

Vocabulary and comprehension

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In early 2005, I spent some time reading about comprehension as I was new to the ARCT team and this was the area of focus for our resource development in English. In my reading I was particularly interested to find that the gap between decoding and comprehension experienced by many middle and upper primary students was well documented. It was something I had experienced and worried about as a teacher of students at this level.

Vocabulary and grammatical knowledge are significant factors in influencing reading achievement. Many students struggle particularly with words that have different meanings in different contexts. (Pickens, Glynn, Whitehead, 2004). Words that students do not use in their every day language also cause difficulty.

According to Chall, (1983), weak vocabulary leads to poor reading comprehension that in turn limits vocabulary development. This cyclic effect is particularly worrying because as students move up through the school system it becomes increasingly important that they can read with understanding across the curriculum. The research literature suggests that there is a place for explicit vocabulary instruction within a balanced reading programme. (Pressley, 2000).

<http://www.readingonline.org/articles/handbook/pressley/>

Working with students

During term 3, I worked with a group of six Year 7 students for approximately one hour, once a week. According to the classroom teacher these students were all able to “decode” at a relatively high level when reading but needed support with comprehension. This was an opportunity for me to try out some strategies for teaching vocabulary and identify common words that students could be struggling with. As a first step a colleague and I looked through several “Figure it Out” maths books to get an idea of the sort of vocabulary middle/upper primary aged students were likely to encounter in instructional material. We identified:

- words commonly used when giving instructions eg. Explain, describe, compare, contrast
- words that had different meanings in different contexts eg. Table, prime, turn
- words that we thought the students were unlikely to use in every day conversations eg data, strategy,

We then designed some diagnostic assessment activities based on these words.

From the assessments it became clear that this group of students had only limited understanding of several words that I would have previously assumed they would have known. I then planned a series of lessons that all focused on the word explain. I attempted to include activities that would allow the group to construct together a meaning for the word that was deep enough to be useful for them, and to heighten interest in words in general. Activities included oral language games, “post box” type activities that lead to discussions clarifying meanings, exploring other words that were derived from explain or had similar meanings, reading and analysing explanations, giving explanations and critiquing others’ explanations.

Outcomes

The most important outcome for me from this exercise was my heightened awareness of how often I used words that were potentially difficult for students. For instance the

first sentence of a science assessment task we explored coincidentally contained the words “table”, “material” and “properties” – all words which have a different meaning in science than in every day contexts. During a group discussion about the words, we agreed that property was something that belonged to you but that in some situations property meant specifically land. In science “properties” refer to the way things behave or look eg shiny, can be bent, heats up, melts easily. Prior to this intervention I would not have stopped to think about the range of meanings “properties” could have, nor the potential difficulties this could cause for students.

During the time I worked with these students I also became aware that some of the words that I used in written feedback were unfamiliar to them and their inability to infer meaning from the context of what I had written made my feedback inaccessible and therefore pointless.

Working with these students also gave me opportunities to explore ways of developing students’ interest in words and their meanings. I was constantly amazed by the insights into students’ thinking and the opportunities for learning that were provided by group discussions. For instance when discussing the difference between “describing” a school rule and “explaining” a school rule (as a follow up to the “post box” activity) the group as a whole quickly came to realise that the word “explain” had an element of “because” in it.

Possible considerations for teaching

In order to develop a classroom climate that promotes the importance of words and their various meanings:

- Critically look at the language in instructions students are being given and discuss the vocabulary with them. Are there words with multiple meanings? What does a particular word mean in this context?
- Encourage students to ask for clarification of unknown words – may be build up a class list of words causing difficulty to identify the really high frequency ones.
- Include language activities that build families of words or rank words by shades of meaning.
- Construct Word maps (See Teachers’ Notes Selections 2005)
- Play language games as a way of promoting interest and awareness of words and their various meanings.

None of these strategies is new, yet I believe if the teacher is aware of potential difficulties students could be facing with vocabulary they could all be used effectively, with little modification to the usual class programme, to enhance the development of vocabulary.

References:

Chall, J.S. (1983). *Stages of reading development*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Pickens, J., Glyn, T., & Whitehead, D. (2004). *Students reading together: A modified reciprocal teaching approach*. Set 3, 2004.