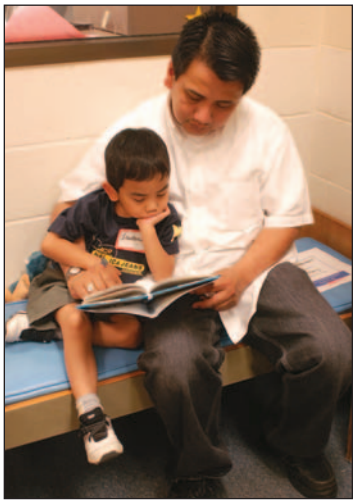

Vocabulary Instruction for English Language Learners

SUMMARY

To comprehend a text, readers need to understand up to 95% of the vocabulary. Where does this leave English language learners? With the help of simple, research-based strategies, vocabulary instruction can be less daunting, more successful — and even fun.

Katie Kurjakovic is an ESL teacher and United Federation of Teachers chapter leader at P.S. 11, a K-6 school in Queens. She is a trained coordinator in the American Federation of Teachers Educational Research & Development program in beginning reading instruction. She is a member of the NYSUT Committee on English Language Learners.

Last week, I witnessed a scenario all too familiar to teachers of English language learners. A second-grade teacher was preparing to read a story about George Washington's wife, Martha, to her class. She anticipated all the unfamiliar vocabulary she thought they would encounter. She told them what colonies and colonists were. She spoke of the American Revolution and the Declaration of Independence. Then, shortly after she began reading, a girl raised her hand with a puzzled look on her face. "What's a wife?" she asked.

My colleagues and I find two generally recognized statistics particularly daunting. The first: Readers need to know 90% to 95% of vocabulary in a text in order to understand it. The second: College-bound seniors have working vocabularies of 60,000-100,000 words.[1] The problem: ELLs enter our classrooms starting from scratch. Where does one begin? Thanks to the research of Isabel Beck, Margaret McKeown and Linda Kucan, we have new knowledge of not only how students acquire vocabulary, but how to more effectively teach it to ELLs.

I have taught ESL for 15 years at PS 11, a K-6 elementary school in Queens. PS 11 has a large population of ELLs. This year, 340 of our 1,175 students were eligible for the New York State English as a Second Language Achievement Test. Approximately 80% of the student body speaks a second language at home. While we have had great success in teaching decoding skills using explicit, multisensory strategies and programs, teaching vocabulary has remained an obstacle. Even the simplest decodable or predictable text contains words unknown to ELLs. Take, for example, a story titled "The Bet." A colleague asked her third-graders to predict what the story might be about. Members of the class confidently raised their hands. The first student she called on thought it would be about an animal doctor (confusion with *vet*). The second suggested the book might be about someone sleeping (confusion with *bed*). They were clearly unfamiliar with the word "bet." Given their initial misunderstanding, what kind of meaning could these students have constructed if they had read the text on their own?

by Katie Kurjakovic
United Federation of Teachers
New York City

As ESL teachers, we knew our students needed explicit vocabulary instruction. We knew that asking our students to look up words in dictionaries would not work — they could not understand the words used in the definitions. We were also frustrated by the quality of sentences students would hand in as their vocabulary or spelling homework — *"Shop: I shop every day. Rush: I rush every day."* It was evident that we were not helping students to internalize the meanings of words at all.

We knew we were not alone. In the spring of 2003, the entire issue of the American Federation of Teachers' research journal, *American Educator*, was devoted to words and the role that weak vocabulary plays in the "fourth-grade comprehension plunge."[2] Fortunately for us, that issue included an article by Beck, McKeown and Kucan titled "Taking Delight in Words: Using Oral Language to Build Young Children's Vocabularies." In this article, and in their book from which it was excerpted, *Bringing Words to Life: Robust Vocabulary Instruction*, the authors provide strategies that have proven

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METHODOLOGY

Growing Vocabulary from 'Sentence Stems'

To encourage the use of new vocabulary, many of my colleagues and I would ask students to write sentences using a weekly list of words. More often than not, this was a source of frustration for students and teacher alike. One of the most helpful exercises we have incorporated from Beck's research is the tool of "sentence stems."[1] Sentence stems are a miraculous scaffold for English language learners. Instead of requiring students to start from scratch to create context, meaning and syntax simultaneously in one sentence, sentence stems serve to isolate meaning.

To prepare for this activity, the teacher provides the beginning of a sentence. This sentence starter should be carefully constructed so the students will demonstrate their level of knowledge of the word by how they complete it. It should include the targeted word, but be open-ended so students can finish the sentence.

Sample stems might be, *Dad got mad when I* ***upset*** *the paints because ...* or *When he* ***leaned*** *back in his chair...* We have found that the support of sentence stems limits student error significantly while still allowing for authentic use of language. They can be used in groups or pairs, as well as independently.

Sentence stems are an accurate assessment tool that provides immediate feedback. I gave a fourth-grade group of intermediate and advanced ELLs the following sentence starter for the word *panic*: "My mom will panic if..." Some examples students posed were: "My mom will panic if I come home late from the park" and "My mom will panic if I fall off the boat." When one student suggested, "My mom will panic if I lose my shoe," I was able to clarify the difference between panicking and getting angry or worried. The student changed his example to, "My mom will panic if I lose my brother."!

Writing stems takes more effort on the teacher's part, but saves time on error correction. This year, one fourth-grade teacher is experimenting with stems for a few words per week. Another uses this as an oral activity during the literacy block, providing the beginning of the sentence verbally and having students working in pairs confer briefly to develop an ending. Even students who are normally hesitant to participate are eager to jump into the discussion with their classmates.

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effective in our ESL classrooms. Their suggestions for selection and instruction of words, as well as a follow-up activity based on "sentence stems" *(see related article)* have been particularly useful. What follows is a description of how I have incorporated their strategy for early literacy instruction for ELLs.[3]

In brief, there are six steps *(see sidebar at far right)*.

I use these steps regularly with a group of second-grade beginning and intermediate-level ELLs, as determined by the NYSESLAT. The story I last read to them was the classic *Caps for Sale* by Esphyr Slobodkina. The first step was to choose three to five words. Beck suggests picking words that are unknown, but that will be useful to students in other contexts.[5] As I planned the lesson, I anticipated that many students would not know the words *long* (in reference to time), *leaned, upset, peddler* and *checked* (as in fabric design). I decided that the first three words were of broader importance to my second-graders, and that when it came to *peddler* and *checked*, I would just provide a quick synonym or explanation as I read the story aloud.

One generally accepted best practice for ELLs is to preview vocabulary. So, in the first lesson, I introduced the words to students with user-friendly definitions. It is important to clarify the meaning of the word as it is used in the text. I defined *long* as "not quick, taking a lot of time." *Lean* was "to bend a little so you are not straight" (we all acted this out, of course). *Upset* does not have its usual meaning, but rather is used in the sense of "to make things fall over." Once we had covered all the words, I was able to read *Caps for Sale* aloud, without interrupting the flow of the story.

As Beck and her co-researchers stress, it is not enough for students to have passive word knowledge.[5] Therefore, steps 4 through 6 help students transfer words from a page of a book into their own experiences and active wells of language. To begin this process, I re-read the book the following day, then discussed one word at a time. First, I used the targeted word in the context of the story. For example, "Let's talk about the word *long*. In *Caps for Sale*, we read that the peddler slept for a *long* time." Next, I demonstrated that *long* can be used in different contexts. "My train was late yesterday. I had a *long* wait before it came. While I waited, I read for a *long* time." Students have now had the opportunity to hear the word "long," with the same meaning, in a completely different context and using different language structures.

The final step was to give students an opportunity to use the target word in terms of their own lives. I provided

my students with the scaffold, "I waited for a *long* time. What is something you have done for a *long* time?" Their responses allowed them to practice while giving me a window to assess whether they thoroughly understood and could use the word correctly.

If students are to fully internalize new words, however, they need to have repeated interactions with them. In *Bringing Words to Life*, the authors state, "The vocabulary research strongly points to the need for frequent encounters with new words if they are to become part of an individual's vocabulary repertoire."[6] It is my goal to systematically infuse my instruction with newly taught words. I plan to create a vocabulary word wall and challenge myself to use as many words as possible, as many times as possible, throughout the school day and year. It is a challenge I will make to my students, as well.

We reap the rewards of vocabulary instruction daily. It may come after a teacher mentions the *long* weekend coming up and a buzz goes around the room: "Did you hear that word? *Long!*" It may be when we ask the students to work slowly and carefully during a test and one asks, "You mean don't rush?" It may be when a bilingual kindergarten student points to an energetic group of his peers and knowingly says to the teacher, "boisterous!" It is stories like these that excite us and challenge us to keep our expectations high.

Robust vocabulary instruction shows great promise in our K-6 ESL classes. It is free; it is fun; it can be adapted to any text or literacy program. The more English words students know, the more they can understand and speak. The more they can understand and speak, the more they will be able to comprehend what they read and develop their writing abilities.

No, we can't teach 100,000 words in a year, but teaching five today is a great start.

ENDNOTES

[1] Hirsch, E.D. (2003) Reading comprehension requires knowledge — of words and the world. *American Educator,* Vol. 27, No. 1, pp. 16-29. American Federation of Teachers. p.16.

[2] Chall, J.S. & Jacobs, V.A. (1996) The classic study on poor children's fourth grade slump. Reprinted in *American Educator*, Vol. 27, No. 1, pp. 14-15. American Federation of Teachers. p.14.

[3] Beck, I.L., McKeown, M.G. & Kucan, L. (2002). *Bringing words to life: robust vocabulary instruction.* New York: The Guilford Press.

[4] Beck, p. 8.

[5] Beck, p. 13.

[6] Beck, p. 69.

SIDEBAR ENDNOTES

[1] Beck, I.L., McKeown, M.G. & Kucan, L. (2002), *Bringing words to life: robust vocabulary instruction*. New York: The Guilford Press. p. 80.

METHODOLOGY

Early Literacy Instruction for English Language Learners

1. Choose three to five words from a story.

2. Preview the words, using definitions the student can understand.

3. Read the text (as a read aloud, shared or guided reading).

4. Put the words in context.

5. Give an example in a different context.

6. Ask students to provide their own examples.