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Word knowledge has particular importance in literate societies. It contributes

significantly to achievement in the subjects of the school curriculum, as well as in formal and informal speaking and writing. Most people feel that there is a common sense relationship between vocabulary and comprehension--messages are composed of ideas, and ideas are expressed in words. Most theorists and researchers in education have assumed that vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension are closely related, and numerous studies have shown the strong correlation between the two (Baker, 1995; Nagy, 1988; Nelson-Herber, 1986).

Although the opportunities for vocabulary instruction are especially pronounced in language arts and reading, vocabulary instruction properly belongs in all subjects of the curriculum in which learners meet both new ideas and the words by which they are represented in the language. This Digest will consider several viewpoints on teaching vocabulary, offer some strategies for implementing vocabulary teaching, and suggest some sources for further reading.

TEACHER'S DILEMMA

From a teacher's point of view the issue in the classroom usually revolves around how to improve the student's reading comprehension, whether it be in content area reading or in the language arts. Should the teacher teach vocabulary directly or incidentally? That is, should words be targeted for the learners or should they develop naturally through reading and the learner's desire to clarify concepts? Evidence falls in both directions. Certainly vocabulary knowledge can be acquired through reading and discussions about certain contexts (Nagy et al, 1985). But it appears that direct instruction is more effective than incidental learning for the acquisition of a particular vocabulary, and also more efficient (McKeown and Beck, 1988). However, in one study of fourth graders that examined whether a context or a definitional approach was better for vocabulary development, Szymborski (1995) found that there was no significant difference in raw scores between the samples using the two different approaches.

INSTRUCTIONAL TECHNIQUES

It is generally accepted that students learn vocabulary more effectively when they are directly involved in constructing meaning rather than in memorizing definitions or synonyms. Thus, techniques such as webbing that involve students' own perspectives in creating interactions that gradually clarify targeted vocabulary may be a way to combine direct teaching and incidental learning in one exercise. Teachers can use students' personal experiences to develop vocabulary in the classroom. Through informal activities such as semantic association students brainstorm a list of words associated with a familiar word, pooling their knowledge of pertinent vocabulary as they discuss the less familiar words on the list. Semantic mapping goes a step further, grouping the words on the list into categories and arranging them on the visual "map" so that relationships among the words become clearer. In semantic feature analysis, words are grouped according to certain features, usually with the aid of a chart that graphically depicts similarities and differences among features of different words. Finally, analogies

are a useful way of encouraging thoughtful discussion about relationships among meanings of words.

CONTENT AREA READING

In content area reading, the development of vocabulary as a study of relationships seems particularly pertinent. Recognition of isolated information in an article on mechanization, for instance, may represent little understanding of the changes that are occurring as industry moves from human labor to robotics. Barton and Calfee (1989) suggest using a vocabulary matrix to establish the dimensions of a subject. The power of any vocabulary matrix lies in its image of connected ideas, in its process of discovering context for a new word, and in its visual reminder of gaps in our understanding.

Vocabulary development in any subject can proceed by asking students to reveal any vocabulary framework that they already have. Those known words may help them associate meaning with new vocabulary. In that way, definitions and the particular meaning within a given sentence have a context and a set of relations to build on.

One group technique that enables students to list synonyms and/or definitional phrases that they already associate with the topic involves the construction of a simple T-bar chart. Suppose, for example, an article on protecting the environment includes the word "menace." The teacher lists words that students associate with threats to the environment. Associated terms and synonyms are them listed in the T-bar chart.

With this kind of visual representation of a word and related terms, a matrix is begun for most students and the definition is enriched. The semantic context may now be rich enough for the reader to use this word in its context (Moore et al, 1989). To build background and to understand vocabulary in content area reading, students need the benefit of seeing multiple relationships.

TEACHING VOCABULARY

Christen and Murphy (1991) contend that research clearly emphasizes that for learning to occur, new information must be integrated with what the learner already knows. They feel that teaching vocabulary as a prereading step is an instructional intervention that should be considered when readers lack the prior or background knowledge to read in a content area. Kueker (1990) also argues that prereading activities help enormously in reading comprehension.

Another technique to help students see a word in a broader context is to have them answer the following questions: (1) what is it?; (2) what is it like?; (3) what are some examples? Schwartz and Raphael (1985) believe that this list of 3 questions helps students see relationships between familiar and less familiar terms and also brings the meaning of an unknown term into focus by requiring analogies and examples.

LANGUAGE ARTS

In facilitating vocabulary instruction in the language arts classroom, Hodapp and Hodapp (1996) suggest using vocabulary packs and cued spelling as intervention strategies, while Cooter (1991) discusses using storytelling. Wilkinson (1994) opts for enlivening vocabulary lessons by combining them with two effective teaching strategies--cooperative learning and story development by students. Ruddiman (1993) also offers activities for vocabulary development. Bear et al (1996) presents a practical way for teachers to study words with students, providing more than 300 word study activities which are set up to follow literacy development from emergent to more mature, specialized stages. For an overview of current information on vocabulary instruction and acquisition, see Baker (1995).

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