



TIPS | for Educators of ELLs in Grades 4-12: Teaching Vocabulary

Research shows that vocabulary development is one of the most important skills English Language Learners (ELLs) must acquire to become English-proficient. Here are some strategies to help you get started!

■ Teach vocabulary in an explicit, systematic way.

Choose the vocabulary that your students most need to know in order to support their reading development and content-area learning. Plan for repeated exposures to ensure mastery. When introducing new vocabulary, be sure to provide student-friendly definitions for words important to the task at hand.

■ Teach vocabulary thematically.

Organize vocabulary around a common theme, and choose reading materials that reinforce that vocabulary in context.

■ Teach vocabulary by focusing on common root words and affixes to expand word knowledge.

Learning about roots, prefixes and suffixes is a great way to reinforce and expand ELLs' understanding of English words. Breaking the words down into smaller pieces makes unfamiliar words more comprehensible.

■ Capitalize on cognates.

Teach students to make the connection between words that are the same or similar in English and in their primary language. This is an easy way to improve both vocabulary and reading comprehension.

■ Preview, preview, preview!

Before reading, teach essential vocabulary and preview the content. "Walk" through the book or chapter, looking at the pictures and demonstrating how the previewed vocabulary is used in context; vocabulary is learned best through meaningful associations.

■ Teach and build academic vocabulary.

English language learners need continued instruction in academic vocabulary as they encounter new subjects and new ideas at the high school level. Work with colleagues to identify and teach the vocabulary that ELLs need to become successful readers and learners in each of their other classes.

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■ Teach vocabulary specific to content.

A student's maximum level of reading comprehension is determined by his or her knowledge of words. Teach key words that children will need to comprehend texts, to learn the content in those texts and to pass tests.

■ When your students learn new words, make sure they:

- Are able to define the word;
- Know when to use the word;
- Know the word's multiple meanings;
- Can decode and spell the word.

Content-specific words include words such as: photosynthesis, revolution and metaphor. Examples of words with multiple meanings: party, mouse, table.

■ Teach signal words and directional words in order to build a student's academic vocabulary.

Help ELLs learn how to recognize, understand and use signal and directional words.

Signal words are sometimes called transition words and "signal" relationships between clauses. They include cause-and-effect words ("therefore" and "because"), comparison and contrast words ("despite" and "while") and time-sequence words ("then" and "before").

Directional words describe a language function students need to perform. Examples: explain, compare, inform, contrast, persuade, justify.

■ Differentiate between different kinds of academic vocabulary and usage.

Help ELLs understand how to recognize and when to use different kinds of academic vocabulary (content-specific words, signal words, etc.) by making clear and specific distinctions between the different kinds of academic words students need to know for a specific topic.

■ Teach students how to use context clues to discover a word's meaning.

Show students how to determine more meaning based on the rest of the sentence or surrounding sentences and paragraphs.

■ Give students multiple opportunities to work with vocabulary.

This includes connecting vocabulary to personal experience; allowing students to use their primary language to make associations; using cognates; practicing speaking, reading and writing; and using artwork to represent words, in addition to techniques such as total physical response (TPR), which allows students to show what they know by acting it out.

■ Teach students to actively engage with vocabulary as they read.

Underlining, highlighting, making notes and listing unknown vocabulary words are just a few strategies that foster comprehension by helping ELLs actively engage with text.

