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Facilitating ELLs' Access to Academic Text

by Lauren Heffernan

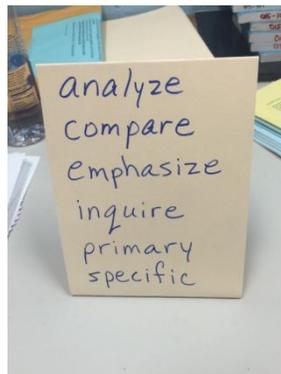
English language learners (ELLs) are failing to make necessary gains in academic literacy development. This population of learners is more and more at risk as the stakes are raised with the implementation of Common Core Standards. Grade-level texts are often inaccessible to ELLs and materials provided may be inappropriately matched to students' reading levels. Despite educators' efforts to provide ELLs with scaffolds and interventions, learning outcomes are often minimal. In order to assist ELLs and set attainable goals, all stakeholders, including administrators, literacy coaches, classroom teachers, and English as a new language (ENL) specialists, must be a part of the ongoing conversations about growth in academic language proficiency.

Acquisition of academic vocabulary poses a significant challenge for ELLs due to lack of exposure to key words. Nisbet (2010), for example, has explained that "Researchers, English as a second language (ESL) teachers, and students have long recognized the importance of vocabulary development as a foundation for second language reading" (p. 10). This article addresses three ways for educators to efficiently expand their ELLs' oral and reading vocabulary.

Select Words Carefully

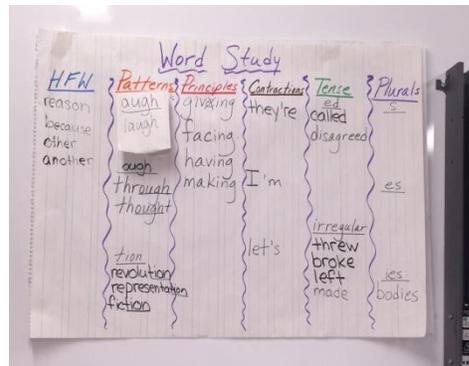
Varied resources should be used to determine which vocabulary words will most efficiently promote gains in comprehension of academic text. Ultimately, words that cross over content areas should be prioritized; Beck, McKeown, and Kucan (2002) referred to these words as "Tier Two vocabulary," identifying criteria for identification such as "Importance and utility: words that are characteristic of mature language users and appear frequently across a variety of domains" (p. 19). These are some of the words that I have just used with teachers spanning Grades 3-8: *accurate*, *exceed*, *generate*, *incentive*, *perspective*. For example, ELLs can participate in cooperative group work as they respond to social studies or ELA questions using the pre-identified words on a table tent, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Table Tent



Once target words have been identified, educators need to foster the development of academic vocabulary as students build foundational reading skills. By incorporating activities such as word study feature charts, ELLs will take ownership of their word learning. Such charts can be created on columned poster boards by categorizing phonics, spelling, and word study principles along a continuum, as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Word Study Feature Chart



As ELLs spot additional examples that follow the highlighted patterns or principles, they have the autonomy to add to the chart independently. One teacher who has had great success as her ELLs build word consciousness noted, “Creating word study feature charts has made my students not only more aware, but also more excited about words.”

Encourage Shared Reading

ELLs must be exposed to new vocabulary in multiple contexts through meaningful and authentic activities in the classroom. The Report of the National Reading Panel (2000) explained that “The best gains were made in instruction that extended beyond single class periods and involved multiple exposures in authentic contexts beyond the classroom” (p. 4-4).

One way to provide multiple exposures and avoid the pitfalls of isolated vocabulary instruction is through daily shared reading. Shared reading, developed by Holdaway (1979), is an interactive reading experience that occurs when students join in or share the reading of a common text that is guided and supported by a teacher or another experienced reader. This type of connected reading can be strategically designed to steer ELLs toward increased academic vocabulary knowledge and improved learning outcomes. Kesler (2010) noted that “Shared reading activities provide explicit support with comprehending decontextualized language that all students need for academic success” (p. 276).

A middle school ENL teacher explains how multiple exposures to complex text has enabled her ELLs to acquire targeted academic vocabulary: “I have found that the repetition of shared reading paired with an academic vocabulary emphasis has worked tremendously well for my ELLs at all levels,” she says. ELLs were able to take ownership of newly acquired academic language as they used these words regularly, and there was also a marked increase in comprehension and advancement in reading levels, she notes.

A specific focus on both explicit and context-embedded vocabulary instruction allows ELLs to develop a repertoire of academic language. Teachers accomplish this by identifying high-mileage vocabulary, allowing students to read the text collectively through shared reading, and

charting targeted words along with definitions, examples, and synonyms. Student-created charts and lists can be displayed throughout the classroom as constant reminders of new understandings. Follow-up cooperative group activities that prompt students to use new terms appropriately and in context will foster ownership. Activities such as jigsaw groups, Socratic seminars, mock trials, and debates are just a few more constructive options where students can negotiate new language. Uccelli, Galloway, Barr, Meneses, and Dobbs (2015) stated that “Students’ academic-language proficiency is being increasingly understood in the field as a malleable factor” (p. 5).

Increase Oral Practice

In comparison to native English speakers, ELLs may not be able to retrieve word meaning from their oral vocabulary as they decode. Many have not had the opportunity to develop a repertoire of academic vocabulary through exposure in school. Blachowicz, Fisher, Ogle, and Watts-Taffe (2006) explained that although high-utility words “are often firmly established in the students’ oral vocabularies, this may not be the case for English-language learners and for students with small vocabularies” (p. 531).

ELLs need multiple opportunities to use targeted academic language appropriately with peers. Carefully designed participatory activities must be a part of a student-centered classroom for ELLs. High-mileage vocabulary tally graphs can be used to track the number of encounters with targeted words. Table tents to prompt word usage can be placed during cooperative group and partner work. Student-created charts revolving around word structure such as prefixes, contractions, possessives, and compound words can be incorporated to develop understandings.

Conclusion

The advantages of word study, shared reading, and oral practice for struggling ELLs extend far beyond those outlined for native English speakers. Given that literacy development is at the core of academic achievement for ELLs, the scaffolding techniques presented need to be incorporated across grade levels to address students at all language proficiency levels in order to facilitate their access to academic text.

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Lauren Heffernan is a faculty member in the Linguistics/TESOL Department at CUNY Queens. She is a doctoral student in the Literacy program at St. John's University and has experience as a literacy coach, staff developer, and teacher preparation professional. She holds a Professional Diploma in school administration/MSED TESOL. <Lauren.heffernan@qc.cuny.edu