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Vocabulary Instruction for ELLs

by Elizabeth I. Vander Woude

Abstract

An English language learner (ELL) can be found in nearly every classroom in the United States today, and each of these students is deserving of distinctive instructional adaptations to maximize their learning. Academic vocabulary and language are components of learning that can impact the success of all ELLs. The author implemented a strategic study with nine sixth-grade students who qualified for ELL and special education services. Graphic organizers, sentence starters, and enrichment or re-teaching strategies were rooted in discussion to enable these students with dual labels (ELL and IEP) to master and participate in the discourse of academic vocabulary. By initially focusing instruction on students' oral use of academic vocabulary, students were better able to demonstrate the knowledge they had gained. Requiring ELL students to write and read academic language and vocabulary before giving them opportunities to orally communicate with these words can short-change them by eliminating valuable opportunities to practice expressing their thoughts.

Literature Review

ELLs in the Classroom

In the United States today, an English language learner (ELL) can be found within nearly every classroom. Indeed, the National Center for Education Statistics reported in May of 2014 that during the 2011–2012 school year, approximately 4.4 million students were considered ELLs, or 9.1% of the total U.S. student population (NCES, 2014). ELL students are generally defined as students who have not yet mastered the English language enough to access the English-centric academic curriculum. Each year, more students



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from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds are attending our nation's schools.

Teachers are attempting to shift the ways they educate students to address ELLs' unique learning needs as they simultaneously strive to raise the rigor of their instruction. Unfortunately, however, the National Assessment of Educational Progress, or NAEP (Baker et al., 2014), reports that between 2002 and 2011, ELL students performed, on average, below their peers. Additionally, the achievement gap between general education and ELL students increased from 36 to 44 points as the ELLs progressed from grades four to eight. Furthermore, NAEP reported that in 2009, 97% of eighth-grade ELLs performed below the proficient level in reading (as cited in Baker et al., 2014). These outcomes have remained stagnant from year to year (NCES, 2014). ELLs exhibit a clear need for distinctive instructional adaptations, and time is of the essence to change their learning trajectories.

Vocabulary and Academic Language

Academic language and vocabulary are components of learning that can impact all content areas and have the potential to alter assessment outcomes. Cisco and Padron (2012) synthesized data demonstrating that unfamiliar English vocabulary adversely influences ELLs' abilities to perform well on reading assessments because these assessments are written and given in English. A large part of learning in school is reading about and listening to content that is unfamiliar. To comprehend what is being read and heard, students must have

adequate background knowledge, and particularly background knowledge of the vocabulary associated with the subject being addressed (Goldenberg, 2013). Vocabulary has the power to impact overall school success as well. The knowledge of words and their meanings is central to education because it is a catalyst for learning larger concepts (Fisher & Frey, 2014a). As Manyak and colleagues (2014) noted, "A limitation in vocabulary knowledge represents a key obstacle to long-term academic success for many students and points to the urgent need for teachers and schools to improve the quality of vocabulary instruction across grade levels" (p. 14). When an ELL student is being introduced to new topics across content areas, it is not a lack of ability that impedes learning, but rather a lack of access to the needed English vocabulary. Solid vocabulary instruction can help ELLs reveal the knowledge and potential they possess by supporting their reading comprehension, allowing them to access important background knowledge they may have and contributing to their overall academic success (Miller & Hill, 2013; Mohr & Mohr, 2007; Wasik & Iannone-Campbell, 2012).

One specific segment of vocabulary instruction that benefits ELL students is *academic language*, which is central to school success and a crucial element of overall academic success. (Francis, Rivera, Lesaux, Kieffer, & Rivera, 2006). Understanding the term academic language may be the first step to designing instructional lessons that are effective for ELLs. Gottlieb and Ernst-Slavit (2014) clarify academic language as "specific linguistic features associated with academic disciplines, including discourse features, grammatical constructions, and vocabulary across different language domains or modalities (listening, speaking, reading, writing) and content areas (language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies/history, among others)" (p. 6). Simply stated, academic language is used for a specific purpose and audience in a specific context; however, academic language is not independent. Academic language does not stand in isolation. It is used throughout students' daily lives

and education. Academic language falls under the larger umbrella of vocabulary. It is composed of words that directly relate to a specific content area. Vocabulary can be thought of more broadly as knowledge of word meanings that cut across content areas, whereas academic language is usually content area specific (Gottlieb & Ernst-Slavit, 2014). Still, vocabulary and academic language can influence one another. As academic language improves, overall vocabulary is positively impacted. Teachers must begin to foster the development of academic language in their classrooms.

ELLs often learn the social and cultural context of academic language in English at school because the language spoken at home often is not English. ELLs should be on the receiving end of research-based and best practice instruction of academic language because this type of language is prevalent within each content area and across all forms of communication: reading, writing, speaking, and listening (Gottlieb & Ernst-Slavit, 2014). Academic language is vital for ELLs' academic success, yet ELLs often lack the knowledge of how to use this specialized language of the content areas in English. When the words they need to read, write, speak, and learn about different content areas are missing from ELLs' vocabulary, these students may miss out on opportunities to take part in school learning (Rivera, Moughamian, & Francis, 2009). Choosing instructional methods to teach English academic language is crucial for helping ELLs acquire this knowledge.

Best Practices of Vocabulary Instruction: Building Talk Time into Classroom Instruction

Fisher and Frey (2014b) assert that "reading and writing are optional accessories that are bolted onto a speaking and listening brain" (p. 64). Human minds have an insatiable desire to communicate primarily through talk, and vocabulary knowledge directly enhances the talk that occurs.

All students require the opportunity to participate in conversations that give them chances to use the vocabulary they know and the academic language of the content area they are learning. Fisher and Frey (2014b) also contend that 50% of instructional time should be spent having students collaborate through conversations with same-age students. It may be even more vital for ELLs to have that time to express their thoughts orally, so they are given a chance to use new English vocabulary and English academic language terms in conversation (Rivera, Moughamian, & Francis, 2009). Academic language flourishes for ELLs through talk. Additionally, teachers can better assess what ELL students know if they elicit verbal responses. Modeling and supporting academic language development for ELLs is a teacher's responsibility because ELLs will be able to use new vocabulary words, and especially academic language, orally before they can use them in writing or reading. At the beginning stages of language acquisition, ELLs will be able to understand more academic language than they can produce. This means that ELL students often have a great deal more knowledge than they are yet able to show using the English language (Mohr & Mohr, 2007). Language proficiency and deep understanding of academic language will be gained through conversations and talk within the classroom. Teachers must persevere in finding instructional methods to encourage talk within the classroom, especially for ELLs with differing language and cultural backgrounds from the instructor (Mohr & Mohr, 2007). The first, and ultimate, best practice of vocabulary instruction for ELLs is planning for and eliciting talk among students.

Meaningful talk in a classroom is an integral part of learning for all students; however, dialogue and discussion can be an agonizing and anxiety-ridden experience for ELLs. To fully engage ELLs in classroom discussion and conversation, educators must provide scaffolded instruction on how to participate in these types of talk. Scaffolding students' learning within their zone of

proximal development enable teachers to differentiate instruction based upon the students' current knowledge and ability. Scaffolding involves decreasing the amount of support students receive as they begin to master concepts. Teaching within the zone of proximal development means providing lessons that meet students where they are currently performing (Miller & Hill, 2013). These are best practice approaches that must be applied to ELLs and to the talk they are asked to produce within the classroom environment. Miller and Hill suggest that teachers provide scaffolding, such as modeling correct usage of words and posing interesting and challenging questions, to assist ELLs in contributing to classroom conversations. This can be accomplished through creating purposeful and strategic dialogue in the classroom.

To aid in ELLs' academic language acquisition, teachers must design lessons that include conversations with specific purposes and engage students in using the academic language in play. Teachers must introduce and model several times how and why these words are used in an academic context. Developing ELL students' confidence during classroom discussion can be done by informing students about what upcoming activities will be and clearly stating what is to be communicated during said activities. Additionally, teachers must encourage dialogue in the classroom while simultaneously providing constructive feedback to ELLs on how the academic language was used (Miller & Hill, 2013; Mohr & Mohr, 2007). Teachers can thereby scaffold students' use of the English academic language. Careful consideration must to be given to the types of questions and prompts that are asked of ELLs during classroom conversations. Open-ended questions that provide opportunities for students to use the academic language and expand on their thoughts must be prepared in advance. These types of questions require higher-level thinking skills and offer ELLs opportunities to elaborate upon their thinking (Wasik & Iannone-Campbell, 2012). The primary goal of this type of talk within the classroom walls is to

help ELLs further their knowledge of and capacity to use academic language.

Some ELLs will require additional supports to partake in these kinds of conversations. Sentence starters can provide a bridge between an actively engaged student and one who is passive and unable to share his/her knowledge with the class. This strategy can be helpful when ELLs know what the specific academic language means but do not have the knowledge of how to put these thoughts into sentences. Thinking is conveyed through sentences; thus, when teachers provide ELLs with sentence structures, this supports students in being able to orally share their thinking (Velasco, 2012). ELLs' knowledge can be more visible when given this kind of scaffolding. By using sentence frames to lessen the pressure of knowing how to express thoughts, teachers create a supportive learning environment where ELLs can successfully employ the academic language they have been taught and demonstrate their knowledge (Frey, Fisher, & Nelson 2013; Mohr & Mohr, 2007). Posting sentence frames, modeling how to use them, and then letting students use them in talk will offer the support ELLs require to participate in conversations.

English language acquisition for ELLs has been the primary goal of ELL educators, yet the need for innovative and research-based practice is at an all-time high. ELL curricula today are far more rigorous than in the past because of the realization that students are capable of more than they were previously given. As a result, teachers are challenged to be efficient and practical in the ways they approach instruction for and with ELLs. One of the greatest indicators of academic success for all students, ELLs included, is the depth of students' knowledge of academic language. Directing instruction with graphic organizers, designing activities that create purposeful student talk using academic language, and scaffolding support during these dialogues will give ELLs ample opportunities to practice and demonstrate the English academic language they are learning.

Application Within the Classroom

This school year, my population of students dramatically changed from the previous years, and I did not have the tools to be the effective teacher my students deserved. I had nine students who qualified for ELL services and each had an Individualized Education Program (IEP) for various reasons, including specific learning disabilities, emotional disabilities, and other health impairments. Special education had been my domain for 10 years, and I felt equipped to provide meaningful vocabulary instruction across content areas for my students; however, I had not encountered the unique needs of students who were also learning the English language. I, therefore, turned toward the experts in the field of ELL vocabulary instruction to aid me in designing lesson plans to guide my newly-minted middle schoolers so they would find success in their content area classes. I thus began to research best practices and write lesson plans to mimic what I learned.

Prior to receiving any instruction on the new academic language and vocabulary addressed within this study, students took a survey to assess their knowledge of 10 academic words. Five students stated that all 10 words were new, meaning they had never seen or heard the words before and could not explain, define, or use the words correctly. Three students had previously seen or heard two of the words but noted that they did not think they could explain, define, or use them correctly. One student stated that he had heard four of the words and could explain one of them but would not be able to use it correctly in writing or during a conversation. Synthesizing this data, I knew there was work to be done, but I was enthusiastic because I had willing students and a well-crafted plan to achieve success. Implementing the next steps made me realize I also had to assess my instruction to determine if it worked.

I introduced the academic vocabulary words and their meanings by having students create a graphic

organizer for each word. Students used a computer program, ReadWriteGold 2011, creating a four-column organizer for the 10 new words. The columns were titled *word*, *meaning*, *symbol*, and *context*. Class discussions enhanced the creation of the organizers because students talked with one another to decide which meanings suited the context of the word, edit and add descriptions of the words to the *meaning* column, decide whether to keep the computer-generated image or find a new one, and hear the vocabulary words used correctly in context. When students asked for help, I would suggest that they talk with a peer about the picture they were given and the meaning of the word. This helped to encourage talk. Some of the words included in this study were *captivity*, *domesticate*, *tame*, and *humane*. During the classroom discussion, students easily related the words to their life experiences because I walked around the classroom and engaged each student in casual talk about the words. Not only did this increase the talk within the classroom, but I was also able to better assess what my students knew.

I soon came to realize that giving students the words and an opportunity to express themselves allowed them to voice their thoughts. Students shared their knowledge of animals in captivity, species that have been domesticated, how they had tamed animals, and what they viewed as humane treatment. Through this talk, students were better able to grasp the definitions of the words and demonstrate their knowledge. The creation of the graphic organizer and the conversations that took place while students filled it out were my first attempts at scaffolding the students' learning. This provided a relaxed setting for students to begin using the words. Having a correctly completed reference sheet for the academic vocabulary and the ideas generated during discussion, students were then ready to delve further into cementing their learning.

The following day, students were given additional examples of how the academic vocabulary is used

within the context of argumentative writing. Groups of three students worked together to make note of how the words were used in sentences and of whether the meaning of the words changed at all depending upon the structure or content of the sentence. Two sentences were offered for the word *captivity*: "The animals at the zoo are held in captivity and away from their natural habitat" and "The audience was captivated by the elephant parade." After discussing these words and sentences in small groups, each person was asked to choose one word and prepare to share what he or she had learned about it with the whole class. By doing this, I was able to ensure that each student would participate in the discussion. This gave students the chance to choose what they added to the discussion. Additionally, they could clarify with their peers what they would say when it was their turn to share.

A whole-class share-out session followed as a way of helping the groups learn from one another. Some misconceptions were fleshed out during this talk, as students asked if the audience was held in a cage or contained area. Other students were able to answer and explain that the audience was interested or watching the elephants closely. The amount of student talk that took place during this day was impressive and heartening. Talking together about unfamiliar words, first in small groups of three and then as a whole class, seemed to have given students confidence. Students watched one another use and practice these words, which made everyone more willing to participate in the upcoming discussion.

Students' confidence increased because I had scaffolded so much of the instruction: (a) they had been introduced to the words through a pre-assessment, (b) they had been able to construct their understanding of the words with each other through talk, (c) they had used these words in small groups, and (d) they had been given mentor sentences that modeled how words could be used. Students then needed to be challenged to use these

words in discussion. With the previously-created graphic organizer in hand and sample sentences hung around the room, students were presented with sentence starters. I gave specific directions on how to use the sentence starters in the next discussion that was going to take place. I encouraged and invited students to use as many different sentence starters and vocabulary terms as possible during the discussion, with the preface that the purpose of this discussion was to get our minds, mouths, and ears used to thinking with, speaking with, and listening to the academic vocabulary we were learning. I led the discussion. I had prepared higher-level thinking questions for the words as well as sentence starters to help students answer and pose more questions. I posed questions such as, Why should animals be or not be treated humanely? Is captivity fair to all animals? If a species is domesticated, is it okay to keep them in captivity? Yes or no questions would not have furthered my students' thinking, learning, or English at this point, so I avoided those types of questions.

Remaining quiet after I asked questions during this discussion proved difficult for me, but it was all the more important to encourage students to answer. It was during this discussion that I began observing students who were coming close to mastery of the words versus those who needed more scaffolding. Confidence and mastery of the academic vocabulary seemed to show through students' willingness to participate and through the amount of talk they contributed to the discussion. Conversely, students who were reluctant to speak or who did not correctly use the sentence starters showed a need for more direct instruction, modeling, and opportunities to practice using the words in their speaking.

The following day, to extend the growth of the five students who had begun showing mastery of the vocabulary terms, I asked those students to create questions that could be used in our next discussion. I specified that they should write questions that contained a vocabulary term, could be answered with one of the vocabulary terms, or

could be answered using one of the sentence starters with which they had worked. Simultaneously, the other four students took part in an activity we called "a cube of options." I had made a cube out of paper and had written questions on each side of the cube. We stood in a circle and tossed the cube to one another. When the cube was thrown to a student, he or she could choose to answer one of the questions on the cube, rephrase what the previous person had said, use one of the vocabulary terms in a sentence of his or her own, or ask a question about one of the terms. I am convinced that this purposeful differentiation is what altered the course of my students' successes. Having one group of students actively engaged in a conversation about how the vocabulary terms could be used in discussion challenged them to engage in higher-level thinking, solidified their understanding, and supported them in learning to use these terms seamlessly. Further, creating an even smaller group of students in which listening, questioning, and speaking with the vocabulary terms was a non-negotiable allowed each student the opportunity he or she needed to master the terms.

Measuring progress, growth, and mastery with students who are dually classified as ELL and IEP students is necessary, but it can be complicated. Knowing that my students' overall academic success is highly dependent on strengthening their vocabulary, I decided to assess their growth using multiple formats. I prepared a discussion guide for my students, and they participated in a conversation in which the only speaking I did was asking questions when the talking stopped. Students were given sentence starters but were asked not to have their reference sheets out. As students talked, I tallied how many times each word was said and then noted if it was used correctly or not. For 21 minutes my students questioned, spoke, listened, and used nine out of 10 of the vocabulary words correctly for a total of 12 word occurrences. All nine students attempted using the terms, seven of them doing so correctly at least once. There were clear instances of when students fully realized the

power of the new words they had learned; they chose to use new vocabulary instead of relying on old, more simplistic words during this discussion.

One student stated, "Chimps shouldn't be captive because they are so like us, and we wouldn't want to be in a cage." While I cannot, with absolute certainty, say that the student would have said it differently before instruction, I do know that the student could have used a simpler term instead of captive. The word was used correctly in a way that was applicable to the discussion, and the context of the rest of the sentence shows knowledge that when an animal is in captivity, it might be in a cage.

Another student rebutted this statement, stating, "But a chimp can, you could, it could, make tame so it can be in a cage. Like you can make it be good and then it could live in a cage." This rebuttal, along with other statements made by most of my students, showed that they knew how to use the words and when they were appropriate to the conversation. Without the use of reference sheets or listings of the words, students had to use their working memory and understanding of the words to participate. They demonstrated their learning and knowledge through the use of the new terms in conversation.

To help my students become aware and proud of their own growth, I asked them to take the survey they had previously completed about their familiarity with the vocabulary terms. Seven of the nine students reported they could explain the meaning of and correctly use eight of 10 words taught in either conversation or writing. One student noted that he recognized all 10 words, could explain six of the words, and could use four of the others correctly. The last student stated that he could explain five of the words and use three of them in conversation correctly. Students were cognizant of their learning; I hope this will help them generalize these terms to new settings.

Implications

There are implications for teaching and learning of any instructional plan. One is that the plan must be developed strategically and with well-aimed strategies. Teaching is not just about delivery. It is about how effective that delivery is and where it may lead students in their learning. Because the successful classroom is founded upon meaningful relationships, the delivery of the plan must have authenticity and a personal genuineness that students can see, hear, feel, and embrace. I was mindful to let students know that what I was asking of them was difficult but within their reach. I also provided students with patience, plenty of wait time while they figured out what they wanted to add to the discussion, and praise when they made mistakes while taking risks. These are all practices that must be used to help students to feel comfortable and confident to participate.

To enable ELL students to master academic vocabulary so they can participate in the discourse of academic language, a plan must incorporate well-devised, purposefully-sequenced activities that continually encourage ELLs to talk. Instruction should engage ELLs in frequent and intentional academic conversation. I was purposeful in encouraging and celebrating everyone in their effort to use new words. When asked a question, I would answer with another question so the students were having to further their talk of the English academic language being used. Challenge them to use all of their senses to absorb these words into their mind. At all ages, language learning, development, and growth require opportunities to hear and use the language before writing words and understanding them in a text. Why are ELL students continually being asked to read and write with new language before consistently speaking it? ELL students, along with all others, need to learn to read and write with academic language and vocabulary. Eventually, it is true that writing will need to be done, but not initially. As a teacher of ELLs, after completing this unit of study, I can earnestly

report that without having asked my students to speak so frequently and to use the newly-taught academic vocabulary in conversation, I would not have been able to accurately assess what my students knew before or what they gained from the lessons with which they were presented. If we force ELL students to write and read academic language and vocabulary before we teach them to orally communicate with these words, we shortchange them by eliminating the opportunity to express their thinking. Talk is what will let you, as the instructor, become aware of the knowledge that your ELL students have.

As with any new instructional plan, there are drawbacks and downsides. When shifting the focus from writing and reading with new vocabulary and academic language to talking with vocabulary and academic language, it can take considerably more time to assess each individual student. Planning for this time will greatly improve the ease with which teachers implement the instructional suggestions I have provided in this article. Another drawback is that some students are extremely reluctant and anxious about talking. It is not fair to demand that a student speak in a large group when he or she feels uncomfortable. I found it helpful to forewarn my students, especially those who might be perceived as introverted, about activities in which they were going to be asked to speak. This produced better results in their learning because they were more willing to talk. I also allowed for small-group discussions before large-group discussions. In these smaller groupings, students were often told what the larger, whole-class discussions would be about, which gave students time to practice what they wanted to say. It can also be helpful to give a challenge of talking at least once or twice during a discussion to students who are reluctant to participate in a large group; this can support students in talking by offering them a reasonable goal and target.

It is also important to note that I saw each of these students for several periods a day, including

literacy, math, and one 52-minute period that was dedicated to pre-teaching, re-teaching, or supporting other content area classes. This unique scheduling allowed me to provide lessons focused narrowly on vocabulary and academic language that would support learning throughout their day. Focusing on such a narrow grouping of words is not always ideal because it can limit the breadth of what is being taught, and time constraints in a classroom cannot always support this kind of instructional design. With a few modifications, many of the implemented strategies could be used in content area classes within one class period.

Tips for Instruction

Anchoring an instructional plan with the following tips and thoughts can help students and teacher alike:

1. Speaking and listening should be at the forefront of vocabulary instruction. Structure activities and formative or summative assessments with this in mind. This will allow students to be immersed in the new language of the unit. Encourage speaking and playing with words. Remind students constantly that the more they attempt to use new words, the more they will learn.
2. Scaffold instruction through direct teacher support, collaborative activities, class discussions, and opportunities for extension or re-teaching.
3. Provide students with resources that will enable them to display their knowledge, learning, and questions. Graphic organizers and sentence starters will give students the tools they need to speak their thoughts.
4. Remind yourself that your goal may not be to give students new information but rather new words to express their thoughts and speak their knowledge. ELL students have an abundance of information in their minds. The instruction being delivered could very possibly be more about

providing students with words and language to use in expressing what they know.

5. Be patient and watch for small signs of success. Growth and progress can take time.

Conclusion

We are more than three quarters of the way into the school year and quizzical looks still appear on my students' faces. New words appear every day and different learning takes place. My students talk freely (sometimes even more than I would like), but now I know how to look beyond the confusion and teach with a strategic plan based upon the principle that students need to have chances to speak.

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