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Chapter summaries by SSIF2 SLE group

Chapter 1: Rationale for Robust Vocabulary Instruction

This chapter starts by reflecting on the roles of vocabulary in people's lives, highlighting that a large and rich vocabulary is not only the hallmark of an educated individual, but also facilitates one in *becoming* an educated person. The tight link between vocabulary and reading comprehension is also emphasised. Beck et al then go on to outline the stark differences in vocabulary knowledge among learners from different ability or socioeconomic groups – differences which, once established, remain from early years into adult life – as a clear rationale for the need for vocabulary instruction in schools. They comment that much vocabulary teaching in schools tends to comprise dictionary definitions and short exercises such as cloze passages or matching words with definitions and synonyms, whereas they are advocating **robust vocabulary instruction** which “involves directly explaining the meanings of words along with thought-provoking, playful and interactive follow-up”. The approach can be used with all children and young people, from the earliest years upwards.

The role of context in word acquisition

Whilst words *are* learnt from context, one of the problems is that later vocabulary learning shifts from oral to written contexts. It is more difficult to learn word meanings from written context as it lacks many of the features of oral language that support learning new word meanings (intonation, shared physical surroundings etc.). So, whilst learning new words in the course of reading does occur, in order to truly learn them, students must read widely enough to encounter a lot of unfamiliar words, read texts complex enough to contain a number of unfamiliar words, have the skills to infer word meaning information from the context and encounter the word(s) a number of times. Therefore, relying on wide reading for vocabulary learning adds to the inequities in individual differences in vocabulary knowledge.

Additionally, natural contexts are not necessarily informative for deriving word meanings, they may be:

Misdirective – unhelpful context, which seems to direct the student to an incorrect meaning;

Nondirective – provides no assistance in directing the reader towards any particular meaning;

General context – provides only enough information for the reader to place the word in a general category;

Directive – leads the student to a specific, correct meaning for a word.

We are then introduced to the writers' framework for choosing the words to be taught through robust vocabulary instruction: **the three tiers framework**.

Tier 1: most basic words which typically appear in oral conversations, *e.g. warm, cat, girl, swim*. Children are exposed to these words a lot, from a very young age, so readily become familiar with them.

Tier 3: words rarely used, which are limited to specific topics and domains, *e.g. photosynthesis, machicolations*. These words are probably best learnt when a specific need arises.

Tier 2: words which are of high utility for mature language users and are found across a variety of domains, *e.g. precede, auspicious, retrospect*. As these words are characteristic of written text, and used more rarely in conversation, students are less likely to learn the words independently. This is why the writers recommend instruction directed towards **Tier 2** words as being the most productive approach, with an aim of teaching around 400 new words per year.

This chapter also explores the fact that knowing the meaning of a word is not a case of 'all or nothing', firstly through referencing Dale's (1965) four stages of word knowledge:

Stage 1: Never saw it before.

Stage 2: Heard it, but don't know what it means.

Stage 3: Recognise it in context as having something to do with...

Stage 4: Know it well.

Page 18 includes a 'your turn' activity exploring this in more detail.

The writers then go on to look at other dimensions of in-depth word knowledge, such as pronunciation, understanding of the kind of context in which the word is usually found, register, morphology and syntax.

Making words come to life through robust instruction

In the final part of the chapter, the writers highlight that rich and lively vocabulary instruction will encourage students to become interested and enthusiastic about words, keen to explore relationships among words and use them in a way that they come to 'own' the words. The writers finish the chapter by giving some examples of how they have "enhanced" traditional classroom activities for teaching vocabulary, which are explored further in later chapters and the appendices of the book.

Chapter 2: Choosing Words to Teach

This chapter looks at the importance of looking for the right words to teach. It focuses on the principles that might be used for selecting the words to teach.

Which words to teach....?

The writers categorise words into three Tiers:

Tier One – these are words typically found in oral language.

Tier Two – words that are wide-ranging and of high utility for literate language users.

Tier Three – words that tend to be limited to specific domains or rare words.

Vocabulary Researchers – those who describe the criteria for choosing words to teach (Nation, 2001, Stahl & Nagy, 2006) and those who have developed procedures for identifying specific words (Biemiller, 2001, 2005; Hiebert, 2005).

Biemiller – Living Word Vocabulary. This investigates actual word knowledge and found that most of the words known by 80% of fourth grade students were actually known already by second grade students. It was identified that those words that 30-70% of children knew seemed likely to be learned next. Biemiller and Slonim noted that words were learnt in sequential order and thus concluded that word learning was a developmental matter and that teaching words in the order they would be acquired would be beneficial. The order of word learning must go through sequenced stages (the comparison is made with not running before you can walk). The order of learning words is dependent upon children's environments and experiences i.e. what they hear, see, are told, read and like. However, the writers highlight that words are not related in a hierarchical way, so adhering to a sequence for learning words is not necessary.

Hiebert's approach focuses upon frequency, although there is problem here with words with more than one meaning e.g. bank (financial institution), bank (the side of a river). Hiebert goal was to identify words from School Grades 1 – 4 but which also appear beyond. It is recommended that we do not simply rely upon word frequency as a main criteria for choosing words to teach, as it does not necessarily mean that the words are easy/difficult to learn or indicate how useful they may be in a student's repertoire.

Stahl and Nagy (2006) assert that the categories of words that merit significant attention are high frequency – the bulk of words spoken - (similar to Tier 1 words) and high utility general vocabulary words (similar to Tier 2).

Nation (2001) identifies four kinds of vocabulary when designing instruction: high frequency (likely to be learned from everyday experiences), academic (common across texts), technical and low frequency.

Identifying Tier Two Words:

These are words that are most likely to appear frequently in a wide variety of texts and in the written and oral language of mature language users. These could be words that students have no other way of expressing, or that give them a more mature/precise way of expressing concepts. E.g. merchant – salesperson / clerk. The boundaries between the tiers of words is not precise but instead a starting point.

Criteria for Tier Two:

Importance and utility, conceptual understanding and Instructional potential

Summary - Words for Instruction

1. How useful is it? Will they meet it often? Will they find it in other texts? Will they use it to describe their own experiences?
2. How does it relate to other words they know? Will it add more dimension to a topic covered?
3. What does the word contribute in the situation or text?

Chapter 3: Introducing Word Meanings

This chapter looks at when to introduce the meanings of new words, how many new words to introduce and how to introduce these new words.

When?

The chapter initially discusses the difference between understanding the meaning of words in a text context e.g. stopping part way through the text to clarify unfamiliar words to gain a better comprehension of the text, and after the reading so as not to interfere with the comprehension of the text. In other words, text comprehension or vocabulary development.

How to introduce the words

This chapter explores how teachers traditionally introduce new words, through dictionary definitions. Caution should be taken in using this method alone, as the definitions can be ambiguous when not put into context. The authors suggest here that when introducing definitions of unfamiliar words, teachers should put them in to an appropriate context for their pupils. Examples of these are listed on pages 46 and 47, including the word *covert*.

Resources to support this?

Learner's dictionaries are a suggested method of teaching the definitions of tricky words. As the book points out, it can be difficult to put some words into 'child-friendly' speak but this resource supports both teachers and pupils to do this. Google 'Cambridge Learner's Dictionary' to find an online version; another online resource which can be readily accessed and provides child-friendly definitions is onelook.com.

Words with multiple meanings

Words with multiple meanings can cause their own difficulties when they are taken from the higher tiers. However, tier one words with multiple meanings do not tend to cause much problem for children who have English as a primary language, as they will come across these words on a context basis through speech. This is not necessarily so easy for children who don't have English as their primary language.

Examples of how to introduce words

Word associations – 'Which words goes with...?'

This develops understanding of relationships between words as opposed to synonyms. The need for children to explain why words are associated is a key aspect of this method of word introduction as they are encouraged to justify and explain.

Have you ever...? 'Describe a time when you have...'

This supports the acquisition of new words by encouraging children to manipulate the newly learned word.

Applause, Applause! 'Clap how much'

Children are encouraged to clap how much they would like... and why.

Which would? 'Which would you rather...'

The children are asked this question in relation to the new word.

Summary:

Make word meanings clear and explicit.

Actively involve students in the thinking about and using word meanings right away.

Chapter 4: Bringing Vocabulary into The Earliest Grades

This chapter focuses upon the suggested sequence for the teaching of new vocabulary to young children. This comprises of systematic word introductions and follow up activities designed to enrich the listening and speaking vocabularies of young children.

The chapter begins by reinforcing the fact that words for young children's language development do not come from the reading materials young children are asked to read. This is due, as you would expect, to young readers' word identification limitations. The language in these early reading books comprises of words known to children through their oral language, which are in essence 'tier one' words, and, as such, do not represent a rich source of vocabulary.

The chapter goes on to explain that the most valuable source of words for young children come from what are referred to as 'trade books,' i.e. books that are designed to be read aloud to young children. According to the research conducted, a word is considered a good candidate to teach to children if it seems likely to be unfamiliar but has a concept with which they could identify and use in normal conversation.

The number of words that can be successfully taught in a week is discussed in the chapter. The book suggests that up to 10 words can successfully be taught to children, but it does not suggest that this is the norm. More so, the book suggests that the decision on the number of words to be taught should be decided by the teacher, based upon time constraints and what else is going on in the classroom.

When introducing words to young children, the chapter explains that direct instruction should occur *after* a story has been read, meaning that teachers have a strong context with which to begin word meaning introduction. This is the first component of introducing words to young children. This is because it provides a situation that is already familiar to the children and provides a rich example of the word's use. Specific examples of the format for introducing words to young children are given in the chapter, pages 61-69 and 70-74.

The second component of the process, as detailed in the chapter, is about developing a definition of the word that is accessible for children. In the case of young children, this can pose more of a challenge. The authors highlight the fact that when giving a definition to young children, an example of the word's use should be embedded within it, as this can help pinpoint and clarify its meaning. This is also important to ensure that children have examples of the word beyond the original use in the story; using contexts the children are familiar with and interested in is one such way to do this. This is a fundamental part of the process, as multiple contexts are needed for a learner to construct meaningful and memorable representations of the word. It also helps to stop the common occurrence of young children limiting their use of a word to the context in which it was originally presented.

The chapter concludes with details about the final component of instruction for young children: giving children the opportunity to interact with the words that have been introduced. This involves responding to and explaining examples of the words, as well as developing their own examples of the word's use.

Chapter 5: Instructional Sequences for Later Grades (Key Stage 2 and beyond)

The nuances, subtleties and uses of a word can only be understood through repeated exposures to the word in a variety of contexts.

Robust and instructional activities

Multiple, frequent and varied encounters with target words together with robust and instructional activities which engage students in deep processing are needed. Choose 10 words per week with daily follow-up activities which expose students to their use in different contexts and with different nuances of meaning:

- Students log words and meanings in a vocabulary book together with examples of how each word can be used.
- Give out one “example” and one “non-example” of the target word to establish meaning. Ask which is correct and which not, and seek an explanation:
e.g. **banter** a) *A husband and wife argue about what to have for dinner.*
b) *A husband and wife tease each other about who ate more at dinner.*
- Pair two target words which are not obviously related. Does a relationship exist? This helps students when a word is encountered in a new and unfamiliar context.
e.g. Could a **virtuoso** be a **rival**? Would you **suppress** a **profound** thought? When would **compensation** not be **sufficient**?
- Expose students to (up to three) slightly altered definitions of each target word over a week - this stops blithe learning of a definition off-by-heart and deepens thinking and understanding.
e.g. **ambitious** 1. *Really wanting to succeed in becoming rich/important.*
2. *Wanting to get ahead by becoming powerful.*
3. *Wants great success in life.*
- “Beat the Clock” quiz game – Give 2 minutes to complete true/false on a range of definitions e.g. **Shrill** sounds can hurt your ears. **Gregarious** people would rather be alone. It might be hard to have a conversation when there is a **commotion**. **Frank** people keep their thoughts to themselves.
- Provide sentence stems with the target word to extend e.g. *The citizens were **incredulous** when...*
- “Ready, Set, Go” – list the target words on one side (numbered) and mixed up definitions on the other (lettered) and get the students to match them correctly.

5 day instructional sequence approach

Day 1 – Introduce target words (with page ref), how used in story (context) and a student-friendly explanation of the meaning:

e.g. Target words	Story context	Student-friendly explanation
Forlornly (page 131)	Jack shrugged his shoulders forlornly when he had to finish digging the garden.	Forlorn means miserable or unhappy.

Days 2 - 4 – Engage in a range of follow-up activities as outlined above.

Day 5 – Assessment e.g. 1. List the target words and write a series of sentences into which the correct word has to be placed (cloze exercise) 2. Questions using target word e.g. *Would you **admire** someone who absconded with your new cricket bat? Why/why not? When might your teacher be **incredulous** about something you did?*

Benefits of this approach

- a) promotes “word ownership” by students;
- b) develops “word awareness” – students start to notice words generally as well as the target words;
- c) words can only truly be learned through use since the distinctions between them are often so subtle.

Chapter 6: Assessing and Maintaining New Vocabulary

This chapter discusses the all-important assessment aspect of teaching vocabulary and maintaining these words in pupils' vocabulary. However, it stresses that assessments should not be considered the end of word learning. It must continue throughout the year, phase and key stage to ensure pupils develop a bank of vocabulary that can be used for various purposes. To allow for this continued relationship with taught words, opportunities must be created to ensure that pupils can activate the use of these written words in verbal and written form. Attention to these words needs to be maintained within and outside the classroom.

Assessment – What does it mean to know a word?

Teachers will need to consider the learning that they expect to take place – is it the initial understanding of a word or is it a deeper understanding to allow for use in comprehension and composition? In early key stage one, pupils are asked to recognise real and 'nonwords' for example, in the phonics screening check, most pupils are able to spot 'nonwords' but, when asked about the meaning of the real words, they may struggle to define a word and are inclined to use the word in an example. This lack of understanding of word meaning continues throughout the primary setting, where the ability to generate synonyms or explain the meanings of words can be limited. Teachers must also be aware of lower ability pupils' more limited vocabulary and the fact that they may have less knowledge about the words that they do know. All of this needs to be considered when selecting processes for assessing word knowledge. An example for assessing varied abilities is to use a word matched to its definition but then extend this to asking pupils to provide an example of the word being used.

Multiple choice tasks are often used, as seen in end of key stage assessments. However, word choices need to be considered carefully to ensure that the incorrect words in the selection are not too abstract and make the answer too easy to find. True or false tasks are also used and can be used to assess depth of knowledge by asking for an explanation. Providing an example and 'non-example' of a word meaning can also be used and, again, asking for explanations will allow for depth of knowledge to be assessed.

Assessing depth of knowledge (greater depth pupils)

For younger pupils, these tasks could be completed verbally. Strategies could include:

- Describe how someone acts that shows them being ...
- Tell me about a time when you were/felt ...

Compare pairs of words (acquaintance / ally, extraordinary / peculiar)

Supply use of a word in varied contexts and plan for these in questions or tasks.

Maintaining Vocabulary

Pupils require *frequent* encounters with the words that they are taught. Creating a classroom dictionary, index cards or making use of a working wall area all go towards maintaining pupils' attention to these words. Pupils in upper key stage two could keep their own record in journals, planners or work books. Strategies could include:

- Training pupils to acknowledge use of word in a text and suggesting how the author could have used one of the taught words instead.
- During planning stages, ensure pupils are given opportunities to use taught words.
- Ensure teachers use these words in daily routines, marking, conversations and questioning.
- Provide pictures to stimulate the use of these words – this could be displayed as a morning task.

Taking vocabulary outside of the classroom - 'Word Wizard' / 'In the Media' (McKeown et al 1985)

For younger pupils, create a reward system and encourage pupils to recognise use of taught words in 'real-life'. Pupils will come to school and share when they have seen, heard or used the words. Evidence for the correct understanding of the word(s) will be clear, based on the context of word use. Even if the teacher feels that pupils are not being honest about this, it is still valuable and can be assessed if the word is discussed appropriately. It can be more prescriptive – teachers can ask pupils to find a specific word in newspapers, on TV etc. Each week the 'Word Wizard' (pupil with most points) can be given a wizard's hat and be open to questioning around the school setting. For older pupils, consider 'In the Media'. Pupils are set the task to recognise taught words in video games, movies, on the internet etc. They can record their learning on slips or post-its and add to a working wall area.

Chapter 7: Working with Instructional and Natural Contexts

In this chapter the writers open by considering the challenge of deriving word meaning from both *instructional* and *naturally* occurring contexts. An overview of instructional strategies along with the potential pitfalls faced by low skilled readers is presented. The advantages but also potential limitations of teaching 'context cues', regarding the challenge of transferring learning to natural contexts, are briefly discussed.

The importance of getting students to 'make their thinking public' (Goers et al 1999) is examined, in order to support students' ability to learn to think about what a word might mean by querying the context and making hypotheses about word meanings. The chapter uses 'transcripts', e.g. for the word *conscientious*, to explore and expose the vital instructional steps, whereby a teacher models and then carefully 'scaffolds' questions to help low skilled readers (through repetition of this practice) to develop sensitivity to the relationship between a new word and the context in which it appears.

Finally, the authors share that words more commonly appearing in *informational contexts* may not be being given the attention required. The writers introduce their latest instructional focus 'RAVE' (Robust Academic Vocabulary Encounters), whereby the meanings of academic words are explored by first introducing the words through a variety of authentic contexts and by providing 'friendly' explanations of word meanings, to promote discussion about how the word meaning fits the various contexts.

Instructional Sequence: Goerss, Beck and McKeown (P126 – 128)

This section talks the reader through a Five Step instructional model, to explore the meaning of 'scowled' in the following sentence: 'As for Rusty, he scowled at Mary before stamping out of the room, "And I'm not coming back either, see!"' (Further examples/transcripts p128 – 132).

1. **Read and paraphrase text** – introduce context, placing emphasis on unfamiliar word
2. Through skilled questioning, **establish meaning of the context** – for students to become 'sensitive' to the relationship between a context and an unfamiliar word. Prompt, 'Is there anything else?'
3. Student provides **initial identification/rationale** of unknown word
4. Student **considers other potential meanings**
5. **Summary** of information established through teacher/student dialogue for conclusions to be drawn.

Research and Development Project – Robust Academic Vocabulary Encounters (RAVE)

Beck et al state that although *academic words* often frequently occur in students' environments, they are not likely to learn their meanings without direct instruction.

Academic Word List (AWL), Coxhead (1998), is a list of high-frequency words common across various *content-area texts*/high transfer words e.g. *anticipate, neutral, diminished*.

Example RAVE lesson (P134) provides teacher materials for introducing the word 'expose' in two specific contexts: 'miners *expose* layers of coal'; 'students *exposed* to the world of jazz'. The steps outlined can be adapted in order to utilise this approach for other words.

Web based resource: The British National Corpus (BNC) enables searches for contexts containing specified words for exploration/instruction; a great resource for teachers to expose students to a range of contexts for the same word and to use with the RAVE approach to vocabulary instruction!

Chapter 8: Vocabulary and Writing

This chapter starts by reflecting on the notion that vocabulary knowledge being related to writing proficiency is intuitively compelling. Word choice is often one of the features included on assessment frameworks to evaluate students' writing. Precision of word knowledge is another feature related to good writing as it enables the writer to say exactly what they want to say. Corson (1995) suggests that it is the content of language, especially the use and diversity of vocabulary, that teachers look for when their students are communicating meaning.

Reading and writing as related processes

Historically, reading and writing have been thought of as contrasting processes, with reading being identified as a receptive process and writing an expressive process. In the 1950s, psychological research shifted from behaviourism to cognition. This influenced educational thought and new understanding about reading and writing developed. By the 1970s, reading had emerged from a passive, bottom-up activity to a constructive process in which readers actively engage with text to create meaning. Writing emerged from a focus on the product to a process of interactions between the writer and knowledge of language, topic and audience.

The overall theoretical orientation of the similarities is that they are both constructive processes. Fitzgerald & Shanahan (2000) discussed four types of knowledge that both readers and writers share and need to ensure that reading and writing are successful.

Meta-knowledge about written language – awareness as a reader of the need to interact with the text to understand ideas and as a writer to interact with ideas to create text. Meta-knowledge also involves monitoring one's own meaning making.

Linguistic features of written language – phonemes, spelling, morphology, syntax and text features.

Procedural knowledge – knowing how to access and use knowledge during reading and writing.

Domain knowledge and semantics – often referred to as content knowledge (what the reader or writer already knows about the content) and vocabulary; the words and word choices which are the building blocks of reading and writing.

Vocabulary instruction and writing

The chapter continues to explore different approaches to teaching vocabulary with the latter part reproducing some of Yonek's (2008) dissertation research regarding students' essays pre-vocabulary instruction and post-vocabulary instruction (p144 – p151).

Scott, Skobel and Wells (2008) describe an approach whereby teachers immersed students in rich literature whilst encouraging them to examine the authors' use of words. The notion was that students would value the power of words in texts, leading to wider vocabulary use and thereby improved writing. Students were encouraged to "gather Gifts of Words" and then record these in a word bank to draw on in their own writing. (Often phrased as "Magpie books" in the UK).

Three studies mentioned in this chapter (Mezynski (1983), Stahl and Fairbanks (1986), Duin and Graves (1987)), conclude that vocabulary instruction does appear to have an effect on comprehension. The key features of this being:

Amount of practice of targeted words (multiple exposure)

Breadth of word knowledge about the words (definitional and contextual)

The use of active processing

These features are the hallmarks of robust vocabulary.

Summary

The content of students' essays dramatically improved with the introduction of Tier Two words as this gave the writer focus and content. Adams (2009) stated: "Words are not just words...What makes vocabulary valuable and important is not the words themselves so much as the understanding they afford".

There is a paucity of research about the relationship between vocabulary and writing in contrast to that of reading and vocabulary. What research there is supports the notion that it is not just any kind of vocabulary instruction that affects writing but that it has to be **robust**.

Chapter 9: Differentiating Vocabulary Instruction

This chapter describes approaches for differentiating vocabulary instruction. Specifically, how robust vocabulary instruction can be used to address the needs of students who struggle with reading and students who are English learners (ELs).

Students who struggle with reading

In the US in 2004, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) was reauthorized, allowing for more timely and multileveled support for students who were having difficulty in school, most often reading. One model for support is response to intervention (RTI), which provides differentiated instructional approaches designated as tiers. These should not be confused with the tiers identified for vocabulary words. There is no correspondence between them.

Tier 1 RTI instruction makes use of a core program with a curriculum that meets state guidelines, such as a basal reading program. Tier 2 instruction is in addition to the instruction provided by tier 1 approaches. Based on assessment results, students who are assigned to tier 2 receive targeted instruction in small groups to address areas such as phonics or fluency. Tier 3 instruction is designed to address the needs of students who are high risk for academic failure and often involves one-to-one instruction. The instructional support offered at each tier increases in intensity, frequency and duration.

There is sufficient evidence to indicate that the vast differences in children's vocabulary need to be addressed from the beginning of schooling if those differences are ever going to be mediated. Further studies have seen huge success in the power of instruction that provides students with more time and opportunities to develop rich representations of word meanings. Duration and intensity do make a difference. Another way to provide more intensive instruction for at-risk students is to bolster initial instruction with modelling and more explicit questioning within activities that require reasoning about words and word relationships. Students must also explore relationships among words and between words and the contexts in which they appear.

English Learners (EL)

There is evidence that ELs not only know fewer words but also tend to have looser semantic networks between words in their vocabularies and less developed knowledge about word parts. With slower or weaker access to relevant meanings, comprehension may be slowed or prevented.

Which words to teach ELs?

The lexical bar, mentioned in chapter 2, is a concept that characterises the distinctions between everyday oral language and academic, literate language. All students, including ELs, need to cross this lexical bar as early as possible. When EL students can manage everyday conversation, they should receive instruction in Tier Two words. This instruction can be done along with their native speaking classmates who will also be unfamiliar with these words. Some instructional time will be needed for Tier One words but these will be acquired for daily life and will be readily learned when used in conversation. Tier Two words are more difficult to learn and are less likely to be used in conversations so will need direct instructional time. Without this teaching, there will be comprehension problems that leave students the wrong side of the lexical bar.

Instructional methods for ELs

The key fact is that what works for first-language learners will also work for second-language learners. Such as: instruction that provides multiple encounters with target words, promoting active processing of words, meeting words in multiple contexts, purposeful talk with others embedding the target words.

Incorporating cognates

Cognates are words in two languages that are closely related in meaning and that overlap orthographically and phonologically, such as the English word *adapt* and its Spanish cognate *adaptar*. Some EL students are able to transfer cognate knowledge from their first language to English to infer the meaning of unknown words. However, this will affect comprehension only if they are adept at recognising cognate relationships.

Focusing on broader morphological relationships may help ELs, such as learning how Latin roots relate to the meanings, and learning how these roots relate to other words, can give students access to additional words that share the same root.

Chapter 10: Energising the Verbal Environment

In this chapter, the writers celebrate the idea of an “energised verbal environment”, a classroom where words are in play almost all of the time - noticed, investigated and savoured - and where every opportunity is taken to add words to students’ surroundings. They emphasise that this is in addition and complementary to robust vocabulary instruction, basically focussing on words beyond those that are explicitly being taught so that students become interested in and alert to words and word use. They assert that the teacher is really the most important element in this environment – the teacher who is alert to opportunities to use sophisticated, interesting and precise language.

Firstly, they point out the importance of mature language as a visible part of classroom practice through careful choice of words by the teacher (e.g. describing a well-crafted sentence as ‘engaging’ or ‘intriguing’). They also highlight that teachers should become sensitive to words and show their own curiosity about words, as well as being alert to words and their uses inside and outside of school.

As part of a rich verbal environment, students need resources to discover and follow up on interesting words. The writers suggest having a range of dictionaries available, including unabridged dictionaries for older students, and particularly recommend the *Collins COBUILD English Language Dictionary* (Sinclair, 1987) which provides discursive explanations rather than traditional definitions. They also advise having a thesaurus available, but being sure to frame discussions around the words the students find, to avoid the issue of students simply replacing a word with another – any other! - they find in a thesaurus.

Poetry is put forward as a great way to expose students to fascinating, enthralling and innovative ways of celebrating language, whether this be through poems that lend themselves to performance or concrete poems encouraging students to think about the images that words evoke.

Another suggested resource to have available to students is books about words. This chapter refers to, for example, books that describe words in terms of their part of speech, such as a collection by Ruth Heller which includes books that introduce nouns, collective nouns, pronouns, adverbs and conjunctions to name but a few.

The words which will be part of the classroom environment for a while don’t need to be planned in advance, teachers can take spontaneous opportunities to introduce new words as they naturally arise, using their professional judgment as to what best to do with words as they enter the verbal environment. Once words have been introduced and discussed, they can be ‘kept around’ in the classroom, for example on a word wall or bulletin board, with the teacher remaining alert for ways to “sprinkle them in”.

Finally, the book reminds us of the benefits that can come from bringing attention to familiar words, adding depth to students’ understanding of the nuanced meaning(s) of those words and broadening their perspective about relationships between words and the contexts in which they can be used.

The **Appendix**, Pages 183 – 193, contains a “**Menu of Instructional Activities**” – a useful range of example activities that can be used immediately in the classroom and/or provide a base which can be adapted to different texts, scenarios and situations.