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Quick guide for teachers

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Helping students with English as an Additional Language to improve their vocabulary

Introduction

All students deserve support with learning vocabulary. This is especially important for students with English as an Additional Language (EAL). These students' vocabulary scores are often lower than their scores on other sections of our baseline tests.

Our guide, 'Helping all students to improve their vocabulary', explains teaching strategies that are helpful for all students, including those with EAL. The strategies include:

- Providing access to the right dictionary
- Actively teaching vocabulary in all school subjects
- Expanding vocabulary through reading
- Asking open-ended questions during lessons, and giving plenty of time for responses.

This guide covers extra things that teachers can do to support EAL students.

Which words are the most important to teach?

Leading researchers in vocabulary distinguish three tiers of words. All three tiers are important for doing well in education . When actively teaching vocabulary to EAL students, teachers should spend most of their time focussing on **Tier 2** words. That is, teachers should focus on teaching words that appear across the school curriculum but are not typical in everyday conversation.

Tier 1:

Basic everyday words

Examples: about, who, because, time, most

- Important for good communication with all teachers and fellow students.
- Needed to understand the background contexts used in questions.
- Important in creative subjects such as English literature and drama, where students communicate everyday situations to a reader or an audience.

Tier 2:

Words that appear across the school curriculum but are not typical in everyday conversation

Examples: assess, contrast, method, analyse, examine, conclude, theory, percent

- Around 570 words occur frequently in academic texts and discussions.
- Very general academic words - not specifically connected with a single school subject.
- Not used very often outside of school, but very useful during lessons and in examinations.

Tier 3:

Subject-specific words

Examples: polygon, metabolism, symbiosis, electron, genre, tectonic

- Academic words that are specific to a single subject or a group of similar subjects.
- Help students to engage in lessons and follow what is being taught.
- Help students to demonstrate their understanding in examinations.

What kinds of teaching activities and strategies are most effective?

Leading researchers suggest that the most effective activities for teaching vocabulary to EAL students are those in which the students meet the words in multiple contexts and have lots of opportunities to use and think about the words. All students, but EAL students especially, need to develop their vocabulary through using the words in extended conversation.

Additionally, teachers can use two main types of strategy:

- Strategies to make the language of instruction more supportive. These include:
  - providing a text preview in the student's first language
  - using visuals and multimedia texts to help students access a text.
- Strategies directed at the target words themselves. These include:
  - translating the words being taught
  - for speakers of Latinate languages, drawing students' attention to cognates (words in two languages that are closely related in meaning and look and sound alike).

Resources

We recommend that teachers who want to support students with English as an Additional Language to improve their vocabulary should read Chapter 9 of Bringing words to life: Robust vocabulary instruction losing the vocabulary gap by Isabel Beck, Margaret McKeown and Linda Kucan. This chapter gives more detailed information on these strategies and other ideas in this guide.

Resources from Cambridge University Press & Assessment:

The Cambridge Dictionary is an excellent resource for all students:

https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/

For teachers of English as an Additional Language, the Cambridge group offers a two-hour online course called: Introduction to Teaching Vocabulary which we recommend highly.

Additionally, we publish the following books and resources:

- The Vocabulary in Use book series. This includes Test Your Vocabulary in Use and Academic Vocabulary in Use.
- Developing Intermediate Vocabulary by Simon Haines.
- Primary Vocabulary Box by Caroline Nixon and Michael Tomlinson.
- Games for Vocabulary Practice by Felicity O'Dell and Katie Head.
- Off the Page by Craig Thaine and Scott Thornbury. This book includes a section focused on teaching vocabulary.
- Penny Ur's 77 Tips for Teaching Vocabulary by Penny Ur.
- Vocabulary Activities by Penny Ur.
- Advanced vocabulary in context by Donald Watson.

References

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[iv] Carlo, M. S. August, D., McLaughlin, B., Snow, C. E. Dressler, C., Lippman, D. N., et al. (2004). Closing the gap: Addressing the vocabulary needs of English-language learners in bilingual and mainstream classrooms. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 39 (2), 188-215.

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