Semantic Maps

Why Is This Strategy Useful?

Because semantic maps use visual symbols to convey meanings, they may be helpful for students who are visual learners. They provide an organizational framework that facilitates the thinking process for both children and adults. Semantic maps form a powerful visual picture of information and allow students to discover patterns and relationships they might otherwise may have missed. By mapping relationships among words and concepts, students may remember vocabulary words better.

Description of Strategy

A semantic map is one type of graphic organizer. It helps students visually organize and graphically show the relationship between one piece of information and another. This strategy has been identified by researchers as an excellent technique for increasing vocabulary and improving reading comprehension. As a prereading activity, semantic mapping can be used to activate prior knowledge and to introduce key vocabulary words. As a postreading activity, words, categories, and new concepts can be added to the original maps to enhance understanding. Semantic mapping has been shown to be a beneficial learning/teaching technique for native speakers of English at all grade levels in regular and remedial classrooms as well as for those who are learning-disabled.

Research Evidence

One experimental study compared the effects of three types of interactive vocabulary instruction to “definition instruction.” The intervention consisted of eight 50-minute sessions over a span of 7 weeks. The subjects were 61 learning-disabled middle school students. Students in the interactive interventions (including semantic maps) scored higher on a multiple-choice test for reading comprehension and vocabulary learning than did students in the “definition instruction” intervention.

Sample Studies Supporting This Strategy


Drawing upon theory-driven vocabulary instruction and the vocabulary-reading comprehension connection, this study compared the effectiveness of three interactive vocabulary strategies with “definition instruction.” Subjects were 61 learning disabled junior-high students. Using content-area texts, students participated in one of three interactive strategies—semantic mapping (SM), semantic feature analysis (SFA), and semantic/syntactic feature analysis (SSFA)—or in definition instruction (DI). Learning was measured at both short and long terms by vocabulary and comprehension multiple-choice items and written recalls. Results from the multiple-choice items suggested that students participating in the interactive strategies demonstrated greater comprehension and vocabulary learning than students receiving definition instruction. Results of the written recalls indicated qualitatively and quantitatively greater recalls at long term for students in the SFA and SSFA conditions, compared with those in the DI condition.
Sample Activity

(Source: http://fcit.usf.edu/FCAT/references/strategies/mi8.htm)

This strategy helps students organize information using a graphic organizer. Semantic mapping enables students to not only visualize relationships, but to categorize them as well. As a direct teaching strategy that includes brainstorming and teacher-led discussions, it provides opportunities for schema development and enhancement, as well as prediction, hypothesizing and verification of content when used as a pre-reading activity. It is also referred to as a web or concept map.

1. The teacher introduces a graphic organizer to the class. It can have several different appearances. It can be shown as circles, squares, or ovals with connecting lines.
2. The students read an assigned text.
3. Through class discussion, the teacher writes the main idea of the text in the middle of the top circle.
4. The students share the supporting details of the main idea and place them in circles that are connected to the main idea by lines.
5. This activity can also be used by students in cooperative groups or individually.

Additional Resources