



**Question:** How can we help English language learners with their vocabulary development?

**Concern:** Understanding of content vocabulary (i.e., concepts and understandings).

### **Scaffolding Strategies**

- Pinpoint content-obligatory vocabulary (terms and phrases indispensable for concepts and understandings) as the focal point of vocabulary development. Identify content-support vocabulary (terms and phrases that are important for concepts and understandings). Work with the ESL teacher to devise personalized vocabulary lists for English language learners and have the students keep vocabulary journals.
- Use categorical frameworks to help students understand the difference between general and technical vocabulary. For example, post a science word wall that distinguishes between general academic vocabulary (e.g., fall to the bottom, rise to the top, stay the same) and technical vocabulary (e.g., sink, rise, remain unchanged). Use the Simon Says, Science Says strategy to have students practice the different terms, or have students use a cooperative learning strategy after they have completed related experiments. Finally, indicate to the students which terms are expected in their lab reports.
- Use vocabulary strategies that are more inductive and interactive in nature, such as open word sorts for science, definition maps for social studies, four-dimensional word study for math, and character maps and word walls for language arts (see the vocabulary strategies in the Literacy Strategies area that follows in this section of the manual).
- Plan explicit vocabulary strategies or have vocabulary-building strategies available in centers or as anchor activities (see the Literacy Strategies area that follows in this section of the manual).
- Provide glossaries and bilingual, picture, or electronic dictionaries to students.
- Gather materials (e.g., visuals and multimedia) to create a context for essential vocabulary. Post symbols or icons with labels around the room. Construct a content-based word wall with students as the unit progresses (elementary school level) or have students keep a portable word wall (middle and high school levels).

### **Commentary**

- Content-area vocabulary falls into four categories: high-frequency words, general academic vocabulary, technical or specialized vocabulary, and low-frequency words. Teachers need to systematically analyze which types of words are needed for each kind of classroom task and make the categories explicit to learners.



- Direct study of vocabulary in isolation is not effective. Vocabulary must be contextually presented and practiced. Do not give long lists of words for students to look up in dictionaries and then test them on the meanings of the words.
- The process for vocabulary instruction is best planned as “exposure to, practice with, and mastery of.” The ultimate goal of vocabulary instruction is transfer; that is, students should be able to recognize meanings of words when they come across them while reading or listening, and they should be able to use an expanding vocabulary in their speaking and writing.
- Vocabulary acquisition is also a social phenomenon. Having students work together with words, terms, or phrases will have a positive effect on all students’ conceptual development. Don’t make the assumption that students who are English-proficient do not need vocabulary development, especially academic and technical vocabulary.
- Research continually indicates that free voluntary reading or reading extensively in a wide range of genres is essential for developing high levels of vocabulary (and reading comprehension).