Effective Vocabulary Strategies for English Learners in Middle School Classrooms

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Abstract

A significant amount of research indicates that vocabulary plays a critical role for English Learners (ELs) in developing reading skills. This paper provides a variety of vocabulary strategies that classroom teachers can use on a daily basis. Effective strategies, such as student-created videos, literacy circle groups, teacher read-alouds, word sorting games, and word play are applicable for ELs across different content areas.

Keywords: vocabulary, English learners, middle school

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Introduction

From 2003 to 2013, the number of ELs in U.S. public schools grew from 4.1 million students to 4.4 million students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015a). According to recent data, approximately 5 million public school students in the United States participate in school-based English as Second Language (ESL) programs (Kids Count Data Center, 2015; Sanchez, 2017). Of this group, 2.8 million students have insufficient spoken English skills (National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisitions, 2010). Currently, nearly 70% of ELs read at below basic proficiency levels (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2011) and perform 20% to 50% below native English speakers on standardized assessments for reading (Menken, 2010; National Center for Education Statistics, 2015b). Exploring which reading strategies are most effective in working with ELs is highly warranted.

Research illustrates that vocabulary knowledge places a particular burden on ELs' reading comprehension and is a significant predictor for the acquisition of writing skills (Calderon et al., 2005). Limitations with vocabulary presents a major obstacle for ELs with learning the English language (Hart & Risley, 2003; Snow, Barners, Chandler, Goodman, & Hemphill, 2000). Given ELs' critical need for vocabulary development in support of academic literacy, the goal of this paper is to describe engaging and effective ways to promote word study across different content areas.

Strategies Across Disciplinary Areas

Oral Language Practices

Oral expression and word knowledge is enhanced when teachers give middle school ELs the opportunity to use new words or practice

talking about words they have learned. Engaging in oral language practice activities moves beyond traditional instructional practices, such as rote definition and memorization. Instead, students are actively engaged in the learning process, increasing their vocabulary knowledge, oral skills development, and confidence levels. Suggested oral language practices for middle school ELs include student-created I-movie videos, show-and-tell, and author's chair.

Student-created I-movie videos. Technology applications are excellent tools to support oral English language skills and vocabulary usage in different contexts (Peregoy & Boyle, 2017; Tompkins, 2018). Technology and collaboration strategies can be easily combined when students work in small groups to create a short 15-20 minute video. First, the teacher divides the class into small groups of three to five students. Then, the teacher gives each small group several academic vocabulary words from different content areas. Next, small group members use these words to create a storyboard for their movie. Using their completed storyboard as a guide, students compose a draft of a movie script. After small group members revise and edit their movie scripts according to teacher or peer-group feedback, they may then create their video using a moviemaker technology application, such as I-Movie or Windows Movie Maker. An overview and example of a student-created I-Movie is provided below.

A small group of middle school ELs created a television commercial advertisement entitled "Revolution." The small group employed a wide range of vocabulary, such as *blemish, glow, damage, crease, contours and firm,* and *hydrate*:

> I am a super model. I am very famous in the USA. You can find me on many cover pages of well-known woman magazines. I am often being asked, "Why your skins looked like a baby? Why does your facial skin look so

glow?" I use a revolution cream to improve the damaged and blemished skin. The cream can reduce your deep crease lines on the forehead overnight. It will contour and firm your skin and fight for gravity fitness. If you are interested in the incredible skill care product, please call the toll number 1-888-8888.

Student-created I- movie videos projects improve oral language skills with a variety of academic words and create a positive collaborative learning environment.

Show-and-tell. For show-and-tell, the teacher selects about 25 words across content areas. There should be enough variety so that each student selects a different word. For example, a word list might include *mean, repeating decimal, complex fraction, condensation, economics, reprimand,* and *trivial*. The teacher writes the selected words on index cards and places them in a vocabulary jar. The teacher then selects five students to choose a word from the vocabulary jar. Either at the front of the room or at their desks, each student explains the meaning of their word, while the rest of class attempts to guess the word. For example, a student might explain the meaning of the word *mean* in the following manner:

> The word has four letters. The word starts with the letter "m." The word can mean "equal" in math. But, the word can have a negative connotation when it describes someone as not nice or polite. What do you think the word will be?

The teacher should repeat this activity throughout the day or week until each student has had a turn. Show-and-tell could occur before transitions, after transitions, or as a daily warm-up activity.

Alternatively, the teacher divides the class into small groups of three to five students. The teacher provides each small group with their own vocabulary jar that contains about 10 words across content areas. Working in their small groups, students take turns selecting a word and

explaining the meaning while the other small group members try to guess the word. After students use all 10 words, small group members work together to rank the words from easiest to most difficult. Lastly, each small group shares and explains their word ranking to the class.

Author's chair. Author's chair is a popular activity used to support classroom literacy among younger learners (Cunningham & Allington, 2003) and can be adapted to support oral language proficiency among middle school ELs. First, the teacher displays a list of vocabulary words that are connected with different content areas, such as *proportion*, *evaporation*, *condensation*, and *expedition*. Students then take turns sitting in an author's chair and describing the meaning of one word on the list either verbally or nonverbally. For example, a student might explain the meaning of the word *evaporation* as follows:

> The word has 11 letters and starts with the letter "e." The word describes the process of turning a liquid into vapor. We often see the dew on the grass in the morning. But, the dew will be gone when the sun comes out. What word I am?

After the student describes the meaning of their selected word, the rest of the class tries to identify the correct word. The teacher should continue this activity throughout different subject areas each day and provide each student with a turn in the author's chair.

Teacher Read-Alouds

Informational books contain many infrequent and rarely used words, almost twice as many as occur in everyday conversations among adults (Hickman, Pollard-Durodola & Vaughn, 2004). Thus, it is essential that middle school ELs learn to use context clues as a way to help decipher unknown word meanings while reading. To support the development of academic vocabulary, the teacher should consider using children's literature that supports instruction across different content areas, such as the following texts for math and science instruction: *Math Curse* by Jon Scieszka and Lane Smith, *Science Verse* by Jon Scieszka, and *One Grain of Rice* by Demi. Within selected texts, the teacher should identify words that are important and useful for students (see Table 1). Important words are those that appear frequently on literacy tests, and useful words are those that occur more often in casual speech (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002).

Table 1

Children's Literature for Math Instruction and Examples of Important and Useful Words

Book Title and Author	Important Words	Useful Words
Math Curse Jon Scieszka & Lane Smith	carbonate, evaluation, nucleus, ration	electric appliance, water cycle, calories
Science Verse Jon Scieszka	lunatic, estimate	fractions, division
One Grain of Rice Demi	ratio	doubles

For example, the book *Math Curse* includes math vocabulary terms, such as *ratio, fraction*, and *division*. Prior to reading the book aloud, the teacher should display these words for the students and instruct students to snap their fingers when they hear the words during the teacher read-aloud. During the teacher read-aloud, the teacher stops reading when students snap their fingers. The teacher then leads a discussion regarding how to decipher the meaning of the word with context clues. In order to promote retention and applicability of the word under discussion, the teacher leads students to discuss how they could use the words in real life experiences.

Visualizing Activities

Teachers can use visualizing activities with middle school ELs for vocabulary acquisition and comprehension. First, the teacher reads a text aloud to students without showing any illustrations. Following the reading, the teacher asks students to select three key words from the text. The teacher then works with students to create a graphic organizer that helps them visualize the vocabulary words (see Table 2). On the top third of a blank sheet of paper, students write the three words they selected from the text and include a definition for each word. On the remaining two-thirds of the paper, students create a visual illustration for each word using information from the text. Once students complete their graphic organizer, they share them with the class. The visualizing activity provides interaction among middle school ELs with various learning experiences and promotes their understanding and recalling of text.

Table 2

Example of Visualizing Activity from The Boy Who Loved Words by Roni Schotter (2006)

Words	Definitions	Visual Illustration
Scrupulous	Describes a person who is diligent and meticulous to do something.	1►►►►►►►►► 10
Stunning	Describes a person or thing that is extremely impressive or attractive.	Word Puzzle
Spacious	To have ample space.	A 1000-foot swimming pool

Literacy Circle Groups

A literacy circle group promotes reading widely among middle school ELs. The teacher creates a reading list by selecting supplemental reading materials, such as *The Lightning Thief* by Rick Riordan (2005), *The Outsiders* by S.E. Hinton (1967), and *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson (1999). Students select a book from the reading list and form small groups based on their selections. Each small group should consist of no more than six students. Within small groups, each student fulfills a different role, such as summarizer, discussion director, connector, illustrator, travel tracer, and vocabulary enricher. Students read in their

books daily, and the teacher allots 15-20 minutes each week for small groups to meet and discuss their book. Once students finish reading and discussing their book, each small group creates a poster to illustrate vocabulary words and aspects of the story. For example, a small group that read *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson (1999) might highlight the words *abysmal* and *blathers* on their poster in the following character description:

> Heather is from a small town in Ohio and is a new student in Texas. She wants to join a book club that meets every Friday after school. She wants to be part of her new community. But, she is finding it very difficult to break in to the new social scene. These students have been friends since childhood. She feels lonely and *abysmal* since she is not able to join the book club. She began *blathering* on some nonsense topics.

As middle school ELs read and write with their peers through authentic literacy circle experiences, their vocabulary knowledge and word consciousness increases.

Words for the Day

Each school day can begin with Words for the Day. The teacher asks students to select learned words from different content areas and display them on a word wall. Example words may be *exponent*, *insulator*, *satire*, and *diplomacy*. Students then take turns choosing a word and explaining why they selected it, what they think it means, and how they use the word. For example, a student might offer the following explanation for the word *exponent*:

> The word *exponent* has multiple meanings in different content areas. It means advocate, supporter, and proponent. But, it the meaning is different in math. It looks like a small, raised number connected to a whole number in an expression. The word *exponent* is important when making math calculations.

After a student completes their explanation, the teacher reviews meanings associated with the selected word and makes connections across content areas. For example, the teacher can point out that the word *exponent* can be used to measure miles around the globe or the distance to Mars.

Word Sorts

Using word sorts with middle school ELs across different content areas is beneficial for effective development of word knowledge. For example, the teacher can provide students with a list of prefixes (e.g., *dis-*, *mis-*, *un-*) and suffixes (e.g., *-able*, *-ible*, *-ful*). The teacher explains the meanings of each prefix and suffix, along with several examples. Studying prefixes and suffixes is important for ELs and helps them explore word patterns and meanings. To extend word sorting knowledge, the teacher can create a word sort game using different colors. For example, the color green can represent prefixes, and the color orange can represent base words.

Word sorts may also be used as small group activities. The teacher divides students into small groups of no more six students and gives each group the following materials:

- Several index cards labeled with different word categories.
- Several small slips of paper labeled with corresponding words for each category.

Small group members then work together to place categorize the individual words correctly (see Tables 3 & 4). With word sorts, the teacher could also scramble important terms from different content areas for small group members to categorize and alphabetize (see Table 5).

Newspaper Game

Teachers can use a newspaper game to improve the acquisition and development of English among with middle school ELs. The teacher first divides the whole class into several small groups of four students and gives each

small group a newspaper and a list of academic words. Within their small group, students unfold the newspaper, set it on the ground, and place one foot onto the newspaper. Students then take turns being the vocabulary leader. During each turn, the vocabulary leader selects a word from the vocabulary list and explains the meaning of the word. Small group members then have three seconds to make a sentence using the selected word. If the small group does not make a sentence using the word within three seconds, the newspaper is folded in half. This process continues until small group members cannot fit their feet onto the newspaper.

Finding a Partner

Homonyms, homophones and homographs can cause confusion among middle

school ELs. Creating game-like activities for students to explore homophones (i.e., words with the same sound and different spellings) and homographs (i.e., words with the same spelling and different sounds) can be used to reinforce correct word meanings, spellings, and pronunciations (Ganske, 2008). First, the teacher writes different homophone and homograph words onto index cards and uses these words to write sample sentences on separate index cards. The teacher then divides the whole class into two groups. The teacher gives one group the individual word cards and the other group the sentence cards. Within each group, students distribute the index cards among themselves and then move around the classroom to match up words with sentences.

Table 3		
Word Sorts – Home Words		

Bedroom Words	Bathroom Words	Kitchen Words
bedspread	bathtub	cabinets
bedtime	bathrobe	can opener
dresser	shower curtain	countertop
headboard	shower rod	freezer
nightstand	sink	refrigerator

Table 4		
Words Sorts – Parts of Speech		

Noun Words	Adjective Words	Verb Words
behemoth	astute	circumvent
equilibrium	detrimental	germinate
metamorphosis	fraudulent	snoop
operative	inoperable	vanquish
pinnacle	operative	waive

Table 5

Word Sorts – Weather Words

Altitude	**N**imbostratus
Breeze	**O**bscuration
Circulation	**P**revailing westerlies
Density Altitude	**Q**PF: Quantitative Precipitation Forecast
Earth's tilt	**R**iver Food Warning
Freeze	**S**leet
Gust	**T**ornado
Hail	**U**pslope Flow
Ice Crystals	**V**apor Pressure
Jet Stream	**W**all Cloud
Kinetic Energy	**X**lokk
Leeward	**Y**ellow Wind
Meteorologist	**Z**odiac

Teaching Suggestions

It is crucial for teachers to provide middle school ELs with a variety of effective vocabulary instruction strategies so all students are able to identify words and their meanings inside and outside of classrooms. Classrooms should be places to cultivate ideas, stimulate questions, act out human curiosity, and provide an intellectually challenging reading and learning environment. Below are additional teaching suggestions to help teachers create a language-rich environment for middle school ELs:

- Provide literacy-rich learning environments - Teachers should provide students with access to a wide variety of fiction and non-fiction texts. When students read widely, their vocabulary knowledge, reading comprehension, and writing skills are strengthened.
- Assign reading partners - Teachers can provide opportunities for ELs to share their interests with peers and allot time for them to practice reading aloud together. Students' reading skills and confidence levels will improve when they engage in positive interactions with others. Working with reading partners also enhances self-concepts towards reading among students (Guthrie, Klauda, & Morrison 2012).
- Integrate technology during instruction – In addition to making videos, teachers can integrate technology during instruction with virtual scavenger hunts, webquests, and blogs. For example, webquest sites are available that offer more than 2,500 different lessons designed for a variety of ages and grade levels.
- Incorporate hands-on activities - Hands-on activities provide tangible connections for ELs to build valuable background knowledge that supports content area instruction and literacy skill development.
- Design inquiry-based projects – Teachers should encourage students to generate questions based on their interests and curiosities about different topics or texts (Guthrie et al., 2012).

Once students generate a list of questions, they may participate in inquiry learning experiences to find potential solutions.

- Use daily informal assessments - Teachers need to use a variety of informal assessment tools for different content areas every day, such as observations, teacher-student conferences, and peer collaborative projects. Teachers should review assessment results and adjust their instruction accordingly.

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