

Dealing with Words in Intensive Reading

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The workshop looks at how teachers should deal with vocabulary when it comes up in intensive reading or during classroom work. By the end of the workshop, the participants should know ten different ways of dealing with words and should be able to explain why they would choose a particular way of dealing with a particular word. The reasons include giving most attention to high frequency words, focusing on strategy development for low frequency words, giving attention to a range of aspects that are involved in knowing a word, and making sure that teaching considers the future rather than present value of a particular word.

Intensive reading involves the detailed reading of texts with the goals of understanding the text and learning language features through a deliberate focus on these items. Typically the text chosen for intensive reading is one that the learners would have difficulty in reading unassisted. This could be because of the unfamiliar subject matter, unfamiliar discourse features, or unfamiliar grammar and vocabulary items.

Now we will look at the ten options for dealing with words in intensive reading.

Preteaching

The aim of preteaching is to get some vocabulary problems out of the way before the learners meet them in the text. Preteaching can have positive effects on vocabulary learning and text comprehension, but it needs to involve what is called rich instruction if it is to have these effects. Rich instruction involves spending at least four or five minutes on each word looking at the aspects of what is involved in knowing a word. Preteaching is best limited to a few words and should probably be used as a way of stimulating background knowledge about the text as well as providing vocabulary knowledge. In this way teaching has a double effect.

Simplifying

Sometimes a text contains too many unknown words and contains words that are unlikely to be of value to a learner in the near future. In these cases it may be more efficient to rewrite parts of the text, replacing some of the least useful unknown words with known words or more useful words. Simplification can be a time-consuming process but if the text will be used with many different classes and contains very interesting and useful information, then simplification is a sensible option.

Adding a glossary

Glossaries consist of words and a brief L1 or L2 meaning. Glossaries can have two major functions and before making a glossary it is important to decide what function it will perform. One function is to help words be learned. If this is the glossary's function, then the words included in a glossary should be high frequency words. Learners prefer the gloss to occur next to or near the line of text containing the glossed word.

Putting words in an exercise after the text

There are many kinds of exercises that can follow a text. They include word and meaning matching, word part analysis, cloze type exercises, and collocation activities. These exercises take quite a lot of time to make and to do. Thus they are best suited to high frequency words. High frequency words can include technical words that are part of the learners' area of specialisation if they are using English for special purposes. Ideally, such exercises should expand on the knowledge of the word that the text provides.

Quickly giving the meaning

An efficient way of dealing with unknown words is for the teacher to quickly give an L1 meaning for the word, or to quickly draw a diagram illustrating the word on the board, or to quickly give a demonstration or L2 definition. This has the effect of satisfying the learners while not interrupting the reading too much. Quickly giving the meaning can have a positive effect on learning. In a study of listening to stories, Elley (1989) found that vocabulary learning was increased by about 40% by such attention. Similarly, Dobinson (2001) found positive effects on learning for some words that had received only brief attention during a lesson.

This way of dealing with words is most suited to low frequency words which are important for the message of the text. Because of their salience in the text they need attention, but because they are low frequency words they do not deserve a lot of attention. It can also be a useful way of giving some attention to high frequency words when there is not enough time to do rich instruction.

Doing nothing about the word

Low frequency words that are not important for the message of the text may be passed over without any comment. This can be a favoured way of dealing (or not dealing) with the word if it is easily guessed from context or if it is a loan word and is thus very similar to a first language word. Like guessing the meaning, this is most suited to low frequency words.

Helping learners use the context to guess the meaning of the word

When a word appears in a context that provides a lot of clues to its meaning, this is a good opportunity to practise the most important of all vocabulary learning strategies, guessing from context. Guessing from context is such a widely applicable and effective strategy that any time spent learning and perfecting it is time well spent (see Nation 2001: 256-259). If the strategy is used on low frequency words, the teacher's goal is to help learners practice the strategy. If it is used on high frequency or technical words, then there is a bonus. Not only is a useful strategy being practised but a useful word is being given detailed attention. Technical words are sometimes defined in the text and thus provide good opportunities for guessing.

Helping the learners use a dictionary

Dictionary use, like guessing from context, is a useful vocabulary learning strategy. When it is used on high frequency or technical words, it has the double benefits of helping develop a useful strategy and giving attention to useful words. When it is used on low frequency words, the main goal is not the learning of the low frequency word, but the development of skill in using the strategy. Good dictionaries provide a wealth of information about words and good dictionary use involves using them to find the common underlying meaning of the word, to relate it to already known words, to help fix its form in memory, and to gain some wider knowledge of its use.

Using word parts to help a word be remembered

Breaking words into prefix, stem and suffix is another vocabulary learning strategy. This strategy involves breaking the word into parts and then relating the meaning of the parts to the meaning of the word. So, if the low frequency word explication is met in a text, its meaning "a detailed explanation" can be related to its parts by pointing out that ex- means "out" (a prefix that learners must know), that -plic- means "to fold", and that -ation indicates that the word is a noun. "An explication involves the unfolding or opening out of the parts of a principle or process". The essential feature of the word part strategy is that the meaning of the word parts are related to the overall meaning of the word.

Spending time on explaining a word

The last option for dealing with words in intensive reading that we will examine here is the equivalent of preteaching except that it is done during the reading of the text, not before reading. A rough rule of thumb is that in such teaching, at least three aspects of what it means to know a word should be focused on. Typically one of these will be the meaning of the word, and attention can also be given to the spelling and pronunciation of the word, its word parts, its grammar and collocations, and restrictions on its use if there are any, such as if it is a formal word, a very colloquial word, a rude word, a word mainly used in a particular country, or an old fashioned word. Clearly this detailed time-consuming attention should only be given to high frequency words or words such as technical words that are going to be of frequent repeated value to the learners.

Conclusion

The ways teachers deal with words in intensive reading should be guided by principles that reflect the nature of vocabulary and vocabulary learning. To put it another way, if a teacher is asked "Why did you skip quickly over that word?" or "Why did you spend so much time helping learners guess the meaning of that word?", a teacher should be able to indicate the goal of such attention and to give sensible informed reasons for choosing a particular option. Vocabulary teaching and learning should not be a random, ad hoc process, but should be guided by well supported principles.

References

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