English as a second language (ESL) readers are unsure of what they read. To begin with, they have relatively little experience with oral communication, at least compared to native English speakers. Their ability to gain meaning from print is, at least initially, difficult because they still are acquiring proficiency with English language structure and, therefore, cannot anticipate the flow of language or predict what words will come next in sequence. ESL readers need continuous and graduated exposure to language and print.

ESL readers are unsure about what they read also because they are inexperienced in their knowledge and use of vocabulary. Without the frequency of contact with words and their meaning in various contexts, ESL readers may have difficulty comprehending. This can lead to frustration in learning content which is so bound to textbooks.

Along with continued exposure to language, developing a greater range of vocabulary is critical if ESL readers are to achieve academic progress. Multiple exposure to words in a variety of contexts is necessary if these readers are to expand their lexical knowledge of content.

This Bulletin examines content vocabulary acquisition for ESL readers: what it means to know a word; activities for acquiring content vocabulary; and general teaching hints.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO KNOW A WORD?

Learning a word involves several categories of understanding: 1) Form, i.e., the ability to distinguish grammatical aspects such as nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs. Classifying a word helps to clarify the word's relationship to other words in the sentence; 2) Position, i.e., knowing the structures and patterns in which a word can occur, and the words that frequently occur before and after it; 3) Function, i.e., knowing how common or rare the word is and in what types of situations or contexts it will occur; and 4) Meaning, i.e., knowing the various meanings and connotations of the words, as well as synonyms.

There is obviously a great deal of print interaction that all readers must engage in to achieve the types of word knowledge described above. For ESL readers, the tasks is even more challenging because both oral and written language is not as familiar.

15 ACTIVITIES TO PROMOTE CONTENT VOCABULARY

The following activities are suggested for promoting students' vocabulary growth:

1) Word Categories. Periodically place content-specific words in categories to demonstrate their relationship to one another;
2) Guessing Words From Context. If students do not recognize a word, a) have them read sentences before and after, b) read the entire paragraph for context, or c) look for meaning relationships (e.g., prefixes/suffixes, cause-effect, cohesive markers, etc.) to determine the part of speech and guess its meaning;

3) State It, Say It, Erase It. Write words on the board that are similar in categories. Start erasing them one by one in the middle of choral practice. Invite students to practice saying words on the board as if they were visible;

4) Word Definition Matching. In small groups, have students match words from the textbook with their definitions written out on separate cards/pieces of paper;

5) Two Step Recycling. Make a set of cards/slips of paper with one/two sentences from the original text with the designated word missing;

6) Connections. With words chosen for review, arrange them into groups and have students explain the connections between them;

7) Missing Words. Select a paragraph or short text and delete selected words. Number the blanks and ask students, in small groups, to fill in the correct words;

8) Word Sorting. Dictate words to be reviewed and ask students, individually or in groups, to place them in appropriate categories;

9) Minidomains. With a target word, elicit other words with similar meanings to obtain synonyms and connotative gradations of meaning;

10) Enhancing Meaning. Have students, in small groups, expand the meaning/use of a word according to the following categories: general meaning; parts of speech; derivative forms; synonyms; antonyms; and categories;

11) Word Families. When introducing a new word, write it on the board, along with its part of speech. Ask students to provide other related words;

12) Word Samples. Provide several sample sentences containing unknown words and have students guess the meaning from context;

13) Prefixes and Suffixes. Form the students into pairs - one being the teacher, the other a student. Provide each "teacher" with a list of prefixes and sample words using each prefix; provide each "student" with a list of meanings. Have the "teacher" say the prefix 2-3 times with a sample word. The "student" guesses the meaning of the prefix from the list. The "teacher" corrects if the "student" does not guess properly after the third attempt;

14) Vocabulary Notebook. Have students write down unfamiliar words from a content unit. Encourage them to write the meaning, part of speech, and sentence context; and

15) Keyword Technique. Have the students learn to use a key word from their first language that is associated with the word to be learned in English.

GENERAL TEACHING HINTS

The following are particularly helpful when instructing ESL readers in acquiring vocabulary:

* help organize students' thinking by invoking their background knowledge through brainstorming, semantic mapping, graphic organizers, and visuals;

* realize that "narrow" reading, as expressed through content-specific language, is helpful to second language readers because similar vocabulary is repeated frequently;

* increasing the volume of reading helps to increase vocabulary acquisition; therefore, help students engage in sustained silent reading;

* assist students with individualized record keeping through personalized vocabulary building programs that help them to maintain a record of troublesome words.

ESL readers must have numerous encounters with words, both orally and in print, to acquire a passive knowledge of content vocabulary. It is incumbent upon teachers, whether in and ESL or in a mainstream context, to place special emphasis on a variety of vocabulary development activities, such as those listed above, to help embed this knowledge and to support the academic success of ESL readers.

SOURCES