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Vocabulary Development for English Language Learners: The Language-Concept Connection

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Across the United States, teachers of English Language Learners (ELLs) in K–12 classrooms face the challenge of increasing their students' academic achievement. This is a difficult and complicated task because many of their students are new to English, and these students are developing English language skills as they are simultaneously acquiring literacy skills and content knowledge. The National Literacy Panel on Language-minority Children and Youth issued a report in 2006 on a meta-analysis of hundreds of research studies in teaching ELLs (August & Shanahan, 2006). The Panel's findings and conclusions supported teachers' intuitive understanding of the importance of vocabulary teaching for increasing students' English proficiency and abilities in reading comprehension and academic writing. Reviews of earlier research on ELLs' vocabulary acquisition (Coady, 1997) concluded that targeted instruction in vocabulary development is vitally important at all levels of proficiency and grade levels. Furthermore, the cumulative studies document particular instructional approaches and strategies that enhance ELLs' vocabulary learning.

Depending on the type of English learning program students are provided (e.g., English Language Development [ELD] program, English as a Second Language [ESL] program, or Specially Designed Academic Instruction in English [SDAIE]), the focus, intensity, and content of vocabulary instruction shift. For example, at the secondary level, students may be orally proficient in English but encounter challenges in content-area learning due to limited vocabulary meaning-making strategies. This is especially apparent when they encounter technical and abstract terms associated with mathematics, science, and social studies. However, regardless of the ELL program design, several underlying principles guide and inform teachers' planning and implementation of vocabulary instruction. These principles serve as a foundation for rethinking traditional approaches and strategies for teaching vocabulary. They also function as a framework for targeting the academic and language learning needs and potential of ELLs.

The Language-Concept Connection

Since ELLs characteristically have different levels of English proficiency and divergent types and levels of cultural and academic background experiences, teachers must assess the relationship between the language and the concepts students know. Garrison and Mora (1999) proposed a helpful framework for planning instruction. Their framework is based on the premise that ELLs may be familiar with the concepts being taught, but lack the English labels for those concepts. Their framework also recognizes that students may be unfamiliar with both the English words and the concepts. The underlying principle is to use students' known language to teach unknown concepts and to draw on students' known concepts to teach unknown language.

The Language-Concept Connection

Domain	*Language*	*Concept*	*Learning*
A	Unknown	Unknown	Limited: Modify Instruction
B	Known	Unknown	Concept Development
C	Unknown	Known	Language Development
D	Known	Known	Concept & Language Mastery

▲ *This chart shows Garrison and Mora's (1999) language-concept connection framework. The vignette of Mr. Molina's classroom (on the next page) illustrates how this conceptual framework applies in a classroom context.*

The content of vocabulary teaching and instructional strategies that teachers select will be more meaningful and effective when their planning takes into account the language-concept knowledge domains. This approach allows teachers to focus on students' academic language development. Mastery of content-specific vocabulary requires students to be able to use words and terms to describe, explain, and discuss increasingly abstract and complex concepts at the higher grade

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April 2–5, 2008
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April 10–13, 2008
Sacramento, CA

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May 7–8, 2008
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Sanibel Leadership Conference
June 25–28, 2008
Sanibel Island, FL

levels. The framework is also useful in planning instructional steps that lead to mastery of both language and concepts.

The following vignette demonstrates how this language-concept connection framework might be applied in a classroom context.

Mr. Molino's Social Studies Class: A Vignette

Mr. Molino applies the language-concept connection framework for planning and implementing vocabulary instruction in his middle school social studies class. His academic goal is to teach the impact of deforestation on the world ecology as well as on the inhabitants of rapidly deforested regions. In planning the lesson for his students who are at mixed levels of proficiency, he establishes both content knowledge and language development objectives.

Some of his ELL students fall within **Domain A** (unknown language—unknown concept). These students do not know the word or the concept "forest," which is essential to building an understanding of the more complex and abstract term "deforestation." His initial vocabulary instruction focuses on words and expressions that describe forests. Because his lower-proficiency students need the vocabulary to discuss aspects of the concept such as what types of forests exist, where they grow, and what uses they have to humans, Mr. Molino selects vocabulary teaching strategies to scaffold knowledge about forests, including use of visuals, realia, concrete objects, films, and simulated experiences to represent the meanings of related words. Using photographs of different types of forests, students label the different types of trees and their commercial uses. Students with higher levels of proficiency label a diagram showing the oxygen/carbon dioxide cycle of the forest.

Mr. Molino's ELL students in **Domain B** (known language—unknown concept) develop their conceptual understanding through the use of graphic organizers, charts, and graphs. In this way, Mr. Molino helps students attach known labels to the ideas associated with forests. He gradually builds understanding of the interrelationships between concepts about forests and the processes of deforestation. Students create a bilingual glossary of words describing the layers of a tropical rain forest. Then they collaborate on a drawing to depict and label the flora and fauna at each level of the forest.

Students in **Domain C** (unknown language—known concept) are already familiar with the concept of "forest," but need to learn the English words and expressions to discuss what they know about this topic. Mr. Molino graphically depicts the uses of forests for different purposes such as for lumber, paper products, or exotic woods for furniture-making. Each concept has a set of associated words and expressions that students must master before learning the more abstract and complex concept of deforestation. Students categorize forest-usage vocabulary and draw a concept web for each use.

As students enter **Domain D** (known language—known concept), Mr. Molino directs his vocabulary instruction toward mastery of language to describe and explain the process of deforestation. For example, the process begins when people overexploit forests. To achieve mastery of vocabulary, students engage in reading and writing tasks to reinforce and apply the language they have learned. These learning activities might include oral and written reports or preparation for a debate. Mr. Molino's students go online to locate editorials and magazine articles about the impact of deforestation on global warming. They analyze and outline the arguments, identifying functional words used for persuasion as well as common words and technical terms that journalists use in writing about deforestation for the public. Then students write their own letters to the editor expressing their opinions about the causes and effects of deforestation from a local, regional, and global perspective.

Guiding Principles

The vignette of Mr. Molino's classroom exemplifies the principles that guide teachers of ELLs in effective planning and classroom practices:

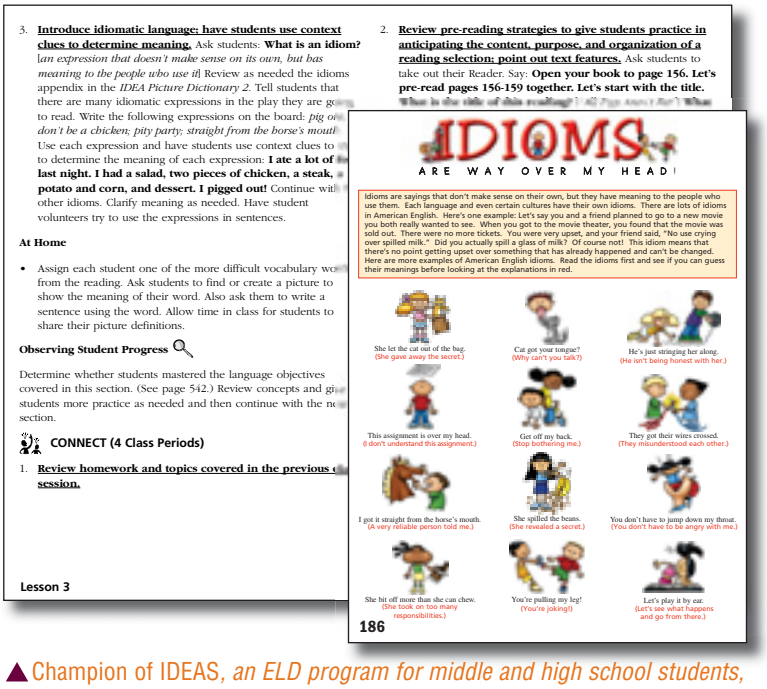
Plan for thematic vocabulary instruction

Teachers routinely organize vocabulary instruction in content classrooms around the academic topics and themes dictated by the curriculum standards. However, in planning instruction, teachers of ELLs need to be strategic and deliberate in selecting what vocabulary to present around a theme based on students' English proficiency and background knowledge (Mora, 2006). The following steps are recommended in planning a vocabulary lesson(s):

1. Identify unfamiliar, difficult, and important words to create a "keywords" list around the topic or theme. Look for general and common terms about the subject as well as technical vocabulary from the texts and readings students will use in performing academic tasks.
2. Categorize the words according to their challenge level based on whether the words label concepts that are simple/complex or concrete/abstract and whether the words are easy or difficult to pronounce, decode, and spell.
3. Assess students' level of familiarity with the word meanings and the concepts they label or describe. This suggests the use of different student groupings for targeted instruction in addition to whole-group instruction.
4. Cluster or group words according to the associative features or aspects of a concept. These groupings will suggest separate lessons or steps for teaching.
5. If the list contains predominantly nouns, generate a list of related verbs, adjectives, adverbs, and phrases or expressions that students need to put the words into sentences, definitions, or short narratives.
6. Identify tasks and activities that provide opportunities for students to apply their vocabulary knowledge in multiple contexts (e.g., structured speaking, reading, and writing assignments).

Teach more than just words

Traditionally, the goal of vocabulary teaching has been to increase the number of words in students' linguistic repertoire. However, a focus on word learning alone can disadvantage ELLs because they have fewer opportunities to learn complex lexical units like formulaic phrases and idioms as well as functional words like cohesion markers, conjunctions, adjectives, and adverbs (Arnaud & Savignon, 1997).



3. **Introduce idiomatic language; have students use context clues to determine meaning.** Ask students: **What is an idiom?** [*an expression that doesn't make sense on its own, but has meaning to the people who use it*] Review as needed the idioms appendix in the *IDEA Picture Dictionary 2*. Tell students that there are many idiomatic expressions in the play they are going to read. Write the following expressions on the board: *pig out; don't be a chicken; pity party; straight from the horse's mouth*. Use each expression and have students use context clues to determine the meaning of each expression: **I ate a lot of last night. I had a salad, two pieces of chicken, a steak, potato and corn, and dessert. I pigged out!** Continue with other idioms. Clarify meaning as needed. Have student volunteers try to use the expressions in sentences.

At Home

- Assign each student one of the more difficult vocabulary words from the reading. Ask students to find or create a picture to show the meaning of their word. Also ask them to write a sentence using the word. Allow time in class for students to share their picture definitions.

Observing Student Progress

Determine whether students mastered the language objectives covered in this section. (See page 542.) Review concepts and give students more practice as needed and then continue with the next section.

CONNECT (4 Class Periods)

1. **Review homework and topics covered in the previous session.**

Lesson 3

2. **Review pre-reading strategies to give students practice in anticipating the content, purpose, and organization of a reading selection; point out text features.** Ask students to take out their Reader. Say: **Open your book to page 156. Let's pre-read pages 156-159 together. Let's start with the title.**

IDIOMS
ARE WAY OVER MY HEAD!

Idioms are sayings that don't make sense on their own, but they have meaning to the people who use them. Each language and even certain cultures have their own idioms. There are lots of idioms in American English. Here's one example: Let's say you and a friend planned to go to a new movie you both really wanted to see. When you got to the movie theater, you found that the movie was sold out. There were no more tickets. You were very upset, and your friend said, "No use crying over spilled milk." Did you actually spill a glass of milk? Of course not! This idiom means that there's no point getting upset over something that has already happened and can't be changed. Here are more examples of American English idioms. Read the idioms first and see if you can guess their meanings before looking at the explanations in red.

She let the cat out of the bag. (She gave away the secret.)
Cat got your tongue? (Why can't you talk?)
He's just stringing her along. (He isn't being honest with her.)
This assignment is over my head. (I don't understand this assignment.)
Get off my back. (Stop bothering me.)
They got their wires crossed. (They misunderstood each other.)
I got it straight from the horse's mouth. (A very reliable person told me.)
She spilled the beans. (She revealed a secret.)
You don't have to jump down my throat. (You don't have to be angry with me.)
She bit off more than she can chew. (She took on too many responsibilities.)
You're pulling my leg! (You're joking!)
Let's play it by ear. (Let's see what happens and go from there.)

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▲ Champion of IDEAS, *an ELD program for middle and high school students, includes activities that address idiomatic language. Idioms such as "she let the cat out of the bag" and "get off my back" can confuse English language learners and should be addressed in an ELD instructional program.*

Teach word analysis strategies

An important component of vocabulary instruction is the explicit teaching of strategies students can use to figure out the meaning of unfamiliar words. Effective ELL readers utilize these metalinguistic strategies to comprehend words they encounter in more complex texts (Koda & Zehler, 2008). ELLs acquire metalinguistic knowledge when they analyze words for prefixes, suffixes, root words, and stems. For example, of the 20,000 most commonly used words in

English, 4,000 (20%) have prefixes; fifteen prefixes make up 82% of the total usage of all prefixes students learn. Research shows that effective L2 readers use cognates—words that have similar spellings and meanings in students' L1 and English (Genessee, Lindholm-Leary, Saunders & Christian, 2006). Spanish L1 learners gain access to between 10,000 to 15,000 words through their cognate vocabulary.

Best Practices in Action

The glimpse into Mr. Molino's middle school social studies classroom reveals how he uses analytical planning and carefully selects content and instructional strategies to enhance his students' vocabulary development. When teachers of ELLs place vocabulary instruction within the context of their programs' language development, literacy and content learning goals and objectives, the language-concept connection framework guides classroom instruction, providing continuity and coherence to vocabulary teaching across grade levels.

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