

## Article Presentation

### “Using Cognates to Scaffold Context Clue Strategies for Latino ELs”

ENG 530

Paula Wurst

The article, “Using Cognates to Scaffold Context Clue Strategies for Latino ELs”, encourages the use of context clues and cognates to help English Language Learners understand texts written in English. Montelongo, Hernandez, Herter, and Cuello (2011) say that teachers should tap into their Latino ELLs knowledge of cognates. There are over 20,000 English-Spanish cognates (p. 429), and teachers should use these cognates to scaffold the strategy of using context clues. The beauty of using cognates is that it builds upon the linguistic strengths of our ELLs. Cognates help these students “build on the strength of prior knowledge and establishes language learning for all students (p. 432)”. If the context clues contain cognates that the English learners know, they will be more successful in finding the meaning of the vocabulary and the surrounding text. ELLs who are literate in L1 benefit the most from using cognates.

Not understanding vocabulary words affects a reader’s comprehension. Stopping to ask a teacher or looking up a word’s meaning further takes away from comprehension. Students need to be taught to look in the sentences around an unknown word for clues to the word’s meaning. These context clues may include synonyms, antonyms, definitions, examples, appositives, and punctuation clues (p. 430). Because context clues aid comprehension without losing reading fluency, using the context is the preferred strategy for gaining an understanding of words in the text.

Montelongo et al explained combining cognates and context clues by having students “read around” the sentence for clues, specifically looking for a cognate that might be a synonym to the unknown word. This activity is best used as a pre-reading strategy, using cognates as examples of synonyms, antonyms, etc, in a cloze activity using vocabulary from the story.

When using cognates, since cognates vary from exactly the same spellings to less similar, teachers should focus on cognates that are very similar in spelling. Teachers should also use common English-Spanish cognates, not rare ones. The article cautioned teachers to be aware of false cognates, but to also to realize that there are far more true cognates.

One interesting point that the article made had to do with academic language. Montelongo et al (2011) stated an interesting fact: “Many English-Spanish cognates are academic vocabulary words (p. 429)”. These words came from Latin, which was the language used by European scholars. Our ELLs need to understand academic language. By connecting to cognates, ELLs may be able to learn academic vocabulary more easily.

This article listed two good resources for cognates: The first was *NTC’s Dictionary of Spanish Cognates: Thematically Organized* (Nash, 1997). This dictionary has 20 themes of words, subdivided into 100 topics, including academic vocabulary and technical terms. (p. 432)

An online resource is [www.angelfire.com/ill/monte/findacognate.html](http://www.angelfire.com/ill/monte/findacognate.html)

This is a good site to check to see if an English word has a Spanish cognate, or if a Spanish word has an English cognate.

#### Reference

Montelongo, J. A., Hernandez, A. C., Herter, R. J., & Cuello, J. (2011). Using cognates to scaffold context clue strategies for Latino ELs. *The Reading Teacher* 64(6), 429-434.

#### Application and reflection:

Awareness of context clues contributes to vocabulary growth, because the students solve the problems on their own and figure out the new words. By discovering the meaning of words on their own, students are, to paraphrase Krashen, “reading selectively to help solve a problem, and then remembering what they read (p. 73)”.

Keying into cognates as context clues is an excellent way to help understand the text. If the ELL knows the meaning of the cognate in Spanish and can connect that definition to English, she not only increases her vocabulary. She also makes a connection to her ability to understand and connect two languages.

I also liked the idea of using cognates to help teach our ELLs academic vocabulary. Since many Latin-based academic vocabulary words have English-Spanish cognates, I can use cognates that my ELLs already know.

Part of what I am continuing to learn is that everything must be taught explicitly. I have always referred to *context clues*, but I have not taken much time to explicitly teach how to use them. As the Montelongo et al mentioned, teaching context clues should be done as a pre-reading activity using vocabulary from the story. This activity doesn't have to take a lot of time away from the reading itself, but the skills and the vocabulary have still been taught explicitly.

#### Question:

Montelongo et al tell us: “Much of the academic language found in the glossaries of the content area textbooks in the upper elementary grades and beyond includes English-Spanish cognates (p. 429).” What are some words found in your classroom textbooks' glossaries that have Spanish cognates? How would knowing the definitions of the cognates help your ELLs understand the content of the textbook?