

Teaching Vocabulary

Mid-Continent Comprehensive Center (MC3)

Regional ELL/CCSS Task Force

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Vocabularies

- There are two types of vocabularies.
 - **Receptive** - words that we understand when others use them
 - Oral receptive - understanding the words we hear
 - Written receptive - understanding the words we read
 - **Productive** - words with which we communicate
 - Oral productive - appropriately using words when we speak
 - Written productive - appropriately using the words when we write
- These vocabularies sometimes overlap, and their individual mastery changes over time.

Learning New Vocabulary

- As we learn new words, we can easily associate the grammar inflections of the new word, thus increasing our vocabularies (e.g., want/wanted and pencil/pencils) with what are called “word families.”
- During the school years, a student will learn an average of 50,000 word families with an estimate of 3,000 to 4,000 per year.
- Most English language learners (ELLs) also learn the same estimated word families per year; however, when they enter school, they are usually behind the English speakers one or more years because the vocabulary they will use at school is different from the vocabulary they acquired at home.

Learning New Vocabulary

- The level of proficiency ELLs have in their native language influences the time and proficiency in learning new English vocabularies.
- Knowledge and skills transfer from the first language to the second language that shares cognates with English when the student has knowledge of such words in the first language. Cognates are words with similar spelling and meaning in both languages (e.g., important/importante and experiment/experimento).

Fundamentals of Vocabulary Instruction

- Provide rich and varied language experiences.
- Teach individual words explicitly.
- Make word instruction available within a context.
- Include several examples using different contexts.
- Encourage students to pronounce, spell, and write the new words appropriately.
- Repeat and reinforce target words.

Basic Instructional Strategies

- Build vocabulary on students' first language knowledge and skills (use of cognates).
- Develop a basic oral and reading vocabulary of the most frequent English words (e.g., *The First 4,000 Words* by Sales and Graves, 2008).
- Reinforce learned material through repeated exposure to words, concepts, and skills with English speakers.
- Scaffold instruction through the use of guides, visuals, graphic organizers, etc.

Basic Instructional Strategies

- Promote casual word learning through shared book reading, especially in the primary grades.
- As much as possible, make students read first in their native language and then read again in English. Skills and knowledge acquired in the native language transfer to the second language.
- Provide numerous opportunities to use learned vocabulary in different situations (discussions, listening, writing, reading, etc.).

Identifying Which Words to Teach

- Assess the vocabulary the students already have.
- Select the words in the text that are content words.
- Use an academic word list (e.g., <http://www.victoria.ac.nz/lals/resources/academicwordlist>).
- In deciding which words to teach, consider whether the word represents an important concept in the subject being studied.
- Also consider how useful would be the word outside of the reading selection currently being taught.

Reinforce Students' Oral Vocabularies

Students may understand English words when read aloud, but not identify them when they see such words in print. Before teaching new words in print, reinforce students' existing oral vocabularies.

- Model correct pronunciation.
- Emphasize appropriate spelling.
- Provide different opportunities to help students be able to associate the written word with what they already know.
- Rehearse with words found in the text you will be using.

Teaching Individual Words

- Provide student-friendly definitions rather than traditional dictionary definitions.
- As much as possible, include visuals.
- Teach the use of the new word in different contexts.
- Make students participate in small group discussions about words' meanings.
- Make students process the new words in ways they can discover the meaning (partner-talk).

Semantic Mapping

- Using a Venn diagram, place the target word at the center.
- Surround the target word with categories related to the word.
- Working as a group or individually, students list words for each category.
- Discuss with students the central concept and its relation with the different categories.
- Add information to the semantic map with the collaboration of all students.

For More Advanced ELLs

- Students are asked to read the text the class is going to be working on ahead of time.
- Independently, students select five words from the text to bring to the class.
- Using the semantic map, students work independently.
- Students share their work with the group, and the teacher organizes a discussion about what and how they learned about the new word.
- Students are asked to use the target word in different contexts.

Instruction of Prefixes

- Select the most common prefixes used in English words (White, Sowel, & Yanagihara, 1989).
- Explain the meaning of each prefix explicitly.
- Teach one prefix at a time and reinforce through strong practice.
- Clearly explain how to break up a word to identify if there is a prefix (e.g., inactive: in-active = non active [has a prefix]; index: in-dex [does not have a prefix]).
- For younger students (K-2), act out the root word before teaching the prefix (e.g., fold/unfold).
- Make instruction interesting, useable, and effective for students and teachers.
- Teachers can use the same process to teach suffixes.

Grammar Inflections

There are eight basic inflections that need to be taught to ELLs clearly.

- -s 3rd person singular present tense
- -ed past tense
- -ing progressive aspect
- -en, ed past participle
- -s plural of nouns
- -'s possessive
- -er comparative
- -est superlative

General Recommendations

- Create a word-rich environment in the classroom.
- Provide plentiful opportunities for ELLs to interact with native English speakers.
- Use different strategies to teach vocabulary.
- Request students have their own vocabulary cards and glossaries with definitions, usages, and different meanings.
- Practice the different strategies continually.

Additional Resources

- Adams, M.J.(2010-2011). Advancing our students' language and literacy: The challenge of complex test. *American Educator*, 34(4),3-11,53.
- August, D., Carlo, M., Dressler, C., & Snow, C.(2005). The critical role of vocabulary development for English language learners. *Learning Disabilities Research & Practice*, 20(1), 50-52
- Graves, M., August, D. & Mancilla J. (2013). *Teaching vocabulary to English language learners*. New York, NY: Teacher College Press
- Sales, G.C., & Graves, M. F. (2008) *The First 4,000 Words*. Minneapolis. MN: Seward Inc.
- White, T.G., Sowel, J., & Yanagihara, A. 1989)Teaching elementary students to use word-part clues. *The Reading Teacher*, 42, 302-308



For additional information, please contact

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