



**University of Florida
College of Education
School of Teaching and Learning**

Vocabulary Strategies Across Stages of Proficiency

Vocabulary is a critical topic regarding the education of ELLs. It cuts across all four domains of language--reading, writing, speaking and listening, as well as all grade levels, all content areas and all levels of English language proficiency. One of the most important things we can do for our ELLs is provide comprehensive vocabulary instruction that blends **direct instruction** with **incidental learning**.

Direct Instruction

One of the most common strategies for teaching vocabulary is asking students to look up the definition of a word in a dictionary. There are a few problems with the definitional approach.

First of all, dictionary definitions are often not all that helpful, particularly for ELLs. **Definitions** do not typically teach students how to use a word. In fact, definitions alone teach us very little about how a word is actually used.

The point is not that the definitional approach should never be used. The point is that the definitional approach is not adequate by itself.

Context is not always as informative and helpful as we think it is either. Context may look quite helpful if one already knows the meaning of the word, but it doesn't always supply adequate information for the person who has no idea of what the word means.

For example, read the following sentence and determine the meaning of the underlined word.

- Although Mary is funny, her sister is **morose**.

Do you know the meaning of the underlined word using just the context of the sentence? Contrast is clearly involved but the exact nature of the contrast is only clear to someone who already knows the meaning of morose. The problem becomes obvious

when we substitute other words for morose. No reason we couldn't substitute hysterical or boring for morose.

There is no question that learning from context is an important avenue of vocabulary growth, but students need more than just being told to look at the context of the sentence to figure it out.

Effective direct vocabulary instruction involves integrating new words with other knowledge students already have. In other words, it involves tying new words to familiar concepts and experiences.

Two vocabulary strategies that integrate new knowledge with prior knowledge include Semantic Maps and Semantic Feature Analysis.

Semantic Maps

Semantic maps are excellent tools for building vocabulary and activating background knowledge. The following YouTube video showcases a teacher talking about using semantic maps in his classroom.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-GOIMPkhzJ4>

Semantic Feature Analysis (SFA)

While semantic maps present a broad view of semantic relationships within a concept, SFA focuses on the finer relationships between and among words.

Like semantic maps, SFA draws on a reader's prior knowledge and stresses the relationship across words within a concept.

Unlike semantic maps, however, SFA explores how words differ from one another rather than how they are alike

Analyzing semantic features of a word helps ELLs master important concepts and has great potential for expanding their vocabulary

SFA works well for building general vocabulary, as well as content-specific vocabulary.

	has fur	has feathers	can fly	can be a pet	runs on four legs
dog	+	-	-	+	+
cat	+	-	-	+	+
hamster	+	-	-	+	+
buffalo	?	-	-	-	+
tiger	+	-	-	-	+
sparrow	-	+	+	-	-
horse	?	-	-	?	+

SFA Directions

Select a category or topic for the semantic feature analysis.

Provide students with key vocabulary words and important features related to the topic.

Vocabulary words should be listed down the left-hand column and the features of the topic across the top row of the chart.

Have students place a "+" sign in the matrix when a vocabulary word aligns with a particular feature of the topic. If the word does not align students may put a "-" in the grid. If students are unable to determine a relationship they may leave it blank.

Meaningful Use

Many encounters with a new word are necessary if **direct vocabulary instruction** is going to expand the lexicons of our students. Effective vocabulary instruction helps students use words in meaningful ways. The more deeply information is processed, the more likely it will be remembered. In other words, vocabulary instruction that makes students think about the meaning of a word and demands they do some meaningful processing of the word is more effective than instruction that does not.

Remember—there is a difference between knowing the meaning of a word and being able to use it. Knowing the definition does not always mean that the word will be used properly in a sentence.

One way to process words in a meaningful way is to design activities that require students to draw inferences. Look at the two items below. Which task requires students to draw an inference about the meaning of a word rather than simply recalling the meaning?

- | | |
|--------------------|--|
| 1. Gendarme means: | 2. A gendarme is most likely to carry a: |
| A. bellboy | A. suitcase |
| B. policeman | B. tray |
| C. waiter | C. policeman |

If you said item 2, you are correct. Item 1 simply asks students to recall the meaning of gendarme (a French policeman), while item 2 requires students to draw an inference.

Word Association Activities

The teacher says a familiar word and students respond with a closely related word selected from a group of words that have been taught.

For example, let's say students have learned the meaning of these four words: ***virtuoso, philanthropist, novice, and accomplice.***

Students are then asked to associate or match familiar words with the new vocabulary words they learned.

If I say burglar, which word do you associate it with from the four previously learned words? That's right—accomplice

Sentence Completion Activities

Sentence completion activities help steer students in the direction of writing sentences that really use the meaning of the word instead of producing non-meaningful sentences like “I saw X yesterday.”

Sentence completion activities are used after students have learned the target words. They are ideal for helping reinforce target vocabulary in a meaningful way.

For example, how can the following sentence be completed?

The accomplice was worried because _____.

This stem steers students in the direction of using the word **accomplice** in a meaningful way.

Inferential Questions:

When father heard that Lisa ripped up Steve’s letter from Steve, Father commended her for it.

What does father think of Steve?

Asking questions like this, requires students to engage in inferential thinking. It is only meaningful, however, after students have learned the meaning of target words

Word Sorts: Open and Closed

The object of word sorting is to group words into different categories by looking for shared features among their meanings.

Open sorts: no category or criterion for grouping is known in advance.

Look at the list of words below. What categories can you sort them into?

Tools, water, trees, minerals, machinery, wildlife, factories, tractors, labor, Buildings, power plants, typewriters

Closed Sorts: students are provided the category or criterion for sorting a group of words.

Name: _____

Animals Copy and Paste

Classify – Copy and paste these animals next to the correct word groups.

Insects		
Amphibians		
Mammals		
Fish		
Reptiles		
Birds		

Butterfly, Frog, Pig, Fish, Bird, Snake, Fly, Bear, Lizard

Notice that this word sort can be completed with either pictures or words depending on the English proficiency level of the student



Dog, Boy, Fish, Starfish, Cat

Incidental Vocabulary Learning:

Incidental learning is the process of learning something without the intention of doing so. In terms of vocabulary acquisition, ELLs learn new words while watching television, listening to the radio, talking with a friend, and while independently reading, just to name a few. Incidental learning is one way of acquiring new words, but to maximize the chance of students acquiring vocabulary incidentally, we need to teach students **about** words.

For example, we can teach students about word parts given that a **word** usually has three parts: a **root**, a **prefix** and a **suffix**. It is in the **root** part of the **word** that the **base** element or basic meaning is contained.

A **base word** is a word in its simplest form. A base word has nothing added to it.

Happy, Do, Wonder & Color are all base words. Students can be taught to add prefixes and suffixes to base words to make new words.

Prefixes are added to the beginning of a base word. They change the meaning of the base word.

Un + happy = unhappy

Re + do = redo

Suffixes are added to the end of a base word. They change the meaning of the base word.

wonder + ful = wonderful

color + ful = colorful

Selecting Words to Teach:

In the article "Choosing Words to Teach," the authors discuss principles for selecting which words to explicitly teach. Another article, "Selecting Vocabulary Words to Teach English Language Learners," offers specific guidance regarding ELLs. Both articles address Three Tiers of Vocabulary Words teacher need to consider. Definitions and examples regarding the three tiers of vocabulary are below, as well as links to the articles.

Tier 1 words consist of the most basic words — *clock, baby, happy*. Tier 1 words commonly appear in spoken language. Because they are heard frequently in numerous contexts and with nonverbal communication, Tier 1 words rarely require explicit instruction, except for beginning ELLs.

Tier 2 words are high-frequency words that occur across contexts. Examples include, hilarious, compare, contrast, despise, and endure. We get a lot of bang for our buck explicitly teaching Tier 2 words.

Tier 3 words are content specific words. They are not frequently used except in specific content areas or domains. Examples include *isotope, lathe, perimeter, peninsula*. Tier 3 words are central to building knowledge and conceptual understanding within the various academic domains and should be integral to instruction of content.

<http://www.readingrockets.org/article/choosing-words-teach>

<http://www.colorincolorado.org/article/selecting-vocabulary-words-teach-english-language-learners>

Teach ELLs what to Do When They Come Across a Word They Don't Know:

1. Recognize that an unknown word has occurred.
2. Decide whether you need to understand it to understand the passage.
3. Attempt to infer the meaning of the word from the context surrounding it.
4. Attempt to infer the meaning looking for word parts.
5. Attempt to sound out the word and see if you come up with a word you know.
6. Turn to a dictionary, glossary, or another person for the meaning.

What Research Tells Us About Vocabulary Instruction

Closing the gap: Addressing the vocabulary needs of English language learners in bilingual and mainstream classrooms by Maria Carlo, Diane August, Barry McLaughlin, Catherine Snow, Cheryl Dresser, David Lippman, Teresa Lively and Claire White

Gaps in reading performance between Anglo and Latino children are associated with gaps in vocabulary knowledge. An **intervention** was designed to enhance fifth graders' academic vocabulary strategies that **blends direct and indirect vocabulary** instruction. More specifically, the meanings of academically useful words were taught with strategies for using information from context, from morphology, from knowledge about multiple meanings, and from cognates to infer word meaning. Among the principles underlying the intervention were that new words should be encountered in meaningful text, that native Spanish speakers should have access to the text's meaning through Spanish, that word should be encountered in varying contexts, and that word knowledge involves spelling, pronunciation, morphology, and syntax as well as depth of meaning.

Fifth graders in the intervention group showed greater growth than the comparison group on knowledge of the words taught, on depth of vocabulary knowledge, on understanding multiple meanings, and on reading comprehension. The intervention effects were as large for the English-language learners (ELLs) as for the English-only speakers (EOs), though the ELLs scored lower on all pre- and posttest measures. The results show the feasibility of improving comprehension outcomes for students in mixed ELL-EO classes, by teaching word analysis and vocabulary learning strategies

Additional Resources:

Welcome to Project DELTA's ESOL (English to Speakers of Other Languages) professional development videos. These videos are intended for teacher-educators in teacher education programs, either with infused content and/or stand-alone coursework in ESOL. The videos were designed in consideration of a two course, ESOL infused teacher education program model, such as the ProTeach program at the University of Florida. However, varied other teacher education programs, institutions of higher education, or local school district professional development (PD) programs in ESOL may find these videos useful to prepare teachers or to reinforce teacher learning in professional learning communities.

In Video 2 Segment 1, Sasha Abreu is a third grade, mainstream teacher who teaches in an inclusive classroom with students from diverse backgrounds. She has four ELLs. This segment focuses on the use of visual aids and **vocabulary-building techniques** as strategies she uses to support English language learning in a math class

<https://education.ufl.edu/project-delta/facilitators-guide/>

For more information, see Project STELLAR <https://education.ufl.edu/stellar/>