Elaboration Techniques

There are several elaboration techniques that appear to be particularly powerful facilitators of comprehension and memory of new terms. These are briefly described below.

**Elaboration technique #1:**

Teach new terms in context of a meaningful subject-matter lesson, and facilitate student discussion that centers on use of the new term. At some point, students should use the new term themselves in a sentence within the context of discussing broader topics. The traditional practice of having students look up definitions and then write sentences using the new terms likely stems from the idea that students must think of the term and create a context for which it might be appropriately used. While composing written sentences clearly is an important elaboration technique for the learner, essential to also include in the learning process is learning about the term within an overall context so that relational understanding can develop.

Although providing opportunities for students to elaborate about new terms requires a significant portion of class time, it is clearly a worthwhile instructional practice. The problem is, students are often expected to memorize the definitions of far more terms than there is time in class to elaborate upon. To provide meaningful opportunities for elaboration, we need to teach considerably fewer terms, and invest considerably more time in developing deep knowledge structures of those that are really essential for students to know. This means that students are typically expected to memorize far too many terms each week. The adage “less is more—depth is more” is very true in this case.

**Elaboration technique #2:**

Facilitate paraphrasing of new term’s definitions so that students can identify the core idea associated with the overall meaning of the term, as well as distinguish the new term’s critical features. If you were to dissect the semantic structure of a new term, you would find that its definition actually has two main components: (i) The core idea of the new term is like its “gist” or main idea; and (ii) critical features of the definition are specific bits of information in the definition that clarify the broader, more general core idea. This is analogous to paraphrasing main ideas of paragraphs when reading in which the reader says what the overall paragraph was about (main idea) and indicates important details in the paragraph. With new terms, the goal is to paraphrase the core idea of the term and identify specific critical-to-remember details that clarify the core idea.

**Elaboration technique #3:**

Make background knowledge connections to the new term. While teaching the new term in context of a subject-matter lesson is a critical instructional technique, an equally important elaboration technique is for students to relate the term to something in which the students are already familiar. There is a wide array of methods by which students can formulate knowledge connections. For example, they can identify how the term is related to previous subject-matter they have learned, they can identify something from their personal life experiences the term reminds them of, they can create metaphors or similes for the term, or they can say how the term relates to understanding or solving some form of real-life problem. An essential part of this elaboration process is having the students explain the connection. For example, the students should not only say what personal experience the term makes them think of, but also why it reminds them of it.
Elaboration technique #4:

Identify examples/applications as well as non-examples/non-applications related to the new term’s meaning. Comprehension is greatly enhanced if the learner can accurately identify examples of the term or ways the new term can be appropriately applied within the context of discussing another context. For example, the term “peaceful resistance” might be used when describing Martin Luther King’s approach to solving racial discrimination problems.

You will likely find that students’ comprehension of new terms becomes considerably more focused and refined if they can also identify examples of what the term is not about or inappropriate applications of the term’s use. Having the student discuss of what the term is not an example, or other concept with which someone should not confuse it, can facilitate this.

Elaboration technique #5:

Create multiple formats for which students can elaborate on the meaning of new terms. Many teachers will utilize all of the above elaboration processes within the context of a class discussion, and yet some students still do not seem to “get it.” This is because the manner in which elaboration was facilitated was all “lip-ear,” or verbal or listening, forms of instruction. Writing elaborations, even for those where scripting is a laborious process, creates an opportunity for greater reflection on the term’s meaning. Other forms of elaboration involve using role-play to capture the essence of a new term’s meaning.

The Clarifying Routine focuses on ways each of the above forms of elaboration can be facilitated. The teacher uses an instructional tool, called a Clarifying Table, to facilitate these kinds of thinking behaviors. Figure 2 illustrates a Clarifying Table that was used in the context of an integrated unit with a “Titanic” theme.

![Clarifying Table](image)