Developing Academic Vocabulary in English-Language Learners

By
Dr. Diane August
Educational Researcher
Center for Applied Linguistics
Washington, D.C.

As children progress through school and attempt to comprehend more challenging text, academic vocabulary becomes increasingly important (Lesaux & Siegel, 2003). Researchers have identified a number of methods to develop student’s academic vocabulary (Ellis, 2008; Graves, 2006; Nagy & Stahl, 2006). Among these methods are engaging students in rich and varied language experiences, teaching individual words, and teaching word learning strategies.

Engaging Students in Rich and Varied Language Experiences

Vocabulary is primarily acquired incidentally, through listening, speaking, and reading (Graves, 2006). Thus, to the extent possible, teachers need to immerse students in rich language environments. One method to expose students to rich language is through interactive shared reading in which adults engage children in rich dialogic discussion about the storybooks. Interactive shared reading has been successful with English-language learners as well as native English speakers (Zevenbergen, Whitehurst, & Zevenbergen, 2003; Carlo, et al., 2004; Biemiller & Boote, 2006; Silverman, 2007). It exposes students to language not often heard in classrooms and not encountered by young children or struggling readers in the texts that they are able to read. While many studies have been conducted with young children, there is some evidence that this technique can be effective with older learners as well (Brabham & Lynch-Brown, 2002).

Students also acquire new vocabulary through texts that they read independently (Nagy, 1997). For example, when a large number of new and engaging reading materials are added to classroom libraries, ELLs have increased their independent reading and have improved in comprehension and oral language development (Elley, 1991; Tudor &
Hafiz, 1989). Books for English-language learners must be carefully selected to ensure texts are at the highest grade-equivalent at which they can read with high accuracy and comprehension. However, as Laufer (2003) notes, structured support for ELL students’ reading comprehension and language development facilitates ELLs’ language development to a greater degree than reading that is not accompanied by these tasks. According to Laufer, “a word that is filled in a given sentence, used in an original sentence or incorporated into a composition has a better chance of being remembered than a word seen in a text, even when it is looked up in a dictionary” (Laufer, 2001, p. 10).

Teaching Individual Words
A second method of developing academic vocabulary is through teaching individual words. General guidelines for teaching individuals words call for “including both definitional and contextual information, involving students in active and deep processing of the words, providing students with multiple exposures to the word, reviewing, rehearsing, and reminding students about the word in various contexts over time, involving students in discussions of the word’s meaning, and spending a significant amount of time on the word” (Graves, 2006, p 69-70).

Several methods have been used to teach individual words in the context of shared interactive reading. In one method, teachers provide embedded explanations of target words when they are encountered during the story reading; in another method—extended vocabulary instruction—there is “explicit teaching that includes both contextual and definitional information, multiple exposures to target words in varied contexts, and experiences that promote deep processing of word meanings” (Coyne, McCoach, & Kapp 2007, p. 74; Silverman, 2007).

Teaching Word-Learning Strategies
A third method of building academic vocabulary is to teach word-learning strategies. Well researched word-learning strategies used with first language learners include using context clues, using word parts, and using dictionaries (Graves, 2006). There is a substantial body of first-language research that supports two approaches to teaching word-learning strategies that are particularly effective when used together (Graves, 2006, p 90-93). In the first, direct explanation of strategies, teachers first explain the strategy, note its importance, and model its use and then gradually give students responsibility for employing it. In the second, transactional strategies instruction, there is some direct explanation as part of the initial instruction; however, this tends to be brief and less structured than direct explanation and carried out as part of the ongoing reading activities of the classroom when the occasion arises for students to use a particular strategy.

Modifications for English-Language Learners
While these instructional methods build on first language research, in some cases they have been modified for English-language learners. With regard to interactive shared reading and teaching individual words, modifications include using English-as-a-second-language techniques such as providing additional background information; scaffolding through the use of visuals, gestures, and body language by both teachers and students to demonstrate meaning; asking more literal,
inferential, and critical questions at strategically selected intervals than are generally used with first-language learners; providing reinforcement, such as choral repetition of selected words and phrases, repeated exposures to words and concepts through re-readings and glossaries; and brief summaries after reading challenging passages (August & Shanahan, 2006). Other adjustments include selecting materials relevant to ELL's experience or culture; strategically using students' first languages to make the content delivered in a second language more comprehensible (Carlo, et al., 2004); teaching word learning strategies that build on first language knowledge such as using cognates; and frequently using partner talk to give low-English-proficient students more opportunities to talk with more English-proficient peers.

References


