* in their textbook. As they read, students use the chapter overview to record what a mission was, who built it, and its purpose. Chapter overviews easily can be modified for a range of learners by varying the number of cells left blank or varying the amount of information included in each cell. This tool is designed (a) to raise student awareness of the vocabulary as it is encountered in context, (b) to provide repeated exposure to new vocabulary, and (c) to make explicit the connection between content and vocabulary.

The CLUE strategy. In addition to strategies that are teacher directed, students also need strategies to learn words

Context Clue Strategy

✎**Check** for words that are bold or highlighted.

✎**Look** for and read the sentences around the word to see if there are clues to its meaning.

✎**Use** the word in the sentence to see if you understand the meaning of the word? If not expand your resources.

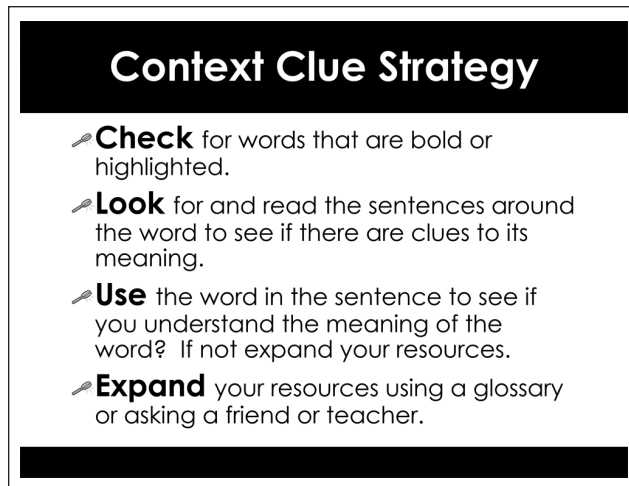✎**Expand** your resources using a glossary or asking a friend or teacher.

Figure 4. Steps used in the CLUE strategy

independently. Although contextual analysis is among the most frequently studied vocabulary strategies, it has not been applied extensively with content-area text. A recent investigation by Baumann, Edwards, Boland, Olejnik, and Kame'enui (2003) found significant effects using context clues in social studies. The CLUE strategy was developed using the work of Baumann et al. as a theoretical framework (see Figure 4). Effective context clue instruction not only teaches students how to learn word meanings from text but also communicates when and where context clues are effective. That is, context clues will not work for each unfamiliar word. Some context clues are very strong and provide a clear, accurate definition, whereas some are very weak and may lead to an incorrect definition. The CLUE strategy has four steps: (a) check, (b) look, (c) use, and (d) expand. First, students are directed to check the text for words that are bolded or highlighted. Although not every highlighted word is of equal importance, it can signal students to pay close attention. Next, students read the sentences around the word to look for clues. The last two steps require students to evaluate their vocabulary knowledge. Students use the word in a sentence to check their understanding. If they fail to understand the word, they are to expand their resources by using a glossary or dictionary or asking a friend or teacher for clarification. Although these steps will not ensure that students learn all unknown words in context, they provide a strategy to begin learning difficult social studies vocabulary independently.

Strategies After Reading

The primary purposes of after-reading activities are to review and consolidate content learning. These practices repurpose several of the tools used before and during text reading and include the vocabulary map, the chapter overview, the anticipation guide, and practice activities.

Vocabulary maps after reading. After reading, students return to the vocabulary map to deepen knowledge of target vocabulary. To refine vocabulary knowledge, students identify semantically related vocabulary in shown in Box 5 of Figure 3. In Box 6, they discriminate between words and nonwords and then extend that knowledge by adding words with the shared root. In Box 7, students write their own definition. Together, these activities raise student word awareness and provide multiple opportunities to engage in word study.

Chapter overviews after reading. Chapter overviews are strategically used to integrate vocabulary and content knowledge in an activity called *Down and Across*. In this activity, students read either down a column or across a row in the chapter overview, creating a sentence about the content using key vocabulary. For example, students could create the following sentence reading down the column on missions (see Figure 2): "Missions were religious settlements built by the Catholic Church to provide shelter, food, and religious education to the Texans." In addition, vocabulary from previous lessons can be incorporated into the activity, reviewing past learning, connecting new words with known words, and providing the multiple exposures needed to develop rich vocabulary knowledge.

Anticipation guides after reading. After reading, teachers and students return to the anticipation guide to confirm or correct their predictions made prior to reading. In addition to providing opportunities for students to discuss important information, this activity allows teachers an opportunity to assess student accuracy and depth of understanding and, if needed, to return to the text to correct misunderstanding.

Practice activities. After-text reading provides an excellent opportunity to expand vocabulary knowledge through practice. To this end, two practice activities were built into the framework: (a) a vocabulary journal and (b) a vocabulary game. Vocabulary journals require students to categorize words based on broad social studies categories (e.g., government, geography, people, culture). When done across multiple units of instruction, students can connect social studies content and vocabulary knowledge across time. Ready, Set, Go! is a 3-minute vocabulary game in which students draw a vocabulary card and respond with the definition. Another option is to have one partner read the definition and another respond with the correct word. This game delivers the repeated practice required to build vocabulary knowledge in an engaging manner.

Active engagement. Active engagement is an underlying principle of each strategy and component of the framework. Active engagement has also been shown to be important in learning new vocabulary (Beck et al., 2002; Nagy, 2005; NRP, 2000). The anticipation guide, chapter overview, and vocabulary map were designed to actively involve students and to extend their understanding of content and vocabulary.

One method to increase student engagement is through pairing students to work on specific vocabulary-related tasks. For example, pairs can complete the anticipation guide, followed by a whole-class discussion. Similarly, once students are familiar with the expectations of the vocabulary maps, these can be completed in pairs prior to reading the text. Pairs can also read the text and complete the chapter overview, followed by class discussion.

Summary

Although much research has investigated strategies to improve vocabulary learning in narrative text, not as much attention has been given to the social studies text students encounter in the upper elementary grades. Using research on effective vocabulary instruction, a vocabulary instructional framework that bridges current research to practice in the social studies classroom has been presented. Through the use of anticipation guides, vocabulary maps, chapter overviews, and practice activities that promote student engagement, vocabulary instruction can be incorporated into social studies content to aid navigation of difficult texts.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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