Evidence-Based Vocabulary Instruction for English Learners

by Elsa Cárdenas-Hagan

All English learners (ELs) face the challenge of developing second language vocabulary skills comparable to their native English speaking peers. This is also challenging for students with dyslexia and other related learning disorders. Educators must understand how to foster opportunities and ensure accelerated second language vocabulary development. Evidence-based practices that can be integrated during vocabulary instruction among this population of students are now available. Many of the techniques for successful vocabulary instruction with native English speakers can also benefit ELs. However, some adjustments must be considered.

Schools today are discovering that there is a great need to understand how to best instruct ELs. A major reason this is true is because ELs represent one of the fastest growing student populations. During the past decade, public schools experienced a 32% increase of ELs in their schools. This is compared to a 4.9% growth in student population (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data, 2014). Approximately 5 million ELs, representing more than 400 different home languages, attend public schools in the United States. However, 80% of ELs in the U.S. speak Spanish in their home. Teachers must be prepared to meet the educational needs of ELs, despite the fact that they may not have had the opportunity to study and learn how to differentiate instruction for this population of students.

ELs face many challenges. For example, they must develop first and second language and literacy skills. In addition, many ELs live in poverty and are twice as likely to drop out of high school (Dillow & Snyder, 2012). Living in poverty presents many challenges. Some of these challenges include attaining adequate nutrition and healthcare. Another challenge is the lack of opportunity for exposure to language and word learning (Hart & Risley, 2003). Therefore, it is not surprising that ELs' vocabulary levels lag behind their English speaking peers (Garcia, 1991; Geva & Ryan, 2006; Mancilla-Martinez, & Lesuax, 2010; Proctor, August, Carlo, & Snow, 2006). This finding is a cause for concern because students' vocabulary knowledge is a predictor for reading comprehension during the upper elementary grade levels (Mancilla-Martinez & Lesaux, 2010).

Vocabulary Instruction for Elementary and Middle School Students

Several intervention studies with ELs address vocabulary development and content knowledge in the elementary and middle school years (August, Branum-Martin, Cárdenas-Hagan, & Francis, 2009; Carlo et al., 2004; Lesaux, Kieffer, Faller, & Kelley, 2010; Vaughn, Martinez, Linan-Thompson, Reutebuch, Carlson, & Francis, 2009). These studies have included purposeful, explicit, systematic, and multifaceted vocabulary instruction that incorporates the use of morphemes (i.e., the smallest units of meaning in a language), cognates (i.e., words similar in meaning and spelling in a student's native language and English), bilingual glossaries, multiple meaning words, and extended discussions with much repetition and rehearsal. In addition, a meta-analysis or thorough review of existing research for effective vocabulary instruction recommends choosing engaging text that includes academic vocabulary and in-depth teaching of the academic vocabulary using multiple modalities such as writing, speaking, and listening (Baker et al., 2014). Therefore, it is the use of multiple strategies in a systematic manner that helps students with word learning and thus generates positive outcomes for vocabulary knowledge. Many of the strategies are described below.

Morphological Awareness

Morphemes, such as prefixes, roots, and suffixes are units of meaning. For example, the prefix *pre-* means *before* as in the word *prekindergarten*. The root *vis* means *to see* as in the word *vision*. In addition, the suffix *-ist* means *the one who* as in the word *pianist*. During the middle elementary grades, Spanish-speaking ELs can learn the meanings of word parts in their native language and increase their awareness that many of these morphemes have meaning not only in their native language but also in English. Thousands of words are derived from Latin and Greek and can be used to unlock their meaning (Henry, 2011). This is a resource from native language knowledge for second language development. However, it will be important for instructors to know the word parts that transfer across languages so that they may explicitly teach them to the students. It is often an untapped resource. Nagy et al., (1989) noted that more than 60% of new words that readers encounter have relatively transparent morphological structures. For example, words such as *immigration*, *trilingual,* and *invisible* have morphemes that help unlock the meanings of words. These words can therefore be broken down to determine word meanings. Spanish-speaking ELs can use their knowledge of the native language and these word parts to determine the meanings of words. They have twice the resources as their monolingual English-speaking peers. These ELs can learn and increase their vocabulary knowledge when explicitly and systematically instructed to analyze the words and use their native language as a resource. It is less likely for them to achieve morphological awareness within and across languages if they are not taught this strategy. Once the strategy is taught, with much practice these students can analyze unfamiliar words and thus determine meaning independently.

To explicitly teach the word parts, students have to analyze the smaller units within words. Teachers can provide examples of many words that have the same word part. They can also help students discover the meaning of the word parts. The use of pictures with concrete examples is helpful. Showing a visual representation of the words and highlighting the similar word

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part in the native language is also beneficial. Discovering that the same word part exists in the native language and English deepens the students' understanding of the morpheme. Instructors can design and implement morphological awareness opportunities. For example, they can use the 20 most common prefix list developed by White, Sowell, and Yanagihara (1989) but focus on the prefixes that transfer from the native language to the second language, first. For example, those that directly transfer from Spanish to English in this list of the most common prefixes include the following:

re-	in-	pre-	mis-
sub-	de-	inter-	trans-
super-	anti-	semi-	dis-

The following roots directly transfer from Spanish to English for Spanish-speaking ELs:

audi
gram
liber
port
struct
tract
vis

The following common suffixes directly transfer from Spanish to English to increase morphological awareness among Spanish-speaking ELs:

-s
-lent (lento)
-ite (ito)
-ty (-tad)
-ness (-ura)
-ous (-oso)

In summary, ELs can learn word parts that help to unlock the meaning of new words. When introduced explicitly and systematically, these students can use native language morphological knowledge and apply it to second language word learning.

Cognate Knowledge

The use of cognates, which are words similar in meaning and spelling in a student's native language and English, is helpful for vocabulary knowledge (Lubliner & Hiebert, 2011). Examples of English and Spanish cognates include *extraordinary/extraordinario*, *microscope/microscopio*, and *history/historia*. Some cognates have similar morphemes within them. For example, the word *microscope* in English and Spanish has two morphemes or two units of meaning. Spanish and English share many cognates as Spanish is derived from Latin. It is reported that 60% of English is derived from Latin (Lindzey, 2003). Words from Latin that came into the English language are often words that have many syllables. They are also English words that are related to topics such as the law. One advantage that Spanish-speaking ELs have is the fact that common everyday words of Spanish are often higher level academic words in English. One example is the Spanish word ***fácil***. In English the cognate would be *facile*. In Spanish the word ***fácil*** is a basic word used in everyday speech that even young children would understand. A similar word in English is *easy*. So, although the word *facile* is considered a higher level academic word in English, in Spanish it is a basic word. A few examples of common everyday words in Spanish that are more academic words in English are written below.

Spanish	English
facilidad	facility
aplacar	placate
verificar	verify

Steps for Explicit Instruction of Morphemes

- Say words with the common word part.
- Repeat the words.
- Write the words.
- Discover the common feature.
- Determine if word part exists in their native language.
- Say the words in the native language or have students say the words.
- Write the words in the native language.
- Determine the meaning using pictures, examples, and non-examples.
- Act out the meaning of words, if possible.
- Have a discussion regarding the words and their meanings.
- Create more words with the same word part and note grammatical features of words.
- Prepare an activity with target words and use them in connected text.
- Have students work in small groups and discuss the text using the target words.
- Have students work on creating a bilingual glossary to reinforce knowledge of words and word parts.
- Have students work with a partner or at home discovering other words with the same word parts.
- Report back to class.
- Provide review and further opportunities for word use in oral and written language.

When teaching cognates, it is useful to highlight the similarities and the differences between the words. For example, the Spanish word *audifonos* and the English word *audiophones* are similar. However, they are spelled and pronounced differently. Teachers can highlight and discuss what is similar and what is different among these words that are considered cognates. Instructors can also incorporate color or alternate fonts to highlight the differences to help students make a connection.

The chart below has examples of Vietnamese words that are similar to English words. The same procedures for instruction would apply.

Vietnamese	English
cà rốt	carrot
cà phê	coffee
đô la	dollar

Instructors must be cautious as there are many words that appear as cognates that do not have the same meaning. For example, the word *pie* in Spanish means foot—not a type of dessert. The word *red* in Spanish means net—not a bright color. Dictionaries with lists of false cognates are available to assist instructors (Prado, 1999).

Bilingual glossaries can be created to further extend word learning. The glossaries may include the targeted vocabulary word. Students can create a picture to help them remember the meaning of the word that they have derived from the extended discussions. They can create a sentence and also make a connection to their home language by writing the word in their native language.

Words with Multiple Meanings

ELs can benefit from learning words with multiple meanings (August et al., 2009; Baker et al., 2014). The multiple meaning words can be those that are considered basic words or academic words. Beck, McKeown, and Kucan (2013) have described three tiers of words. The first tier includes words that are common, everyday words such as *run*, *chair*, and *light*. The second tier includes academic words with high generalizability and usage such as *content*, *miraculously*, and *consequently*. The third tier of words includes academic words that are specific to

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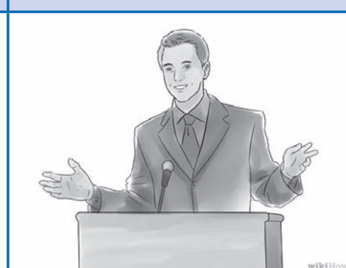
Word	Usage	Picture	Word in Native Language
proclaim	The governor proclaimed a new holiday for our state.		proclamar (Spanish)
spectacular	The fireworks in the sky look spectacular.		spectacular (Spanish)
content	He was content that all his friends came to his birthday celebration.		contento (Spanish)
curious	Mark is curious and wants to learn how the internet was first developed.		curioso (Spanish)

an area of study and are not as frequently used such as *photosynthesis*, *cerebellum*, and *phoneme*. For native speakers of English it makes sense to use the academic words that are used frequently. However, for ELs it is important to teach basic words and academic words with high utility (August et al., 2009). Common, everyday words often have multiple meanings. Most ELs have experienced or have knowledge of only a few of the meanings of these words. ELs can benefit from more in-depth knowledge built around these common everyday words because they often have multiple meanings and are used in a variety of contexts. For example, the English word *run* has many meanings as shown in the examples below.

Run home.

She participated in the 5K run.

He hit a home run.

There was a run on water at the grocery store.

The yard had a dog run.

I must not write a run-on sentence.

He will run the advertisement in the newspaper next week.

The refrigerator runs well.

The river runs through his property.

Maria will run the governor's campaign.

Juan will run for student council president.

The play had a good run.

The waitress will run a tab.

Therefore, working with words that have multiple meanings is beneficial for ELs. It increases their depth of knowledge for these words and improves their understanding of how these words vary in meaning and function across the content areas.

Summary

Much of what we have learned from research on vocabulary instruction among monolingual English speakers applies to working with ELs. However, special considerations must be incorporated within the instruction. Successful vocabulary instruction requires more than just knowledge of instructional strategies and routines.

Understanding first and second language development and the connection between language and literacy development provides the knowledge base from which vocabulary instruction may begin. Evidence-based vocabulary development for ELs includes teaching word learning strategies such as analyzing words for word parts, determining if an unknown word is a cognate that correlates with a word from the native language, and using text to determine word meaning. ELs can learn words and improve their English vocabulary but they need explicit, systematic, and multifaceted vocabulary instruction with many instructional routines. This type of instruction helps them develop the metalinguistic skills necessary for word knowledge that will help them understand and use oral and written language.

Special Considerations for ELL Vocabulary Development

- Provide and engage students in oral language opportunities to listen and use English words.
- Place students in small groups or in partner pairs for practice using their new words.
- Pair EL students who have lower English proficiency levels with those students who have a higher proficiency level to provide a good model for English.
- Establish routines that can be easily understood and followed (e.g., oral directions, daily schedules, and lesson formats).
- Make directions simple and comprehensible.
- Use concrete examples for abstract concepts.
- Use simple language to explain meanings of words.
- Use native language as a resource.
- Provide various modalities for learning new words.
- Use auditory, visual, tactile, and kinesthetic cues and demonstrations.
- Provide clarification in native language.
- Use visual aids such as pictures, diagrams, and graphic organizers.
- Use multimedia such as a video clips.
- Make connections about words within and across languages.
- Create activities that will extend word use in oral and written language.

ELs face the challenge of developing second language vocabulary skills comparable to their English speaking peers. It is important for educators to understand how to foster opportunities and ensure accelerated second language vocabulary development.

Instructors can teach ELs word learning strategies such as analyzing words and their meaningful parts. This is especially beneficial for Spanish-speaking ELs, as many English words are derived from Latin. The use of cognates, words that are similar in the native language and English, can assist these students with expanding their word knowledge. In addition, bilingual glossaries and the provision of engaging text with extended discussions through multiple modalities can generate positive outcomes for vocabulary knowledge. Teaching in an explicit and systematic manner using multiple strategies can also facilitate second language vocabulary development.

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