

President’s Message

by Gaylene Mackay



This issue of *Accent* is the first under the former English as a Second Language Council’s new name: the Council for English as an Additional Language (CEAL). This name change, approved at our annual general meeting

last fall, reflects the evolving terminology used in Alberta to represent our programs and learners. It also provides our council with the opportunity to rebrand, which we have been working on.

We started 2024/25 with our annual general meeting in October in Red Deer. Thank you to those who attended. The morning was filled with valuable professional learning and collaborative discussions.

A special thank you to Angela Skene for her engaging presentation “Understanding the Difference: The Science of Reading and Implementation for EAL/Emerging Literacy Learners.” Reading programs based on the science of reading are becoming more common in our classrooms. However, as with everything, we must consider how we can adapt those programs to be the most beneficial for English as an additional language (EAL) learners. This topic spurred a lot of great conversation, and we look forward to follow-up sessions.

At the beginning of November, the new CEAL executive met for a productive weekend, during which we collaborated on upcoming professional

learning opportunities for our members. We planned to host workshops on the following topics:

- Welcoming and supporting refugees in our schools
- Vocabulary development across the disciplines
- Experiential EAL active learning strategies

Watch our website (www.eslcata.com) for more information.

I am greatly looking forward to our inaugural CEAL annual conference, which will be held in Canmore in May. This conference always offers an invaluable opportunity to connect with educators from across the province and delve deeper into strategies for supporting the growing number of EAL students in our classrooms.

We continue to look for a director for our May 2026 annual conference. Please reach out to me if you are interested in this opportunity.

CEAL remains committed to providing resources and professional learning opportunities to support educators working with EAL learners. Watch for updates on our website and social media.

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Editor's Corner

by Annie Fung



Welcome to this issue of *Accent*, which now proudly serves as the newsletter for the Council for English as an Additional Language.

This issue is packed with insights and resources designed to empower EAL

educators in their crucial work.

In her report on the Vocab@Vic 2023 conference, Joan Miles, our past president, offers a glimpse into the world of applied linguistics research. Her summaries of the conference sessions provide a unique perspective on global vocabulary research and highlight the work of international scholars. Particularly significant is her take-away on the importance of specialized vocabulary development, particularly for EAL students pursuing trades.

Through two articles by Angela Skene, CEAL's professional development director for the central region and a presenter at our annual general meeting, we dive into adapting the science of reading (SOR) for EAL learners. In "Beyond the Five Pillars: Adapting the Science of Reading for EAL Learners," she proposes a crucial sixth pillar—oral language development—and advocates for a reordered approach to SOR for EAL learners. This focus on oral language provides a foundation for vocabulary acquisition, a topic she addresses in her article on

teaching academic vocabulary to young EAL learners, emphasizing explicit instruction and multiple exposures for deeper comprehension.

These articles converge on a central theme: the need for evidence-based practice and a holistic approach to EAL education. From adapting established reading methodologies to prioritizing oral language and vocabulary development, the articles in this issue provide practical strategies and research-backed insights for enhancing student learning.

Shhhhh. Do you hear that? The mountains are calling! The upcoming CEAL annual conference, to be held May 9–11 in Canmore, promises to be a transformative experience. Our presenters, including keynote speakers Norbert Schmitt, Johanne Paradis and Diane Schmitt, will delve into topics such as vocabulary acquisition, dual language development and technology integration—and much more. We look forward to welcoming you to Canmore and to the many interactive workshops, invaluable networking opportunities and resource exhibits that will be offered. To register and learn more, visit www.eslcata.com/conferences.

Thank you so much to those who have submitted articles for *Accent*. Your contributions and feedback are always welcome and gratefully considered. Please contact me at publicationsdirector@eslcata.com.

See you in Canmore!

Conference 2025 Update

by Diane Pham



Conference 2025: “On the Move” May 9–11 Malcolm Hotel, Canmore

Join CEAL in beautiful Canmore in May for a weekend of great learning, making connections and rejuvenation.

As a specialist council conference director, I had the opportunity to attend another council’s annual conference to learn how they do things. So, in April 2024, I attended the Council for School Leadership (CSL) uLead conference, “The Summit of Educational Leadership.”

While observing the intricacies of running a conference, I noticed that the CSL’s focus is not much different from CEAL’s—to support and engage our members. Regardless of specialty area, we all strive to lead and teach through the lens of cultural and educational inclusivity. Advances in education add another layer of complexity and accountability.

Speakers at uLead emphasized the need to be bold and to foster a sense of hope amid challenges in education. They challenged educators to think

beyond conventional teaching strategies and embrace a holistic approach to education. These insights resonate deeply with the mission of CEAL, particularly in fostering inclusive, effective learning environments for English-language learners.

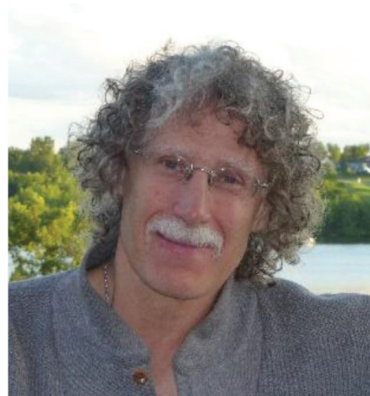
CEAL is “on the move” to help educators find ways to enhance their teaching and learning practices while also taking care of themselves. Our annual conference is designed to address the specific needs of EAL educators.

Here’s what you can look forward to.

Keynote Speakers Who Inspire

The conference will feature speakers who specialize in EAL education, equity and innovation. Their keynotes and breakout sessions will provide fresh perspectives and practical strategies you can immediately apply in your classroom.

Norbert Schmitt



Norbert Schmitt is a professor emeritus of applied linguistics at the University of Nottingham, in the United Kingdom. He is interested in all aspects of second language vocabulary, including the

development of vocabulary knowledge, vocabulary assessment, formulaic language, lexical research methodology, vocabulary learning strategies and vocabulary teaching methodology. He has published 11 books and over 100 journal articles and book chapters, and has lectured and presented widely. He recently published the Knowledge-based Vocabulary Lists (KVL) for the British Council and *Language Power: 100 Things You Need to Know to Make*

Language Work for You (Wayzgoose, 2023), which is intended for a general audience.

His keynote session is titled “A ‘Complex, Integrated, Incremental, Process’ (CIIP) Perspective of Vocabulary Knowledge and Acquisition.”

Vocabulary knowledge and acquisition are often seen in black-and-white terms: a word is either unknown/unlearned or known/learned. But vocabulary knowledge is too complex to be understood in a dichotomous manner. Rather, it is

- complex (there are many things to know about a word),
- integrated (different aspects of word knowledge are interrelated with each other),
- incremental (vocabulary knowledge is learned incrementally over time in a bit-by-bit manner), and
- a process (vocabulary learning is a process, rather than a one-off event).

By themselves, these characteristics are well known in the field. But their implications have not generally been acknowledged.

Schmitt will propose a unified approach, called a CIIP perspective. He will then outline what a CIIP perspective means in terms of a range of pedagogic and assessment issues.

Johanne Paradis



Johanne Paradis is a professor in the Department of Linguistics and an adjunct professor in Communication Sciences and Disorders at the

University of Alberta. Her research focuses on bilingualism in children with typical development and children with developmental disorders, in particular children from immigrant and refugee families. She has published more than 70 peer-reviewed journal articles and chapters and is a coauthor of *Dual Language Development and Disorders: A Handbook on Bilingualism and Second Language Learning*, 3rd ed (Brookes, 2021). In

2020, she received the National Achievement Award from the Canadian Linguistic Association.

Her keynote session is titled “At the Interface of Communication Disorders and Dual Language Development.”

Dual language learners (DLLs) are more heterogeneous in their language development than their monolingual peers. This heterogeneity in rate of development and outcomes means that, in their second language (L2) abilities, some DLLs overlap with children who have communication disorders.

This keynote will explore answers to the following questions:

- What are the reasons DLLs vary so much in their L2 abilities, and what can teachers do to support slower DLLs?
- What causes overlap between the profiles of children who are L2 speakers and children with communication disorders, and how does this complicate identifying language differences versus disorders?
- Do children with communication disorders have the capacity to learn two languages?

Diane Schmitt



Diane Schmitt was a senior lecturer in English as a foreign language (EFL) at Nottingham Trent University, in the United Kingdom, and now works as an independent educational consultant.

She has given presentations, workshops and seminars for students and teachers in over 30 countries. Her interests include all aspects of English for academic purposes, vocabulary acquisition and pedagogy, writing from sources and plagiarism, materials development, English-medium instruction (EMI), and quality assurance.

Her work has appeared in journals such as *Language Teaching*, the *ELT Journal*, the *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, *Reading in a Foreign Language* and *Language Testing*. With

Norbert Schmitt, she has coauthored *Vocabulary in Language Teaching*, 2nd ed (Cambridge University Press, 2020) and books 1 and 2 of the Focus on Vocabulary series (Pearson, 2011). Most recently, she has authored a series of vocabulary textbooks for Swedish secondary schools.

Information about her keynote session will be available soon.

Interactive Workshops and Breakout Sessions

The conference workshops and sessions are tailored to provide teaching strategies to address the challenges EAL educators face daily.

Networking Opportunities

Connect with fellow educators and advocates who share your passion for EAL learning. The conference creates a supportive environment where delegates can exchange ideas, thoughts and resources.

Resource Exhibits

Discover current research and best practices, curriculum enhancements, and instructional materials to support your professional growth and your students' success.

This year's CEAL conference promises to be a transformative experience. This event offers an unparalleled opportunity to deepen your knowledge, refine your teaching practice, expand your network, revive your passion for teaching and gain actionable strategies to enhance student outcomes.

For more information and to register, go to www.eslcata.com/conferences.

Mark your calendar and prepare to be inspired. Together, we can elevate EAL learning.

Vocab@Vic 2023: Recent Research in Applied Linguistics

by Joan Miles



Vocab@ is an international conference focusing on current research in the area of vocabulary development for English-language learners (ELLs) and learners of other additional languages.

The conference, which takes place every three years, was first held in Wellington,

New Zealand, in 2013. It has since been held in Tokyo and Belgium.

In December 2023, I had the opportunity to travel to the North Island of New Zealand to attend Vocab@Vic at the Victoria University of Wellington—the conference’s point of origin.

The Vocab@ conference attracts prominent researchers in the field of applied linguistics. Teachers in Alberta are familiar with North American vocabulary pundits, such as Jim Cummins, Margaret Early, Hetty Roessingh, Kate Kinsella, Susana Dutro, Marlise Horst, Tom Cobb, Stuart Webb and Keith Folse. Perhaps less frequently do we hear the names of those whose groundbreaking research takes place in distant countries. Vocab@ is a window into the work being done in the global community to support students striving to learn a new language.

The format of Vocab@ is unique, as all breakout sessions last for a mere 25 minutes. Research students and their supervising professors use that brief window of time to give their “elevator pitch” for their most recent findings on topics ranging from the corpora used to develop academic word lists to whether children can learn and retain new vocabulary by watching television.

The sessions are fast paced and data driven, and the cognitive load can be heavy. I frequently found myself in over my head, as I scrambled to connect the academic discourse to my more pragmatic

understanding of classroom teaching and learning. The uneasy feeling that arises when trying to keep up with the stream of unfamiliar terms and concepts certainly helps build empathy for the experiences of ELLs in inclusive Canadian classrooms.

Nevertheless, several ideas stood out for me, and they may resonate with you, as well.

Sessions

Investigating Specialised Vocabulary in Spoken English

Averil Coxhead, a professor in the School of Linguistics and Applied Language Studies at the Victoria University of Wellington, is known for creating the Academic Word List (AWL) for middle school students.

Recently, she has turned her attention to developing word lists suitable for students pursuing education in the trades. Specifically, she has been gathering data on the oral discourse used in the trades by having researchers wear a recording device on job sites to capture the authentic use of technical language (Coxhead et al 2020).

Because the language in each trade is so specialized, Coxhead has determined that creating word lists that combine vocabulary from various trades is not feasible. For example, the word list for plumbing alone includes 1,465 word families, 81 hyphenated terms (such as *hot-dip* and *cross-sectional*), 72 common abbreviations, and 9 proper nouns (such as *Kelvin*).

In addition, Coxhead found that the predominant language strands used in the trades are listening and speaking, as workplace banter tends to comprise questions and answers about how various systems work (for example, motorcycle engines). Those studying or working in the trades also need to rely on their memory to understand and execute multistep instructions.

The Take-Away

A lot of vocabulary discussion focuses on the core content areas. However, many ELLs are destined for employment in the trades, and they should be given opportunities to develop the oral language proficiency needed to succeed in specialized industries. Word lists based on authentic language used in various trades would be an asset to both teachers and students.

Inferring the Meaning of Idioms: Does Accuracy Matter for Retention?

Frank Boers, a professor of applied linguistics at Western University, in Ontario, and Xi Yu, a PhD student in applied linguistics at Western University, examined the pros and cons of teaching idioms under three different conditions to determine which condition led to the highest retention (Yu and Boers 2024).

The conditions were as follows:

- Providing students with the meaning of a given idiom (condition 1)
- Asking students to infer the meaning of an idiom from the context (condition 2)
- Asking students to infer the meaning of an idiom from the context after being provided with the literal underpinning (or origin) of that idiom (condition 3)

Participants learned 21 idioms in a single session. They were given a post-test immediately after the session and were then retested one week later to determine retention.

The findings showed that the use of inference in teaching the idioms was not necessarily more effective than simply providing students with the meanings in advance. However, inference is likely preferable, as it fosters autonomy and promotes cognitive engagement.

Unfortunately, students' inferences are not always accurate, and unsuccessful inferences require corrective feedback, which is not always effective. For that reason, teachers should strive to ensure a high success rate for students when asking them to infer the meaning of an idiom. This is best achieved by asking them to make inferences in context after they have been provided with the literal underpinning of the idiom (condition 3). When

students infer meanings correctly, every subsequent encounter with the idiom enhances retention.

The Take-Away

In teaching idioms, enhancing inference by providing a hint was found to significantly improve retention. Teachers should introduce the idiom, provide the literal underpinning (origin) of the idiom, use the idiom in a meaningful context and then ask students to infer the meaning. After students have made their inference, the teacher should provide the actual meaning of the idiom.

Yu and Boers (2024, 734) use the idiomatic expression "jump the gun" as an example. The teacher first tells students the origin of the idiom: "This expression comes from the context of racing contests. An athlete who starts running before the starting pistol is fired is said to jump the gun." The teacher asks students to keep this in mind as they read the sentence: "She jumped the gun by announcing they were going to get married, while Jeff hadn't proposed to her yet." The teacher then asks, "What do you think 'jump the gun' means here?" Students then infer the meaning of the idiom, and the teacher provides the meaning: "The expression 'jump the gun' means doing something too soon."

What's the Point of Word Association Research?

Tess Fitzpatrick, a professor of applied linguistics at Swansea University, in Wales, has conducted a great deal of research in the area of word association, which "involves presenting participants with cue words, and asking them to respond with the first word that comes to mind" (Fitzpatrick and Thwaites 2020).

Fitzpatrick and Thwaites (2020) claim that word association is "an attractive approach for researchers interested in understanding what second language (L2) learners know about words" and "as a technique for assessing vocabulary knowledge." The idea is that association is part of lexical competency and word knowledge. Nation (2001), for example, considers association to be one of nine components of knowing a word.

Word association knowledge is measured by comparing the responses of ELLs (or learners of

another additional language) with stereotypical responses from normed lists derived from groups of native speakers of the target language.

The hypothesis is that as second language proficiency increases, the word associations learners produce will increasingly mirror those produced by native speakers. However, because responses are based on a variety of factors (for example, age and experience), accurately prescribing target responses is difficult.

The Take-Away

There is a long history of exploring word association in the study of second language acquisition. Researchers believe that there are benefits to exploring several compelling questions, including whether there is a causal relationship between how new words are taught and the network of associations learners are able to connect to those new words, as well as how associative networks in the first language differ from those in the second language. Hopefully, research in this area will result in finding new ways to escalate vocabulary uptake.

Word Families for Learners at All Proficiency Levels

Batia Laufer, a professor of applied linguistics at the University of Haifa, in Israel, spoke about her research on word families for learners at all proficiency levels.

She noted that most tests of vocabulary size assume that if second language learners understand a base word, they will likely also understand many of its derived forms. The counterargument is that “if this basic assumption is wrong, then vocabulary scores on word family–based tests overestimate learners’ vocabulary size” (Laufer 2017, 7).

This counterargument makes the following assumptions:

- Texts contain many derived words (root or stem words with various affixes), so if learners do not understand those words, their lexical text coverage is reduced. (In other words, learners understand less of the text than we think they do.)
- Even when derived words appear in context, learners generally do not understand them.

- Most second language learners do not have enough morphological knowledge to accurately analyze the meaning of derived words.

To investigate this, Laufer and Cobb (2020) looked at three types of text to quantify the occurrence of derived words. They found that in academic articles, 7.8 per cent of the text was composed of derived words, most of which were constructed using a small number of frequent and regular affixes. The proportion of derived words dropped to 5.0 per cent in classic literature and 3.2 per cent in graded readers.

This suggests that learners at low proficiency levels are exposed to a low number of derived words in the texts they read. For example, in a graded reader at level 3, in which only 1,000 word families are required in order to ensure 95 per cent text coverage, the word *centre* may have only one derived form: *central*. In an academic text, however, which requires more than 5,000 word families for 95 per cent text coverage, derivations of the word *centre* may include *centred*, *central*, *centralism*, *centralist*, *centrality*, *centralization*, *centralize*, *centralized*, *centrally* and *centric*. Laufer and Cobb (2020) found that, in most cases, the number of derived words in a text increased with text difficulty.

To test how well derived words were learned in context, Laufer (2024) conducted an experiment in which ELLs were presented with pseudo-stems (made-up stems) combined with 22 frequently used affixes (such as *-ment*, *-ful*, *-ly* and *ex-*) under three different conditions:

- In isolation (for example, “If *stace* means ‘participate,’ what does the word *stacement* mean?”)
- In sentences with only syntactic clues (for example, “If *stace* means ‘participate,’ what does the word *stacement* mean in the sentence ‘I’m asking for your stacement.’”)
- In sentences with both syntactic and semantic clues (for example, “If *stace* means ‘participate,’ what does the word *stacement* mean in the sentence ‘Full and active stacement in school activities is required of all students.’”)

She found that the learners’ overall comprehension of derived words improved when both syntactic and

semantic clues were present. In addition, their morphological knowledge increased as their lexical proficiency developed, so learners with stronger vocabularies had a better chance of comprehending text with a higher percentage of derived words.

The Take-Away

The assumption behind word-family-based vocabulary tests has been that learners who understand a base word and one derived word will be able to understand many other derived words if they apply their knowledge of basic morphology. Laufer's research has modified that assumption as follows: learners who understand a base word and one derived word can understand other derived words necessary for comprehending texts at their language level using their knowledge of basic morphology and contextual clues. No one knows all possible derived words. Assessments based on word families are not flawed and do not overestimate learners' vocabulary size. If learners are given proficiency-appropriate texts, the word derivations in those texts should be comprehensible to them. In other words, learners' knowledge of word families may be incomplete, but the knowledge they have is compatible with their comprehension needs.

Student Perceptions of Academic Vocabulary Learning: Insights from Metaphor Analysis

Edsoulla Chung is an assistant professor in the School of Education and Languages at Hong Kong Metropolitan University, and Jonathan Newton is an associate professor in the School of Linguistics and Applied Language Studies and program director for the Master of TESOL and Master of Applied Linguistics programs at the Victoria University of Wellington. They presented their interesting study on ELL undergraduates' socioemotional perceptions of academic vocabulary learning (AVL) (Chung and Newton 2024). This research was prompted by recent findings that ELL students transitioning to postsecondary schools lack sufficient academic vocabulary to comprehend lectures and complete assignments.

Chung and Newton chose metaphor elicitation as their research tool to reveal how students perceive themselves as language learners and make sense of

their learning experience. Students were asked to complete the following prompt:

Learning academic vocabulary is like _____
_____ because _____.
_____.

Their answers were categorized as positive, mixed-positive, negative, mixed-negative, neutral, mixed-neutral or nonmetaphorical.

On the positive side, students viewed AVL as a desideratum (a need) ("like wearing a suit of armour because it assists us in equipping ourselves for academic work") or as an exploration ("like turning a book page because it can be exciting to find out what comes next").

Neutral answers indicated that students saw AVL simply as part of a developmental process ("like cooking because you must do it step-by-step") or a long haul ("like playing the piano because it requires daily training").

The negative responses revealed that students saw the intrinsic nature of AVL as difficult, laborious or overwhelming ("like walking in the desert because it is hard and exhausting"). They also reflected students' personal struggles with AVL ("like working in a factory that produces screws because it can be monotonous and dull" or "like having memory loss because I always forget everything easily").

Overall, Chung and Newton found that students' socioemotional attitudes toward AVL were evenly split between positive, neutral and negative. The implication for teachers is that there is a need to support students in understanding and managing the task of learning academic vocabulary.

The Take-Away

There is plenty of research on what learners know (vocabulary size) and what learners do (vocabulary learning strategies). However, there is little research on learners' perceptual and attitudinal stance on learning academic vocabulary. Since cognition informs behaviour, knowledge about learner cognition can and should inform curricular priorities and teaching decisions (for example, metacognitive awareness raising that allows learners to make sense of their language learning experience).

Does Contextual Variability Matter When It Comes to Learning New Meanings of Known Words?

Nurul Aini Mohd Jelani, a research student in the School of Linguistics and Applied Language Studies at the Victoria University of Wellington, and Irina Elgort, an associate professor of higher education at the Victoria University of Wellington, explored whether contextual variability matters when learning new meanings of previously known words.

They asserted that 80 per cent of the English-language lexicon is made up of ambiguous words (words that are unclear or have multiple meanings) and that high-frequency English words often have more meanings than low-frequency English words. To illustrate, studies by Ozturk (2017) and Stahl and Nagy (2006) showed that there were over 22,000 meanings for just 3,000 high-frequency English words.

This implies a heavy learning burden for language learners who are working to master high-frequency vocabulary while trying to keep up with the shifting meanings of words over time. (For example, the word *catfish* is now used to refer both to an animal and to a person who sets up a fake social media profile in order to deceive others.)

Given this information, it is important to understand how ambiguous words are represented, processed and learned. Jelani and Elgort sought to find out whether learners would find it easier or harder to learn a second meaning of a word if they already knew another meaning. They also wanted to investigate whether learners would benefit more from encountering target vocabulary in diverse contexts (allowing distinct episodic memories to be created) or through repeating the same context for target words to “facilitate consolidation and reduce interference, resulting in stronger memory representations” (Mak, Hsiao and Nation 2021).

The Take-Away

Ultimately, Jelani and Elgort concluded that contextual variability is immaterial to how well secondary word meanings are learned. What matters most is that learners have multiple exposures to the target words in comprehensible contexts.

Sifting Through Trends: Vocab Ideas Worth Forgetting or Discovering

On the final day of the conference, a panel of researchers—Kevin Parent, Stuart McLean, Paul Nation, Geoff Pinchbeck and Norbert Schmitt—was convened to render opinions on where vocabulary researchers should focus their attention.

Schmitt, a professor emeritus of applied linguistics at the University of Nottingham, in the United Kingdom, suggested that teachers focus on how to move vocabulary knowledge from receptive mastery to productive mastery. He discussed a study by Lee (2003) that showed that secondary school EAL learners who were asked to write an essay on a familiar topic using a familiar format used only 13 per cent of previously learned target vocabulary and virtually no new target vocabulary. However, when they were provided with explicit instruction on the meaning and form of the target words, as well as a writing frame that cued the use of the target vocabulary, their use of the previously learned target vocabulary rose from 13.2 per cent to 63.6 per cent, and their attempts to use new words rose from 0.0 per cent to 43.1 per cent. This was seen as clear evidence of the value of writing tasks that explicitly encourage learners to try out new or receptive vocabulary in their written work.

Nation, a professor emeritus in the School of Linguistics and Applied Language Studies at the Victoria University of Wellington, offered two pieces of advice.

First, Nation suggested that students need a balance of learning opportunities. Too much emphasis is placed on explicit teaching (such as presenting words and giving vocabulary tests), and not enough on the implicit learning that happens when students are extensively exposed to English through their reading, their viewing or the activities they engage in during their spare time. He asserted that teaching is a teacher’s least important job and that three-quarters of the time students spend in the classroom should involve using the target language for authentic communication.

Second, Nation suggested that students need to become more autonomous learners. Teachers can support students in developing independence by

teaching them strategies they can apply without relying on the teacher's guidance.

The topics vocabulary researchers choose to study sometimes seem worlds apart from the big issues that dominate teaching and learning in public school classrooms.

On the other hand, research findings may seem obvious to teachers, who might be inclined to say, "If you'd have asked me, I could have told you that."

Then there are the topics that inspire teachers to cast a critical eye over their own classroom practice and ask, "Am I doing too much of X?" or "Should I be doing more of Y?"

Hopefully, at least one take-away shared here resonates with you. Maybe you have been inspired to dig deeper into an idea or tweak an existing strategy, or perhaps you are even motivated to pursue your own research topics.

You might even put the next Vocab@ conference on your professional learning wish list. Maybe I'll see you there in 2025—wherever *there* may be!

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Beyond the Five Pillars: Adapting the Science of Reading for EAL Learners

by Angela Skene



Traditionally, the science of reading (SOR) has five pillars:

- Phonemic awareness
- Phonics
- Fluency
- Vocabulary
- Comprehension

Although these pillars are key to both reading and effective instruction, the SOR does not fully address the unique needs of older learners who are navigating the complexities of acquiring literacy in EAL.

Adapting the SOR for EAL learners requires a shift in both focus and sequence.

Differences Between L1 and L2 Literacy Development

Learning to read in a second language (L2) differs significantly from learning to read in a first language (L1).

EAL learners often have established reading skills in their L1, bringing with them a wealth of experiences, background knowledge and linguistic abilities that can both enhance and challenge their English literacy journey. Educators must account for this in EAL instruction by recognizing and leveraging learners' L1 skills as assets.

When learning to read, native English speakers typically progress through phonics and decoding first, because of their greater exposure to and background knowledge of English words.

In contrast, EAL learners benefit from more-explicit, systematic instruction to build their language skills effectively. Through oral language activities (such as short stories, songs, nursery rhymes and read-alouds), EAL learners can build the vocabulary and syntactic awareness they need in order to

interpret text meaningfully. This approach aligns with Krashen's (1985) theory of comprehensible input, which emphasizes providing accessible, context-rich language in a low-stress environment.

Therefore, EAL reading instruction should prioritize developing spoken English and understanding word meanings as foundational steps before progressing to decoding and fluency. Explicit vocabulary instruction is essential for EAL learners, as it supports their understanding of English sounds, contexts, meanings and sentence structures, creating a strong foundation for reading comprehension. This approach allows learners to actively engage with and internalize language in meaningful ways.

SOR for EAL Learners: A Six-Pillar Framework

To address the unique needs of EAL learners, a sixth pillar is added to the SOR framework: oral language development. Moreover, the pillars are reordered to prioritize oral language development as the foundational element for reading.

For EAL learners, oral language development is not just an additional element of the SOR but, rather, the most crucial pillar. Oral language is the foundation upon which all other literacy skills are built. EAL learners must first develop a strong grasp of spoken English in order to effectively decode, comprehend and engage with texts. Without sufficient oral language proficiency, EAL learners may be able to decode words accurately but still struggle with comprehension and meaning.

The SOR framework for EAL learners places oral language as the first priority of literacy development, directly supporting vocabulary acquisition, phonemic awareness and comprehension, which creates a stronger framework for building essential reading skills.

The six pillars are as follows:

- Comprehensible input
- Oral language development
- Vocabulary development
- Phonological awareness and phonics
- Fluency
- Comprehension

While the SOR is often misunderstood as focusing primarily on phonics, this approach shifts the emphasis for EAL learners to oral language development and comprehensible input, creating a stronger foundation to support future learning.

Comprehensible Input

Activating the prior knowledge of EAL learners creates a bridge to comprehensible input.

Comprehensible input is an instructional method that provides input for EAL learners to aid comprehension. Instructional methods include pointing to keywords, keeping instruction short, modelling tasks, using realia (real objects), offering constructive feedback, giving praise, celebrating language goals, and providing opportunities for students to interact and use their language skills.

This strategy, supported by Krashen's (1985) theories, makes language accessible and allows for organic language growth as students build background knowledge and familiarity with English sounds and sentence patterns.

Oral Language Development

Oral language serves as the primary medium for building confidence in English.

Educators should give EAL learners the opportunity to learn through listening and speaking activities that mimic natural language acquisition but with guided, explicit support (such as songs, poems and nursery rhymes).

Educators should also encourage learners to speak to each other in English as much as possible. This can be hard at first, as they may be nervous and not feel ready to speak. However, if support is provided, scaffolds are in place and learners feel safe, their oral language proficiency will thrive.

Vocabulary Development

Once learners are comfortable with basic spoken English, vocabulary growth becomes critical.

Vocabulary is an essential building block that aids comprehension and supports the later development of syntax and grammar.

Phonological Awareness and Phonics

While decoding is essential, it should be built upon a solid foundation of oral language and vocabulary.

Educators should adapt phonological awareness and phonics instruction to help learners confidently and accurately map sounds to English, building on their background knowledge through explicit instruction.

Fluency

After establishing a foundation of oral language, vocabulary and phonics, educators can bring in fluency practice to help learners read text smoothly. Fluency allows learners to focus on understanding meaning rather than decoding each word.

Fluency practice should include ample opportunities for repeated reading across varied genres to help learners recognize words and patterns automatically.

Comprehension

Finally, comprehension strategies empower learners to derive meaning from text actively. Equipped with a strong background in oral language, vocabulary and fluency, they can engage with texts more analytically and thoughtfully, building connections to their background knowledge and personal experiences.

Intentionally including learners' home languages and cultural backgrounds in the literacy experience enhances their oral language development by building on their background knowledge and creating bridges to new learning. When educators design instruction to help learners make connections between their L1 and English, using strategies such as cognates, dual language resources or translanguaging practices, they can foster vocabulary growth and make English more accessible.

By adapting the SOR pillars to prioritize oral language, educators can create a framework that aligns with EAL learners' unique language acquisition journeys, supporting their development

of confidence and proficiency as readers and learners.

Reference

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This article presents the author's key insights from the workshop Teaching Reading to Students Learning English: Direct Strategies, offered by the Center for Applied Linguistics.

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Teaching Academic Vocabulary to Young ELLs

by Angela Skene

There are varying approaches to English-language instruction in order to specifically target vocabulary acquisition. However, research indicates that ELLs need instruction that is “direct and rich” (McKeown and Beck 2004) to increase their vocabulary learning and, thus, their comprehension.

Vocabulary comprehension influences a learner’s ability to produce language, as well as their success beyond the educational setting. Therefore, quality vocabulary instruction is essential.

Moreover, not only do ELLs need to acquire and comprehend everyday (or non-academic) vocabulary, they also need to develop an understanding of academic vocabulary, often at the same time.

DiCerbo et al (2014, 452) define *academic vocabulary* as “words students must comprehend in order to access the concepts associated with a particular discipline and also use in order to display their acquisition of these concepts.” Many academic words reappear across subject areas and in future grades. Therefore, educators must ensure that ELLs understand academic vocabulary when they are first exposed to it.

This literature review explores whether explicit instruction and multiple exposures to academic vocabulary increase ELLs’ ability to comprehend academic language and concepts.

Explicit Instruction

McKeown and Beck (2004, 13) state that “research indicates that direct instruction in vocabulary can increase vocabulary learning and comprehension.”

Research on academic vocabulary also stresses the importance of targeting specific vocabulary through explicit instruction (DiCerbo et al 2014). Explicit instruction is critical for helping learners understand the concepts associated with academic vocabulary. Instruction in the structure and origin of the targeted

words to promote and support their meaning is an example of an enriched explicit approach.

Sylvester, Kragler and Liontas (2014) suggest that in order for explicit instruction to be effective, educators must approach new vocabulary in a systematic way. Many researchers agree that this can be achieved by using methods such as the “see/hear/say/write” method, which is recommended by Nisbet and Tindall (2015).

On the other hand, Nagy, Anderson and Herman (1987) argue that academic vocabulary can be acquired through reading and context. However, this style of learning is not measurable, and it is potentially problematic, since learners can make incorrect inferences, which will then hinder their understanding of the vocabulary.

Explicit instruction can serve as quality vocabulary instruction by presenting new vocabulary systematically and incorporating opportunities for practice.

Multiple Exposures

Academic vocabulary instruction must go beyond simply reinforcing meaning. To facilitate learners’ comprehension, explicit instruction must allow for multiple exposures to the targeted academic vocabulary and provide opportunities for learners to make personal connections to the words and to then relate them to the context.

Chung (2012, 107) states that effective vocabulary instruction must occur in “an environment where students are exposed to rich language and word experiences.” Providing multiple exposures to targeted academic vocabulary helps create a rich verbal environment.

Moreover, research indicates that “multiple exposures to target words accelerate vocabulary learning (Blachowicz et al., 2006)” (Chung 2012, 111). Educators should expose learners to the targeted words frequently and in a variety of contexts.

In their framework for explicit academic vocabulary instruction for middle school ELLs, Nisbet and Tindall (2015) emphasize that multiple exposures to targeted vocabulary must be at the forefront of instruction. They suggest that, to significantly improve comprehension, learners need as many as 12 exposures per word. Educators should engage learners in meaningful activities during and after reading to expose them to new words and promote the use of those words in context.

McKeown and Beck (2004, 13) assert that “if [vocabulary] instruction is to influence comprehension, it needs to involve a breadth of information about the instructed words and engage active processing by getting students to think about and use the words.” Therefore, academic vocabulary instruction must allow learners to reflect on the word presented, make connections to their native language (when applicable) and then apply the word directly in context.

Increasing exposure to academic words through a multifaceted approach can lead to increased learning and comprehension.

Breadth and Depth of Vocabulary Knowledge

Nisbet and Tindall (2015) note that ELLs tend to understand fewer vocabulary words than native English speakers and that disparity exists between the two in terms of breadth and depth of vocabulary knowledge and comprehension. Unfortunately, if instruction is not targeted, the disparity in breadth of vocabulary comprehension only increases over time.

Similarly, Chung (2012, 106) notes that “studies show that, compared to first language speakers, second language learners ascribe meanings that are more limited and less diverse to target-language words (August et al., 2005; Verhallen & Schoonen, 1993),” which likely impedes their comprehension of academic words.

This accentuates the need to increase learners’ exposure to the targeted academic vocabulary.

Selecting Words Purposefully

To provide rich instruction of academic vocabulary that includes a breadth of information,

educators must select and present words purposefully.

Nisbet and Tindall (2015, 76) suggest that educators should “be purposeful in selecting words to directly teach, and focus on academic words.” The words that will be the most useful “are those that both appear frequently in academic text, and are of high utility across content areas” (p 76).

Selecting high-frequency words, and subsequently providing multiple exposures to and opportunities to apply those words, is imperative to long-term comprehension. Therefore, “knowing how best to select and introduce vocabulary for rich instruction is critical” (Sylvester, Kragler and Liontas 2014, 435).

Moreover, exposing learners to vocabulary that has a purpose emphasizes the need for learners to “master a more robust range of language” (DiCerbo et al 2014, 451).

Conclusion

As McKeown and Beck (2004, 13) assert, “Direct instruction is an important component in students’ vocabulary development.” However, to facilitate comprehension, this instruction must allow for multiple exposures to the targeted vocabulary in a systematic, rich and meaningful way.

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