

Everybody's Talking!

Helping English Learners Build Academic Language

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Why is Oral Language So Important?

Native English speakers come to school with a tremendous receptive and expressive language base. Second-language learners possess deep and wide knowledge in their home language, but need to build a similar base in English. There is significant evidence that capitalizing on first-language abilities (e.g. higher-order vocabulary knowledge, cognate awareness, transferable literacy skills, etc.) can benefit English learners (Goldenberg, 2008; Christian, et.al., 2006).

Most English learners readily acquire social language skills. Over time they can develop the academic language proficiency necessary to deal with complex texts in English and ultimately succeed academically. Regretfully, some do not. Particularly alarming is the increasing numbers of long-term English learners who do not reach this level of proficiency.

English learners typically make rapid progress in language and literacy development in the early grades, when instruction relates mainly to decoding, word recognition, and everyday social discourse. However, when academic vocabulary and other linguistic challenges demand higher-order language skills, significant numbers of students become stymied. Educators agree that helping English learners build a strong oral base in academic English is an invaluable tool in positioning students for scholastic achievement (Christian, et.al. 2006; Goldenberg, 2008; Goldenberg and Saunders, 2010).

Several studies provide evidence of the positive relationship between oral language proficiency and reading achievement. Research indicates that well-developed oral proficiency is associated with English reading comprehension and writing skills. Vocabulary knowledge, listening comprehension, and the ability to handle metalinguistic aspects of language (e.g., providing definitions of words) are linked to reading comprehension and writing (August, et. al., 2006).

Studies also show that oral development is complex. While exposure to "school language" is necessary, it is not sufficient to achieve advanced levels of proficiency. English learners, as well as native speakers, will more readily develop the academic dimensions of the language (e.g., content specific and academic general vocabulary and advanced grammatical and discourse level understandings) when they participate in rich and varied oral language experiences (Goldenberg and Saunders, 2010). Such academic contexts foster the *discourse skills* necessary for students to express their thinking about complex subject-matter material. In short, English learners with more fully developed oral language proficiency are better able to engage in academic uses of the language. (Goldenberg and Saunders, 2010). Advanced English proficiency, and in many cases academic achievement, hinge on mastery of the type of language used in academic settings.

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The Need for Robust Vocabulary Development

The teaching of vocabulary can improve reading comprehension for both native English speakers and English learners (Carlo et. al., 2004), but vocabulary instruction must incorporate a variety of techniques that afford students opportunities to practice key words and develop independent word-learning strategies. In order for students to ultimately own a new word, they will need multiple exposures and will need to be actively engaged in learning tasks (August, et. al., 2006).

To become independent word-learners across disciplines, students need to think about what they do—and do not—understand as they encounter unfamiliar vocabulary. Word awareness is a critical aspect of a comprehensive vocabulary program. Word consciousness is especially important for English language-learners, who must be aware of figurative language, such as idioms, and multiple meanings that make word learning more challenging (Carlo et. al., 2004).

There are two major independent word-learning strategies that are extremely valuable for English learners: context clues and structural analysis. Context clues can include definitions, examples, and restatements, as well as visual images, illustrations, etc. A high percentage of new words that students encounter have easily identifiable structures; i.e., they can be broken into parts. Morphological clues can help English learners make connections among words, and there is great value in teaching roots, prefixes, and suffixes for purposes of vocabulary development. Using common Latin roots to link between known words in Spanish to new ones in English can prove to be extremely beneficial for Spanish-speaking English learners (August, et. al., 2006).

It is important to keep in mind that much academic vocabulary is abstract and conceptual in nature. The ongoing expansion of world knowledge and the learning of new information

through rich content experiences are essential for intellectual growth. Language development and cognitive development are dependent on one other; English learners enhance their language skills as they learn concepts. The more students know about a concept, the more words they will utilize to refine their understanding of the concept (Christian, et.al., 2006).

Language and conceptual development occur when classroom activities are well planned, carefully scaffolded, and require a range of focused cognitive and linguistic work. It is important to keep in mind that students new to English only need to learn the English labels for concepts that they have previously acquired in their native language. Broad conceptual knowledge in the native language is a great advantage. Strategies that make connections to the native language avoid *doubling the work* in terms of building conceptual vocabulary (Goldenberg, 2008).

Academically Productive Discussion

Although educators agree that oral language development is critically important, it can get short shrift in classrooms. It is widely agreed upon that excessive teacher talk and limited time for structured student-to-student interactions are not optimal for language development (Goldenberg and Saunders, 2010). Language learning involves active engagement in learning tasks. Fortunately, there are tools available that can assist teachers in organizing classrooms for academic language talk. *Discussions4Learning* is a highly engaging oral language program based on dazzling images from around the globe and across time. Fine art and real-world photos take students on *virtual field trips* to fascinating new cultures and capitalize on their curiosity about the world. These impactful images serve as a springboard for vocabulary development. Cross-curricular themes provide an authentic context for English learners to build a repertoire of content-rich academic vocabulary.

Unique Features of Discussions4Learning

The emphasis on oral language in *Discussions4Learning*, along with the presence of captivating visuals, ensures that academic language is accessible to *all* English learners regardless of their decoding skills or language proficiency. As a supplemental program, teachers can easily use the materials in a variety of settings (e.g. during language development time, at the beginning of the class period or start of the day, in before- and after-school programs, as a bridge from one subject area activity to another, and also during intervention). Since fine art and real-life photos are not grade-level specific, they can be used at all grade levels.

Discussion is designed to facilitate extended oral discourse by moving beyond traditional *initiation-response-evaluation* instructional structures, and vocabulary is presented using carefully constructed scaffolds. Questions are tiered to provide adequate support for all students without having to create separate activities. Guided discussion strategies support second-language learners at all levels. For example, those still acquiring English might respond by repeating what another student has said, or by agreeing or disagreeing with a simple thumbs-up or thumbs-down gesture.

Both fine art and high utility, cross-curricular vocabulary are taught and revisited through multiple presentations of target words. Students are focused on discussing the brilliant images, and the vocabulary is the vehicle for that discussion. Regular vocabulary deposits are made in students' oral-language banks to prepare them for challenging texts.

The English Language Arts Common Core Standards (CCSS) include challenging vocabulary development, citing evidence to support an argument, close reading, comprehension, and oral expression. English learners will need to perform such required tasks as persuading, providing details, supporting their opinions with evidence, and analyzing point of view of authors and artists, etc. *Discussions4Learning* provides the crucial language foundation for students to master these reading and writing standards.

Ideas for Making Classrooms More Language-Centered

- Make certain the physical set-up of the room allows for student-to-student interaction and *talk*.
- Provide sufficient time for students to talk and elaborate on their ideas in various group settings.
- When structuring small group discussion, make students' roles clear and ensure that all understand what is expected.
- Model ways for more proficient students to help those who are still acquiring the language. Re-configure the groups often, taking students' language proficiency into consideration.
- Closely monitor group discussions to ensure all are participating, that students understand their rights and responsibilities, and that participation is equitable.
- Make sure that students are citing evidence as they discuss. Guide students to support their point of view and challenge other students to substantiate their claims. Challenge and give counter-examples when appropriate to model additional language.
- Plan and provide language scaffolds to help focus student responses. Supply additional scaffolding during instruction while students are involved and interacting. Carefully planned scaffolds are vital for keeping English learners engaged in meaningful activities that challenge them intellectually and expand their linguistic horizons.
- Ask a variety of open-ended questions and encourage students to elaborate and expand on their responses. Try to *probe* and *pull* language. Make sure that those who are less proficient can respond by using more direct questions when needed to keep the talk flowing.
- Experiment and expand on new language and make connections between word families, root words, cognates, etc. whenever possible.

While it is clear that second-language learners must be proficient in all the features of English—vocabulary, grammar, syntax, usage, etc.—it is also clear that many of these features are best learned not through discrete skills lessons, but through scaffolded, meaningful, robust discussions that encourage students to use language skills in context.

Final Thoughts

English learners are the most rapidly growing segment of the school-aged population in the United States. Language skills are the key to their success both at school and in the workplace. While it is clear that second-language learners must be proficient in all the features of English—vocabulary, grammar, syntax, usage, etc.—it is also clear that many of these features are best learned not through discrete skills lessons, but through scaffolded, meaningful, rigorous discussions that encourage students to use language skills in context. The case for intensive oral language development—especially vocabulary and academic English—is a compelling one. The good news is that there are wonderful instructional materials now available to help teachers engage students in rigorous interactive and inquiry-based language experiences.



Dr. Alfredo Schifini assists schools across the nation and internationally in developing comprehensive language and literacy programs for English learners. He has served students new to English as a teacher, a reading/language arts specialist, a school administrator, and university professor.

Dr. Schifini has co-authored widely used reading/language arts programs, as well as highly successful language development materials for students at all levels. He has keynoted and been a featured speaker at numerous language and literacy conferences and has contributed to two monographs published by the International Reading Association.

Dr. Schifini's research interests have focused on the integration of academic language development and content-area instruction.

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Resources

Davis Publications: Art Education Publisher and creator of *Discussions 4 Learning*. <http://www.davisart.com/>

Colorín Colorado: Offers free teacher tips, professional development video,s and tools for outreach to parents of English learners. <http://www.colorincolorado.org/>

Understanding Language: Language, Literacy, and Learning in the Content Areas—Commissioned Papers on Language and Literacy Issues in the Common Core State Standards Stanford University Graduate School of Education <http://ell.stanford.edu/>