

# Relationships in reading

**Yeli Shi** suggests some strategies to help students with unfamiliar words.

**R**eading, as a basic skill, has always received a great deal of emphasis in English teaching, especially at the first two grades of university. Getting students to read in English is vitally important for a number of reasons. Firstly, whether they are faced with tourist brochures, instruction manuals, medical textbooks or even fiction, many students will have to be able to read effectively in English in their daily lives. Secondly, reading comprehension is tested in almost all examinations. On top of this, frequent reading exposes students to the language in a way that, if successful, helps them to acquire the language itself, either consciously or subconsciously.

Nevertheless, students often drop out of reading courses because of frequent encounters with unfamiliar words.

## Strategies for reading

In an extensive reading class, we often teach learners skills and strategies for understanding content, textual features, rhetorical elements and cultural background. Skills-based approaches include teaching basic skills (finding the main idea, skimming and scanning) and advanced skills (schema-building and metacognitive skills). Reading activities usually involve these 'skills'. In other words, when reading, we engage in activities such as recalling word meanings, inferring, drawing conclusions and so on, but these are all aspects of the act of comprehending. In fact, even the comprehension of words involves a series of skills or activities. But most students are not ready to use these skills. When they encounter unfamiliar words, they

would rather turn to dictionaries, which in turn will hinder the improvement of both reading speed and reading comprehension.

## Applying different skills

Why are students unable to use these strategies spontaneously? The reason may be that they unconsciously use intensive reading procedures to do extensive reading; that is, they automatically perform syntactic, semantic and lexical analyses of a passage and employ translation into their LI to grasp the meaning. They often find it hard to shake off the influence of the intensive reading methods which they have been taught since they began to learn English. So when they encounter an unfamiliar word, they don't try to employ extensive readings skills to understand the meaning.

How can we help students to use reading strategies and skills like those used by native English speakers when reading in their own language? Is such a thing feasible?

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## Strategies for words

Since words are the basic units of a text, comprehension of words is essential to the comprehension of the whole text. As Thomas Scovel points out, '*the comprehension of words is ... a very complex psycholinguistic process*'. He uses a model of cognition – Parallel Distributed Processing (PDP) – to account for this complexity. PDP means that we use several separate but simultaneous and parallel processes when we try to understand spoken or written language.

## Meeting new words

Based on this PDP approach, the Logogen model and Tip-of-the-tongue (TOT) phenomenon clearly explain how we access the words stored in our



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mental lexicon. If we see a word on the printed page, we stimulate an individual logogen or 'lexical detection device' for that word. Logogens can be likened to individual neurons in a gigantic neuronal network; if they are activated, they work in parallel and in concert with many other logogens to create comprehension. Therefore, if learners know their own cognitive process, they can learn better. As extensive reading teachers we should help students to stimulate their logogens frequently so that they can consciously activate them while reading independently after class.

## A fruitful example

When I taught my students the new word *citrus*, I first wrote *orange* on the blackboard. Then I asked them, 'What do you think of when you see this word?' They responded with these words: *sour, thick skin, juice, yellow, green, orange*. Then I asked what fruit was similar to an orange. 'Lemon and grapefruit' was their answer. I then asked if they now understood what *citrus fruit* was and they replied that they did. So I asked one student to define *citrus fruit* and *citrus*. Finally, I wrote another new word, *lime*, on the blackboard and told them that a lime is also a citrus fruit, giving them an accurate definition of *lime*: a small yellowish green citrus fruit with acid juicy pulp. Though they didn't know the word *pulp* and seldom used *acid*, they could easily understand the definition. In this process, I purposely activated the students' logogens. The word *orange* very rapidly evoked images of oranges and their different colours, similar fruits like lemons and grapefruit, and even stimulated memories of their smells and tastes. We can see that the comprehension of words can be linked via PDP to the network of associations that are triggered by a word's meaning. The whole process was impressive and these newly learnt words became new logogens in the students' minds.

## Forgetting new words

More often than not, my students complain that they frequently forget

words which they had in mind just a moment before. In fact, many of us have had experiences like this, called the Tip-of-the-tongue (TOT) phenomenon by psychologists. The reason is that our long-term memory storage is better for recognition than for recall. In other words, though we can't recall a momentarily lost word, we can instantly recognise it when it is presented to us. Based on this TOT model, I encourage the students to do extensive reading on certain subjects.

## A nourishing example

When I taught a coursebook unit on food, I tried the following experiment.

I wrote on the board many words related to food, such as *ingredient, recipe, chef, cuisine, specialty, appetiser, dessert, dough, yeast, pastry, nutritious* and *spicy*. I explained these words in English and asked the students to remember them. Then, after erasing all

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the words, I gave out a piece of paper with the definitions of five newly-learned words and asked the students to write the correct words next to the definitions. None of them could spell the words correctly; some could not recall them at all. However, when the words were presented on the board again, most of the students were able to match them correctly to the definitions.

I then asked them to match the rest of the words and their definitions. Because there were so many words, the students got confused and most of them couldn't do this. They were then asked to put aside this exercise and read three articles which included these words. After reading, they did the matching exercise again. The result was that most of the students got the right answers.

This suggests that word meaning construction occurs through repeated exposure: the students were exposed to these words at least four or five times (from my first presentation, the matching exercise and frequent occurrence in the articles).

## Remembering new words

Knowing that long-term memory storage is better for recognition than for recall, the students were excited about this experiment. They realised that a useful technique is first to become familiar with words associated with a given topic, then read some articles on the same subject. They found it much easier to comprehend the articles as a result. This experiment emphasised for me the role of wide reading in vocabulary development: wide reading is vital because it leads to multiple encounters with words.

## Strategies for meaning

The above experiment allowed the students to study particular words before engaging in context-related strategies for inferring meaning. But as we know, extensive reading activities are mostly done outside the classroom. What should students do then when they encounter totally unfamiliar words for the first time?

## Working alone

In order to solve this problem, I deliberately train my students to acquire the reading skill of looking for clues to word meaning in the context. I do work on this for almost 13 weeks (immediately after the students begin the course), so they become adept at integrating information and understanding the relationship between words and their contexts. As a result, they can deal with unfamiliar words more skillfully.

## A sporting example

Once again, I performed an experiment with the students to demonstrate the efficacy of this technique. I offered them two types of reading materials. One focused on familiar subjects, such as football fans and football violence. The other focused on less familiar topics. As expected, the results were quite different. When reading texts on familiar subjects, the students could infer word meanings more easily. Here



schematic knowledge based on all their life experiences and thematic knowledge built on their overall grasp of the content of these particular texts assisted inference of word meaning.

When they were asked to explain the phrase *the away team*, none of them could do it. But when they located the term in the text *Football fans and football violence*, they understood it immediately. In practice, some words are easy to guess from context, others are not, especially when these unfamiliar words occur in texts on unfamiliar topics.

### A cultural example

The second group of texts, which were about the unfamiliar topic of native peoples, demonstrated this. For instance, when the students read the text *Native American influences on modern American culture*, they encountered the following sentences:

*'In addition to place names, English has adopted many everyday words from various Indian languages. The words "chipmunk", "moose", "raccoon", "skunk", "moccasin" and "potatoes" are just a few examples.'* Here the words in quotation marks were almost all unfamiliar to them. They didn't have any knowledge about Indian culture and they failed to guess the meanings because the context gave them no clue. Knowing only one of the words, *potato*, they were inclined to classify all these words into one category: food.

Another example was the word *aborigine* in another article:

*'Aborigines today live in different circumstances throughout Australia, ranging from some who live much as their ancestors did in the more remote distant areas, to those who have merged with the life of large cities and towns.'*

At first, the students responded that the word referred to a kind of people, but they could get no further. When I mentioned the opening ceremony of the Sydney Olympic Games, and asked them who there were very conspicuous and quite different from modern people, they suddenly became aware of the meaning.

### Relating knowledge

From this second experiment, I concluded that learners of English meet with more difficulties than native speakers in dealing with unfamiliar words because they are seldom exposed

to English and their lack of related knowledge further hinders them from comprehension. The solution to this problem seems to be that students need to know as much as possible about different cultures, history, society, customs and habits and the like. In other words, they should enlarge their knowledge, whether this is by reading in English or their native language.



As Thomas Scovel asserts, the comprehension of words involves a dynamic, growing and active process of searching for relevant relationships in spreading activation networks. And the students do not rely on one general strategy to comprehend words, but simultaneously use both top-down information involving context and meaning and bottom-up data about the pronunciation and spelling of words to assist them in decoding the words they read. In this complex process, the learner's ability to apply knowledge and to use general strategies across different tasks and contexts is crucial. However, students do not spontaneously apply the skills presented in skill lessons, so instruction and activities to encourage the development of and automatic use of comprehension skills must be incorporated into daily instruction.

Students rarely have much opportunity to use English outside of class. Assignments involving the reading of books will greatly increase their exposure to English. Meanwhile, each encounter with an unfamiliar word in reading represents an opportunity for students to expand their vocabulary knowledge, which will in turn benefit their eventual acquisition of the language. (ETP)

Scovel, T *Psycholinguistics* Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press 2000



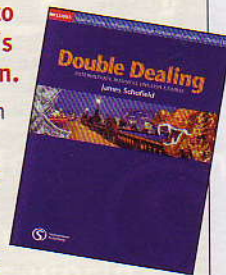
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## COMPETITIONS

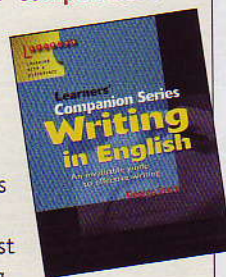
### There's still time to enter our 'Planter's Punch' competition.

The deadline has been extended to 10 May 2005. Full details are on pages 13 and 14 of Issue 34. We will give complete sets of *Double Dealing* by James Schofield, published by Summertown Publishing, to the writers of the two best accounts of what happened (and why) on the night that Colonel Flint died.



### There's also still time to enter our 'ELT Venn diagram' competition.

Full details are on page 16 of Issue 35. We will give a copy of *Writing in English* by George Stern, published by Learners Publishing, to the senders of the six best diagrams. The closing date for entries is 10 March 2005.



### There's also still time to enter our 'Word illustrations' competition.

Full details are on page 18 of Issue 36. We will give an ETP T-shirt to the senders of the six word illustrations that we like best. The closing date for entries is 10 May 2005.



### Competition entries and all correspondence to:

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