

Vocabulary Instruction for English Language Learners

Carrie Kracl

University of Nebraska-Kearney, 2006

Vocabulary refers to the words we must know to communicate effectively.

Vocabulary can be designated as oral or reading vocabulary. Oral vocabulary refers to words that we use in speaking or recognize when listening. Reading vocabulary refers to the words recognized or used in print. Vocabulary plays an important part in learning to read because children use the words they have heard to make sense of the words they see in print. Vocabulary is also important to reading comprehension. Readers cannot understand what they are reading without knowing what the majority of the words mean (Armbruster, Lehr, & Osborn, 2001).

Considerations When Instructing ELLs in Vocabulary

- Vocabulary development is one of the greatest challenges when teaching ELLs to read because in fluency and comprehension rely not only on phonics but on context. Students may be able to read phonetically but if they do have a vocabulary they will have difficulty in comprehending what is being read. Therefore, vocabulary needs to be taught explicitly and be part of the daily curriculum (Antunez, 2002).
- Scientific research on vocabulary development demonstrates that children learn the majority of their vocabulary indirectly in three ways:
 - Through conversations, mostly with adults
 - Listening to adults read to them
 - Reading extensively on their own

ELLs often have adults in their lives that are not fluent in English. Educators need to explicitly teach vocabulary words before introducing text, practice using dictionaries, teach prefixes and suffixes to decipher word meanings and instruct students on how to use context clues (Armbruster, Lehr, & Osborn, 2001).

- Educators need to be aware that students may be able to define a vocabulary term without being able to develop the concept behind the word. Even if the teacher preteaches the term, students may not be able to understand the concept without additional hands-on work even though the student has memorized the definition (Freeman & Freeman, 2000).

- The explicit instruction of word study should include concepts and word meanings, multiple meanings of words (many words have more than one meaning), compound words, synonyms (words that have nearly the same meaning as other words), antonyms (word that express opposite meanings), homonyms (word that sound alike but are spelled differently), figurative meanings of words (similes, metaphors and idioms) (Tompkins, 2003).

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