## ABSTRACT:

Many students have the ability to decode words in text but struggle when needing to comprehend what they have read.  Students who have a have small vocabulary often encounter difficulties when comprehending texts and lack the ability to use their word knowledge to retell aspects of the various texts that they have read.  It is therefore necessary for teachers to expand students' vocabulary so that they are able to gain a deeper understanding of word meanings and therefore improve their skills in order to make meaning of what they are reading.

The hypothesis of this research project is that **teaching children in Year One word meanings through pictures, improves their ability to retell at a sentence level.** Research suggests that explicit teaching of vocabulary has an impact on student's oral language and reading comprehension. The students in this study were presented with various pictures to label and name and were asked to suggest synonyms for some of the words that they named.  Students were also asked to use these words in simple sentences to retell the story, which in turn helped to increase their comprehension ability.

The present study compared the findings of two groups of students, a control group who received no intervention and an experimental group who were taught to use pictures to help develop their vocabulary and their ability to retell a story at the sentence level.  The results indicate support for the hypothesis as the 'Synonym' test and 'Oral Retell' scores of most students in the intervention group indicated improvement in each of these areas.

The implication for teaching suggest that explicit teaching of word meanings through picture chats leads to an increase in students vocabulary as well as the students being able to retell a story at a sentence level.

## INTRODUCTION:

In primary schools today, we are faced with many students who experience reading difficulties in various forms.  One example of this, is those students who have poor vocabulary skills and thus, resulting in them being more likely to struggle when needing to comprehend a text both at a literal level as well as an inferential one.  It has been argued by researchers that 'there is a strong relationship between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension – each of which is critical to the development of the other.' (Henkin, Harmon, Pate & Moorman 2007).  We know that as readers learn to read, they encounter new words all the time, thus extending their vocabulary development, which in turn will enhance their reading comprehension.  Students who don't increase their vocabulary development at a rate that will help them to make sense of the text that they are reading will continue to struggle with reading comprehension throughout their schooling. Further supporting this Dickinson & Tabors (2001), Hart & Rinsley (1995) and White, Graves, and Slater (1990) as cited in Joshi (2005) have shown that poor vocabulary development in children's early years negatively affects their reading comprehension in later years.

The difficulties students experience in relation to poor vocabulary may be due to limited oral language development or lack of life experiences.  Research into this area has also shown that oral language plays an integral role in the development of vocabulary and reading comprehension.  As identified by Edwards, Beckman & Munson (2004) children who have 'smaller vocabularies provide less support for abstracting knowledge… the more often a child has heard and said a word, the better the child knows the word.  The child can fluently incorporate the word into unfamiliar prosodic structures in productions of novel sentences.' What we can take from this study is that oral language and vocabulary are interconnected. Students who lack oral language skills will often have a poor vocabulary as they have had little exposure to words and word meanings or the limited exposure that they have had, is not linked to their personal/life experiences.  It is suggested that the words and concepts

students absorb and use as they listen and talk are the foundation for what they will read and write later.  As a result, students with large vocabularies tend to be articulate and possess the confidence that is sometimes not exhibited by students who lack vocabulary and conceptual knowledge (Bromley 2007).

In a study undertaken by Gambrell (2004) 'Exlporing the Connection between Oral Language and Early Reading' it was identified that as teachers we should not loose sight of the fact that aspects of oral language are equally as important in learning to read as vocabulary knowledge and print awareness.  These are all predictors of beginning reading for both word-level skills and text comprehension.   It therefore becomes pivotal that teachers not only focus on teaching vocabulary to students but provide them with experiences that will foster oral language development where children can practise using words in context and therefore gain a deeper understanding of word meanings.   As noted by Green wood & Flanigan (2007) students may learn words as discrete meanings but they don't necessarily connect these meanings back to the larger context of the text.  Studies have shown that when students store new information by linking it to their existing knowledge there is a better chance the new word will be remembered later (Bromley, 2007).  Bromley (2007) states that as teachers we need to engage student's prior knowledge and related experiences before teaching new words.

The implications of the research findings around oral language and vocabulary development are interesting.  It suggests that children with poor oral language skills have limited experiences to draw upon when attempting to make meaning of words and thus, will affect their reading comprehension.  These variables will impact directly on these students experiencing success in reading from a very early age.  Munro, (2007) states that oral language and the ability to communicate effectively is a key foundation to students' capacity to learn in most general ways.  Therefore, unless these issues are addressed it may be

possible for students to continue to move through their school years without an in depth understanding of what they are reading which will filter through to all subject areas.

The present study aims to extend the earlier research by examining the influence of oral language on children's vocabulary development through picture chats.  It is hypothesised that teaching children in Year One word meanings through pictures, improves their ability to retell at a sentence level.

## METHOD:

### Design:

The study uses a 0X0 design to compare the increase in vocabulary development of Year One students through picture chats to improve their oral retell to one group, the teaching group, and not teaching the strategies to another group, the control group.

### Participants:

Table 1:

| Experimental Group | | | | | Control Group | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Year Level | Student | Sex | Age | Intervention | Year Level | Student | Sex | Age | Intervention |
| 1 | Student A | F | 6y 10m | NO | 1 | Student H | M | 6y 11m | NO |
| 1 | Student B | M | 6y 11m | NO | 1 | Student I | M | 7y 0m | YES |
| 1 | Student C | F | 6y 5m | NO | 1 | Student J | F | 7y 2m | NO |
| 1 | Student D | F | 7y 0m | NO | 1 | Student K | F | 7y 4m | NO |
| 1 | Student E | M | 7y 3m | YES | 1 | Student L | M | 6y 9m | NO |
| 1 | Student F | F | 7y 1m | NO | 1 | Student M | F | 7y 4m | NO |

The above participants came from one Year 1 classroom. The selection of the teaching group and the control groups were undertaken in consultation with both classroom teachers. The students were selected with the intention of having mixed ability groups (some children who are experiencing reading difficulties and children who are very fluent readers) however all students have demonstrated a need to develop their vocabulary to build on their reading comprehension.

### Materials:

Materials used for this assessment include the following:

- Synonyms Task: – created by John Munro 2005. This was adapted to cater for year one students (see appendix 1). The task was administered by the teacher orally and

individually to students.  The students were given a word and asked to respond with a synonym for that word.

- Oral Narrative – Story & Re Tell Assessment Pack (Catholic Education Office, Eastern Region.  Taken from *'Evaluating Communicative Competence, Simon C. 1987)*.  This task was administered by the teacher to each of the students individually. Students were shown pictures of Spot's Biscuits and were asked to tell a story about the pictures.  They were read the story story and asked to re tell the story using the pictures to help them recall the text (see appendix 2).

**Procedure:**

In pre testing for this study students were assessed using 'Synonym Task' (Munro 2005) to identify their vocabulary development and knowledge of word meanings.  The task was adapted slightly to make it more age appropriate for the students in Year One.   Each student was given a word that they were expected to respond to by giving another word that has the same meaning.

The intervention program consisted of 10 lessons ranging in duration from 20 – 25 minutes. Each lesson was conducted in a small group situation where students were withdrawn from their regular classroom program three times a week. Students in the control group continued to participate in the regular classroom program.  Following the 4 weeks of teaching for the intervention group, all students were assessed again using the same materials and procedure used during pre testing.

The intervention program consisted of the following format, which was created to make it easily transferable to a classroom setting as a teacher focus group activity.  Each lesson used large pictures where a story was being told without text.  Students were initially shown the large colourful pictures to generate ideas on story the pictures were telling us.  As the students suggested words to match the objects/action/characters in the pictures the teacher

recorded their responses to make a list of words. As a group, the children then looked at the meaning of each of these words. The students were asked to put the words into a simple sentence to show their understanding of the word meaning. After each sentence was shared the students used their words to create a list of synonyms for some of the words (not all words suggested allowed for a synonym to be suggested).

The lesson following the picture chat involved students listening to a story created by the teacher (using the language developed from the previous session, see appendix 3) and where then asked to draw pictures to sequence the story according to beginning, middle and end. The students then used their pictures to retell the story. Whilst this was happening the teacher recorded the students re tell on a tape recorder to assess the effectiveness of the teaching session as well as a tool to guide the following lesson.

## RESULTS:

The results of the intervention group and the control group indicate support for the hypothesis that teaching children in year one word meanings through pictures, improves their ability to retell at a sentence level. The synonym test scores (Figure 1) for most students in the intervention group indicate an improvement in their ability to suggest synonyms for a particular word. The gains made by the intervention group in this area were greater than those made by the control group (refer to Figure 2). However it should be noted that small gains were seen in both groups but the most significant gains were evident in the intervention group.
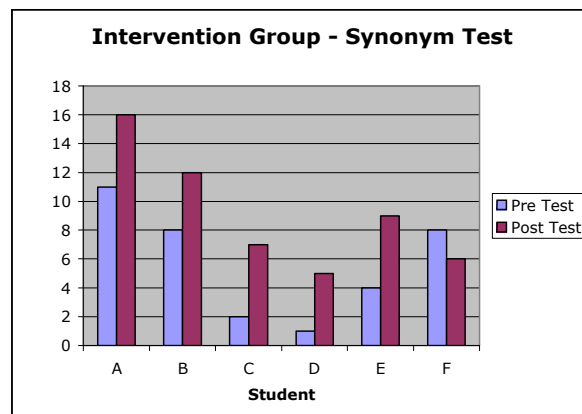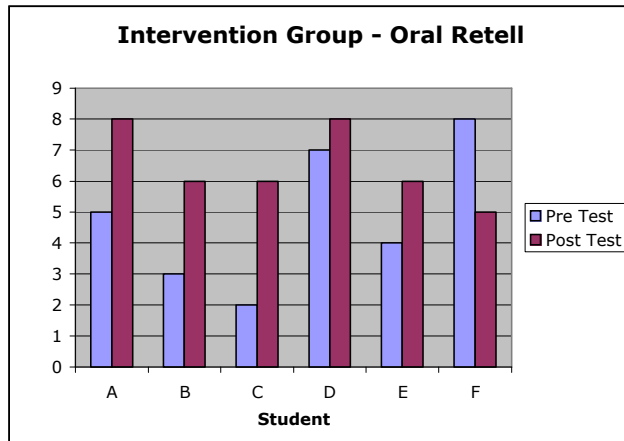


**Figure 1** –Synonym Test results
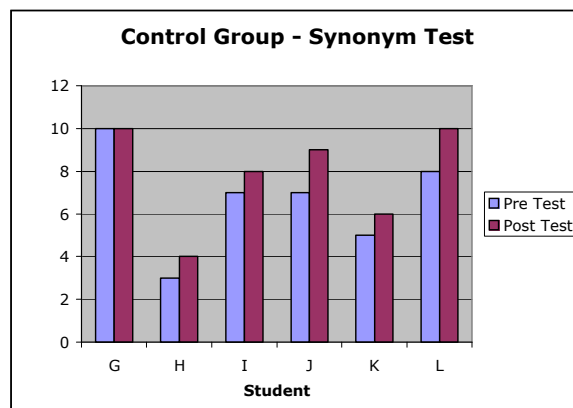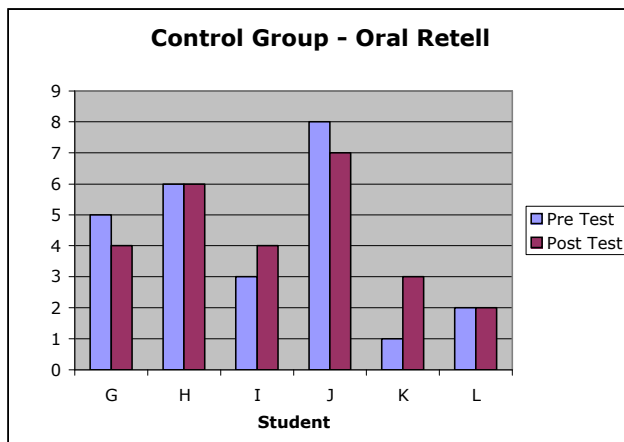


**Figure 2** – Synonym Test results

When examining the results for the pre and post test for the oral retell it became evident that the largest growth in this area occurred in the intervention group. The results for the

students in the intervention group indicate a minium growth of two or more points when retelling the story (refer to Figure 3). The results for the students in the control group however are much more varied. Some students showed no growth in their score when retelling a story whilst others achieved a lower score in their post test result when compared to their pre test score (refer to Figure 4).

**Intervention Group - Oral Retell**

Figure showing Pre Test and Post Test scores for students A–F.

**Figure 3** – Oral Retell results (Intervention)

**Control Group - Oral Retell**

Figure showing Pre Test and Post Test scores for students G–L.

**Figure 4 -**Oral Retell results (Control)
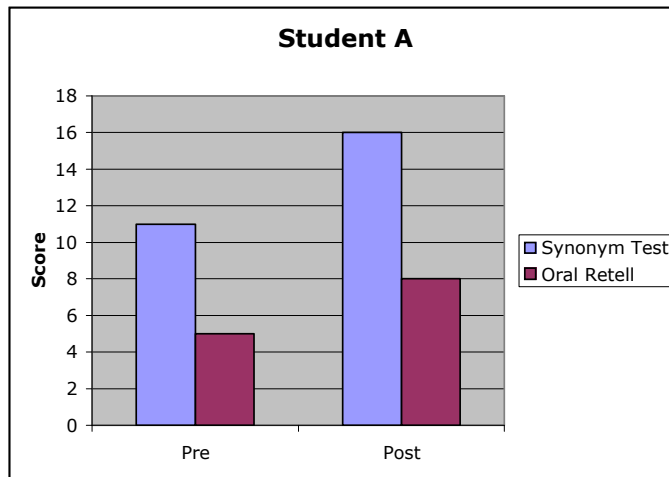
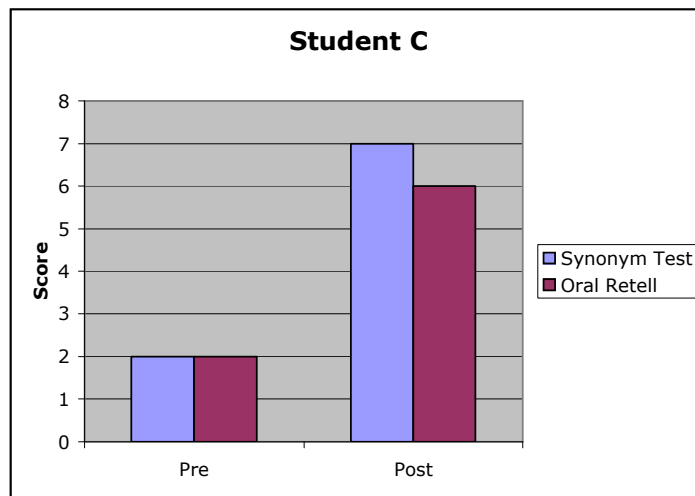**Figure 5 -** Pre & Post Test results for Student A

Student A has demonstrated a considerable increase in their ability to identify synonyms for given words as well as being able to show growth in being able to retell a story in their post testing scores. This student was very enthusiastic when working with the small group and was able to contribute to the discussion without prompting.
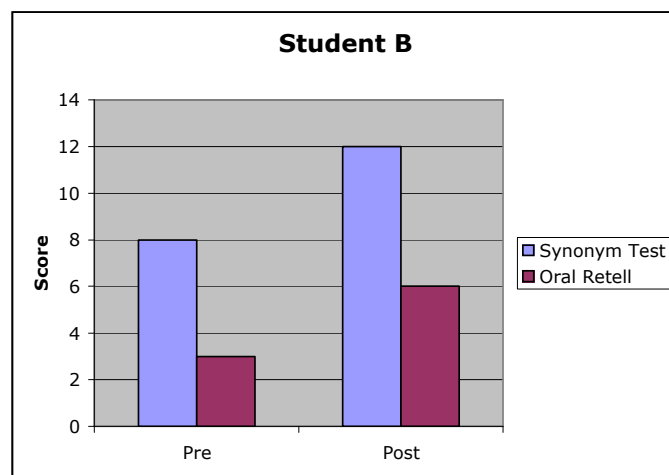


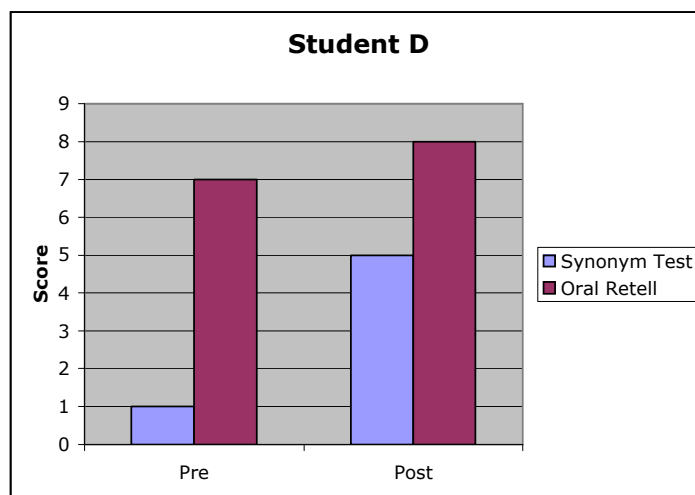**Figure 6** - Pre & Post Test results for Student B

Student B contributed well at all the intervention sessions. When examining his results it is evident that he showed a growth in both areas of testing. Student B was able to identify the meaning of words with little difficulty and when asked to generate synonyms for words found in the pictures he used his understanding of the word meanings to do this. When completing

the oral retell post testing for Student B it was evident that Student B implemented many of the strategies taught in the intervention program to both sequence and retell the story.

**Student C**

**Figure 7** - Pre & Post Test results for Student C

Student C (Figure 7) achieved pleasing results in both the synonym test as well as the oral retell.  Her results indicate a growth in both areas, which is indicative of how she contributed to discussions in the teaching sessions.  She was able to generate vocabulary using pictures and would offer synonyms for many words, hence supporting the area of greatest growth in her results.

**Student D**

**Figure 8** - Pre & Post Test results for Student D

Student Ds (Figure 8) results show significant improvement in being able to identify synonyms for specific words. She increased her score by 4 points and her oral retell shows an increase of 1 point to score the top mark for this assessment.
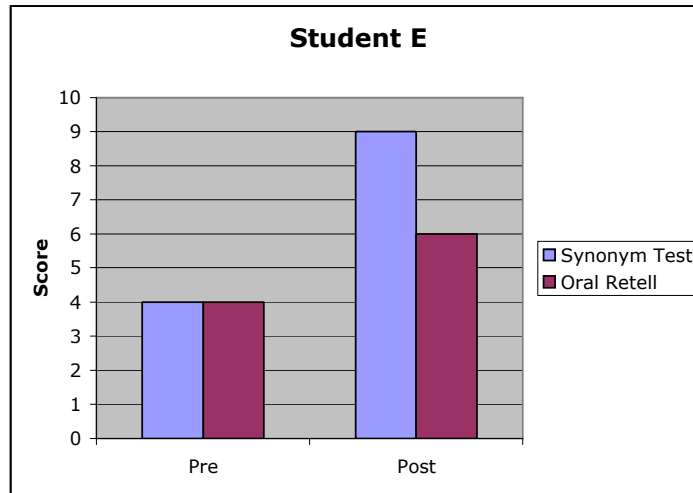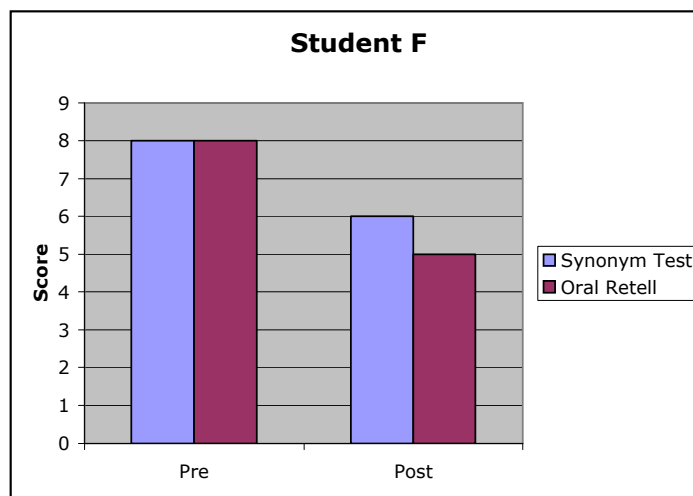
**Student E**



**Figure 9 -** Pre & Post Test results for Student E

**Student F**



**Figure 10** - Pre & Post Test results for Student F

When examining the results for Student F (Figure 10) it is evident that she showed the least amount of progress in the intervention group, in fact her results indicate a decrease in scores from the pre testing to post testing. Student F displayed difficulties during lessons in being able to sequence the story (both orally and when recording on paper) and was reluctant to independently attempt to talk about the pictures. Student F needed a great deal of prompting from the teacher to participate in the group discussion. It should also be noted

that Student F was absent for 4 out of the 10 sessions, which may be a contributing factor to the results that she obtained.

Students in the control group demonstrated significantly less improvement in their ability to identify synonyms for words in post testing with one student showing no growth in their score and three students only increasing their synonym score by one point (refer to Figure 2). Upon further examination of the students scores for the control group in post testing for oral retell it is evident that Students H & L scores showed no growth at all and Students G & J decreased in their score. The other students in the control group made minimal gains in their oral retell score (refer to figure 4).

In summary, it is clear from the results that the intervention group achieved greater results in both the synonym test and oral retell than the control group. This conclusion supports the hypothesis that teaching students word meanings through picture chats will increase their ability to retell at a sentence level.

## DISCUSSION:

In reflecting on the current study, it is evident that the hypothesis of teaching children in year one word meanings through pictures improves their ability to retell at a sentence level, is supported by the results and current research findings. Five out of six students in the study improved in their ability to identify synonyms for words as well as being able to retell a story using sentences. Nevertheless, in order for the current intervention to be even more effective it is suggested that the lessons be run over a longer period of time to help develop a more consistent approach to the explicit teaching of vocabulary.

The findings of this action research are not unusual when looking at past research in the areas of vocabulary development and oral language. In a study by Bromley (2007) findings suggest that 'students with large vocabularies tend to be articulate and possess the confidence that is sometimes not exhibited by students who lack vocabulary and conceptual knowledge.' This may account for the unexpected results achieved by Student F in this action research. Throughout the ten teaching sessions, Student F exhibited a limited vocabulary knowledge that may be linked to the lack of life experiences that she has had. She often struggled to name objects/characters found in the picture and therefore would rarely contribute her thoughts and ideas to the discussion. The limited vocabulary that she appeared to have also influenced her ability to retell a story at a sentence level. Parker et al (2002) noted that many students who have poor reading comprehension often have difficulty understanding key words. This finding was noticeable in the intervention group, particularly with Student F who found it difficult to generate synonyms for words found in the oral brainstorm.

Another variable that could have played a role in the results of Student F and the way she responded to the intervention process could be that the student only attended 6 out of the 10

lessons.  The lessons were conducted in the morning session and on some of these day she arrived late or was absent from school altogether.

A key element to the success of this study (which should be considered when replicating the teaching sessions in the future) was being able to ensure that all the lessons were taught in a small group situation.  Students were able to actively participate in the discussions and if they were not voluntarily participating the teacher observed this and engaged them through prompting and ongoing support.  Another advantage of having a smaller group to explicitly teach vocabulary was that the teacher was able to give immediate feedback to each student in the group to provide clarification, correction, extension and affirmation.  For future reference it is important to note that when teaching vocabulary to students, we teach it in a meaningful ways and keep it in the context of the students' learning (Henkin, Harmon, Pate & Moorman, 2007).  When working with the students in this research project it was vital that the pictures chosen related to the topic that the students were studying in the classroom so that their learning kept in context and was much more meaningful.

It is also important to mention that some of the students' use of synonyms in the post test did not reflect their use of synonyms in the teaching sessions.  This may be due to some of the words on the synonym test being a too difficult or that students have not been previously exposed to these words prior to being tested.  When working with the students closely, it was evident that they were able to use the knowledge gained from the picture chats to make inferences about what was happening and also formulate word meanings from their inferences.  Students then used their word meanings to suggest synonyms that could be used in place of the original word not only in isolation but also in the context of their oral retell.

The results of this study were also further supported by research previously completed in vocabulary development and its impact on reading comprehension.  As suggested by Wise,

Sevcik, Morris, Lovett & Wolf (2007) vocabulary knowledge is important for word identification performance and reading comprehension. The results achieved by the students also indicate this. The students who achieved an increase in the amount of synonyms that they were able to identify also showed an increased ability to retell a story using more involved vocabulary.

A success of the this action research was that students were given the opportunity to discuss the pictures in a structured setting where questions were deliberately asked to promote the language that would lead to identifying the meaning behind particular words. Greenwood and Flanigan (2007) state that the size of an individual's vocabulary is a powerful predictor of how well a student comprehends texts that they read. Therefore it is necessary that as teacher's we make teaching vocabulary explicit in our classrooms to help our students increase their oral language skills as well as their ability to make meaning of what they are reading.

Another area of possible study could be to examine the effect that allocated and directed discussion has on the development of oral language and thus, the reading comprehension of students. Further supporting this is Bromely (2007) who states that the words and concepts students absorb and use as they listen and talk are the foundation for what they will read and write later.

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Munro. J. (2005). Synonym Task. *Literacy Intervention Strategies Tests*, 2008.

# APPENDIX 1: SYNONYM TASK (ADAPTED FROM MUNRO 2005)

| | Target Word | Possible Responses | Child's Response |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. | small | tiny, little, wee, mini, miniature, short, shrimp, slight, stunted, teensy, minor | |
| 2. | fast | quick, rapid, snappy, speedy, hasty, swift | |
| 3. | old | aged, ancient, elderly, senior, experienced, veteran, outdated, stale | |
| 4. | leave | go, clear out, scram, stop | |
| 5. | car | vehicle, van, sedan, automobile | |
| 6. | shoe | boot, runners, sneaker, slipper | |
| 7. | child | boy, girl, infant, kid, tot, brat, toddler, kiddie | |
| 8. | fat | plump, burly, overweight, large, bulk, big, obese | |
| 9. | walk | stroll, amble, hike, amble, tramp | |
| 10. | cat | kitten, moggy, puss, pussy, lion, tabby, leopard | |
| 11. | tired | exhausted, sleepy, weary | |
| 12. | boat | ship, types of boats | |
| 13. | clean | neat, tidy, clear, sparkling | |
| 14. | sick | ill, unhealthy, unwell, weak | |
| 15. | dog | puppy, pup, dingo, hound, terrior, type of dog | |
| 16. | tiger | cat, cheetah, cougar, jaguar, leopard, lion, panther | |
| 17. | cold | freezing, chilly, cool | |
| 18. | angry | mad, irate, frustrated, rage, fiery, furious | |
| 19. | hit | slap, punch, strike, bat, smash, sock, swipe | |
| 20. | hot | warm, boiling | |
| 21. | cage | pen, cell, prison | |
| 22. | A building | structure, type of building, house, home | |

**Scoring:**
Two scores are allocated to each synonym; (1) whether the child give one response that is correct – either 1 or 0 and (2) when the child gives more than one response, the number of additional responses that are correct.

# SPOT'S BISCUITS – RETELL ANALYSIS

| | | CHILD'S RESPONSE | SCORE |
|---|---|---|---|
| **_Story Beginning_** | One day… | | |
| **SETTING:**<br>- Characters | Sue/Spot | | |
| - Scene | Sue was watching her favourite TV show | | |
| **EPISODE:**<br>- Initiating event | Sue is hungry/she got hungry/she decided to get a bowl of biscuits | | |
| - Action | Sue knocks biscuits on the floor/as she reached for biscuits bowl fell on the floor/bowl of biscuits fell on the floor next to Spot/ biscuits fell on the floor | | |
| - Outcome | She makes a mess/she looked at the mess/Sue and Spot looked at the mess | | |
| - Problem | Sue thinks she will get in trouble/she will get in trouble/she had to clean it up | | |
| - Action to problem | She decides to clean it up/Sue gets a broom to clean up the mess | | |

**Scoring:** 1 point given for each correct response.

*Session One:*

| ACTIVITY | DESCRIPTION |
|---|---|
| 10 minutes<br><br>Stimulus | **Picture Chat**<br>Large colourful pictures of Aboriginal artwork<br><br>Vocabulary generated from picture chat recorded on A3 pieces of paper |
| 10 minutes<br><br>Synonyms | Synonyms generated from the vocabulary given<br><br>Word grouped to any phonological features identified. |
| 5-10 minutes<br><br>Sentence Work | Children choose a word from the list. They then use the word that they have chosen to put into a sentence that relates to the picture used earlier. |

*Session Two:*

| ACTIVITY | DESCRIPTION |
|---|---|
| 10 minutes<br><br>Review of Session 1 | **Story relating to Picture Chat**<br>Teacher generated story is read to the children. The children were asked to put picture in their minds (visualise) while the teacher read the story. |

| 10 minutes<br><br>Sequencing Story | Students sequenced the story read by the teacher according to beginning, middle & end. (students responses were recorded through pictures) |
| --- | --- |
| 5-10 minutes<br><br>Oral Retell | Children used their pictures to retell the story in their own words. The emphasis was put on them to make use of the synonyms brainstormed in the earlier session. |

*Session Three:*

| ACTIVITY | DESCRIPTION |
| --- | --- |
| 10 minutes<br><br>Stimulus | **Picture Chat**<br>Large colourful pictures of Aboriginal artwork<br><br>Vocabulary generated from picture chat recorded on A3 pieces of paper |
| 10 minutes<br><br>Synonyms | Synonyms generated from the vocabulary given<br><br>Words to be recorded on flash cards and then used to play concentration where they have to match the original word to the synonym. |
| 5-10 minutes<br><br>Sentence Work | Children choose a word from the list. They then use the word that they have chosen to put into a sentence that relates to the picture used earlier. |

*Session Four:*

| ACTIVITY | DESCRIPTION |
|---|---|
| 10 minutes<br><br>Review of Session 3 | **Story relating to Picture Chat**<br>Teacher generated story is read to the children. The children were asked to put picture in their minds (visualise) while the teacher read the story. |
| 10 minutes<br><br>Sequencing Story | Students sequenced the story read by the teacher according to beginning, middle & end. (students responses were recorded through pictures) |
| 5-10 minutes<br><br>Oral Retell | Children used their pictures to retell the story in their own words. The emphasis was put on them to make use of the synonyms brainstormed in the earlier session. |

*Session Five:*

| ACTIVITY | DESCRIPTION |
|---|---|
| 10 minutes<br><br>Stimulus | **Picture Chat**<br>Large colourful pictures taken from Aboriginal stories (blown up & put on the Interactive Whiteboard)<br><br>Children had to circle the items in the picture that match the vocabulary they were using to describe the picture.<br><br>Vocabulary generated from picture chat recorded on A3 pieces of paper |

| 10 minutes<br><br>Synonyms | Synonyms generated from the vocabulary given.<br><br>Teacher to give a sentence to the children using one of the vocab words & the children are then asked to substitute that word with a synonym.  Ask, Does the sentence still make sense?  Why?  How else could we say that? |
| --- | --- |
| 5-10 minutes<br><br>Sentence Work | Children choose a word from the list.  They then use the word that they have chosen to put into a sentence that relates to the picture used earlier. |

*Session Six:*

| ACTIVITY | DESCRIPTION |
| --- | --- |
| 10 minutes<br><br>Review of Session 4 | **Story relating to Picture Chat**<br>Teacher generated story is read to the children.  The children were asked to put picture in their minds (visualise) while the teacher read the story. |
| 10 minutes<br><br>Sequencing Story | Students sequenced the story read by the teacher according to beginning, middle & end.  Students worked together to act out the story according to the above sequence. |
| 5-10 minutes<br><br>Oral Retell | Children use their plays to orally retell the story.  The emphasis is put on the children to make use of the synonyms brainstormed in the earlier session. |

*Session Seven:*

| ACTIVITY | DESCRIPTION |
|---|---|
| 10 minutes | **Synonym Snap**<br>Children use words generated by the teacher to play the game of Snap. The purpose of the game is assess children's learning to see if they were able to identify synonyms for various words. |
| 10 minutes<br><br>Sentence construction | Students given the opportunity to choose 2 words. The students then put each of their two words into a sentence to show their understanding of the meaning. |
| 5-10 minutes<br><br>Oral Retell | Students share their sentences with the group. |

*Session Eight:*

| ACTIVITY | DESCRIPTION |
|---|---|
| 10 minutes | **Synonym Bingo**<br>Teacher generated words to allow children to identify words that can be used that still maintain the same meaning. |
| 10 minutes<br><br>Sentence Work | Using pictures from earlier lessons, children create a sentence to describe the picture. They then are asked to substitute one of the words in the sentence with a synonym. Teacher to ask 'Does it still makes sense?' |

| 5-10 minutes <br><br> Oral Retell | Students share their sentences with the group.  Other students are given the opportunity to comment on the sentences that the students present. |
| --- | --- |

**Sessions Nine & Ten:**

| ACTIVITY | DESCRIPTION |
| --- | --- |
| 10- 15 minutes <br><br> Review of Pictures from previous sessions | **Picture chats** <br> Students were given an opportunity to choose a picture already used in previous sessions.  They created a sentence to describe the picture.  The teacher then cuts up the sentence and has the students re order their sentence. |
| 10 minutes <br><br> Synonyms | Students used each other's sentences and synonym lists from previous lessons to retell the sentences in their own words. |