**Survival Words – The Key to Comprehension/Understanding**

As students, and especially as non-native speakers, reading can be a challenging task because of the many words that are new or unknown as one reads. The more words that are unfamiliar can make reading very difficult and not enjoyable. Therefore, what efficient readers must learn is how to identify what are called *survival words*—those words a reader needs to know so that his or her comprehension survives, or continues, while reading a particular text. In other words, efficient readers learn to identify which words are necessary to understanding the topic and main idea of whatever they are reading.

Learning to identify *survival words* from the less important words is the first step to improving both a reader’s comprehension and fluency. It isn’t necessary to know every word of text to understand a text. Learning which words are *survival words,* or topic related, is necessary and can save time while reading because the reader will not have to look up EVERY word that is unfamiliar. The reader will focus attention only on words that seem necessary to understand the main idea or focus of the topic

To begin the process of deciding/determining which words are necessary, it’s probably best to start with the title. In many texts and especially academic texts, clues to the topic and content are generally mentioned in the title. Therefore, activating, or turning on, one’s background knowledge (schema) about the topic before even beginning to read is important because it will allow one’s brain to synthesize what is already known about the topic, vocabulary associated with/related to the topic as well as experiences the reader may have had in connection to the topic. This prevents the reader from just reading “blindly” and wasting brainpower, which could otherwise be focused on comprehension of important ideas rather than first having to figure out what the topic is while reading. Pre-thinking about a topic will also improve a reader’s ability to determine which words are *survival words* and which words are not. For example, in an article entitled “Unsolved Mysteries,” it is necessary to understand what the word *mysteries* means so the reader can begin the text with some knowledge of what to expect or what is important to know and learn. The reader cannot understand this article if the word mysteries is unknown to him before starting to read. “Comprehension time” will be wasted as the reader first struggles with determining WHAT A MYSTERY IS rather than focusing on what is being discussed ABOUT a mystery. Therefore, understanding the title of a passage or text before beginning a reading is very important to building comprehension and being able to write and/or discuss a topic clearly.

After activating one’s schema, the reader can then underline unfamiliar words that make comprehension of **the idea** unclear. Word knowledge does not mean the reader must be able to define a word exactly. Some words will be familiar even if the reader can’t say the definition. Also, in some cases, the meaning of the word can be made clear by context or clues, such as examples, or sentence structures which define the word for the reader, such as a dash, the ***, o*r** structure, or specifically defining a term in the text.

The goal when reading is NOT to learn every word that is unknown, but rather **focus on learning the words that are necessary to comprehending the main idea** or focus of the text. Six to ten words are sufficient per reading.

We will practice as a class the process of identifying *survival words* in every text we read, so that this will become a natural habit to use each and every time you pick up something to read.