CONSTRUCTING MEANING IN READING

When placed under the umbrella of language awareness, the teaching of phonics or grammar ceases to be a contentious issue. The development of students' awareness of sound-symbol relationships and grammar is a legitimate and important aspect of instruction.

- Jim Cummins

The above statement underlies an important truth about acquiring another language academically: the process of learning enables the student to focus on the structure of the language in insightful ways through opportunities to examine the form of language as well as its meaning. English Language Learners (ELLs) can construct meaning from stories or texts by an awareness of three aspects of written language: graphophonic cues, the sound, visual, and phonic information in written language; syntactic cues, knowledge of how words go together; and semantic cues, how words have meaning as they relate to the students' knowledge of the world. Each of these cuing systems work integratively; as a result, ELLs may make miscues with these systems due to first language interference.

GRAPHOPHONIC MISCUES
The inability to decode a word may be due to: 1) lack of oral experience with the word in English; 2) lack of experience with the word in the learner's first language; 3) lack of a similar sound in the learner's first language; or 4) lack of basic decoding skills. For example, word substitutions or hesitations, mispronounced words, missing words, or word repetitions may be caused by the learner's inability to affix meaning, not only of sound-symbol association, but also of basic decoding skills. Regardless of the origin of a learner's miscues, it is critical for the ELL to comprehend what s/he reads in the process of attempting to pronounce a word. Pronouncing a word correctly should occur as a result of gaining meaning from words in context, not in isolation.

SYNTACTIC MISCUES
The syntax of language enables the reader to predict how words will be put together to make meaning. A proficient reader will be able to predict what comes next in the flow of the language because of familiarity with language structures. For ELLs, miscomprehension may occur when the learner does not have prior knowledge of the context in which the language is presented because the language structure(s) is too unfamiliar for constructing meaning. In particular, knowledge and use of verb tenses, function words (e.g., prepositions, adverbs, adjectives), and transition signals can be gained
through ongoing interaction with texts.

**SEMANTIC MISQUES**

Semantic cues deal with three aspects of meaning. One is understanding the literal vs. metaphorical meaning of a word. For example, literally, skirt is an article of women's clothing; metaphorically, it means to avoid something. An ELL may not know the specific meaning or use of this word in context. A second aspect of semantic meaning relates to connecting strings of words that deal with a particular subject. For example, election, ballot, polls, and booth all relate to voting. An ELL may not have the range of vocabulary knowledge nor the knowledge of culture to understand the meaning and use of these words. A third aspect of semantic meaning relates to transitional signals in language revealing how ideas are connected to each other. Sentence connectors (e.g., however, therefore, for example, etc.), coordinators (e.g., and, but, yet, etc.), subordinators (e.g., because, after, since, etc.), and determiners (e.g., another, additional, final, etc.) are inherently troublesome for ELLs and may cause difficulty in constructing meaning from texts.

**INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES**

*English Language Learners construct meaning better in the context of a story or complete text rather than in isolation because they have additional cues in the flow of the language.*

All teachers of language minority students can provide critical assistance to ELLs in the following ways:

1. Whether reading narrative or expository language, call attention to how language is being used and how it works. Go beyond discussions of meaning and focus on actual words, phrases, expressions, and grammatical devices. For example, concerning graphophonics miscues, call attention to the fact that the b is silent in a word such as tomb or that the s in slaughter changes the pronunciation of laughter; concerning syntactic cues, for example, call attention to the fact that a clause beginning with because does not stand alone as a sentence; and concerning semantic cues, for example, call attention to metaphorical uses of words as they occur, or to how transition signals change the relationship of ideas.

2. Provide ELLs with opportunities to participate in classroom discussions of subject matter in more and more sophisticated and mature forms of academic language. For example, wean students from forms of speech adaptations in delivering instruction, such as language simplification, posting and repeating instruction, and alert students to lesson transitions, while simultaneously being sensitive to how students comprehend increasingly complex uses of language.

3. Provide learners with helpful, timely, and useful feedback on their efforts in reading. Without corrective feedback, learners cannot tell how they are doing. Consistently use focused, graduated questions to elicit critical thinking (see Bulletin Vol.2, No. 10) from students; regularly obtain oral or written feedback from students to determine comprehension; and provide individualized correction on aspects of language confusion or cultural aspects of meaning.

4. Provide many opportunities to use the oral and written language in more and more sophisticated ways in instructional activities. Expect students to use more complex forms of language and vocabulary and provide them both with the language and the opportunities to do so, either individually or with the help of peers.

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All of the suggestions cited above are meant to assist ELLs in constructing meaning from print. Constructing meaning is a continuous, ongoing process for comprehending language in more sophisticated ways; it needs to be accomplished within the context of content instruction or in using complete texts or stories.

**SOURCES:**
