

“If it’s simple, I can do it”: A Study of Adolescent Students’ Reading Motivation Linked with Explicit Vocabulary Strategies

Jamie Witt

Centerville City Schools
111 Virginia Avenue
Centerville, OH, 45458
United States

Stephanie Altchuler

Alexandria City Public Schools
1340 Braddock Place
Alexandria, VA 22314
United States

Abstract

Sparkling a student’s motivation to read can be complex, especially when high school learners are the focus. Many factors influence students’ motivation but reading achievement or a perceived lack of understanding is often a precursor as to where adolescent students’ motivation lies. Four vocabulary strategies were explicitly taught to the 10th grade students in this study to enhance their understanding of Julius Caesar in hopes to positively impact the students’ reading motivation. Previous research has not thoroughly examined the relationship between vocabulary instruction and reading motivation, particularly with high school students, often a forgotten group. The results of the study emphasized authentic vocabulary strategies positively supported the students’ understanding and motivation to read, especially learning tasks perceived by the students as “simple.”

Keywords: vocabulary; strategies; motivation; adolescent literacy; practitioner/teacher/action research

HIGH SCHOOL READING WOES

A student from this study lamented, “I don’t enjoy reading because it’s boring. When I read, I fall asleep, like if I am just reading a book or a paper, I start like... It is just boring, there’s like no interesting things.” Students across the country often express similar sentiments reflecting a strong aversion to reading. As much as students can express a dislike for reading, it is far more difficult to pinpoint exactly why they abandon the practice. Students’ motivation to read decreases as they start middle school and continues to decrease in high school, which compounds the issue for teachers (Ivey, 1998). Numerous factors impact reading motivation in adolescent learners: reading achievement, the availability of books, the types of books available, and relationships formed with teachers (Gilson, Beach, & Cleaver, 2018; Melekoglu, 2011). Considering all the factors, teachers must ponder, *what more can be done to support adolescent students’ motivation to read?* This question is one of critical importance because reading motivation often leads to greater success with reading, and success with reading helps prepare adolescents for postsecondary school and transitioning to the work environment (Applegate & Applegate, 2010; Melekoglu, 2011). This study examined the reading motivation of adolescent learners.

Students who are strong readers may often think positively about their reading skills, and as a result are more likely to be motivated to read (Melekoglu, 2011). Thus, teachers should work to equip their students with strategies to improve their reading skills to promote feelings of confidence and increase motivation (Altchuler & Chai, 2019). One way to accomplish this is through providing explicit vocabulary strategies to adolescent students, a group so often overlooked (Thompson, 2000). When students have strong vocabularies, their reading comprehension is markedly better (Ilter, 2019). Unfortunately, teaching such explicit vocabulary strategies is often neglected at the high school level because the focus is on *reading to learn* rather than *learning to read* (Marinak, 2013). Therefore, the goal of this study was to incorporate a variety of vocabulary strategies to support students' understanding of the play, *Julius Caesar*, and to examine the impact of the strategies on students' motivation to read. This study addressed the following research questions:

- (1) How do explicit vocabulary strategies impact students' motivation to read?
- (2) What vocabulary strategies, if any, provide engaging literacy experiences for adolescent students?
- (3) Which vocabulary strategies were students drawn to the most?

Review of the Literature

The Regression of Reading Motivation

Teachers across the country are faced with the difficult task of trying to motivate students to read (Melekoglu, 2011; Wood, Edwards, Hill-Miller & Vintinner, 2006). A decline in middle and high school students' motivation to read is likely due to increased academic expectations (Ivey, 1998). With these higher expectations and a major discrepancy between the types of texts students read in school versus the students' reading interests, motivation continues to fall. In addition, students who struggle with reading engage in the act less frequently and often avoid vocabulary-rich texts (DeStefano, 2017). Students who experience reading deficits are also more prone to have a negative attitude and low motivation to read (Melekoglu, 2011). In turn, it is imperative for teachers to ensure their literacy instruction provides students the opportunity to experience success in reading, and one way to accomplish this is through explicit vocabulary instruction. Explicit vocabulary instruction through authentic strategies can lead to a richer understanding of vocabulary, which helps students understand what they are reading (Chai & Welz, 2018; Ilter, 2019). As students experience success and view reading as a valuable activity, they are more likely to develop a deeper appreciation for the task, which can lead to an increase in intrinsic motivation (Gunter, 2012; Marinak 2013).

The Importance of Explicit Vocabulary Instruction

Vocabulary instruction can be considered one of the key components of literacy instruction (Marchand-Martella, Martella, Modderman, Petersen & Pan, 2013). Students with strong vocabularies are better able to analyze and comprehend a text (Ilter, 2019). On the other hand, limited vocabulary knowledge can lead to difficulties in reading comprehension (Leslie & Caldwell, 2011). Vocabulary strategies are a critical part of content-area instruction because a strong vocabulary can improve comprehension and support students' learning (Ilter, 2019). Effective teachers often prioritize and incorporate explicit vocabulary strategies in their classroom instruction as a way to set their students up for success in reading.

Vocabulary instruction for adolescent learners should be delivered through multiple modalities and should be explicitly taught (Harper, 2018; Marchand-Martella, et al., 2013). Effective vocabulary instruction may feature written and visual representation of vocabulary, repetition and review, and manipulation. During a study of a Universal Design for Learning (UDL) approach and its impact on vocabulary performance, UDL principles were used to create an intervention to develop students' background knowledge and vocabulary (Kennedy, Newman-Thomas, Meyer, Alves, & Wills-Lloyd, 2014). The students in this study who received the intervention acquired new vocabulary quicker than participants who did not receive any vocabulary intervention. Content Acquisition Podcasts (CAPs), which were created based on UDL principles and evidence-based methods, led the participating students to deeper understanding. The results demonstrated the importance of integrating the principles of UDL with evidence-based vocabulary practices to support students' ability to learn new vocabulary terms. Explicitly teaching vocabulary using a variety of strategies supports students' comprehension and has the potential to retain student engagement.

Theoretical Stance

Expectancy-Value Theory suggests there are many facets to consider when motivating students. A person who expects to be successful with an activity and values the activity will be more inclined to participate (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002; Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). Vocabulary instruction can help students become more successful readers, which may help students feel more confident in their reading ability. As a result, students who expect success with reading tasks and feel reading is a meaningful part of their lives will be motivated to read (Hancock, 1995).

Reading Achievement Influences Reading Motivation

Reading motivation strongly correlates to a student's reading comprehension ability (Guthrie et al., 2006). The more motivation one has to read supports a higher level of reading comprehension, whereas less motivation can negatively impact a student's reading comprehension. During Applegate and Applegate's (2010), "A Study of Thoughtful Literacy," students who were inclined to respond deeply and thoughtfully to text were considerably more motivated to read than students who were only successful in text-based comprehension. Although high achieving readers are often more motivated to read, there is still opportunity for struggling readers to make reading gains and increase their motivation. When struggling readers with learning disabilities (LD) and without learning disabilities improved their reading skills, their motivation to read was positively impacted (Melekoglu, 2011). The students without LD exhibited reading gains and improved their motivation scores from the start through the end of Melekoglu's study (2011). However, only the self-concept scores significantly increased (Pitcher et al., 2007). This is likely because, "as youth developed their reading skills, they started to think positively about their reading abilities, thus improving their Self-Concept as a reader" (Melekoglu, 2011, p. 256). The students with LD who participated in this study also experienced substantial increases in their reading achievement, yet there was not a significant change in their motivation to read over the course of the study. This is likely because students with LD face continuous problems with reading, which contributes to lower motivation. It is clear reading achievement can have a prominent impact on students' motivation to read (Applegate & Applegate, 2010; Guthrie et al., 2016). Students who are strong readers will likely see themselves as good readers, which will make the act of reading more enjoyable and motivating.

External Factors Influence Value of Reading

Reading achievement significantly impacts reading motivation, but also external factors can contribute to students' motivation (Gilson et al., 2018). If students improve their reading skills, but do not value reading in their lives, they are more likely to lack the motivation to read (Melekoglu, 2011). In Melekoglu's study (2011), both students with LD and students without LD improved their reading skills after they participated in an intervention program; however, the value of reading scores slightly declined for students with LD and only slightly improved for students without LD. This may be attributed to a lack of interest in the reading materials or other external factors. Additionally, in a study examining struggling adolescent readers and their motivation to read, factors such as the availability of books, the types of books available, and relationships with teachers and family members influenced students' motivation to read (Gilson et al., 2018). The students in Gilson et al.'s study (2018), who described teachers and relatives as supportive of their reading goals, were positively impacted from their nurturing experiences. This demonstrates the urgency for teachers and students to have purposeful conversations about books and the teacher's responsibility to provide access to quality literature. If teachers want to truly improve students' reading motivation, these relationships are essential.

Prioritizing Vocabulary Instruction

Explicit vocabulary instruction can support students' comprehension, and as such, it should be a priority to teach vocabulary (Ilter, 2019). There is not one right way to teach vocabulary, but rather, teachers should utilize a variety of strategies to support student engagement and learning (Chai & Welz, 2018). If strong vocabularies are associated with strong readers, and strong readers are more likely to be motivated to read, then vocabulary instruction cannot be overlooked, particularly in the high school literacy setting (Melekoglu, 2011). Explicit vocabulary instruction embedded within the study of literature has the potential to enhance reading motivation. The aim of this study was to further examine how explicit vocabulary instruction supports students' motivation to read.

Methodology

Context and Participants

This study took place in a public high school in Southwestern Ohio, which serves students in grades 9-12 in a suburban community. At the time of this study there were 2,722 students who attended this school, 51% female and 49% male (Ohio Department of Education, 2019). Approximately 75.5% of the students identified as White, 9.7% as Asian, 6.9% as Black, 4.6% as Multiracial, and 3.2% as Hispanic. In addition, 12.1% of the student population received free and reduced lunch, and 11.8% of the students received Special Education services. Administrative permission was obtained prior to the start of the study.

This study took place in a 10th grade standard English class. The English class was co-taught by an English teacher and an Intervention Specialist (Ms. Witt). There were 27 students in the class (18 males and 9 females). All study participants were native English speakers. All 27 students in the class were invited to participate, and parent consent forms and student assent forms were distributed before the start of the study. Twenty-one students (14 males and 7 females) were granted permission to participate and pseudonyms were used for all participants.

Focal Students At the start of the study, three focal students were selected based on their survey raw score on the Adolescent Motivation to Read Survey (AMRS; Pitcher et al., 2007). Additionally, Ms. Witt considered the students' willingness to engage in interviews throughout the study. The three students consisted of: a student who scored low, a student who scored average, and a student who scored high regarding their self-concept and value of reading. The focal students participated in the same activities as the entire class and did not receive any additional instructional support; however, they participated in both group and individual interviews throughout the study.

Focal Student, Tara. Tara's score on the pre-assessment AMRS indicated she had substantially low motivation to read at the beginning of the study. Tara was very social and outgoing, but she was also reserved during English class. She received support through an IEP for deficits in the areas of reading, writing, and mathematics. Tara often complained about reading and referred to most class reading assignments as "boring." Tara was also a creative student and she thoroughly enjoyed the opportunity to interact with her peers and make choices about her learning.

Focal Student, Ethan. Ethan's score on the AMRS revealed he had average motivation to read at the start of the study. Ethan loved sports and video games. He was usually quiet during English class and was often hesitant to share his ideas. Ethan also received IEP services for deficits in reading, writing, and mathematics. However, Ethan did not typically complain about reading and writing; instead, he maintained a nonchalant attitude. Ethan was a strong self-advocate and sought extra help if he struggled with challenging texts.

Focal Student, Spencer. Spencer's score on the AMRS showed he had remarkably high motivation to read at the start of the study. Spencer was one of the quietest students in the class and consistently performed high on all class reading assessments. He was a voracious reader and was often seen reading a book if there was free time at the end of the class period. Spencer's attitude toward reading was typically positive.

Materials

Throughout the research study, both quantitative and qualitative data tools were used to gather information regarding the impact of the four vocabulary strategies on students' motivation to read. The use of multiple tools provided a triangulation of data to better address the initial research questions (Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K., 2007). The following data tools were used: AMRS, teacher created exit surveys, semi-structured interviews with the focal students, and a teacher created questionnaire.

Adolescent Motivation to Read Survey

The AMRS was used as a quantitative pre- and post-assessment tool to provide insight into the participants' motivation to read at both the start and conclusion of the study (Pitcher et al., 2007). The survey has 20 total items based on a four-point rating scale (80 points in all). Ten of the statements assess self-concept, and the other ten assess value of reading. In addition, the data from this survey was used to select the focal students for the study who demonstrated low, average, and high reading motivation in their full survey raw score. The AMRS post-assessment data was used to determine if the vocabulary instruction provided during the study impacted the students' motivation to read.

Exit Surveys

A short exit survey was administered at the end of Weeks 2, 3, 4, and 5 to gauge the impact of the four explicitly taught vocabulary strategies. Although a new vocabulary strategy was introduced each week, the survey statements remained the same to keep the surveys brief, clear, and consistent (Cohen et al., 2007). The survey statements were designed to help determine the strategy's influence on students' desire to read and their interest in using the particular strategy. Likert-style scales of 1-5 were used for student responses (Cohen et al., 2007). The following statements were used in the exit survey:

- (1) This week's strategy helped me understand the play (*Julius Caesar*) better.
- (2) When I understand what I am reading, I am motivated to continue reading.
- (3) I would like to use this strategy again in the future.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Individual and small-group interviews took place throughout the six-week study with the three selected focal students. The individual student interviews were conducted during Week 1 of the study. Baseline questions were asked to assess how the students view themselves as readers. In addition, focal group interviews were conducted during Weeks 2, 3, 4, and 5. Discussion during group interviews was focused on the weekly vocabulary strategy and student perceptions of *Julius Caesar* thus far. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in order to allow the participants' responses to help guide the interviews (Cohen et al., 2007). Student responses during the interviews were transcribed, coded, and analyzed using open coding.

Questionnaire

In addition to the AMRS, all participants were given an open response questionnaire at the conclusion of the study. These questions included, "Do you think having a strong vocabulary makes you a better reader, why or why not?", "If you understand all of the words in a book you are reading, does this make reading more enjoyable? Why or why not?", and "Which vocabulary strategy did you like the best?" The open-ended questions provided valuable qualitative data and opportunities for the participants to share their opinions in an authentic manner (Cohen et al., 2007).

Procedures

This study took place over a six-week period during a unit on *Julius Caesar*, by Shakespeare. During Week 1, the AMRS was administered to the entire group and one-on-one interviews were conducted with the three focal students. Before the four vocabulary strategies were introduced to the class, the students completed a variety of activities to build their background knowledge prior to reading the play, led by the English teacher and Ms. Witt. During Weeks 2, 3, 4, and 5, the following four vocabulary strategies were introduced to the students and practiced throughout the week: Frayer Model, Possible Sentences, Cartoon Vocabulary, and Verbal & Visual Associations.

- For The Frayer Model strategy consisted of the following tasks: write the definition of the vocabulary word, write characteristics of the word (i.e., what comes to mind when you think of this word?) use the word in a sentence, and draw a visual representation of the word.
- The Possible Sentences strategy involved the participants writing the definition and then creating an original sentence for each vocabulary word.
- The Cartoon Vocabulary strategy required the participants to draw a cartoon to represent the vocabulary word's meaning, and then write a sentence (using the vocabulary word) to explain the cartoon.
- The Verbal & Visual Associations strategy required the participants to draw a visual representation of the word and to write a personal association (i.e., what does this word remind you of?).

Table 1. Breakdown of the Explicit Vocabulary Instruction Over 20 Minutes

0:00-5:00	5:00-15:00	15:00-20:00
Day 1: Ms. Witt modeled the weekly vocabulary strategy.	Ms. Witt introduced the words of the day via Google Slides. Then, the students completed the Frayer Model/Possible Sentences/Cartoon Vocabulary/Verbal & Visual Associations worksheet. Support and additional cues were provided as needed.	The students had the opportunity to share their work with a partner and then shared as a whole class.

Throughout the study, the vocabulary instruction took place during the first 20 minutes of a 55-minute class period, as referenced in Table 1. During this time, one of the four vocabulary strategies was introduced and two to three vocabulary words were selected from Julius Caesar and applied to the particular strategy. Ms. Witt and the English teacher carefully selected vocabulary words upon examining and discussing the play together. The students then spent the remainder of the class period reading the play together and reviewing the vocabulary words in the context of the play.

Results

Adolescent Motivation to Read Survey

Self-Concept Results

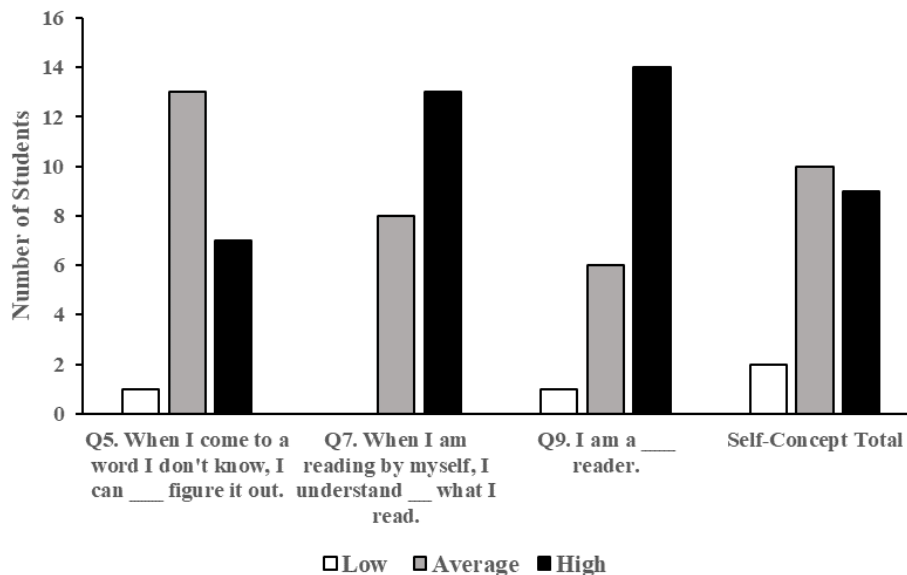


Figure 1. Pre-Assessment: Adolescent Motivation to Read Survey Results (Self-Concept).

The majority of the participants displayed average self-concept on the pre-assessment at the start of the study, as noted in Figure 1. In response to Question 5, 13 students said they can sometimes figure out a word they do not know when they are reading, and seven students said they almost always figure it out. However, when the participants were asked about their understanding of what they read in Question 7, their self-concept was much higher. When reviewing the results of Question 7 in the pre-assessment, it is evident the students had more confidence in their ability to comprehend what they read independently compared to their ability to figure out the meaning of an unknown word. Furthermore, only seven students indicated they can almost always figure out an unknown word, yet 14 students considered themselves to be good readers, as shown by their responses on Question 9 of the pre-assessment. It was clear the students’ beliefs about their reading skills were influenced by more than their ability to determine the meaning of unknown words.

According to the post-assessment results in Figure 2, more students displayed a high self-concept in comparison to the start of the study. In response to Question 5, nine students said they almost always figure out the meaning

of an unknown word, which was a slight improvement from the pre-assessment. This implies the four explicit vocabulary strategies improved the students' confidence in determining unknown words while they were reading. When looking at Question 7 of the post-assessment, the results were identical to the pre-assessment. It is possible these results did not change because the students were focused on reading *Julius Caesar*, rather than being provided additional time to read independently. Although there were not drastic changes in the self-concept category from the pre-assessment to the post-assessment, there were positive trends in the data.

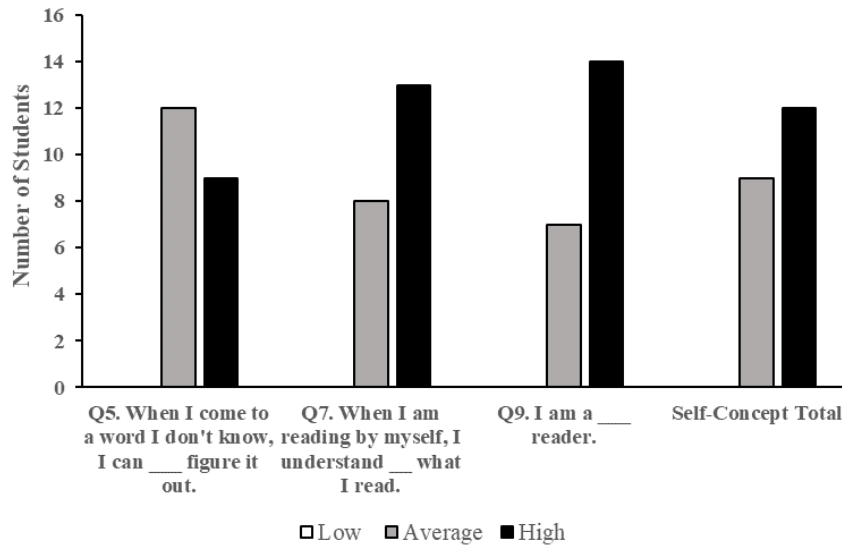


Figure 2. Post-Assessment: Adolescent Motivation to Read Survey Results (Self-Concept)

Value of Reading Results

The value of reading pre-assessment results in Figure 3 revealed a bleak image regarding the students' appreciation of reading in great contrast to their self-concept. In response to Question 2, only one student said he/she liked to read a book often. Yet on Question 14, five students said reading was an interesting or a great way to spend time. In addition, when looking at the responses of Question 16, 12 students said they would spend no time or very little of their time reading as an adult. Again, this raises the question, if some students thought reading was a great way to spend time, why did they not envision a future where reading was a regular part of their lives? Furthermore, more students had a low value of reading than a low self-concept, which showed even if students believed they had adequate reading abilities, it did not mean they would value reading in their everyday lives.

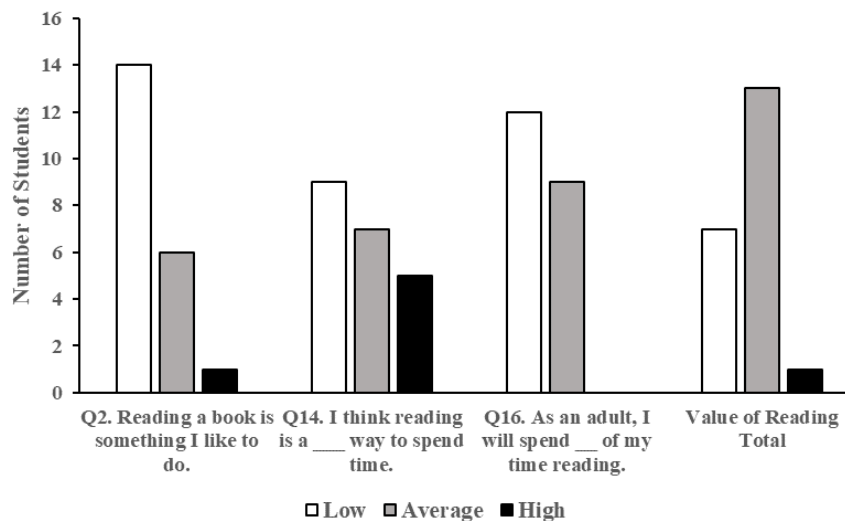


Figure 3. Pre-Assessment: Adolescent Motivation to Read Survey Results (Value of Reading)

Regarding the value of reading post-assessment results in Figure 4, Question 2 showed the students responded in a more positive manner when asked if reading a book is something they liked to do. This trend in the data implied the vocabulary strategies introduced helped make reading more motivating for the students. In turn, this resulted in an increase of positive attitudes toward reading overall. In response to Question 16, there was also an increase in the number of students who said they would spend some/a lot of their time reading as an adult, which indicated the students began to experience the value of reading outside of the school setting. At the conclusion of the study, both the self-concept and value of reading categories displayed positive trends in the data, albeit a slight increase. The contrast of results at the end of the study remained stark, as the value of reading overall scores were significantly lower than the self-concept overall scores.

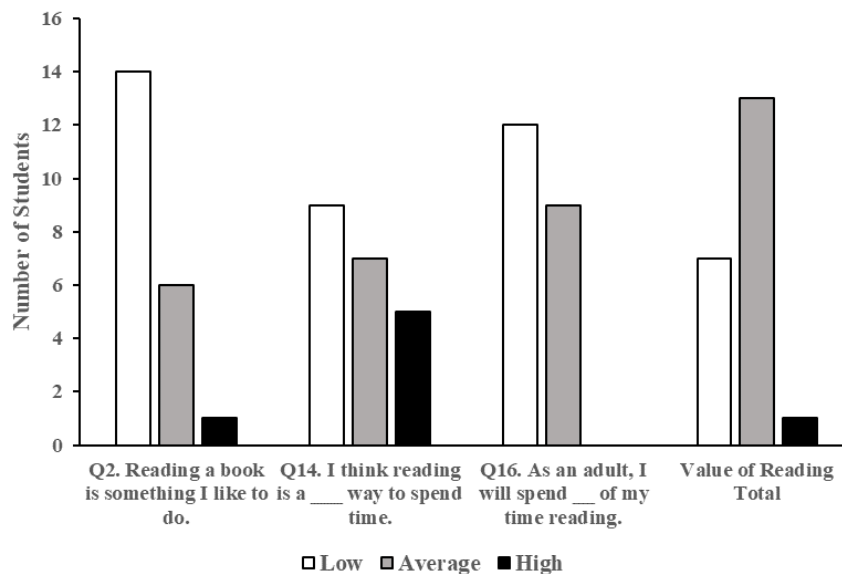


Figure 4. Post-Assessment: Adolescent Motivation to Read Survey Results (Value of Reading)

Exit Survey Results

The first statement on the exit survey, “This week’s strategy helped me understand the play better,” was used to examine the impact of the four explicitly taught vocabulary strategies on the students’ overall comprehension of the play, *Julius Caesar*, as seen in Figure 5. The results of this statement were mostly unchanged at the end of Weeks 2, 3, 4, and 5, with roughly half of the participants agreeing or strongly agreeing, and very few participants disagreeing or strongly disagreeing. During Week 4, the highest number of students strongly agreed with the statement, signifying the Cartoon Vocabulary strategy had been the favorite instructional strategy for the students in this study. The students elaborated about their favorite in their interviews and questionnaires.

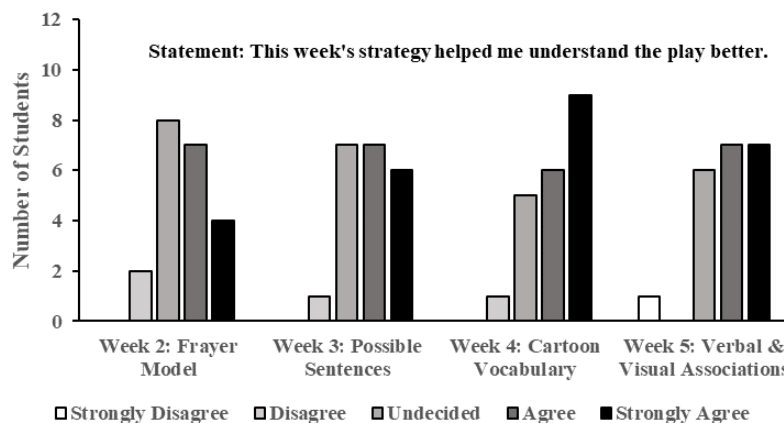


Figure 5. Exit Survey Results: Statement 1

Figure 6 displayed data from the second statement on the exit survey, “When I understand what I am reading, I am motivated to continue reading.” This statement was used to monitor the students’ motivation to read the play. Again, the results of this statement were consistent from week to week. Many of the participants agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, and none of the participants strongly disagreed with the statement. This indicated a strong correlation between comprehension and motivation; i.e., when students understood what they were reading, they were more motivated to engage in the practice of reading.

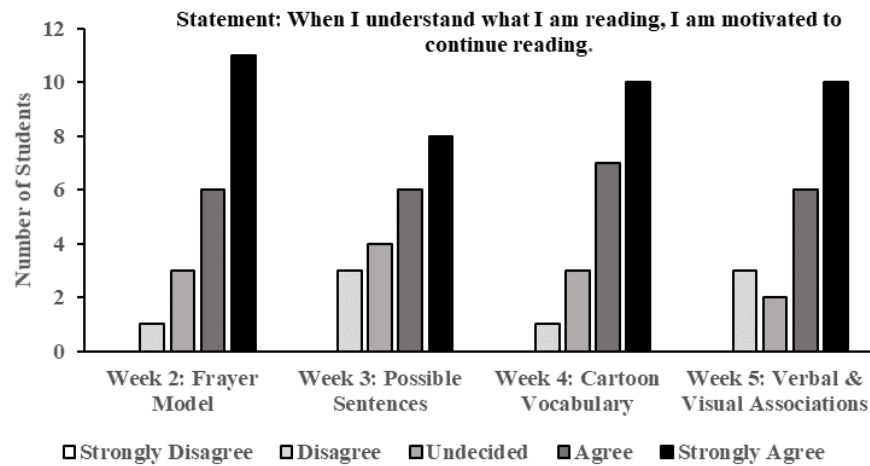


Figure 6. Exit Survey Results: Statement 2

The final statement results were shown in Figure 7. The statement, “I would like to use this strategy again in the future” was used to provide insight into the students’ engagement with each of the four vocabulary strategies. The responses from Weeks 2 and 5 were similar, with several students disagreeing with the statement. The responses for Week 3 and 4 were the most positive, with over half of the participants agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement. This suggested the Possible Sentences and Cartoon Vocabulary strategies were more engaging than the Frayer Model and Verbal & Visual Associations strategies. This showed how motivation in adolescents may be linked to their specific likes and dislikes. Interestingly, the results of Statement 1 revealed the Cartoon Vocabulary strategy had the greatest impact on helping the students understand the play, and it was also enjoyed the most. From the results of the weekly exit surveys, there was a clear connection between the students’ understanding of the play and their motivation to dive deeper into the unfamiliar texts.

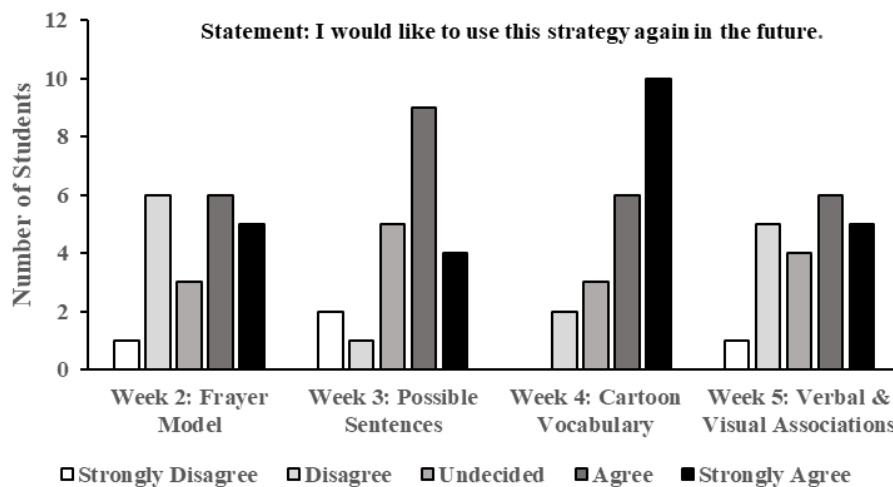


Figure 7. Exit Survey Results: Statement 3

Interview Results

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the focal students during Weeks 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 of the study. The interviews helped to frame a better understanding of the students' reading motivation and their opinions of the four explicit vocabulary strategies introduced during the study. All participants had built rapport with Ms. Witt for several months prior to the start of the study. This helped to ensure the focal students felt at ease in speaking freely. During the Week 1 individual interviews, the students discussed how their ability to *understand words in a text* strongly influenced their beliefs as readers. Tara explained, "I've always been lower, so like there's big words I can't pronounce, so I just skip over them and laugh about it." In addition, Ethan remarked, "Like there's words I may not know, so like I might not be able to pronounce it, but like I can read pretty well." The students' ability to decipher difficult vocabulary words impacted their own self-perceptions as a reader. Consequently, their ability to understand what they read also influenced their enjoyment of reading. When Tara was asked if understanding words in a text made reading more enjoyable, she responded, "Yeah, because I don't feel stupid." Ethan also stated, "I am not really the person who likes to read, so like if I understand a book really well, it kind of makes me look at it differently." The data revealed a connection between an understanding of vocabulary words and finding reading as a pleasurable activity.

During the semi-structured group interviews, the students also talked about enjoying a vocabulary strategy if they thought it was "fun" to use. When discussing the Possible Sentences strategy, Tara said she liked creating sentences for the vocabulary words "because I can make them funny." Tara also enjoyed the Cartoon Vocabulary strategy because she loved drawing. Tara explained, "Doing drawing for vocab words really helps me." She also said this strategy provided her with the "freedom to choose" what she wanted to draw. On the other hand, the focal students did not enjoy using a vocabulary strategy if they perceived it as boring or time consuming. While the explanations of what constituted the strategies as "boring" were inconsistent, Spencer proclaimed he did not like Verbal & Visual Associations strategy because, "It was kind of boring. I felt like it was the same as the circle one [Frayer Model]." Tara also expressed a similar dislike of the Verbal & Visual Associations strategy. She declared, "I didn't like it. It wasn't fun. There wasn't enough space to draw." The students were more engaged in vocabulary strategies they perceived as fun and tied into their personal interests, such as humor and artistic expression.

An unexpected finding from the study was the focal students' adamant preference for vocabulary strategies they felt were easy and simple to use. The students were hyper focused on the layout of each strategy, particularly when there were several open spaces they were asked to fill. Ethan did not like the Verbal & Visual Associations strategy because he thought "there were too many boxes... it was too cluttered." He further explained, "[I wish] it was like last week's strategy [Cartoon Vocabulary], with less boxes and more space." The amount of perceived time and effort to complete a task was indicative of the students' likes and dislikes. Spencer enjoyed the Possible Sentences strategy because he thought it was, "faster and more efficient." Tara also thought the Possible Sentences strategy was, "more organized and simpler to understand." Moreover, Ethan appreciated the Cartoon Vocabulary strategy because, "it was broken down into different sections" and Spencer noted, "it was pretty simple and we could work through it quickly." The students' perception of the simplicity of each strategy determined how much they enjoyed the task and their willingness to participate.

Questionnaire Results

At the conclusion of the study, the students were asked to answer three questions on a qualitative open-ended questionnaire. When asked, "Do you think having a strong vocabulary makes you a better reader, why or why not?" 20 of the 21 students responded yes, and one had a neutral response. Many of the students who responded yes believed having a strong vocabulary helped them understand what they were reading. Justin wrote, "Yes, because if you don't know many words you won't know what you are reading and will be less motivated to read." Similarly, Zane reflected, "Yes, because then you can understand what you're reading better so you're not confused. It also makes you a smarter person by having a wide range of vocabulary." Maria replied, "I think having a strong vocabulary makes you a better reader because understanding certain words makes whatever you're reading easier to understand." The students associated building a strong vocabulary with improved reading comprehension.

The next question asked, “If you understand all of the words in a book you are reading, does this make reading more enjoyable, why or why not?” Of the 21 students, 16 students responded yes, four students responded no, and one student had a neutral response. Several students who answered yes explained when they understood what they were reading, it was more enjoyable because their reading was more fluid, without the interruptions or stopping because of an unfamiliar word. Grant mentioned, “Yes, it does make the reading better because you understand exactly what the writer is trying to say.” Maria also revealed, “Absolutely, because you know what’s happening in the story.” On the contrary, a few students noted when they understood everything they were reading, they experienced boredom. Elliot explained, “No, because I like to learn and if I know all the words then it is too easy,” while Nick stated, “No, because you are not pushing yourself. The reading will get boring because you are hardly trying.”

The final question asked, “Which vocabulary strategy did you like the best?” The responses were varied: four students listed the Frayer Model, four students listed Possible Sentences, seven students listed Cartoon Vocabulary, four students listed Verbal and Visual Associations, and two students said they did not have a favorite strategy. Some students chose the Frayer Model because they felt it had a simpler layout, which made it less intimidating and easier to complete. Others preferred Possible Sentences because it helped students to “really see what manner to use the word in” and “to understand what the word was and how it could fit in a sentence.” Many students chose the Cartoon Vocabulary strategy as their favorite because they felt it provided them with a chance to use their creativity and deemed this strategy as “fun.” Reagan wrote, “I liked the cartoon the best because I got to use my imagination to create a cartoon to help me understand the word,” and Brandon affirmed, “Cartoon, I believe making a visual representation is easier to understand, and more enjoyable.” Although the Verbal and Visual Associations strategy was not as popular as Cartoon Vocabulary, a few students linked using personal and visual associations to learning vocabulary words. For instance, Alex explained, “I learn best when I can see a visual.” Paul felt similarly by noting, “It helped me remember it better because of the pictures.” Even though the students had clear preferences, they appreciated the access they were given to a variety of strategies. The students embraced the opportunity to be creative and use strategies which they felt were simple to understand and complete.

Discussion

This research study sought to answer three questions regarding the impact of vocabulary instruction on adolescent students’ motivation to read. Another goal of the study was to explore how to better support students’ engagement during vocabulary instruction, and how explicit vocabulary strategies impacted students’ motivation and engagement to read. Three trends became apparent at the conclusion at the study and indeed the students were impacted by the vocabulary strategies presented.

Vocabulary Strategies Can Positively Support Understanding and Enjoyment of Reading

Many adolescent students may not be motivated to read because they do not view themselves as strong readers, and as such they may not think reading is a pleasurable activity (Applegate & Applegate, 2010; Guthrie et al., 2006). Often, students do not see themselves as strong readers because they encounter “big words they can’t pronounce.” When students struggle to understand challenging words in a text, their comprehension is negatively impacted (Ilter, 2019). When the participants were asked if having a strong vocabulary made them a better reader, the majority of students indicated if they had a strong vocabulary, they might see themselves as better readers. Tara declared, “Yes, having a better vocab makes me feel smarter! And understand what I am reading more.” It was clear the participants believed in a correlation between a strong vocabulary and the ability to successfully understand what they were reading. This belief was also evidenced on the exit surveys. Every week more than half of the students said the strategies helped them to understand the play better. The vocabulary strategies provided gave the students agency to participate and understand the play. While strictly relying on vocabulary strategies alone was not suitable, it provided a powerful tool for the students to comprehend the play *Julius Caesar*.

For reading to be enjoyable, the students needed to feel they had an adequate understanding of what they were reading. Although, students’ perception of “understanding” was varied and inconsistent, their beliefs as readers were supported by the vocabulary strategies implemented in the study. Ethan was asked if reading became more enjoyable when he understood what he was reading, he responded, “Yes. Because I am not really the person who likes to read, so like if I understand a book really well, it kind of makes me look at it differently.” Most of the

participants agreed there was a correlation between understanding and enjoyment. Madison affirmed, “When I understand everything I’m reading, it is more enjoyable because I don’t have to stop my train of thought and look up a word.” When students understood and enjoyed what they were reading, this led to greater motivation to read (Applegate & Applegate, 2010; Melekoglu, 2011). In addition, the data acquired from the AMRS (Pitcher et al., 2007) revealed there was an overall improvement in self-concept at the end of the study, as well as more students with a high value of reading. Although there were not extreme changes in the data from the pre-assessment to the post-assessment, the positive trends suggested the vocabulary instruction provided during the study positively influenced the students’ motivation to read and engage with the play.

Student Engagement Is Dependent on Freedom to Show Creativity

Vocabulary instruction has the potential to enhance students’ motivation to read, thus it is crucial for teachers to utilize engaging vocabulary strategies with adolescent learners (Harper, 2018). During this study, four strategies were explicitly taught to introduce vocabulary words from *Julius Caesar*: Frayer Model, Possible Sentences, Cartoon Vocabulary, and Verbal & Visual Associations. According to the students’ responses on the third statement of the exit survey, the Cartoon Vocabulary strategy was enjoyed the most by the participants, followed by the Possible Sentences strategy. These strategies gave the students the freedom to be creative; the students were able to create a cartoon to represent the meaning of the word using the Cartoon Vocabulary strategy, and they were able to use the vocabulary word in an original sentence using the Possible Sentences strategy. Throughout the study, students elaborated and explained why they preferred these specific strategies. The students identified they valued the freedom to draw and write what they wanted, “I like having more freedom to choose” (Tara). Additionally, Justin explained, “I liked the cartoon strategy because it helped me learn the word just as well as the others, but drawing is more fun.” While the other strategies, Frayer Model and Verbal & Visual Associations, were not as engaging for the students because they were perceived as “boring” and “not fun” (Tara and Spencer). The students in the study truly thrived when offered many modalities to present their understanding and ideas.

Simplicity Influences Student Engagement/Disengagement

When analyzing the data, it became clear the students valued strategies with simple layouts or what they perceived as simple and quick to accomplish. The focal students shared regarding the Possible Sentences strategy, “This one is more organized and simpler to understand” (Tara). Moreover, similar remarks were made when the focal students explained what they liked about the Cartoon Vocabulary strategy. Ethan expressed, “I liked how it was broken down into different sections,” and Spencer reiterated, “I liked how it was pretty simple and we could work through it quickly.” The students liked when a strategy was simple because they were able to work through it with more ease, and it was easier to understand. Although the students were unable to clearly express why a task felt more “simple,” the students’ responses implied they equated simplicity with decreased time to complete a task or activity. Their perception of time and effort put forth deeply affected their perseverance throughout the study. Interestingly, even though the Frayer Model strategy was not as popular as Cartoon Vocabulary and Possible Sentences, some students preferred it because they believed it was “easy to use.” Allie’s response on the third question of the questionnaire highlights this perception. She noted the Frayer Model was her favorite strategy because “it made sense and was easy.” Ella also preferred the Frayer Model because “there was the least number of things for my brain to process.” Although the students enjoyed using different strategies, simplicity was a predominant reason for their preference. When the focal students discussed their dislike for a strategy, their explanations again alluded to a task they felt was not simple to complete. Ethan and Tara both said they did not like the Verbal & Visual Associations strategy because it was too “cluttered.” If educators strive to use creative and simple vocabulary strategies, there is potential for retaining student engagement (Harper, 2018). The only missing component is what precisely adolescent literacy learners deem is “creative and simple.”

Conclusion

Teachers often feel like they are in a losing battle when trying to motivate seemingly *unmotivated* students to read. Reading is an essential part of education, and an important part of life. A great book can bring happiness, incite laughter, inspire change, and spark new ideas. Reading is also a way to bring people together and foster a sense of community, which can prove to be difficult in today’s time with the constant influx of new technology. Many teachers may fear their students’ motivation to read will dissipate altogether in the upper grades... but there

is hope. When teachers utilize vocabulary strategies to help their students become better readers, the impact can go far beyond building confidence and motivation. This study proposes the question, how can teachers provide these crucial vocabulary instructional strategies but manage to present them in an engaging way? As teachers introduce new challenges in the classroom, more focus should be placed on the way the tasks are perceived by the students as well as the risks students need to take to grow as learners. Perhaps the opportunity for creativity and the ease of the task are the keys to cultivating student motivation. When teachers achieve this balance in the classroom, students can revel in the joys of reading and share the experiences with their friends and family. Although the simple task of enjoying a good book can seem minute and unimportant at the surface level, it may be the impetus for creating life-long readers. Ethan reflected, "I like those [books] because they kind of lighten the mood. It makes it better because you can sit down with a group of people, no matter how old you are, and still enjoy them."

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