7 Strategies for Exploring Unfamiliar Vocabulary

A 10-year-old child who is a good reader will encounter something like 1 million words a year (around 12 novels). Crucially, approximately 20,000 of those words will prove unfamiliar (Oakhill et al. 2015). It is crucial then to support our pupils to develop an array of independent word learning strategies to explore and to better understand an unfamiliar word they encounter.

We can support pupils by deliberately practising an array of strategies for exploring an unfamiliar word:

1. **Word parts (morphology).** Though a word may prove unfamiliar, pupils can often recognise parts of a word. Common prefixes and suffixes offer strategies for pupils to recognise words and connect them to their prior knowledge. Faced with a word like '*depression*' and '*devolve*', pupils can connect the '*de*' prefix, meaning '*down*'.
2. **Word families.** The common patterns and features offered by word families are helpful to recognise tricky new words. Faced with a complex word like '*oligarchy*', pupils can recognise the familiar root *'archy'*, meaning *'rulership'*. It offers an essential hook to understand the word, offering more familiar related words like '*monarchy*'.
3. **Word histories (etymology).** The majority of the complex vocabulary of school has Latin & Greek origins. These word stories can offer vital hooks to better understand the meaning of an unfamiliar word. For example, the word 'hydrogen' derives from the Greek – '*hydro*' meaning 'water'; '*gen*' meaning 'to bring forth'.
4. **Spelling (orthography).** The spelling of a word can sometimes give a useful clue as to the meaning of a word. Pupils can identify common word families and parts when exploring the spelling of a word. In words like 'subtle' and 'debt', pupils can recognise the unfamiliar 'b'. The roots of the spelling are in Latin, connecting to word histories and word families.
5. **Multiple meanings.** Deep word knowledge needs pupils to actively connect words and to explore layers of meaning. Many of the complex words of school are *polysemous* – that is to say that they have multiple meanings – and so pupils need to explore the appropriate meaning of the word. A word like '*cracking*' has a popular meaning, but in Science it is a very specific chemical reaction.
6. **Synonyms and antonyms.** Sometimes unfamiliar words are simply the more sophisticated labels for familiar words e.g. '*avarice'* simply means excessive greed. Exploring these can deepen understanding as well as introducing more new vocabulary items.
7. **Connecting to context.** Rather than just relying on the contextual clues from a sentence (which can be helpful, but sometimes is not), pupils can be more aware than certain words are more common in different subject domains or text types. By connecting up words, their families, into different subject domains and text types, it helps pupils to build a deep 'schema' of knowledge that increases understanding of word meanings and their uses.

MIND THE GAP