

Building English Language Learners' Academic Vocabulary

Strategies & Tips

Claire Sibold

Introduction

According to Beck, McKeown, and Kucan's Three Tier Model (2002), when it comes to language instruction the distinction between academic vocabulary words and content specific words has a significant bearing on the language success of English language learners (ELLs). By using the strategies described in this article teachers and parents will have the means to develop ELLs' vocabulary through reading, direct instruction, and reinforcement activities and games. Teachers and parents can use these strategies before, during, and after reading, and thus provide students with a set of tools they can use independently as they read.

Often vocabulary instruction receives inadequate attention in elementary and secondary classrooms (Biemiller & Boote, 2006). Academic vocabulary, specifically the language that may occur in multiple contexts or the precise words that are presented in a specific context, can help students acquire new learning strategies and skills (Marzano, 2005).

Academic vocabulary, however, is notably more difficult to learn than conversational language because it is more specific and sometimes abstract, making it difficult to grasp. Knowledge of this kind of technical vocabulary in any specific content area—for example, social science, science, mathematics, or language arts—is directly linked to content knowledge. Stahl and Fairbanks (1986) found that such vocabulary instruction directly improves students' reading comprehension of textbook content.

While the majority of teachers develop students' vocabulary across the curricu-

lum, it is essential that English language learners have explicit instruction about the academic vocabulary that is necessary for their success in school.

The Importance to ELLs

When English language learners struggle with reading comprehension, it can often be attributed to their difficulty with understanding the vocabulary. Many studies report that low academic language skills are associated with low academic performance (Baumann, Edwards, Font, Tereshinski, et al, 2002; Biemiller & Boote, 2006; Carlo, August, McLaughlin, Snow, et al, 2004). These studies also report a discrepancy among students of diverse ethnicities related to the amount of vocabulary they know and the depth to which they know and use that vocabulary. According to Beck, McKeown, and Kucan, "there are profound differences in vocabulary knowledge among learners from different ability or socioeconomic (SES) groups" (2002, p. 1).

Thus, students with smaller vocabularies are at a greater disadvantage in learning, and this lack of knowledge too often is the main barrier to their comprehension of texts and lectures (Newton, Padak, & Rasinski, 2008). According to Graves (2006)

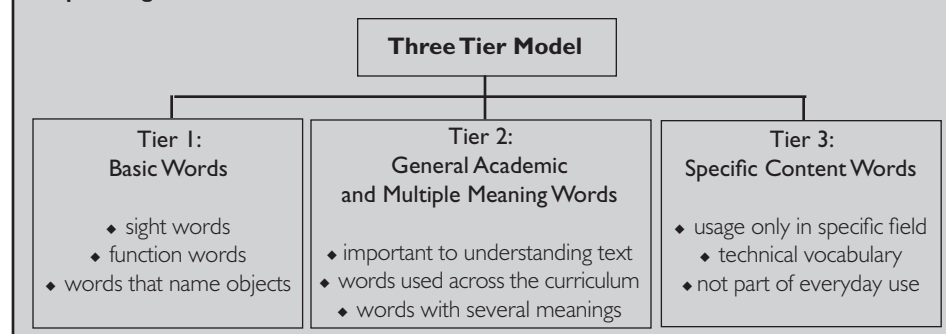
and Zwiers (2008), ELLs require assistance in developing content-related vocabulary in their second language if they are to experience success in school.

Both native English speakers and ELLs need support in learning the language that is used in the classroom as part of instruction, reading, discussion, and assignments. Interweaving direct instruction in academic language helps students acquire an understanding of abstract concepts, multiple meaning words, and content vocabulary. When students are able to understand the vocabulary for the that content they are reading and hearing, they will have a better understanding of the material. While wide reading promotes vocabulary growth, ELLs who do not read enough cannot acquire the word wealth that would help them with language learning.

Three Tier Model

Beck, McKeown, and Kucan's (2002) Three Tier Model places vocabulary words into three categories: Tier 1 which consists of basic or common words, Tier 2 which involves words that are used across the curriculum and multiple meaning words, and Tier 3 which is content specific vocabulary. In this model (see Figure 1),

Figure 1
Graphic Organizer of Three Tier Model



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Tier 1 words are the most common words in English and they make up a significant percentage of the words students read. These words generally require little or no instruction, e.g., *table*, *swim*, *cars*, and *dog* (Wosley, 2009). Sight words, function words, and words that name objects are included within Tier 1 vocabulary.

Tier 2 words are useful terms found with high frequency. These are words that are important to understanding the text and are used across the curriculum. For example, *analyze*, *compare*, and *conclusion* are words commonly used in academic settings during instruction, in discussions, on tests, and in assignments. Multiple meaning words such as *set*, *bat*, *base*, and *check* have several meanings and must be presented in context in order to be understood. Students who are proficient in English typically have a better grasp of these words and are able to use them to communicate.

Tier 3 vocabulary words are found with less frequency and are typically limited to specific content areas. According to Vacca and Vacca (2008) these words have “usage and application only in a particular subject field,” e.g., *centimeter*, *kilogram*, and *deciliter* in a mathematics or science class, or *abolitionist*, *emancipation*, and *secession* in a history class (p. 145).

It is relatively easy for teachers to iden-

tify these Tier 3 words in their textbooks. Students, on the other hand, struggle to define or explain the meaning of these vocabulary words, words that are not part of the language they use every day. Therefore, this technical vocabulary needs to be taught explicitly and thoroughly (Vacca & Vacca, 2008).

Effective Vocabulary Instruction

Effective vocabulary instruction emphasizes direct instruction. For example, presenting both key words that help ELLs understand difficult text and multiple-meaning words that require students to use context to figure out the meaning will be necessary. By using direct instruction, teachers can incorporate relevant vocabulary into the before, during, and after reading stages of instruction (see Table 1).

In order to help students remember new words, teachers can ask ELLs to associate the new words with things that are already familiar to them, or the teacher can translate the words into the students' primary language (Colorado, 2007). After students read, teachers can use word play to reinforce the understanding of new words and create enthusiasm for learning those new words. For example, “Find the Antonym” (*divide* → multiply) and “Which One Doesn't Fit” (square, circle, ruler, triangle) are two possibilities

While students may learn new words by encountering them in their reading, it is critical that teachers give ELLs the tools for acquiring vocabulary through explicit instructions. To create enthusiasm for learning new words, teachers can help students hunt for clues that unlock the meaning of unknown words such as synonyms, descriptions, explanations, and visual aids.

It is important to connect the new words to students' prior knowledge. To do this, teachers can actively involve ELLs in learning new words, create a vocabulary rich environment, and teach through a variety of strategies. For younger children, *realia*, actual objects or items, are useful for making abstract words more concrete. For example, in teaching *shapes*, teachers can bring to the classroom objects of different shapes.

Real objects, pictures, and photographs that clearly match unfamiliar words provide visuals that help ELLs make sense of the new words, e.g., photographs of frogs and salamanders to illustrate “amphibians.” Teachers can also use anchor words for new words, e.g., “baseball cards” as the anchor for “collection,” “frogs” for “amphibians,” and “rice” for “grains.”

To create a rich vocabulary environment teachers can use a word wall that contains words from different content

Table 1
Three Stages for Incorporating Relevant Vocabulary

Before Reading:

- ◆ Pronounce the word and use the Spanish equivalent; then have students repeat the word in English several times
- ◆ Tap students' prior knowledge and identify anchor or familiar words for new vocabulary words, e.g., “walk” as the anchor for “saunter”
- ◆ Pre-teach words before students read the material
- ◆ Introduce graphic organizers that show relationships among words
- ◆ Show *realia*, actual objects, pictures, picture books, and video clips to introduce vocabulary
- ◆ Use the Spanish equivalent
- ◆ Teach students how to use the structure of words, e.g., compound words, prefixes, roots, and suffixes, to break down a word into the meaningful units

During Reading:

- ◆ Define words in context, using sentences from students' reading material
- ◆ Help students find the context clues that will help them determine the meaning of an unknown word as they read
- ◆ Use graphic organizers to help students process the content
- ◆ Show students how to use the dictionary to confirm their predictions about the meaning of the vocabulary they meet in their reading
- ◆ Talk-through the words as students hear these during oral reading
- ◆ Use a variety of strategies to help students process the meaning of difficult words

After Reading:

- ◆ Focus on a limited number of key words, particularly interrelated words, to increase the depth of their understanding and concept development
- ◆ Give students multiple exposures to words throughout the day in order to cement their understanding of the word meanings
- ◆ Reinforce new words through activities, discussions, and assignments following students' reading
- ◆ Help make the words meaningful to students by linking the words with familiar things, people, or experiences
- ◆ Have students incorporate the new words into students' writing assignments
- ◆ Help students integrate new words into their speaking and writing vocabularies
- ◆ Display word walls and other graphic organizers with the new vocabulary and definitions

areas, word books, and develop a reading room with books that teach and reinforce new concepts. Word walls engage students visually and can be used to display content vocabulary from the curriculum or involve students in activities that will help them learn new words. It is also helpful to integrate the new vocabulary into students' writing assignments.

Strategies for Teaching Academic Vocabulary

It is important to explicitly teach vocabulary using effective strategies that will engage students in learning new words—for example, association strategies, imagery, and graphic organizers. When introducing a new word, it is helpful to avoid a lexical definition as dictionary definitions often include other words that are equally difficult and do not make sense to the students. Instead, teachers can provide students with a description or explanation of the word or an example as shown in Figure 2.

Repetition is one of the keys to learning a new word. First, have the students listen to the pronunciation of the new word and at the same time view a picture or an actual object that goes with the word. Have them repeat the word out loud at least three times. Then have them use the word in a sentence similar to what appears in the material the students are reading. For example, the teacher reads, "There are four geographic *regions* in California." Then the teacher explains that regions are *parts* of

Figure 2
Presenting a New Word

Introduce the new word → Provide synonyms → Describe or explain the word → Use the word in a sentence

the state of California. She shows these regions on a map. Students can work in pairs to come up with a new sentence using the word in question. This procedure can be repeated with each key word as shown in Figure 3.

When teaching academic vocabulary using this repetition cycle, carefully select a few content-specific words from the textbook that are critical to students' understanding of the main concepts, topics, or sub-topics. After developing activities that provide multiple exposures to the words in context, then present opportunities for the student to practice using these words. Through the use of a variety of strategies, teachers can scaffold students' learning of new vocabulary. Since learning vocabulary through reading may not be sufficient, direct teaching of vocabulary words will ensure learning and greater opportunities for academic success.

Sample Strategies for Elementary Students

Signal Word of the Day

In an elementary classroom the teacher selects a word for the day from students' reading as the "signal word" of the day. The teacher pronounces the word;

then the students echo the word. This word is used as a signal for the children to start or stop an activity.

When the students are seated, the teacher checks their understanding of the word. The teacher asks: "What does this *character* mean?" "Can you use the word in a sentence?" To help the class pay attention to the word the rest of the day, the teacher states the definition of the word and has the students say in unison the word. Through this method the use of repetition and the multiple exposure to the word throughout the day increases the students' retention of new words.

"Talk-through" Strategy with Reading Aloud

Both teachers and parents can help students learn new words by "talking-through" the definitions and giving examples during oral reading. This allows students to hear the word in context. For example, in reading a passage from the science textbook on the earth's water, teachers would stop and talk through the meanings of *cover*, *surface*, and *atmosphere*.

Repeated readings of the text are essential for learners with more limited vocabularies and help them link the pronunciation of new words with their meanings. After reading, reinforcement activities can help cement the students' newly obtained knowledge.

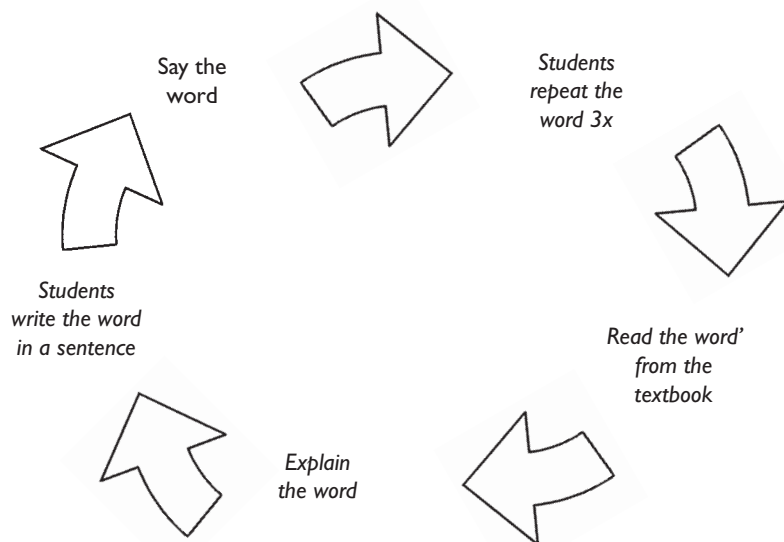
Academic Vocabulary Journals

In a fifth-grade class, the teacher asks students to guess what a new word means; the teacher then gives the students the formal definition. Next, the students use the word in a sentence and draw a pictorial representation of the word. Students record the new words alphabetically in their journals. These academic journals may also be created in chart form and include ratings, pictures, and ideas that are connected to the new words (see Figure 4 for a sample Academic Vocabulary Chart).

Graphic Organizers

Graphic organizers are visual representations that show arrangements of concepts and/or vocabulary words. Such organizers are effective when coupled

Figure 3
Repetition Cycle



with direct instruction. Because graphic organizers use visual images, they are particularly appropriate for English language learners. The use of graphic organizers, such as word trees, concept maps, and relational charts, help students understand concepts and the related vocabulary. Graphic organizers also help to link the definitions to examples (Colorado, 2007).

Teachers can also use a flow chart to look at a multiple-meaning word. This graphic organizer helps students break the word down into syllables, note the parts of speech, bring into view different definitions, and provide sample sentences. Both teachers and students can draw pictures to illustrate the words. See an example in Figure 5 for the word “difference.”

The Power of Games

Games can also be powerful tools for reinforcing ELLs’ vocabulary. Commercially published games such as *Balderdash* and *Scrabble* promote general vocabulary usage, however, other interactive games and teacher-created games are equally useful in reinforcing students’ understanding and encouraging enthusiasm for learning new words. Bingo cards are an example of these.

Sample Strategies for Secondary Students

Explicit instruction of technical words is even more critical in content areas at the secondary level “where students need a shared set of vocabulary to progress in their learning” (Biemiller & Boote, 2006, p. 190). ELLs must not only be able to

define the words but must also be able to understand these words in context as well as use the words in discussions and integrate the words in their writing. Some of the previously mentioned strategies for elementary students can be appropriate at the secondary level, but three strategies that are particularly effective with secondary students are the PAVE procedure, Student VOC Strategy, and Quick Writes.

PAVE Procedure

Bannon, Fisher, Pozzi, and Weasel (1990) developed the PAVE procedure, a four-step process that encourages students to compare their guess at the meaning of a word with its lexical definition. PAVE stands for **P**rediction, **A**ssociation, **V**erification, and **E**valuation. Students first read the new word as it appears in the textbook and then based upon the context clues they predict the meaning of the word.

Students then try to personalize the word by connecting the word to their own mental images. To verify the meaning of the word, they look up the word in the dictionary, read the definition, and compare this definition to their predicted meaning. Through this process, students learn a strategy that helps them become more independent learners.

Student VOC Strategy

The Student VOC Strategy is a Tier 3 strategy that targets content vocabulary. It helps students acquire a deeper meaning of the word. To implement this strategy, teachers provide a list of the key words from the chapter the students will be reading. Before reading, the students meet in small groups and choose one or two words they

don’t know or which may be unclear (West Virginia Department of Education, 2010).



After reading, students discuss what they think the word means and consult an “expert”—their textbook, a web-site, or a friend for the actual definition. After learning the definition of the word, they use the word in a sentence and draw a picture to remember the word. For example, one group chose the word “proclamation” and came to a consensus that the word meant “an announcement.” To verify their guess, one student sent a text message to his father who provided this definition: “Proclamation means ‘announcement or declaration. It can also be a document declaring something.’”

This strategy allows teachers to assess their students’ prior knowledge, and it helps the students realize the possible sources of information they can tap to verify the meaning of a new word.

Quick Writes

Quick writing invites students to write brief responses to questions about a key word, e.g. What do you think *freedom* means? The student writes “to do what you want.” Then the teacher asks, what other words do you think of when you hear this word? For example, students write “the Statue of Liberty,” “the Bill of Rights,” “wearing what you want,” and “listening to the music you like.” Students’ Quick Writes can be used to start a dialogue that taps their prior knowledge and allows the teacher to build upon this knowledge. As an alternative, English language learners can work in pairs to generate an answer to the questions.

Figure 4
Academic Vocabulary Chart

Word	Rating	Description or Example	Picture	Ideas
<i>nutrition</i>	No, never heard it	Foods that make your body work Vegetables are good for you		Not fast food Good for you Makes you healthy
<i>balanced</i>	Yes, have heard it	Eating some of each type of food Eating things that are good for you Not eating too much sugar		Sandwich with tuna, celery, & mayonnaise, wheat bread A banana Milk Use the Food Pyramid

Partnering with Parents to Develop ELLs' Vocabulary

Teachers can partner with parents in developing ELLs' academic vocabulary, particularly when it comes to content words that students need to master in each unit. Teachers can provide word lists that include the words in English as well as the home language and the definition of the word. They can supply parents with tips on how to build vocabulary and share examples of strategies they can implement at home. For example:

- ◆ Provide synonyms in the students' home language whenever possible.
- ◆ Use flash cards with the vocabulary word and definition.
- ◆ Create charts with anchor words that link students' knowledge with new words.
- ◆ Find simple books that focus on one topic in the content area and related content vocabulary, especially books with illustrations.
- ◆ Use a dictionary in the child or teen's home language.
- ◆ Keep a vocabulary journal for younger students and review the words periodically to ensure the words have become part of their vocabulary.
- ◆ Collect and review words with their children after reading and before tests.
- ◆ Play games to teach and reinforce new words with their children.

During parent-teacher conferences,

teachers can promote the importance of vocabulary development, review some of the strategies, provide dictionaries, and respond to parents questions. For parents who are not proficient in English, it is important to translate or have someone proficient in the home language translate the tips and participate in the conferences.

Conclusion

English language learners who struggle with academic vocabulary can have difficulty comprehending reading materials and class instruction. By explicitly teaching multiple meaning words and technical words, teachers can assist students in developing word wealth and increase their understanding of content material. It is important for teachers to make connections between the learners' prior knowledge and the new vocabulary.

Direct instruction of academic vocabulary includes the use of a variety of strategies, many of which use visual aids for students and present the words in context. There are many effective strategies such as the use of signal words, talk-through with read-alouds, vocabulary games, the Student VOC Strategy, and Quick Writes that help ELLs learn new words and provide tools for them to use in class and independently. By partnering with parents, teachers increase the opportunities for students to receive the help they need in learning academic vocabulary.

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Figure 5
Flow Chart

