

Implementing Word Walls Across the Content Areas

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Overview

In this study, middle and high school teachers learned strategies for using a word wall with all students to enhance vocabulary development across the curriculum. The project examined (a) how the teachers used word walls to enhance vocabulary development and content, (b) how the use of word walls affected the vocabulary growth and academic achievement of students, and (c) how the use and format of word walls varied among content area teachers.

Methods

The project used a quasi-experimental approach that included pre- and post-teacher surveys, two classroom observations, and teacher logs. Participants included middle and high school teachers and students at two purposefully selected schools in a small-city public school district in south central Kentucky. Twenty-two teachers participated; eleven were in the control group and eleven were in the experimental group.

Teachers in the experimental group participated in two professional development sessions regarding words walls and their implementation. These sessions provided teachers with research showing the importance of vocabulary to academic success, suggestions for vocabulary word selection and word wall format, the characteristics of effective vocabulary instruction and instructional strategies to use with the word wall for introduction, review, and reinforcement of words. Teachers were provided an opportunity to visit one another's classrooms and share ideas as well as learn additional strategies for vocabulary instruction.

Findings and Implications

Results indicated participating teachers increased their use of word walls and found word walls effective for student learning. Overall, teachers reported that they used a variety of the strategies presented during the professional development activities, identified positive outcomes with students, and expressed improved teaching strategies. Teachers referred to students who requested further engagement in the Word Wall activities and were observed discussing the newly learned vocabulary outside of the classroom and using the Word Wall as a reference during class time. More importantly, teachers reported that students improved academically, as measured on formative assessments.

Surveys, teachers' logs, and classroom observations all showed that teachers applied what they learned in the professional development sessions. All teachers in the experimental group reported having and using a word wall in their teaching as a result of their participation in the project, and teachers reported using the instructional strategies and activities taught in the professional development sessions. Teachers felt the word wall strategies did make a difference for student learning of vocabulary. In addition, teachers expressed a desire to learn more vocabulary strategies.

Aside from learning about word walls and specific instructional strategies for vocabulary, teachers learned several things about vocabulary in general and their students. Teachers recognized that teaching vocabulary takes time. Also, vocabulary instruction should include both general academic and content-specific vocabulary. This is perhaps related to a lesson learned about students – words they assumed their students knew were not known or not known well. Participation in the project made teachers more aware of the importance of vocabulary instruction and the qualities of effective vocabulary instruction. Teachers wanted to learn more strategies to increase teaching effectiveness as well as student achievement.

This project suggests that vocabulary instruction should be a priority in middle and high school classrooms and that word walls are helpful for teaching and reinforcing both academic and content-specific vocabulary.