**Vocabulary Development**

By: Colorín Colorado (2007)

Knowing vocabulary words is key to reading comprehension. The more words a child knows, the better he or she will understand the text. Teachers can teach vocabulary directly or indirectly. Using a variety of effective methods will increase the student's ability to learn new words.

**How vocabulary relates to ELLs**

For English language learners (ELLs), vocabulary development is especially important. The average native English speaker enters kindergarten knowing at least 5,000 words. The average ELL may know 5,000 words in his or her native language, but very few words in English. While native speakers continue to learn new words, ELLs face the double challenge of building that foundation and then closing the gap.

You may be surprised at how quickly a new ELL student can communicate verbally with peers, but remember that there is a big difference between [**social English and academic English**](http://www.colorincolorado.org/educators/background/academic). Reading, writing, speaking, and understanding academic English happen in the classroom. Using a combination of the following strategies will help ELLs to close the gap.

**Classroom strategies: Vocabulary**

**Pre-teach vocabulary**

Before doing an activity, teaching content, or reading a story in class, pre-teaching vocabulary is always helpful, especially for ELLs. This will give them the chance to identify words and then be able to place them in context and remember them. You can pre-teach vocabulary by using English as a second language (ESL) methods such as:

* Role playing or pantomiming
* Using gestures
* Showing real objects
* Pointing to pictures
* Doing quick drawings on the board
* Using the Spanish equivalent and then asking students to say the word in English

To ensure mastery of more complex words and concepts, you might want to follow these six ESL steps:

1. [**Pre-select a word**](http://www.colorincolorado.org/educators/content/vocabulary) from an upcoming text or conversation.
2. Explain the meaning with student-friendly definitions.
3. Provide examples of how it is used.
4. Ask students to repeat the word three times.
5. Engage students in activities to develop mastery.
6. Ask students to say the word again.

**Focus on cognates**

[**Cognates**](http://www.colorincolorado.org/educators/background/cognates) are words in different languages that are derived from the same original word or root. Note that about 40% of all English words have similar cognates in Spanish! This is an obvious bridge to the English language – if the student is made aware of how to use this resource.

Cognates are related words like family and familia, director and director, and conversation and conversación. False cognates do exist (mano in Spanish means hand, not man), but they are the exception to the rule. Encourage ELLs to guess at words and try to decipher text based on this existing knowledge. The more familiarity a teacher has with Spanish, the easier it is to point out these connections.

**Scaffold**

Scaffolding is providing a support for students as they learn new skills or information. For scaffolding vocabulary, you can:

* Use a graphic organizer to explain concepts and related words. [Example coming soon]
* Use the six ESL steps above to help students understand and use the word immediately.
* Post new vocabulary on a word wall, and review the words daily. Swap out old words as necessary.
* Label drawings and pictures to help students make the connection between oral and written English. Point to these visuals to clarify meaning when using these words.

**Use computers and television**

When geared to ELLs, computer programs and [**television programs**](http://www.colorincolorado.org/educators/teaching/television) are proven supplements to helping ELLs build language and reading skills. Computers are a non-threatening way to help children work on their own or with a buddy to learn vocabulary, sounds of English, syntax, reading, and writing. Educational children's television can also be a wonderful way to increase many reading skills, including vocabulary and comprehension.

**Use audio books**

Help ELLs build vocabulary by providing books with tapes in a listening center on one side of the classroom. By hearing and seeing the word in context at the same time, ELLs pick up its meaning and also gain prosody, and oral fluency.

**Use a word wizard box**

Ask students to bring new words into the classroom that they hear at home, on TV, or anywhere else and drop these words into a word wizard box. At the end of class, pull out a word and ask who wrote it. Have students tell you where they heard the words and how they were used. Ask students to use these new words in their discussions and writing.

**Encourage oral language use**

ELLs are not going to learn academic English from their parents nor their peers. They are going to learn it from you. Begin by making sure that they know instructional words that you use every day, such as "follow directions", "describe", "start at the top of the page", "read to the bottom of page 4", "highlight the verbs only", and "use the steps in your guide."

Encourage ELLs to speak in class as much as possible. Structure conversations around books and subjects that build vocabulary. Instead of simple "yes or no" questions, ask questions that are interactive and meaningful. For example, "What do you think? What should we change?" In these ways, ELLs will learn the academic English they will need to succeed in future schooling. Remember to be sensitive to ELLs who may be afraid to make mistakes. Here are some ideas for [**helping ELLs feel comfortable in the classroom**](http://www.colorincolorado.org/educators/reachingout/welcoming).

**Model correct usage**

Instead of frequently correcting pronunciation or grammar, reaffirm the student's idea and then say the word correctly and in context.

**More ideas**

* Label classroom objects in English and Spanish
* Develop lesson plans and activities with new vocabulary words in mind
* Read narrative (children's literature) and expository (nonfiction, such as science, social studies) texts to your class and discuss vocabulary words
* Teach words in context – this is more effective than isolated memorization
* Discuss literal vs. figurative meanings of idiomatic expressions such as "sweet tooth," "at her heels," "make up your mind," and "the cat's got your tongue."
* Teach students how to use dictionaries
* Teach students how to use prefixes and suffixes to determine meaning

**References**