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## ENHANCING ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE STUDENTS' VOCABULARY KNOWLEDGE

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### Abstract

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Vocabulary knowledge has long been considered critical to children's successful reading comprehension. When children increase their reserves of word meaning, they also broaden their thinking and become aware of new semantic and conceptual relationships. Their broadened awareness, in turn, increases reading comprehension and writing abilities. Many barriers prevent English as Second Language learner from grasping new vocabulary, but one of the biggest challenge is the minimal time teachers devote to vocabulary instruction. Inundated with a number of other curricular mandates, many elementary school teachers do not rank vocabulary instruction as their top priority. A disturbing number of studies indicate that vocabulary instruction is a very small part of elementary instruction. Again some teachers struggle with determining how to provide students with appropriate contexts for learning new words. We report here four vocabulary strategies for teachers to actively involve students in the vocabulary learning process. The activities are easy to introduce and students can participate with peers to develop a self-regulated approach to vocabulary enhancement.

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### Introduction

With her index finger, Rosita traces the letters of various words on a word wall.

Paco, Ephraim, Juan and Hector sit on the reading carpet across the classroom and play a memory flashcard game that reviews English/Spanish synonyms like "pretty" and "bonita."

Meanwhile, second grade teacher Nicyesha Robinson reviews some prefixes and their meanings with a group of five students at a crescent moon table.

"I try to keep the kids moving so class never seems boring," she admits later. "By having lots of vocabulary activities and centers available, kids can pick and choose based on their preferences."

Many barriers prevent English as a Second Language (ESL) student from grasping new vocabulary, but one of the biggest is the lack of time teachers devote to vocabulary instruction. Inundated with a number of other curricular mandates, many elementary school teachers do not rank vocabulary instruction as their top priority. Some teachers struggle with determining how to provide students with appropriate contexts for learning new words. Many teachers wonder how much time is appropriate to spend on explicit vocabulary instruction. Others express concerns

over how to assess student mastery of vocabulary terms. What is the best way for ESL teachers to enhance students' vocabulary?

### **Vocabulary Development and the ESL Student**

Facilitating lots of student reading is far and away the most important thing a teacher can do to improve ESL students' vocabulary development (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1998; Krashen, 1993; Nagy, 1988). Therefore, the best strategy teachers should utilize to enhance their students' vocabulary growth is to provide students with as much time to read for themselves as possible and frequently integrate literature into curricula so that students experience words in a variety of contexts.

Although research has shown that vocabulary knowledge plays a critical role in students' literacy development, many teachers devote little class time to vocabulary instruction (Scott, Jamieson-Noel, & Asselin, 2003). Beyond reading, no single vocabulary strategy works best, as no two ESL students are alike. Some students respond better to flashcards, while others may prefer collaborative discussions. Teachers who do devote time to vocabulary instruction often use strategies that fail to increase students' vocabulary and comprehension abilities (see reviews in Blachowicz & Fisher, 2002; Nagy, 1988). Essentially, many ESL teachers use inefficient strategies.

While traditional memorization drills continue to dominate the landscape of vocabulary teaching, Graves and his colleagues (Graves, 2000; Graves & Watts-Taffe, 2002) advocate broader classroom vocabulary programs for students. ESL teachers who want to improve students' vocabularies realize that they have to create classrooms that accommodate multiple learning intelligences. The goal of this article is to expand the scope of vocabulary instructional strategies discussed in previous research (Brassell, 2003; Brassell & Flood, 2004) to include some classroom-proven, time-efficient methods for teachers to use to enhance their ESL students' vocabulary knowledge.

### **The School**

Cesar Chavez Elementary School<sup>1</sup> enrolls nearly 950 students in a tiny school district serving predominantly ESL students in the Los Angeles area. In 2003, several classroom teachers received individual donations of 500-1000 books from BookEnds ([www.bookends.org](http://www.bookends.org)), a local non-profit agency that enhances classroom library caches. Teachers were then trained and asked to facilitate a variety of vocabulary instructional strategies throughout their curricula (see reviews in Brassell & Flood, 2004).

Based on previous research (Graves, 2000; Graves & Watts-Taffe, 2002), the teachers organized their vocabulary activities to: (1) facilitate wide reading, (2) teach individual words, (3) provide word-learning strategies and (4) foster word consciousness. As teachers discovered that their ESL students preferred learning vocabulary through games, the remainder of this article focuses on some specific vocabulary activities that were the most popular among ESL students.

#### *Barrier Games*

"Barrier Games" (Fagan & Prouty, 1997; Herrell, 1999) are a flexible teaching tool used to reinforce ESL students' understanding of new vocabulary words and concepts. The aim of barrier games is for one student to place/identify selected objects onto a game board while describing to a partner what s/he does. The partner follows the instructions to replicate what

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<sup>1</sup> All names of teachers and locations are pseudonyms.

is being done, sight unseen. At the end of the game the objects should be in identical positions on both game boards. The strategy is used to: (1) elicit students' spontaneous speech; and (2) allow students to practice new vocabulary terms related to a new concept.

Rima Hossein's third graders studied fractions and decimals by practicing with money. In this way Ms. Hossein covered a number of math objectives. Her students loved math because she created a number of centers that offered students games. Students enjoyed barrier games because they could work in pairs. Ms. Hossein designed different barrier games almost every week, depending on what new concepts she wanted to teach.

This week, two of her boys (Victor and Manuel) played a "money decimals" barrier game at their table. They placed a recycled pizza box between them, and each had an identical game board and bag of items (fake coins, musical notes, decimal cards, fraction cards, dollar/cent cards and word cards). Victor chose items to match various spots on the game board and then gave clues to Manuel. For example, for "1/4" Victor said that it was the type of quarter you see when you sing music, and Manuel chose a quarter note from his bag.

When they finished their game, they removed their barrier and discovered that they had almost identical boards. They discussed why Manuel chose to use decimals instead of cents for "0.75" and "seventy-five cents," respectively. Ms. Hossein never had any direct involvement with the two boys as they played the game.

#### *Word Plays*

A "Word Play" (Blachowicz & Fisher, 2002; Duffelmeyer, 1980) is an instructional strategy that utilizes dramatization to encourage students' vocabulary development. Using a short list of new vocabulary words or concepts, small groups of students create vignettes that feature and demonstrate the new vocabulary. The strategy is used to: (1) motivate students to make predictions about the possible use of words in a new text; (2) allow students to experiment with using words in their own speech; and (3) provide students with the opportunity to collaborate and discuss various meanings of new vocabulary.

As part of a unit celebrating the diversity of cultures in America, Ed Polamalu selected numerous texts for his fifth graders to read that chronicled the contributions of many important African Americans. Today, he told his students, they would create short skits using vocabulary words from the book *I Have a Dream* (King, 1997), based on Martin Luther King's historic speech. Mr. Polamalu told the class that they would perform word plays for each book they read. For this first word play, he gave each small group of students the same five new vocabulary words from the book (*Negro, discrimination, civil rights, destiny and brotherhood*). He told students that he would give them 20 minutes to try to create a 3-minute skit that used all five words. They could be as creative as they wanted, he assured them, but they had to use the words correctly.

Students presented their skits and discussed the similarities and differences of their performances. Mr. Polamalu asked them to read the book in pairs and highlight areas that used the new vocabulary words. After reading and discussing the text with their partners, students shared their opinions as a class and discussed similarities and differences between the text and their skits. Mr. Polamalu encouraged them to use the new vocabulary words in future oral and written presentations as they continued to celebrate Black History Month.

#### *Scavenger Hunts*

"Scavenger Hunts" (Cunningham, Moore, Cunningham, & Moore, 1995; Vaughn, Crawley, & Mountain, 1979) can be used to enhance students' vocabulary through the gathering of

objects and pictures to represent concepts that students need to develop more fully. The strategy is used to: (1) allow students to sharpen their reference skills and become involved and interested in new topics; (2) provide students with direct and indirect experience with unfamiliar words through the collection of objects and pictures; and (3) help students develop word meanings as they relate to new topics.

Cindy Rodriguez read her third graders the book *Millions to Measure* (Schwartz & Kellogg, 2003) and told students that they would study a unit on weights and measures for a couple of weeks. She selected ten words from the book and other books they would be reading about different forms of measurement, and she photocopied lists of the words for students. Mrs. Rodriguez gave the lists to students and asked them to form small groups. She told the groups that they would have a scavenger hunt where each group tried to collect as many pictures and objects as they could that illustrated each word from their measurement vocabulary list. She told students that she would give them class time to find photos in books and magazines or to draw pictures and write sentences with the words, but she suggested that teams that sought objects and pictures outside of school would probably find the most items. She promised students that the group that found the most items would decorate an entire bulletin board with their objects.

Throughout the week Mrs. Rodriguez allowed students about 30 minutes daily to research words with their teams, and students also used any extra time they had when they finished their other work early. The following week, students brought their objects and pictures to class, and the class decided which group had found the most items that illustrated their scavenger hunt words. The winning group spent time after school the rest of the week decorating their bulletin board with the “measurement memorabilia” that they had collected.

#### *Word Riddles*

“Word riddles” (Blachowicz & Fisher, 2002) are questions with pun-like responses. This instructional strategy arouses student interest in experimenting with different word uses, meanings and structures. It is often used as an extension activity to encourage students to think about language beyond the classroom. The strategy is used to build students’ interest in word learning, expand students’ knowledge of homonyms and multiple meanings of words and provide students practice with common figures of speech.

Eva Eriksson’s first graders studied space. They created paper maché models of the sun, Earth and moon, sung songs about the Earth and studied how the sun warms Earth. Mrs. Eriksson read aloud a passage from *The Stars: A New Way to See Them* (Rey, 1976). During language arts she practiced riddles with her students, and her students loved playing with words. So Mrs. Eriksson told the class that they would create riddles about outer space and make a class book to share with their parents.

She asked her excited students to brainstorm words that they heard about outer space. After creating a short list, Mrs. Eriksson chose the word “star” and asked students to drop the initial sound. She wrote the word “tar” on the chalkboard and asked students to think of words that started with “tar.” After the class brainstormed some words and inserted the letter “s” at the beginning, she asked them to work with partners and try to think of riddles for their new words. Students shared their riddles as a class, and then Mrs. Eriksson asked them to continue to work with partners and think of riddles with another key word they discussed (“sun”). She told the class that they would create a riddle book with all of their riddles.

## **Reflections**

While most ESL teachers seem to understand the importance of vocabulary instruction, few seem to have a grasp on how best to facilitate students' vocabulary development. Teachers who provide students with plenty of reading materials and opportunities to read are off to a great start. Beyond providing students with lots of interesting books, teachers should facilitate a variety of vocabulary activities for their students. The ESL students at Cesar Chavez Elementary responded glowingly to various vocabulary games.

The strategies discussed here were only a few of the vocabulary development activities offered at Cesar Chavez, in addition to increased access to books. As Rupley, Logan and Nichols (1998) point out, "teaching vocabulary versus incidental learning of words through wide reading should not be viewed as competing philosophies... vocabulary instruction that is geared to the active process of learning and connects new information to previously learned experiences provides the means for students to make the connection between new words and their past experiences (p. 346)."

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