

It is helpful for students to learn a new word by associating it with other related words. The related words can be words students already know or new words.

Semantic feature analysis is an engaging activity that can be used to make associations.

One critical finding from research is that word learning takes place most efficiently when the reader or listener already knows something about the context related to a new word. We learn words up to four times faster in a familiar context than in an unfamiliar one (Landauer & Dumais, 1997; Hirsch, 2006). Vocabulary instruction that compares and contrasts word meanings and activates prior knowledge not only helps students learn new words, but has been shown to improve comprehension of the reading selection that includes the words being taught (Graves, 2006).

When a new word is taught in relation to other words, information becomes available that is unique to how that word is being used in context. Many words have multiple meanings and different connotations depending on the subject area. They can also be different parts of speech. When associations can be made to other words, students will acquire a better understanding of how a new word is being used in a specific text or related classroom discussion.

Semantic Feature Analysis:

- helps students make connections between new and known words
- helps students make connections between background knowledge and concepts, and words associated with the concepts
- provides opportunities for rich discussion about words
- pushes students to go beyond simply learning definitions to actively thinking about the connections between word meanings and how words are similar and different

A relational matrix, or grid, is used to show how related words are alike and different.

To generate a SFA matrix, the teacher selects a list of related vocabulary words and places them along the left column of the grid. Some knowledge of the words is necessary in order to begin, so it is best to do this activity after words have been previewed or after students have read a passage containing the words. The teacher supplies features across the top of the grid that highlight how these words might be similar and different. To complete the grid, students consider each word and determine if each feature applies to the word. A plus sign (+) is placed in the corresponding block on the grid if the feature is associated with the word, and a minus sign (-) is placed if it is not. If students are not sure, a question mark (?) can be placed in the block. This activity is more effective if students work collaboratively with peers to complete the activity.

Sometimes, depending on the context, both a plus or minus sign can be given. There is often no absolutely correct answer. Through discussion and disagreement about whether a feature is applicable or not, students gain a deeper understanding of the ways a word can be used. An extension of the activity is to have students generate additional related terms for the vocabulary list, or to generate additional features.

Math Example

Words	Features					
	2 dimensional	3 dimensional	contains equal angles	has curves	has straight lines	has a flat surface
line	–	–	–	–	+	+
square	+	–	+	–	+	+
cube	–	+	+	–	+	+
rectangle	+	–	+	–	+	+
circle	+	–	–	+	–	+
ball	–	+	–	+	–	
prism	–	+	+/–	–	+	+
cylinder	–	+	–	+	–	+
equilateral triangle	+	–	+	–	+	+
isosceles triangle	+	–	–	–	+	+
pyramid	–	+	+	–	–	+

Information shared from Keys to Literacy webinar