BARRIERS TO ACTIVATING KNOWLEDGE IN READING

Two concurrent processes occur in reading: 1) recognition of visual information - letter symbols, individual words, and the grouping of words to form sentences; and 2) activation of individual real world knowledge - recognition of text types and structures (e.g., fiction vs. non-fiction, newspaper vs. magazine, or ads vs. editorials, etc.), prediction of content (e.g., titles, headings, pictures, subheadings, etc.), recognition of key words and sentences, and inference of unknown information. We simultaneously combine the information contained in the text with our knowledge of the world to comprehend what we read.

This Bulletin examines three aspects of real world knowledge that specifically affect English Language Learners: cultural citations, language structure, and vocabulary.

CULTURAL CITATIONS

I never get any R-E-S-P-E-C-T.
The future of the live theater is in blue hair.

Individual real world knowledge is reflected in the two statements cited above. Meaning is enhanced by our knowledge of U.S. culture: the spelling out of "respect" in the first statement refers to Aretha Franklin's song of the 1960's reflecting a growing awareness of women's emerging equality in cross-gender relationships; and the reference to "blue hair" in the second statement refers to elderly affluent widows in U.S. culture who can provide endowment assistance in the arts. In both examples, mere knowledge of the words is not enough. Cultural knowledge gained through learning or experience is necessary to gain deeper meaning.

LANGUAGE STRUCTURE

Another aspect of real world knowledge related to comprehension involves knowledge and use of language structure. This knowledge assists the reader in identifying tense use and other subtle aspects of language meaning. For example, understanding the use of the past vs. present perfect tense and prepositions in the statement

I had known George several years before he became famous. vs. I have known George several years since he became famous.

indicate two different meanings about how the author knows George. Similarly,

She wore the blue sweater. vs. She wore a blue sweater.

informs the reader (or not) about an author's intended degree of specificity depending on choice of definite versus indefinite article.
Finally, the statement

*He only brought the food.* vs. *Only he brought the food.*

indicates a dramatic difference between one person’s stinginess versus another’s generosity relative to others. Specific aspects of language structure, obvious and natural to native speakers, are important and somewhat challenging to ELLs, depending upon the similarities or differences with their first language. Examples cited above, such as verb tense, article choice, and word placement are some of the many aspects of language knowledge that carry meaning well beyond decoding ability.

**VOCABULARY**

A third aspect of an individual’s knowledge which affects reading comprehension relates to vocabulary. One aspect concerns familiarity with structural forms of words (nouns, verb, adjective, adverb forms (e.g., *persuasion/persuade,* *persuasive/persuasively*); understanding the various meanings of multiple word verbs (*put on, put out, put up with,* *put upon,* *etc.*); idiomatic expressions (*get in someone’s hair,* *shoot off one’s mouth,* *jump down someone’s throat,* *pay through the nose,* *etc.*), and culturally derived uses of words (e.g., *yuppie,* *cajun,* *hillbilly*). Knowing the dictionary definition of the word is frequently insufficient; rather, a combination of experience in the culture and/or extensive sociocultural familiarity with word use is important in extracting meaning.

**INCREASING CULTURE, LANGUAGE, AND VOCABULARY KNOWLEDGE TO IMPROVE READING COMPREHENSION**

Below are some suggestions for assisting ELLs to activate their knowledge, thus improving reading comprehension:

*Culture Knowledge.* Proofread what is to be read by students beforehand to anticipate cultural citations which might be unfamiliar to students. This is especially important for social studies texts. For more extensive reading of fiction, encourage the development of a journal to discuss unfamiliar cultural references at a later time.

*Language Structures.* Language structure difficulties are harder to anticipate because each student may have different background knowledge based on the structure of his/her first language. Be sensitive to the difficulties of language and the impediments to comprehension that may occur. *It is important to call attention to how language works!* ELLs possess a tremendous natural metacognitive perspective as they interact in a second language with a first language foundation. By exposure to aspects of well-written language, ELLs will eventually familiarize themselves with the grammatical means of organizing and structuring ideas; with how these ideas are linked together to form larger pieces of discourse; and with the preferred ways of expressing ideas that are unique to the English language.

*Vocabulary.* Focus attention on actual words, phrases, and expressions. In addition to discussing content, include discussion about *words.* If necessary, consult references and make up lists of idiomatic expressions or multiple word verbs. Encourage students to maintain a vocabulary notebook with words and their contextualized uses.

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The real world knowledge that ELLs bring to the classroom is individualized, culturally unique, and varied from individual to individual. Familiarity with culture and language references as well as vocabulary usage is an ongoing, additive process that takes time. The ability to gain meaning from print incorporates graphophonic (sound, visual, phonic), syntactic (grammar), and semantic (lexical) information all interacting simultaneously. Individual knowledge is activated when learners can make connections between this print information and their own experiences and knowledge base. Teachers can greatly assist ELLs by helping overcome the cultural, language, and vocabulary hurdles which inhibit comprehension.

**SOURCES:**
