Introduction

For my 6th-grade classroom of predominantly English Language Learners, the identification of different parts of speech has been a formidable challenge in reading, writing, and speaking English. When identifying the meaning of a word in context, students can use knowledge of the part of speech to help them figure out the word meaning. Identifying words in context is a middle school standard in the District of Columbia Public Schools. The standards read:

6.LD-V.7. Determine the meaning of unfamiliar words using knowledge of English structure, Greek and Latin roots, suffixes, and prefixes.
6.LD-V.8. Use clues like definitions, examples, and restatements to determine the meanings of unfamiliar words and words with multiple meanings in context.

Both standards require “knowledge of English structure” and finding “the meanings of unfamiliar words…in context.”

For teaching students parts of speech, the traditional definitions used in the classroom are semantic; e.g. a noun is a person, place, or thing; a verb is an action word. However, if students do not already know what a word means, they cannot determine its part of speech using these semantic definitions. Moreover, because a common way of forming new words in English is through conversion – changing part of speech without altering the form of the word – there are many words in English that are ambiguous as to their part of speech, or that must be classified as a part of speech that is contrary to their semantically prototypical definition. For example: table semantically appears to be an
object, and therefore belongs to the class of nouns. Yet in the phrase *table the motion*, the word *table* functions as a verb. Conversely, *walk* semantically appears to be an action, and therefore belongs to the class of verbs, but in the phrase *go for a walk* it functions as a noun.

Through research on noun – verb conversions, and my experience in the classroom I synthesized two questions:

1. How well do ELL students distinguish between prototypical nouns and verbs, and between ambiguous nouns and verbs?
2. Can students with only a semantic knowledge of nouns and verbs improve comprehension through syntactic instructional intervention?

Through explicit instruction on syntactic word characteristics, I am giving my students tools to navigate the meaning of unfamiliar words.

**Intervention**

The research questions require information in two areas in order to implement intervention. First, I aim to understand how children view conversions through a technological lens. Are students using words like *google* as a verb? Do students understand *text* as a noun or a verb (i.e. *Read the text* versus *I will text you after school*)? In addition to semantic understandings of the words, the placement of words in the survey sentences will give me an idea of how students read a sentence syntactically.¹

Second, I aim to teach syntactic structures in the classroom that will give students a better understanding of the non-prototypical nouns and verbs (i.e. *googled*, *texted*, *a walk*). The lesson that will be measured in this project as well as future lessons on

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¹ See Appendix 1 for Survey
language syntax will give students the tools to identify language organization, and ultimately build comprehension.

In sum, I am giving my students ‘technological’ noun-verb conversions (i.e. on Google vs. to google) in order to help them identify the categories of ambiguous nouns and verbs. Based on their surveys of identifying the part of speech in a sentence, I provide a lesson that allows students to identify a word syntactically.

**Grammatical Background**

Word meanings stem from both semantic and structural characteristics. The semantic definition of a part of speech classifies the word through its meaning. For example, *green* is a word that we understand semantically as a color, a prototypical member of the class of adjectives. On the other hand, the structural characteristics of a word highlight the place of a word in a sentence, the constituents, and the “function” the word has in a sentence (GB 14)\(^2\). Suddenly, *green* shifts into a verb in the sentence *I want to green the economy*. The difficulty of determining the part of speech stems from the multitude of irregularities that offset prototypical words.

Semantically verbs are categorized as action words or states of being. For example, *I jump, She ran, and I swim*, are all prototypical verbs in this form, because they are actions. Early in childhood children learn to classify words semantically rather than syntactically.\(^3\) Verbs are action words, and nouns are objects (i.e. “Mommy look! Dog run”). For instructional purposes in a classroom it is important to know that children


acquire language through a semantic mode, because a teacher can begin to formulate syntactic strategies that help form memory patterns.\textsuperscript{4}

In addition to semantic meaning, verbs have syntactic patterns that aid their classification. Morphologically, a verb always can have the affix –s, -ed, -en (perfect), and –ing (progressive) (Crystal 212)\textsuperscript{5}. For example, ‘I jump’ becomes ‘she jumps.’ Also, the deep structure of a sentence contains a noun phrase and a verb phrase. In that structure the verb phrase always follows the subject noun phrase (e.g. The song was sung by Sarah $\rightarrow$ Sarah past + sing + the song). Thus, as syntax suggests, a verb follows a noun. If there are auxiliary (‘helping’) verbs, the main verb will follow them in the deep structure as well (e.g. Sarah will sing, Sarah is singing, Sarah might have been singing). Using these syntactic cues allows a learner to identify the main verb in a sentence without knowing the meaning of the word, or relying on the semantic definition of ‘action or state of being’.

Like verbs, nouns also can be defined by both semantic and syntactic characteristics. The noun prototype is a ‘person, place, or thing.’ The semantic definition fails in situations with ambiguity and irregularity, such as those created by conversion. To give a technological example, the dictionary definition of the word text is, “the original words and form of a written or printed work,”\textsuperscript{6} a noun by the semantic definition. Through conversion the word text has now also taken on the attributes of a verb (i.e. I texted you last night).

\textsuperscript{4} This idea was developed from my research on this project.
\textsuperscript{5} Crystal, David. (2003). The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language (2\textsuperscript{nd} ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (Crystal)
The syntactic characteristics of nouns help students identify the part of speech in context. Nouns have four classifications: common nouns, count nouns, proper nouns, and collective nouns (GB 16). A powerful tool in highlighting nouns in sentences is the “function words” or determiners placed in front of nouns (Crystal 210). Determiners like the, a, an, and their located in front of nouns yield the word’s grammatical classification (the dog, a text, their walk). Unlike verbs, nouns do not have distinctive inflectional morphology (GB 17), since the plural and possessive ending /s/ could also be a verb ending. The word wilderness can be used as both a place, e.g. in the wilderness (noun), or a way to describe a place, e.g. in the wilderness reserve (adjective), depending on its position in the sentence.

Methodology

The respondents in this survey range in age from 10 – 13 years old. Four of the respondents were born in the United States, and English is their second language. One respondent was born in El Salvador, and is an English Language Learner (ELL). As stated in the “intervention” section above, there are two phases of this language intervention research. First, I administered a survey that had students identify basic semantically-prototypical nouns, verbs, and adjectives, and those same words which were conversions to a different part of speech. These words include: GREEN, WALK, GOOGLE, TEXT, and FRIEND. Students were asked to read ten simple sentences and determine if the word in the sentence was a noun (N), verb (V), or adjective (A):
Second, I gave a lesson that highlighted the syntactic characteristics of nouns. In the lesson I provided students with two specific methods of identification: 1) if *a, an, the,* or *their* precedes a word then the word will probably be a noun, and 2) if the word is in front of a verb it is probably a noun. In addition, I reminded students of ‘proper nouns.’ At the end of this phase, I administered the above questionnaire as a post-test.
Results

Survey sentences contained nouns, verbs, and an adjective that were semantically prototypical, and their contrasting conversions that were written syntactically as a noun, verb, or adjective.

Sentence 1: I wanted to GREEN the environment.

Sentence 9: My Shirt is GREEN.

Sentence 2: I took my dog for a WALK.

Sentence 10: I WALK to school everyday.

Sentence 3: My teacher GOOGLED the answer online.

Sentence 6: I use the GOOGLE website for homework.

Sentence 4: We TEXT our friends at the mall.

Sentence 8: Read the TEXT.

Sentence 5: I FRIENDED someone on Myspace.

Sentence 7: Please speak to a FRIEND.
In sentences 3 and 4, the majority of students responded that *googled* and *text* were verbs (sixty and eighty percent respectively). From a syntactic standpoint, selection of these words as verbs makes the most sense. *Googled* has the –ed affix, and the word *text* follows a pronoun ‘we.’ In sentence 5, students classified the word *friended* as a verb sixty percent of the time (twenty percent said noun, and twenty percent said adjective). It appears that in this sentence students are not using syntactic clues, but rather guessing the answer, because the word is unfamiliar. In addition, sentences 2 and 10 contain both the noun and verb form of the word *walk*, yet students treated the word as a verb 100% of the time in each sentence. Respondents in sentence 9 classified the adjective form of *green* as an adjective eighty percent of the time, whereas, in sentence 1 the students had confusion about ‘*to green,*’ because of its conversion to a verb.

An emerging pattern suggests that children are using semantic knowledge to identify the part of speech. It is possible that without knowledge of the deep structure of English, students are creating a pseudo grammar that allows them to comprehend texts through a broad semantic database.

After the lesson on nouns, students increased their awareness of syntactic noun patterns. The greatest change in syntactic understanding occurred in sentences 2, 6, 7, and 8. See graphical results below:
In all four sentences students identified the words as nouns 80 – 100% of the time. The result was an increase in overall mastery of identifying nouns by thirty percent.

Discussion

One great benefit of this project was the realization that my students had not developed patterns for creating part of speech meaning. Often students guess at words using their semantic knowledge. Giving students syntactic frames to develop their understanding of part of speech allowed them to look at English in a very different light. By developing patterns some students felt as though they were creating mathematical problems to discover the meaning of English words.

The most common classification that students used throughout the process was a noun. Without having a syntactic reference students were forced to guess, and often that guess was a noun. As a teacher it is highly beneficial to be able to compartmentalize language in small chunks. This is the first grammar ‘framework’ that I feel comfortable using in the classroom with my students.
The number of students that I polled, as well as the brief time period between the diagnostic and assessment, placed limits on the accuracy of this research. Furthermore, I was unable to take a large spread of words to identify if students truly did not apply a pattern to the identification of word classification.

Overall, the project was highly beneficial to my cognitive awareness for teaching grammar in ‘bite-size’ chunks. It was extremely beneficial to be able to apply this research to my classroom practices.
References


Appendix 1

Look at the sentences below. Decide whether capitalized word is a noun, verb, or an adjective. Circle the answer you think is correct.

Ex. I JUMP up and down. 

1. I wanted to GREEN the environment. 
2. I took my dog for a WALK. 
3. My teacher GOOGLED the answer online. 
4. We TEXT our friends at the mall. 
5. I FRIENDED someone on Myspace. 
6. I use the GOOGLE website for homework. 
7. Please speak to a FRIEND. 
8. Read the TEXT. 
9. My shirt is GREEN. 
10. I WALK to school in the morning.