



TURNING THE PAGE ON LEARNING NEW VOCABULARY

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Abstract

Advances in technology have caused a major shift in how students spend their time and challenged curriculum development to maintain interest and focus in the classroom. Implications are most profound in issues related to literacy due to a lack of experience and interest in reading. This article explores this issue and how it relates to teaching new vocabulary and choosing course content. Basic precepts include the importance of relating new information to prior knowledge and linking course content to topics that hold student attention.

Introduction

This article explores some of the issues teachers face in working with struggling readers from diverse backgrounds and makes suggestions to adapt curriculum to support learning. Targeted populations include ESL students and those enrolled in academic enrichment programs on the collegiate level as well as secondary students in junior high and high school who have fallen behind reading grade levels. There are high expectations from both students and administrators to make rapid progress with skill sets that are typically developed over many years, which makes the need for effective teaching methods an important focus for educators.

Two major concerns of this article are presenting literary material to students who have little background experience with texts of any sort and the related issue of learning new vocabulary. All of my students express a desire to graduate, but don't see their animosity towards reading as a deterrent to that goal. This article introduces methodologies and resources that address a current negative bias towards reading for some students, in an effort to improve overall success.

The proposed changes in teaching methodology are based on several fundamental precepts. One is that reading material for struggling readers should be matched to their independent reading level, with few words that are unknown. Initial teacher support of the material should encourage comprehension of the text without the need for focusing on learning new vocabulary. When comprehension is achieved, new vocabulary should be introduced as a substitute for words students already know. The following paper clarifies the reasoning behind these methods and gives specific directions for implementing the lesson and adapting materials.

Foundations of Learning

Educational methods have come a long way from the emphasis on rote memorization that dominated classrooms and textbooks during much of the early twentieth century (Skinner, 1954). Innovations from a cadre of researchers (Bloom, 1956, Gardner, 1983, Bruner, 1986, Ogle, 1986)

have tried to keep pace with a swiftly changing technological world that has dramatically changed our culture. Demands for curriculum to adapt to these changes have become an important component in efforts to maintain attention in the classroom (Au, 1993, Safi, 1996).

Interest in studying disciplines that relate to technology may be stronger as a result of the changing times, but reading is still the foundational utility for learning and it has taken a back seat to other choices for spending time for many students. Given increased ethnic diversity and children from poverty entering the school system (Pallas et al., 1989), it is more important than ever to refine our teaching methodology to enable students to make connections with the learning environment. The ability to reason thoughtfully and make coherent inferences relies on the potential to make connections with existing background knowledge, which can become a problem with students who feel incongruent with the demands of the learning situation (Heilman et al., 2002).

There is general consensus among many educators that new material should relate to a student's previous knowledge (Rupley & Nichols, 2005; Safi, 1996; Ogle, 1986, Krashen, 1987). Both Vygotsky (1985) and Krashen (1987) emphasized the importance of knowing students well enough to understand their ability to grasp new information based on their comfort level with acquired knowledge. I contend that this philosophy is of even greater concern when the new material relates to activities that students are unaccustomed to doing and have little interest in learning.

Scarborough (2001) supports the strong relationship between reading difficulties and poor vocabulary, showing that struggling readers have lower than average vocabularies. It is important to teach vocabulary to struggling readers trying to comprehend narratives (Rupley et al., 1999), due to the difficulties of comprehending text with too many unknown words (Chall et al., 1990). However, teaching vocabulary needs to reflect the same concerns for relating new information to what a student knows, while presenting it in a format that encourages participation and supports success.

Educators then face a dilemma. There is no getting around the need to expand vocabulary, but that activity should not detract from the natural process of reading and contribute to a negative bias that some students feel from the outset. Vocabulary instruction should derive from an understanding of the text, characterized by deductive rather than inductive reasoning. When students are motivated to read and understand content, learning new vocabulary becomes a natural process that stems from comprehending the material, not a separate activity involving rote memorization that takes place separately from the reading activity.

Problems/Issues

Growing up with hundreds of TV stations, i-pods, cell phones, video devices, and every computer gadget imaginable, it is no surprise that many students have little to no experience with reading, except when forced to do so by their teachers. Comic books have been replaced by video games. While some texts come with introductory material and pictures to try and make the overall presentation of literary material more palatable, the form still falls short in bridging the interest gap for students who are accustomed to multi-media experiences throughout the day.

In my experience, topics for many reading assignments are considered dry and boring for many students, in spite of an effort on the part of publishers to use subject matter that relates to their lives. Content of introductory material is often times focused on historical background of the content rather than striving to make a connection with the student. Follow-up activities attempt to further learning by suggesting activities to build and expand on student interest, but

the need to spark student interest needs to be focused during the introductory stages to encourage participation at the outset of the lesson.

Material is often secondary sources from authors who are targeting student populations. The tone and format of this material typically has an academic feel that can stifle enthusiasm, reinforcing the notion that this is schoolwork, polished and produced, removed from the quirks of the real world.

A common format for many contemporary textbooks is to list potentially difficult or technically important vocabulary on the first page of the section, with instructions to review these words prior to reading. These are usually presented out of context in a list format with definitions. Any enthusiasm to proceed with reading new material must now be put on pause while attention is diverted to learning new vocabulary.

I assume the logic behind this methodology is to help students comprehend the text by studying potentially difficult vocabulary and technical terms before encountering them within the text so comprehension will be easier. However, there are two problems with this approach. One is that research shows that learning new vocabulary is more effective when it is taught from the context of the literature as opposed to rote memorization from lists (Cain, 2007; Nash & Snowling, 2006). The other problem is that once students are motivated to explore new topics, there should be no obstacles that might impede participation. Ideally, there would not be an interruption between having enthusiasm to read and starting the activity. They should not get mired in a memorization activity that is dissociated with prior knowledge and interests.

Coming across unknown vocabulary is inevitable for any reader and considerations should be given concerning how best to handle this challenge while in the process of reading. Some instructional methodology suggests that students write down new vocabulary as it is encountered and have a dictionary on hand to look up words as they read, a method that has been popular with many Asian students (Safi, 1996). Research shows that this method stifles the reading process and is not as effective as working with words in context (Safi, 1996; Nash & Snowling, 2006). Students should be encouraged to keep reading, even when encountering unfamiliar words. Sometimes highlighting text may be appropriate or advising students to quickly write down the word on a 3 by 5 card. The idea is that working with new vocabulary out of context should take place after the book is put down, not during the reading process.

Solutions

There are several advantages for using teaching material that is designed by an individual teacher. One is that no one knows better what particular topics might interest a classroom of students better than the teacher who has interactions on a daily basis. The other advantage is that after working with a group of students, the individual teacher has a more intimate knowledge about vocabulary words that need extra attention as well as what readability level is appropriate for his/her classroom.

All of the visual and audio media that students are familiar with originate from written words in the form of screenplays and lyrics. Too, there is an abundance of literature covering a wide range of topics related to speeches given by prominent politicians and public figures. These sources offer a vast resource of material that is of immediate interest to students and in many cases offers an opportunity to present challenging vocabulary that will enhance overall reading ability. The following example is an excerpt from the movie *Amistad* and offers an example of how materials can be utilized to enhance literary skills.

The first task is to give students some information about the content, offer some questions to ignite participation, and relate the story to the student's lives. The following is an excerpt from the "Warm-up" section of the lesson.

Amistad Warmup

Throughout the first 3 months of 1839 Africans were rounded up near the coast of West Africa and in early April a Spanish slaving ship loaded them at the mouth of the Gallinas River, just below Sierra Leone. In Havana, Cuba, two Spaniards bought 49 males for \$450 each and along with 4 children, set sail on a boat named Amistad for the United States. On the third night out the slaves took over the ship and killed some of the crew. They kept sailing north and were eventually seized two months later by authorities in New York. The two Spaniards who bought the slaves demanded they be returned to them and a Spanish minister wanted them to stand trial for mutiny and murder. The case went all the way to the Supreme Court, and John Quincy Adams argued on behalf of the slaves. The speech you are about to hear is his closing argument.

Questions for Discussion

1. What do you think happened to these slaves?
2. If you were a slave on that boat, how would you react to members of the crew being murdered? How would react if you were a crew member?
3. Why do you think John Adams felt so strongly about the issue of slavery?
4. How do you explain this Supreme Court decision compared to Plessey v. Ferguson (1896), 57 years later and after the Civil War? Plessey v. Ferguson said it was OK to segregate blacks (in buses, schools, restaurants, bathrooms, etc.), as long as the facilities were equal.

The next step is to read the text with the difficult vocabulary omitted. In its place is a blank line. The word choices offered to fill in the blanks are synonyms for the challenging words that students are comfortable with. The teacher has the option of offering support with the whole class, or having small groups fill in the blanks and comparing answers.

Amistad Cloze Worksheet

Fill in the blanks using the words from the following list:

absorbing with hardly get downtrodden important beaten skill
turn our back on

Adams: Your Honors, I _____ much consolation from the fact that my colleague, Mr. Baldwin, here, has argued the case in so able and so complete a manner as to leave me _____ anything to say. However, why are we here? How is it that a simple, plain property issue should now find itself so _____ as to be argued before the Supreme Court of the United States of America? I mean, do we fear the lower courts, which found for us easily, somehow missed the truth? Is that it? Or is it, rather, our great and _____ fear of civil war that has allowed us to heap symbolism upon a simple case that never asked for it and now would have us _____ truth, even as it stands before us, tall and proud as a mountain? The truth, in truth, has been driven from this case like a slave, _____ from court to court, wretched and _____. And not by any great legal _____ on the part of the opposition, I might add, but through the long, powerful arm of the Executive Office.

After reviewing the speech in this manner, students will understand the content using vocabulary that is comfortable to them and any misunderstanding can be discussed prior to listening to the excerpt. At this point students can watch the section of the movie that contains the speech or simply listen to it.

(<http://www.americanrhetoric.com/MovieSpeeches/moviespeechamistadjadams.html>)

What they hear will be vocabulary words that you have chosen to work on in place of the easier words that you substituted in the previous activity. Their understanding of the content will support learning new vocabulary. Teachers can have students listen to the speech once without referring to the text that has omissions, or have students focused on writing down the words represented by blanks as they first hear the dialogue. Since they have worked out the synonyms in the previous activity, they will know what the words mean immediately from the context. The following is the same excerpt with the vocabulary words underlined in the text.

Adams: Your Honors, I derive much consolation from the fact that my colleague, Mr. Baldwin, here, has argued the case in so able and so complete a manner as to leave me scarcely anything to say. However, why are we here? How is it that a simple, plain property issue should now find itself so ennobled as to be argued before the Supreme Court of the United States of America? I mean, do we fear the lower courts, which found for us easily, somehow missed the truth? Is that it? Or is it, rather, our great and consuming fear of civil war that has allowed us to heap symbolism upon a simple case that never asked for it and now would have us disregard truth, even as it stands before us, tall and proud as a mountain? The truth, in truth, has been driven from this case like a slave, flogged from court to court, wretched and destitute. And not by any great legal acumen on the part of the opposition, I might add, but through the long, powerful arm of the Executive Office.

Notice the words chosen as vocabulary words. Depending on the particular group of students, additional words could have been chosen or perhaps different words. You can use the same methodology for working with pronouns, verbs, prepositions, or any specific grammar point that needs work. The process offers the flexibility to accommodate a classroom of diverse abilities and needs. In order to assess how well students learned the new vocabulary a matching test may be used.

Amistad Vocabulary Matching

- | | |
|--------------|------------------------|
| 1. scarcely | _____downtrodden |
| 2. ennobled | _____ skill |
| 3. consuming | _____ get |
| 4. disregard | _____ turn our back on |
| 5. flogged | _____ with hardly |
| 6. destitute | _____ important |
| 7. acumen | _____ absorbing |
| 8. derive | _____ beaten |

Comprehension can be assessed by using specific passages from the text and forming multiple choice questions that challenge how students interpret meaning.

Amistad Comprehension Questions

1. In the sentence: "Or is it, rather, our great and consuming fear of civil war that has allowed us to heap symbolism upon a simple case that never asked for it and now would have us disregard truth, even as it stands before us, tall and proud as a mountain?" What do you think is the best meaning for 'truth'?
 - A. Slavery is illegal
 - B. Murderers should be punished
 - C. You cannot take the law into your own hands
 - D. The Constitution

2. In the sentence: "And here is the fine point of it: What her majesty wants is a court that behaves just like her courts, the courts this eleven year-old child plays with in her magical kingdom called Spain, a court that will do what it is told, a court that can be toyed with like a doll, a court -- as it happens -- of which our own President, Martin Van Buren, would be most proud."
 - A. Adams has little or no respect for the president
 - B. Adams thinks the President has fine judgment
 - C. Adams thinks our courts are like Spain's
 - D. Adams had respect for the Spanish courts

3. In the sentence: "James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, John Adams: We've long resisted asking you for guidance. Perhaps we have feared in doing so we might acknowledge that our individuality which we so, so revere is not entirely our own." Adams means:
 - A. We don't respect the past because the founders made serious errors of judgment.
 - B. We are afraid of the past because it was unjust
 - C. We don't look back on history because it stifles our individuality
 - D. History can't help us because times have changed

The topic can also be used to help students recognize grammatical problems with text and develop skills to write more effectively. The following format is an excerpt from this activity.

Amistad Sentence Structure Worksheet

Choose the underlined words that are incorrect and rewrite correctly.

1. I wonder what form of government Blacks have in Africa during the mid 1800's and why they didn't have better protection from being captured as slaves?
Mistake _____ Correction _____

2. Slave owners paid \$450 for each slave, that doesn't seem like much money nowadays, but I wonder how it is comparing to costs of other things in those days?
Mistake _____ Correction _____

3. John Quincy Adams was 74 years old when he had spoken on behalf of the slaves in front of the Supreme Court; he must have had very strong personal feelings for getting involved.
Mistake _____ Correction _____

Discussion

Amistad was chosen for its relevance to African American issues and was a natural fit for my classroom, which was 95% Black. The content was available within the context of watching the movie, a segment of the movie, or as an audio track that included just the speech. The following examples are other movies or speeches that students have found interesting.

Barbara Jordan – Speech to the House of Representatives concerning an appeal to proceed with impeachment of President Nixon.

Princess Bride – (Movie) Comedy set in the middle ages that spoofs the fairy tale/princess/commoner theme. The story is based on a grandfather who is reading the story to his sick grandson.

Gerald Ford – Speech to the country that explains his pardon of Richard Nixon for the Watergate scandal.

Franklin Roosevelt – Speech to the country explaining the decision to wage war on Japan in response to the bombing of Pearl Harbor.

Barack Obama – Speech in response to comments by Reverend Wright that explains his views on the issue of race. Start this topic by playing Reverend Wright's tirade; you will see some eyes open wide.

O Brother Where Art Thou – (Movie) Comedy set during the Great Depression in the South about convicts that escape from prison and have a wild time traipsing around the countryside.

Robert Kennedy – Speech to express sorrow for the killing of Martin Luther King.

Martin Luther King – I Have a Dream – The famous speech that spoke of civil rights for all.

It is typical for most curriculums to use books from publishing companies as a basic resource. Using these techniques to introduce new vocabulary from these texts would require customizing the format. Instead of starting a reading selection with vocabulary words to learn, the text could include blanks for where these words would occur. Choices for implementing words in those blanks would include familiar words which are synonyms for the more difficult vocabulary. After reviewing the content and choosing appropriate words, students will have a solid understanding of the content. At this point they should read the text that includes the challenging vocabulary and should have little difficulty working the meaning from the context. Until publishers make this format available, teachers will have to rely on adapting text from a digital source that can be manipulated through a word processing program.

Reading may have difficulty competing for student interest alongside more multi-media formats, but there are ways to improve the introductory material that might help. Introductory content should emphasize how the subject matter relates to the individual student. It should explain how this directly impacts their lives, with the ultimate goal of showing how this information impacts their very survival or those closest to them.

Working with students in Developmental Reading Programs has given me a first hand perspective concerning the challenges of bringing students up to grade level expectations at an accelerated pace. There are no magic formulas, but presenting information that is interesting within a format that supports their prior knowledge are two important considerations that should be in the forefront of our efforts.

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Free screenplays are available from: <http://sfy.ru/scripts.html?range=a>

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