

Thinking like a Historian: How do Sixth Grade Students Analyze Documents?

by

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A thesis submitted to the Department of Education of the College at Brockport, State University
of New York, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Literacy

May 15, 2017

Abstract

This qualitative study investigated the ways in which sixth grade students analyze documents in a social studies classroom. This research aimed to provide teachers with insight into how students are analyzing documents and what strategies are being used. Through observations, semi-structured discussions, survey questions and a benchmark, a plethora of data were collected. An intensive data analysis was conducted resulting in four major findings. The use of background knowledge, and captions made analyzing a document easier, whereas academic vocabulary made analyzing a document more difficult. The data collected also showed a number of strategies students are currently using to analyze documents. The insights provided by the students in this study are valuable for teachers and staff involved in teaching students how to analyze documents.

Keywords: analyze, strategies to analyze, background knowledge, academic vocabulary

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Introduction

“Analyze the document, don’t just summarize it,” a teacher said as I walked into her social studies classroom. A week later, while sitting in a social studies department meeting, I was listening to the teachers talk about essential questions and matching them to the newly created benchmarks that word “analyze” came up in conversation again. The teachers started discussing the struggle students have analyzing a document, rather than just summarizing it. Students can easily look at a historical document and tell you what it says, but can they infer its meaning? Even a 20 year veteran teacher was worried about getting her students to engage in the content instead of just being able to recite exactly what was put before them. I instantly felt a sense of motivation and wanted to be the teacher who finds ways to teach students to analyze, I wanted to help these teachers become comfortable teaching students how to analyze! I wanted to make a difference, I wanted to take the students’ summaries of a document that consist of the simple, who, what, where, when and turn them into historical thinkers, interpreting the why and how.

This conversation made me deliberate what strategies I could use to help students analyze documents. I wanted to find evidence-based practices that support the rigor of the common core state standards when teaching students how to analyze documents.

Topic and Research Problem

The sixth grade Social Studies Framework has recently shifted. The shift in the social studies curriculum emphasizes analyzing documents rather than writing a document based questions (DBQ) exam. Students are unfamiliar with the word analyze and exactly what that

means when looking at a primary or secondary source document. According to Stovel (2000), to analyze is to separate into elements or constituent parts, to see their relationship to one another (p. 503). The revised Social Studies Framework outlines the elements students will be learning when analyzing historical documents. Students will be able to understand the document's historical context, author (source), point of view, purpose, and intended audience. In the Framework, each element is explained in detail for teachers and students to better understand as described below.

The elements of document analysis are: historical context, author (source), point of view, purpose, and intended audience. The historical context is the circumstances surrounding the issue presented in the document, the point of view is the perspective of the author on the subject, including the author's opinion and word choice due to his/her attitude or judgement. To better help the students fully understand a document's source an explanation discussing types of sources would be beneficial. To identify the type of source, students need to understand the difference between a primary and secondary source. Another element when analyzing a document is to understand the document's purpose. Purpose can be defined as the author's reason for writing the work or portraying the work as a drawing. The final element when analyzing a document is to think about who the document is intended for, who is the audience. Although each element is clearly defined with detail, students still seem to misinterpret the word analyze, when looking at documents. I have provided students with the opportunity to use these elements as part of this research study.

Rationale

The importance of this research study is to find strategies that support students when

analyzing a document, along with presenting this information to my colleagues. The Common Core State Standards direct students to determine what texts say explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text (Neumann, Gilbertson, & Hutton 2014). With the increase in rigor and understanding of historical documents for student success in the classroom, teachers need to know and be able to implement the best strategies. The research provides teachers with different strategies to help students analyze documents, along with reasons students struggle when analyzing documents.

Watching my students struggle to understand the elements and listening to my colleagues worry about the best strategies, motivated me to help find an answer. In order for students to have a strong grasp of each of the elements, the teachers too, must have a clear understanding. It is up to the teacher to model the behavior we want projected by the students. Knowing the best strategies to support student learning when breaking the document into specific elements, will help teachers be more confident when teaching strategies.

Purpose

The purpose of the research is to observe how students are currently analyzing documents. I acknowledge students' strengths, but also focus on the areas of struggle in order to develop strategies that may improve their analytical thinking about documents. Based on the observations, I implement multiple strategies and log the findings to better, not only my teaching practice, but assist my colleagues in their education of this topic as well.

Research shows there are three strategies when identifying historical thinking. Sourcing which means the author, date, and place of the certain document, contextualization which

attributes to the historic context of a document's evidence and how it influences interpretation, and finally corroborating, which is comparing various documents to better understand the pieces being analyzed (Fillpoint 2012).

Research Question

- What are the ways in which students analyze documents?

Review of Literature

The following literature review discusses the struggles students in sixth grade have while analyzing a historical document. Students of this age level often have a hard time understanding the difference between analyze and summarize. Research on sixth grade students' overall brain development and their understanding of analyzing might help teachers get a better understanding of why some students may struggle. There are many strategies teachers may use to assist students when analyzing documents. I will be discussing the most important of these strategies and how they relate to the students' development.

Disciplinary Literacy

First, I need to explain how to teach reading and analyzing historical documents in the social studies classroom. Reading and analyzing is much different in the social studies classroom compared to the English, science, and math classroom. Students are reading and analyzing different types of documents to get different types of meanings. Each content-specific teacher is responsible for showing students how to use discipline-specific literacy skills as tools for accessing content and incorporating reading and analyzing strategies that only make sense within the context of the discipline (Lent, 2016).

Close reading is a strategy implemented across all core classes. Close reading occurs both within and across texts, reflecting the common core state standards that students are always trying to connect the ideas they encounter in a given text with other ideas from a range of sources, including previously read text and their prior experiences (Nathan and Minnis, 2016). Close reading gives students the ability to attend to a text with a critical eye, reading more deeply than in the past or in other subject areas. In social studies, reading a historical text calls for a close reading strategy that involves an understanding of how the perspective may alter a historical account or how the context of a primary source may change its meaning. Readers must put what they think and know and feel aside at first and focus on the text being read (Nathan and Minnis, 2016). There may be obsolete words when reading a historical document or unfamiliar terms students come across and need to be aware of them, and question their meaning (Lent, 2016 p.19). Just as a learner is situated in a time and place, so, too, is every text. To situate the reading, it is important to provide students with historical content knowledge (Pennington, Obenchain, & Brock, 2014). Students unfamiliar to complex text or the historical context need background knowledge and prompting from their teachers. The close reading strategy is specific to the social studies classroom, which will help students create a strategy for them to understand complex text in a more efficient way. Although close reading helps students understand how to read and analyze complex texts, students still need help analyzing historical visuals.

Visuals are imperative in the social studies classroom now that the Common Core State Standards recommend that students should be able to analyze visual documents. Visuals appear as if they would be easy to teach students, especially in a generation that thrives on visuals (Lent, 2016). Just because students use visuals regularly, does not mean they know how to interpret them in the social studies setting. It is important for teachers to model for students, that visuals

provide the same information a piece of text would, it is just given to the students in a different format (Lent, 2016). Throughout the year, students need many opportunities to work with visuals in order to feel comfortable digging deep and analyzing them. Throughout my research, I found strategies students feel comfortable engaging with when analyzing primary source documents, in order to understand a certain time period better, or answer critical thinking questions.

Analyze verse Summarize

Students in my sixth grade social studies class struggle to understand the difference between summarizing and analyzing a document when answering critical thinking questions. Students learn how to summarize text before they learn how to analyze documents. Writing a summary is easy, it can be as simple as writing to tell the reader what the document is about. When I think summarize, I think about answering the questions, who, what, where, and when. The amount critical thinking involved in summarizing is minimal on the student's part. Sixth grade students are very capable of writing a summary, as they have been taught how to answer those questions their entire elementary career. However, asking a student to analyze the text and write an analysis of their thoughts can be a very difficult task for students. This is something that needs to be implemented throughout their middle school careers.

To analyze is to break the reading into elements or constituent parts, or to separate mentally the parts of a whole so as to reveal their relation to it and to one another (Stovel, 2000). Stovel (2000) suggests that, when really analyzing a document, students need to discuss their attitudes and reactions, they must do more than just tell about the details. Michael Berube (2004) relates analyzing to the sports talk TV show, *Around the Horn*. On the show, *Around the Horn*,

sports commentators analyze the up-to-the-moment sports topics, however it is not just summarizing if a team won or lost, the commentators look at the data and find reasons or trends, they talk cause and effect, and also talk about their own feelings allowing for the viewers at home to agree or disagree with what is being said. Berube (2004) suggests, “Everyone reads the book, however, we haven't read it in quite the way you're reading it. We haven't focused on the same scenes and passages you're bringing to our attention, and we haven't yet seen how your argument might make sense of the book for us” (p. 1). Students need to understand the difference between writing a summary of a text or document and really analyzing it.

Strategies

There are many differing strategies and ways of teaching students how to learn to analyze documents. I have focused on finding strategies that best fit my students and their abilities when analyzing documents. I have looked for research-based strategies that many other teachers are implementing and using in their own classrooms.

Finding strategies to help students understand the term ‘analyze’ and the encompassing elements within that word are necessary when breaking down a document. One component that impacts the students’ most is their background knowledge. A historical document provides the viewer with little to no background regarding the document’s purpose; it is up to the students, who will pull that information out. If a student possesses little to no background knowledge then it is up to the teacher to scaffold the student through the document in order to help them pull out that important information. Fillpot (2012) discusses a student who analyzed seventeen historical documents on a topic he had never previously encountered, with which he had no direct background knowledge, but with his knowledge of other historical events aided his ability to

interpret and make meaning of the given piece (p. 206). With this being said, students who do not possess background knowledge on a certain historical topic, might still have the ability to interpret using their historical thinking skills.

The first question students need to think about when looking at a document is what is this document trying to show me, what is the document really telling me? (Stovel, 2000). After students figure out what the document shows, they need to understand how the document compares to other documents to get an even deeper analysis.

There are many different strategies used when analyzing documents. The strategies I came across most often while researching were as follows: sourcing, contextualizing, and corroborating. A description of each is provided below.

Sourcing

According to Fillpot (2012) sourcing is when “historians inventory a text’s attributes to take into account how elements such as the author, date, and place of creation of a piece of evidence influence how the evidence should be interpreted” (p. 207). Students will need to know and understand the importance of the author and date of a certain document in order to analyze it correctly and thoroughly. It is up to the teachers to educate the students with explicit language when sourcing documents.

Contextualizing

When students are analyzing a document, they are piecing together the context of the document. Contextualizing a document can be difficult; teachers need to teach with explicit language and modeling. Contextualizing is making sense of the document while connecting the

information being shown to previously learned information. This strategy can be taught with think aloud prior to analyzing documents. Teachers actively read historical sources in order to vocalize thoughts about historical documents, modeling the process going on inside the head (Fillpot 2012). As students witness the process of contextualizing documents, when they are set out on their own to analyze, they will automatically start making connections to other historical documents.

Corroborating

The final strategy students use when analyzing documents is corroborating. Fillpot (2012) describes corroborating by comparing various pieces of evidence to better understand how to most accurately interpret each document. Stovel (2000) agrees by saying, “students should begin to see the document in the context of all of the other documents and pose questions really analyzing why the author chose this document to get his or her point across” (p. 504). The process of corroborating is linked directly to a student’s background knowledge. The more a student is familiar with, and has access to, the easier it will be to make connections from one document to another.

Background Knowledge/Schema

Each strategy that is taught needs to be connected to a memorable piece of information in order for the students to retain and file away that knowledge. Every experience a person has experienced is stored somewhere and recalled when needed. Schema theory according to Yanxia Shen (2008) is a theory of how knowledge is acquired, processed, and retrieved (p. 104). The more experience a person has, the more information a person has to pull from. This previously learned knowledge is called the reader’s background knowledge (Yanxia, 2008). Schema theory

and background knowledge go hand in hand when recalling specific information.

Students may be able to use strategies to analyze documents along with understanding what an analysis really is, but without background knowledge no real connection could be made. Michael Pressley and Peter Afflerbach (as cited in Neumann, Gilbertson, & Hutton, 2014) found skilled readers regularly employ their background knowledge to construct meaning, interpret information, and connect new information to existing knowledge (p. 70). Prior knowledge of a domain under study has been shown to be a highly important variable in comprehending and understanding text (Twyman, McCleery, & Tindal, 2006). Students' interaction with text is directly affected by their prior knowledge, the less prior knowledge a student has with a certain domain or topic, the harder it will be for students to focus and analyze the document. Twyman, McCleery & Tindal (2006) state, "No matter the strategy used to read a text, without proper background knowledge, students have difficulty developing the contexts for historical thinking" (p. 333). With this being said, teachers should implement as many content enriched lessons into the year as possible allowing for students to have access to this information and strengthen their background knowledge.

When students are given primary documents, those documents are drawn from a world different from that of the students in time or place, or both. It is up to the teacher to provide the student with a historical context of the document. Give the students information about the time, location, and purpose for the creation of the source (Neumann, Gilbertson & Hutton, 2014). This will allow the students to make connections more quickly and have a better understanding of the document. Giving the students the proper information about a primary text will allow more student engagement and motivation to analyze the document.

Another problem students are faced with when analyzing documents, is the lack of understanding the time period. Wineberg (2001) discusses students' lack of empathy with the people from ancient times. He goes on to say, "Students lack a sense of empathy that allows them to see through the eyes of the people who were there" (p. 8). This lack in empathy will impede on the student's ability to analyze a document to its fullest understanding, especially when analyzing why the author would chose a certain document to explain a theory.

Implementing the suggested strategies, sourcing, contextualizing, and corroborating, will push students to analyze rather than summarize documents. Students able to analyze documents clearly, will be thinking more critically. The Common Core State Standards aim to prevent students from simply offering their opinions in response to questions teachers pose about challenging text. Students, instead, will have to defend their answers using textual evidence (Neumann, Gilbertson, & Hutton, 2014).

Methodology

This study focuses on how sixth grade students in the social studies classroom are analyzing documents. Surveys and semi-structured interviews/discussions were implemented during each lesson taught about analyzing documents. Surveys included questions for students to answer based on how well they felt they did while analyzing a document. Students also described any strategies they used while analyzing the documents.

Participants

The participants in this study were selected because they are all students from my sixth grade social studies classroom. The class is made up of 22 students total, 13 of them are female while 9 of them are males. My students are Caucasian, with the exception of four students who

are mixed race. All the students speak English as their first language. Each student comes from the same socioeconomic background, none of which receive reduced lunch. I am the sole instructor of social studies. The students see me for 39 minutes a day to receive their instruction in social studies.

Setting

The setting for this study is in sixth grade classroom in a suburban school district. My classroom is in a middle school that includes grades 6-8, located in New York State. The environment of this school is very welcoming with high standards. The walls are filled with the core principles: trustworthiness, perseverance, kindness, and respectfulness, which the students work towards every day. Within the classroom, the students are seated in groups of 6, to promote positive peer interactions when working on group work.

Positionality

My experiences affect my role as a teacher and researcher in the classroom. Being aware of my race, class, gender, education, and personal beliefs will help me apply a more critical lens, while performing my research. I am a female, who grew up in a working household. My mom never went to college, but my dad was the first in his family to graduate from college. I was the first grandchild in my family to attend college, graduating from The College at Brockport, SUNY with my Bachelor's degree in Inclusive Early Childhood Education. I am certified to teach grades 1 – 6, general and special education and am currently working on my first year of teaching in a sixth grade social studies classroom.

Regardless of my background, I believe every student has a right to the best education possible. All students should receive what they need to get the best out of every situation in and

out of the classroom.

Methods of Data Collection

As the teacher and researcher, I first observed my students' abilities to analyze a historical document without giving prompts. I focused on what they did really well, and what they struggled with. I then had semi-structured discussions with my students asking which documents were easy and which documents were more difficult to analyze. I paid close attention to the students' answers along with the specific documents they discussed. The following week, the students took a benchmark, after each document there was a survey question asking the students their opinion. The questions asked, if the document was easy or difficult to analyze and if the students used any strategies to help them answer the questions. The data were collected throughout my normal classroom instruction.

Semi-structured interviews

After observing my students, I asked them semi-structured interview or discussion questions. These interview questions were very general, allowing the students to guide the discussion. The questions were asked for clarification and understanding purposes and the students' answers guided my instruction.

Field Notes

I allowed students to practice analyzing documents in groups and independently. While the students were engaged in conversations with their peers about analyzing documents, I observed and listened closely to their conversations. While I was listening, I heard a lot of self-talk and good discussion directed towards the critical thinking questions. Students were most honest with

their peers about whether they understood the documents or not. The observation of my students helped guide my instruction as well.

Benchmark

A week after the field notes a benchmark was given. The benchmark allowed me, as the teacher researcher, to comprehend how the students analyzed the documents. I was also able to see which documents the students thought were most easy and most difficult to analyze. Students answered survey questions following each document given on the benchmark. I collected these surveys for analyzing purposes and to further my instruction as a teacher.

Procedures

The whole class engaged in their normal instruction on analyzing documents. Students were given documents to analyze starting in December to gauge what my students already knew and to observe any misconceptions. In January, I began to give students more documents and ask them semi-structured discussion or interview questions based off their prior knowledge. After three weeks of gathering information the students were given a benchmark or final assessment. Once the students finished with the benchmark they filled out survey questions, following each document. The survey questions asked the students to decide which document was the easiest and which document was the most difficult to analyze. I looked closely at the survey questions, finding common themes of reasons why students felt certain documents were easy and why they felt certain documents were more difficult. I also found common strategies students were already using.

Trustworthiness

While becoming a teacher-researcher I collected written notes, surveys, assessments and interviews which are all good tools, but according to Shirley Brice Heath (as cited in Shagoury and Power, 1999) who reminds teacher-researchers, “You are the key instrument, and you must keep that instrument on all the time” (p.118). The trustworthiness of this study will be established through the triangulation of my data. My data was collected in multiple forms such as, observation, survey, interview, and a post-assessment. My peers examined my research to enhance its trustworthiness.

Data Analysis

As I was analyzing the data I collected, I kept finding reoccurring patterns. I started coding and developing themes from my data, all while keeping in mind my research question. Analyzing the content of interviews, surveys, student work, and observations was a process of identifying, coding, and categorizing the primary patterns (Dye, Schatz, Rosenberg, & Coleman, 2000). After I found these primary patterns I continued to analyze my qualitative data and constantly compare my findings to the primary patterns. I discovered the following patterns: 1) Students with background knowledge find it easier to analyze documents; 2) Students struggle to understand documents that contain challenging academic vocabulary; 3) Students that used the caption or historical context had an easier time analyzing a document; and 4) Many students are already using strategies when analyzing documents, such as: using the caption, re-reading the document, and re-wording the questions that contain academic vocabulary.

Finding One: 15 out of 20, or 75% of students said the document was easy to analyze because they had background knowledge surrounding the document.

I gave 20 students three documents to analyze, the first document was a picture with a caption below, the second document was a short quote from Pericles followed with historical context describing the document, and the third document was the Hippocratic Oath from around 400 B.C., also followed with historical context describing the document. Under each document the students had to answer three analytical questions about the document. Once the students were done analyzing the document and answering the questions, the students had to answer survey questions regarding the documents being analyzed. The first question asked, what was hard about analyzing the document and what was easy about analyzing the document? The second question asked about implementing any strategies while the students were analyzing the documents.

Many students come to school with varying degrees of background knowledge. Some students are more familiar with mathematics, while others really connect with science. Before I start a lesson, I give the students an anticipatory worksheet to activate their prior knowledge or any knowledge they might have around the lesson being taught. There are always very knowledgeable students about a certain topic, but there are also those students who know very little about a topic. Nuemann, Kaefer, and Pinkham (2014) put it simply, “the more you know about a topic, the easier it is to read a text, understand it, and retain it” (p.145). The only way a student is going to know more about a topic is through previously being taught and gaining that background knowledge. All students walk away from a lesson with a greater amount of background knowledge.

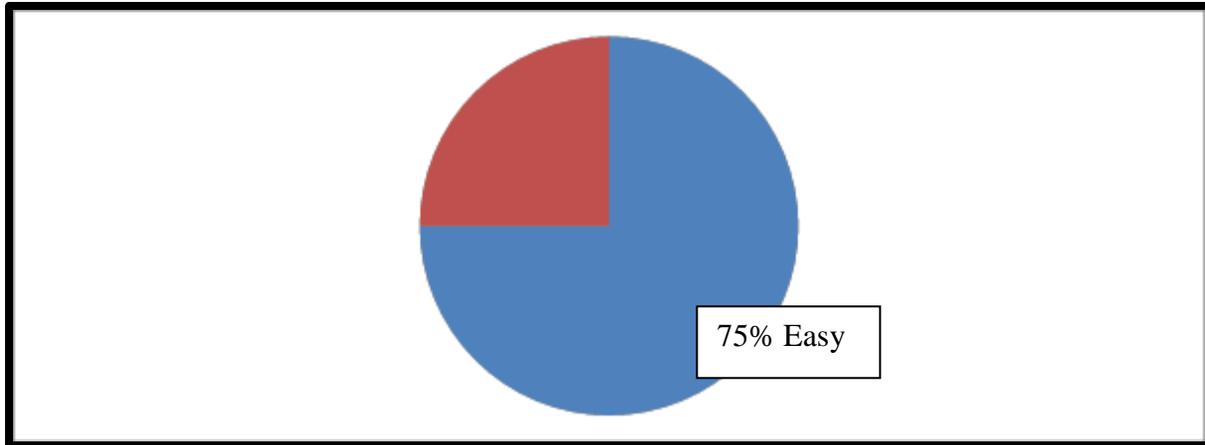


Figure 1. Results of Having Background Knowledge. This figure illustrates how many students said having background knowledge made analyzing a document easier.

As I was analyzing the data collected, background knowledge kept showing up in the students' answers when they thought the document was easy to analyze. In figure 1, the majority of the students said analyzing the document was easy because they had background knowledge about the documents.

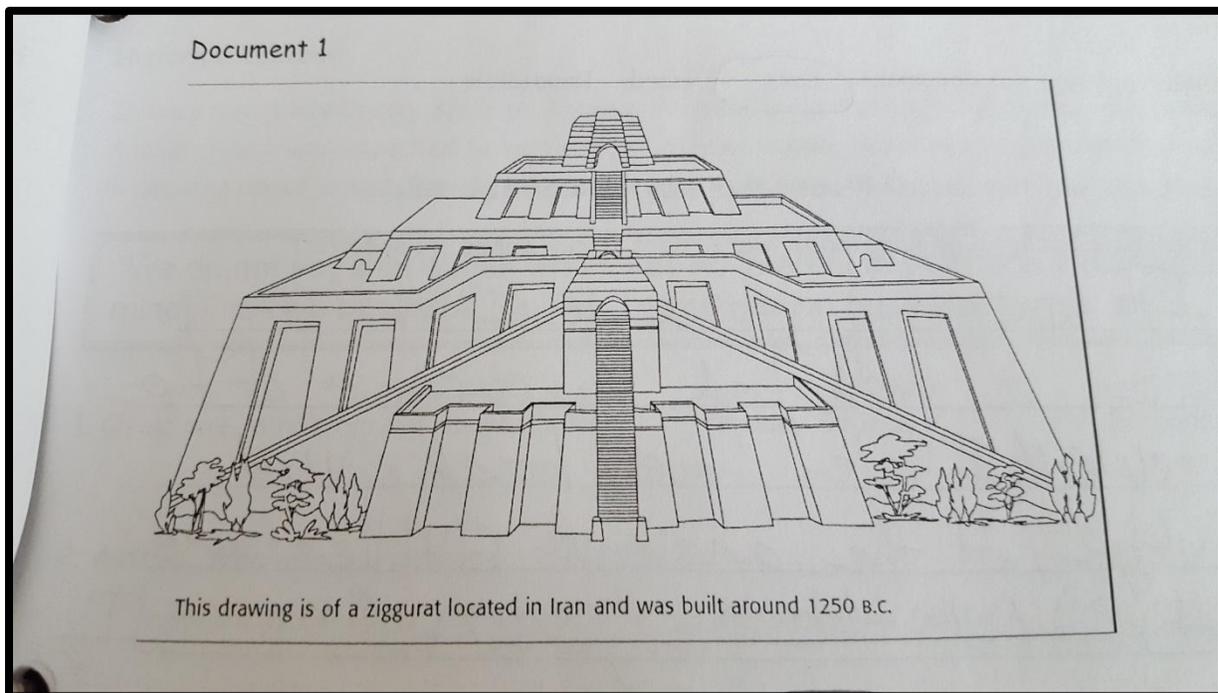


Figure 2. Document 1. This illustrates the document students were analyzing.

The following quotes are from three different students explaining why they thought a certain document was easy for them:

- Student one said, “Document 1 was easy because I had background knowledge I used for this document.”
- Student two said, “I have background knowledge of the ancient civilizations that create the ziggurats.”
- Student three said, “I had background knowledge about Mesopotamia/Fertile Crescent.”

These students thought the documents were easier to analyze when background knowledge was available to them. Shen (2008) discusses the importance of background knowledge, “If the students haven’t enough relevant knowledge and comprehensible culture-based input to the text, they will fail to analyze and understand even the most simplified documents” (p. 105). Those students who had background knowledge about a certain document said it was easy to find an answer to the questions. When students are given the opportunity to use their background knowledge, they are able to think more deeply about a concept, and pull more outside information in the process of answering the questions that follow.

Finding Two: 17 out of 20, or 85% of students said, the document was harder to analyze when the vocabulary was too hard to understand and comprehend.

With the increased emphasis on college and career readiness, the need for students to be able to read and write proficiently using academic language has become well established (Evans & Clark, 2015). Academic language is not only being integrated into the English classroom, but into the social studies, science and math classrooms as well. With this shift, teachers are supposed to give students opportunities to analyze text and form evidence-based propositions

and arguments using academic vocabulary (Evans & Clark, 2014). In order for students to be successful at analyzing text, they need access to academic vocabulary. Larson, Dixon & Townsend (2014) put it simply, “active vocabulary practices helps young adolescent learners develop academic language and access academic text” (p. 17). 90% of my students did not answer a question, simply due to the academic vocabulary that was used. As one student stated, “The question was too hard to understand because I did not know the words being used, so I skipped it.”

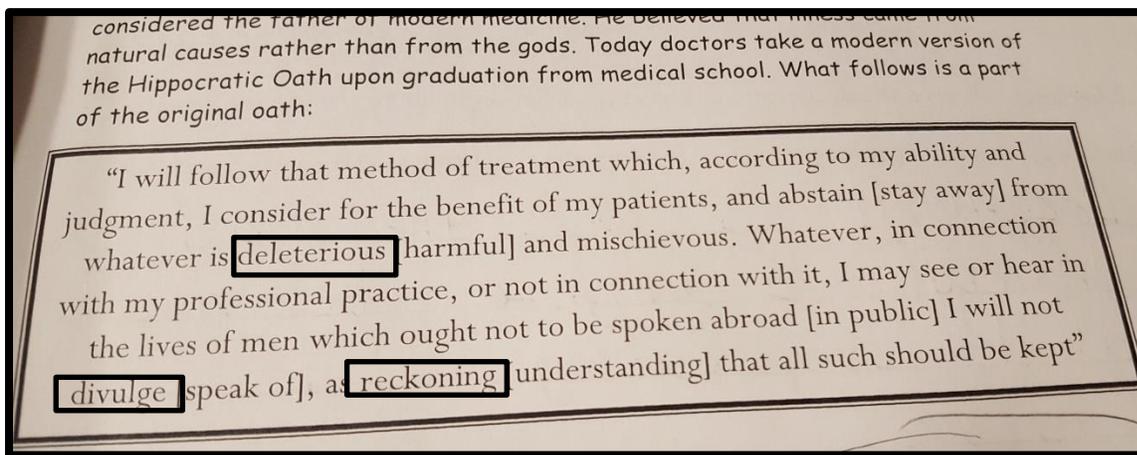


Figure 3. Document 2. This figure illustrates the document with the tricky words.

One day during class, I gave the students a few documents to analyze and answer questions. These documents were mostly quotes written by philosophers from ancient Greece. An example, of the academic vocabulary is shown in figure 3 above. The students had been learning about ancient Greece for about four weeks by that time, I assumed analyzing these documents and answering the questions would be easy. I wanted them to work independently, in order for me to observe any struggles they were having. Within 5 minutes of letting them work alone, many students had their hands in the air, asking what a certain word meant. For example, students asked what divulge, deleterious, and reckoning meant. As I was sitting there observing

this phenomenon, I was astounded. I realized these students either had minimal background knowledge about the document, minimal strategies for figuring out academic language, or minimal academic language taught to them. As I kept comparing my observations, with the surveys the students filled out, I found a shared theme.

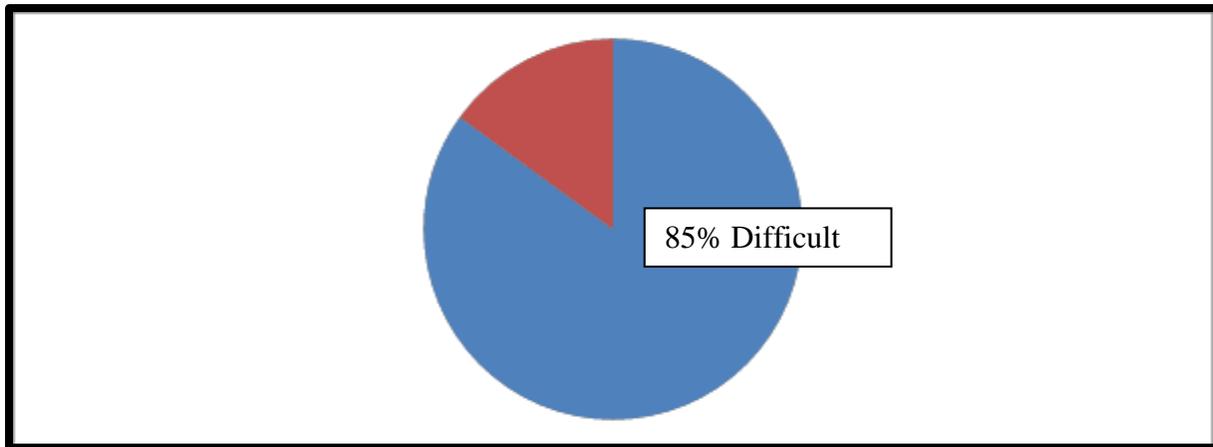


Figure 4. Results of academic vocabulary. This figure illustrates the percentage of students who thought analyzing a document was difficult when there was academic language.

In figure 4, the majority of the students thought the document was hard to analyze when the document had challenging academic vocabulary. On the survey one student said, “This document was hard because it was long and had tricky words that I did not know.” A critical component to academic reading comprehension and analyzing documents is the understanding of vocabulary (Larson, Dixon, & Townsend, 2014). When students are able to analyze and comprehend a document without getting stuck on the academic language they are reaching their potential of being college and career ready. It is up to the teachers, to provide students with the access of academic vocabulary.

Finding Three: 11 out of 20 students, or 55% of the students said, the caption and historical context helped them analyze the document and answer the questions.

The historical context gives the students a setting of the document they are analyzing. Historical context gives the students the moods, attitudes, and conditions that exist during a certain time period. Those students who read the historical context or the caption below a document are not only learning more about the document, but also activating more of their background knowledge. Captions give students additional information about the circumstances surrounding the given document. Without the caption or historical context, students who have minimal background knowledge will have nothing else to pull information from, but with the caption it allows supplemental information for the students.

One goal for students when analyzing documents is to break the document down and look at all its parts. Earlier in the year I gave the students a graphic organizer to help them analyze documents. On this organizer, there was a column for the students to write down everything they saw in the document. As I was walking around, I realized they were writing down inferences. The students were skipping over the easy part of analyzing a document and going right to making inferences. The students started creating logical ideas for what might be going on in the document, instead of really analyzing what was going on. Although this does not sound like a negative outcome, when the students got to the questions, they struggled. Without really looking at the document, important details may be missed or misinterpreted.

45% of the students did not use the caption or historical context when analyzing the document. Those students also said they had minimal background knowledge and that the document was hard to analyze. However, 55% of the students used the caption and historical context to help them analyze the document.

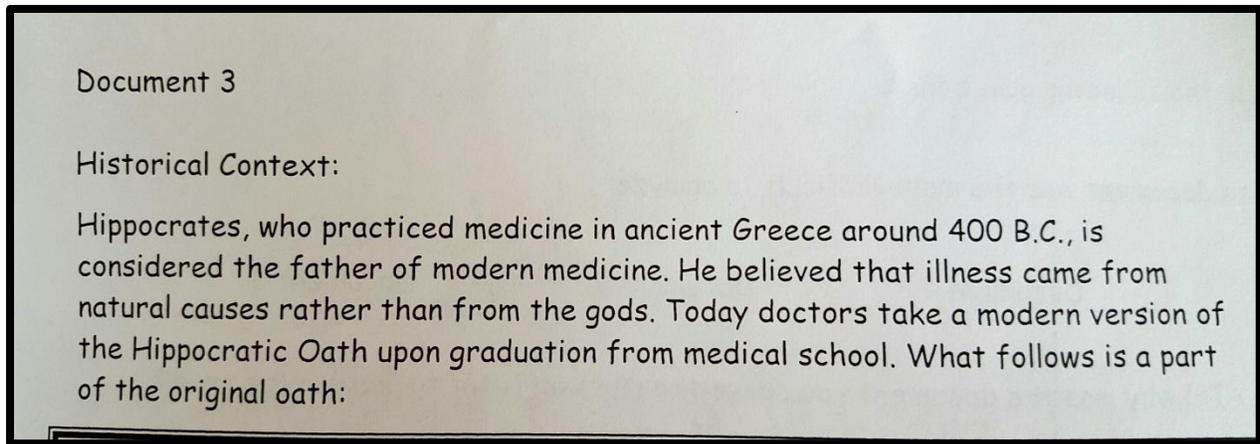


Figure 5. Historical Context. This illustrates an example of the historical context students were reading.

These 11 students also said by using the caption, it gave them even more background knowledge making it easier to analyze the document. The correlation between analyzing the entire document as a whole, caption included, and the difficulty of answering the questions, indicates the importance of the use of a caption and historical context.

Finding Four: Some students already use strategies when analyzing documents

Out of 24 students, 10 students said looking at the caption was a strategy they used, 8 stated they re-read the document, and 6 students said they underlined important details while reading, but some of the students used more than one of these strategies. As important as understanding the meaning of the document when analyzing it, the true learning comes from the awareness of the strategies used to find the answer. Out of 20 students, 10 students understood how they came up with the correct answer after analyzing a document. A lot of the students said, re-reading the quote and underlining important details within the quote. These are all strategies that have been pre-taught to the students. When students re-read a document they are getting more out of it every time they go back and re-read. When a student starts to underline important

information in the document, they are getting even more out of the text to help them answer the questions.

Prior to this activity, I did not teach the students any strategies to use when analyzing a document. I strictly wanted to see what they were already doing and what they already knew.

Discussion

The purpose of this qualitative study was to determine how sixth grade students analyze documents. This study was focused around the following research question:

- What are the ways in which sixth grade students analyze documents?

During this 5 week study, 4 findings emerged: 1) Sixth grade students with background knowledge said it was easier to analyze a document; 2) Sixth grade students used the caption of a specific document to help them analyze and answer critical thinking questions; 3) Sixth grade students struggled to analyze a document that contained challenging academic vocabulary and 4) Sixth grade students are aware and already using certain strategies to help them analyze documents.

Students are more capable of analyzing documents when they have prior background knowledge. For students to do well, readers must have a foundation of knowledge about the topic they are analyzing (Neumann, Kaefer, Pinkham, 2014). Data also showed that the more academic language being used in the document, or even in the questions being asked, created a struggle for the students to comprehend or make sense of the document and what was being asked. Lastly, I found that students are aware of strategies they are using, such as re-reading the document, underlining important details, and using the caption to help readers analyze the document. This finding demonstrated that students are aware of strategies they are using, which

will help give teachers a starting point when teaching students how to analyze documents. Sometimes asking the students what they already know, will give the teacher a direction.

Conclusions

Background knowledge and the use of captions make analyzing a document easier.

The data collected in this qualitative study demonstrates the importance of having background knowledge prior to analyzing a document. The students, who had background knowledge about the document they were analyzing, were able to answer the analytical questions. Background knowledge looks different for each student. Fisher, Frey, and Lapp (2012) discuss that background knowledge varies from student to students because of the diverse world we live in today. Some students come to school with the experience of winter and snow storms, while others do not. Some students have been taught their multiplication tables, while others have not. Some students have seen every museum in the community, while others have not (p. 23). This growing gap will impact how each and every student analyzes a document and answers questions that follow.

Having a wide variety of background knowledge is important for student success. Even though some students have had great opportunities to build on their background knowledge, they also need to know how to access it. Neuman, Kaefer, and Pinkham (2014) say, “It makes good sense that to comprehend a story or text, readers will need a threshold of knowledge about the topic, but also know how to access this information to make meaningful connections” (p. 146). My research helps to prove this statement true, the students that analyzed the document with little to no difficulties said they had background knowledge, but those students who had a difficult time analyzing the document, had little to no background knowledge. Understanding

this phenomenon will give teachers a better outlook on why students are having trouble analyzing documents or even reading and comprehending text. Knowing this, teachers can create new ways to help students build their background knowledge, prior to analyzing a document or reading and comprehending a text.

Academic vocabulary makes analyzing a document harder for students.

Through my research I was able to determine what made analyzing a document hard for students. Not only was it the lack of background knowledge, but many students were unable to understand the document because there were challenging words; the students struggled to comprehend the academic language in the document. When the academic language or vocabulary was not something the students had seen before, they were perplexed. The students were confused about the vocabulary within the document, but the students were also confused about what the questions were asking. From all the data I collected, the students were not only confused about challenging vocabulary, but the questions that went along with each document. This finding tells me two important aspects about the students: 1) The students either have limited academic vocabulary knowledge, and/or 2) Students have limited strategies to help them decipher those academically challenging words.

With the rigorous vocabulary knowledge, students' need access to these more challenging words. If the students do not have this access, they then need to be taught strategies to help them decode and figure out the challenging words on their own. Evans and Clark (2015) discuss the importance of reading and writing strategies that can increase the critical-thinking skills of their students and strengthen student understanding of social studies content material (p.8). As a teacher, knowing and understanding the importance of critical-thinking, in order for students to

think critically, they need access to strategies and a plethora of academic vocabulary.

In the long run, not just in the social studies classroom, or even in the any other classroom, students will eventually graduate and enter into the real- world. Within the real-world adults are expected to think-critically and understand challenging vocabulary in order to get day to day activities accomplished.

Students are already using strategies when analyzing documents.

The results of my study show that some students are already using strategies to analyze a text. When the students were analyzing a document, some of the students discussed going back to the document and re-reading or re-analyzing what was going on in the document. When students are aware of strategies they are already using to help them analyze a document, they will transfer that skill into another classroom and use it when reading complicated text. The importance of students using strategies already and being aware of these strategies is helpful for the teacher. When students already use strategies that work for them, all the teacher needs to do is re-teach and continue developing the already learned strategy.

Although some students did not say they were using a strategy to engage with the document, if they were capable of answering a question related to the document, there was most likely a strategy being implemented. My research has shown a few aspects of using and teaching strategies to students. Those students who knew what strategy they were using have a better grasp of cross curricular understanding. Instructional strategies that are implemented in the English classroom, such as KWL charts, making predictions prior to reading, and question-answer relationship can also be brought in and used in the social studies or science classroom. Literacy-related instructional strategies can be implemented across all content area classes, as

long as the teacher uses content specific reading, with explicit modeling of each strategy the students can use implement the strategy across all area classes (Vacca, Vacca, & Mraz, 2005). Any and all students who used their background knowledge are using a strategy called, contextualizing which is essentially pulling information that has been previously learned, and adding it to new learning. Even though some students did not talk about background knowledge being a strategy many students understood they were using it.

Implications

Teachers need to provide students with ample opportunities to build background knowledge.

Teachers need to be aware of the importance of background knowledge. When reading informational text or choosing between multiple meaningful words in order to make inferences we rely on our background knowledge. By creating an atmosphere that not only teaches the students about the topic of study, but actually gives them experiences we can increase their background knowledge. Involving the students in the topic of study by having guest speakers, or participating in field trips, and demonstrations will be more powerful than reading from a text book and stick with the students for much, much longer. (Fisher, Frey, & Lapp, 2012). By letting the students really experience the topic of study, they will be more apt to hold onto it in their memory and be able to pull from it when needed. Clark and Evans (2014) also discuss the importance of recognizing that knowledge is not only accumulating facts; rather, students need to develop knowledge networks, comprised of clusters of concepts that are coherent, generative and supportive of future learning” (p. 147). In order for teachers to help students build knowledge networks, teachers can implement strategies into their teaching such as; teaching content in

categories, using contrasts and comparisons, as well as analogies. These three strategies will allow students to connect new learning to prior learning; it will also help them create a knowledge network that is important for building background knowledge.

Give students opportunities to use academic vocabulary.

Students are having a difficult time reading through documents that have challenging vocabulary. Even though the students are reading the documents, there may be little comprehension going on. When students are analyzing a document with challenging vocabulary, they are often unable to decipher what is being said in the document. While observing my students, when they came to a word they did not understand, they instantly raised their hand for help. For teachers, this means students need opportunities to stumble over more challenging words. When students have to try to figure out the puzzling words on their own, this will challenge them to learn strategies that best help figure out the meaning of the word. When students struggle, this is a great opportunity to implement teaching strategies to help students figure out these more challenging vocabulary words. There are strategies for teachers to implement. Teaching students how to use context clues in a given reading is one strategy. Context clues give students an idea or hint about what an unfamiliar word might mean (Baumann, Font, Edwards, Boland, 2005). Students will read the sentence while looking for these clues given by the author. Once the students have re-read the passage, then they will insert the new meaning of the word into the passage to make sure it makes sense. This is one strategy teachers can implement into their classroom to help students figure out challenging academic language.

Continue to teach students how to use strategies to analyze documents.

Students are already using strategies when analyzing documents. Some students are actually aware of the strategies they are using. From my research, I have found more than half the students in this study are aware of the strategies they are using. The top three strategies are: re-reading the document, underlining important information in the document and using the captions to gain a better understanding of the document itself. As a teacher, I want to know what the students are already doing and build off that knowledge. Knowing that the majority of my students use the caption, as a teacher, I want to continue the use of that strategy. Teaching all students how to use a caption to deepen their understanding of a document is a great strategy for every student to be aware of. Using the caption not only deepens the understanding of the document, but also allows students to pull more background knowledge surrounding the document. Start off by giving the students a big caption to pull from, but as they learn how to use the caption and pull out the most important information, take a little bit away at a time.

Another strategy the majority of the students said they used was re-reading the document. This is another great strategy that all students should be doing, especially after reading the questions and having a purpose for reading the document. As a teacher, knowing some students are already re-reading a document this provides the perfect opportunity to teach those students who are not aware of re-reading. Being aware of the strategies students are already using is very helpful.

Limitations

The limitations of this qualitative study include time and participant size. Due to the time constraints this research was conducted in 5 weeks with a small group of students. Also, I was the only one conducting the study, which means I was unable to get other's perspectives or

feedback while conducting the study and analyzing the data.

Suggestions for Further Research

Based on my research, I will implement the strategies my students are currently using to analyze documents into lessons weekly. This will allow those students who are already using these strategies to refine them, but it will also promote the students who are unaware of the strategies to start using them. I will continue to look for other strategies that help students analyze document and discuss my findings with other sixth grade teachers. Next year, I will start the year off with a survey asking the students what the difference between analyze and summarize is. I think it is important to take a step back and make sure the students know what it means to analyze and not just summarize. Sometimes, I feel teachers take the simple things for granted and do not realize students might not know what analyze means. The survey question alone, will give great feedback and insight into my incoming sixth grade class. This survey will give me a starting point when teaching students how to analyze a document. Based on the impact of background knowledge students need to analyze documents, a suggestion would be to look into best practices for teaching background knowledge and how help the growth of student background knowledge throughout the school year. Background knowledge will not only help students in social studies, but throughout their entire school career.

Overall Significance of the Study

This study is important as it looks at ways students are analyzing documents. As a social studies teacher, with the new social studies framework and common core state standards looking at ways students analyze documents and finding strategies that work will help all teachers find a starting point when teaching. The results of this research illustrates many students already use a

few strategies and how important background knowledge is when analyzing documents. This study can be used by teachers to show students how to analyze documents in their classroom.

The documents could be historical or documents for an English class, or even readings for science. Students need to know and understand how to analyze a document and answer critical thinking questions in order to be college and career ready.

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