



Frontloading Vocabulary is a Key to Reading Comprehension

By Educator Barnes – August 12, 2019

Last month, over sixty of my relatives took a cruise to the Bahamas for our family reunion. It was the first time my children had been out of the country and on a ship. Although they read fluently and above grade level, they were confused about the terminology my husband and I were using while we were on the ship. When we first arrived, I remember saying, “Our room is on deck eight, port side.” One of my sons said, “What?” His response reminded me of my

students' responses when I first started my career as an English teacher. I quickly learned the importance of frontloading vocabulary to help with reading comprehension.

Frontloading vocabulary is when teachers teach words and their meanings before students are exposed to them in a text. Although this is a reading strategy used to aid English language learners, this strategy also helps all students. When teachers are using a text with lots of jargon or terms students have had no exposure, they should frontload the vocabulary. There is value to letting students use context clues, words surrounding a word in a text, but context clues don't always help especially when there are so many terms students don't know.

There are various ways to frontload vocabulary. When my sons were confused about the terms used to describe our location on the ship, my husband and I took them to a picture hanging up in the hall. It was one of those signs that said, "you are here." Also on the sign, the ship was labeled with the nautical terms: port, starboard, aft, and forward. Seeing the sign gave my sons clarity about which direction we were walking on the ship. In the classroom, in addition to pictures, you could also show a video clip.

What is even better than pictures or video is realia. Realia is giving students exposure to the terms in real life. If students are reading a text about tools doctors use, a teacher could bring in those items such as a stethoscope for students to hold and touch. It can help students make a permanent connection between the term and the meaning.

Field trips can also solidify word meanings. For example, if a teacher going to cover farming during a unit, the teacher could take the class to a farm. If the word elevator will be used in text students are going to read, the teacher should be intentional about showing students what an elevator of grain is so they can better understand the term.

Field trips aren't always feasible. Incorporating teaching word roots and stems can also help with frontloading vocabulary. When students are taught words part, it can help them with the meaning.

There are various ways to frontload vocabulary. It is important teachers do this to help students be successful readers. Now if my sons read a text with nautical terms, they are more likely to have a better understanding because of the experience they had with nautical terms before they read the text.