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Building Academic Language Proficiency for English Learners

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March 2023

Dear Fellow Educators,

We proudly present the third edition of VSLA's *The Collection*, a publication series dedicated to delving into a single, rich literacy topic intended to meet the needs of educators. VSLA's mission is to lead the advancement of literacy across the Commonwealth of Virginia and through this publication, we share pertinent information on the Science of Reading.

This edition focuses on building language comprehension which is critical to the background knowledge component of the Science of Reading. The first article by Abda Gupta Ph.D. examines the importance of building academic language and offers teaching techniques designed to build the academic language of English Learners. Next, J. Richard Gentry Ph.D. asserts that the knowledge of spelling is critical to the brain's reading architecture; hence, he makes the case for the explicit teaching of spelling. Finally, Austen Hecker M.Ed. and Christa Beil Ph.D. explore the role of language comprehension in reading development and highlight the importance of read-aloud practices.

I hope you enjoy this third edition of *The Collection* and find it enlightening. The next focus will be decoding as a component of the Science of Reading. In addition to *The Collection*, we continue to annually publish our well-loved journal, *Reading in Virginia*.

Thank you for all *you* do to promote literacy!

Best wishes,

Laura Labyak

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Building Academic Language Proficiency for English Learners

Abha Gupta Ph.D.

Abstract

Academic language proficiency is essential for success in school, especially for English Learners (ELs). However, it is a skill which receives little attention. Many ELs frequently exit from language assistance programs because they perform well on social language tests and sound proficient in language interchange, due to strong basic interpersonal communication skills. However, they may still struggle in content areas due to poor academic language proficiency. This article's main goals are to illustrate the value of academic language comprehension and offer teaching techniques that will help ELs develop this skill. These strategies, which play to English Learners' strengths, incorporate cognates and academic word lists into instruction.

Introduction

Language development is essential to reading and writing. The four primary language skills— listening, speaking, reading, and writing — are integrated into language and literacy acquisition. Students get better at decoding and comprehending texts in speech or print as their language skills grow. Focusing on language comprehension early can have a significant impact on individuals' literacy skills. Understanding vocabulary and semantics as well as how morphology and syntax influence meaning are all essential components of language comprehension (Scarborough, 2001). These competencies predict reading comprehension, and students who struggle with them frequently experience difficulties with elementary reading comprehension beyond the classroom (Adlof et al., 2010). While some students quickly pick up language comprehension, others require explicit support during an intervention to develop the cognitive skills necessary to understand difficult texts and to learn from them (Connor et al., 2011). An important finding from the National Early Literacy Panel (NELP 2008) report indicated that measures of complex language are powerful predictors of subsequent reading abilities. According to research, language and reading comprehension can be supported by

explicit instruction on the components, namely, vocabulary, semantics, morphology, and syntax (Silverman, et al, 2020).

This article draws on existing literacy research to build language comprehension of English Learners (ELs). It is embedded in the framework of the 'robust and socially just science of reading' proposed by Auckerman & Schuldt (2020). They recommend that "reading education should attend closely to linguistic, cultural, and individual variation, honoring and leveraging different strengths and perspectives that students bring to and take away from their learning, particularly for student from nondominant cultures." The article begins with information on ELs, continues with a brief explanation of the funds of knowledge and understandable input/output theory, and then carries on to strategies for developing academic vocabulary via cognates and tier-vocabulary.

English Learners

Due to their increasingly diverse environments, today's classrooms provide numerous opportunities for teachers and students to engage in effective learning. According to NCES (2012) data, 10.9 million students, 21% of the school enrollment in the age group of 5 to 17 are English language learners (ELLs) (Li, 2015; NCES, 2012). Given the rising number of English learners (ELs), it is crucial that language and literacy programs consider the students' language and culture in an inclusive learning environment (Brooks, et al 2010; Gupta, 2015, 1999).

We know as educators that ELs must put in extra work to acquire new content through the academic vocabulary used in the classroom. ELs have twice as much work to complete than native English speakers, claim Freeman et al. (2010). They must learn both English and academic content in the English language. Additionally, they frequently reside in areas with underfunded schools that are likely staffed by less experienced teachers. In a similar vein, teachers have a dual responsibility to collaborate with ESOL teachers to teach

English while also imparting the essential competencies mandated by the curriculum in order to meet the standards. It increases the burden on teachers to raise students to grade-level standards.

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) compares state-by-state student success in reading, writing, and mathematics for students in grades 4, 8, and 12. The findings from the NAEP report (2019) indicate a drop in reading scores nationwide. In comparison to 2017, the 2019 reading scores were lower in 17 states at grade 4 and 31 states at grade 8. The reading statistics for Virginia are summarized below.

- According to the NAEP results (2019), the average reading score of 4th grade students in Virginia was 224. Although this score is higher than the national average of 219, it is lower than the Virginia average score of 228 during the previous cycle in 2017.
- The average score of 8th graders in Virginia is 262, i.e., the same as the national average. However, this is the first time in last twenty years that Virginia's average reading scores have dropped to the national average.
- The 8th-grade scores showed an increasing racial disparity, which is concerning. White students' scores dropped by 4 points, but the scores of Black and Hispanic students dropped by 8 points and 12 points, respectively.
- English Language Learners in 8th grade saw a 20-point decline between 2017 and 2019 in comparison with a 5-point drop for non-English learners.

The aforementioned data offer compelling support for working effectively with all students, especially English Learners in their early years, so as to counteract the clear decline in the reading scores.

Funds of Knowledge

Recognizing the knowledge, and abilities that a student already possesses is essential for effective teaching of ELs using their language as a resource rather than a deficit. Moll et al. (1992) refer to this accumulated body of knowledge including cultural and linguistic experiences as “funds of knowledge.” Learners’ funds of knowledge should be incorporated into instruction, to give value

to the life experiences of the students and to support their academic learning. For instance, a recent immigrant may have beginner-level proficiency in English but show strong

technology skills. Teachers can then build on those technology skills by integrating web-based interactive platforms like Kahoot, podcasts, or use a learning app to advance ELs language skills.

Comprehensible Input and Comprehensible Output

Stephen Krashen (1982) developed the linguistic idea of comprehensible input for language learners. The comprehensible input theory maintains that in order for second language learners to understand new input, they must be exposed to linguistic input that is only slightly above their current language level. Language learners need to be challenged, but with support and assistance that allows them to perform at the next level, called scaffolding. Vygotsky (1962) referred to this as the zone of proximal development (ZPD). The notion of comprehensible input serves as the foundation for specially designed academic instruction in English that emphasizes the following teaching strategies (Peregoy & Boyle, 2017):

1. Focus on communication, not grammatical form;
2. Allow students a silent period rather than forcing immediate speech production; and
3. Create a low anxiety environment.

Comprehensible input helps learners generate comprehensible output, i.e., speaking and writing (Swain, 1985). Deeper language processing is necessary as learners actively choose the lexical items, phonology, syntax, semantics, and vocabulary that best represent their ideas while speaking or writing in a new language. When a teacher provides directions to students in class or explains a concept to them, learners must be able to fully comprehend the directives or explanation supplied by the teacher. Building meaningful vocabulary for understandable input (hearing and reading) and understandable output (speaking or writing) is essential to gaining a knowledge of language comprehension. Techniques that can be used to encourage comprehensible input and output include cognates, developing academic language and vocabulary, and using tiered academic vocabulary.

Building Vocabulary using Cognates

Issues with reading comprehension are frequently brought on by a lack of vocabulary, which hinders fluency and comprehension. In other words, for students to become proficient readers, they must integrate all of their skills involving word recognition, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension. One way to build vocabulary with ELs is by showing semantic connection of the target language with their first language, called cognates. Cognates are words in different




languages that are derived from the same original word or root. These words have the same meaning and similar sounds. For example, the words /action/ in English and /acción/ in Spanish. It helps ELLs when teachers explicitly and directly advise students on identifying and utilizing cognates in class. With the use of cognates, students can familiarize themselves with and translate related words from their native tongue into English. Students also need to be made aware of false cognates, also known as “false friends”, which are words that look and sound similar in two languages but have very different meanings. For example, the word /exito/ in Spanish means success, and not ‘exit’ as in English. In their journals, students can compile a list of words they think are true and false cognates.

If the focus is on Spanish cognates, students could examine definitions from a Spanish language dictionary with a partner for five minutes at the conclusion of each reading session. The chosen words can then be written on a word wall or a classroom board, where new words can be added every day. Students can use the cognate word wall in class since they can see it visually.

To learn the English language more quickly and better grasp the terms, students can add pictures to the word wall. To build academic vocabulary using academic cognates, here is a sample chart that teachers and students can continue to add words to throughout the year.

Figure 1

Cognates

English	Spanish	Visual
Family	<i><u>familia</u></i>	
Circle	<i><u>círculo</u></i>	
Insect	<i><u>Insecto</u></i>	

**ACADEMIC
LANGUAGE
COGNATES**

English	Spanish
Cause	Causa
Classify	Clasificar
Antecedent	antecedente
Compare	Comparar
Adverb	Adverbio
Electrode	Electrodo

Figure 2



Building Academic Vocabulary

An important aspect of language comprehension is competence in academic language, the language used in schools for teaching and learning in subjects such as language arts, math, social studies, science, and history. Academic language is the set of words and phrases that describe content-area knowledge and procedures (Zweirs 2005). It tends to be more complex, abstract, and decontextualized. The importance of explicit teaching of academic language is critical for school success. Jim Cummins (1980) pointed out a broad distinction between academic and conversational language and called it Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). BICS refers to “social English or “playground English” which ELs pick up more quickly than academic language. According to research, academic language proficiency takes at least five to seven years to develop for ELs, whereas interpersonal and social language development takes two to three years (Thomas & Collier, 2002). However, ELs frequently leave language assistance programs because they perform well on social language tests and sound proficient in language interchange (Butler, et al. 2007).

Frequently used words in English make up about 85% of the words we use in conversation and 80% of the words from the texts in school (Nation & Waring, 1997). Many of these high-frequency words are function words that cannot be easily learned except through exposure and use in a meaningful context (e.g., the, and, have, was). What crucial vocabulary should we teach our students, then? The words that are used the most frequently should be taught to the beginners first, followed by terms that may be visualized, such as cat, book, and tree. The following link contains the 2000-word New General Service List in English:

https://cdn.learningvillage.net/sites/default/files/highfrequencywords_2000_1.pdf

Academic words can be generally classified into three tiers (Beck et al 2002). Tier 1 vocabulary consists of everyday words including high-frequency sight words. Tier 2 words include cross- curricular vocabulary that shows up across content areas. The words can have multiple meanings across different subject areas. Tier 3 words are domain-specific words in a content area.

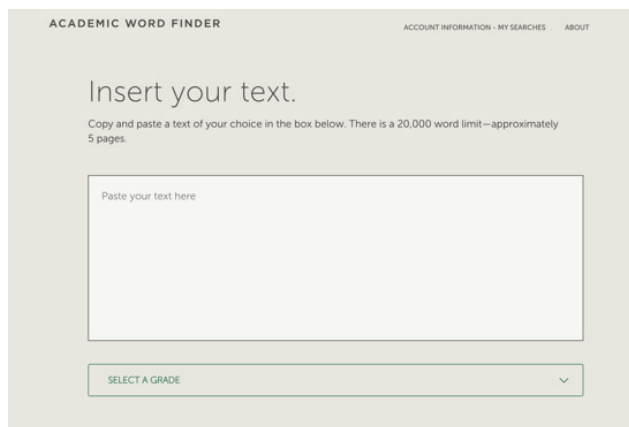
Table 1 - Tiers of Academic Vocabulary

<i>Tier</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Example</i>
Tier-1	Everyday basic familiar words, high frequency	draw, next, circle, list, highlight, underline
Tier-2	High utility words including cross curricular words	summarize, contrast, antonym, italics
Tier-3	Technical words from a specific subject	circumference, volcano

Coxhead (2000) examined a large corpus of millions of words to identify words that were commonly used across academic areas. The Academic Word List (AWL) at https://simple.wiktionary.org/wiki/Wiktionary:Academic_word_list is organized by frequency of use from most to least.

Additionally, there is a free online tool that can assist teachers in selecting academic words to concentrate on while developing vocabulary as a prereading exercise (<https://achievethecore.org/academic-word-finder/>). By entering the text in the box and choosing the grade level, the weblink enables teachers to locate high-value academic words in the text that students may encounter before the lesson is presented.

Figure 3



Summary

Several recent studies have found that a third of students in the youngest grades are falling short on reading criteria, a considerable increase from before the pandemic (Curriculum Associates, 2021). Because reading proficiency affects learning in a variety of subject areas, low literacy accomplishment among students is a serious concern. Reading is not only a fundamental ability but also an essential skill for success and personal growth. Building strong academic language is important for being able to access challenging content and fully engage in classroom learning, and literacy skills are one of the best predictors of academic success. According to WIDA (2012), the academic language register differs from the social language in terms of grammatical structure, vocabulary usage, discourse, and social complexity. It is frequently abstract and less contextualized. Consequently, it necessitates higher-order cognitive functions such as evaluating, comparing, and synthesizing. Academic language is not limited to written language alone. Students need to understand oral instructions, explanations, podcasts, and even YouTube tutorials in subject areas. As discussed in this article, academic vocabulary is one facet of

academic language that allows one to access challenging subject area content. For all students, not just English language learners, a collaborative teaching strategy can be successful in dividing up the responsibilities of instruction between content and ESOL teachers.

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