Five Strategies for Teaching Vocabulary As a Process

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FIVE STRATEGIES FOR
TEACHING VOCABULARY AS A PROCESS

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Building vocabulary is an important component of any reading program; it is a crucial comprehension skill. In fact, Davis (1968), in an analysis of comprehension skills, found word knowledge to be the key factor in comprehension. However, vocabulary has often been relegated to a secondary position in the scheme of language development, and no real systematic program for vocabulary building in reading or language arts course really exists (O'Rourke, 1974). Additionally, the approaches to vocabulary study have long emphasized product over process (Brooks, 1986). Students have been presented with long lists of often unrelated terms that they could study and memorize for a test only to purposefully forget them following the quiz. Yet, readers need to expand their vocabulary range, and speakers require an ever increasing number of specific terms to communicate fully and effectively at various levels. How then does the teacher incorporate vocabulary study into the classroom? A few process oriented strategies seem to be the answer for meaningful vocabulary development and retention. In this paper, five strategies for vocabulary as a process are provided.

Teach Words in Context

In teaching vocabulary, it is important to provide meaningful learning experiences for students. One way of nurturing vocabulary development and retention is to teach words in context (Kruse, 1979). Divorcing words from their surroundings decreases the likelihood of comprehension and retention. Students need to be made aware of the total linguistic environment in which a word or phrase appears. This provides valuable input which aids in comprehension and eventually assists in the development of syntac-

tic knowledge. In addition, the teacher can begin to model strategies for utilizing contextual clues. Such strategies could possible enhance reading comprehension capability.

To tap into student interest and motivate learners, have students provide the context. Brooks (1986) describes a process whereby students contribute the vocabulary words to be studied from their own reading or listening world. They not only volunteer the word and its source, but also the context, sentence or phrase, within which the item occurs. The teacher can introduce these student initiated items in a variety of ways. A word for the day can be listed on the board, or a running list of words can be compiled on a large poster or piece of paper for the entire class to view and add to. These words and the context then become part of the students' work bank.

Move From Known to Unknown

The next suggestion follows logically. Teachers should introduce new words in already known structures, moving from known to unknown. When students are bombarded with too many new items in new contexts, they become overwhelmed. Their understanding diminishes, and they tend to focus on memorization rather than comprehension. However, when new word use is introduced amidst familiar structures and content, comprehension increases. Having students volunteer words from their own familiar environment increases comprehensibility. Students can begin to keep their own notebook of vocabulary items drawn from personal reading or writing. In fact, vocabulary instruction should frequently center on individual needs as in words drawn from student writing.

Group and Categorize Items

Grouping items into topical or thematic areas also enhances vocabulary development. Advocates of this type of grouping (Haycraft, 1978; Krashen & Terell, 1983) stress that thematic vocabulary units encourage students to form a network of interrelationships among the items. Alphabetized or unrelated lists of words do not facilitate discovery of the organizational pattern which relates the items.

Linking items in a semantic framework can be encouraged through the technique of webbing or semantic mapping.

(See Figure 1, below.) The teacher starts with a central word or theme for the unit, and the students build on this core by calling out the words that are associated. For instance, a unit on recreation can be broadened into subcategories such as hobbies, sports, or pastimes. These subcategories can be further expanded by specifically listing typical hobbies or sports (nouns) or by noting sporting activities (verbs). Semantic maps are effective alternatives to traditional prereading activities in that they introduce new vocabulary as well as tapping into students' previous knowledge and conceptual background. Pre-reading webs can also be extended after reading to focus on the main points of the story (Personke & Johnson, 1987). This technique is also an excellent pre-writing strategy to generate vocabulary prior to writing. For more advanced students, teachers can employ vocabulary webs to introduce symbolic or figurative language. As in the case of the word 'house' as a central core, there are both literal associations, rooms and furniture, which can be developed, as well as symbolic connotations, love, family, security. Webbing them visually reinforces the multiple meanings of vocabulary items.

Figure 1
Vocabulary Web
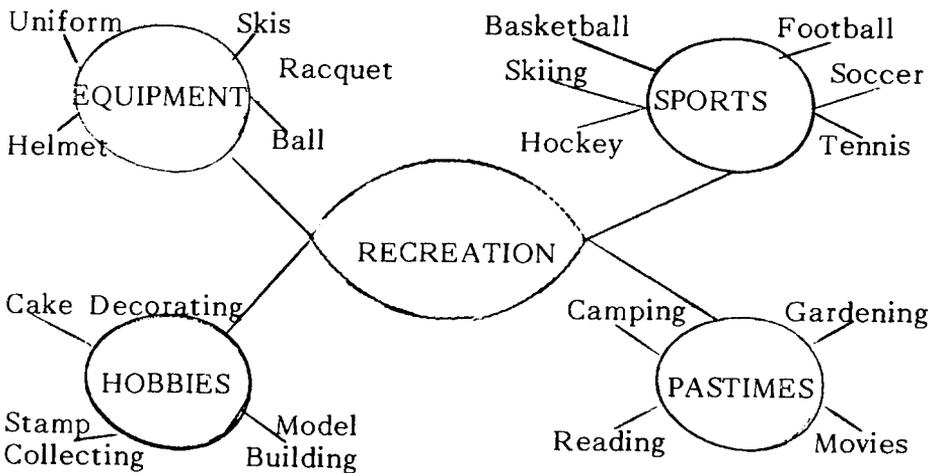
The use of a continuum (Figure 2) can also pictorially represent concepts and shades of meaning. The class rank

orders adjectives along the continuum from best to worst, strongest to weakest, or informal to formal language. Valuable class discussion can emerge surrounding the placement of words on the continuum, and this can also contribute to student understanding of the power of contexts.

Figure 2
Continuum

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        Attractive
        Cute
        Good looking              Unattractive
 ──────────┬──────────────┬──────────────┬──────────
   Handsome              Plain            Ugly
   "Hunk"                                 Dog
   Fine
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Vocabulary grids (Figure 3) are another technique for stressing the interrelatedness of definitions (Harvey, 1983). A grid for vocabulary associated with sports can be developed with various categories such as equipment, location, and time divisions. Then students can work together to fill in all the appropriate vocabulary associated with each grid.

Figure 3
Vocabulary Grid

SPORTS	EQUIPMENT	LOCATION	TIME DIVISION
Tennis	Racquet Ball	Court	Match
Baseball	Bat Base Ball Helmet Glove Mitt	Diamond Mound Infield Outfield	Inning Double Header
Basket- ball	Ball Hoop	Court	Half

As the class spirals back to and expands previous vocabulary, students may come up with new groupings within the subject area or across theme groups. For instance, a unit on clothing, my introduce men's and women's clothing items. Later study of the weather can bring in seasonal clothing.

Another technique which could utilize grouping is a

word bank. Students write each new word on a separate notecard; they may then sort the cards into any number of organizational groupings. Thus, word banks, webs, grids, and continuums can all expand student vocabulary by stressing related terms.

Relate Content to Students' Interests

Another important consideration in vocabulary instruction is student interest. Hooking onto individual interests and backgrounds can enhance vocabulary development (Finocchiaro, 1974). Students are motivated when they acquire words and expressions which can be put to immediate use in everyday communication. To gather initial information on students, teachers could use an interest inventory at the beginning of the semester. Items such as hobbies, abilities, clubs, places lived, travels, and favorite food, music, or celebrities can serve as starting points for classroom activities. Teachers can then have students scan real world texts such as menus, fashion, movie, or music magazines, and travel brochures for vocabulary items. In fact, scavenger hunts can be created with vocabulary of interest to students. They can search for sources which would contain specific types of words.

Another means of promoting student interest in vocabulary development is to provide more personalized assignments to excite and motivate their learning. A unit on the family could incorporate a poster of the students' family tree, or a family scrapbood with actual photos and a written description of each member. Instructional activities for the house could include a floor plan of the students' real home or their dream home. Clothing items can be taught via a fashion show, or a compilation of a clothing catalog with pictures, descriptions, and prices of items. The possibilities are endless, but the object is to put actual vocabulary to use in the students' world and to highlight each student's special talent or interests in the language learning process.

Provide for Constant Review

Finally, frequent, almost continual review of vocabulary after the initial presentation is crucial. The teacher must continue to weave new words into the lessons and

units in order to expose students to lexical items that can be acquired and to provide a knowledge base for understanding the text. Too often vocabulary words are presented in the text or instructional unit and are never repeated, making it difficult for students to understand and retain. Thus, teachers must analyze curricular material for such shortcomings and adjust instructional efforts to include constant repetition of vocabulary. The class must talk about the new vocabulary items, encounter them in reading, and be encouraged to utilize them in writing after the first initial introduction. Individuals seldom incorporate new items into their word memory after only one exposure (Judd, 1978). Once students discover new words they might keep a personal list of especially useful items to include in their personal writing or to refer to for reading in specific areas.

The teaching of vocabulary is receiving new emphasis in the teaching of reading and writing. The key to successful vocabulary development appears to lie in providing students with relevant and useful input and using language as a process. This can be accomplished by presenting items in context and within known structures. Emphasis on vocabulary work should also include items of relevance to students in order to ensure their incorporation into the students' active vocabulary.

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