

Four Key Ways to Help English Language Learners Improve Their Academic Vocabulary



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The Common Core State Standards require that English language learners “meet the same high standards” as other students (Common Core State Standards, p. 6). However, the standards do not define the supports necessary to help ELLs get to those increased levels of learning. Many teachers are concerned that the new standards will cause ELLs to fall behind. How do we prevent this from happening? It all starts with vocabulary instruction. “**Learning**, as a language-based activity, **is fundamentally and profoundly dependent on vocabulary** knowledge” (*emphasis supplied*) (Baker, Simmons, & Kame’enui, 1998, p. 183). We’re not just being told here that vocabulary is a help in learning. It’s much bigger than that. “Profoundly dependent” and “fundamental” tell us that learning can’t really happen without appropriate vocabulary. Learning starts with vocabulary, is continually enlarged by new and richer vocabulary, and can fail for lack of vocabulary. We must be sure to give English language learners (and all students) sufficient vocabulary instruction throughout the day, in our moment-by-moment classroom interactions. Vocabulary should be ubiquitous in our instruction. It has to underlie and infuse every sphere of learning, including every element of literacy (reading, listening, discussing, and writing) and every content domain. How can we make that happen? Here are four big ideas that will enrich your verbal environment, add stimulus to your vocabulary instruction, and expand ELLs’ vocabularies in productive ways.

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1. Be deliberate with your own vocabulary.

Who do students listen to for much of the school day? You! The vocabulary you use in your classroom can have a powerful impact. As explained further in my book, *Reaching English Language Learners in Every Classroom* (Eye On Education, 2012), there are several ways to connect words to meaning for our ELLs, such as predictable routines, gestures and physical movements, objects and pictures, and hands-on activities. Once routines are established, think about deliberately using words that stretch students' concepts and introduce academic terms. For example, you might direct younger students to *observe* an activity rather than *watch* it, or ask older students to *articulate* rather than *explain* what an author means in a particular passage. Instead of constantly using the same phrases for classroom routines, find new and imaginative words to communicate your messages or instruction. Our language usage should represent the best model in the classroom. Our students will imitate what they see, hear, and experience.

We can also be deliberate in our language usage to provide the “bridge” for students to attain higher levels of cognitive and language proficiency through instructional conversations. Good instructional conversations are engaging and lively, but not random. They focus around ideas or activities that students are exploring, and the theme or learning objective is maintained throughout. An important dimension of instructional conversation is what I call “bridging for language.” This includes using opportunities in our moment-to-moment exchanges to clarify and enrich students' language, as well as familiarizing students with academic language. When students don't understand the meaning of a phrase, an idiom or a sentence, we can bridge that for them through paraphrasing. If they use different tenses in a single sentence or put an adjective in the wrong place, we can recast their statement to model correct usage. When they are unsure of how to express an idea, we can suggest language structure (“You might say...”). “Strategically, the teacher introduces provocative ideas or experiences, then questions, prods, challenges, coaxes, or keeps quiet... extending discussion around ideas that matter to the participants, allowing them to reach new levels of understanding” (Rueda, Goldenberg & Gallimore, 1992). Although the teacher facilitates the conversation and helps maintain its focus, he or she takes care not to dominate the discussion. Students talk with the teacher but also with each other. They're encouraged to express their own ideas, which others build on or challenge. Because students are engaged and interested, there's a high level of participation.

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2. Read aloud as often as possible to expand and enrich vocabulary.

In the early primary grades, students tend to read only simple words they already know, so word-learning during these years relies almost entirely on listening and discussion. Many children's books provide engaging stories and wide-ranging vocabulary, which makes them excellent vehicles for exploring words and concepts with students. Repeated readings and explicit explanations are especially useful for ELLs or any students needing more vocabulary support. But just reading aloud to students in classrooms with linguistically diverse populations won't yield significant gains in literacy skills. So what specific models and behaviors are needed to support language development while increasing academic literacy? **An interactive**

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read-aloud gives students the opportunity to hear the language of texts *and* to interact in a way that builds their capacity to think about and respond to their reading. Michael Graves (2006) calls interactive read-alouds “the most powerful oral language activity that has been developed for use in classrooms.” Using a book selected for its humor/color/vitality/main character/vocabulary (or any other number of factors, depending on the desired focus), the teacher can:

- introduce students to the richness of stories, genres, and verbal rhythms that will engage even the most reluctant readers.
- use stimulating questions that motivate students to become more active learners.
- raise the complexity of language to a level just above the children’s current ability, encouraging students to stretch both vocabulary and meaning.
- expand conceptual knowledge by elaborating on what students already know (for example, words like *gleeful*, *exuberant*, and *delighted* help students enlarge what they know about *happy*).

Unlike any literacy event, the read-aloud experience offers rich opportunities to enlarge vocabulary, drawing from meaningful contexts.

3. Use methods that promote word learning as a multifaceted process.

Not so long ago, a student who could recite dictionary-style definitions of words might have been considered well grounded in vocabulary. But knowing a word is much more complex than knowing a definition. In fact, researchers now recognize that word knowledge is not so much “declarative” (the capacity to “declare” the meaning of a word) as “procedural” (the ability to “process” a word in relation to other knowledge). “In most cases, **knowing a word is more like knowing how to use a tool than it is like being able to state a fact.** Word knowledge is applied knowledge: A person who knows a word can recognize and use it, in novel contexts, and uses knowledge of the word, in combination with other types of knowledge, to construct a meaning for a text” (*emphasis supplied*) (Nagy & Scott in Kamil, et al., 2000). It’s helpful to be aware of these significant research findings:

- **Word knowledge is gained incrementally.** A child’s initial understanding of a word is often imprecise and incomplete. Words are learned very gradually, with mature knowledge developing through many exposures over a period of years or even over a lifetime.
- **Word knowledge is multidimensional,** consisting of different types of knowledge. Some of these dimensions of knowledge include awareness of a word’s verbal and written forms, its meaning, its synonyms and antonyms, how it’s used in sentence structure, and how it relates to other words.
- **Many words have multiple meanings,** some of which may be associated (“the mud *made* the path slippery” and “I *made* money babysitting”) while others have no connection to each other (a magazine may be a storehouse for ammunition or a type of reading material). Further, word meanings in general aren’t rigidly fixed but take on nuances from context.
- **Word knowledge is interrelated.** What we know of one word is connected to our knowledge of other words and helps us construct meaning. For example, familiarity with the words *ocean*, *wave*, and *rhythm* can provide useful links in learning the meaning of *tide*.
- **Different words require different kinds of knowing and learning.** Our vocabularies include a wide range of words that are very different from each other in their use, interrelatedness, and level of complexity. Some words are simple function words, like conjunctions or pronouns, while others have diverse and sophisticated meanings. Clearly, knowing a word such as *she* is very different from knowing a word like *cumulonimbus*.

(Nagy & Scott, 2000 in *Handbook of Reading Research*)

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Some of the techniques that show the multidimensional, interrelated nature of word knowledge include making connections, providing associations, and building networks, webs, links, relationships, and maps. These methods will yield significant gains in vocabulary for our ELLs. Visual representations such as mind maps, semantic webs, and similar tools greatly enhance vocabulary acquisition. The more we can tie words together for students, the broader their vocabulary network can become.

4. Give attention to explicit instruction with academic vocabulary.

Unlike everyday conversation, academic language tends to be abstract and complex because it expresses cognitive processes and procedures (*evaluation, represent, hypothesis, assumption, validate, etc.*). Knowledge of these “working” concepts and processes is indispensable to learners performing their job as students, but English language learners can be particularly challenged by these sophisticated terms and meanings. Academic terms and processes need to be explicitly examined, reviewed, and modeled as they arise in relation to specific lessons. What are the academic terms that need to be taught in a direct manner? Consider those words that have high utility across different disciplines. What are the complex thinking processes that will be used to help students comprehend, solve problems, and express ideas? For example, students need to understand the term *classify* when it comes to math and science, and it has applications in language arts as well. Other terms that have high utility across disciplines are *compare* and *contrast*. Here are some basic guidelines for explicit instruction with these words, which can be expanded with other strategies. (Adapted from Marzano’s *Building Academic Vocabulary*, 2005)

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1. **DESCRIBE** the word—Provide a description, explanation, or example of the word. For example, tell a story related to the word, act out the word, or draw a picture to represent the word. Help students unpack the word by discussing common affixes that connect to other words.
2. **RESTATE** and **ILLUSTRATE**—Students give a description, explanation, or example in their own words. Students draw a picture, symbol, or graphic representation. Have students share and learn from one another.
3. **ACTIVATE** and **DISCUSS**—The learner engages in activities that consolidate and extend knowledge with a partner(s) and utilizes strategies that require multiple representations of the word. For example, have students generate synonyms, antonyms, and other words with similar affixes. Similarities and differences between words helps students focus on shades of word meanings.
4. **REVISIT** and **REVIEW**—Use a variety of methods to help students cement understanding and provide multiple exposures over time. This requires not only seeing the word but also reviewing its meaning and using it in discussions or writing. You might want to consider individual vocabulary logs as well as vocabulary games.

In review, remember to include these three principles for working with academic vocabulary.

1. Rely on descriptions rather than definitions.
2. Represent knowledge in linguistic and non-linguistic ways.
3. Provide multiple opportunities to develop understanding of a term.

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Flooding Vocabulary Across the Day

As you implement these four ideas, keep in mind that every teacher is a teacher of language. Vocabulary needs to be taught in English and across the curriculum. And don't forget that teaching vocabulary "is more than teaching words; it is teaching how they are put together, how they are learned, and how they are used" (Nagy, 2007, p.71).

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