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Promoting Vocabulary Learning for English Learners

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Abstract

Vocabulary knowledge, which is key to the reading comprehension of English learners (ELs), must be a focus for every teacher in today's increasingly diverse schools, including those in the mainstream classroom. This article strives to increase awareness of the five characteristics of effective vocabulary instruction as well as demonstrate how such characteristics can be variously emphasized in the before-, during-, and after-reading phases of the instructional process. Research-based strategies can provide teachers and ELs with a gateway to increased vocabulary learning. One such strategy, the Vocabulary Quilt, is explored in depth to illustrate how teachers can use a single strategy throughout the lesson to access students' background knowledge, support students in making critical content connections, and guide students to higher levels of word knowledge.

Keywords: Assessment, Informal, Self-assessment, Comprehension, Prior knowledge, Content literacy, Content analyses, Language learners, English language learners, English learners, English as a second language, English for speakers of other languages, Strategies, methods, and materials, Instructional strategies, teaching strategies, Vocabulary, Cognates, General vocabulary, Practice, exposure, wide reading, Specialized vocabulary

The continual increase of linguistic diversity in the United States is having a profound effect on the nation's schools. English learners (ELs) constitute the fastest growing school-age population, of which approximately 55% are native born and 45% are foreign born (Lachat, 2004). Classroom teachers have to address the *double demands* on ELs, who are learning English while simultaneously learning to read academic content (Gersten, 1996).

Vocabulary knowledge is essential to students' academic success. If students do not understand the meaning of the words in the text, they will have difficulty understanding the content. Vocabulary knowledge is the single best predictor of ELs' academic achievement (White, Graves, & Slater, 1990). With this in mind, effective vocabulary instruction must be a goal of all educators working with ELs, not just those

who specialize in English as a second language. In this article, I draw from data collected and analyzed as part of a larger study on the effect of research-based strategies on the vocabulary development of ELs (Wessels, 2008). I have identified five characteristics necessary for students' vocabulary learning: (1) accessing background knowledge, (2) connecting unknown vocabulary to known knowledge, (3) ensuring opportunities for meaningful vocabulary use, (4) providing multiple exposures, and (5) focusing on higher level knowledge (Allen, 1999; Carr & Wixson, 1996; Nagy, 1998; Watts, 1995). This article examines how educators can integrate these characteristics into instruction throughout the reading process (see Table 1 for an overview). A rationale for each characteristic of effective vocabulary instruction is provided, and its integration in a specific instruc-

Table 1. Overview of the Vocabulary Quilt Throughout Each Reading Phase

Phase	Directions	Benefits
Before	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Choose vocabulary based on their relevance to the lesson. ■ To make the quilt, create boxes on chart paper by folding it depending on the number of words. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Divide students into groups of 3–4. ■ Have the students write one word in each quilt. ■ Explain to students that they are going to write (in English or their native language) or draw whatever comes to mind when they read each word. ■ Give students 2–3 minutes to individually write/draw something for each word. If students have no recognition of a word, they simply rewrite the word. ■ Provide students with the opportunity to discuss in their group the connections made. ■ This phase lasts about 10–15 minutes. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Allowing use of linguistic and nonlinguistic representations including the native language, ensures all students can participate. ■ Talking with peers supports ELs’ connections and articulation of their background knowledge
During	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Post the quilts so students can revisit the quilts throughout the lesson ■ As vocabulary is encountered in the text, stop to discuss students’ reactions and comments. ■ Working as a facilitator, refer to the quilts and help students make connections between their initial connections and text-related information. ■ Monitor students’ understanding to clarify misconceptions of activated knowledge or the text that could interfere with their understanding. ■ The time limit for this phase depends on the length of the story and the discussion about each word. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Focusing on target vocabulary allows ELs to selectively attend to the words in relation to the content. ■ Revisiting students’ words/images encourages ELs to view their background knowledge as a resource.
After	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Have students work together to generate a definition for each word and record it on a sticky note to put on the quilt. ■ Groups share with the class the definitions they generated. ■ The completed quilts can be revisited as a review of content learned throughout the semester. ■ This phase lasts about 15–20 minutes. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Writing their own definitions provides students with a greater sense of ownership of their learning and allows them to demonstrate newly acquired knowledge.

Adapted from *Biography-Driven Culturally Responsive Teaching* by S. Herrera (New York: Teachers College Press, 2010).

tional phase is illustrated through discussion of the Vocabulary Quilt (Herrera, 2007; Herrera, 2010), an example of a research-based vocabulary strategy. The Vocabulary Quilt offers EL students the opportunity to activate background knowledge and use their existing resources to connect with target vocabulary. The strategy revolves around a *word quilt*, a learning tool used by students throughout instruction.

Before-Reading Phase

The purpose of the *before-reading phase* is to prepare students for what they will encounter in

the text and to develop domain knowledge (Gibbons, 2002). This preparation should include activating background knowledge, incorporating known vocabulary, and introducing target vocabulary. In the before-reading phase, two characteristics of effective vocabulary instruction are emphasized: (1) accessing background knowledge and (2) connecting unknown vocabulary to known knowledge.

Background knowledge is what students use to develop, expand, and refine word meanings (Rupley et al, 1999). When ELs bring their background knowledge to the surface and are provided with

opportunities to share their initial connections, the teacher can assess their understanding and plan a route for instruction to clarify and enrich students’ vocabulary knowledge.

Pause and Ponder

- How am I currently activating my EL students’ background knowledge about key vocabulary in the lesson?
- How can I sustain vocabulary learning throughout all phases of a lesson?
- How can the vocabulary quilt be used in content area lessons?

ELs should be encouraged to use their cultural and linguistic knowledge to establish and strengthen their understanding of the target vocabulary. Research on the literacy development of ELs suggests that language knowledge and skills acquired through the native language can be transferred to English, although degrees of language transfer vary depending on individual differences and their proficiency in the native language (Goldenberg, 2008). A student's ability to learn a new word in the second language is enhanced when they have access to concepts stored in their first language (DeKeyser & Juffs, 2005).

After students have activated their existing knowledge, they begin making new connections to known words, ideas, and images in long-term memory. As a result of these connections, ELs are more likely to actively construct meaning in context. The rich engagement with the vocabulary increases the likelihood that students will take ownership of their learning and use the new vocabulary (Blachowicz & Fisher, 2000).

Vocabulary Quilt in the Before-Reading Phase

The teacher selected target vocabulary from the story *Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing* (Blume, 2007), part of the district's reading program. Students were placed in groups of three and recorded their individual responses in each square of the quilt. Each student in the group was able to participate through the use of native language (*solution*: untiempo), drawings (*solution*: girl with magnifying glass; and *present*: a gift) or by rewriting the target vocabulary when they could not make any connections

(*cooperation* and *method*). Some connections indicated a partial understanding of the vocabulary, which can be built upon and extended (*committee*: a group of people). While the students were working, the teacher circulated around the room monitoring each group. After the students had written or drawn their responses, each group was given an opportunity to discuss their individual ideas.

During-Reading Phase

In the *during-reading phase*, students read and determine how their background knowledge can be linked to the text and the target vocabulary. The teacher and students have conversations about the vocabulary as it appears in context. Discussing new vocabulary in an authentic context is essential for ELs (Carlo, August, & Snow, 2005). In the during-reading phase, two characteristics are emphasized: (1) ensuring opportunities for meaningful use of the vocabulary words and (2) providing multiple exposures.

Ensuring meaningful use of the vocabulary requires that educators stay away from lecture (Bromley,

2002) and instead call attention to the use of the words in context, helping students make meaningful connections to their own lives. Group discussions and related small-group vocabulary activities support and expand ELs' understanding of the target words while exposing them to rich language from their peers. For students to integrate new words into their vocabulary, they must continue to use the words after initial introduction (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002). ELs need multiple access points to word meanings that will support their understanding (Schunk, 1999).

Vocabulary Quilt in the During-Reading Phase

As students read the story silently or listened to peers read aloud, they placed sticky notes on the target vocabulary in the text. Because they had to explicitly identify the vocabulary on the page, the students were able to develop a greater awareness of the role these words played in the text. At designated stopping points, the teacher and students collaborated to identify the target words they had encountered and discuss their meaning. The teacher guided students to make connections to their background knowledge in ways that allowed them to build, extend, and clarify their understanding.

Throughout this phase, the teacher was able to acknowledge students' connections with the words and address misunderstandings. For example, one of the words was *present*, and several of the students had drawn a picture of a wrapped gift. While the students were reading the text, they came across the word *present*.

“Rich engagement with the vocabulary increases the likelihood that students will take ownership of their learning.”

Student 1: [reading the sentence from the book] “Everyone was present for the committee meeting.” [The student continued to read aloud the rest of the page.]

Teacher: Was there a vocabulary word located on this page?

Student 1: Present.

Student 2: This is not like a present you give someone.

Teacher: What does this present mean?

Student 3: It means that everyone was in the room and ready to go.

Teacher: So they were in attendance. The word *present* is a multiple meaning word. This means that the word can have many different meanings. Several of you drew a picture of a present like you would get for your birthday. However, in this story it means something different. It means everyone was at the meeting who needed to be there.

In this example, the students were able to learn an additional, contextually appropriate meaning of the target word – *present*.

After-Reading Phase

In the *after-reading phase*, students review and critically think about their learning so that they can refine and deepen their word knowledge. In this phase, students strengthen their vocabulary understandings by focusing on higher level knowledge. Students should be given time to process the information they learned and reflect on how the new vocabulary knowl-

edge integrates with their existing knowledge.

Having thoroughly explored their connections to the target vocabulary, ELs are more prepared to demonstrate their understanding. End-of-instruction assessments, in conjunction with various informal assessments of learning, provide the teacher with evidence of the degree to which students have attained the vocabulary knowledge.

Vocabulary Quilt in the After-Reading Phase

ELs worked in their original groups to consolidate their understanding of the target vocabulary. They collaborated to generate definitions given what they had learned throughout discussions of the story. By the end, the students were able to demonstrate their newly acquired understandings, indicating a higher level of word knowledge. The students were able to build vocabulary knowledge that did not previously exist

(*cooperation*: when people work together; and *method*: a plan for doing something), extend on their initial understandings (*committee*: a group of people chosen to do a particular job), and clarify misconceptions of the vocabulary in specific context (*Solution*: you have a problem and you figure it out). The students recorded their definitions on sticky notes and added them to the quilt. By revisiting their quilt, the students were able to assess the degree to which they had increased their understanding of the vocabulary. The final Vocabulary Quilts (Figure 1) captured the students’ full progression of learning in relation to the target vocabulary.

Final Thoughts

The use of research-based strategies such as the Vocabulary Quilt can replace traditional vocabulary instruction that heavily relies on worksheets or dictionary work. Traditional vocabulary



Figure 1. Completed Vocabulary Quilt

instruction produces only superficial understanding, and students rapidly forget words (McKeown, 1993). In contrast, the Vocabulary Quilt strategy embeds the characteristics of effective vocabulary instruction. It is designed to actively engage EL students with the academic vocabulary words throughout all phases of instruction.

In the before-reading phase, this strategy allows students to activate their background knowledge and provides the teacher with insights into students' lives to help them make relevant connections between their background knowledge and the new vocabulary words. The students then engage in meaningful use of the target words in the during-reading phase, resulting in multiple exposures to the vocabulary words.

As the students continue to make connections to the target vocabulary using their background knowledge, the text, the teacher, and their peers as resources, they come to a higher level of word knowledge, which they document on their final quilt in the after-reading phase. The Vocabulary Quilt strategy thus helps educators facilitate vocabulary learning not only for EL students, but also for primary English speakers as well. At the end of the lesson, students have a tangible product that documents their learning and can serve as a useful study aid.

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