Cognates and Polysemous Words

Cognates are words in two languages that share a similar meaning, spelling, and pronunciation. Multilingual Learners (MLs) may need to learn that cognates exist. It is helpful to highlight examples and non-examples (i.e., false cognates), and to encourage students to look for them. Cognates may support comprehension and independent vocabulary development in English. Caveat: multilingual students may (not) know the word in their other language(s). Still, the cognate may help MLs remember the word.

Select cognates:

- Coefficient/coeficiente

- Formula/fórmula

- Rational number/número racíonal

Polysemous words are words with identical spellings and pronunciations, but different meanings that are based on context. Multilingual students may need to learn that words in English can have different meanings or connotations across subject areas. Awareness of this may allow learners to make informed guesses about and/or help them to remember the meanings of new words.

Select polysemous words in mathematics:

- Sides of quadrilateral (vs. sides of an issue)

- Table (vs. the everyday definition)

- Plane

- Even

- Odd

- Mean

- Operation

- Root (vs. tree roots in science or even root cause in social studies)

- Base

- Net (physical education)