

Effective Literacy and English Language Instruction for English Learners in the Elementary Grades

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Recommendation 3. Provide extensive and varied vocabulary instruction

Provide high-quality vocabulary instruction throughout the day. Teach essential content words in depth. In addition, use instructional time to address the meanings of common words, phrases, and expressions not yet learned.

Level of evidence: **Strong**

This recommendation is based on three studies conducted specifically with English learners. This recommendation is also indirectly supported by a strong body of research conducted with native English speakers.

Brief summary of evidence to support this recommendation

Three intervention research studies evaluated the effectiveness of explicit vocabulary instruction for English learners.⁵¹ They converge in showing that explicit and intensive vocabulary instruction helps English learners understand what they read (see appendix 1 for details). One study, appearing on the What Works Clearinghouse website,⁵² is rated as demonstrating a *potentially positive* effect on students' English reading comprehension.⁵³ It suggests that intense and explicit vocabulary instruction enhances reading comprehension. Two other studies support the impact of vocabulary instruction on reading comprehension.⁵⁴

51. Carlo et al. (2004); Perez (1981); Rousseau et al. (1993).

52. See www.whatworks.ed.gov.

53. Carlo et al. (2004).

54. Perez (1981); Rousseau et al. (1993).

Research shows that English learners need to learn many words to catch up with their native-English-speaking peers' word knowledge.⁵⁵ Clearly, not all of the words they need to learn to make up this gap can be taught through explicit vocabulary instruction. Our recommendation thus integrates procedures from studies on explicit vocabulary instruction with English learners,⁵⁶ extensive research with native English speakers,⁵⁷ and expert opinion in establishing a comprehensive framework of vocabulary instruction for English learners.

How to carry out the recommendation

Vocabulary instruction is essential in teaching English learners to read. It is rare that core reading programs include adequate guidelines for vocabulary instruction for English learners. So, districts need to provide teachers with tools that will help them support vocabulary development.

1. Adopt an evidence-based approach to vocabulary instruction.

The Panel believes that an evidence-based approach should require that teachers provide daily explicit vocabulary instruction. Evidence-based vocabulary instruction should be a strong part of reading instruction and an integral part of English language development. Vocabulary instruction should also be emphasized in all other parts of the curriculum, including reading, writing, science, history, and geography.

Typically, the vocabulary instruction supported by research studies is more thorough and explicit than that usually

55. Umbel, Pearson, Fernandez, & Oller (1992); Verhallen & Schoonen (1993).

56. Carlo et al. (2004); Perez (1981); Rousseau et al. (1993).

57. NICHD (2000).

3. PROVIDE EXTENSIVE AND VARIED VOCABULARY INSTRUCTION

provided in classrooms.⁵⁸ Researchers converge in noting that effective vocabulary instruction includes multiple exposures to target words over several days and across reading, writing, and speaking opportunities. A small but consistent body of intervention research suggests that English learners will benefit most from rich, intensive vocabulary instruction that emphasizes “student-friendly” definitions,⁵⁹ that engages students in the meaningful use of word meanings in reading, writing, speaking, and listening,⁶⁰ and that provides regular review.⁶¹ The goal of rich vocabulary instruction is for students to develop an understanding of word meanings to the point where they can use these and related words in their communication and as a basis for further learning.⁶²

The core reading program used in the classroom is a good place to begin choosing words for instruction and methods for teaching them. For English learners additional words need to be identified for instructional attention, and teaching procedures need to be much richer and more extensive than instruction usually recommended within core reading programs.⁶³

Valuable for professional development, teacher study groups and lesson study groups can get teachers engaged in planning effective vocabulary instruction.⁶⁴ These study groups can be guided by avail-

able texts that provide evidence-based approaches to vocabulary instruction. Activities in these study groups should include a good number of hands-on activities, such as transforming textbook definitions into “student-friendly” definitions, identifying crucial words in the texts students will read, and developing daily lesson plans for intensive vocabulary instruction.⁶⁵

2. Develop districtwide lists of essential words for vocabulary instruction. These words should be drawn from the core reading program and from the textbooks used in key content areas, such as science and history.

A major part of any vocabulary curriculum is specifying the words to be taught. It is the Panel’s opinion that adopting a districtwide core vocabulary list for English learners will help focus instruction on valuable words and reduce unnecessary duplication. A core vocabulary list does not prevent teachers or students from adding to this list when problem words arise in the classroom—in fact, some districts even build in space for the addition of such words.

The lists currently identified in core reading programs are inadequate for this purpose.⁶⁶ They often fail to emphasize the words most critical for understanding a story or most useful for the child’s language development. For example, many vocabulary lists stress decoding issues rather than meaning. Thus, to accomplish vocabulary instruction goals, districts must develop their own lists and provide access to these lists for their teachers.

Words for instruction should be selected carefully. Long lists of words cannot be taught in depth because rich vocabulary instruction is time intensive. Only a handful of words should be taught in intensive

58. National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) (2000).

59. Carlo et al. (2004); Perez (1981).

60. Carlo et al. (2004); Perez (1981); Rousseau, Tam & Ramnarain (1993).

61. Carlo et al. (2004); Perez (1981).

62. Gersten, Dimino, & Jayanthi (in press).

63. August, Carlo, Dressler, & Snow (2005); Blachowicz, Fisher, Ogle, & Watts-Taffe (2006).

64. Gersten, Dimino, Jayanthi, Kim, & Santoro (2006).

65. Gersten et al. (2006).

66. Hiebert (2005).

ways at any one time. Some authorities recommend teaching only about eight to ten words per week this way, while others suggest teaching two to three words per day (but always with lots of future review and extension).⁶⁷

Reading coaches, teacher teams, curricula specialists, and summer workshops for teachers can generate vocabulary lists for intensive instruction. A key is for teachers to have these lists as they teach reading, social studies, and science units, so they know in advance which words to teach in depth. Study groups and grade-level teams can do this work.

3. Vocabulary instruction for English learners should also emphasize the acquisition of meanings of everyday words that native speakers know and that are not necessarily part of the academic curriculum.⁶⁸

The vocabulary gap between English learners and native English speakers is substantial because English learners do not know many of the simpler words or conversational words that native English speakers acquire before they enter school or learn in school without explicit teaching. Many of these words are crucial for understanding text and other academic content. For example, English learners may not know such words as *bank*, *take*, *sink*, or *can*. Textbook publishers assume that students know these words and do not include them as vocabulary targets. Nor do they provide recommendations for how to address teaching these words should teachers have students who do not know them. English learners can acquire these words easily if teachers provide them with brief instruction during lessons. This instruction can emphasize the meanings of com-

mon phrases and expressions, not just single words.

During reading instruction, teachers can teach many of these common words explicitly—in roughly the same way that they teach content words, but much more quickly. They can teach many words as they arise in the classroom, drawing attention to the potentially confusing words and phrases. District practice should ensure that these words are also taught and reviewed during English language development.

Possible roadblocks and solutions

1. Teaching vocabulary effectively is difficult. Many teachers will struggle learning how to provide effective vocabulary instruction to English learners.⁶⁹

Concerted professional development and coaching will be necessary to ensure that all teachers learn to provide effective vocabulary instruction to English learners. Teacher study groups can be an excellent vehicle for work on vocabulary instruction, giving teachers a way to share their frustrations and jointly collaborate on solutions. Study groups can also be a way to keep effective vocabulary instruction in the forefront of instructional priorities. They are especially valuable when led by vocabulary experts, who can provide clear suggestions about how teachers can continue to move forward to provide effective instruction in the classroom.

Coaching teachers in effective vocabulary instruction should have a strong in-classroom component. There are routines in good vocabulary instruction that teachers can learn. For some teachers, these routines will be learned best through in-classroom coaching, where coaches provide immediate feedback and demonstrations.

67. Beck, Perfetti, & McKeown (1982); Biemiller (1999).

68. August et al. (2005).

69. Baker et al. (2006); Gersten et al. (2006).

3. PROVIDE EXTENSIVE AND VARIED VOCABULARY INSTRUCTION

2. Some teachers may incorrectly assume that English learners know a concept and the word for that concept in their primary language—when, in fact, they do not. This is particularly true for technical terms encountered in science, geography, and history. If students do not know the concept in their primary language, the Panel suggests teaching the word directly in English.

Caveat: For teachers to help English learners develop vocabulary knowledge by making connections to a student's primary language, teachers need some

knowledge of the primary language. If the linguistic transfer involves a simple concept or a one-to-one correspondence between the student's primary language (each language has an identifiable word for the concept), teachers may be able to help students even when these teachers know very little of the primary language. But if the concepts are difficult or there is no clear word for the concept in the student's native language, teachers will need more extensive knowledge of the primary language to be able to help the student.