

# The Educator's Science of Reading Toolbox

*By the National Center on Improving Literacy in Partnership with The Reading League Journal*

## BEST PRACTICES FOR IMPROVING LANGUAGE AND LITERACY OUTCOMES FOR ENGLISH LEARNERS

As classrooms across the United States continue to change, it is critical that educators are able to successfully address the unique language and learning needs of English learners (ELs) and provide efficient and high-quality supports when gaps in achievement are identified. This Educator's Toolbox describes some best practices that educators can use in their classrooms to help ELs acquire the language and literacy skills needed to succeed academically.

### ***Direct and Explicit Instruction Focusing on Key Aspects of Literacy***

All students should receive comprehensive, evidence-based language and literacy instruction as part of their core curriculum. This is especially critical for ELs. Effective core instruction for ELs should target the key components of literacy, including phonological awareness, phonics, vocabulary, oral reading fluency, comprehension, and writing. Core classroom teaching should be explicit, systematic, and differentiated for students' language and learning needs.

### ***Academic Vocabulary***

It is important to provide extensive and varied vocabulary instruction to ELs. Research suggests that you carefully choose a set of academic vocabulary words to teach intensively across several days using a variety of instructional activities (Baker et al., 2014). An academic vocabulary word is one that is used when talking or writing in academic settings but not usually when talking or writing in social settings. There are four ways that you can carry out this recommendation in your classroom:

- 1. Choose a brief, engaging piece of informational text that includes academic vocabulary as a platform for intensive academic vocabulary**

### **instruction.**

Find a short, interesting piece of text with the words that you want to focus on. Select a text that is motivating to students and carries content-rich material that will allow you to provide deep instruction and vocabulary.

#### **2. Choose a small set of academic vocabulary for in-depth instruction.**

After you have selected an engaging piece of text, you can next choose a small number of academic vocabulary words that you want to teach in-depth. These could be words that are used frequently, words that are used in other subjects, words that have more than one meaning, words that can be studied based on their word parts, or words that are cognates.

#### **3. Teach academic vocabulary in depth using multiple modalities (writing, speaking, listening).**

After you have selected the words you want to teach, vary how you teach them between listening, speaking, and writing activities. Academic vocabulary should be taught explicitly using a variety of strategies. Recommended strategies include using student-friendly definitions; clarifying and reinforcing these definitions using examples, non-examples, and concrete representations; and using activities to promote word learning.

#### **4. Teach word-learning strategies to help students independently figure out the meaning of words.**

It is important to give students ways to determine the meaning of words when they are reading by themselves. Developing students' independent word-learning skills helps them to engage with challenging text and new vocabulary on their own. You can introduce multiple word-learning strategies for students to use, including context clues, word parts, or cognates (National Center for Education Evaluation, 2022). Each strategy includes techniques that may help the reader create a working definition of an unfamiliar word. *Context clues* allow students to derive personal, yet workable definitions of words using the surrounding text that they understand. By focusing on *word parts*, students can examine prefixes, suffixes, and root words to find familiar patterns in unfamiliar words. *Cognates*, or words that have a shared origin in one or more languages, can be used to help ELs link English words to their primary language.

## **Content-area Instruction**

Educators should provide ELs with opportunities to build content knowledge and language competence in tandem (Baker et al., 2014). Integrating oral and written English language instruction into content-area teaching will allow your students to build both their speaking and writing abilities as they are learning subject matter. These four steps will help you carry out this recommendation in your classroom:

#### **1. Strategically use instructional tools--such as short videos, visuals, and graphic organizers--to anchor instruction and help students make sense of content.**

These instructional tools can be used to prepare students for a lesson by providing them with necessary background knowledge, raising issues, and conveying themes that will be pursued in the lesson.

#### **2. Explicitly teach the content-specific academic vocabulary, as well as the general academic vocabulary that supports it, during content-area instruction.**

The importance of vocabulary instruction for ELs cannot be overemphasized. It is critical to teach

both general and domain-specific academic vocabulary words to ELs during content instruction. General academic vocabulary words are used in writing across many academic disciplines, while domain-specific academic vocabulary words are unique to a particular academic discipline. Both general academic words and domain-specific vocabulary should be taught explicitly.

### **3. Provide daily opportunities for students to talk about content in pairs or small groups.**

Short peer conversations should take place multiple times daily in order to reinforce learning. Keep in mind that success in ensuring that peer conversations are productive hinges on having routines and guidelines firmly in place.

## **Structured Writing Instruction**

Educators should make writing a priority by providing regular, structured opportunities for ELs to develop written language skills (Baker et al., 2014). There are several ways that you can incorporate regular opportunities for ELs to develop their skills in writing:

### **1. Provide writing assignments that are anchored in content and focused on developing academic language as well as writing skills.**

Assign writing tasks that are based on subject matter that you have already studied and discussed with your students. The writing assignment should provide students with an opportunity to use their newly acquired academic vocabulary words and to improve their writing skills. Vocabulary words, as well as transition words such as therefore, however, and next, should be reviewed before students begin writing. It is recommended that you develop and consistently use instructional routines that help move students from graphic organizers to the writing process.

### **2. For all writing assignments, provide language-based supports to facilitate students' entry into, and continued development of, writing.**

Use language-based supports to help students as they write. For example, you can take a graphic organizer, such as the Venn diagram, to help students comprehend content being studied and then develop a writing framework. This helps students to convert the content in the graphic organizer into an organized response to a writing assignment. A writing framework may include a sentence starter for ELs who need this level of support.

### **3. Use small groups or pairs to provide opportunities for students to work and talk together on varied aspects of writing.**

Have your students talk in small groups or pairs during all phases of the writing process, from brainstorming to revising to final draft. Giving your students opportunities to talk to their peers benefits their language development and, thus, their ability to write.

### **4. Assess students' writing periodically to identify instructional needs and provide positive, constructive feedback in response.**

Weekly assessments, using writing rubrics, are a good way to measure student growth as well as your own progress in attaining your instructional objectives.

## **Small-group Intervention**

It is necessary to provide small-group instructional intervention to students struggling in areas of literacy and English language development (Baker et al., 2014). Additional high-quality small-group intervention should be provided to students who are struggling in literacy, English language development, or both. This small-group instruction should be provided on a daily basis. It should

be teacher-directed, with ample scaffolds to make learning easier. And, there should be plenty of opportunities for students to practice what is being taught. Ways to carry out this recommendation include:

**1. Use available assessment information to identify students who demonstrate persistent struggles with aspects of language and literacy development.**

You should use available assessment information to identify which of your students demonstrate persistent struggles with literacy and language development. These students should receive small-group instruction with content designed to target their identified needs.

**2. Design the content of small-group instruction to target students' identified needs.**

It is important to target each students' instructional needs, keeping in mind that some ELs struggle with foundational skills, such as phonemic awareness, phonics, and fluency, while others struggle to comprehend what they are reading. For students who struggle with basic foundational reading skills, it is important to spend time not only on these skills but also on vocabulary development and listening and reading comprehension strategies.

**3. Provide additional instruction in small groups consisting of three to five students to students struggling with both language and literacy.**

It is useful to formulate homogeneous groups for students with similar needs and foundational skills in reading development. At the same time, it may also be effective to form heterogeneous groups, especially when working with students in content areas or when introducing and discussing a piece of text. This is because students will benefit from listening to the thoughts and opinions of their peers related to the new concepts they are learning. Small-group instruction within a 30-minute period should include several brief, targeted, and engaging activities.

**4. For students who struggle with basic foundational reading skills, spend time not only on these skills but also on vocabulary development and listening and reading comprehension strategies.**

Whenever possible to make more productive use of time, plan instructional activities that address literacy and language needs simultaneously.

**5. Provide scaffolded instruction that includes frequent opportunities for students to practice and review newly learned skills and concepts in various contexts over several lessons to ensure retention.**

The beneficial instructional practices of explicit, systematic instruction should be utilized when providing small-group instruction for struggling ELs. These practices include dividing instruction into small, manageable units; providing ample modeling and think-alouds; frequently checking for student understanding; providing immediate corrective feedback; reviewing previously taught material; and providing frequent practice opportunities.

## **Leverage ELs' home language, prior knowledge, traditions and other assets**

Effective educators recognize that bilingual students draw on linguistic resources in both languages (*Multitiered System of Supports for English Learners*, 2018). In effective classrooms for ELs, teachers view linguistic and background, languages, traditions, and beliefs as assets in the learning process, communicate high expectations, and apply instructional practices that are

responsive to variations in student knowledge (*Multitiered System of Supports for English Learners*, 2018). Effective school leaders and coaches support teachers in establishing home-school partnerships, identifying and addressing deficit perspectives of ELs, and providing instruction that is responsive to linguistic and background variations.

For more information about evidence-based reading instruction and resources you can use in your classroom, please visit the National Center on Improving Literacy at <https://improvingliteracy.org>.

## References

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[nciliteracy@gmail.com](mailto:nciliteracy@gmail.com)

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