

Reading: From words to texts

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This presentation focuses on *struggling readers* who find reading a laborious and painful process. According to teachers at Queen Elizabeth School Old Students' Association Branch Primary School, struggling readers display these learning features: (i) *they fail to recognize familiar words, even in very simple texts*; (ii) *they fail to make use of contextual clues to guess or infer*; (iii) *they refuse to read unless with much teacher support*; (iv) *they find reading independently a daunting process and give up easily halfway through*. The first two features relate closely to word unfamiliarity and poor reading skills whereas the other two relate to attitude. There may be a causal link between the two as there is always an intriguing relationship between reading ability and attitude.

Students' reading difficulties may be explained by the subskill theories which posit that reading is a skill integration process in which readers need to master a list of subskills before they can read fluently. One fundamental skill is *word identification*. Readers need to gather information from the written text (e.g. letters and words), identify the meaning of words, and then move forward to processing the structure and meaning of larger syntactic units, such as phrases or sentences (Hinkel, 2006). Unlike fluent readers who have learned and integrated these subskills so well that they use them automatically, beginning readers struggle a lot with the requisite skill of word recognition. They are often 'stuck' on words, especially in texts with many unfamiliar words; subsequently they do not even have the mental capacity to guess or to engage in the thinking process.

Curriculum Planning

To tackle this problem, the teachers decided to *integrate explicit teaching* of word identification skills into the school-based curriculum. This involves meticulous *modular planning* as curriculum space and time for the continuous and integrative development of vocabulary learning are needed. Unlike in the past when only two to three lessons were spent on a textbook passage, now teaching time related to reading and vocabulary learning is spread out over a two-week teaching schedule. At the beginning of the lesson, teachers usually spend five to ten minutes on vocabulary review before moving onto another focus. The total reading and vocabulary-related teaching time can add up to five lessons. One important consideration for this drastic change is that teachers need to adapt other curriculum content, adjust expected learning outcomes of other teaching objectives and change assessment design and focus accordingly (will be discussed further under the heading of 'assessment').



From the outset, the teachers also needed to answer a theoretical question: What does 'knowing a word' mean? In this context, *passive recognition*, that is the ability to recognize the meaning of a target word when given meaning options (Laufer & Goldstein, 2004), was agreed to be the minimal requirement for struggling readers. Apart from the depth of learning, teachers needed to define the scope as well. Since most of the textbook passages in Key Stage 2 are very long, it is difficult to ask struggling readers to learn every word in the passage. The teachers, based on their intuition and word occurrence frequency, chose a certain number of vocabulary as target words. (Please note that this is different from thematic vocabulary found in most textbooks). Alternatively, teachers may consider selecting words based on the *Wordlists for the English Language Curriculum at primary level* developed by the EDB, English Key Learning Area Section. The wordlists can be retrieved from the website: http://cd1.edb.hkedcity.net/cd/eng/vocab09/appendix_1_content.htm. By drawing students' attention to a defined set of words and to a limited set of lexical features, students may find vocabulary learning more manageable and may lead to increased motivation to learn new words.

Learning and Teaching

Extensive research has pointed out that intended vocabulary learning leads to significantly higher rates of vocabulary retention and that, in comparison, a word needs to be encountered twelve to twenty times to be learned from context (Coady, 1997). When putting these findings into classroom practice, the difficulties are that there is often insufficient time to allow numerous times of contextual learning to happen and, to make the matter worse, there is no standard definition of what is meant by context (Nation, 1982). Rather, Nation has advised teachers not to focus on quantity, but to create favorable conditions for vocabulary learning: "*interest, repetition, deliberate attention, and generative use (the use of a word in a new context)*" (Nation, 2005, p. 585).

In order to capture students' attention and to make vocabulary teaching more explicit, the teachers, in the post-reading stage, illustrate (in the form of powerpoints) words with interesting photos or clip art. New contexts are therefore created to bring about meanings for these target words. Classroom routine is then formed to read aloud target words (as a warm-up) at the beginning of the lesson. The purpose is to help students match sounds with letters, and also with meanings. *Repetition*, yet with variation, is built into lessons by encouraging students to read aloud target words in groups and in pairs. This is combined with whole passage reading aloud. After three to four times, when students have mastered pronunciation and remembered meanings, teachers then modify the powerpoint so that only pictures, without words, are shown on the slides. Students are expected to memorize target words and recall them when cues (i.e. visual stimulus) are given. The purpose is to promote *quick lexical recall*. This is found to be an effective and efficient way to promote automaticity among



struggling readers. When time allows, teachers also introduce *interesting and interactive vocabulary games and exercises* into the lessons to encourage students to revisit vocabulary learned in previous units.

At first, teachers worried that it would be difficult to find suitable graphics for the powerpoint illustrations, however, after several times, teachers found that technical problem was not a major issue. Teachers observed that visual stimulus helped students remember word meaning and made learning more interesting.

In subsequent lessons, teachers spend some class time on "*vocabulary talk*". The substance of the talk is grounded on the strong interpretation of *lexical learning*. According to Richards (1976), it "entails knowledge of the *network of associations between that word and other words in language*" (p. 81). This includes the following categories (Slobin, 1971):

	<u>Examples</u>
by contrast or antonym	wet – dry
by similarity or synonym	blossom – flower
by subordinative classification	animal – dog
by coordinate classification	apple – peach
by superordinate classification	spinach – vegetable

and collocations as well. Teachers use an interactive approach to explain and elicit responses from students. During the talk, students are instructed to jot down words or draw word webs in their vocabulary book for retention and revision.

The next step is to put newly-learned vocabulary into a new context (i.e. a text). First teachers need to select/rewrite/compose a reading passage in which a majority of the words (about 90%) are familiar words and target words. This strategy is found to be important for struggling students as it helps them to practise the skill: recognize familiar words in new texts. Then in the reading lesson, after introducing the text type and brainstorming a few ideas related to the topic, students are instructed to read and answer comprehension questions on their own. This is found to be a good means to build up students' confidence and train them to read long texts independently. Finally, answers are checked and immediate feedback is given in class. Poor readers are encouraged to explain how and why they get their answers. When they fail to recognize familiar words, they are asked to locate words found in the new passage and words that they have learned in textbook passages. This kind of transfer is found to be an effective means to promote lexical processing, practise basic reading skills, and, most importantly, understand students' reading difficulties.



Assessment

Assessment papers have been changed accordingly to reflect the new curriculum emphasis. New lexical parts focusing on antonyms and synonyms are included. Since the expected learning outcome is passive recognition, students do not need to spell or recall target words actively, they just need to recognize their meanings when given meaning options. The results showed that a majority of the students were able to recognize a large number of target words. Students reported that they found it *easier to recall lexical-phrase items than single-word items*. As for reading, a less challenging text is designed with vocabulary control in mind. In order to evaluate teaching effectiveness, detailed analysis was done. Initial findings showed that struggling readers greatly benefited from explicit teaching and training of word identification skills. They were able to recognize familiar words at a faster rate. Additionally, they were able to locate specific information in familiar texts without teacher support. Last but not least, their attitude towards reading has become more positive.

Remarks

This presentation is planned to be participatory. The focus is more on modular planning than whole curriculum planning. Examples are mostly taken from P. 4. It is suitable for Key Stage 2 teachers who work with a number of struggling readers.

References

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