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Teaching independent word learning strategies to struggling readers

In facilitated peer dialogues, the teacher and two students explore, use, and analyze independent word learning strategies within the context of real reading.

Teachers in middle and high school classrooms are aware that many students continue to struggle with comprehension because of limited vocabulary knowledge and ineffective strategies. In response, they make concerted efforts to teach vocabulary in differing ways. Some lessons are intended to help students acquire specific word meanings for selected readings and typically occur as prereading activities, whereas other lessons are designed to help students develop independent word learning strategies. The focus of this article is on teachers assisting students to become more strategic word learners and ultimately more effective readers.

Vocabulary strategy building lessons, which abound in current methodology texts, generally emphasize learning about context clues, examining the structure of words (prefixes, suffixes, root words, inflectional endings), and using reference books such as dictionaries and thesauruses (Blachowicz & Fisher, 1996; Graves, Juel, & Graves, 2001; Ruddell, 2001). While these lessons work well with average and above average students, many students who struggle with reading continue to have difficulty transferring these strategies to their independent reading (Harmon, 1998). Hence, they tend to know fewer words than their more proficient counterparts and continue to fall behind in their reading. These students are the ones who need more intensive help with independent word learning strategies. Yet many teachers find strategy instruction difficult to implement (Dole, 2000). It is far more straightforward to design activities

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for specified word meanings than it is to create opportunities for students to develop strategic ability for grappling with word meanings in naturally occurring contexts while reading independently.

In spite of the complexity of strategy instruction, the demand for this type of instruction tailored to fit the needs of struggling adolescent readers is even more critical because many of these students have not learned how to be strategic readers. Students in middle and secondary classrooms are confronted with increasingly difficult texts and unfamiliar terms in all content areas. One reason those with limited reading strategies struggle continuously to handle the demands of reading is their inability to infer word meanings from connected texts (Jenkins, Stein, & Wysocki, 1984). They quickly learn the futility of their efforts and ultimately rely on ineffective strategies to help them with naturally occurring contexts that may not provide strong word meaning clues (Schatz & Baldwin, 1986). Because the sheer volume of learning new words is exponential (Miller & Gildea, 1987; Nagy & Herman, 1987), reliance on teaching specific words to older learners, while a necessary component in any secondary classroom, is not sufficient to help them become stronger independent, lifelong readers. They need instruction in how to develop strategic word learning abilities that will serve them well in both narrative and expository reading.

In a recent study, I explored the use of teacher-facilitated peer dialogues as a tool for supporting independent word learning strategies of struggling middle school learners (Harmon, 2000). What we know about learning from context (Baumann & Kameenui, 1991) and about the tenuous nature of context clues in authentic texts (Beck, McKeown, & McClaslin, 1983) served as a theoretical and research base for this investigation. Furthermore, in light of studies showing the capability of struggling readers to engage in complex thinking during group discussions (Raphael, Brock, & Wallace, 1997) and the promise of social interactions for promoting word learning (Drum & Madison, 1985; Stahl & Vancil, 1986), I hoped to create a context in which students would not only grapple with word meanings but also develop a stronger metacognitive awareness of their own efforts.

Using what I learned about the effectiveness of small-group discussion with word meanings from the three pairs of middle school students who participated in 17 facilitated small-group discussions, I then worked with pairs of high school students in a remedial reading class using the same procedure. Data collection and analysis in both contexts involved the use of transcriptions of taped sessions as well as field notes (Patton, 1990). In this article, I describe the facilitated peer dialogue approach, discuss the insights gained from using this approach with the middle school and secondary students, and finally present an instructional framework that can be implemented with both middle and secondary students.

Facilitated peer dialogues

Facilitated peer dialogues occur in small discussion groups that are composed of the teacher and two students. They meet for the purpose of exploring, using, and analyzing independent word learning strategies within the context of real reading. The discussions that develop focus on functional word meaning constructions as well as metacognitive awareness of strategic moves made by the students. While the initial discussion is student led, the teacher provides support and guidance when the students are unable to grasp important clues or appear to lack necessary background knowledge about the topic or about specific language conventions. The group convenes once a reading assignment is given to the class. Students in the group read the same assignment with the teacher nearby. The readings may be student-selected or teacher-assigned narrative or expository texts. When one student encounters a confusing or unfamiliar word, the reading stops and the discussion begins. These discussions can be taped to allow participants to later replay the conversation in order to analyze their word learning strategies.

The motivation behind the development of facilitated peer dialogues for supporting independent word learning strategies is based on several critical components. These include the importance of talk for enhancing learning, the need for understanding how independent word learning strategies work, the use of self-selected words, and the

importance of strong teacher and peer support in contextualized settings.

The importance of talk for enhancing word learning

Facilitated peer dialogue sessions provide a context for struggling readers to focus on vocabulary and word learning strategies and to practice their communication skills. While studies show that diverse learners can benefit from discussions in general (Raphael et al., 1997), they can also benefit from meaningful discussions about word meanings. These discussions can enable students to understand what it means to use word learning strategies as well as to examine what they do to make sense of words.

These discussions also provide opportunities for the teacher to assess the difficulties students may have with articulating their thoughts, the existing strategies students use in their encounters with unfamiliar words, and the depth of their word meaning constructions. On the basis of these assessments, the teacher can provide explicit instruction in word learning strategies and can offer many opportunities for students to use and analyze these strategies. However, explicit instruction alone offers no guarantee that struggling readers can transfer the use of strategies to other reading contexts or that students can articulate an awareness of their actions as they encounter unfamiliar words in their reading. They need to examine their own use of independent word learning strategies in settings where their voices can be heard, such as in facilitated peer dialogue sessions.

These sessions move away from traditional classroom discussions where student participation typically means responding to teacher-posed questions and where many struggling readers remain silent (Cazden, 1988). As Lipson and Wixson (1997) argued, "the practice of answering questions is so pervasive that it is sometimes difficult for teachers to recognize that the ability to answer questions is not the same thing as understanding" (p. 284). Nor does this practice provide teachers with information about how students construct word meanings as they read. In contrast, facilitated peer dialogues can reveal the independent

word learning strategies of the students and their awareness of these strategies.

The need to understand how independent word learning strategies work

Struggling readers typically exhibit limited knowledge of how independent word learning strategies work. Self-reported data indicate that they rely on skipping unfamiliar words or asking others for help (Harmon, 1998). Facilitated peer dialogues as learner-centered discussions can, however, broaden students' understanding of independent word learning strategies through close examination of personal moves through texts. Furthermore, students are motivated because they can listen to themselves on tape or verbally comment on their own contributions to the discussions. The participants develop a vested interest in both initial discussion sessions and subsequent self-analysis sessions. With support from the teacher, the discussions focus on strategic actions such as making connections to the text and other texts, searching beyond the sentence level for clues, and, most important, keeping in mind that word meanings must make sense.

The use of self-selected words

By using self-selected words from their independent reading, the participants engage in authentic, meaningful dialogues and maintain control of their learning. The students have a voice in their learning while expanding their own vocabulary base, and can also acknowledge every word discussed whether they know the meaning or not. Because each participant knows or does not know different words, each one can assume different roles in the discussions. Sometimes knowing the word means taking the lead in the discussion, whereas not knowing the word may force the learners to follow the lead of the more knowledgeable participant. These stances are turn-taking events that are not permanent roles for any participant. The choice of words and who selects them determine the nature of the dialogues, just as what the participants choose to talk about determines the teacher's prompts. As facilitator, the teacher has

no preconceived agenda that would take ownership of the dialogues away from the learners.

The importance of strong facilitator and peer support in contextualized settings

Struggling readers must not be left to their own devices in secondary school reading programs. Reading independently, while important and necessary, will not by itself help struggling learners become more strategic readers. They need and deserve explicit instruction and strong support from a knowledgeable teacher who can create fruitful opportunities for developing independent word learning strategies. These opportunities can use the potential of peer-led discussions that enable learners to have some responsibility and control of their learning in nonthreatening contexts that they themselves create (Almasi, 1996). In the words of Bomer (1998), "struggling readers need both rich conversations about big ideas in texts, which let them participate as full members of a literate community, and interactions that support figuring out the details of the textual world" (p. 32). Facilitated peer dialogues help students figure out the details of how to approach unfamiliar words in their reading.

Insights gained from facilitated peer dialogues

As I worked with pairs of learners in small peer-led dialogues and examined written responses about word learning strategies, patterns of independent word learning strategies emerged. These patterns provided insight on their interactions with unfamiliar words as well as their level of metacognitive awareness about their actions. First, the students used some strategies spontaneously with both productive and unproductive results, whereas other strategies required scaffolded support. Strategies that students used voluntarily included the following: (a) analysis of the word itself involving both pronunciation and orthographic similarities to other words; (b) examination of clues in the sentence containing the targeted word; (c) attention to punctuation and capitalization; and (d) use of outside sources, such as the dictionary (Harmon, 2000). The effectiveness of these strategies varied across pairs of students and across different targeted words. At times, the students used

several strategies as they discussed one word, such as in the following excerpt about the word *Holstein* in the sentence "John went to the next cow, Marge, a big Holstein who was an easy milk-er because she dropped the milk as soon as you started pulling." In this section one student grappled with sentence clues while the other had more background knowledge about the word. (Students' names are pseudonyms.)

Michael: I think it [Holstein] probably be like a powerful milk cow...like milk comes out quicker and easier.

Robert: I don't think the milk has anything to do with it. I just think it's like a brand name like a horse. What do they call them big horses?

Facilitator: Clydesdales?

Robert: Yea. Like a Clydesdale. Because it is a type of horse. And Holstein is a type of cow.

Michael: I didn't know they had names of cows. (Harmon, 2000, p. 340)

With facilitator prompting, the students also noticed writing conventions.

Facilitator: Is there any other clue in there?

Robert: The comma after *Marge*.

Michael: They got *Holstein* capitalized. (Harmon, 2000, p. 340)

The strategies that most frequently required support encompassed the following: (a) awareness of the function of a word in relation to the context and its importance to the overall comprehension of a passage, (b) ability to discern the helpfulness of the immediate context, (c) reference to text events or the broader story line beyond the immediate sentence level, and (d) ability to make connections with personal background knowledge or explicitly stated text information. The examples that follow illustrate how these strategies are interwoven in various ways during different interactions with unfamiliar words with middle and high school students. Each dialogue session with different students resulted in an array of attempts at constructing meaning for the targeted words.

In reference to the functions of words, some students had difficulty determining whether the unknown word described something, showed action, or named something. For example, in the sentence “I was...hiding my light under a bushel,” one high school student claimed *bushel* named “hiding the light” and another believed it showed the action of “hiding.” Clearly the students had no understanding of word functions because they did not grasp the general nature of the word. In another instance, a student who highlighted the word *ballistic* in the sentence “[Goddard] had successfully developed a solid-fuel ballistic rocket,” was quick to determine that the word described “when someone can go crazy over you.” In this case, the student completely disregarded the context in favor of relying solely on personal knowledge.

While reading an expository passage about baby elephants, a pair of high school students attended to the immediate context to figure out the meaning of the word *foreleg* from the following excerpt:

By the time a little elephant is two years old, its days of being “babied” are over. The same older females who were patient and loving now begin to use discipline. If a two-year-old hurts a younger baby or does something else wrong—smack!—it gets slapped with a trunk. If it tries to nurse, a heavy *foreleg* shoves it away. (Spargo, 1989, p. 36)

The ensuing discussion about *foreleg* illustrates an unproductive attempt at the word level, followed by facilitative support to help the students make connections, and ending with a return to word-level analysis.

Facilitator: Okay. Both of you would like to talk about *foreleg*. What do you think so far about *foreleg*?

Belinda: Umm...it's a big elephant or something.

Facilitator: What makes you say that?

Belinda: Because it has four legs and it's heavy. And maybe it's like completely grown—maybe an adult.

Facilitator: What makes you think it's a big elephant?

Belinda: It says *foreleg*.

Kari: A little elephant has four legs too. It's probably because a heavy *foreleg* shoves it away.

Facilitator: “A heavy *foreleg* shoves it away.” So what do you think it means? Think about what the elephant is doing. Reread the sentence.

Belinda: A heavy *foreleg*. Is it like a heavy hit or something? Because the trunk you know? The elephant hits the baby.

Facilitator: The elephant is hitting the baby. Right? Because that's what it says.

Kari: So it's like a force. A heavy force or something.

Facilitator: The sentence right before it says “If a two-year-old hurts a younger baby or does something else wrong—smack!—it gets slapped with a trunk.” So can you picture that in your head? But then it says “If it tries to nurse....” Talk to me about that. What is the baby trying to do?

Belinda: Tries to nurse....

Facilitator: What's it trying to do?

Kari: It tries to nurse...it tries to be bad, I guess. Yeah, probably misbehaves.

Facilitator: Think about baby kittens. How do they eat when they are first born?

Kari: They suck milk.

Facilitator: From?

Belinda: From their parent.

Kari: From the mom.

Facilitator: Okay. So that means they are nursing.

Kari: Oh, when it wants milk, the mom elephant, like, shoves it away. It wouldn't let him. It shoves it away.

Facilitator: So how do you think the elephant is shoving?

Belinda: It's pushing him.

Facilitator: With her leg. Which leg?

Kari: The last one.

Facilitator: What makes you say that?

Kari: Like the elephant is kicking in the back because it needs balance. If it kicks from the front, then it will not be balanced and it's going to fall. But if it kicks in the back, it can have balance in the front.

Facilitator: It would seem that way, doesn't it? It makes sense that it would be the back leg. But actually...look at the first part of the word.

Belinda: Yeah, *fore* means front.

Facilitator: How do you know *fore* means front?

Belinda: Because like forward it's front.

Facilitator: So *foreleg* is actually the....

Belinda: Front leg.

Kari: So it kicks with the front leg.

This excerpt also illustrates how facilitators may have to clarify the meanings of other words, as in the case of the word *nurse*, in order to construct legitimate meaning for the targeted word.

In another session, high school students helped one another grapple with the word *mandated* that appeared in the following context:

Disabled people formed grassroots coalitions to advocate their rights to integration and meaningful equality of opportunity. Congress responded by passing major legislation recognizing people with disabilities as a protected class under civil rights statutes. In the mid-1970s, critical legislation *mandated* access to education, public transportation, and public facilities, and prohibited employment discrimination by federal agencies or employers receiving federal funds. (Spargo, 1989, p. 19)

Facilitator: Okay. What do you think *mandated* means?

Belinda: Umm...until the man decides.

Facilitator: A man decides? What do you mean by that?

Kari: Provided.

Facilitator: Provided access.... Okay, let's talk about what you both did right here. What made you say "man decides?"

Belinda: Because it says *man dated*.

Facilitator: It has *man* in it. And you [Kari] said....

Kari: Provided.

Facilitator: What makes you say provided?

Kari: Well, access to education and it talks about the rights that people with disabilities [have] so I guess it's provided.

Facilitator: Why do we have to have a law that makes us do things?

Belinda: So that we follow it.

Facilitator: If we didn't have a law would we do all this?

Kari: No.

Facilitator: So *mandated* is a little more than provided. It's making us do it, right? So *mandated* is forcing us to do it. It's stating that we have to do it. It's a little stronger than provided.

Kari: Forced.

Along with peer support, the facilitator used this opportunity to clarify the meaning of the word and to have students justify their thinking.

In regard to their metacognitive awareness about independent word learning strategies, both middle and high school participants struggled with articulating any kind of awareness about their actions, behavior typical of poor readers (Garner, 1992). Initially, many focused on general actions, such as talking about a word or looking around a word. In subsequent sessions, however, some students listened to my explanations and began to focus on where they found clues and how they looked at word parts.

Instructional framework

Teaching independent word learning strategies involves both direct and facilitative instructional procedures as the teacher creates an awareness of strategies, supports the application of strategies, and continues the dialogue about word learning. The teacher assumes several roles in the instructional framework for teaching independent word learning strategies. As an instructor, monitor, and reminder, the teacher must maintain a focus on word learning strategies during virtually all reading tasks throughout the year. In the instructor

role, the teacher employs explicit instruction initially to create an awareness and understanding of specific strategies. Then the teacher assumes the role of monitor or facilitator to support the application of strategies during facilitated peer dialogues and eventually in independent reading. Finally, the teacher continues the dialogue about word meanings at every possible opportunity by reminding students of what they can do to help themselves develop stronger vocabularies. For each component, the teacher and students have shared responsibilities for ensuring the success of these teaching and learning opportunities and ultimately for the development of stronger independent word learning strategies. (See Figure 1 for discussion framework.)

Creating an awareness of strategies

Teachers need to create strategy awareness to help students learn about alternatives to skipping potentially important words. Students need to become more metacognitively aware of what they al-

ready know about a word. They need to learn how to make connections with the existing text clues and to formulate word meanings in line with constructing meanings for the passage in which the word is found. To address these objectives, teachers can follow these procedures:

Discuss the importance of word meanings. Begin with a class discussion about the importance of word meanings. Suggested prompts include (a) How important is vocabulary in reading? (b) Do you need to know all the words when you read? (c) How do you go about figuring out unfamiliar words? (d) Do those strategies help you all the time? The discussion will direct students to think about their own use of word learning strategies and to consider how useful this repertoire of strategies really is in helping them unravel word meanings in independent reading.

Teach alternative strategies. Explain to students that there are alternatives to skipping words—asking someone or using the dictionary—and that these alternatives are problem-solving techniques that

FIGURE 1
Instructional framework for facilitated peer dialogues

| Components | Teacher responsibilities | Student responsibilities |
|--------------|--|---|
| Awareness | <i>Instructor role</i> Explain the importance of word meanings. Teach alternative strategies. | Acknowledge importance of word meanings. Consider the value in learning new strategies. |
| | <i>Facilitator role</i> Create time for facilitated peer dialogues. React to student attempts at constructing meaning. Guide problem-solving efforts. Acknowledge student attempts. Focus on strategies and content. Conduct self-analysis sessions. | Actively participate in facilitated peer dialogues. Pay attention to unfamiliar words that may hinder comprehension. Apply strategies. Provide support for peers. Monitor comprehension. Recognize strategies used by self and peer. |
| Continuation | <i>Reminder role</i> Review strategies periodically. Remind students to use strategies. Conduct facilitated peer dialogues throughout the year with varied texts. Allow students to engage in peer dialogues without facilitator support. | Practice strategies with varied texts. Continue self-monitoring of strategies. Participate in facilitated peer dialogues. Engage in peer dialogues without facilitator support. |

can strengthen their understanding of text. The alternatives include examining word functions, sentence clues, location, connections, and word parts.

- Help students examine the function of the word. In this way students use their linguistic competence to make decisions about the kind of word the author is using. They also begin to realize that they do know something about the word even though it is only in a general sense. Ask the following questions: (a) Is it describing something? (b) Does it show action? or (c) Is it naming something? Such prompts can then lead students to other questions to consider, such as what kind of object is being described and what the author is trying to say about this object.
- Help students understand the different kinds of clues that may be evident in the sentence containing the targeted word. Many students claim that one of the word learning strategies is to study the sentence containing the targeted word (Harmon, 1998). Although this is an important strategy, many students do not take advantage of the variety of clues that might be available at the sentence level. Furthermore, context clues are tenuous in many instances because the clues found in naturally occurring contexts may not always provide enough support to help the reader with unfamiliar word meanings (Schatz & Baldwin, 1986). Nevertheless, it is still useful for students to learn what contexts can offer in the way of clues. Numerous sources provide examples of contextual aids to use with students, typically definitions, synonyms, common expressions, direct descriptions, modifying phrases, serial listings, contrasts, setting and mood, and cause and effect (Vacca & Vacca, 1998). Blachowicz and Fisher (1996) advocated having students discover for themselves the types of context clues authors use and sharing these authentic examples with others.
- Many students, especially those who struggle with reading, create narrow boundaries as they search for word meaning clues. In fact, those who do use context clues typically rely only on the sentence in which the word is found for clues. For this reason, discuss how clues can be found in other places in the text, such as right before or after the sentence, and even in previous pages or chapters. In this way, the students can widen their parameters for clues as they figure out word meanings.
- Encourage students to make connections with the clues they find and the ideas they have about

the unfamiliar word. Explain to the students that these connections can be with what they already know in their lives, events in the whole story, facts presented in the passage, immediate story events, the author's use of the word, and reasons why the author would use that particular word.

- Another important word learning strategy is structural analysis whereby readers study the word itself looking for prefixes, roots, or suffixes that may be familiar. As in the case of contextual aids, there are sources available that provide information about teaching affixes, roots, and inflectional endings (Blachowicz & Fisher, 1996; Graves et al., 2001).

It is important to remember that these alternative strategies for learning word meanings do not necessarily follow any particular order. How students implement the strategies will depend upon the word, the context, and the student's adeptness in applying the strategies. Figure 2 provides guidelines to

FIGURE 2 **Independent word learning strategies**

What can I do to help myself figure out the meaning of an unfamiliar word? (not necessarily in this order)

1. Figure out the purpose of the word. Does it describe something? Show action? Name something?
 2. Find out what clues are in the sentence. Does the author use a definition, synonym, description, listing, contrast, or a common expression?
 3. Look before and after the sentence containing the word. Are there any clues like in 2?
 4. What kind of connections can I make? Think of things in my life, the whole story, immediate events, how the author uses the word, or why the author would use the word.
 5. Study the word itself. If the pronunciation does not help, look at word parts or the appearance of the word. Does this tell me anything?
 6. Consider using a dictionary if this word is important to the story or text. Does the dictionary definition make sense to me?
 7. Think of the meaning of the word. State the meaning. Does it seem to fit the context?
-

help students think about ways to approach unfamiliar words.

Supporting the application of strategies

Although the problem-solving strategies I have described are not difficult to teach, it is a more challenging task to support the transferability of these strategies into independent reading. This is a critical juncture where struggling readers need support for internalizing strategies and need reinforcement and acknowledgment of what they are doing. Having students attend to their own meaning-making efforts by listening to themselves on tape or by emphasizing strategy awareness during facilitated peer dialogue sessions enables them to understand what it means to grapple with unfamiliar words in productive ways. It also provides the opportunity for the students to articulate their actions in a risk-free environment. They need to talk about what they do and to become aware of what they are learning. One high school student acknowledged that talking about words helped her

because “[I learned] that sometimes you think it makes sense to you but then it really doesn’t.”

Facilitated peer dialogues can be a useful instructional tool for mediating the transfer to independent reading. This approach requires that teachers allocate instructional time for addressing these strategies by creating contexts where the rest of the class works independently while the teacher attends to a selected pair of students who are relatively close in ability level. The technique works not only with self-selected books for independent reading, but also with expository texts that may be assigned by the teacher. Figure 3 provides suggested prompts for the teacher to use during the sessions.

Continuing the dialogue about word learning

Word learning is a continuous process that must be addressed throughout the year. It is also a slow process for struggling readers who lag far behind in their strategic abilities to construct word meanings independently. They need support with words during actual reading engagement not only after reading. In this way, teachers can blend strategy awareness with content understanding by reminding students constantly about what they are doing to help themselves construct viable word meanings and how this affects the larger understanding of what they are reading. The dialogue about word meanings and strategies for developing word meaning constructions should become an integral part of the learning environment of the classroom.

Helping struggling adolescent readers develop stronger independent word learning strategies is a demanding task that requires time, commitment, and effective instruction. Yet these students deserve every possible opportunity to help them abandon ineffective word learning techniques and to acquire more productive tools for becoming confident, strategic readers. The use of facilitated peer dialogues does present some challenges to teachers, and the benefits noted in these studies may not be applicable to all struggling readers. Nevertheless, this framework appears to have the potential to enable teachers to create learning environments that perhaps will broaden students’ understanding of their own literacy capabilities

FIGURE 3
Suggested facilitator prompts

1. What do you think the word means?
2. What makes you say that?
3. Are there other clues that made you think of that?
4. What is happening right here in the story?
5. What events are we reading about right here?
6. Why would the author use this word?
7. What does the word make you think of?
8. What do you notice about this word?
9. How did you figure that out?
10. What did you notice about what your partner said?
11. What strategies did you use?
12. What strategies did your partner use?
13. Were these strategies helpful?
14. Does the word meaning make sense?

while increasing their confidence level as they approach unfamiliar words in their reading.

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