Semantic/Syntactic Feature Analysis (SSFA)

Why Is This Strategy Useful?

Reading research and theory support reading as an interactive process. The reader is characterized as an active participant who interacts with the text to construct meaning. From this perspective, the reader uses prior knowledge about the world and syntactic knowledge as a framework to understand the meaning of text. One of the most important aspects of this prior knowledge is the reader’s vocabulary knowledge.

Description of Strategy

Semantic/Syntactic Feature Analysis (SSFA) is an interactive, discussion-oriented strategy for vocabulary instruction. It combines the Semantic Feature Analysis (SFA) approach with use of knowledge about word order and sentence structure as additional context clues for inferring about word meaning. In an SFA, before reading a passage, teachers ask students to predict relationships among concepts using a relationship or grid. (See the abstract about Semantic Feature Analysis for further details about this approach.) Both SFA and SSFA are conducted first in a group, then individually as each student reads, and finally as a group again, as the students and their teacher discuss the activity.

Research Evidence

At least one experimental study with junior high school students supports this strategy. The intervention consisted of eight 50-minute sessions over a span of 7 weeks. The subjects were 61 students with learning disabilities. Students who learned how to guess the meaning of words based on semantic and syntactic clues scored higher on a multiple-choice test for reading comprehension and vocabulary learning than did students who did not receive instruction in SSFA and instead had greater access to definitions of words.

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” (DI). 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 DI. Learning was measured both at short and long term 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 the DI condition.

**Sample Activity**

(Source: Lapp, Flood, & Farnan, 2004)

**Step 1:** Introduce a coordinate term or phrase. Explain the meaning of the term in the context of the lesson.

**Step 2:** Ask students to predict the relationship between each subordinate term and the coordinate term. Ask the student to draw a chart in which the symbol (+) represents a positive relationship between the terms, (0) represents no relationship, and (?) means that no consensus has been reached about the relationship between the terms. Encourage students to use their prior knowledge in making predictions. Conduct a discussion in which students explain why they made certain predictions.

**Step 3:** Prepare sentences with blanks for the coordinate term and two subordinate terms. For example: “The Constitution of the United States seeks to protect a (citizen’s right for privacy), meaning that police need (probable cause to search) and, except under special circumstances (you give consent) for the search.” Based on the relationship chart and the location in the sentence, students are asked to assign the terms or phrases into the correct locations in the sentences.

**Additional Resources**
