FOR-PD's Reading Strategy of the Month

Contextual Analysis
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RATIONALE:

According to Stahl (2005), "Vocabulary knowledge is knowledge; the knowledge of a word not only implies a definition, but also implies how that word fits into the world." Vocabulary knowledge is ongoing. Instruction in vocabulary involves a lot more than just looking up words in a dictionary and using the words in a sentence. Vocabulary is acquired indirectly through exposure to words and directly through explicit instruction in specific words and word-learning strategies.

One of the recommendations of The National Reading Panel (2000) about teaching vocabulary includes word-learning strategies such as: dictionary use, morphemic analysis, and contextual analysis. Contextual analysis involves inferring the meaning of an unfamiliar word by analyzing the text surrounding it. Instruction in contextual analysis generally involves teaching students to use both generic and specific types of context clues.

In the primary grades, word identification instruction focuses on helping children to understand the alphabetic principle and to quickly (to the point of automaticity) relate the letters and spelling patterns of written words to their corresponding speech sounds. Once beginning readers are able to do this, they begin to focus less attention on word reading, or decoding, and more attention on constructing meaning from what they read.

Beyond the primary grades, word identification instruction focuses on teaching students skills that they can apply to read difficult or unfamiliar multisyllabic words—the kind of words often found in content area reading materials and textbooks. Useful word identification skills to teach older students include contextual analysis and structural analysis. Contextual analysis helps students to determine the meaning of an unfamiliar word by drawing clues from the context—the sentence or paragraph—in which the word appears.

Context clues include definitions; synonyms, antonyms, examples; restatements; graphic illustrations, such as charts, tables, figures, and diagrams; and syntactic and semantic clues found in the sentence structure and words that surround the unfamiliar word.

HOW TO USE THE STRATEGY:

Teaching Contextual Analysis Steps:

1. Tell students that they can sometimes use context clues to figure out the meaning of an unfamiliar word they come across in their reading. Remind them that context clues are the words, phrases, and sentences surrounding an unfamiliar word that can give hints or clues to its meaning. Inform students that although these clues can prove to be helpful, they can sometimes be misleading.

2. Teach (Model)

   o Definition context clues

   Give students copies of the Context Clues Chart [PDF: 2 pages / 64 kb]. Go over the chart, identifying the types

of context clues and discussing the example for each one. Tell students that they should refer to the chart as they learn more about the different types of context clues.

Explain to students that in a definition clue the author provides the reader with the specific definition, or meaning, of a word right in the sentence. Point out that words such as *are*, *is*, *means*, and *refers to* can signal that a definition clue may follow. Then print the following sentence on a transparency or write it on the board:

A yacht is an expensive vessel propelled by sail or power and used for cruising or racing.

- Read aloud the first sentence.
  Say: I'm going to look for a context clue to help me understand the meaning of the word "yacht".

    - Underline or circle "yacht".

  Say: In the sentence, I see the word "is". The word "is" can signal a definition context clue.

    - Underline "is" using a different color marker.

  Say: The phrase "an expensive vessel" follows the word "is".

    - Underline the context clue in a different color.

  Say: *A yacht is an expensive vessel propelled by sail or power and used for cruising or racing.* The author has given a definition context clue.

3. Allow time for students to practice using context clues to construct meaning of unknown words and provide corrective feedback and support as needed.

Additional Instructional Extensions:

Cloze activities are a nice way to practice context clues as they invite students to use context to identify the meaning of unknown words. Other extensions include: talking about words, teaching in context whenever possible, focusing on a developing meaning of a few words at a time, using literature, using semantic mapping, concept of definition, and the Frayer model to develop students' vocabulary, and encouraging students to use context to predict the meaning of unknown words.

ASSESSMENT:

Use informal assessment to assess and monitor students' understanding of using context clues to identify unknown words. Ask students to explain their choices and thinking and also use the Context Clues Chart as a means of assessing which context clues they use and how they use this new knowledge to construct meaning about unfamiliar words.

RESOURCES:

Read-Write-Think lesson plan (grades 6-8).
http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=253

In the following video, taken from the Third Grade Online Teacher Reading Academy, the teacher models for her students how to use context clues to determine meanings of unknown words.
http://searchlight.utexas.org/content/features-of-effective-instruction-resources/Third/activities/video-context-clues/view

Context clues exercises and activities.
http://edhelper.com/language/Context_Clues.htm

Teaching context clues.
http://www.brighthub.com/education/k-12/articles/6323.aspx

Learn new words using context: lesson plan activities.
http://www.learnnc.org/lp/pages/3971

REFERENCES:

National Reading Panel. (2000). *Teaching children to read: An evidence-based assessment of the scientific research literature on reading and its implications for reading instruction.* Washington, DC: National Institute of Child Health and Human Development.

Stahl, S.A. 2005. Four problems with teaching word meanings (and what to do to make vocabulary an integral part of instruction). In E.H. Hiebert and M.L. Kamil (eds.), *Teaching and learning vocabulary: Bringing research to practice*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

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