

**Context and Constructivism: Bridging Vocabulary, Critical Thinking,  
and Lifelong Learning**

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The supervisory committee met with the candidate for a final evaluation in which all aspects of the candidate's program were reviewed. The committee's assessment and recommendations are:

Recommendations:

- ✓ Degree should be awarded

Recommendations:

- ✓ Exit Requirement has been approved
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## **Chapter 1: Philosophy of Education**

### **Connections to My Personal Academic History**

Growing up twenty minutes from the Mexican border in San Diego, California, I recognized the value in learning another language from an early age. Spanish was something I experienced in everyday life growing up, whether it was spoken by friends, neighbors, heard in commercials, or even from my own family members with Mexican ties. The Baja California culture commingled with San Diego culture, and it was simply a part of life—cultural translanguaging in a truly authentic form. During my time in secondary school, students were allowed to enroll in Spanish classes beginning at grade seven, and I jumped at the opportunity to better understand and participate in the rich Mexican community around me. Spanish quickly became my favorite class, and I took it for all four years at Grossmont High School in El Cajon, CA, and even for two additional years at the university level.

To some, a lanky, Caucasian teenager of German descent may be an atypical example of a high achieving Spanish student, but learning another language had unlocked something within me that felt hard to articulate until this MAT program. Whether this was finding enjoyment in the “puzzlelike nature of learning languages” (p 19) as noted by Bailey in her 1996 study on successful language learning histories, or being able to instantly apply these lessons outside the classroom, learning a language was something that was useful, enjoyable, and challenging—all elements of fulfilling education that mutually support each other. Bailey (1996) elaborates on the value of this connection and its influence on the educators in her study, noting that:

“When teachers focus on language skills perceived as useful and relevant by students, they support students' intrinsic motivation. In our data, materials and assignments that

required creativity and emphasized multiple skills were often recalled as having perpetuated the students' desire to learn the language” (p 19).

In other words, being able to utilize practical, skill-based lessons with a variety of mediums beyond traditional quizzes, tests, and lectures seemed to be the combination of classroom elements that resonated with me most, and is one of my favorite parts of building my own pedagogy today.

To allow these creative opportunities for learning and growth, one of the consistencies across the language department at Grossmont High School was that teachers maintained high levels of rigor, or strictness, when viewed from the students’ perspectives. The teacher who I had for all four years of high school, Señora Bates, was viewed by many of my peers as being the firmest of them all. She was quite divisive on campus as far as whether or not she was a ‘good teacher,’ since many high school students judged their teachers based on personability, however, as Bailey states, “these strict teachers were sometimes remembered as inspiring their students to work hard or achieve more than did the pleasant teachers” (Bailey et. al, 1996, p 16). Señora Bates embodied this, as she excelled at enforcing guidelines and appropriate, high expectations in the classroom. It was through this disciplined approach that my classmates and I were able to become successful emergent bilinguals ourselves. She established firm rules early and set the precedent for all four years of my Spanish studies, and once my classmates and I understood the baseline of how to work within her structure, she was able to form strong relationships with us and provide creative ways for my classmates and I to practice the language. Some of my favorite methods in learning were songs, performance based projects, and the ever-popular and intense “Mata la Mosca” vocabulary game, where students would slap the appropriate definition on the board with a fly swatter. Beyond getting a good grade or having fun presenting a made-up

product in Spanish with my friends, gaining the knowledge itself and creating lifelong language skills was likely the reason why I look back on the class so fondly.

When reflecting back on the whole of my personal academic journey, these classes and teacher were what stuck out to me—not English Language Arts (the class I currently teach) or video production (my undergraduate degree). The way in which this subject was taught, and the way I was able to actually apply it to real life scenarios made me realize the things that I valued most in my own education, and the core values that inspire me as a teacher. Not only do I want to provide students from all backgrounds and abilities valuable skills, strategies, and creative ways for them to demonstrate them, but inspire students to immediately take those classroom ideas and implement them into their own communities or careers. Señora Bates instilled a curiosity and hunger for knowledge within her students, providing them with tools to be lifelong learners, and this is something that I wish to channel as well.

In Tillamook, OR, where I currently teach English Language Arts at Tillamook High School, there are a lot of opportunities to achieve this goal in the classroom since writing and reading comprehension are essential skills across all subjects, in addition to the actual content of books I teach and lessons I could curate. Beyond that, I can relate what we learn to each student's longer term goals, whether academic or professional, as communication and critical thinking ability affects both. Many students within the Tillamook community will likely not attend college, and opt for the workforce instead, and their meager 37% college going rate comes in 16% lower than the state average (*ODE Report Card - THS*). When lesson planning and trying to relate my own class to better suit these students, it can be a challenge to maintain relevancy and ensure that my lessons can be purposeful within each of their own paths. However, the one standard that I believe can align them all, one that I have actually found my own students

perform poorly on, is being able to discern vocabulary words in context: the CCSS RL.4 standard. Whether my students graduate and work at the Tillamook Creamery or pursue a degree at a university, each of them will be faced with terminology and jargon in their own respective fields, and many of them who are already in the local workforce interact with specialized vocabulary daily. This crossover could not only help students understand the importance of literacy, but boost their grades in other classes, their critical thinking skills, and inspire them to develop a love for learning new information.

Thinking back on my own Spanish experience, similar to that of any language learner, vocabulary acquisition and being able to figure out words in context was a vital skill for being able to communicate and comprehend discussions, and unlocking the puzzle of language was something that I looked forward to doing. By focusing on the CCSS RL.4 standard specifically, defined as “Determin[ing] the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text” (*ELA 9-10 Standards—Common Core State Standards Initiative*), I can better equip students to understand how to utilize context clues to figure out definitions in any scenario. I had over time noticed students’ challenges in vocabulary acquisition and using context clues, and am curious if a stronger focus on this standard would boost engagement in other areas, especially if there was more buy-in from the students to bring in terminology from their own lives. Additionally, this standard has a profound importance for English learners, a growing population in Tillamook and one that I am passionate about serving. As Oxford and Scarella (1994) note in Zarfsaz and Yeganehpour (2021), “Effective communication, according to researchers, is dependent on vocabulary, which is one of the most critical aspects of language” (p. 25). In short, Zarfsaz and Yeganehpour (2021) expand on this idea by emphasizing the role of context in vocabulary development, explaining that “As a result of focusing solely on the native language equivalent of

vocabulary, learners cannot comprehend authentic communication or use the words for practical purposes” (p. 27). What the others are saying is that without contextualizing words within the broader scope of a subject, or providing students with the strategies and instruction to do so, teachers risk limiting both academic and cognitive growth.

Beyond supporting all of my own students in meeting this standard for academic purposes, the focus on contextual vocabulary should concern all educators as it impacts learning across all subjects, and learning beyond the classroom. This action research project is centered around these goals, focusing first on inspiring students to bring in content-specific terminology from their own lives, and following that up with a more academic approach that tests these contextual skills. The research analyzes how understanding content-specific language and applying critical thinking through contextual analysis can not only strengthen comprehension, but foster confidence in problem-solving situations. As a result, I am to build the innate sense of curiosity that I had in my early Spanish classes, and inspire my students to search for context and define the unknown in any situation.

### **My Pedagogical Approach: Constructivist Learning Theory**

Within the classroom itself, my favorite and most natural way to create a comfortable, fair, and positive learning environment is to facilitate open discussions by simply being myself. I am a genuine, transparent person, and try my best to not make any adjustments to my overall personality when I am teaching, although this may be an impossible goal. I am clear with my students that I am learning just like them, and to show me the same patience and grace that I give to them. Leading by example and showing students to be their true selves, to ask questions when they are unsure, and to own up to and be accountable for mistakes comes naturally to me, and I want my students to know and believe that I would not ask them to do something that I myself

have not or would not do or that would not be valuable for them to learn. As a student or member of any team, I always felt more of a connection to teachers, coaches, or bosses who were ‘in the trenches’ with us, practicing with us or making efforts to demonstrate that what we were learning was truly useful and worthwhile. I personally always disliked leaders who gave the sense that they were above something, or gave the impression that what the team was doing was not significant or important enough for them to spend their own time and effort on. I make it clear to students that all of my lessons are things I think they should know in addition to the school, and the buy-in increases if I actually believe in what I am teaching.

This approach, a sort of all-in-this-together or captain with its ship way of thinking, is somewhat similar to Grace Lee Boggs’ ideas about teaching from the ‘bottom-up,’ rather than a traditional ‘top-down’ approach from teacher onto student. Boggs notes the ineffectiveness of this hierarchical, power hungry approach, saying, “The movements of the sixties, I noted, were led mostly by men coming out of a patriarchal culture. So there was a lot of top-down vertical leadership... There was a lot of competition for leadership, a lot of militarism” (Boggs, 2012, p.108). In other words, by not allowing other voices to be heard, or simply flexing power onto the students for the sake of authority and control, teachers create an ineffective, militaristic, and archaic teaching style that absolutely has roots in a patriarchal culture.

The emphasis on the collective classroom experience and communal learning is also discussed by bell hooks (1994) in her book *Teaching to Transgress*. She addresses her own teachers and how they neglected to foster her spark for education, and limited the ability for her and her peers to have meaningful discussions. Referring to strict teaching guidelines as “Bourgeois values,” she writes how “students are often silenced by means of their acceptance of class values that teach them to maintain order at all costs. When the obsession with maintaining

order is coupled with the fear of ‘losing face,’ of not being thought well of by one’s professor and peers, all possibility of constructive dialogue is undermined” (hooks, 1994, p.178-179).

What hooks is saying is that the teacher must maintain this delicate balance, as Señora Bates did for me, by instilling firm guidelines, pushing students to become their best, and supporting students with assignments that they are interested in and can express themselves creatively.

Although their philosophies may not explicitly mention it, these visionary thinkers both align with the principles of the constructivism learning theory, a pedagogy that focuses on the students’ own connections and self-generated meaning through experience. Ador et al. (2022) define the theory as such; “The basic premise of constructivist theory is that people are said to learn when they have gained experience from what they learn. That is, people create their own meaning through experience” (pp 93-94). In other words, Boggs and hooks both advocated for teachers to incorporate students’ lived experiences to inform their instruction, and constructivism is both equitable as it is practical. The lived experiences of students within our rural community, whether White or Hispanic, poor or employed, have taught them plenty beyond my classroom walls, and the same ideals of learning through living should be utilized in school.

This is especially so when it comes to explicit vocabulary instruction, as constructivism theory already has a massive influence on the way that it is taught and subsequently acquired. When studying vocabulary, students bring in words they have previously learned, phrases they may be familiar with, or technical jargon that they know and can relate to what is being taught. Even in a simple graphic organizer like a Frayer model, where the teacher will guide students through the process of defining, diagramming, and relating a given word based on what they know about it, students lead the learning process and build their own connections based on experience. Together alongside their peers, students are able to create the information relevant to

the lesson, rather than simply receive it. The students have buy-in to the lesson as a group, are engaged, and are seeing in real-time how to define a word that many of them may be wondering about already. In Ador et al.'s 2022 study on using constructivism to enhance vocabulary acquisition, they found that "The findings of [their] study can be used in teaching Adjectives which has a significant role in building the learners vocabulary acquisition and attitude toward conversation" (p 96). What this means is that by changing students' perceptions of what vocabulary can do, and how they already are well equipped to study it, they can understand language learning through a lens of mastery and relate it to things beyond the classroom.

### **Connection to InTASC Standards**

My own teaching goals to help bridge this gap include improving my own students' performance in the RL.4 standard through authentic, choice-driven, focused experiences to help them build their contextual skills. As a result of this improvement, students will grow their critical thinking and independence by not only integrating more robust vocabularies into their writing, but become better at analyzing written works and growing in other subject areas. Ultimately, I wish to foster a classroom environment where students are comfortable and equipped to be self-sufficient, adaptable, inquisitive, and career ready. Through assignments and assessments aligned with constructivism learning, students will be able to draw on their own lived experiences to relate, reflect, and analyze a multitude of texts from a variety of diverse writers.

For the InTASC standards themselves, I believe that the Content Standards 4 and 5 are the most applicable to these goals, since they emphasize applying knowledge through critical thinking and problem solving. Standard 4 highlights the importance of making content accessible, meaningful, and useful, which reflects my pedagogy as well as the end goal of

improving the RL.4 standard. Vocabulary acquisition through context requires more than memorized definitions, and it is on me as the teacher to provide modeling and guidance to allow students to build those connections themselves. Standard 5 completes this goal by encouraging students to utilize these skills interdisciplinary in other areas. Once students have made the connections and understood the content via standard 4, they can then utilize what they have learned beyond my own classroom and apply it to other avenues.

I strongly believe that through teaching this standard with a constructivism approach, students can unlock cognitive potential in more areas beyond ELA. Vocabulary skills can create opportunities for success in every aspect of academic and professional life, and I want to transform my own instruction from memorization and top-down teaching to relate to and empower students to apply the puzzle-solving skills that I loved about language acquisition.

### **Summary**

Although it has felt like a lifetime already, it is hard to believe that I have only been teaching in a classroom for only two full years. If my evolution as a teacher has shown me anything in this small amount of time, it is that there will always be something new to learn, and always something that can be improved upon. When considering this growth mindset, John Dewey (2001), an original advocate for constructivism, emphasizes that “since growth is the characteristic of life, education is all one with growing; it has no end beyond itself” (Dewey, 2001 p. 57), a perspective that perfectly encapsulates the long, limitless path that we have begun to take as young teachers. If I am able to articulate to my students the importance of learning and taking aspects from one thing and applying them to another, then they will be better equipped to take on their own paths. A true pedagogical philosophy that is authentic to learning should not be created with an end goal in sight, but rather the never ending accumulation of knowledge and

growth. This concept is what will directly influence my action research, through applying constructivist practices to inspire students to participate in learning, and subsequently putting that learning into practice by testing their ability to remain curious and search for context.

Growing as a professional in any field is not linear, and as a teacher this growth mentality and thirst for knowledge is the core tenet I will remember for myself and look to instill in all of my students.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

### **Definitions and Applications of Constructivist Learning Theory**

Bada (2015) examines the foundational principles of constructivist learning theory and summarizes that constructivism and the Constructivist Learning Approach provides an effective framework for teaching and learning, especially in the modern world. Bada clarifies and breaks down the role of teachers and learners within the constructivist definition and explains how and why constructivism closely aligns with the educational goals of today. In summary, he advocates for the students to be the active creators of knowledge and for teachers to be the facilitators. This article interprets, reviews, and synthesizes literature pertaining to educational psychology and pedagogy, based heavily around the early research and findings from constructivism pioneers Piaget (1980) and Vygotsky (1962). The theoretical lens and framework of this article, as one could assume, was entirely constructivist theory. In particular, it emphasized the different traits within both cognitive constructivism and social constructivism, and the importance of using each when applying the theory. Bada consolidates their sources and others into a series of easily understandable bulleted lists, highlighted by the four basic characteristics of constructivist environments, the seven goals of constructivist environments, the seven overall benefits of constructivism, and the 12 principles of constructivism.

This article gave me my baseline knowledge of constructivism and was entirely essential to my understanding of the theory. Not only were the bulleted lists and straightforward language helpful, but the article was filled with powerful lines that explained the theory perfectly. Among the many that stuck out, Bada summarizes constructivism best on page 70, writing, “To date, a focus on student-centered learning may well be the most important contribution of constructivism” (Bada, 2015, p. 70). Especially as I am new to the pedagogical world, articles

written in this way that are easily laid out and verbalized, while providing tangible steps and ideas to focus on, are some of the most valuable pieces of literature to inform my early studies and pedagogical formation.

Zarfsaz & Yeganehpour (2021) look to examine the role that context plays in acquiring vocabulary, and argue that the key to vocabulary instruction must be that it is intentional, contextualized, and consistent. Zarfsaz & Yeganehpour analyze a Turkish study to “see how context levels, word occurrence rates, and the combination of these variables affected the understanding and retention of unfamiliar words” (Zarfsaz & Yeganehpour, 2021, p. 24), and emphasize the importance of connecting learning with a larger purpose or previous understanding in order to increase vocabulary knowledge and reception. Zarfsaz & Yeganehpour conduct research on how varying degrees of context (zero context, minimal context, and maximum context) affected Turkish emerging bilingual learners’ vocabulary and retention. The study was done on 60 Turkish university students, learning English as a foreign language, using a Nelson 350 A test to gauge proficiency levels. The article is based on the lens of contextual vocabulary acquisition, drawing on research to suggest that contextualization leads to stronger vocabulary knowledge over isolated memorization. The results found that higher and reduced contexts provided slightly better performances than zero context, suggesting the importance of context. Zarfsaz & Yeganehpour also review research that connects vocabulary instruction to overall learning and success in other academic and life skills like speaking, reading, and listening.

This article was helpful in justifying the importance of vocabulary acquisition as a whole, and connecting it to the importance of context, one of the main premises of my ARP. Although it does not specifically mention constructivism, the article cites Hong (2008), saying how “the

teacher creates an atmosphere in which students can construct knowledge and reflect on what they are learning” (Zarfsaz & Yeganehpour, 2021, p. 25). These two ideas are connected—constructivism and context—and it is helpful to see the constructivism approach when not explicitly done through that lens. In my early research, findings related to vocabulary acquisition often were centered around second language acquisition, therefore I would be curious as to how this study would differ when it is for speakers of a native language. Additionally, I would have liked to see if this contextual learning approach contributed to knowledge acquisition in other areas, or if building these connections in the brain through vocabulary acquisition aided other areas as Zarfsaz & Yeganehpour argued early on.

Ador et al.’s (2022) article combines some of the ideas from the above pieces of literature, and investigates the effectiveness of the Constructivist Learning Approach (CLA) when it is specifically applied with the end goal of improving students’ vocabulary acquisition skills, in addition to their overall attitudes towards academic participation and learning. Since the constructivist theory is based around the importance of experiential learning, and increasing motivation through discovery, this study was deemed to be incredibly successful in regards to the actual increase in skills. The researchers aimed to document the students’ growth in vocabulary abilities over the course of a unit, as measured by a baseline data collection prior to constructivist learning approaches (pretest data) in comparison with their posttest scores. Additionally, researchers evaluated their overall attitudes after exposure to this approach through a Likert scale survey. The study was grounded in constructivist theory, especially the teachings of Piaget and Vygotsky. Learning was approached as an active, experiential process, where students created meaning through interaction and discovery. The researchers frame vocabulary development as inseparable from social language use, conversation, and cognitive growth; therefore this

approach is entirely suitable and warranted. The makeup of the study participants was 20 third graders from Colegio de San Gabriel Arcangel in the Phillipines. The authors eventually found students' vocabulary scores improved by 5 percentage points.

This article was helpful in understanding the validity of applying CLA to vocabulary specifically and connects well to my overall ARP and theories. The article was very straightforward in its purpose and results and detailed that for younger learners or emergent bilingual learners especially, social interaction and discovery-based learning was important for vocabulary acquisition. However, I would have been interested to learn more about what specific methodology was used during the study as far as the actual CLA strategies that were used. The article does mention using visual expressions of vocabulary on page 96, stating that “the use of drawings with elementary students allowed kids to showcase oneself; even the most illiterate students in the class were able to communicate without using words” (Ador et al., 2022, p. 96). They also previously provided an example of how constructivism theory could apply, posing that “learning about vocabulary by playing word strips and other collaborative activities would help [students] be active participants in conversations which will eventually improve their attitude towards engagement” (Ador et al., 2022, p. 94). Another strength was that although findings on learners' attitudes towards CLA was not overly positive in each category, the results did not have any negative reactions. Thinking critically about the article, I would suggest that this study be done with a larger sample group with more variations in the methodology and approach. I would be interested to see which particular assignments and drills warranted higher positive attitudes, however I am not sure how controlled or possible that would be through this one Likert scale.

Oka et al. (2024) expanded on the importance of contextual vocabulary skills by relating them to fluid intelligence, semantic knowledge, and personality, measured through a test called

the Semantic Similarity Test (SST). They argue that finding ways to connect familiar and foreign concepts whilst learning or conveying information is an essential critical thinking skill, and indicative of cognitive strengths beyond strictly vocabulary knowledge. They articulate that “The core idea behind connecting similarity and creativity is that creative thinking requires connecting remote concepts” (Oka et al., 2024, p. 2). The researchers of the study gave four separate SST’s to separate groups of 70-80 paid participants who were given 24 word pairings and rubrics to categorize their answers. Both Japanese and English were used across each group. Through statistical analysis, they examined how variation in semantic knowledge predicted performance on the test overall. The closest related learning theory in this psychological study would be experiential learning, as participants used real-time experiences to inform their decision making. The article mentions that “The results suggest that openness (e.g., openness to experience, ideas, and intellectual curiosity) is positively correlated with both crystallized ( $r = .25$ ) and fluid ( $r = .17$ ) intelligence” (Oka et al., 2024, p. 3), meaning that those who were open to experiences may have a positive correlation with a higher SST. The authors found that performance on the SST depended not only on raw semantic or linguistic knowledge, but also on fluid reasoning ability. In other words, individuals with stronger reasoning skills and contextual skills tended to do better on tasks requiring relational thinking. This suggests that vocabulary knowledge combined with reasoning skills can create a comprehensive critical thinking ability.

Although many of the psychoanalytical aspects are still beyond my grasp, this article is valuable because it expands on the importance of vocabulary knowledge from simply knowing definitions to being able to relate meanings to other concepts. This study supports the idea that vocabulary growth should not stop at definition acquisition, which is precisely the kind of deeper understanding that constructivism and context-heavy approaches aim for. If students learn words

in context and repeatedly encounter them, it fosters not just superficial knowledge but deeper, transferable intellectual skills.

### **Value and Applications of Vocabulary Instruction**

Twenge et al. (2019) examine trends in American adults' vocabulary skills, which is "a key component of verbal intelligence" (Twenge et al., 2019, p. 1), using data from the General Social Survey—a nationwide survey administered since 1974 that includes 10 multiple choice vocabulary questions. The authors found that over time, these skills decreased among the average U.S adult, drawing on data from 1974 to 2016, and among these findings was that college graduates had some of the most significant declines. Twenge et al. argue that as educational attainment increases, students at each educational level appear even less verbally skilled despite the increase in schooling and college enrollment. The analysis explores nearly 30,000 GSS participants who took the 10 question vocabulary portion pulled from the Gallup-Thorndike Verbal Intelligence Test. The authors admit that despite the items on the GSS test being consistent over this time period, "an unchanging list of words has the disadvantage that the words might have become dated or used less frequently in books" (Twenge et al., 2019, p. 5). It is difficult to articulate this article into one theoretical lens, but the closest one would be instructivism since it is measuring vocabulary acquisition over time through different levels of schooling. Since the common thread among all students would be to have a teacher providing them the material at hand, one could assume that instructivism played at least somewhat of a role in all of the GSS participants' schooling journeys. The conclusion of the study was eye-opening, as "The vocabulary of American college graduates declined more than a half a standard deviation over this time period, and vocabulary also declined among those without a four-year college degree" (Twenge et al., 2019, p.4). The authors posed a few reasons for this result, one being the

overall decline in student reading and familiarity with words, and the other being the disconnect between formal education and reasoning abilities.

This article was impactful for my understanding because not only did it emphasize the importance of vocabulary for intelligence, but it recognized that the increase in formal education did little to improve vocabulary acquisition over time. As a result, this could mean that constructivist theory and more contextual, real-life methods for vocabulary learning could be a more worthwhile approach to teaching. Additionally, it challenges the current system of vocabulary instruction and provides evidence that active reading and engagement outside of academic settings have large influences on learning. As cited previously, the biggest flaw of this study is the unchanging list of words, despite it being a strength in its consistent data measuring. I would be curious to see the results of this type of exam and scale in a modernized format, with current words and more of a focus on context clues.

Continuing from that point, an earlier article from Twenge et al. (2012) examines trends in language deemed 'individualistic' published in books from 1960 to 2008, determining that a trend in individualism, or focusing on the self and the needs of the self, has increased over time. An interesting consideration when looking at the previous GSS data and terminology, this separate study focused more on the rise of an individualistic culture as a result of increased individualistic language, rather than the understanding or learning of language itself. This cultural shift could perhaps be correlated with the decline in vocabulary acquisition, although that was not the intention of this particular study. The study had a two step approach in identifying terminology labeled as individualistic. First, it asked 53 adults to develop a list of terms, ranking them on a scale of 1-7 from not at all individualistic to most individualistic, as well as not at all communal to very communal. Then, after finding the 20 top-rated words, the

authors of the article examined their occurrence over time in the Google Books Ngram database. Although not explicitly linked to a learning theory, the acquisition of individualistic tendencies over time could be linked to radical behaviorism, since learners' changing behaviors are reinforced with the terminology they interact with in these newer books. The data reported an increase in individualistic phrases within this very large spectrum of books over an extended period of time. These results are what led to the conclusion that people are now surrounded by more individualistically focused terminology and phrasing than ever before, shaping a way of thinking that could be more self-centered—both positively and negatively.

These findings feel more abstract as to how they can be utilized in my ARP, however my correlation is that despite seeming similar, individualism and social constructivism are concepts at odds with each other. Although cognitive constructivism focuses on the individual learner and their own discovery of knowledge, social constructivism is reliant on shared experiences and growth, and an individualistic culture limits that collective frame of thinking. If learners are surrounded by constant reminders of self-reliance, self-validation, and limited social thinking, they may not feel compelled enough to develop a curiosity for new knowledge. Once an individual satisfies their own needs, whether in an academic setting or beyond, they will likely not feel the need to continue searching for ideas or expanding knowledge.

Many journals emphasize the importance of reading in particular when it comes to vocabulary acquisition, which as previously explained leads to higher intelligence and academic skills, however Duff et al. (2015) introduce a hypothesis labeled the Matthew Effect—where stronger readers from early on in their academic journeys accumulate vocabulary more rapidly than weaker readers, further widening the classroom gap. Their study followed a large selection of 485 students and tracked oral assessments in their vocabulary tested in grades four, eight, and

ten, with written skills also measured in fourth grade. The specific questions and assessments varied from picture identification to definition generation, all monitored and standardized for control. There are slight glimpses of constructivist approaches within this study in that early readers are able to build their own knowledge base, but this study may also share ties with the multiple intelligence view since each student varies in their reading level. The students are however grouped by ability, which could further emphasize multiple intelligences. The results directly aligned with the hypothesis of the Matthew Effect—children who were better readers early on experienced more growth over time, where the weaker readers fell behind. The authors conclude that reading skill plays a critical role in overall vocabulary development and long term growth.

My biggest takeaway from this article was that vocabulary acquisition is not solely related to targeted instruction, and long term growth can be attributed to early reading engagement or aspects of student learning that are beyond a teacher's control. This gap is an important consideration to make when differentiating lessons as well, since it is difficult to teach high level content to students who are severely behind. That leads to the one thing I disliked about the article, what are some ways to improve or assist the lower tier of readers? Although there are strategies, it would have been interesting to see this study furthered and to test the lower level 10th graders again with some targeted interventions.

Cubillos & Rousseau (2024) provide a very intriguing and relatable study on an independent reading program at a rural school in Chile, created to increase reading motivation and overall volume among male students in particular. Teachers in the area found that male students reported much lower levels of reading for pleasure than their female counterparts, and therefore were further behind in overall comprehension. The program focused on providing

high-interest materials, dedicated time in class to read, and guided peer collaboration centered around reading. The program contained 120 male students and lasted over nine months, with each 90 minute Friday period dedicated to the independent reading assignment. Students self reported their overall reading motivation, and volume was measured in total pages consumed. This student-led learning reflects constructivist theory perfectly, as students are building meaning through self-selected texts. The student choice aspect is only enhanced with peer discussions about the books, making the full program student led. The results of the program were somewhat mixed—the intervention was successful in increasing total reading volume but with a variance of overall intrinsic motivation growth. The authors admit the lack of a significant boost “suggests that the program's short duration may have limited its impact on motivation” (Cubillos & Rousseau, 2024, p. 346). On average, students expressed satisfaction with the program overall, with one low area in the opportunities to discuss books category, “suggesting that providing more opportunities for students to recommend and discuss books could be areas for improvement in future versions of the program” (Cubillos & Rousseau, 2024, p. 345).

This is an issue that I have noticed in my own classroom, and the sample of students from the study nearly directly correlates with the male students in my own rural community. If I was to gauge the amount of male students who read for pleasure at my school, I am sure the number would be dismal. This is a promising study to show that a similar demographic can find enjoyment in reading, and hopefully carry with them new comprehension skills and curiosity about learning in other areas. The growth in volume is encouraging when students are able to self-select materials, however I would be interested in seeing what their actual comprehension of the books were, which this article was lacking. An observation I found interesting was that the results truly reflected the importance of the classroom library, as “Nearly half of the students in

this study reported having none or fewer than 10 books at home, yet their reading volume increased significantly” (Cubillos & Rousseau, 2024, p. 346). Providing students with the initial opportunity to choose their own materials would hopefully have led to more motivation to read for pleasure in the future, however the initial information is promising.

Salazar et al. (2024) examine the growing communication discrepancies within the veterinary and animal science fields, specifically when it comes to native English speakers and the large Spanish speaking population of the U.S agricultural workforce. The authors evaluate the effectiveness of targeted language courses, and whether or not they can benefit prospective animal scientists and agricultural professionals of all English-speaking abilities within their real-life workplaces. The authors developed SSPA courses (Spanish for Specific Purposes in Agriculture) ranging in complexity from low to high English proficiency. They built their courses around contextualized language instruction, and LSP (Language for Specific Purposes) found within the agricultural and animal science field. Salazar et al. mention the connection between LSP and modern constructivism, saying that “This approach prioritizes tailoring syllabi to specific communicative functions and contexts, integrating various language skills and sub-skills relevant to learners’ fields of specialization” (Salazar et al., 2024, p. 1). The blended approach integrated communicative language teaching, constructivism, and emphasized domain-specific vocabulary. A total of 89 students completed the program, with 69 of them (78%) passing the course. These results prove the effectiveness of targeted vocabulary instruction when taught in a constructivist lens.

The work done by Salazar et al. demonstrates how targeted language instruction in real-world contexts can significantly enhance students’ communication skills, which aligns with research on vocabulary development through constructivist approaches. This is especially

relevant in my own school and district, which is heavily influenced by agriculture and has a large Hispanic population. By designing LSP lessons that immerse veterinary and animal-science students in authentic agricultural scenarios, learners are given meaningful, context-rich opportunities to encounter and apply specialized vocabulary. This mirrors constructivist strategies, where students actively construct understanding through engagement with relevant content rather than memorizing isolated terms. Although my own teaching is not related to agriculture, many of my students are bound for that professional world, and understanding the importance of targeted vocabulary instruction is helpful in designing classroom lessons that pull from real-life scenarios and increase buy-in. Again, if this study included information about non-Spanish speakers and their own acquisition data, it would be more relevant to the broader focus of my ARP.

### **Creative Instructional Approaches and Assessment Design**

A lot of the articles discussed focused on traditional academic methods and approaches to vocabulary acquisition, context skills, and constructivism within the classroom, but there is also value in learning methods that are less common. Anggraini and Salmiah (2024) conduct a fantastic study utilizing the classic board game Scattergories to improve vocabulary mastery. In Scattergories, players will try to match words to a provided category, using a specific letter selected from a dice. They will race to write down the most unique phrases beginning with that letter within an allotted amount of time. The researchers used a pre-test to gather baseline data from 30 eighth grade students and then led three sessions of Scattergories-based vocabulary games. Rather than general topics like the typical game, the researchers focused on providing more academic categories with parts of speech like nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs. Afterwards, they provided a post-test to compare results. This is a textbook example of

gamification theory, giving students an academic task in the form of an interactive challenge, and also has ties to constructivism since students are learning and connecting vocabulary as they participate in the game. Anggraini & Salmiah (2024) found fantastic results from this experiment, noting that “From the pre-test results, the mean students’ score was 13.63, then after being given treatment, the mean students’ score was 25.36” (Anggraini & Salmiah, 2024, pp. 311-312). This 11 point jump is significant enough to call this instance a large success, however the authors do note that the small sample size should not make this research be considerable evidence.

As I built up my base in research-based articles, I had not considered more outside the box approaches, as I really do not feel that I am the gamification teacher since I rarely give Kahoots or other similar online quiz games. Funnily enough, I play Scattergories multiple times a week with my homeroom class to pass the time and had never really thought of it as a purposeful lesson tool. Scattergories is a perfect example of using non-traditional methods to increase learning, and it pulls directly from students' own knowledge and experiences with each possible response. I would like to figure out a stronger way to utilize this in my own classroom beyond the suggested methods and would consider creating a customized version to align with the topics we are learning in the class currently. My main takeaway is the value of non-traditional methods when it comes to vocabulary teaching, and tying into students’ own knowledge bases with this game is unique and powerful.

Focusing now on student-led and generated content, these final two articles address the impact and value of classwide materials that students create themselves, continuing the conversation about the significance of individual buy-in to lessons. The first article written by Hardy et al. (2014) examines whether having students generate their own multiple-choice

questions, rather than relying solely on teacher-generated assessments, can improve student learning outcomes. The study aims to explore how this approach impacts engagement, understanding, and retention within a university-level introductory physics course through an online application called PeerWise. The authors argue that by constructing assessment items themselves, students deepen their understanding of content and benefit from peer learning. This large study utilized a group of over 850 undergraduate students across three UK universities, using the PeerWise platform to create multiple-choice questions related to their course's content for the week in lieu of teacher generated questions. Once the students submitted their questions, their peers reviewed and answered the questions. Hardy et al. tracked student engagement through total question generation, quality of questions, and participation to assess how learning outcomes would be influenced. The study aligns with constructivist principles as learners construct knowledge through actively engaging with material, rather than passively receiving information. By asking students to create multiple choice questions, they are required to analyze content and think about underlying concepts. Hardy et al. found that the student-generated content resulted in high engagement and found correlation between participation and higher learning outcomes. They also noted that lower-level students found great success with this method, writing that "there was evidence that students in the lower/intermediate part of the classes may have benefitted most...it could be hypothesized that these students found questions to be challenging but not completely beyond their reach" (Hardy et al., 2014, 2192).

This article was incredibly impactful as it connected many of the themes from my research, like student-led discussion, alternative assignments, and constructivism, and inspired me to utilize a similar method for my action research. The biggest question raised is comparing these college students to current high school students, especially with the amount of freedom

they were given. Hardy et al. note that “Students’ contributions were not actively moderated for correctness by staff. Anecdotal evidence suggested that the number of incorrect explanations was small” (Hardy et al., 2014, p. 2185), which would likely not apply to high schoolers still learning the content. They even admit afterwards that “A fruitful avenue for future work would be to investigate the quality of student questions, associated explanations and comments and how this may help promote deep learning” (Hardy et al., 2014, p. 2192).

Lastly, this final article ties in student-generated content, non-traditional assignments, and vocabulary acquisition. Anderson (2012) developed a strategy in which he asked students to draw their target vocabulary terms, similar to those in the previously mentioned Ador et al. (2014) study, or the common Frayer model strategy. He argued that drawing was an effective vocabulary learning strategy to not only aid recall but enable more effective feedback from teachers. This article placed a larger emphasis on teacher feedback as a powerful tool to deepen understanding. This study was carried out over a semester with a group of low English proficiency Japanese university students. Each student was given 40 weekly terms to draw after studying the definitions, and then students were asked to recall terms based on the pictures alone. The teacher would finally provide individualized feedback on the images themselves and ask students questions about the words they described and the details of the drawings themselves. This approach is largely based in experiential learning, with an emphasis on feedback that can derive from behaviorism or experiential learning itself. This study did not really present any detailed results or quantitative data, but Anderson notes that drawing pictures “offers educators and learners a novel, yet effective activity with which to support the complex and difficult task of acquiring word knowledge” (Anderson, 2012, p. 42). Overall, he lays out a helpful framework for this strategy and presents the base requirements that can be studied upon with data tracking.

The strengths of this article lie in its methodology, easy application, and individual expression. The emphasis on feedback, in comparison with previous literature, helps facilitate relationship building and allows students to voice their thought process orally rather than written down. The article does lack a strong data-driven purpose, and because drawings can be subjective this approach may be difficult to lean on for any assessment purposes. Additionally, it would be interesting to see this in a non-ESL context, however amending the requirements to be more challenging or domain specific could sufficiently alter the assignment. Overall, it presents another fascinating method to engage students in vocabulary development where they can bring in their own personal knowledge and style.

## Chapter 3: Methods

### Defining Action Research

In *Guiding School Improvement with Action Research*, Richard Sagor (2000) defines action research as “a disciplined process of inquiry conducted *by* and *for* those taking the action” (Sagor, 2000, p.3), which in other words means that action research is a carefully planned and curated process that is centered around improving the needs of the individual students in the classroom. A key differentiation between action research and other types of more broad, professionally done research, is that action research is relevant to the participants, rather than those conducting the research themselves. Sagor (2000) structures action research into a clear seven step approach that can be executed by any teacher in any classroom, beginning with identifying a focus and seeking out additional theoretical framework and guidance before building an actionable query. After an action researcher develops this base in understanding what it is they wish to gain, they collect and analyze data related to those initial questions, process the results, and immediately put them into action within their classroom. Although these steps are what Sagor (2000) suggests in a fully comprehensive action research plan, shortening the steps or at least becoming data-driven with the students in mind is what every teacher should strive to do. Sagor (2000) summarizes this sentiment well at the end of his introduction on page one, writing that “When teachers have convincing evidence that their work has made a real difference in their students’ lives, the countless hours and endless efforts of teaching seem worthwhile.”

In the rural school where I teach, student-centered learning takes priority over nearly every other aspect of curriculum, and understanding that the majority of my students do not need vocabulary skills for continuing academics, but for lifelong learning, drives my lesson planning and assignment construction. Action research perfectly aligns with these teaching practices in

addition to the constructivist ideals previously noted, as I want my students to be well-equipped for any situation inside or outside of the classroom where they will have to rely on critical thinking skills. When deciding how to approach this project at the very beginning, I did not know which standard to focus on, and it was not until I gave a series of baseline quizzes and tests that I noticed the severe lack of vocabulary and contextual understanding across all of my 10th graders. These standards, which on their surface may seem academic, bleed into every aspect of life, as being able to discern language, thoughts, and critical information from context alone is essential. This is especially so for the students in my own classroom, as many of them will graduate and immediately enter the workforce and surround themselves with an endless amount of content-specific terms and concepts.

The main purpose of my own action research was to remove the idea that vocabulary and context clues are found in informational text and literature alone, and challenge students to construct their learning and relate it to ideas that they and their classmates knew well. The guiding research questions for this study are as follows:

1. Does student-centered, constructivist instruction increase students' vocabulary skills?
2. Does higher vocabulary mastery correlate with higher mastery in other English language arts areas?
3. Does explicit understanding of context increase students' perceived engagement?

To best attempt to answer these questions, I presented my class with a variety of scenarios with which they would construct their own context and understand the key terms within each one presented. First, they completed a series of baseline assessments where I could accurately gauge their vocabulary skills alone. Then, each of them presented their own vocabulary terms through informative oral presentations about concepts that were important or

relevant to each of them as individuals, before taking a different assessment on those shared terms as a group. From there, they brought the constructivist mindset back into more traditionally academic coursework, and through group collaboration modernized older Shakespearean text into words they collectively understood. Ultimately, this ARP sought to not only improve these vocabulary standards, but provide students with a productive, realistic approach to understanding new concepts in everyday life.

### **Participants and Setting**

One of this project's strengths lies in its student sample size and timeframe, a personal benefit of already being in a full time teaching role. The primary portion of this research took place over the course of two academic trimesters, approximately 24 weeks, across five periods of sophomore English language arts students. The amount of students within these groups varied from 85-92 per trimester, and differed for each individual data collection depending on student attendance and completion of that particular assignment. 41 of these students are honors-level students, with nine of them classified as Talented and Gifted alongside one additional Talented and Gifted student participating in the standard group. Although this research did continue into the third trimester, the base data collection occurred within the middle part of the academic year. One final thing to note is that only the 41 honors students stayed consistently throughout the entire year, whereas the remaining 40-50 sophomores would rotate between myself and another teacher. As a result, the most consistent data is from the winter trimester, when the entire group was introduced to constructivist concepts and was observed based on their collective understanding of contextual learning.

The school where this research was performed, THS, is a smaller high school of approximately 700 students, located in a rural town on the Oregon coast. Although there is a

community college in town that also offers dual-credit classes at the high school, most THS graduates do not pursue higher education. Careers in agriculture, forestry, customer service, and hospitality are what drive the surrounding community, and in many cases students are concurrently working in these fields as they attend high school. As a whole, the student population is 65% White, 28% Hispanic, and 7% Multiracial, and THS students are on par with the Oregon student average for graduation rate at 82%. However, the THS student population as a whole is far below the state average in attendance at 56% for regularly attending, and as previously mentioned below college going rate at 43% (*Tillamook High School ODE Profile*, 2025). The students in this research represent a respectable portion of the sophomore student body as a whole, a total of 207 students, but it is important to note that the 41 honors students are higher achieving, and more likely college bound, compared to the remaining students likely not pursuing higher education. Therefore, the constructivist learning approach benefits both groups equally, despite the honors group being more academically driven.

To focus on the research demographics of this group more specifically, the 90 students in the main study are 76% White and 25% Hispanic, with only 43% of them identifying as female and one student identifying as nonbinary. There are two students currently classified as English learners, with four having recently exited the program, and many more not classified as either type who speak Spanish both at home and at school. Beyond the TAG students previously listed, this group also has three students on IEP's and six students on 504 plans. Finally, two students receive McKinney Vento resources for student homelessness.

Personally, my strengths with this group have been through relationship-building, as I taught many of them as freshman last year and got the chance to teach the honors group for the entirety of their sophomore year. This, in a sense, benefits constructivism theory as well, since I

am able to relate better to each student and, in turn, encourage them to relate to their own personal funds of knowledge as well. These students draw on a number of cultural backgrounds, and largely participate in agricultural, athletic, academic, and family-centered activities in their personal lives. Each of these were drawn upon in the primary data collection, which in itself is a victory for the constructivist approach regardless of statistical improvement. The one challenge I have had with the group and this data collection was assignment submission, and overall completion. The honors group succeeded at turning in requirements in a timely manner, and putting in concentrated effort on assignments, but it was a challenge to reach the same results with the standard students. This led me to ask myself if the assignment had issues, or if it was student-to-student, as well as worry about data consistency and whether or not it accurately reflected student learning.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Although it took me time to develop the assignments for my main data collection points, I made it a priority to record baseline data in the RL/RI.4 standard for the entire 2025-2026 school year, and therefore provided students with a variety of traditional multiple choice vocabulary questions early in trimester one. Sagor (2000) emphasizes the importance of triangulating one's data, which "involves the use of multiple independent sources of data to establish the truth and accuracy of a claim" (Sagor, 2000), according to his definition on page 113. Since my initial research questions were more progression based, rather than anecdotal, I felt it important to record a baseline of vocabulary data in order to appropriately compare results over time. These initial samples were largely pulled from McGraw Hill's StudySync 10th grade curriculum, and varied from shorter reading comprehension tests to more focused vocabulary sections on multiple choice exams. Across five collection points taken largely from these formative and

summative assessments, the student score average was a 67% within this standard. These scores climbed over time, and the last collective quiz based on reading and key terms from those texts reached a high of 85%.

The second baseline data collection, although quite challenging to interpret, was standard-specific data from iReady diagnostic testing. The iReady diagnostic is administered by many schools in the state, and was recently mandated for all K-8 schools as data checkpoints to monitor math and language arts comprehension. These are long, multi-day tests, and data can be severely skewed based on individual effort and energy, beyond true academic ability. Across the 59 students who completed iReady testing in trimester one, only 23% of them were shown to have passed the RL/RI.4 standard, with an overwhelming 60% being below iReady's definition of understanding. When the iReady test was taken again in trimester two, these numbers dropped even further, with only 18% of students passing and 67% now below understanding across 71 students. The common factor in both of these baseline collections, beyond both being heavily based in test-taking skills, is that there were no constructivism techniques involved in either formative or summative assessment, beyond drawing on what the student may have known individually from reading.

The initial introduction of constructivism learning took place through an informative writing assignment that asked students to present a how-to instructional guide in six steps. Each guide was required to be written clearly, to be presented with a visual aid, and to incorporate three vocabulary terms unique to the topic. Each student who completed the assignment presented these guides to their peers, with topics ranging from how to ride a dirtbike to how to make tortillas, to more straightforward ideas like how to make scrambled eggs. Each presentation provided the audience with concise steps as well as content-specific vocabulary, and

at the culmination of each period's presentations I compiled the terms into a vocabulary quiz. Although this process may not seem like a major part of data triangulation, the fact that each student who completed the project understood how to recognize content-specific terms within their specific topic was a major step in overall understanding, as they were demonstrating constructivism by completing the requirements. The difficulty and variance across each term was wide, and I looked to the three tiers of vocabulary from Beck, McKeown and Kucan (2013) to better create suitable test question types for each. On the 30 question test, I gave 11 questions that asked students to find the best term for a given definition, 11 to find the most appropriate definition, and to write their own definition based on the term. Overall, this quiz was a resounding success, with a class average of 81% across 75 students who completed the assessment. This initial data proved that the constructivist approach that allowed students to bring in their own terms and share them with peers had more early success than traditional quiz and reading comprehension assessments.

For the next stage of data collection, I wanted to continue the constructivist learning momentum by bringing the collective learning approach to a unit on William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. During each day of reading, a selection of students would be tasked with identifying words in the original text, and adding their own modern synonyms to help their classmates' understanding. Once they were familiarized with the responsibilities and read-aloud format, students throughout the class, regardless of if it was their role, would begin providing modernizations to words. For each word that the students gave, I would write the original word on a student-facing whiteboard alongside its accompanying modernization or synonym, creating a true constructivist word wall. In an initial quiz, with 11 total terms, students were tasked with reading three Shakespearean passages and defining a selected phrase based on the context, as

well as finding modern synonyms for eight Shakespearean terms from a word bank. Overall, in this more challenging context, 81 students averaged a 73% score, achieving a 70% average when pulling from the context of a passage and a 74% when using the word bank.

After recording and coding this data onto spreadsheets, I brought these results to my weekly PLT meetings, and they have contributed greatly to our group's understanding of question types, vocabulary retention, and the constructivism approach as a whole. The numbers themselves trend in a positive direction, and the data itself does not require any intricate coding in order to evaluate it fairly, since it all comes from written exams. However, in order to truly say that this theory works, it needs more implementation into larger groups of students over time.

### **Researcher Positionality**

As the chief researcher, I have become increasingly data-driven over the course of this project, and want each assignment I provide to be meaningful in recording information that is fair and accurate. Sagor (2000) delivers a poignant point on the importance of data on page 109, writing, "When you make teaching decisions on the basis of sloppy research, you place your students at risk" (Sagor, 2000, p.109). Even though I care about the results, I have learned the importance of not skewing or altering data in the face of these processes, whether accidental or purposeful. I have also realized the importance of creating equitable assignments that are truly scaffolded for everyone, because if all of my students cannot accurately complete an assignment then I can not accurately record data and learn from it. The entire process has shown me how to design an impactful lesson, and given me strategies on how to use constructivism to do so. I emphasized the value of learning a new language early on in my own life, and feel I am finding ways to help spark that love in others.

With that being said, something I need to be increasingly aware of is my own presence in data collection, and my own impact on projects where they should be largely student-driven. Some students may need more guidance, more structure, and more ideas to help get them going, and I have to develop strategies to do so without skewing their project or making it too related to a ‘desirable’ end result. I am a White male teacher, not from the area, who is asking these students to draw on personal experiences and feel comfortable sharing them with others. This process cannot be executed without a comfortable classroom environment, which luckily I feel that I have achieved. What I also found in this project is the importance of leading by example, as I too made my own presentation and provided students with a glimpse into my own cultural background. This is something that I can never forget if I am to truly become a constructivist teacher.

## **Chapter 4: Findings**

Four major themes emerged from analyzing the data, which all result from the constructivist assessments and their relation to increased contextual understanding and vocabulary acquisition. The themes are: improved student learning outcomes, increased student engagement, the role of assessment design in student performance, and a development of deeper understanding through real-world application. Each theme is discussed with supporting data.

### **Improved Student Learning Outcomes**

The overarching theme that emerged from both the data and anecdotal observations of the students was an overall improvement in learning outcomes when instruction was guided by constructivist learning principles. Students demonstrated measurable quantitative growth in vocabulary skills after being introduced to constructivist practices, and this performance continued to improve as they were given more opportunities to apply these concepts to different content areas.

The early baseline assessments showed that students struggled with vocabulary and context-based standards, namely RI/L.4, averaging 67% on traditional assessments and showing low proficiency on iReady diagnostic measures (Leimbach, 2025). These results suggested that students had limited ability to apply vocabulary knowledge beyond simple identification, or in other words understand vocabulary in context. Even when just identifying terms, students still performed poorly. They were able to recognize vocabulary at its most basic level, but struggled to apply it in different situations outside of the academic setting or understand it on a deeper contextual level. Benjamin Bloom famously tiered these various stages of learning acquisition into his 1956 Bloom's Taxonomy pyramid, and using that pyramid my students would fall somewhere into the knowledge and comprehension tiers. However, as the handbook states,

comprehension occurs when “the individual knows what is being communicated and can make use of the material or idea being communicated without necessarily relating it to other material or seeing its fullest implications” (Armstrong et al., n.d.). So, in other words, the students’ iReady diagnostic scores demonstrated that they were not yet into the comprehension tier, since they were not moving from recall into application.

As classroom instruction turned its focus on context specifically, and incorporated more student-centered activities where they were able to bring in their own vocabulary terminology and provide their own context, student performance increased. This idea was largely pulled from the Ador et al. (2022) study mentioned in chapter four that directly analyzed vocabulary results before and after the introduction of constructivism. In their research, they detailed that the pretest vocabulary score for the third graders grew by five points after introducing constructivism (Ador et al., 2022, p. 95). This was by no means a monumental leap, but was a significant one, enough for the researchers to conclude on pages 96 and 97 that “Using this method, learner's performance improved by utilizing a constructivist learning approach when critical thinking is at its own original phases” (Ador et al., 2022, pp. 96-97). This albeit small increase from a positive study was a large inspiration for my own research, especially after unknowingly uncovering this data prior to beginning this project.

For the main assessment of this action research project, students presented their classmates with a six step guide on how to complete any task of their choosing. Not only was this a constructivist assignment where students drew on their own funds of knowledge in order to create academic material, but it perfectly coincided with an informative writing unit and met a multitude of CCSS standards. Each student presented three key terms to coincide with their

guides, which would all be on a multiple choice midterm exam following the presentations. Each period had a custom-made, group-specific test made that incorporated their terms and definitions.

After completing these student-generated vocabulary assessments, 85 students across 5 periods averaged 81% on their individual 30 question exam, demonstrating very strong understanding of content-specific terms that they may have never encountered before. These terms were all organized according to Beck, McKeown, & Kucan's (2013) three-tier vocabulary theory, which values all vocabulary but classifies terminology that is high frequency as tier one, more academic but still high-utility words as tier two, and very content-specific words as tier three, in order to determine term difficulty. Surprisingly enough, students did not opt for common tier one terms, only submitting 34 total (23% of the overall terms). Students voluntarily provided 66 out of 150 tier three (44%) terms, or domain-specific words, which means that these self-selected vocabulary words truly required context or previous knowledge in order to properly identify them. On these terms, students averaged a 79% across all of the exams, scoring an 84% in tier two terminology. In the more common tier one words, they matched the 79% score, but on nearly half of the terms that were found in the tier three category. In analyzing this trend further, I feel that this seemingly inconsequential piece of data also reveals that students wanted to showcase their knowledge for their peers, and when given the opportunity to demonstrate their skills or passions, wanted to present themselves as knowledgeable and professional. Revisiting the guiding questions of my action research project, this could strongly correspond to the third question, in that students' desire to learn and demonstrate their knowledge at a high level was apparent throughout the unit.

Although these numbers alone can signify that constructivism when applied to vocabulary instruction is effective, I did not feel that this was the end of the research, and wanted

to see if this same methodology could be applied to more complex, academically rigorous contexts. The same group of students brought this constructivist approach to a unit on William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, in which they were tasked to identify challenging words from the original Shakespearean text and modernize them with a more common synonym. At the end of each reading, a select number of students would lead the additions of synonyms to a public classroom word wall, which was revisited throughout the unit. Students were then asked to identify phrases within context, as well as match Shakespearean terms to their modern synonyms as generated by the class. Overall, students were able to achieve a 70% success rate when identifying the words within the context of the original passage, and a 75% when matching them to the modern synonyms. This 73% class average on the Shakespeare Quiz assessment suggested that the students were able to successfully transfer their skills to more challenging materials. None of these Shakespearean terms could be classified as tier one or two, and needed either direct instruction or contextual clues in order to properly define each of them. Although the score itself was much lower than the previous midterm averages, it still points to a clear trend of improvement and increased student learning outcomes.

Finishing the data collection with these two assessments would have been sufficient, especially for the scope of this action research project, but since I had completed this research early into the winter trimester and our *Macbeth* unit went until the tail end of term, I had time to record one final assessment based in the same constructivist theories. For the final exam, I presented the students with a similar multiple choice format as the previous Shakespeare quiz, but there were a handful of new terms and the overall section was longer. This was tacked onto a longer, 60 question final exam, and unfortunately the results on this particular assessment were not as promising as the previous two. The final exam proved to be a challenge, with students

averaging 71% overall, with the scores of a RL.4 section plummeting down to 59%. When averaging out all of the quantitative data from the entire unit, including this final exam, students only grew 3.6% in their RI/L.4 standard since the introduction of constructivism. Without factoring in the final exam results, this jumps up to a 10% increase when looking at only the midterm and initial Shakespeare quiz.

Although this result was a discouraging way to wrap up the research, it taught me a lot about question design, exam sequencing, and the overall effectiveness of vocabulary-specific exams versus larger exams with vocabulary just added on to the end, another theory I may explore in the future. Especially for an initial action research project that seemed to have been going well, I was not sure how to address this hiccup, and even debated on including it in the overall results. Revisiting the Sagor (2000) reading helped me to reassess the purpose of action research, and make more sense of negative results in the grand scope of the project. Sagor (2000) details poignantly on page 7, that “Although all teaching can be classified as trial and error, action researchers find that the research process liberates them from continuously repeating their past mistakes” (Sagor, 2000, p.7). In other words, this negative result in the series of positive ones does not mean that the theories behind the research are not valid or sound, but that they can be refined in the assessments, data collection, or instructional methods. Ultimately, the final assessment does highlight some growth, but mostly informs how the future action research can be amended.

With this, this overall unit still reflected meaningful growth in student learning outcomes, both with its tangible quantitative data and the intangible constructivist strategies that both the students and I learned. The more traditional assessment formats proved to be ineffective compared to these, and despite having a somewhat small sample size in this research the task of

only identifying and defining vocabulary terms is not an effective way to truly incorporate vocabulary into a lifelong learning journey. Regardless of the data, students demonstrated an obvious shift in moving beyond simple recall to beginning to develop skills related to context and meaning-making. Even though full mastery may not have been achieved in this small study, students gained a stronger ability to approach unfamiliar language, contexts, and questions, both inside and outside of a classroom setting, with greater confidence.

### **Increased Student Engagement**

Student engagement increased when instruction incorporated choice, relevance, and opportunities for active participation. Students were more invested in their learning when they were able to connect content to their own experiences and validate their own cultural backgrounds as legitimate academic material.

This high engagement was extremely evident during the buildup to the student-generated instructional guide presentations, where students selected topics that were personally meaningful and built a creative presentation to inform their audience. Many students opted for videos, which was the suggested medium, but even students with limited technical ability showed excitement for the project and made creative slideshows. This project was challenging, because it was one where students could not create the assignment fully during class since they had to record or find photos of their topic material on their own. Not only this, but it was also an assignment that was extremely difficult to cheat on or underdo since it involved a voice recording of the student reading the actual script of their guide. Only 13 out of the 86 total students (15%) did not complete the assignment, with the average grade on the full presentation with all of its components being a 75%. Many students in the class who traditionally do not participate in group discussions were given a platform to not only speak to their peers, but express their

personalities, and this alone made the unit and implementation of constructivism worthwhile. In chapter four, I mentioned a Chilean study that was focused on increasing reading volume in male students, largely through allowing students to choose their material. The study showed a lot of success in reading volume, but not in providing intrinsic motivation as measured over their study, as they detail in their abstract that “t-Tests showed a significant increase in students' reading volume but not in their reading motivation” (Cubillos & Rousseau, 2024, p. 338). When I initially read this study, I thought that this may be something that I would run into during this assignment—that students would complete the task to the requirements but not find motivation in going above and beyond, or paying attention to peers' presentations. However, that was not at all the case, as students worked diligently and showed up to participate in this unit in large numbers. Even if a student had trouble creating their own presentation, they could still partake in the presentations and collaborative learning with their peers.

During the presentations themselves, the audience played a large role in the overall success of the assignment. Not only were they asked to take notes and remain engaged, but their ability to perform well on the midterm vocabulary quiz was based on their overall attentiveness during their classmates' presentations. On a five point speaking and listening rubric aligned with CCSS standards SL.6 and SL.1c, 86 students averaged just over a four on the scale, meaning that they had listened attentively and respectfully during all presentations. On a percentage scale, these students averaged an 86% in this listening category, which despite being a somewhat arbitrary thing to score is an English language arts standard, and one that strongly correlates with these findings. The higher learning outcome of an 81% average on this assignment, as previously mentioned, can be largely attributed to the increase in overall engagement.

Even further, I wanted to reward students who paid close attention to their classmates' presentations, therefore I included five extra credit questions that called on specific details that would only be possible if the test taker was engaged, present, and recalled the specifics of their peers' instructional guide. On these extra credit questions, with five appearing on each individual assignment, students averaged an incredible 81%, matching the overall average, demonstrating that they were deeply involved in the presentations and could recall specifics of what was presented. The success of this particular assignment, compared to earlier baseline data, indicated that students were not only more engaged during the actual process, but were able to retain and apply information more effectively when they had ownership over the content.

This leads to further evidence of increased engagement that was observed during the *Macbeth* unit, which was highly interactive and collaborative as students signed up for individual reading roles and performed the play aloud in class. Although this approach is inherently engaging, students who did not wish to read were able to select a role of "Script Specialist," in which they would either act as a Story Analyst, Stage Director, or Text Modernizer. Students who signed up to be our group's Text Modernizers were tasked with selecting and identifying words from the text that stuck out to them for any particular reason, whether that be because the word sounded strange, felt important, or the student simply did not understand it. Then, they would have to provide a modernized synonym based on context, and I would write it on the whiteboard. This daily activity required students, who may or may not be comfortable speaking out loud, to actively process unfamiliar vocabulary and make it accessible to their peers, creating a shared responsibility for learning.

Over time, more and more students would begin to participate voluntarily, making our text modernizer class time one of the more robust sections of our day's reading. This shift from

teacher-directed to student-driven participation suggests high engagement, but an even stronger sense of ownership over the material. Even if students were not signed up as Text Modernizers themselves, they were actively looking for words to add onto our word wall by the end of the unit. As previously mentioned, these terms made up our Shakespeare quiz, which students still found success in even though their 73% average was not as strong as their previous scores. However, with the complexity and unfamiliarity of Shakespearean language, this was a victory in itself. In addition, the practice of constructivism by the students through the Text Modernizer process became a strategy that they could rely on to better understand unfamiliar texts or contexts. Teaching them this strategy, although unquantifiable with current data, is another huge success of this action research.

Despite many variations in task type and overall difficulty, students maintained relatively stable scores after the introduction of constructivist strategies (up until the final exam), suggesting that their engagement was not momentary or situational. These observations, combined with the performance data, support the valid conclusion that student engagement improved when instruction emphasized relevance, participation, and personal connection. This aligns with constructivist theory, which emphasizes that meaningful, experience-based learning can and does increase both motivation and retention.

### **The Role of Assessment Design in Student Performance**

Another large takeaway from this unit was understanding the importance of assessment design, and falling in line with Sagor's (2000) action research principles, being conscious of the assessment format itself in order to yield clear and accurate results. Different assessment types, mediums, and question types revealed different levels of student understanding, even with

similar concepts or terms, suggesting that the way students are assessed can influence how well they demonstrate their knowledge.

With the focus of this study being centered around using context, it was essential to provide students with questions related to defining terminology based on context alone. For the first assessment, this was achieved during the presentation process, as audience members were able to understand the provided terms within the context of their classmates' presentations, whatever the topic. Since these terms were utilized within the actual presentations themselves, as well as frontloaded before the actual instructional guide videos or slideshows were given, students were able to focus on the scenario in which the term was used rather than defining it in real-time, a strategy identified by Cuba (2019) for English learners and students with disabilities. In her article, Cuba mentions a 2009 study from August, Branum-Maratin, Cardenas-Hagan, & Francis, where English learners and struggling readers increased pretest science vocabulary scores after going through lessons with frontloaded terms, and utilizing them within context afterwards. She notes that "a key component of this program included multiple modalities for communication, such as verbal, written, graphic, and even physical, to pre-teach and reinforce important vocabulary using visuals to support retention and practicing cross-curricular words" (Cuba, 2019, p. 232). To apply these ideas to my own classroom, our own assignment's multimodal method of presenting combined with preteaching vocabulary helped students achieve an 88% average score on multiple choice questions that asked them to match definitions to the individual terms, suggesting that familiarity and contextual understanding helped increase their recall. Additionally, they showed that they were able to choose the correct definition based on how the term was used in the presentations themselves, as they were faced with alternate answer options that could have been correct depending on a different context. This strength dropped

slightly when the question types were flipped, as when students were required to select the best term from to match a provided definition, they averaged a 70% rate of success. This further indicates the importance of assessment design and providing a variety of question types on multiple choice exams, as even though these two concepts are incredibly similar they warranted two vastly different results.

Furthermore, on questions that utilized a short answer option where students had to define the key features of a classmate-provided term, classes performed at a 68% average. Interestingly enough, the Period One Honors Section struggled the most with the tier one word 'spoon,' where only 60% of the class was able to correctly define or explain the key features of a relatively simple and well-known object. To make sense of this quantitative result by using a more qualitative lens, I believe that there were two main reasons for this low score. Firstly, I had not been totally explicit with my instructions on the exam, and had I asked students to really consider each object or to describe each object with a certain amount of detail, their responses may have changed since they would be focusing on thorough responses. My exam instructions were precise, but somewhat up to interpretation, depending on how each student understood how to describe in detail. As a result, one student's idea of thorough description could have drastically changed from their peers since they were not being provided with a step-by-step method on how to answer the question. Secondly, I had not given a lot of short answer test questions up until this point, beyond short written responses related to an in-class reading or literary analysis. Students may have felt somewhat caught off guard with the short answer option, and could have remained in a more analytical, multiple choice analysis mindset, skewing their creative thinking. This information was incredibly valuable in helping to inform me about the importance of application skills, and critical understanding of a term's key components regardless of its complexity. It

would be safe to assume that every single student knew what a spoon was, but the fact that they described it as “a utensil to eat with,” or something to that extent, demonstrates that they need more focused practice on deeper-level descriptions. Although I did not have many more opportunities to add similar questions in this unit, this is something that I began incorporating into later classes, building it into my WOU TPA as a key assessment to look at students’ abilities to describe.

On the following Shakespeare quiz, the context for each question was also generated by the students, assessing their understanding through the class-determined synonyms. Additionally, they were asked to define phrases based on their usage within a passage of *Macbeth* itself, but this could have also been supplemented with the knowledge from previous group analysis activities. This latter format was more accurate to traditional methods of assessing the RL.4 Standard, which is providing students with an excerpt and asking them to use just that context in order to discern meaning. Although this format is not based in constructivism necessarily, the ability for students to draw back on their own knowledge, the knowledge built as a group when analyzing the text, there are still constructivist ideas at work. Unfortunately, students were only able to identify the phrase within the passage 68% of the time, which although is by no means a negative indication, does mean that there was a disconnect between this content and the previous instructional guide terminology.

The largest reason for this is likely the increased complexity of Shakespearean text compared to the more approachable words shared by peers, however the contextual ideas still remained consistent. The other category of questions presented students with the original Shakespearean term alongside a word bank of class-generated synonyms, a slightly new concept with the introduction of a word bank over a multiple choice option. This category made up the

bulk of the Shakespeare assessments, counting for 90 of the total questions across each quiz and period, with the students reaching the same 66% average. This was not only the largest sample size of the Shakespeare assessments, but of the study as a whole, and could be a more accurate representation of student learning than others based purely on the total number of questions. However, when answering word bank style questions, wrong answers are far more penalized since a simple mix up can result in multiple questions being missed as a result. If students miss an individual multiple choice response, they can still have an opportunity to correctly answer a question from a separate set of answers, rather than the one-for-one swap. Although the word bank category does help reduce some anxiety, as it offers a process of elimination amongst a larger group, the nature of the category itself could have led to the lower scores.

This conclusion leads to the logical takeaway about the overall importance of assessment question variety specifically, as results can all vary significantly depending on what an assessment is requiring students to actually do. Had I maintained the same exact multiple-choice question format across every question of each assessment, one could reasonably predict that scores would increase based on the provided data. However, when looking at the categories in which the students struggled—using context to define terms and writing short answers—a simple multiple choice question may not be the most appropriate way to gauge student learning within those specific areas. As a result, it is important for instructors to not shy away from the question types that challenge the students the most, in favor of increasing scores, but rather incorporate them early and often in order to familiarize students with them and provide opportunities for more focused feedback and adjustments to instruction. If I had moved away from multiple choice, and only used short answer questions or identifying words in context, the scores would have been lower, but growth would have likely been apparent despite it being small. These

questions, although more comprehensive and accurate to applicable knowledge, have their place, but it is up to the instructor to predetermine how and when they should be utilized. I could have even offered a single contextual exercise, not on a test, that may have warranted better results because there may not have been as much accompanying test anxiety. All of these factor into the overall performance, and are a key reason why action research should be revisited and adjusted into different mediums.

From this, the formatting and delivery of these assessments themselves also proved to have impacted overall results. Out of the three assessments provided during this study, only one of them was entirely focused on vocabulary, whereas the other two combined vocabulary with other questions about reading comprehension or literary analysis. The vocabulary-focused assessment, the initial midterm, yielded the strongest results, and the scores regressed from there as exams became longer and more complex.

This leads to a question about what format is the most optimal in achieving accurate and strong results, and without variation it is difficult to identify which one is the best. Even beyond the multiple choice test options, the way in which the students received the information changed across the varying assessments. All of the assessments relied on oral delivery in order to convey information, however what the *Macbeth* assessments had was a supplementary reading element, that did not seem to help or possibly complicated things based on results. In the first assessment, students all generated the test content originally, and as mentioned performed the best. In the second and final assessments, students still generated the synonyms, but those synonyms were based on a mentor text with which the class was all aware of. While both relied on understanding contextual information, the second one proved to be more challenging with recall and learning outcomes. Overall, focusing on assessment design and being intentional with question types is

essential when collecting quantitative data, as this study relied so heavily on. With this research in mind, I will continue to be more intentional in question design that gradually increases cognitive demand, and challenges students to meet deeper levels of understanding. If this particular study were to continue, I would ensure that there were more opportunities for students to showcase those deeper skills on the question categories that they needed to improve on, rather than those that were proven to be successful.

### **Deeper Understanding through Real-World Application**

While overall learning outcomes did improve across this unit, a separate pattern emerged in how students were able to transfer vocabulary knowledge into unfamiliar and more complex contexts. With the more authentic ways to create classroom curriculum through constructivism, students demonstrated a deeper understanding of content and were able to apply their academic skills into varying contexts—new and complex scenarios similar to those that they will be faced with in the real world.

This development is most clearly supported in the midterm, where students scored highest on an assessment composed entirely of peer-generated terms from topics outside of the classroom, many of which were classified as tier three domain-specific vocabulary. Because these terms were so varied and topic-specific, students had to rely on more than just a straightforward definition in order to truly understand the term, and more importantly, why it was being used for that particular presentation. One presentation could use ‘lead’ as an aspect of a pencil for drawing characters, and another could use it as a lead for animals in Minecraft, and students would need to understand the context of both situations in order to grasp the term and concept. This is the most authentic representation of vocabulary skills in real-world scenarios, as each student, regardless of their path, will be faced with domain-specific vocabulary in whatever

field or topic they come across. These more authentic assessments are often neglected in academic settings, in favor of academic vocabulary or assignment-specific terminology, and the student success on this particular assignment can be attributed to the application of academic skills to real-life contexts.

The deeper understanding continued during the Shakespeare unit, where students were required to apply these same contextual and practical skills to significantly more complex and unfamiliar language. Unlike the instructional guide, where the context was created by each peer and tied to individual experiences, the Shakespeare unit required students to connect archaic language to more familiar terms. Although these concepts are not wildly dissimilar, the same skills could be applied to both scenarios—students were still tasked with using context, prior, knowledge, and reason in order to determine meaning. This assessment mirrors real-world situations in the same way as before, in which individuals must interpret unfamiliar terminology whether it be workplace jargon, technical instructions, or unfamiliar communication in everyday life. Another benefit of this particular assignment was that it connected extremely academic language, or terms that students would likely never encounter anywhere else but within a classroom, into the real world and their real life knowledge. Too often is understanding Shakespeare viewed by students as an English language arts-only skill or long, boring process (understandably so), but approaching it with a realistic contextual mindset helped break the monotony and get students to start thinking about the puzzle-like nature of languages, as mentioned before.

Student performance was slightly lower during the final assessments of the action research project, which may be the most telling real-world application takeaway, as it demonstrated growth in some areas but also revealed places where students needed more

practice. The non-linear nature of lifelong learning may be the most evident in the final assessment of this action research project, because while some students showed clear improvement over the course of the unit with recognizing context, they still struggled to apply it in certain situations. Even though as previously mentioned, this is disheartening, it does not indicate a lack of understanding, but rather demonstrates the difficulty and complexity of transferring skills to new languages or situations. To truly gauge whether or not students mastered Shakespearean vocabulary, I could reassess their knowledge after some reteaching of the terms or areas that they struggled with. With this, the concepts that they learned during this process and the student-centered instruction they received would hopefully be enough to help them reconnect those concepts, and continue to view academic thinking in a realistic, contextual frame.

As I move forward into the final stages of my action research project, I am incredibly satisfied with the results, trends, and themes that developed over the course of the research. There were times where the process may have hit some snags, or not been as streamlined as I had hoped, but each piece of data and each student who participated demonstrated strengths in certain areas. Since I made constructivism a focus for every assessment, I was able to see in real time how those ideals could not only influence student learning and engagement, but shape their approach to learning as a whole. Even though I am no longer acquiring data at the time of writing this concluding paragraph, I am still implementing a lot of the same principles that I learned from both my chapter two research as well as the actual action research itself. The positive themes developed throughout this research proved that the time, effort, and informed instruction could create impactful learning experiences for my students, and the core of this project will continue to guide me as I continue to teach.

## Chapter 5: Discussions, Limitations, & Conclusion

### Discussions

The purpose of this action research project was to examine whether student-centered, constructivist instruction could improve students' vocabulary skills, support broader English language arts learning, and increase overall engagement through explicit contextual learning. Across the study, the findings suggest that constructivist instruction did have a positive impact on student learning, especially when students were given opportunities to create meaning through their own experiences and share that meaning with their peers. While the final exam results did complicate the overall growth trend, the broader pattern still showed that students performed best when vocabulary was taught as a contextual, social, and relevant real-world skill, rather than directly instructed through isolated memorization and removed from context.

The guiding framework of the entire project strongly aligned with Bada's (2015) definition of constructivism as a student-centered learning pedagogy. In Chapter 2, I connected Bada's ideas to my own pedagogical approach by making constructivism the key principle in both of this project's key units—the instructional guide project and the *Macbeth* unit. Both of these allowed me, as the teacher, to act more as the facilitator rather than the direct distributor of information, which is oftentimes an untaken approach when teaching vocabulary specifically. In these units, students were not simply receiving vocabulary terms from me and memorizing definitions, but instead, they generated terms, explained them, connected them to context, and helped their classmates understand them. This aligned with the constructivist idea that students create knowledge through experience, but also applied it into a vocabulary context that connected student identity to traditional literary analysis and practice.

The instructional guide assignment especially reflected and extended the ideas from Hardy et al.'s (2014) study, where students created their own multiple-choice test questions for the class. Having students shift their thinking from reacting to test questions to a more proactive approach, or understanding how and what information to present to peers, required students to think more critically about course content as well as participate in shared learning. My students were able to execute this in a similar way, however rather than generating the questions themselves, they generated the vocabulary, definitions, and context through oral presentations. As mentioned before, I was able to simply facilitate the test and create questions purely based off of those terms, and related possible answers, which resulted in one of our strongest vocabulary exams of the year. By allowing students to use their funds of knowledge to create an academic assessment, it created a successful learning outcome similar to the Hardy et al. (2014) study.

The findings as a whole also support Oka et al.'s (2024) argument that vocabulary knowledge is connected to broader reasoning and critical thinking skills. In my project, students were not just matching words to memorized definitions, but rather making decisions about meaning based on surrounding context, prior knowledge, oral explanation, peer examples, and textual clues. This kind of relational thinking, like Oka et al. described when finding correlations between openness, real-life experiences, and positive outcomes, showed through during both of these ARP units. In both cases, students had to connect unfamiliar terms to familiar ideas, an aspect of vocabulary instruction that applies to many things beyond the classroom. One of the aspects of my own project that differed with Oka et al., and some of the other researchers from Chapter 2 like Salazar et al. (2024) and Zarfsaz & Yeganehpour (2021), is my own lack of primary language diversity. For example, these previously mentioned researches all drew upon English learners' performance when provided constructivist instruction, whereas mine were

provided to mostly English-speaking students. Additionally, some of the age ranges varied, with primary school students being the focus of certain studies and university-level students being the target of others. While my high school sophomores still performed better when provided instruction informed by this research, it is difficult to say that they truly extended those concepts since they were not similar participants.

Finally, the role of engagement was also a significant factor, and Cubillos and Rousseau (2024) found that student choice played a positive role in increasing language arts motivation in their own study on high-interest reading materials. My findings showed a similar pattern, as students seemed much more engaged when they had choice and when language arts coursework reflected their interests. Since engagement is much easier to observe than it is to measure, these observations took place throughout both units in slightly different mediums. The instructional guide presentations created visible buy-in because students were able to present themselves as knowledgeable in areas that they cared about. Likewise, the *Macbeth* word wall became increasingly student-driven as more students began offering modernized synonyms even when it was not their assigned role. Similarly to the Cubillos and Rousseau (2024) study, I was able to find an increase in engagement through student choice, although they were not able to find strong correlations between choice, reading volume, and performance, just as my Shakespeare final did not correlate with the engagement in the word wall. Despite this, engagement can still suggest future success, as connections are made during the moment even though they may not show up immediately on assessments.

Overall, my pedagogical practices strongly aligned with the major themes of chapter two's research, those being student-centered learning, contextual vocabulary acquisition, social construction of meaning, student-generated content, relevance, and real-world application. My

ARP project extended that research by combining these approaches in a high school English setting to create meaningful vocabulary instruction.

### **Limitations**

One theoretical limitation of my action research is that I used constructivist learning theory to guide my instruction, but may not have fully used every tenet of the theory within the entire scope of the actual assessments themselves. The strengths of the study were clearly constructivist—students drew from prior knowledge, used real-world vocabulary, learned socially from peers, and created meaning from experience. However, the assessments were all still quite traditional, including the multiple-choice quizzes, short answer questions, and the comprehensive final exam. This could mean that while the instruction aligned with constructivism, the data collection may not have fully measured constructivist learning based on its design. In future study, I would include more constructivist forms of assessment, like reflections, oral explanations, or more performance-based tasks, in order to accurately reflect the theory in addition to yielding more data that could answer my questions about mastery or desire to learn.

A methodological limitation of the study was the type of data collected, and reliance on quantitative data for a concept that may be better measured in other ways, as mentioned previously. Most of the study relied on assessment scores exclusively, which helped show measurable growth in performance, but did not do as good when capturing student engagement, confidence, or perception. This is important not only to appropriately reflect constructivism, but because my third research question had to do with increasing students' engagement. While I observed stronger participation during the presentations and *Macbeth* modernization, I feel that I did not collect enough qualitative data where students voiced how they felt about the overall

learning process. In the future, I would include more pre- and post- surveys, thorough exit tickets, interviews, or written reflections more related to the ARP questions so that students could better identify and explain whether or not the constructivist approach worked for them individually.

A practical limitation of this study is the slight inconsistency of the participants within the study as well as the overall data set. As described earlier in the context of the study, the research included several sophomore English language arts classes over multiple trimesters, but not all students remained in my class for the full year. The honors students were the most consistent group, since I had them for each assessment, however they may skew true data collection with their higher performance. Attendance and assignment completion also affected the results, especially because constructivist learning principles are heavily reliant on active participation and collaborative class activities. Because of this, the data does not perfectly track the same group and same number of submissions across each assessment, even though it does accurately reflect my own individual classroom. Since the ARP had to be completed prior to a deadline, and I had limited control over the student group and timeframe, I had to take the study with what I had, which again is not inherently negative by any means but results in skewed data. In future research, I would either conduct the study with one consistent group from beginning to end, or potentially separate honors and standard class data more clearly to better understand how different groups responded to the instruction.

## **Conclusion**

This action research project began while searching through data centered around other standards or subject focuses, and realizing that my students were struggling to determine the meaning of words and phrases in context. This was a concerning realization, as in my opinion

this is one of the top two or three skills that I can help them achieve as an English language arts teacher, that they can immediately leave the doors of my classroom and use in the real world. Through this study, I examined whether those vocabulary skills could be increased through more student-centered, constructivist vocabulary instruction, and whether or not I could successfully take a secondary role as an instructor and let them lead the way when studying a traditionally highly-academic concept like vocabulary. The findings suggest that students were far more successful when vocabulary was taught through context, collaboration, and real-world application, especially when compared to baseline data analysis from more monotonous, traditional assessments. These creative assessments, like the instructional guide presentations which allowed students to draw on their own funds of knowledge and teach content specific vocabulary to peers, as well as the *Macbeth* modernization activity that challenged them to use those contextual skills in a more rigorous literary setting, both showed positive learning outcomes and evidence that this strategy could work.

Ultimately, this project taught me that vocabulary instruction should not be limited to word lists, textbook definitions, or isolated quiz questions, and especially not be taught once and never referenced again. Vocabulary is part of how students enter new communities, understand unfamiliar situations, and become active participants in academic, professional, and personal endeavors. Although these assessments could still use further refinement, especially the final exam, this overall study still reaffirmed the value of constructivist teaching as well as action research. Finally, I learned that students are quite capable of deep vocabulary learning when they take on the role as active meaning creators, and that they can accomplish tremendous tasks that may seem out of the ordinary or non-traditional when they are rooted in principles and research that are relevant to them.

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