Enlivening Vocabulary Instruction for English Language Learners

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Abstract
This article provides practical recommendations for promoting growth in vocabulary among English language learners (ELLs). The article examines explicit instruction of vocabulary and includes a review of current literature, specific guidelines for selection of vocabulary words, and a time-efficient and user-friendly framework for identifying and implementing strategies for enlivening vocabulary instruction for ELLs.

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Vocabulary development maintains a vital and prominent place in the academic success of all students -- particularly English language learners (ELLs). The understanding that vocabulary knowledge is critical to both oral and written comprehension is widely recognized (NICHD, 2000). Without adequate academic vocabulary, ELLs tend to experience difficulty comprehending texts and performing well on assessments (August, Carlo, Dressler, & Snow, 2005). Accordingly, teachers continually seek more efficient and vibrant ways to teach vocabulary to this burgeoning and diverse population.

ELLs possess a wide variety of educational, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds, all of which can enrich classroom learning. By very nature of having knowledge of more than one language, these students also possess more complex linguistic systems than their monolingual
peers. In regard to vocabulary, most ELLs have to learn significantly more words on a daily and weekly basis than their native English speaking classmates. Statistics regarding the exact numbers of English words that an ELL needs to know in order to succeed academically are difficult to pinpoint; however, it is estimated that most native speakers of a language know approximately 5000 to 7000 words by the time they begin receiving formal reading instruction in school (August, Carlo, Dressler, & Snow, 2005; Biemiller & Slonin, 2001). Moreover, research indicates that native speakers of English add approximately 3000 to 4000 words to their reading vocabulary during each year of schooling between third and twelfth grade (Graves, 2000, 2006; Nagy, Anderson, & Herman, 1987). Thus, an average native speaker may know approximately 25,000 words by 8th grade, and well over 50,000 by the time he or she graduates from high school (Graves, 2000, 2009).

Although ELLs may know thousands of words in their native language(s), they must learn these words in English, while seeking to master the academic content and vocabulary introduced daily in their various classes. The breadth, or number of words, is only one feature of vocabulary development. ELLs must also address the multifaceted aspect of depth of vocabulary demands. Because depth of understanding is complex and unfolds over time, students may require more elaborate instruction in addition to multiple and distributed meaningful exposures to words in context. To truly know a word, Nagy and Scott (2000) note that students should be able to (a) define the word, (b) decode and spell the word, (c) know the word’s multiple meanings, and (d) ascertain and apply the meaning of the word in appropriate contexts. Overall, research suggests that ELLs know fewer vocabulary words and even less about word meanings than their English monolingual peers (August, Carlo, Dressler, & Snow, 2005). As a result, the
demands for breadth and depth of vocabulary knowledge create a continual challenge for ELLs, especially in content area classes.

**Explicit Vocabulary Instruction**

Vocabulary is acquired through incidental word learning and intentional, explicit instruction (Lehr, Osborn, & Herbert, 2005). Incidental word learning occurs through experiences such as wide reading, classroom interactions, and exposure to print-based resources via technology. Importantly, in order for incidental word learning to occur, materials must be on students’ independent reading level in English.

Explicit instruction for ELLs transpires only when teachers are purposeful in selecting vocabulary words and strategies prior to instruction. Instruction is then planned to include an ELL-friendly definition and multiple contextualized exposures. Teachers, mindful of the unique vocabulary challenges of ELLs, need to carefully plan for and deliver intentional and explicit instruction. This article presents specific guidelines for purposeful selection of vocabulary words and offers a time-efficient and user-friendly framework for identifying and implementing strategies for vocabulary instruction for ELLs.

**Vocabulary Selection**

Teachers’ selection of vocabulary words for explicit instruction is of utmost importance. In order to make informed decisions about which words to teach, it is beneficial to first consider the various types of words that learners encounter in spoken and written English. Vocabulary researchers and experts Templeton, Bear, Invernizzi, and Johnston (2010) present a valuable framework for classifying the different types of vocabulary and making instructional decisions. In this framework, Templeton and his colleagues identify three major types of vocabulary: conversational vocabulary, core academic vocabulary, and content-specific vocabulary.
Conversational vocabulary consists of the most common and frequently-occurring words in spoken English. Words such as *talk, family, use, think*, and *phone*, which are routinely used in everyday conversation, fall under this category. Conversational words are easily recognized by native speakers of English and many English Language Learners; however, these basic words may be new to ELLs at lower proficiency levels. Graves and Sales’ *First 4000 Words Project* (2009) contains a sequential listing of the most basic words in the English language. This resource is available as a free download at


Core academic vocabulary is comprised of words which (a) appear frequently in more formal discourse and academic texts, and (b) are of high utility across content areas. For example, core academic words such as *analyze, predict, advantage*, and *significant* are prevalent in textbooks and academic lectures across all subject areas. Due to their frequency of occurrence and their usefulness in academic tasks and assessment, these words are considered high-utility words. Avril Coxhead’s *Academic Word List* (2000) provides a comprehensive inventory of these types of vocabulary terms that are prevalent in secondary education and post-secondary educational materials.

Content-specific vocabulary includes technical, specialized words that are associated with specific content areas such as math, science, social science, history, and the arts. Examples include *amoeba, integer*, and *radioactive*. While content-specific words do not have broad utility, they are often critical to understanding a given text or lesson. They may also represent complex concepts which are new to the majority of students at a given grade level. As such, these terms are often are directly tied to lesson objectives and standards of learning (SOLs) in content classes.
When selecting vocabulary for explicit instruction, teachers should prioritize core academic words and content-specific words. The following procedure can be used to select vocabulary to be taught in conjunction with a given lesson or unit. First, review all of the text(s) and/or materials to be used in the lesson, and highlight words that are likely to be unfamiliar to your students. Next, underline or circle core academic vocabulary and content-specific academic vocabulary. These words will all be potential options for explicit instruction; however, your selection will likely need to be narrowed further. To do this, review the circled or highlighted vocabulary, and determine which words are the most critical to understanding key content, and which words will have the broadest utility for students in the future. Then make your final selection of words to be explicitly taught, noting that some words will require only brief instruction, whereas others will require more elaborate, or in-depth instruction (Beck, McKeown, and Kucan, 2002; Nation, 2008)

**Instructional Framework**

Once vocabulary has been purposely selected, or what to teach established, appropriate instructional strategies, or how to teach becomes a matter of importance. This section presents a framework that is specifically designed to provide teachers with a time-efficient and user-friendly paradigm for selecting instructional strategies. Foundational to this framework is the maxim that all vocabulary should not be taught the same way. That is, the nature of vocabulary words should be considered and aligned to the most appropriate instructional strategies. In doing so, vocabulary words are more likely to, as Beck, McKeown, and Kucan (2002) so aptly put it, bring words to life.
This framework is undergirded by two instructional sequence principles (Jameson, 2003, p.114). The first is the act of sequencing instruction from what is known to what is unknown. This involves the use of ELLs’ prior knowledge, or what they know from their native language (L1) and their cultural experiences. This linguistic and cultural knowledge, the known, is now connected to new learning, or the unknown vocabulary word. Use of ELLs’ prior knowledge also reinforces the notion that their language and culture are respected and valued. This is a strong motivator for learning. According to Burt, Peyton, & Adams (2003), ELLs who are literate in their L1 tend to draw from the L1 vocabulary and literacy skills, as well as a storehouse of past experiences. In relation to this, Thomas and Collier (2002) assert that using the L1 is a powerful influence for long-term academic success.

The second instructional sequence principle involves moving learning from the concrete, experiencing the real and true, to the abstract, encountering the general and more difficult. Simply put, the use of concrete supports for vocabulary learning such as realia, visuals demonstrations, and other tangible expressions is a time-efficient and effective way to make English vocabulary more comprehensible to ELLs.

Consequently, grounded in the two previously-described principles of instruction, the instructional framework is composed of two categories, Known to Unknown and Concrete to Abstract. Listed within these categories are a number of carefully-selected instructional strategies, which can be used separately or in combination with other strategies. These strategies are by no means an exhaustive list, but rather a compilation of ones generally used as best practice, especially when working with English language learners.

The instructional strategies are presented within the two categories in the tables below. The strategies are named and described, and examples are provided. Additionally, in the
description section of the tables, it is noted whether the strategies require a brief form or more elaborate form of instruction. Brief instruction involves drawing attention to the meaning of a word in such a way that students can immediately add it to their known vocabulary, whereas elaborate instruction involves a more in-depth, extended instructional focus, accompanied by rich, contextualized practice.

The *Known to Unknown* vocabulary strategies represented in Table 1 are listed in order of easy and brief to more complex and extensive. Another distinct aspect of this table is the inclusion of recommended resources.

Table 1

*Known to Unknown Category*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Example</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Labels</td>
<td>Labels are appropriate when ELLs know the word and its meaning in L1. Only the English label for the concept is needed.</td>
<td>For ELLs who know the name and concept for pulley in the L1, the teacher provides the English label, <em>pulley</em>.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Type of Instruction:</strong> Brief</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Cognates</td>
<td>Cognates are words in different languages that have the same original source. They may be similar in meaning, spelling, and pronunciation. Cognates are especially helpful for ELLs that speak Romance languages: French, Italian, Portuguese, Romanian and Spanish. Teachers need to explicitly help ELLs identify and use cognates.</td>
<td>For Spanish-speaking students who know the word <em>alarma in the L1, the teacher explains the connection to the English word, alarm</em>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Type of Instruction:</strong> Brief</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Resource:</strong> <a href="http://www.colorincolorado.org/pdfs/articles/pdf">http://www.colorincolorado.org/pdfs/articles/pdf</a></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Synonyms</td>
<td>A synonym is two or more words in the same language that have the same or nearly the same meaning. If an ELL knows a vocabulary word in English and</td>
<td>For ELLs who know the word <em>English word, food, the teacher uses this known synonym to teach the word,</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Method</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Example</td>
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<tr>
<td>Encountering an unknown synonym in reading</td>
<td>If a student encounters an unknown synonym in his reading, then using the known word to teach the synonym is appropriate. Possible synonym: <em>nourishment</em>.</td>
<td>For students who are using the known word to teach the synonym is appropriate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contextual Analysis</td>
<td>Contextual analysis is using context clues to infer or predict the meaning of an unknown word. These clues include definitions, examples, restatements as well as charts, pictures, and type features. ELLs must know much of the vocabulary in the context to use context. Also, they must have enough visual literacy to read charts, pictures, and type features to detect the meaning of the unknown word.</td>
<td>For students who know the English words, <em>tender</em> and <em>feelings</em>, the teacher guides them to draw on this knowledge to derive the meaning of the unknown word <em>compassion</em> in the sentence below. The picture of the homeless and hungry refugees, stirred compassion, or tender feelings, for their suffering.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morphemic Analysis</td>
<td>Morphemic analysis refers using morphemes, the smallest word parts with meaning, as clues to unlock an unknown word. Morphemes include prefixes, suffixes, and roots words. Using morphemic analysis is appropriate when ELLs are familiar with common Greek and Latin roots as well as affixes.</td>
<td>For students who are familiar with the Latin root, <em>cent</em>, the teacher challenges them to draw on their knowledge to understand the English word, <em>century</em>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generative Approach</td>
<td>The generative approach involves employing root words and affixes to generate numerous new associative words.</td>
<td>For ELLs who know the Latin root, <em>-struct</em> (build), the teacher guides them in generating related words such as <em>construct</em>, <em>constructive</em>, <em>structure</em>, <em>structural</em>, <em>unstructured</em>, and so on.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Semantic Mapping

Semantic mapping refers to using graphic organizers, usually a web, to portray a known targeted word and extend that knowledge to generating related words. This strategy taps into multiple meaning of words or related networks of words.

Type of Instruction: Elaborate

Resource: www.cehd.umn.edu/DHH-resources/Reading/ContextualAnalysis.html. Click on semantic maps.

For ELLs who know the meaning of the root word, port (to carry), the teacher uses a semantic map as an instructional tool. The word is placed in the circle of a web. At the end of each line extending from the circle, the teacher (with student interaction) writes associative words such as deport, importer, and report.

The strategies in Table 2 are more of the show, connect, and do variety. These strategies lend themselves to certain types of words. For example, nouns naming an object are well matched to the use of realia and action verbs are compatible with dramatization.

Table 2

Concrete to Abstract Category

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Example</td>
<td>An example is using the actual item (realia), a picture or illustration of the unknown vocabulary word. Nouns are most appropriate for this strategy.</td>
<td>ELLs see and hold a compass or view a picture or illustration of a compass.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Type of Instruction: Brief</td>
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<tr>
<td>Demonstration</td>
<td>A demonstration is an explanation and showing of a</td>
<td>ELLs see and touch a lever and watch a demonstration of</td>
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<tr>
<td>Type of Instruction</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Examples</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dramatization</td>
<td>Demonstrates how a lever works.</td>
<td>ELLs act out the vocabulary word, <em>stretch</em>, saying the word as they dramatize its meaning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personalization</td>
<td>Connects with ELLs’ interest, life experiences, and culture.</td>
<td>A current personal experience is used to teach the word, <em>thrilled</em>. Lu Jing was <em>thrilled</em> when she made 100 on her first math test.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exemplification</td>
<td>Use personal experiences to teach new vocabulary.</td>
<td>A number of contextualized examples are personalized. Jose was <em>thrilled</em> when he made a home run. Sinar was <em>thrilled</em> when he found his lost cell phone. Liu Jing was <em>thrilled</em> when Ka asked her for a date.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The previously-presented tables can serve as a quick reference for informed decision-making when planning vocabulary instruction. Specifically, the use of the tables can answer the
all-important question: *What is the best strategy to efficiently and effectively teach this word so that students will learn and appropriately use the word?*

**Conclusion**

Vocabulary development is critical to the academic success of English language learners. Many of these students lag behind their English-speaking peers in breadth and depth of vocabulary knowledge. Given the limited time for explicit instruction of vocabulary, the most useful and important words must be expertly and purposefully selected. Additionally, instructional strategies should be (a) based on sound principles, (b) aligned to the particular nature of the vocabulary words, and (c) deemed the most efficient and effective way to teach the word. This article offers an instructional framework for teaching vocabulary to ELLs that embodies these three criteria. We hope that this instructional framework will be a valuable resource for teachers as they seek to meet the challenge of providing explicit, skillful, and vibrant vocabulary instruction for English language learners in their classrooms.

**References**


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