

Improving Language Acquisition Among English Learners: Four Powerful Evidence-Based Activities

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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-UhP2mB-Ebo>

Xochitl Fuhriman-Ebert: English learners must do double duty, building their language skills while also learning complex, grade-level content. This challenge has become even more high stakes with the implementation of Common CORE state standards, and other college and career readiness standards, which put additional emphasis on the ability to read, comprehend, and articulate the meaning of grade-appropriate concepts and content. While challenging, these standards provide a great opportunity for teachers to weave academic language and content together in a literacy-rich environment.

This video demonstrates research-based activities that integrate oral and written English language instruction into content areas. The activities are based on recommendations found in the 2014 IES Practice Guide, teaching academic content and literacy to English learners in elementary and middle school. We will demonstrate four specific activities. First, strategically use instructional tools, such as a short video, visuals, and graphic organizers, to anchor instruction and help students make sense of content. Second, explicitly teach content-specific academic vocabulary, and the general academic vocabulary that supports it, during content area instruction. Third, provide daily opportunities for students to talk about content in pairs and small groups. Fourth, provide writing opportunities to extend student learning and understanding of the content material.

Activity one: Strategically use instruction tools, such as a short video, visuals, and graphic organizers, to anchor instruction and help students make sense of content. When planning, think about visual supports that might help your students learn the content and the academic language necessary to understand the overall concept. These are called receptive language supports, as they amplify access to both oral language and written text. You might ask yourself, are there videos, websites, or other tools that I can use? Perhaps you or your team has built a library of illustrated videos, images, and listening passages.

Another good recommendation is to promote student discussions that are centered on these materials. Through conversation, students connect to their prior knowledge, and build upon the ideas of their classmates as they cooperatively make meaning of new vocabulary and class concepts. Students will be able to think, and describe their ideas, using the language they already know, including their first language, and new vocabulary to express their understanding. Open-ended questions, questions that begin with how, or why, are helpful for promoting engagement, because they require reasoning and evidence.

Graphic organizers support students as they make meaning of new concepts. These tools are especially helpful to students as they engage with new text. That said, graphic organizers such as compare and contrast matrices and cause and effect charts, also create abundant

opportunities for students to re-engage with texts that they have already encountered. John Balbi, from Columbia University's Teachers College refers to this as abundance and redundancy. Graphic organizers are not merely worksheets, they are strategic scaffolds that teachers can use to build student capacity in meta-cognitive skills, all while supporting their understanding of new concepts in grade-level texts.

Activity two: explicitly teach the content-specific academic vocabulary, and the general academic vocabulary that supports it, during content area instruction. It is important to be mindful when planning your classes. You should think about the most important words for understanding the content specific concepts, as well as the general academic language that can help students understand or describe that content. This is key to the successful acquisition of academic language.

Prior to teaching your lesson, you might ask yourself, what specific language might my students need for success in this concept? Content vocabulary, often referred to as tier three language, is essential to students' understanding of concepts. However, it's also important to explicit teach general academic language that is portable from one discipline to another. One question you might ask is, what language will my students need to express their understanding of our class concepts? Meta-linguistic awareness is now viewed as a core vocabulary skill. This means you should specifically teach skills such as word morphology, and encourage students to look for cognates in their first language. You might also consider building sentence frames that model the specific type of disciplinary language functions you want your students to use. As students begin to master each new function, you should gradually reduce the use of the frame, and eventually stop using it entirely.

Activity three: provide daily opportunities for students to talk about content in pairs or small groups. Talking about a concept with a partner or small group is an effective way to increase one's understanding of that concept. This is true for both children and adults. In the classroom, it's essential to plan for this type of activity. These interactions do not have to be long, but research demonstrates that they should occur at multiple points during the day. For example, you can have students read a paragraph and discuss the underlying concept, ask thought-provoking questions that they can discuss in small groups, and require them to cite evidence to support their responses.

Activity four: provide writing opportunities to extend student learning and understanding of the content material. Students need opportunities to apply concepts and skills in writing. This can be done in multiple ways, from writing assignments to hands on projects that include a writing element. Teachers shouldn't worry that explicit instruction on academic language will take away from students' ability to learn content. Research tells us that it's worth it. Language and content activities go hand in hand, and students will be able to learn the content much better when they also have the general academic language to understand and describe the learned content.

English speakers also benefit from these activities, as research demonstrates the same weaknesses among non-English learners. The key is to be thoughtful and to plan the lessons appropriately. Now let's see the teacher using all of these strategies together in a content area classroom.

Jennifer Shipp: Quick check, how many of you, so show me how many of those words you feel like you've seen before. Okay, so have you seen, you can give me a number on your hand. There are nine all together. So have you seen...Okay, zero, that's fine, if you've seen zero. One, five, however many. Okay, good, and so any...Good, okay looks good, can you raise your hand if you would rate any of them a three? If there are any of those words that you would rate a three. Okay, Carson, how many words did you rate a three?

7:01

Carson: Two.

Jennifer Shipp: Two, okay. Braden, how about you?

Braden: Two.

Jennifer Shipp: Two, nice. Okay, Carlos?

Carlos: Three.

Jennifer Shipp: As we start to look at the vocabulary, for our next unit today, with the vocabulary search party, how many of you remember--

Jennifer Shipp and Class: Will be able to use what I know and my problem solving skills to match and learn new vocabulary related to proportional relationships.

Jennifer Shipp: Very good, okay. So, let's talk about the vocabulary search party to get going with that. When I say use what you know, lots of you, I went around, and I don't think there was anybody that had a one for every single word. Most of us had a two, at least for one or two, so that is using what you know. What do you already know about the word, or what do you think you know about it? Because that's important to use as well. What are some problem solving skills that we can use when we're trying to identify and define new vocabulary? Context clues, very good, can you describe what you mean by that?

Student 1: Like the words before or after it.

Jennifer Shipp: Okay, the words before or after it, very good. So context clues, and maybe the definitions, right? What if we have the word?

Jennifer Shipp: Prefix, and suffixes are word parts. Okay, all of those things, pick it apart, what parts are familiar? What parts do you know?

Jennifer Shipp: Okay, we're going to use all of those strategies put together.

Jennifer Shipp: Your job is going to be to get up and go around the room, talk to everybody in the room, and look, and see what they have, and try to match up your word definition or example with the correct thing that goes with it, okay? When you think you've found your matches, you're going to come and check with me.

Jennifer Shipp: If you're correct, I'm going to give you some tape, and I'm going to have you tape them to the wall, around the room, okay? If you're incorrect, I'm going to send you back out to keep searching, alright? When you have found your matches, and taped them in the correct spot, in Monday's bin, you have your own personal dictionary. Now it's got a lot of stuff already filled in, your job is going to be to fill in all of the missing pieces, alright? So you're going to go around and look at all of the things taped to the walls, the words, the definitions, the examples. And you're going to fill yours in.

Students speaking in small groups: (muffled speaking)

Student 2: Wait, Jesu, read this two and tell me if they go together. (muffled speaking)

Student 3: The variable represents the input value in a relationship, so I don't think, I don't think it, where it depends on something.

Student 2: That's the picture, now we need the definition. Let me see (muffled speaking)

Student 4: That word definitely goes with that picture. But so do four other words, right? Yeah? (muffled speaking)

Jennifer Shipp: No, nope, but good try, keep going. Get back out there. Okay, guys, you're going to have to--

Jennifer Shipp: I want to talk about some of those words, what are the words that you felt like you were most familiar with when we started this? Slope, okay, Braden?

Braden: Slope.

Jennifer Shipp: Slope.

Student 5: Origin.

Jennifer Shipp: Origin, good. So what is slope? (muffled speaking)

Student 6: Steepness of a hill.

Jennifer Shipp: Oh good, the steepness of a hill, absolutely. Slope is the steepness of a hill, that's a very good way to describe it. Carson, what's the origin?

Carson: It's the center point, or zero, zero.

Jennifer Shipp: Okay, zero, zero, on a what?

Carson: The coordinate plane.

Jennifer Shipp: Very good, thank you, on the coordinate plane. How many of you felt most comfortable with that set of words? Coordinate plane, quadrants, axes, ordered pair and origin? So the graphing words.

Jennifer Shipp: How did you feel, what are the words that you feel least, the least comfortable with?

Student 7: All of them.

Jennifer Shipp: All of them? (muffled speaking) Can you see that louder?

Student 8: Independent and dependent.

Jennifer Shipp: How many of you get confused when we're talking about independent and dependent variables? Yeah me too, I still have to think, every time I go to decide what the independent and dependent variables, I still have to stop and think about it, still. And one of the really important words to think about is dependent. The dependent variable depends on the other, okay? It changes as the other changes. And we'll do a lot more work with those.

Jennifer Shipp: And I want you to go back over your list, and using another way, so you can box the number this time.

Jennifer Shipp: Did you increase your learning up through this activity? I want you to re-rate yourself on all of those words. And then I want you to choose three to write a short paragraph about, and we are going to share with a classmate. So please choose three to write a short paragraph about. It could be anything. You could write about what you know.

Student 9: (muffled speaking) Three of the words that we understand better, so I just put three of the words I learned, and I understood better all of them.

Student 10: There were a few words I had a problem with (mumbles) and the rate of change (mumbles) although I still don't know what the rate of change is, after I saw the other two definitions, I remembered what (mumbles) they are, the definitions.

Student 9: Good job. (muffled speaking)

Student 10: And that's all I wrote.