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Word Cluster: A Strategy for Synonym Development

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WORD CLUSTER:
A STRATEGY FOR SYNONYM DEVELOPMENT

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"I just can't think of the right word to use!" This common lament is echoed frequently during high school, college, and beyond. Students are often taught the value of a thesaurus for finding the "right" word to use in writing or speaking. Wouldn't it be fine to have a thesaurus in one's brain--a vast store of words with numerous synonyms readily available? Actually, we do. An awareness and expansion of this "thesaurus of the brain" may be developed by using word clusters.

Learning theory suggests that proficiency in synonym knowledge is partly due to our existing cognitive structure, the way in which words have been stored and organized in our brains (Smith, 1975). Word Cluster is a strategy for vocabulary development which assists students in bringing their existing cognitive structure to the surface and helps them modify or extend their structure based on interaction with other learners. It also enhances the learner's understanding of the subtle differences among

words having similar meanings.

A plethora of strategies exists for enriching and expanding the learner's vocabulary. Many exercises designed to increase vocabulary knowledge randomly group words to be studied. Williamson (1976) suggests that vocabulary instruction should focus on complexes or a conceptual organization of words, taking advantage of a person's basic classifying ability rather than expecting the learner to remember haphazard groupings. Gipe's research (1978) with elementary age children found strong support for teaching vocabulary by defining and providing examples of new words in the context of familiar words or through association with a familiar synorym.

The Word Cluster strategy is a content-oriented instructional method which relies on the vocabulary resources of a group of learners. Classification and association as a means of retention are integral parts of the Word Cluster strategy.

A cluster is defined as "a small, close group." Word Clusters are groups of words sharing the same global concept. For example, house, cabin, mansion, and shack are similar in that they are all forms of shelter. However, there are distinct differences that must be distinguished by students to facilitate understanding of the impact of their words in various contexts.

Procedure for a Word Cluster Lesson

The Word Cluster instructional strategy requires very little preparation time for the teacher but, as with any strategy designed to enhance vocabulary, the Word Cluster should relate to the lesson at hand. It can be both a pre-reading and post-reading strategy. When used as a pre-reading strategy, it can serve to generate interest in a story, poem, article, or study topic, while also tapping students' prior knowledge of a subject. When used after reading, Word Cluster acts as a means of assessing student understanding of the organization of a particular concept. Certain steps should be followed, regardless of the placement of Word Cluster in the lesson sequence.

1. Prior to beginning the lesson, the teacher should identify a word or phrase that is central to the theme or purpose of the lesson.

2. At the time designated for the Word Cluster lesson, write the name or phrase on the chalkboard and ask students to name other words having similar meanings to the word or phrase.

3. Record all responses on the board in the order generated by students. Try to obtain ten or more, up to fifteen.

4. When the desired number of responses have been obtained, ask students to organize the words into some kind of cluster or group that can be justified. This can be done on paper by each student or can be accomplished through group discussion. If done individually, ask several students to record clusters on the board and provide a rationale for their organization of the words.

Table 1

	Initial Cluster	Hierarchy
	town	neighborhood
	village	community
Social	community	village
Studies	city	town
	metropolis	city
	neighborhood	metropolis
	megalopolis	megalopolis

from American Civics, 3rd ed., Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

Table 1 and 2 illustrate responses made by students to the words "town" and "cocaine." The first group in each table contains the initial clusters generated by the students. The second group reflects their organization of the words into a hierarchy (Table 1) or mini-clusters (2).

Some clusters of words, such as those relating to "town" lend themselves well to hierarchical relationships. The teacher should ask "which words mean more?" and "which words mean less?" to help students understand the process involved. Also, the definitions of "more" and "less" in the context at hand should be defined. For example, if cocaine is the target word, more and less

Table 2

	Initial Cluster	Mini-Clusters	
Current Events (Drugs)	cocaine	tobacco	least severe
	marijuana	alcohol	
	heroin	marijuana	
	tobacco	cocaine	
	alcohol	amphetamines	
	barbituates	barbituates	
	amphetamines	morphine	most
	morphine	heroin	severe

from Time, Ap.11, 1983, "Fighting Cocaine's Grip".

could be thought of in terms of the perceived severity of the effects of various drugs. As can be seen, it is difficult to construct an exact ranking of the drugs mentioned, therefore, several "mini" clusters emerge. If disagreement surfaces regarding placement of some words into clusters or within a hierarchy, the teacher should serve as a facilitator, helping students see that some words may be used interchangeably in certain contexts, while others may not.

Related Activities

Writing, prediction, and cloze activities may be used to extend the Word Cluster lesson. For instance, students can be divided into small groups and collaborate on construction of sentences using words contained in the cluster or hierarchy. Follow-up should center on sentence content with the teacher emphasizing the contextual differences among words in a given cluster. When Word Cluster is used as a pre-reading activity, students can be asked to make predictions concerning the content of the lesson. Cloze activities can be constructed with the deleted words chosen from the cluster. This affords students an additional opportunity to see the importance of context.

Using Word Cluster in a classroom at any grade level can help decrease the frustration reflected in "I just can't think of the right word to use!" or "I don't know anything about this topic!" Word Cluster is particularly useful in college developmental programs since it facilitates integration of reading and writing activities. Students enjoy the participation aspect of the strategy, as well as the opportunity to share and learn with others. The value of sharing is that it enables students to see varying perceptions of others regarding the organization of words which are often viewed as synonyms. Like Taba's List-Group-Label (1967), Word Cluster helps students develop organizational skills. Finally, Word Cluster enhances the students' ability to identify words appropriate in a given context and to choose the most effective word.

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