Vocabulary

The English language contains over a million words, at a recent 'count' (Global Language Monitor, 03/02/2020). This number is continually changing, as we lose those we don't use much any more (*forsooth*), and we create new words, like *emoji*. Particular words also come to prominence for various reasons.

We don't actually need a million words to be able to function at an everyday level, or in our learning, or even in specialised subjects. These three loose categories – 'tiers' of vocabulary – provide a sound structure for thinking about our teaching of vocabulary (Beck, McKeown, Kucan, 2013).

What students **do** need is the 'Tier 2' vocabulary, the knowledge and understanding of words that is required for success in the classroom. This is where we focus or teaching.

We can provide strategies for students to engage with this vocabulary.

Teaching Vocabulary

Vocabulary learning is contextual, with words interrelating with each other, building a picture over time.

The strategy* presented here uses text, talk, investigation, repeated exposure, and note-taking, and helps develop understanding of the variations and extensions, in both meaning and use, that words can have. The process builds over time, to create a rich understanding of the target vocabulary. It works with pairs, groups, or as a class, and students can use it for individual study.

Process

Words or phrases are analysed and discussed in reference to a set of criteria. In this case, I want my students to have clear understanding of the word **_bee_**, for its literal and symbolic significance. Both scientific and literary understandings will have a part to play in exploring the word.

- <u>labelling</u> – name an item, or concept; what are we talking about? eg **_bee_**
- <u>appearance</u> – what does it look/feel like? how can we describe it? eg *small, furry, striped* etc
- <u>categorising</u> or classifying – grouping a word or concept into a class, eg a **_bee_** is an insect
- <u>function/behaviour</u> – what is it for? what does it do? what is happening around it? eg **_bees_** *collect pollen; they mare social creatures; they make honey* etc
- *associations* – what goes with it? eg **_bee_** – *honey, hive, flowers, wax, pollination* etc
- *comparison* (similarities) and <u>contrast</u> (differences); a Venn diagram can be used here – eg *what is the same about a* **_bee_** *and another insect*? *what is different? bees/spiders?*
- figurative connotations – critical for the awareness of literary allusion, '*as busy as a* **_bee_**'

It is possible to see how each of these categories has the potential to lead into other, informative areas. All the while, the students are building their knowledge of the target word.

An example

The word **'busy'** has appeared in a text, and students seem to have a degree of understanding of its various meanings, each depending on the context.

Introduction: Choose several texts where the word is used. Students read the selections, and talk about the different aspects of the word.

Students can build each section as they build their understanding. This is an example of how the process might develop.

Labelling – naming an item or concept	busy (adj) – related words: *busier, busiest* (adj); *business* (n); *busily* (adv)
Appearance – what does it look like?	*someone moving quickly, doing lots of things with their hands, using equipment, moving their bodies quickly …*
Categorising or classifying – grouping a word or concept into a class	*actions when you want to do lots and don't like being lazy or doing nothing …*
function – what is the word used for, what does it do?	*a way of feeling and showing that you have lots to do but not much time, you enjoy doing things, sometimes you are in a hurry, you are not being lazy*
associations -	*goes with active, concentrating on an action, needing time to focus*
similarities and differences –	*opposite to idle, nothing to do, lazy; same as being involved in something, active, enjoying lots of things to do*
figurative connotations -	*busy as a bee, busy work, busy at work, shops are busy, roads are busy, organising, planning, getting things done, 'my/your business'*

This example is relatively straightforward. It will work with students in Stage 1 as they explore some of the key vocabulary they will need for moving into more sophisticated texts in Stage 2.

Stage 3

The process needs modelling and guidance, and to be re-taught as students develop their own skills of analysis. Actively re-teach at the beginning of each session.

The process becomes even more interesting when we apply it to a label that is actually evolving in meaning and understanding in the broader context. Students are supported to examine and build knowledge and understanding.

Topical subjects

I checked out ABC TV's Behind the News (BTN) for the way they were examining the coronavirus situation. This is a topic that Stage 3 students can address to get factual information, as well as

looking at implications and the symbolism of the situation. There are many literary references to the spread of disease as a threat to humanity, if you want to go that far.

At the time of writing there were two items dealing directly with the topic, *What is the Coronavirus?* and COVID-19 (aka Coronavirus) Explained with considerable information. Each video is about 5 minutes long, and includes a transcript of the text.

These provide enough information for students to begin the discussion to build the vocabulary chart. Students can viewing each BTN item, read the text, revisit each, consult other sources, bring information from home, compare the tone of news reports, examine those from countries other than Australia, to build the contextual interrelationship around the term.

Example: *Coronavirus*

Labelling – naming an item or concept	*Coronavirus*
Appearance – what does it look like?	The virus looks a bit like a crown, and the Latin word for crown is *corona*
Categorising or classifying – grouping a word or concept into a class	There are many *coronaviruses*. This one is now called *COVID-19*. Why?
Function – what is the word used for, what does it do?	
Associations -	Other viruses such as SARS
Similarities and differences -	
Figurative connotations -	The crown

Students can write a report, or a description, or a prediction from this work. They will certainly have the vocabulary for it.

The understanding and use of new vocabulary does not happen quickly. Multiple exposure to new words and concepts needs to occur in a variety of contexts before generalisations will occur. This is an excellent way of recording the students' thinking.

* Apology: the source of this strategy is lost. I will be happy to acknowledge if it can be sourced.

References

Beck, I. L., McKeown, M. G., Kucan, L (2013) Bringing Words to Life 2nd Edition Guildford Press NY