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The Importance of Activating and Building Knowledge

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Introduction

The following exchange occurred in a third-grade classroom:

“I thought *grit* was a food. It doesn’t make sense,” Saida commented. “Yes, there are *grits* that people eat. Grits are ground corn, however, in this story the word is *grit*. Do you remember when it was really windy outside and dust and dirt got on you? That was grit,” Mrs. Henning explained. “That was gross. It got in my hair and teeth,” replied Saida. In this exchange, the grade-level teacher made a meaningful connection between a recent experience and the new vocabulary word. This connection allowed the teacher to clarify the student’s existing understanding of the vocabulary word *grit* which was affecting her comprehension of the story. For vocabulary instruction to be effective, students must relate new words to their existing background knowledge (Author, 2008). The purpose of this article is to explain the importance of teachers’ activating and building students’ background knowledge as a way of enhancing their culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students’ vocabulary development.

A student’s background knowledge is ever changing by academic experiences, social customs, facts, or emotions that are encountered and learned (Marzano, 2004). Background knowledge plays a significant role in a student’s understanding of the new vocabulary being introduced as well as their retention of the word’s meaning for later use. Background knowledge is what students use to develop, expand, and refine vocabulary word meanings (Rupley, Logan, & Nichols, 1999). By activating students’ background knowledge, information is brought to the surface where it is ready to be applied, used to stimulate questions, and build interest in the targeted vocabulary throughout the lesson. Educators are able to use this knowledge to guide learning and to help clarify students’ misconceptions about specific vocabulary terms.

Activating Students’ Existing Knowledge

Activating students’ background knowledge about vocabulary involves teaching students to access the information they have stored in their permanent memory. For educators, the ultimate goal of vocabulary instruction is to have students store their understandings of vocabulary words in their permanent memory to be accessed, consciously or unconsciously, whenever needed (Stahl, 1999). Such activation is important for both native and non-native English students, but is particularly critical for CLD students who may struggle with new and unfamiliar vocabulary. CLD students need more than just a brief introduction of the vocabulary to help alleviate their comprehension difficulties because of their English language proficiency limitations. They need numerous opportunities to discuss and reflect on the relationships among concepts as well as connections between the content and their background knowledge. These meaningful interactions enable CLD students to

deepen their understanding of the vocabulary concepts throughout the lesson. Meaningful instruction that meets the needs of all students starts by building a solid foundation by tapping into their existing knowledge.

Educators must be mindful that *all* students have background knowledge; however, some students may not have the academic knowledge of the English language necessary to be successful in an academic setting. Even in classrooms where all the students have similar backgrounds (e.g., culturally, linguistically, economically), the students do not have identical prior and background experiences to draw upon. Within any particular cultural group, there are considerable differences between students. Students come with different prior experiences, values, and knowledge unique to their ethnicities and personal backgrounds.

CLD students' experiences may be very different culturally and linguistically from those of their peers (Rea & Mercuri, 2006) and teachers. Educators must beware of these mismatches in background knowledge; otherwise, such circumstances can have a negative impact on students' learning opportunities and academic success. Additionally, educators must consider that the educational system is based on European American cultural norms and values (Gay, 2000), which can be very different from those of CLD students.

According to Moll, Amanti, Neff, and Gonzalez (1992), the knowledge that CLD students bring with them to school is known as their *funds of knowledge*. This knowledge is often related to family, home, religion, and the workplace. These sources of knowledge are usually untapped resources in the classroom. When educators create opportunities for CLD students to make meaningful connections between the new vocabulary and their funds of knowledge, their prior experiences are validated and their cultural knowledge is affirmed. The CLD students feel personally connected to the vocabulary and have an increased chance for developing ownership of the new vocabulary.

Brock and Raphael (2005) found that teachers who successfully teach students whose backgrounds differ from their own have several characteristics in common. First, such educators understand that good teaching is not transcendent (an inborn talent to teach). Rather, "good teaching is a contextual and situational process" (p. 5). This process takes into account students' prior experiences, community settings, cultural backgrounds, and ethnic identities (Gay, 2000). Second, effective educators understand that each student has a personal history that shapes his or her individual viewpoints.

CLD students' background knowledge is the underlying force in second language acquisition (Swinney & Velasco, 2006) and a motivating factor in their learning vocabulary and academic English. By allowing the students to tap into their rich cultural linguistic knowledge base and relate to their experiences in their native language and culture, the teachers can integrate this information into the lesson which help the students' understand of the vocabulary and the English language (Krashen, 2003). Activating background knowledge brings students' knowledge to consciousness and facilitates their learning of the new vocabulary, while also increasing their engagement and motivation to learn (Author, 2008). Engaged students continually build on their previous background knowledge and extend it by learning new information

Building on Students' Knowledge Foundations

When teachers tap into students' native languages and cultural educational experiences, they give students a sense of belonging. Research has shown that positive identification with one's own culture leads to increased academic success and improved self-concepts (Carrasquillo & Rodriguez, 2002). Even if a grade-level teacher does not speak the languages of CLD students in the classroom, he or she can facilitate students' participation and comfort level by accepting and encouraging their use of the native language. By encouraging the students to brainstorm about what they already know about vocabulary in their native language, the students are able to transfer their existing knowledge in English. This transfer helps the CLD students develop the academic vocabulary, which is critical to the students' success.

When CLD students struggle with academic learning, teachers need to consider that the problem may be related to background knowledge rather than to intellectual ability (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2004). If the background knowledge is not there, CLD students will continue to struggle with their understanding of the topic. Educators may need to build up CLD students' background knowledge related to certain topics by providing a variety of academically enriching and meaningful experiences. "Background knowledge is doubly important in second language reading because it interacts with language proficiency during reading, alleviating the comprehension difficulties stemming from language proficiency limitations. Therefore building background on a topic through first hand experiences can facilitate success." (Boyle & Peregoy, 2000, p. 239). This background knowledge can be built through the use of visuals, demonstrations, discussions, read alouds, graphic organizers and hands-on inquiry.

One way for CLD students with limited English proficiency to activate their existing knowledge is drawing non-linguistic representations of the vocabulary words. This option gives students who are new to learning the English language an active voice in expressing their understandings of the newly introduced vocabulary word. In voicing these understandings through drawings, students are able to participate and demonstrate their existing knowledge about the topics while they are in the process of learning the English language. The students' genuine experiences and existing knowledge serve as starting points for making vocabulary meaningful.

Conclusion

Activating and building background knowledge has particular importance for CLD students. All new vocabulary needs to be explicitly linked to prior experiences with connections made to past academic learning. This allows students to have the opportunity to make an immediate and concrete connection between their understanding and knowledge of the world and what they are learning in the classroom. By capitalizing and building on the knowledge that students have, educators have a vehicle for providing grade-level content and meeting the language needs of each student.

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