

Harmon, J.M., Hedrick, W.B., & Fox, E.A. (2000). A content analysis of vocabulary instruction in social studies textbooks for grades 4-8. *The Elementary School Journal*, 100, 253-271.

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Summary: The study explored “the nature and representation of vocabulary instruction in the teachers’ editions of social studies textbooks for grades 4-8.” Researchers found the inclusion of some vocabulary activities, which were chiefly at the associational level. Higher, generative level of word use was problematic due to the lack of student support from text materials.

Assumptions:

- Since textbooks are highly utilized in content-area classrooms, they play a crucial role in students’ vocabulary acquisition.
- Comprehension, not solely word meaning, is important to students’ text understanding in content-area classrooms.
- Meaningful use of a word is more important than repetition to acquire word meaning.
- Vocabulary instruction should focus on meaningful vocabulary activities rather than traditional, associational level activities (for example, matching, fill in the blank activities).

Results:

- The main category of key terms found in social studies teacher was that of domain-specific, 78%-89%, with one text outlier at 56%. This was followed by (in order of frequency) specific names, places, and events, general vocabulary words, and multiple-meaning words representing the least amount of key terms.
- Teachers selected different key terms than were highlighted in texts.
- Vocabulary recognition was considerable within the text; however, vocabulary support was premised on traditional models of social studies vocabulary activities, for example, matching or fill in the blank activities. Most of these activities appeared in the review portions of chapters.
- Generative vocabulary activities were included, but these activities were not supported by the text. In other words, there was no scaffolding to assist students in utilizing newly acquired words in creating a written text.
- Teachers’ editions provided no instructional suggestions concerning levels of word knowledge.

Conclusions:

- Publishers recognized the importance of vocabulary, but failed to produce supported, high-generative activities that would be of most benefit to the student.
- Updated knowledge on word knowledge needs to be incorporated into social studies texts. This should include comprehension and conceptual understanding of words.

- Texts should ensure scaffolding is promoted to achieve maximum gains for the students.

Suggestions for Teachers:

- “Word sorts, semantic mapping, semantic feature analysis grids, concept circles, and graphic organizers” can assist students in understanding the relationship between words and concepts.
- Teachers should use discussion and writing activities to engage students in higher-level learning of words and concepts.
- Teachers should use visual representations of key words and concepts to help students acquire word knowledge.

Suggestions for Literacy Leaders:

- Literacy leaders can ensure instructional practices in social studies classrooms reflect appropriate vocabulary teaching practices.
- Literacy leaders can explore ways that vocabulary can enhance reading comprehension.