

English Vocabulary Instruction for English Learners

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Several times in previous columns we have mentioned the importance of vocabulary instruction for English learners (ELs). Here we take up this vital topic in greater depth, summarizing key research addressing the English vocabulary development of ELs and discussing implications for instructional practice.

ELs and English Vocabulary Knowledge

Common sense suggests that the English vocabulary knowledge of young children who do not grow up in English-speaking homes may be more limited than that of monolingual English speakers (EOs) and that this limitation may negatively affect ELs' long-term academic achievement. A number of research findings support these assumptions (Saville-Troike, 1984; Garcia, 1991; Proctor, Carlo, August, & Snow, 2005).

More than two decades ago, Saville-Troike (1984) demonstrated that English vocabulary was strongly associated with second- to sixth-grade ELs' performance on a standardized test of English reading. In another early study, Garcia (1991) carefully analyzed the performance of fifth- and sixth-grade Latino bilingual students on a test of reading comprehension. She found that the lack of familiarity with vocabulary in the test passages and questions was a powerful factor affecting the children's performance, and she shared the revealing detail that the students identified 24 unknown words in a reading passage of 180 words.

More recently, Proctor et al. (2005) found that a group of 132 fourth-grade Latino ELs scored at the first-grade level in English vocabulary knowledge

and that variation in vocabulary knowledge played a key role in explaining the students' performance in reading comprehension. However, the authors pointed out that there was a broad range in the students' English vocabulary knowledge, with some students surpassing grade-level norms. Thus, despite the low average score of the group, the high-scoring students demonstrated that "low-socioeconomic status bilingual Latina/o students are capable of learning English to impressive levels" (p. 251).

A final dimension of ELs' vocabulary knowledge that researchers have examined is the awareness of cognates. Cognates, words that are spelled similarly and have similar meanings across languages, occur commonly in Spanish (and other Latin-based languages) and English. Studies have shown that more proficient Spanish-speaking English readers recognize more cognates than their less-proficient peers and use this knowledge to infer English word meanings (Nagy, Garcia, Durgunoglu, & Hancin-Bhatt, 1993). Significantly, Nagy et al. (1993) found that fourth- to sixth-grade Spanish-English emergent bilingual students recognized less than half the cognates present in reading passages and thus concluded that instruction could greatly enhance such children's awareness of cognates.

ELs and Vocabulary Instruction

Several recent research studies have focused on vocabulary instruction for ELs. In a kindergarten research study, Silverman (2007) investigated whether young ELs could benefit from the same type of instruction of word meanings that has proven successful

with EOs. The teachers in the study used a version of Beck, McKeown, and Kucan's (2002) Text Talk approach to teach 50 words taken from read-aloud texts. Importantly, Silverman sought to enhance the power of Text Talk by adding familiar English as a Second Language (ESL) techniques such as acting out and visually illustrating the meanings of words. Silverman (2007) found that while the EOs knew more of the target words prior to instruction, the ELs actually closed this gap by the end of the intervention. This finding suggests that young ELs can benefit from rich instruction of the same words taught to EOs.

In another study, Carlo et al. (2004) examined the effects of teaching fifth-grade EOs and ELs academic vocabulary and strategies for inferring word meanings, such as using context, morphology, and knowledge of cognates. The instruction was organized around a social studies theme, lasted 30 to 45 minutes a day, focused on 10–12 target words weekly, and involved repeated exposure to the words and consistent practice with the word-learning strategies. The authors found that the ELs and EOs showed similar gains in knowledge of taught words and of other elements such as word parts and multiple meanings. In addition, both groups also demonstrated a small but significant gain in reading comprehension at the end of the 15 weeks of vocabulary instruction. In a separate report of the study, Carlo, August, and Snow (2005) revealed that students who had participated in a pilot version of the vocabulary program in fourth grade learned more words in the fifth-grade program than those students who participated in the fifth-grade program only. This finding highlights the benefit of sustaining well-designed vocabulary instruction for ELs over multiple years.

Implications for Instruction

Based on the review of this research, we now outline a number of implications for vocabulary instruction for ELs:

1. Given the magnitude of ELs' needs in the area of English vocabulary, schools that serve these children must implement consistent, well-articulated, and intensive vocabulary instruction across the grades. This kind of multiyear approach to English vocabulary instruction is

crucial to the long-term academic achievement of ELs.

2. Given the sizable gap between ELs and EOs in English vocabulary, we believe that vocabulary instruction designed for ELs should, in part, provide explicit instruction of relatively basic English vocabulary. For a current research project, Patrick (first author) has designed a systematic approach to address this level of vocabulary that involves teaching semantically rich, less familiar high-frequency words. The instruction will use the *Increasing Fluency With High Frequency Word Phrases* materials. (See, for example, Knoblock, 2007). These books include weekly lessons that present high-frequency words in phrases and short reading passages designed to improve reading fluency. To enhance students' knowledge of the meanings of these words, teachers will examine the week's word list for semantically rich, less familiar words; provide explicit instruction on these words that involves child-friendly definitions, examples of use, and attention to multiple meanings; and discuss the meanings of the selected words as they appear in the context of the reading passages. For example, lesson 10 in the third-grade text includes less familiar words like *observed* and *property*. When using this lesson, the project teachers will specifically discuss and review the meanings of such words. When implemented consistently across grade levels, this approach systematically exposes ELs to the meanings of an important subset of the 3,000 most common English words in print.
3. Because evidence indicates that ELs can also learn the more sophisticated words taught to EOs, teachers of ELs should strike a balance between attention to more basic words and rich instruction of higher-level English vocabulary. We further recommend that this higher-level vocabulary include a combination of useful general words and content-oriented terminology.
4. Because all students need to learn far more words than could ever be taught explicitly, we believe that vocabulary instruction for all students should be multifaceted in nature, involving not only the teaching of specific words but also strategies for inferring word meanings and

the development of word consciousness (i.e., a heightened awareness of and appreciation for words). The impressive findings in Carlo et al. (2004) strongly recommend this kind of multifaceted approach for ELs.

5. With regard to specific teaching strategies, approaches that have proven successful with EOs represent a solid starting point for instruction with ELs. However, such strategies can often be enhanced for ELs through the addition of proven ESL techniques, such as adjusted delivery (slowing down speech, simplifying grammar, and using multiple synonyms) and the use of real objects, visual images, graphic organizers, and drama to enhance the meanings of unfamiliar words. In addition, teachers of Spanish-speaking ELs should guide students to draw on their primary language to recognize cognates in English.
6. Finally, we recommend weaving in rich vocabulary-oriented activities throughout the instructional day. For instance, teachers could easily add Character Traits (Manyak, 2007)—a brief activity that focuses students' attention on high-level vocabulary used to analyze characters—to other reading comprehension activities at the end of each narrative text that students read. Similarly, Vocabulary Visits (Blachowicz & Obrochta, 2005), an approach that involves a teacher reading aloud a set of informational books on a relevant topic and engaging students in several vocabulary-focused activities, represents an excellent way to develop younger children's content vocabulary.

In conclusion, although these six recommendations do not constitute a simple recipe for comprehensive and intensive vocabulary instruction for ELs, we believe that they provide schools research-informed guidance for the urgent task of developing and implementing such instruction.

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