This Bulletin examines the implications of teaching the form and meanings of words for English Language Learners (ELLs). Suggestions are provided that can assist in more in-depth word learning.

FORM

Spoken form. Each language has its unique pronunciation system. The ability of learners to pronounce English words correctly depends on the ability to hold them in the phonological short-term memory. This ability varies with the similarity or difference of the word with the first language (L1) pronunciation system. For example, Asian languages do not have final "s" sounds, making it challenging for ELLs to pronounce English 3rd person singular verbs ("he sits") or English plural forms ("cats"). In general, a learner's ability to pronounce English words in a communicable manner depends on its similarity to the L1 sound system.

Written form. If the learner knows the L1 written form, the learning burden of written forms of English words depends on: 1) whether or not the student's first language shares the same script as English; 2) the regularity of the second language writing system; and 3) the student's knowledge of the spoken form of English vocabulary. The orthography of English has many sound-symbol irregularities. This can cause difficulty for learners.

Word parts. Knowing a word involves knowing members of its family. For example, knowing the word sound means knowing sounding, sounded, unsound, etc. Knowing word parts aid learners in remembering word meaning.

Concepts and referents. Many common, high frequency English words are noteworthy in their ability to have different meanings (polysemy) and to have the same spoken form but different written form (homophony). Thus, fork, an eating utensil and a juncture in a road, is polysemic; and beat, beet are homophonics.

Word grammar. English parts of speech are nouns, pronouns, verbs, adverbs, adjectives, conjunctions, articles, and prepositions. Learners' ability to label and identify these words helps to know the function and use of words in continuous text.
Collocation. Knowing a word means knowing what words it commonly occurs with. Thus, the word bank involves knowing bank statement, bank account, blood bank, etc.

Usage constraints. Finally, knowing a word means knowing when and how to use it. This involves a variety of usage options: formal vs. informal; polite vs. impolite; child vs. adult; men vs. women; American vs. British; and spoken vs. written.

MEANING

Learning a word is a cumulative process. Knowledge of a word is built up gradually through a process of repeated and continued encounters with the word in a variety of contexts. There is denotative or general meaning, e.g., fat vs. skinny; and connotative, or specific, nuanced social meaning, such as skinny vs. thin vs. svelte.

The following are ways teachers can define words in sentences:

Synonym: Svelte means thin.
Antonym or contrast: Tepid is neither hot nor cold.
Analytic definition: A humvee is a vehicle which...

Taxonomic definition: A vessel is a large cup.
Definition by exemplification: Fast food - examples are hot dogs and hamburgers.
Definition by function: Mower - It is a machine to cut grass.
Grammatical definition: Gone - This is the participle form of go.
Definition by association: Ability - It means how well you can do something.
Definition by classification - Igloo - It is an Eskimo house.

SPECIFIC SUGGESTIONS FOR LEARNING A WORD

Although a dictionary is a useful resource for learning words, it can be more expedient to provide direct intervention about word meanings when teaching content. The following are suggestions for helping students comprehend words:

1. Provide a clear, simple, brief explanation. Since word learning is cumulative, initially providing a great deal of information is not important, since additional information can be given upon repeated encounters.

2. Draw attention to underlying, previously known aspects of the word. Make connections to the information given about the word in previous encounters and add additional information as necessary.

3. Give repeated attention to words. This does not mean specific focus every time the word is encountered, but rather periodically and sporadically in order to help embed the word’s meaning more deeply.

4. The quality of mental processing of the word affects the quantity of learning. Drawing attention to spoken and written forms, word parts, concepts and referents (where applicable), grammar, collocations, and usage constraints will help to expand students’ knowledge and use of words.

SOURCE