Learning vocabulary through reading

Learning vocabulary through reading

Vocabulary resources published in 2009:

- Nippers: awkward (level 3)
- Nippers: spectators (level 3)
- Playing with words: implode (level 4)
- Playing with words: memorable (level 4)
- Up from the Ashes: "grateful"(level 5)
- Up from the Ashes: "tragedy" (level 5)

These provide teachers with assessment data on student ability to work out the meanings of words as they read by using background knowledge, context clues, and word part clues. The student task in each resource is based on a vocabulary learning strategy developed by Blachowicz & Fisher (2006). The Next Steps section shows teachers how to teach the use of context and word part clues; this section also exemplifies how key competencies might be foregrounded within reading.

Underlying these resources is the concept of the word knowledge continuum, the idea that knowledge of a word is not simply either complete or absent (known or unknown), but exists in degrees (Nation, 2001).

Word knowledge: moving along a continuum

An individual word fits into a complicated system of language. There are many things to learn about any particular word and there are many degrees of knowing. Therefore, learning a word can be thought of as an incremental process along a continuum of word knowledge.

Stahl (1986) suggested three stages of word knowledge:

- Association
- Comprehension
- Generation.

At the association level, students can make accurate associations with the word, although they may not understand its meaning; at comprehension level, they can understand the commonly accepted meaning of a word; and at generation level, they can use the word in a novel context.

These vocabulary resources enable students to increase their knowledge of a word from whatever point it lies along the knowledge continuum – from association at the first step of vocabulary knowledge, through to comprehension and generation.

association   comprehension   generation

Word knowledge continuum
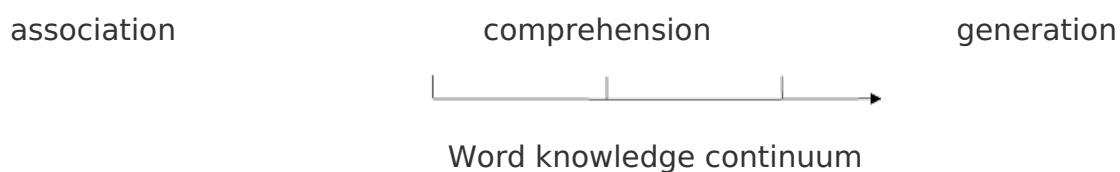
The resources assess student word knowledge (through writing the word in a sentence and then defining it) prior to and after exposure to the word in question in the context of a story. When we trialled the resources (with 68 year 7-8, and 80 year 9-10 students) the data showed most students increased their knowledge along the word continuum by expanding on their original definitions, and by using the word in longer and more detailed sentences after analysing the word in context. Looking at context

also enabled students to come to appropriate definitions of words they had no prior understanding of.

Although trials showed that word knowledge increased for most students through contextual analysis, word knowledge strongly reflected the context of the story it was seen in. The word 'awkward' for example, which appeared in the context of kids running through water, produced definitions related to movement and a sporting context. Results showed a clear improvement on the initial definitions and sentences the students gave, but the students' word knowledge remained partial. The information provided by any single context is only partial, something which adds to previous knowledge and will be expanded on by subsequent experiences of the word.

The success of analysing word parts to understand new vocabulary depends to a large degree on the word being analysed. Words such as 'tragedy' and 'grateful' don't yield much information, but others, such as 'implode' and 'memorable', with their clear relationships to 'explode' and 'memory', provide solid clues.

The most difficult task for the trial students was showing how they had analysed the word in context to make meaning. Most studentsfound it difficult to explicitly unpack the way they found meaning in context, although subsequent tasks proved that they had made meaning from context. NZCER's vocabulary acquisition technique (VAT), which appears in the Teachers' Notes in these resources, approaches meaning making through the use of context clues and word part clues in a clear step-by-step approach. The word being analysed in each resource is looked at in detail against the following criteria:

- attachment to neighbouring words
- 'electrical value' (whether the word is in a positive, negative, or neutral context)
- nearby meanings that may be similar or synonymous
- word parts (including prefixes and suffixes)

While students are using some or all of these techniques on an unconscious level already, these techniques can be developed as explicit strategies for understanding vocabulary and increasing vocabulary acquisition.

References

Blachowicz, C.L.Z., & Fisher, P.J.I., (2006) *Teaching vocabulary in all classrooms* (3rd ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill/Prentice Hall.

Kirton, N. (2007). *Vocabulary acquisition: A literature review*. Wellington, New Zealand: NZCER Press.

Nation, I.S.P. (2001). *Learning vocabulary in another language.* Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press.