



RESEARCH REPORT

Visual Vocabulary Builders

Supporting English Language Learners: Visual Vocabulary Builders

Presently, more than five million English language learners (ELLs) attend schools in the United States. Although 82 percent of the ELLs in the United States are native Spanish speakers, school districts have identified more than 350 other first languages among students (NCTE, 2006). Some studies estimate that by the year 2015, up to 30 percent of the school-age population in the United States will be ELLs (Francis et al., 3).

Who are these English language learners?

Some ELLs are students who are adjusting to a new language and a new country. Others are students who either were born in this country or immigrated to it before starting kindergarten, and have limited exposure to English. Although students in the latter group may have adequate conversational English, their spoken vocabulary often falls far below the level needed to support reading comprehension, and further, to support academic success in all areas (Francis et al., 4).

How can we help our ELLs? Certain approaches in reading instruction and intervention can lead to higher levels of academic achievement for English language learners. On the following pages we will outline some of the most important research in these areas and demonstrate how the Newbridge *Visual Vocabulary Builders* reflect this research.

Foundational Research Basis

In 2006, the Texas Institute for Measurement, Evaluation, and Statistics published *Practical Guidelines for the Education of English Language Learners*. Book one in this series, *Research-Based Recommendations for*

Instruction and Academic Interventions, synthesizes into a concise summary years of research into what works best in helping English language learners succeed in both reading and math.

Research-Based Recommendations for Instruction and Academic Interventions stresses that the key to academic success in reading/language arts is the acquisition of academic language (Francis et al., 7). This holds true for students who are proficient in English as well as for English language learners. Unfortunately, many ELLs go through elementary school and into middle school without mastering academic language.

What exactly is academic language, and why is it important? James Cummins, who teaches in the Second Language Education Program at the University of Toronto, asserts that academic language is the language that children encounter in the classroom. It is this language that ELLs must master in order to succeed in school. Cummins maintains that the conversational abilities that second language learners acquire through interaction with peers are “conceptually distinct from academic language abilities” (Cummins, 2001). Pauline Gibbons, who has done considerable research in Australia on the acquisition of academic language, further defines the differences between what she calls *playground language* and *classroom language*:

... [P]layground language is very different from the language that teachers use in the classroom, and from the language that we expect children to learn to use. The language of the playground is not the language associated with learning in mathematics, or social studies,

or science. The playground situation does not normally offer children the opportunity to use such language as: if we increase the angle by 5 degrees, we could cut the circumference into equal parts. Nor does it normally require the language associated with the higher order thinking skills, such as hypothesizing, evaluating, inferring, generalizing, predicting or classifying. Yet these are the language functions which are related to learning and the development of cognition; they occur in all areas of the curriculum, and without them a child's potential in academic areas cannot be realized (Gibbons, 3).

So how can educators support and promote academic language in the classroom? *Research-Based Recommendations for Instruction and Academic Interventions* spells out the following six recommendations (Francis et al., 30).

1. English language learners need early, explicit, and intensive instruction in phonological awareness and phonics in order to build decoding skills.

Research has shown that a child's phonological skills in her native language are closely related to her phonological skills in English. Further, these skills are often much better developed than the child's vocabulary and grammatical skills (Francis et al., 18). Despite this finding, educators frequently take a "wait and see" approach with regard to phonics intervention, wrongly assuming that the child's phonological skills will develop with increased exposure to print. In fact, research demonstrates that ELLs, like their English-proficient classmates, benefit from early phonological awareness instruction. And like their English-proficient classmates, those ELLs who seem to struggle with developing these skills require extra instruction (Francis et al., 18).

Visual Vocabulary Builders provide ELLs with the tools to master the academic language and content-area vocabulary they will encounter in the classroom. In grades 1 and 2, the program is used

in conjunction with regular instruction in phonological awareness and phonics. For students in grades 3 through 5 who demonstrate difficulties in developing phonological skills, intervention is advised.

2. K–12 classrooms across the nation must increase opportunities for English language learners to develop sophisticated vocabulary knowledge.

It is estimated that only 5 to 10 percent of classroom instructional time is devoted to vocabulary instruction. Yet vocabulary knowledge is the essential requirement for academic discourse.

Isabel Beck has written extensively on what she calls Tier Two and Tier Three words. Tier Two words, Beck explains, are distinct from basic vocabulary words, which fall into the group she calls Tier One (Beck, 8). Tier One words include the vocabulary young children pick up first—words like *clock*, *baby*, *happy*, *walk*. Tier Two words, on the other hand, are the vocabulary students hear in the upper elementary and middle-school classroom. These are the words that ELL students often do not pick up or use in conversational English, but they are the words that are most critical for participating in academic discourse. Beck defines Tier Two words as words that are "likely to appear frequently in a wide variety of texts and in the written and oral language of mature language users" (Beck, 16). Tier Three words are specialized vocabulary, or words whose use is limited to specific areas, such as life sciences.

Visual Vocabulary Builders increase opportunities for ELLs to develop vocabulary that allows them to participate more fully in the language of the classroom. The vocabulary instruction in *Visual Vocabulary Builders* is based on the research of Beck as well as others who emphasize the importance of giving students multiple exposures to critical vocabulary. Words in color on each card in the *Visual Vocabulary Builders* are either high-utility, Tier Two words, or they are Tier Three words that are critical for building

content-area vocabulary. These words are presented visually through pictures, orally through teacher introduction and audio CD presentation, and in a written context through word strips. They are also defined in a glossary list for students' reference. Additional instruction for these targeted words ranges from further visual exposure to oral discussions to writing activities to structural analysis and word play, all of which ask students to analyze and explore the meaning of each word more deeply.

3. Reading instruction in K–12 classrooms must equip English language learners with strategies and knowledge to comprehend and analyze challenging texts.

Typical comprehension instruction tends to focus on the products of comprehension rather than on the processes involved. Essentially, comprehension instruction requires students to answer questions based on the content of a particular passage or text. As a result, “many students read passively, often without conscious monitoring and strategy use, and understand reading comprehension to be a demonstration of knowledge after reading a text or passage” (Francis et al., 22).

The authors of *Recommendations for Instruction and Academic Interventions* advise that comprehension instruction for ELLs must be explicit and direct. It must “actively engage the student in monitoring and carefully selecting and reflecting upon her own use of strategies during the comprehension process. Students must also understand how this process has to be adjusted for the type of text (e.g., expository or narrative) being read, the purposes for reading (e.g., to learn about a science concept or to solve a math problem), and the format of the content (e.g., the format of instructions for a science lab or a primary document in social studies)” (Francis et al., 23).

The short, varied texts that are used for teacher introduction and student practice of vocabulary in *Visual Vocabulary Builders* reflect the

kinds of texts that students will be required to read and understand during their educational career. Specifically, *Visual Vocabulary Builders* focus on the types of nonfiction expository text students encounter in their content-area textbooks and other informational texts, as well as on many state tests.

In addition, the authors of *Recommendations for Instruction and Academic Interventions* recommend that completing writing activities before, during, and after reading provides ELLs with opportunities to develop comprehension and strengthen academic language. The various exposures to writing activities that are built into *Visual Vocabulary Builders* provide opportunities for students to explore the vocabulary in different contexts (e.g., the classroom, the community, their own lives) and through different formats (e.g., graphic organizers, posters, letters), thus broadening and cementing their understanding of the vocabulary.

Research further suggests that strategy instruction works best when taught within a framework that emphasizes a gradual release of responsibility to students. The most effective instruction occurs when teachers explain the purpose of a given strategy and extensively model that strategy, usually through thinking aloud while reading a text. Students are then given opportunities for structured practice, in either written or oral formats (Francis et al., 24).

The instructional model in *Visual Vocabulary Builders* provides strong scaffolding for ELLs in acquiring academic language and content-area vocabulary. The lesson plan that accompanies each card set begins with explicit teacher instruction: introducing and discussing the key concept, previewing the vocabulary words visually and orally, and reading the content-area paragraph that uses the vocabulary in context, all the while displaying a photograph that demonstrates the vocabulary. Follow-up instruction includes presentation of formal definitions for each vocabulary word. After the initial teacher-directed instruction, multiple activities for differentiated instruction allow teachers to choose those activities that best

meet students' needs and levels of independence. Depending on their needs and abilities, students become more and more independent as they explore the vocabulary. Finally, assessment opportunities offer differing levels of independence, should the teacher need those options.

4. Instruction and intervention to promote English language learners' reading fluency must focus on vocabulary and increased exposure to print.

Reading fluency requires word-recognition skills that are automatic. Knowing word meanings as you read allows you to devote greater cognitive resources to comprehending the text. ELLs who struggle with fluency often have no trouble decoding words. Instead, their struggle with fluency stems from an underdeveloped knowledge of word meanings and not enough exposure to print. Successful intervention for fluency difficulties has included repeated readings, in which students practice reading orally with instructional-level passages. Successful repeated readings must also include corrective feedback from adults, discussions and questioning about the book, increased exposure to print, and increased engagement and motivation (Francis et al., 27). Stephen Krashen, Professor Emeritus in the field of linguistics at the University of Southern California, stresses that students must be given the opportunity to read and converse about subjects that interest them. He asserts that "the only criterion for texts is that they be compelling" (Krashen, "Applying the Comprehension Hypothesis: Some Suggestions," 3).

Visual Vocabulary Builders promote ELLs' reading fluency by providing multiple, different exposures to vocabulary words in context and by asking students to demonstrate their understanding through a variety of activities. The audio CD provides an opportunity for students to read the material aloud, as they first listen and then read back the text. This oral reading helps students build vocabulary knowledge as they learn to read with appropriate expression. Students work in pairs or

in small groups as they complete activities, and this cooperative grouping allows fluent and struggling readers to work together.

5. In all K–12 classrooms across the U.S., English language learners need significant opportunities to engage in structured, academic talk.

Although teaching academic language and content-area vocabulary is not usually a focus of instruction, several classroom routines teach and encourage the use of academic language in the classroom. Reading aloud and shared reading, each followed by discussion, help promote academic discourse. So, too, does allowing ELLs to practice academic language with peers who are native English speakers or who have slightly more developed language skills (Francis et al., 29). David Freeman and Yvonne Freeman of the University of Texas–Pan American assert that "when teachers use real content for teaching language, they provide students with genuine reasons to learn the language. This approach, rather than focusing on the language itself, creates situations where students can use language for authentic purposes" (Freeman and Freeman, 2000). Further, Freeman and Freeman contend that when working collaboratively while reading and discussing literature, students develop the academic language they need.

Visual Vocabulary Builders provide students with opportunities to engage in structured, academic talk. Vocabulary is introduced through an extended discussion of a topically related photograph. First, students preview the photograph and discuss what they already know about the topic. Then they listen to a passage about the photograph, during which the vocabulary is introduced. Finally, they share their understanding and knowledge of what is depicted in the photograph, using the vocabulary words they've just been taught. Additional sections of the lesson plan (Talk About It and Develop Oral Language) provide further opportunities to use academic vocabulary, including activities specifically provided for English language learners.

6. Independent reading is only beneficial when it is structured and purposeful, and there is a good reader-text match.

Independent reading for ELLs can provide vocabulary development, increase exposure to print, and improve fluency and comprehension. But independent reading must be carefully planned so that the content is relevant to the curriculum and each reader's ability is carefully matched with an appropriate level of text.

Visual Vocabulary Builders support independent reading that is structured and purposeful, and also provide a good reader-text match. Because every text selection is built around standards-based science concepts, the selections support topics students are learning about in class every day. The program covers reading levels from grades 1 to 4, so there is ample opportunity to match readers to appropriate texts. All activities, but especially the audio CD, provide a structure for developing fluency and comprehension. The program is both timely and necessary.

Conclusion

Visual Vocabulary Builders were developed with the needs of all students in mind, but the program is particularly relevant for the growing population of English language learners in the United States. With many ELLs continuing to fall behind in reading, math, and science, effective instructional approaches and interventions to support their academic development are essential. And in fact, the most effective of these approaches and interventions form the framework of the *Visual Vocabulary Builders*.

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