Get your CASE out

Vocabulary. Probably one of the few infinite things in existence. We can never know every word that exists, and even if we got pretty caught up with the lexicon of all the lands, new words are coined every day. It's impossible to keep up.

Yet the poor souls of Year Six are expected to have a good knowledge of (or at least a good stab at working out) a LOT of vocabulary when confronted with the thrilling texts chosen for their end of KS2 tests.

With this in mind, we have started to use something that the children can use in order to give them a good starting point when greeted with unknown vocabulary.

CASE (everyone loves a good acronym for memory)

C- word CLASS

A- ATMOSPHERE (and context but I needed a word beginning with a vowel!)

S- SENTENCE clues

E- EXPLODE the word

Let's start with C: figuring out whether a word is a noun, adjective, adverb etc can help us immediately categorise the unknown word in amongst words we could link/relate the word to. For example, let's take the word "indefatigable" used in the context of good old Holes, by Louis Sachar.

"Stanley wiped his brow as he forced his shovel into the dirt, using every ounce of his strength to excavate the stubborn earth. He looked over at Zero, who was scooping soil out like a child on the beach. It seemed to Stanley that Zero was indefatigable."

Knowing our unknown word is an adjective, assigned here to describing a human quality, helps us associate it with something that a person can be, immediately narrowing the thought processes.

Next, we explore the A: in this situation, Stanley clearly is uncomfortable in the heat and doing such a strenuous job. It's quite a negative atmosphere for him, with lots of words in this section associated with Stanley's struggle. (In this case, that's as much as we can get from this section- more on this towards the end*)

Moving on, we come to explore S: possibly one of the most helpful aspects of CASE. The words within the other sentences in this extract help us to hone in on Stanley's description of how much he's struggling with the shovelling. The unknown word must have some association with effort and struggle but as it's linked to Zero, who is easily digging away, it helps to narrow it down to something that is linked in with a lack of struggling, perhaps. Zero is "scooping like a child on the beach", an image which conjures up ease and no effort. There is a big clue here. Zero is something that means he can effortlessly dig and dig with little exhaustion.

Lastly, E: Explode the word. By this, we encourage the children to dig into the word and look for any prefixes, suffixes, root words or semantic clues that would allow us to figure out the unknown word. In this example, the prefix "in" suggests whatever the root word is is the opposite in meaning because of its attachment to the word. I used the example of capable vs incapable to demonstrate this to my children. We then look at the suffix "able", which my children knew from exploring our spelling pattern -able/-ible endings- it turns the word into an adjective, confirming our thoughts from C earlier. We are then left with the root word "fatig" which we can infer comes from the word "fatigue" (again, linking into spelling teaching and knowledge of the "gue" spelling linking to -able endings for a hard g sound). Knowing what fatigue means, we can put the prefix 'flip in meaning' into play and get to something along the lines of not being able to get tired.

When we line this up with the other clues from CASE, they all fit and lean towards the following meaning: Zero was full of energy and lacked the ability to tire out. The fact that he scooped with ease whilst Stanley struggled confirms this.

The children use a grid in class, like the one below, as a frame for exploring each element.

WORD	
C Word Class Is the word a: • Noun? • Adjective? • Adverb? • Conjunction? • Preposition?	
A Atmosphere What sort of atmosphere has the author created?	
S Sentence clues Read other sentences in the same extract for clues.	
E Explode the word Look for any prefixes, suffixes, root words or semantic clues. E.g. Unhappy – the prefix 'un' suggests the meaning is opposite to the root word's meaning.	

This may seem like a drawn out process but we can assure you, it's not. It's probably our efforts in trying to explain in text rather than verbally that make it seem drawn out!

When we think about it, these are the internal processes our weathered and trained brains undertake automatically. Making them explicit to the children is key, in the hope that they, after time, become implicit in their thoughts, and when confronted with unknown and alien vocabulary, as in the KS2 paper last year, they can tackle it with confidence.

*not all sections of CASE will help with every word. We teach the children to explore all 4 areas as matter of course but to a rule out the areas that don't provide much help. This gets easier as they become used to it.