

Teaching Vocabulary to Improve Reading Comprehension

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Abstract

Vocabulary is vital for comprehending reading texts. Readers must possess a certain number of words, the so-called threshold level, in order to be able to read in L2. This paper provides direct vocabulary instruction techniques, aimed at helping students with a small lexicon to acquire core vocabulary, more important and high-frequency words, at rates that will improve their reading comprehension.

Key words: Vocabulary; Collocation; Reading comprehension

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INTRODUCTION

Reading comprehension and vocabulary are strongly correlated (Seifert et al., 2017). Limited vocabulary knowledge hinders students from comprehending a text (Silva & Cain, 2015). Thus, a priority task for teachers is to boost students' vocabulary items. Two common ways to build up students' word power are direct instruction and incidental learning. Direct instruction, also referred to as the explicit approach, is particularly useful for students who have insufficient vocabulary and little exposure to lexical learning beyond the classroom (Nation, 2001).

In contrast, incidental learning predominantly involves extensive reading. Through encountering words in different contexts, students not only expand

their vocabulary but also increase their lexical breadth of understanding (Nation, 2001). Experts agree that a combination of direct instruction and incidental learning is the best way to help students develop vocabulary (e.g. Alderson, 2000; Laufer, 1997; Nation, 2001).

This paper illustrates a number of instructional techniques to promote the development of students' core vocabulary, i.e., the most important and high-frequency words. The acquisition of these words will enable them to read texts suited to their level with enhanced comprehension and fluency.

EXPLICIT APPROACH

Lexical researchers (e.g. Alderson, 2000; Laufer, 1997; Nation, 2001) contend that readers need to reach a vocabulary threshold in order to be able to read in L2. Laufer (1992) defines this threshold as the number of words the reader must possess in his/her lexicon. The number of words a reader needs depends on what type of texts s/he intends to read. Adult native English speakers should have three thousand word families to start reading authentic texts, but the easiest simplified reading material requires only a few hundred (Nation & Waring, 1997). It is generally accepted that direct instruction is essential to help students to achieve threshold vocabulary size, i.e., those most important and frequently used words that comprise their core vocabulary (Nation, 1990; Zimmerman, 1997).

So, what do teachers do to assist students to acquire these most important and frequently used words? Prince (1996) suggests beginning with word pairs in which a L2 word is matched with an L1 translation. Furthermore, the relationship between spelling and pronunciation should be highlighted, especially when inconsistency between the two occurs (Ellis & Beaton, 1993). Saying the word out loud reinforces it in students' memory with it. Once students are familiar with these words, timed exercises can

be given to speed up recognition of them, and eventually they can become sight vocabulary, which will lead to more fluent reading (Schmitt, 2000).

Another way to consolidate words in students' memory is to emphasize learning from context. Students achieve this by making correlations between a new word and the text in which it appears. They also learn words through repeated exposure, "gaining more comprehension of a word's meanings and functions by seeing it several times in different contexts." (Nation, 1994)

Other exercises that can deepen students' knowledge of words include providing collocations and idioms, using prefixes, suffixes, and roots, making semantic maps of words. With the advent of corpora, we know some words tend to co-occur. For example, "rear" is collocated with "mirror" instead of "back," and "brush" with "teeth" instead of "wash." Strings of words also collocate, and the resultant meaning has nothing to do with their surface word definitions, for example, "kick the bucket," which in this case is utilized as an idiom for "death." Bahns (1993) discovered that learners tend to transfer directly collocations from their first language to the target language. Some of these collocations correspond with those of the target language and some don't. Therefore, teachers need to sort lists, as much as they can, for those potential incompatible collocations. By raising students' awareness of peculiar lexical phrases, the teacher can help them accomplish improved comprehension when they later encounter them while reading.

Using word parts, such as prefixes, suffixes, and roots, to determine the meanings of words can not only aid students in expanding the number of their vocabulary items but can establish the words more deeply in the brain (Nation, 1990). Additionally, using word parts can be a particularly useful strategy in reading content-area texts. For instance, medical texts often include words that use the same word parts repeatedly, such as "ology" in "cardiology," "radiology," "ophthalmology," "genecology," and "dermatology." Knowing that "ology" means a branch of knowledge can help students recognize these words in context and add to their comprehension of them. This method works best when combined with others, such as utilizing context clues. Students who learn how to break down words into parts and acquire understanding of prefixes, suffixes and roots are better equipped for vocabulary growth.

Semantic maps can be used to develop students' understanding of a particular concept or group of thematically related words (Jiang, 2002). For instance, in teaching about swimming, you might target the following vocabulary words: *free stroke*, *backstroke*, *breaststroke*, *sidestroke*, and *dog paddle*. Then, begin instruction by having students brainstorm words related to the concept of swimming. As they brainstorm, list their words on the board, making sure to include the targeted words. Discussion is the key to semantic mapping. During the

brainstorming session, have students discuss and define all of the words on the list. Semantic mapping works best as a group activity, because discussion helps students with smaller vocabularies learn all the words that are talked about.

CONCLUSION

Vocabulary is a vital component of reading comprehension. Several teaching techniques facilitate the development of a core vocabulary within students. Lexical transfer is beneficial to the process of learning words with L2 translation. Furthermore, the instruction of words within their specific contexts can activate students' schemata, developing links between letters and meanings and leaving a lasting impression in their minds. In addition, the instruction of collocations and idioms acts as an access point not only to the expansion of vocabularies but also to the promotion of reading comprehension when idiosyncratic collocations and idioms that cannot be understood from their surface meanings occur in the text. Word parts and semantic mapping are two additional teaching techniques that can be engaged to increase students' word power. Through the use of a variety of vocabulary teaching techniques, students will be more likely to acquire core vocabulary that functions overall like the words of L1 in terms of automaticity. Once core vocabulary transitions to sight vocabulary in the minds of the students, they will achieve reading comprehension.

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