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Newsletter
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By Dr Hasibe Kahraman

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WHAT DOES 'TABLE' MEAN? UNCOVERING HOW STUDENTS LEARN WORDS WITH MULTIPLE MEANINGS

BY DR HASIBE KAHRAMAN

The ability to select the right meaning of a word from all its possible interpretations lies at the heart of reading comprehension. And it becomes increasingly important as students progress from the early years of learning to read toward the upper primary and secondary challenge of reading to learn. As texts grow more complex, success depends not just on how many words students know, but on how deeply they understand them, including their multiple meanings.
Read the full article here.

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WHAT DOES 'TABLE' MEAN? UNCOVERING HOW STUDENTS LEARN WORDS WITH MULTIPLE MEANINGS

BY DR HASIBE KAHRAMAN

Consider this pair of sentences: *The table on page 5 was hard to understand. The problem is that it was too small.* As a proficient reader, you likely had no trouble recognising that 'table' here refers to a data chart, or that 'hard' means difficult, not solid. But for many students, making that selection quickly and accurately is far from automatic.

The ability to select the right meaning of a word from all its possible interpretations lies at the heart of reading comprehension. And it becomes increasingly important as students progress from the early years of *learning to read* toward the upper primary and secondary challenge of *reading to learn*. As texts grow more complex, success depends not just on how many words students know, but on how *deeply* they understand them, including their multiple meanings.

Two types of multiple-meaning words

Most English words carry more than one meaning, and linguists draw an important distinction between two word types. *Polysemous* words have senses that are related to one another. For example, 'mouth' can refer to a part of the body or the entrance of a river. *Homonymous* words, by contrast, carry meanings that are entirely unrelated, as with 'table' which can mean a piece of furniture or a data chart.

This distinction matters because research tells us that very young children and adult readers process these two word types differently. Yet, despite its clear importance for reading, there is currently no strong evidence base to guide teachers in how to approach teaching multiple-meaning words in the classroom. We do not yet know which types of words are most challenging to teach, which instructional approaches work best, or whether different strategies might suit different learners.

This challenge is especially pressing for Australia's students for whom English is an Additional Language or Dialect (EAL/D). Nearly one in four Australian students speaks a language other than English at home, and these students face a heightened risk of reading difficulties compared to their monolingual peers. For a student navigating word meanings across two or more languages, encountering an English word like 'mouth' or 'table' carries an additional layer of complexity.

New research underway at ACU

A new ACU research project is setting out to explore this territory. We will investigate how primary and secondary school students, including both monolingual and EAL/D learners, understand and process words with multiple meanings, with the aim of translating those findings into evidence-based classroom instruction. The goal is not only to advance our understanding of how this skill develops, but to give teachers practical, research-backed strategies for vocabulary instruction that works for *all* students.

As you think about your own practice, it is worth pausing to consider: How do you currently approach words with multiple meanings? Do your EAL/D students show difficulties with polysemous or homonymous words they are asked to learn? These are questions the field has not yet answered well, but with this research underway, we are getting closer.

Learn more here:

Perfetti, C. (2007). Reading Ability: Lexical Quality to Comprehension. *Scientific Studies of Reading*, *11*(4), 357–383.
Ekaterini Klepousniotou, Shari R. Baum. (2007). Disambiguating the ambiguity advantage effect in word recognition: An advantage for polysemous but not homonymous words. Journal of Neurolinguistics, Volume 20 (1), 1-24.
Ekaterini Klepousniotou. (2002) The Processing of Lexical Ambiguity: Homonymy and Polysemy in the Mental Lexicon, *Brain and Language*, Volume 81, (1–3), 205-223.

MYTH: "If a student knows a word, they know all its meanings".

FACTS:

- Word knowledge exists on a continuum. Knowing a word in one context does not mean a student can automatically recognise or use it in another.
- Research shows that even proficient readers build knowledge of a word's multiple meanings gradually over time and through repeated exposure across varied contexts.
- This is particularly significant for EAL/D students, who may recognise a word in everyday conversation but still struggle when that same word appears in a different sense in a classroom text.