

# Trainer News

**March 1, 2006**

## **Reading Research**

This is the fourth in our series on the four elements for reading instruction outlined in the book *Research-Based Principles for Adult Basic Education Reading Instruction* by John Kruidenier, Ed.D. The elements are alphabets, fluency, comprehension and vocabulary. In this issue, we focus on vocabulary.

## **Role of Vocabulary Instruction in ESL Reading Instruction**

How Should Adult ESL Reading Instruction Differ from ABE Reading Instruction? by Miriam Burt, Joy Kreeft, and Carol Van Duzer

From: CAELA Brief March, 2005

CAELA - Center for Adult English Language Acquisition

## **Vocabulary**

Vocabulary refers to the words that a person knows. Reading vocabulary is critical to the comprehension processes of a skilled reader.

## **Issues for English language learners**

Folse (2004) reviewed the research on teaching vocabulary in semantic sets (e.g. colors, foods, furniture, and days of the week) and found that grouping words in this way can actually impede the learning of vocabulary. This is because if similar new words are presented together, such as a set of colors or the days of the week, the learner is likely to confuse the words. The same is true if antonym pairs such as hot/cold, fat/thin, right/left are presented together. Folse suggests grouping new vocabulary around looser themes such as going out to eat, planning a trip, or celebrating an anniversary. Nation (2000, 2005) recommends teaching high-frequency vocabulary first. For example, rather than presenting red, yellow, blue, black, white, etc. at one time, he suggests beginning with one color. In this way red, which is used more frequently than orange, would be taught before orange. Tuesday, which is used more frequently than Thursday, would be taught before Thursday (Nation, 2000). This separation of Tuesday and Thursday would also avoid the confusions that surface between these two words, which are similar phonologically and in spelling (Folse, 2004).

Acquiring the meaning of a vocabulary item through context clues – a strategy often taught by ABE teachers – is difficult for learners of English as a second language, because they often do not have the vocabulary in English that native speakers have (Eskey, 2005). For example, while fluent English speakers possess a written English

vocabulary of 10,000-100,000 words, second language learners generally know only 2,000-7,000 English words when they begin their academic studies (Hadley, 1993). This gap can impede success in listening to lectures, reading academic material, or writing essays. Using context to understand new vocabulary requires an understanding of more than 98% of the words of a passage (Nation, 2005). Furthermore, even if the meaning of a word can be guessed from context, knowledge of the word may be superficial. Truly knowing a word includes knowing its pronunciation, spelling, morphological and syntactic properties (e.g., part of speech, prefixes and suffixes it has), and multiple meanings; the contexts in which it can be used; the frequency with which it is used; and its collocates, or how it combines with other words (e.g., the word squander is often paired with resources, time, or money; Folse, 2004). For these reasons, vocabulary teaching needs to be planned and deliberate with English language learners.

### **Suggestions for teaching adult English language learners**

Because of the need for English language learners to acquire more English vocabulary for all aspects of their lives, Birch (2002), Eskey (2005), Folse (2004), and Nation (2000, 2005) suggest the following:

- Pre-teach the vocabulary in a reading passage.
- To limit the number of vocabulary items that must be pre-taught, select reading passages that are only slightly above what learners can read independently.
- Teach high-frequency words first.
- Provide learners with multiple exposures to specific words in multiple contexts.
- Provide learners with lists of words for intentional learning.
- Avoid presenting synonyms, antonyms, or words in the same semantic set together.
- Teach learners to use both monolingual and bilingual dictionaries. Because even English dictionaries designed specifically for learners contain about 2,000 words (Nation, 2005) and the definitions and examples are in English, learners at basic reading levels may not understand the definitions and explanations. They will need to use bilingual dictionaries.
- Encourage learners to use word cards –notes cards with the English words on one side and the translation on the back-- and to study them frequently.
- Encourage vocabulary learning through regular tests where students can prove receptive knowledge of words through matching words to definitions or multiple choice exercises.
- After reading, have students write sentences in which they use specific words and grammatical forms.

## **Role of Vocabulary Instruction in Basic Adult Literacy Education**

Submitted by Kim Meade, Program Director, Literacy NENY

At the ProLiteracy Conference in Tucson, AZ, I had the opportunity to attend a session on the Role of Vocabulary Instruction in Adult Basic Education presented by Mary Beth Curtis, of the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL).

Ms. Curtis began the session by giving us a word in a sentence, and asking us what the meaning of the word was. After many varied responses, it became apparent to all of us that teaching vocabulary in such a manner is not the most efficient way. We all found different meanings of the word yet it often is the way we ask our learners to learn a new word. Many times we ask our learners to use the word and context clues to learn what the word means.

Vocabulary is a key factor in comprehension. Based on research, it has been determined that there is a scheme called "word tiers" to help determine which words should be part of vocabulary instruction. Tier one is basic words, such as "girl" or "truck". Tier three is words that are used in a specific setting, such as "photosynthesis" and are not used frequently except in specific domains.

It is the tier two words that we need to focus on. Tier two words are common words, but their meanings are more abstract. Examples of tier two words might be "complex" or "consequence". It is these words that can inhibit comprehension. The meaning of these words may not be apparent from context clues in the sentence. These are the words that take your learner to a new level of comprehension and understanding.

It is important when teaching a new vocabulary word to first use direct instruction to introduce the word and its meaning. For example, in teaching the word "persistent", ask your learner for some examples of when they were persistent. Use the word in a variety of examples to ensure that the learner understands the word. Ask your learner to create sentences using the word. Allowing the learner to produce examples of sentences using the word ensures they understand the meaning. Continue using oral and written activities using the word and extending its meaning. Again, for example, ask the learner if persistence can be a barrier or helper to success, and why? Finally, provide independent opportunities to use the word, such as asking your learner if they think persistence played a role in the accomplishments of the Wright Brothers.

**For more information on the research on adult reading instruction, go to:**

<http://www.infl.gov/partnershipforreading/publications/adult.html>

From this web page, you can download the report Research-based Principles for Adult Basic Education Reading Instruction and review the web document "Adult Education Reading Instruction Principles and Practices."

## **Trainer Tip**

Need a new way of doing introductions during your training workshop? Here's an idea: Have participants break up into small groups and write a group resume. They can list schools they've attended, programs they've worked at, the number of combined years of literacy experience and other relevant information. It's always interesting to learn about the background and of fellow tutors and this is a great way to make connections among participants.

Adapted from Best PLUS Connections Newsletter August, 2005

Trainer News is an online informational newsletter for tutor trainers in the Literacy New York affiliate network. If you have questions or comments about this newsletter, please contact Mary Bartlett, Training Coordinator, Literacy New York. Ph (315) 662-3621 or [Mbartlett@literacynewyork.org](mailto:Mbartlett@literacynewyork.org).