Intensifying English vocabulary instruction

for English language learners

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Abstract

English vocabulary development is a key component of language and literacy development for English language learners (ELLs) living in the United States. With the increase in the number of speech-language pathologists (SLPs) with ELLs on their caseloads, it has become increasingly important for SLPs to be able to facilitate vocabulary growth in ELLs. To assist SLPs working with ELLs in schools, the present paper provides an overview of strategies to enhance English vocabulary instruction for ELLs, drawing on evidence from research with both monolingual and bilingual students. Strategies included are: leveraging the native language, teaching comprehension monitoring, embedding instruction in reading, building morphological awareness, and collaborating with classroom teachers. Specific, effective vocabulary instruction protocols are also briefly overviewed.

The language and literacy development of English language learners (ELLs) has been an important concern for speech-language pathologists (SLPs) since the recognition of the achievement gap consistently observed for this population (Hemphill & Vanneman, 2011). As the number of ELLs grows and standards for academic performance increase, the pressure to identify effective strategies to facilitate literacy development has amplified (Baker et al. 2014). The purpose of this paper is to present evidence-based strategies for supporting ELL literacy development through enhanced vocabulary instruction, a vital component of language development for ELLs.

ELLs typically know at least as many total words as their monolingual peers (Core, Hoff, Rumiche, & Señor, 2013), but show deficits on norm-referenced tests of English vocabulary in early elementary grades. These deficits can be attributed to the division of ELLs' vocabulary across two languages. Some concepts or ideas are understood in one language and others are known in both. Although bilingualism has numerous advantages, the division of ELLs' word knowledge is observable in English vocabulary scores as significant as two standard deviations below the mean of those observed among monolingual students, depending on the students' ages and time exposed to the English language (Wood Jackson, Schatschneider, & Leacox, 2014).

Because most classroom instruction in the United States occurs in English, reduced English vocabulary can lead to reduced understanding of academic material (August & Shanahan, 2006). Consequences include difficulty learning, diminished literacy, and reduced academic achievement. Limited English vocabulary in kindergarten has been revealed as an clear predictor of reading comprehension deficits in later grades (Kieffer, 2008), and increased English vocabulary growth is strongly related to improved literacy outcomes (see Baker et al., 2014). Given the importance of English vocabulary in language and literacy development for ELLs, it is

vital for SLPs to address vocabulary quickly and effectively. This paper presents four evidence-based strategies for SLPs to facilitate vocabulary development in ELLs, and includes recommendations for enhancing vocabulary instruction in the classroom.

Leverage the Native Language

When an individual is learning a second language, instruction in the native language (L1) can support growth in the second language (L2; Cummins, 1981). For ELLs learning English as their L2, this means their native language can be leveraged to speed vocabulary development in English (Lugo-Neris, Jackson, & Goldstein, 2010). When ELLs learn terms in L1 or in L2, they build on a *common underlying proficiency* between the two languages (Cummins, 1981). Instruction in either language can expedite learning of the same concepts in the opposite language when concepts are connected appropriately through bilingual instruction (Cummins, 1981). Although English-only instruction supports English gains, bilingual instruction facilitates at least equivalent English growth while also supporting continued L1 development in ELLs (see Farver, Lonigan, & Eppe, 2009). L1 attrition, or loss of L1 language skills, is a substantial risk when ELLs receive English-only instruction (Restrepo, Morgan, & Thompson, 2013). Reduced L1 skills can be devastating to ELLs and their families, depriving children of communication opportunities with L1-speaking family members and limiting their linguistic experiences that facilitate language development (Kohnert, Yim, Nett, Khan, & Duran, 2005).

Bilingual SLPs can use *bridging* (Leacox & Jackson 2014), *expansions* (Paul, 2007), and *cognates* (Honig et. al., 2008) to connect concepts in L1 and L2. Bridging, or explicitly referencing background information in L1, can be used to provide a translation-equivalent of English target vocabulary in the student's L1. Expansions, or rich definitions and explanations of target words (Paul, 2007), can similarly be delivered in ELLs' L1 to place vocabulary in an

understandable context. Expansions tap into ELLs' concept knowledge to facilitate English growth while reinforcing L1 skills (Lugo-Neris et al., 2010). Building cognate awareness is also useful to leverage the native language (August & Shanahan, 2006). Cognates are words in two languages that have similar spelling, pronunciation, and meaning (Honig et al., 2008). ELLs who readily recognize cognates can develop L2 vocabulary knowledge more quickly by inferring English word meanings (August & Shanahan, 2006).

Bilingual SLPs can also code-switch, or interchange between using L1 and L2, to make targets more salient (Brice & Roseberry-McKibben, 2001). Both typically-developing ELLs and those with language impairment demonstrate similar patterns of code-switching (Simon-Cereijido, 2015), suggesting code-switching is not indicative of language deficits. SLPs providing vocabulary support to ELLs may choose to code-switch to isolate key vocabulary targets in L2 and provide comprehensible context clues in the L1 (Brice & Roseberry-McKibben, 2001). SLPs who code-switch should maintain typical patterns of code-switching, as detailed by Simon-Cereijido (2015), and can encourage code-switching from ELLs to maximize communication. Bilingual individuals often communicate using both languages; code-switching can be the typical form of communicating in bilingual families (Simon-Cereijido, 2015).

Notably, it is acknowledged only 5% of ASHA members identify themselves as bilingual service providers (ASHA, 2014). However, monolingual SLPs can also leverage ELLs' native languages using alternate resources. SLPs can involve caregivers and peers to assist with L1 interventions by coaching L1-speaking individuals to use expansions, recasts, modeling, and imitation to provide support in the L1 (Kohnert et al., 2005). Caregiver involvement in therapy facilitates carryover of strategies into the home environment, enhancing long-term retention (APA Task Force, 2008). Interpreters can also provide invaluable support to monolingual SLPs

working with ELLs and can be used as both a linguistic and cultural reference during intervention (see ASHA Practice Portal, 2015). Starting vocabulary intervention using L1 supports can be beneficial in providing a solid base for future instruction, particularly in teaching ELLs learning strategies they can use independently as they develop English language skills (Ostovar-Namaghi & Rajaee, 2013).

Because ELLs' vocabulary is distributed across two languages (Core et al., 2013) L1 bridging may not always be helpful, particularly if the student was not previously exposed to a specific target in L1. In this case, bridging would lead to the SLP introducing two new lexical terms, one in the L2 and one the in L1. This increases the demand on the student. The cultural context of targets selected for intervention is also important to consider. Terms that are considered *tier 1*, or high-frequency words that commonly occur in spoken language (Beck, McKeown, & Kuncan, 2002), for native English-speakers may not be as accessible for ELLs depending on their cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Méndez, Crais, Castro, & Kainz, 2013).

Teach Comprehension Monitoring

Vocabulary plays a vital role in language comprehension for ELLs (August & Shanahan, 2006). Encouraging ELLs to monitor their understanding of words within connected speech may facilitate improved listening comprehension. This level of metalinguistic awareness, or ability to recognize and manipulate elements of language (Nagy & Anderson, 1995), can be developed through explicit teaching of comprehension monitoring. Taylor and Fry (1992) describe comprehension monitoring as a method of *self-listening*, during which students pay close attention to what they understand, what they do not understand, and their ability to resolve any confusion. Comprehension monitoring is a key skill for children learning English as a second language, particularly considering the potential cultural and linguistic barriers when attempting

to comprehend school language from linguistic minority backgrounds (August & Hakuta, 1997).

There are various strategies for assisting ELLs in developing this metalinguistic awareness; focusing on vocabulary is one such strategy that may be particularly effective in improving later reading comprehension (Zipke, 2011). Explicit strategy instruction is critical to developing generalizable comprehension monitoring skills in students (Lubliner & Smetana, 2005). SLPs can effectively embed vocabulary instruction in connected language to provide concrete opportunities to model, discuss, and practice comprehension monitoring strategies with students (see Zipke, 2011). For example, the SLP may present a novel vocabulary word in a sentence and pause at the end of the sentence to highlight that target word. He or she may then comment on the importance of understanding the word's meaning in the particular sentence and identify strategies to determine the word's meaning. Using think aloud methods, educational team members can model how to say what they are thinking, or the decoding process that occurs, when they see an unfamiliar word (van Someren, Barnard, & Sandberg, 1994). By first modeling strategies and then practicing think-aloud with students, SLPs can help ELLs learn to self-identify unfamiliar words that are impeding their comprehension (Lubliner & Smetana, 2005).

In addition to teaching comprehension monitoring explicitly in the context of connected language, instructors can promote active listening through word play, or manipulating word meanings, arrangements, sounds, spellings, and variations of words (Honig, Diamond, Gutlohn, 2008). Word play activities, such as adding or subtracting affixes to and from various words, can motivate students to become interested in word variations and improve vocabulary acquisition. SLPs can also model *adept diction*, or making specific and intentional word choices to maximize communication clarity, and encourage similar careful word choice in ELLs (Graves, 2000).

Vocabulary Acquisition through Reading

Substantial research has shown ELLs' vocabulary knowledge is closely tied to reading comprehension (e.g., Kieffer, 2008). Recently, it has been demonstrated that vocabulary and reading development are interdependent; vocabulary growth supports reading comprehension and increased reading comprehension promotes stronger vocabulary knowledge (Quinn et al., 2015). SLPs can combine book reading and vocabulary instruction to support vocabulary and literacy growth simultaneously, a strategy particularly beneficial for ELLs who are at risk for language and literacy deficits (Baker et al., 2014).

Books provide excellent contexts for introducing novel words and discussing their meanings with ELLs. They offer multiple exposures to words, rich examples, and contextual information that can support deeper learning of vocabulary (Honig et al., 2008). For younger students, illustrations are often available in books, which can be used as visual referents when discussing vocabulary. They also provide natural opportunities for active engagement with targets through discussion and expansions, enhancing instruction (Honig et al., 2008).

When using a book for vocabulary instruction with ELLs, SLPs should carefully consider the genre of the book and which vocabulary targets to address within the book. Exposing ELLs to different genres, such as informational texts, can help students build the background information necessary to develop their understanding of word meanings. SLPs should emphasize academic vocabulary (Baker et al., 2014) and consider *depth* and *breadth* of word targets. Words that exhibit depth and breadth are words with multiple meanings that can be encountered across a variety of content areas (e.g., math, science, and social studies) (Baker et al., 2014). Improving understanding of words that occur across contexts will yield more noticeable gains, or more generalized comprehension, than words that occur less frequently (Beck, et al., 2002).

ELLs may benefit from comprehension monitoring in oral language and apply this

strategy to written texts as well. SLPs can ask students to identify unfamiliar words and then work with the students to develop a problem-solving approach to determine the words' meanings. It may be beneficial to encourage students to recognize potential cognates in an effort to infer meanings of unfamiliar terms (August & Shanahan, 2006). SLPs can also encourage the use of context clues, dictionaries, and leverage *morphological awareness* to assist children in inferring meanings of new vocabulary in written text.

Build Morphological Awareness

The relationship between morphology and vocabulary has been described as reciprocal. Understanding morphology promotes vocabulary growth and vocabulary growth improves students' understanding of morphology (Kieffer & Leseaux, 2008). For ELLs who lack morphological knowledge, it is difficult to determine the meaning of novel words through incidental exposure in a sentence with limited context (Oz, 2014). Building morphological awareness in ELLs can support enhanced ability to infer novel word meanings and comprehend oral and written language (Apel & Werfel, 2014).

SLPs can incorporate techniques into instruction to bolster ELLs' morphological awareness. While employing comprehension monitoring, ELLs first identify specific unfamiliar words in spoken or written language. When unfamiliar words are identified, SLPs can model how to break the unfamiliar words into morphemes, distinguishing between affixes (i.e., bound morphemes) and roots (i.e., free morphemes), and assisting the student to consider each morpheme's meaning (Oz, 2014). Explicitly teaching morphemes that are not recognized by ELLs has been identified as an effective strategy for improving vocabulary skills (Kieffer & Leseaux, 2008). Providing multiple examples is thought to be beneficial to solidify understanding. ELLs who have sufficient morphological awareness to infer word meanings

develop stronger language and literacy skills than those with more limited morphological

knowledge (Kieffer & Lesaux, 2008).

Collaborating with Classroom Teachers

Although working effectively with ELLs in pull-out situations is widely implemented, it

is also crucial for SLPs to be able to collaborate with teachers to enhance instruction within the

classroom curriculum. Under the speech-language pathology scope of practice (ASHA, 2007),

SLPs should collaborate with teachers to promote provision of effective language and literacy

instruction. With the adoption of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), teachers have

reported unease regarding their preparation to incorporate the rigorous language and literacy

standards in all content areas (Zygouris-Coe & Goodwiler, 2013). SLPs should be ready to work

with teachers to build language and literacy instruction into all curriculums.

To help classroom teachers intensify their vocabulary instruction to ELLs, it is

recommended that SLPs meet with teachers one-on-one or provide a customized educational in-

service (see Baxter, Brookes, Bianchi, Rashid, & Hay, 2009). SLPs can focus on cooperatively

building instructors' understanding of the unique characteristics of ELLs' vocabulary

development. It may be particularly beneficial to discuss the differences between ELLs and

monolingual students who receive the same scores on English vocabulary tests, as outlined in the

earlier sections of this paper, and to establish consistency between the teacher's and SLP's

objectives for students (Baxter et al., 2009).

After establishing a foundation of shared background knowledge, SLPs can work with

teachers to leverage ELLs' native language(s) into the classroom. Teachers can encourage

cognate awareness through creating word walls, or lists of cognate pairs, for students to expand

throughout the school year (Escamilla, 2000). If neither the SLP nor the teacher speaks a

student's native language, cognate lists can be requested from parents or created using translation websites that provide word pronunciations. Teachers and SLPs may use these resources to incorporate ELLs' native language in their English-based classrooms. For students in earlier elementary grades, teachers may find bilingual posters and bilingual signs helpful to label classroom areas. Whenever possible, both the SLP and the teacher should encourage ELLs' native language use to facilitate learning (Kohnert et al., 2005).

SLPs can also assist instructors in teaching comprehension monitoring throughout all content areas to benefit both ELLs and monolingual English speaking students (Lubliner & Smetana, 2005). As an example think aloud activity (van Someren et al., 1994), teachers can introduce comprehension monitoring through narrating short engaging stories that include key nonsense words. Using this task the teacher asks students if they heard the nonsense word or if they know what it means. After a brief discussion, the teacher provides additional opportunities for whole-class practice, encouraging students to signal (e.g., thumbs down) when they hear a word they do not understand. The teacher can model this strategy explicitly, using the agreed-upon signal and thinking aloud (van Someren et al., 1994) during each content lesson while students observe and eventually join in the practice. When teachers see students using the signal, they can provide guided discussions to promote problem-solving and to familiarize students with novel words. After establishing the signal in practice, teachers can encourage generalization of students' comprehension monitoring to activities throughout the day (Dollaghan, 1987).

Teachers of older students can also encourage comprehension monitoring through a variety of techniques. Strategies may include providing pre- and post-lesson vocabulary logs and explicitly demonstrating their use (Abrams & Walsh, 2014). Using this technique, students are taught how to record key vocabulary they think will be included in a lesson, new vocabulary

emphasized in the lesson, and vocabulary with which they were unfamiliar. Logs can also be used with both written and orally-presented lessons. During implementation of this strategy, students are encouraged to pay particular attention to unfamiliar words (Abrams & Walsh, 2014). Teachers can collect logs daily and address unknown words the next day.

Additional strategies for older students include incorporating periodic summarization or self-check comprehension questions with explicit demonstration of think-aloud techniques (van Someren et al., 1994). This technique is intended to increase students' awareness of their own understanding and critical thinking to improve this understanding. Teachers can foster increased awareness through require modeling, group work, and individual guided practice. SLPs may need to provide coaching and support throughout these processes to maximize teacher comfort and persistence in the early stages of teaching comprehension monitoring (Baxter et al., 2009).

Morphological awareness training can also be incorporated into all content areas of the curriculum. For younger students, this may include explicit discussion of root words and their derivational forms. Examples include a) providing students with lists of prefixes and suffixes that change word meanings, b) clustering those that have the same meaning (e.g., "un-" and "dis-," prefixes meaning "not"); and c) incorporating games with weekly spelling or vocabulary words, such as creating as many forms of each word as possible within a designated time frame (see Apel, Brimo, Diehm, & Apel, 2013). Morphological awareness practice with older students can be simple, requiring minimal additions to teachers' lesson plans. One example of a technique, based on suggestions from Apel and Werfel (2014), is to write multiple forms of new vocabulary on the board (e.g., to introduce the use of a triple-beam "balance," a science teacher may write "balance, balances, balancing, balanced" and comment on the difference between the noun and verb forms of "balance"). Teachers can also take advantage of multiple-morpheme

vocabulary words, using opportunities to break down the words into their component parts and discussing what meaning can be inferred (Apel & Werfel, 2014).

Teachers may be unaware of the resources and methods available to intensify their vocabulary teaching to ELL students. SLPs are vital in providing support to instructors and helping strategize to incorporate techniques into their curriculums. Through regular coaching and sensitivity to teachers' particular needs (Baxter et al., 2009), SLPs can create opportunities for ELLs to maximize their learning within the classroom curriculum.

Additional Supports for ELLs

A few programs have emerged in recent years that are explicitly designed to intensify vocabulary instruction for ELLs in the classroom. Some programs are cross-content (e.g. Word Generation) and others are specific to particular content areas (e.g. QuEST). Several have been widely adopted in schools serving a high percentage of ELLs. Other supplemental instructional programs not specifically designed for ELLs have increased in popularity and use in an attempt to differentiate instruction (e.g. iReady). We provide a brief overview of curricular supports in Table 1, many of which are available with free open access. Table 1 is not intended to endorse any specific programs, but to provide informational resources for use in conjunction with regular education to build upon existing supports and resources that may be available within districts.

Table 1

Selected Studies of Supplemental Curricular Supports

Program	Description	Participants	Outcomes/Findings
Word Generation *Materials can be downloaded at: http://wg.serpmedia.org/	Discussion-based vocabulary building activities are provided for structured interactive classroom activities with 5 new words explicitly targeted per week. Critical components are thought to be: a) discussion with peers; b) semantically rich contexts; c) recurrent exposure; d) authentic communication contexts	28 schools in two districts 3754 students in 6th – 8th grade	Word-learning gains were strongest for ELLs. Program effects were still evident one year later. Dramatically higher discussion was noted in the Word Generation classrooms as rated by observers. Significant but small effects were found on student knowledge of targeted academic vocabulary words. No significant effects were found on standardized vocabulary measures.
Quality English and Science Teaching (QuEST)	Incorporates visuals and 1st language translations for use during hands-on experimentation to improve science and academic vocabulary over a 9 week period (40 minute sessions 5 days a week). Critical components are thought to be: a) engagement, b) exploration, c) explanation, d) extensions, and e) evaluation.	890 students participated (562 were ELLs and 328 students who were proficient in English). Ten 6th grade classes in five middle schools in Texas	Significant growth in science knowledge and vocabulary for the treatment group compared to randomly assigned comparison group.
Vocabulary Improvement Program	Repeated exposure to target words is embedded in engaging texts for vocabulary	254 children (142 were ELLs and 112 were English-	Students in the intervention group showed greater growth than students in the comparison group in depth of vocabulary knowledge,

	instruction during a 15 week intervention (targeting 10-12 words per week for 30 minutes four days/week). Intervention leverages meaningful context, morphology, multiple meanings, and cognates. Critical components are thought to be: a) access to text's meaning in Spanish (on first day of exposure); b) exposure to meaning in varying contexts, and c) inferring meaning from cognates.	speaking monolinguals) from nine 5th grade classrooms in California, Virginia, and Massachusetts.	understanding multiple meanings, and reading comprehension. Students improved on word mastery, word association, cloze tasks and a polysemy task. ELLs outperformed English only students on a polysemy task
Language Workshop	After-school supplemental instruction (5 weeks/ 4 days per week) for English academic vocabulary learning (targeting 12 new words per week) through explicit word meanings, multiple exposures across contexts, and varied practice opportunities.	52 middle school English language learners in southern California Mean age: 12 years;11 months	Treatment group showed significantly greater academic vocabulary growth than comparison group. No significant growth on non-target words.
Improving Comprehension Online	Internet delivered 16 week intervention using digital texts with embedded audio recordings, word glossaries, and multimedia illustrations to improve word learning and comprehension.	240 students 49% of participants were Spanish-English bilingual speakers	Significant effects on vocabulary based on researcher developed probes. Significant effects on vocabulary based on standardized vocabulary measure. No significant effects on performance on a comprehension measure.
Vocabulary Enhanced-	Teacher implemented 8 week	50 first grade	Significant effects on definition skills.

Systematic and Explicit Teaching Routines	vocabulary intervention using scripted lesson plan to teach specific vocabulary words (32 targeted) for 15 minutes of explicit instruction during the 90 minute reading block.	Spanish speaking students Elementary schools in Oregon, Washington, and Texas	No significant effects on general English language proficiency. No significant effects on general vocabulary in Spanish. No significant effects on oral reading fluency.

Notes. Referenced programs in the order appearing in the table: Word Generation (Lawrence, Capotosto, Branum-Martin, White & Snow; 2012; Lawrence, Crosson, Pare-Blagoev & Snow, 2015; Snow, Lawrence, & White, 2009); Quality English and Science Teaching (QuEST; August, Branum-Martin, Cardenas-Hagan & Francis, 2009); Vocabulary Improvement Program (VIP; Carlo et al., 2004); Language Workshop (Townsend & Collins, 2009); Improving Comprehension Online (Proctor, Dalton, Uccelli, Biancarosa, Mo, Snow & Neugebauer, 2011); Vocabulary Enhanced-Systematic and Explicit Teaching Routines (Cena, Luft Baker, Kame'enui, Baker, Park, & Smolkowski, 2013)

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Learning Outcome:

Readers will be able to identify and apply enhanced vocabulary instruction strategies appropriate

for school-age ELLs.

CEU Questions:

1. Two kindergarten students receive the same raw score on an English vocabulary test. One

   of the students is an ELL and the other is monolingual-English. What important

   distinction should be made between the students?

   > a. The ELL likely has additional vocabulary in his or her native language.

   > b. The monolingual student has more potential to develop English vocabulary.

   > c. The ELL has more English vocabulary than the monolingual student.

   > d. The ELL has less ability to communicate in English.

   Correct answer is A.

   Rationale: ELLs' total vocabulary knowledge is divided across two languages, but

   monolingual children's vocabulary knowledge exists in only one language.

2. How can a monolingual SLP leverage ELLs' native language to support English

   vocabulary acquisition?

   > a. Use short sentences and frequent pauses, but only speak in English.

   > b. Ask teachers to sit ELLs will only English-speaking peers in class.

   > c. Use interpreter apps to interpret sentences into ELLs' native language.

   > d. Involve individuals who speak ELLs' native language in therapy.

   Correct answer is D.

Rationale: Monolingual SLPs can coach peers and caregivers who speak ELLs' native language(s) to provide support to ELLs. Monolingual SLPs should promote native language use and not rely extensively on interpreter apps.

3. What skill is essential for ELLs to learn to start developing vocabulary more quickly independently?

      a. Common underlying proficiency

      b. Comprehension monitoring

      c. Ability to create expansions

      d. Basic interpersonal communication skills

Correct answer is B.

Rationale: Comprehension monitoring promotes increased self-awareness in ELLs. With increased awareness of understanding, ELLs are better prepared to identify deficits in their own understanding and seek help to increase comprehension.

4. What skill helps ELLs infer novel word meanings by breaking the word into its component parts?

      a. Phonological awareness

      b. Comprehension monitoring

      c. Morphological awareness

      d. Native language use

Correct answer is C.

Rationale: Morphological awareness is the ability to understand and manipulate morphemes in words. When applied to novel vocabulary, morphological awareness can be used to divide words into parts and subsequently infer their meanings.