

## **Paper 1: Strategies for Learning Grammar and Vocabulary**

### **Introduction**

There are many different types of learning; as a teacher I have to be very aware of my students' needs and the obstacles stopping my students from learning. I also have to anticipate possible struggles and create effective strategies in order to create a positive learning environment. While most of the classrooms I have observed have been in middle class suburbs, I am now observing at Thompson Middle School in Southfield, Michigan. The students that come to Southfield have very diverse backgrounds. There are students that live in large houses, smaller houses, apartments, and even trailer parks. A little less than half of the students at Thompson qualify for free or reduced lunches and approximately 95% of the students in the school are Black. Even though my CT has a diverse group of students, all of the students from both the honors and regular 7<sup>th</sup> Grade English classrooms have trouble learning new vocabulary and grammar rules.

Improving one's vocabulary and knowledge about grammar rules is important in all English classrooms around the world. Even in college classrooms, such as Sweetland Writing Center 300, students still learn new grammar rules and apply the rules to their papers. It is often difficult for teachers to teach the infinite array of vocabulary words used in conversation, literature, and academic papers and the grammar rules that students dread learning about. Teachers need to anticipate student's frustration about the legendary grammar rules that teachers need to teach every year. Rather than teaching new vocabulary and grammar rules in a lecture format, and testing students using standard grammar and vocabulary tests, teachers need to use new learning theories in order to motivate students to learn new grammar rules and vocabulary in a way that will end up in

their long term memory. While a certain learning theory might not work for every single one of the students, using new methods can help students learn and remember easier than conventional methods. My CT uses Behaviorism, Constructivism, and the Information Processing Theory in order to help her students develop their vocabulary and grammar knowledge in the most productive way possible so that her students store information in their long term memory, rather than memorize information for their short term memory.

### **Behaviorism**

Behaviorism is a theory that my CT uses by examining her student's behavior and responding to their behavior in a particular manner in order to inspire a particular behavior in return (Omrod, 57). A behavior in which my teacher requires of all of her students is participating in silent reading for the first fifteen minutes of class. My CT does not care what type of material the student is reading, but she strongly believes that reading on an everyday basis will develop their reading skills, enlarge their vocabulary, and give the students practice seeing correct grammar in writing. While my CT has books available for students to check out, she requires the students to remember their books everyday for class in order to gain participation credit. This activity not only will help develop her students' literary skills, it also teaches her students how to be responsible. My CT anticipated that her students might have trouble putting effort into going to the library and checking out books on their own, which is why she created her in class library system.

Within my CT's non-honors English class, she still has trouble with students forgetting their books and earning zero participation points. My CT responds to her student's negative behavior with responses such as "This is the third day that you have

not had a book; this is killing your participation grade.” By responding to the negative behavior, my CT tries to instill the positive behavior that she desires, which is having her students bring their books to class on a regular basis. A problem may be that the students do not think the participation grade will have a strong effect on their grade. Another form of reinforcement that my CT uses in order to prompt her student’s to read during silent reading, or at least reading after school, is that she requires a book report every month from her students. The students are required to comment about every chapter of the book in order to gain full credit; this stimulus influences the student’s behavior to read the entire book, rather than just using a summary about the book from another source. While my CT’s expectations are set about silent reading and the book reports, students continue to forget their books during silent reading and turn in their book reports late. In addition to commenting about the student’s grade going down, my CT could offer a spot in the room where students can keep their books in the class room so that they do not have to bring their book to class each day. While the students would not have an extra responsibility of remembering their books, they would at least have their books there and be doing their silent reading during class time.

### **Constructivism**

Constructivism is an approach that improves the student’s internal struggle with learning. Rather than absorbing knowledge from class lectures or reading a text book, constructivism is used to have the students create knowledge from their own observations and experiences. Individual constructivism occurs when student learners create knowledge through their interaction with the environment (Omrod, 19). For example, my CT gives many comments about grammar patterns and misspelled vocabulary in their

papers throughout the semester. From previous experience, she anticipates the students will continue to make the same mistakes, rather than work on the comments that she has given and improve their next paper. In order to help students learn from their own mistakes, which she points out in their papers, she requires students to create a portfolio of their writing. In their portfolio, they have to organize their drafts in the right pocket and they have to keep a running list of comments from their papers on the left side. Not only do the students have to construct their list of comments, they are also required to study the suggested comments and fix their earlier problems in their future papers. In order to ensure that students are creating their list and instilling their list in future papers, my CT periodically grades the portfolios and will mark students down if they commit the errors that she pointed out in their previous papers.

A problem that I have noticed, regardless of the portfolio system, is that students do not think about the grammar suggestions that my CT has given them when writing their informal in-class assignments. While students put effort into constructing their formal papers using the suggested grammar suggestions, the grammar rules do not come naturally to the students yet and therefore they commit the mistakes again in their informal writing. A possible suggestion is that my CT could create an in-class informal assignment about one of the grammar rules on their portfolio list. The in-class assignment would entail taking one of the suggestions and creating a paper about any topic they would like in which they practice using the grammar rule properly. This could start the student's thinking about their grammar when they are doing informal writing outside of their portfolios. Also, constructing a paper with the freedom to write about a topic within their own schema will let them apply the grammar rule and it will be more likely for the

student to understand the grammar rule and apply it to their formal and informal writing inside and outside of the classroom.

### **Information Processing Theory**

The last learning theory my CT uses in class on a daily basis is the Information Processing Theory. Everyday my CT has to be aware of the ways she presents information so that her students can learn new information and be able to store the new information in their long-term memory. It is important to consider the ways student's perceive, interpret, and mentally manipulate all of the information they encounter in their classroom environment (Omrod, 19). My CT anticipates that giving her students vocabulary quizzes on a regular basis would not help the students learn new vocabulary in the most effective way. In order to help the student's cognitive process, my CT chooses to teach the students information that relates to their own social, cultural, and historical contexts. For example, my CT has a vocabulary wall in the back of the classroom in order to expand her student's vocabulary. Rather than putting up random words, my CT lets her class pick the words that will go on the wall. These words can come from a book they are reading, a cultural artifact they have come across, or words that the teacher uses that the students do not understand. This method of learning is more helpful for the students because it is easier for them to encode words that they pick from their own experience, rather than memorizing a random vocabulary list. The students get to pick words that matter to them.

Oftentimes students have trouble memorizing the vocabulary words in one day by just talking about the new vocabulary in class. In order to help the students master the new vocabulary, my CT uses the board. Placing the words on the board is an effective

strategy for the students' information retrieval. The students reinforce their knowledge about the words by looking at the board or in case the students forget the words, they can restore the word again in their memory by looking at the board. Because the students pick their own words from their own contexts, it is more likely that the students will remember these words and actually learn these words, rather than memorize these words in their short term memory. One problem that I have seen is that there has not been a day in which the class told my CT to put a word on the board. This is a slow way of learning new vocabulary. A possible solution is having ongoing vocabulary lists in their portfolios next to their ongoing grammatical goals. This would require students to look up words on their own, outside of class, and look up the definition. The students would continue the process of finding new vocabulary words of their choice but it would give them a quicker method and it would be more personal because they would not have to be intimidated by bringing up a new vocabulary word in front of the entire class.

### **Conclusion**

My CT uses behaviorism, constructivism, and the information processing theory successfully in her classroom on a daily basis; however, one theory that she uses in correlation to all these theories is the Sociocultural Theory. Using these methods, combined with connecting the information to social, cultural, and historical contexts within the student's ideologies, is the best way for my CT to present grammar rules and new vocabulary (Omrod, 19). While it is important for students to learn from constructing their own portfolios, they are able to write about situations and cultures within their own framework. The combination of the two methods not only allows students to understand new information in association with the information they already

know, they also get practice constructing the new information within their own schemas.

The best method for a classroom with a diverse group of students, such as Southfield, is to vary the different learning theories and continue to anticipate problems and solutions in order to help the students learn best in their own ways.

## **Bibliography**

Omrod Textbook.