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Vocabulary Instruction for Second Language Readers

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Abstract

Over the past 20 years, research has consistently affirmed the importance of explicit vocabulary instruction for adult learners of English as a second language (ESL). Given the significant vocabulary demands faced by adult second language readers, ESL teachers must carefully target their instruction for maximum impact and to foster meaningful connections for learners. This practical resource guide for designing and implementing effective vocabulary instruction provides an overview of a three-tiered vocabulary framework, followed by specific recommendations for selecting and teaching vocabulary in the adult second language classroom. Examples of strategies for brief instruction and elaborate instruction are given.

Introduction

The strong connection between vocabulary and reading comprehension among second language learners is well documented and enduring (Nation, 2005; National Reading Panel, 2000). Researchers, English as a second language (ESL) teachers, and students have long recognized the importance of vocabulary development as a foundation for second language reading.

Over the past 20 years, research regarding effective teaching practices has consistently shown that second language learners actually benefit more from explicit vocabulary instruction than from incidental vocabulary learning through wide reading (Hinkel, 2006; Nation, 2005; Sokmen, 1997). This is partially explained by the fact that the language demands of wide reading are substantial and potentially overwhelming for second language learners. In fact, Hu and Nation (2000) report

that a second language reader needs to know 98% of the words in a text in order to be able to read it unassisted (i.e., without the aid of a dictionary or other resource) and to effectively guess the meanings of unknown words from context. This means that second language learners can normally succeed in navigating passages containing 1 unknown word in 50.

Nation (2006) verified the above findings and determined that a vocabulary base of 8000-9000 word families is typically necessary for comprehension of written text such as a novel or newspaper. These statistics, though daunting, clearly portray the enormous task that lies before second language readers. The reality is that teachers simply cannot directly teach all of the words that their second language students need to master in order to become proficient readers.

An additional consideration is that word knowledge is complex, multi-faceted, and incremental; thus, depth of understanding unfolds over time (Nagy & Scott,

2000). To illustrate, in order to truly know a word, a learner must be able to (a) define it, (b) decode and spell it, (c) pronounce it, (d) know its multiple meanings (including common and specialized meanings), and (e) be able to ascertain and apply the appropriate meaning in a particular context (Calderon, 2007; Nagy & Scott, 2000). ESL teachers, then, need to carefully target their instruction for maximum impact. This article is designed as a practical resource for teachers of adult second language learners in that regard. Specifically, the article provides an overview of a three-tiered vocabulary framework, followed by specific recommendations for selecting and teaching vocabulary in the adult second language classroom.

A Vocabulary Framework

Beck, McKeown, and Kucan (2002) present a useful framework for classifying vocabulary and making instructional determinations regarding which words to teach and how to effectively teach them. According to this model, vocabulary within a given reading selection can be grouped into three tiers with Tier 2 words being the most productive for explicit, in-depth instruction. Tier 1 words are the commonly-occurring, basic words of English; these are lexical items that native speakers of a language easily recognize, such as *map*, *uncle*, *tall*, *sing*, and *dog*. Tier 2 words are academic vocabulary and other lexical items which appear frequently across a variety of domains. Words such as *coincidence*, *industrious*, and *investigate* fall into this category. Tier 2 words are typically essential for understanding the meaning of a text. Finally, Tier 3 words are low-frequency words such as *amoeba*, *isotope*, or *lathe*, which are often discipline-specific. A more detailed overview of the three tiers of words, with specific commentary regarding the language of second language learners (Calderon, 2007) is provided below.

Tier 1 Words

Tier 1 words are the most basic, commonly-occurring words in English. Many of the Tier 1 words are easily recognized by native speakers of English but

not necessarily by second language learners. Adult second language learners typically know the concepts of these words, as well as the labels for them in their native language. They may not, however, know the English labels. To illustrate, consider the word, *dog*, which is translated as *perro* in Spanish. A native speaker of Spanish who knows the word *perro* simply needs to learn the corresponding English label, *dog*.

The meaning of Tier 1 words can often be conveyed using visuals, realia, gestures, or demonstration. Teachers can also provide or allow students to obtain a native language translation. A key consideration here is that the meaning of Tier 1 words should be conveyed quickly and clearly so that connections between students' native language and second language knowledge are fostered.

Tier 2 Words

Tier 2 words are high-frequency words in the speech of mature, proficient users of English. This category includes academic vocabulary and other words which appear across a variety of domains (e.g., *analyze*, *redundant*, *significant*). Multiple-meaning words, which have specialized meanings in particular disciplines, also fall within this category. Examples include *table*, *cell*, and *ring*. Adult second language learners may be familiar with the "common" or "general" meaning of these words, but they may need to learn the specialized meaning.

Tier 2 words are typically critical for comprehending the meaning of a text. Additionally, these words add richness and depth to a learner's vocabulary and, therefore, powerfully impact the verbal functioning of second language learners. For these reasons, Tier 2 words are ideal choices for explicit, elaborate instruction.

Tier 3 Words

Tier 3 words are low-frequency words, often associated with specific disciplines. They tend to be highly technical and precise in meaning. As such, they may be essential words for second language learners to

understand when reading technical or expository material, but they do not have broad, general utility. Thus, Tier 3 words should be directly taught only in relation to a specific reading selection and only when they are essential for comprehension of that particular text. With adult learners, native language translations can be used to quickly convey the meaning of Tier 3 words.

Selecting Vocabulary for Explicit Instruction

Clearly, different words within a given text require varying degrees of instructional focus in the classroom; some words warrant in-depth teaching, whereas others can be adequately addressed with a brief demonstration and/or explanation. To illustrate, because Tier 2 words are often critical for comprehension of a reading selection, they are optimal choices for elaborate instruction. At the same time, however, some Tier 1 and 3 words which are crucial to understanding a particular text should also be directly taught. With these points in mind, Beck, McKeown, and Kucan (2002) propose the following procedure for selecting vocabulary words for classroom instruction:

1. Identify a text or passage to be read by your students.
2. List all of the vocabulary that will likely be unfamiliar to your students, and classify each one according to tier.
3. Analyze the word list, using the following questions as a guide: (a) Which words are Tier 2 words? (b) Which Tier 2 words are the *most* necessary for comprehension of the text? (c) Does the reading selection contain other words (Tier 1 and/or Tier 3) that are needed for comprehension? If so, which ones?
4. On the basis of your analysis, determine which words you will teach, prioritizing those words that are critical for comprehension of the text and of high utility to your students.
5. From this list, decide which words will require only brief instructional attention and which ones warrant more elaborate instruction. (p. 30)

As outlined above, it is recommended that teachers first identify all vocabulary that needs to be taught and then determine the type of instruction that is appropriate for each word (i.e., brief vs. elaborate instruction). When making these instructional determinations, it is beneficial for teachers to consider the following set of questions about each word which needs to be taught, regardless of tier:

1. Is the word concrete? Can it be demonstrated?
2. Is it a cognate in the language(s) of your second language learners?
Note: A cognate is a word which is similar in both form and meaning in two or more languages (Richards, Platt, & Platt, 1992). Consider the following cognates for the English word, *territory*: Spanish, *territorio*; Portuguese, *territorio*; Italian, *territorio*; Romanian, *teritori*; and French, *territoire*. For native speakers of Romance languages, many Tier 2 and Tier 3 words are cognates in English. Some Tier 1 words are also cognates.
3. Is it a high utility word? (Will students likely encounter it in other written text?)
4. Is it a polysemous (multiple-meaning) word? If yes, is a “common meaning” used in the text, or is a more technical or specialized meaning being used?
5. How does this word relate to other vocabulary, or to ideas/themes that students know or have been learning about? (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002; Calderon, 2007)

Words which are concrete and can be demonstrated, as well as words which are cognates in the language(s) of your students are good choices for brief instruction. On the other hand, high utility words, polysemous words with specialized meanings, and words which relate to other vocabulary or content in a particular class should be considered for elaborate instruction. Recommended strategies for the two types of instruction are presented in the section to follow.

Recommended Strategies

Strategies for Providing Brief Instruction

Nation (2005) recommends the following techniques for quickly drawing attention to the meaning of words:

(a) using an L1 [native language] translation, (b) using a known synonym, (c) showing an object or picture, (d) giving a quick demonstration, (e) drawing a simple picture or diagram, (f) breaking the word into parts and giving the meaning of the parts and the whole word (the word part strategy), (g) giving several example sentences with the word in context to show the meaning, (h) commenting on the underlying meaning of the word and other referents. (p. 47)

One additional possibility is to model the use of an online dictionary or similar resource (e.g., www.dictionary.com) to look up a particular word. Using dictionary.com, for example, teachers and students can quickly access the meaning of a word, hear it pronounced, view lists of synonyms and antonyms, read usage information, and view sample sentences using the word in context. Many Tier 1 words and some Tier 2 words can easily be addressed using the above techniques. When students know a particular word in their native language, learning an English label is a relatively straightforward, easy process.

A second way in which learners can benefit from brief, explicit instruction is through the direct teaching of cognates (August, Carlo, Dressler, & Snow, 2005; Calderon, 2007). Teachers can provide a quick focus on cognates that occur in a reading passage by using the following procedure: (a) identify a list of any known cognates from the reading selection, (b) write the list of cognates on the board (in the native language), and (c) ask students to search for the English cognate within the reading selection. Alternatively, teachers can ask students to identify and jot down possible cognates themselves while reading a selection of text or listening to the teacher read aloud (Colorin Colorado, 2007). Students' lists can then be discussed in class with the teacher prompting learners to share their own insights

regarding similarities and differences between the English word(s) and the native language word(s).

Strategies for Providing Elaborate Instruction

The following procedure, which is adapted from Beck, McKeown, and Kucan (2002) and from Calderon (2007), is highly effective for teaching Tier 2 words and other lexical items which warrant elaborate instruction:

1. Say the word in English (and in the primary language in bilingual classes).
2. State the word in context (as it appears in the text).
3. Provide a learner-friendly definition for the word. Note: Teachers should create this definition by (a) thinking about what specific elements make the word different from other words and (b) using everyday language which is comprehensible to students.
4. Provide an additional example of a phrase or sentence using the word in order to clarify meaning.
5. Ask students to repeat the word (at least 3 times) to build a phonological representation of the word.
6. Have students become "engaged with the word" through brief, lively activities which deal with the word's meaning(s). Note: These activities can take many forms, provided that all students are required to use the word and demonstrate that they comprehend its meaning(s). Calderon (2007) recommends that each student be required to say the word aloud and hear it several times spoken by others.
7. Have students say the word again as a group, first in isolation and then in context (as stated within the text). At this point, students may also be asked to spell the word.
8. Plan to incorporate the newly-learned word in post-reading activities. (See the Tindall article in this volume for an overview of the reading framework.) (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002; Calderon, 2007)

This procedure can be incorporated into the regular

routine of a daily or weekly class session. Calderon (2007) recommends teaching 6-7 vocabulary words per day (or class session) using this method, varying the oral language activities to maintain learners' interest and provide ongoing challenge. Of course, the exact number of words selected for instruction will depend on students' overall English proficiency, reading abilities, and difficulty level of the text to be read that day.

Examples of activities for engaging second language learners with the word (step #6 above) include think-pair-share, choral response to targeted questions, whole-class discussion (with learners' responding quickly as answers come to mind), and more. A few sample activities recommended by Beck, McKeown, and Kucan (2002) are provided below (pp. 44-46).

Idea Completions

Have students complete sentence stems which require them to draw on their knowledge of the word's meaning to explain a situation. To illustrate, for the word *virtuoso*, students might be asked to complete the sentence, "The audience asked the *virtuoso* to play another piece of music because..."

Similarly, for the word *alarmed*, the following prompt might be used: "The accountant was *alarmed* when she opened the safe because..."

Applause, Applause

Have students clap to indicate how much they would like to be described by a particular adjective (not at all, a little, or a lot). A few examples are *miserly*, *gregarious*, and *gullible*. Students then explain why they responded as they did.

Have You Ever...

Students respond to a prompt such as, "Describe a time when you might...("refuse something," "negotiate with someone," or "commend someone"). In an alternate version of this technique, students respond to the question, "Have you ever...("had an outlandish idea?" or "felt ambivalent?"). Students then elaborate and

explain their responses. In either version of this activity, students have the opportunity to connect the new word with their own experiences and begin to integrate it into their working vocabulary.

Other similar types of questions, prompts, and activities can be developed by teachers, based on the specific learning needs and interests of their adult second language readers. Questions beginning with *when*, *why*, or *how* are particularly effective for helping students make connections to their own prior knowledge.

Conclusion

Beck, McKeown, and Kucan's (2002) three-tiered vocabulary framework is a valuable tool for teachers' use in identifying words for explicit instruction in adult ESL classes. By classifying words into the three tiers, teachers can then make informed decisions regarding the type of instruction that is warranted (either brief or elaborated), and select appropriate strategies. The recommendations provided in this article can help teachers streamline their instruction and maximize their impact in the vital area of vocabulary development for adult second language learners.

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