

CREATIVE VOCABULARY TEACHING FOR ELLS/ELS**MICHELLE SCHULZE***Grand View University***ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this article is to provide practical vocabulary activities for K-6 English Language Learners (ELLs) and content teachers. Research was collected about the effectiveness of vocabulary instruction and the types of strategies to use with ELLs/ELs. The result is a collection of strategies aimed at K-6 teachers for the purpose of helping ELLs/ELs learn grade-level content vocabulary. The research suggests that teachers do not teach academic vocabulary enough in K-6 classrooms and implies that students' achievement could be positively influenced by more vocabulary instruction. Teachers who desire to find creative and fun ways to teach vocabulary to ELLs/ELs could benefit from this article.

Keywords: Vocabulary Strategies, English Language Learners (ELLs), and English Learners (ELs)

Vocabulary is a key component in the success of English Language Learners (ELLs)/English Learners (ELs) in the mainstream classroom. Too often, vocabulary is not taught because teachers feel they do not have the time to spend on a vocabulary lesson. Yet, Scott, Jamieson-Noel, and Asselin (2003) recommend that students need repeated experiences with new vocabulary words through active learning to improve their retention of those words. K-6 content and ELL/EL teachers have a vast array of vocabulary teaching strategies available to use, but they can sometimes find themselves using the same ones over and over. To promote student engagement, teachers need to use a variety of creative, active learning strategies to help students acquire and utilize new vocabulary words.

1. **Use socially-based activities to encourage students to learn vocabulary.**

Interacting with classmates can help ELLs/ELs to learn vocabulary. Well-known ways to accomplish this task are cooperative groups, inquiry-based learning, interviews, etc. Danny Brassell (2009) describes a lesser-known activity called Vocab-O-Gram, which can be used in fiction reading. Students fill out a table with the vocabulary from a picture book or novel. At the top of the table is the new vocabulary. Then, students discuss in a group where to place those new words in the categories of setting, characters, action, resolution, and questions the group still has after their discussion. Groups share their predictions and write any questions that they still want to answer. After reading the book, students and teacher check the Vocab-O-Gram to see if any corrections need to be made to the students' predictions (p. 2-4). Another strategy to encourage student interaction is providing sentence starters on an anchor chart or for use in students' notebooks for a variety of situations, such as giving an opinion, disagreeing with someone, reporting what you learned from a classmate, or asking for an explanation (Kinsella, 2005).

Another creative vocabulary strategy to use is open word sorts described by Levine, Lukens, & Smallwood (2013). In this strategy, groups of two to four students get large cards with vocabulary words on them. Students get blank cards to write their categories on, and the goal is for students to group the vocabulary words into like categories. This requires students to communicate with each other. The large size allows students to move around rather than being stuck sitting at a table. The best sorts will allow for students to find different ways to categorize the words, and each team can share why they chose the categories that they did (p. 50).

2. Use the “Dump and Clump” organizer to help our ELLs/ELs learn vocabulary.

One of my favorite newer graphic organizers is called “Dump and Clump” (Sprenger, 2017). In this technique, students are given an organizer with a “dumpster” space, a “clumpster” space, and a place for writing sentences. Student groups are given a topic, and the individual students or groups try to come up with all the vocabulary words that they can for that topic. For example, if the topics were sports in warm-weather and cold-weather, students would name all the sports they could think of in the “dumpster.” Then, students would categorize the sports into warm-weather and cold-weather sports in the “clumpster.” Once finished with the categories, students write two sentences: one about the identified cold-weather sports and one about the identified warm-weather sports (p. 27-28). When this graphic organizer is done in a group, an additional benefit for ELLs/ELs is the ability to interact with classmates to discuss and use the vocabulary in all four domains: speaking, listening, reading, and writing. When used individually, students use only the reading and writing domains.

3. Use a combination of music and Total Physical Response to help young ELLs/ELs learn vocabulary.

A typical lesson in kindergarten or first grade science is learning about the needs of plants. Students are required to be able to describe what plants need to survive. Teachers often give students a graphic organizer on which to write the vocabulary words for the needs of a plant. These words include water, soil, space, light, and air. While these words might be easy for some students, ELLs/ELs tend to need more help to remember them and understand their meanings in this context. Therefore, I found a song video about the needs of a plant. After we had sang it a few times, I

realized that some of the ELLs/ELs needed more help to understand the words. At that point, we made a designated gesture for each of the five words about the needs of a plant every time we sang that word. For example, for water, we made a raining gesture with our fingers, and we made a digging motion for soil. This helped the ELLs/ELs to learn how these words were used in this science context, and the repetition of the music and gestures helped them to remember the five needs of plants.

4. **Use the “Scrambled Eggs” vocabulary strategy in reading to aid in comprehension.**

“Scrambled Eggs” (Springer, 2017) is a fun and creative way to get students to dig into text to figure out the meaning of vocabulary words, which increases their comprehension. Students read the article or text selection either individually or in a group. Students can number the paragraphs themselves, but for younger learners, it may be better for the teacher to number the paragraphs in advance. Teachers should also prepare the plastic eggs by putting one word or phrase on a paper inside each egg. If students read individually, they will complete the rest of the task as a group. One student in the group will number a paper from one to ten or to whatever number of words the students are to find. Another student will be the retriever of the eggs. When a retriever brings an egg from the basket, another team member reads the word or phrase. The group tries to define the word and find how it is used in the text. Then, that egg is returned, and the retriever brings a new egg. This continues until all eggs have been chosen and words recorded; therefore, if the teacher wants a shorter timeframe, he or she should use fewer words (p. 65-66).

5. **Use realia to build excitement and understanding of vocabulary.**

Realia can be used for any class subject and allows students to get a hands-on understanding of vocabulary. In one instance, my third grade ELL students read a story about two children in the American Revolution. Students learned about what kids did for fun during that time period, such as play nine pins and shoot marbles. My ELL/EL students had no idea what the games were or how they were played. I brought in a set of nine pins and marbles. ELL/EL students got to examine each game, and I showed them the rules of each game. Then, students got to play a game, and they understood what the story's characters were doing for entertainment when they read about it.

6. **Use technology to enhance vocabulary instruction.**

The use of computer technology in vocabulary instruction has become increasingly popular. This has lead researchers and teachers alike to question the efficacy of technology in helping students to increase their vocabulary. The Hajebi, Taheri, Fahandezh, and Salari (2018) study gave a standardized vocabulary pre-test and post-test to an adult control group and an adult experimental group that had used free vocabulary learning sites for eight weeks. The authors found, "There was a significant difference between the mean differences of the vocabulary size test scores of participants before and after the treatment in terms of their vocabulary development tests" (p. 375). Iowa also had positive results:

The State Educational Technology Directors Association has implemented a new ... professional development system for elementary and middle school reading and math and the use of technology in those subjects. Preliminary results indicate

that achievement scores of students participating in the program have increased by 14 points in 8th grade math, 16 points in 4th grade math, and 13 points in 4th grade reading, significantly higher than scores of students in the control group.

(International Society of Technology in Education, 2008, p. 6)

Even though vocabulary knowledge is a key component of reading comprehension, Brassell and Furtado (2008) found, “A disturbing number of studies indicate that vocabulary instruction is a very small part of elementary instruction” (p. 111). Technology can help bridge the gap between the amount of vocabulary instruction and practice students need and the amount of time teachers have to devote to vocabulary lessons. Numerous programs and games are available for free to use with ELLs/ELs or all students. Teachers should look for websites with activities that are culturally-appropriate and motivate students to learn such as Kahoot, ESL Games World, and games on Vocabulary Spelling City. My older students enjoyed the competition of Kahoot, and the younger kids enjoyed the memory games on Vocabulary Spelling City. Furthermore, programs that are based on using word banks and quizzes were found to increase students’ vocabulary knowledge over words not entered into the word banks (Horst, Cobb, & Nicolae, 2005). Quizlet allows teachers or students to enter words into word and definition banks, and flash cards and quizzes are made from the entered words. Whatever program you use, be sure to have the program track your students’ progress or do it yourself in a chart.

Learning new vocabulary is key to ELLs/ELs’ success, but ELLs/ELs require repeated exposures to the vocabulary words. The best activities will help students to use vocabulary in context. K-6 teachers should use a combination of the academic vocabulary strategies suggested here to keep students engaged and motivated with grade-level content while becoming proficient

in English. In addition, vocabulary words introduced previously should be reviewed periodically to ensure that students continue to use them in speaking and writing. This will improve ELLs/ELs' English vocabulary proficiency at a faster pace.

THE AUTHOR

Dr. Michelle Schulze is an Assistant Professor of Education (ELL) at Grand View University in Des Moines, Iowa. She is in charge of the ESL Endorsement program and is the Project Director for the Project EMPOWER grant. Before becoming a professor, she worked in K-12 education as a secondary French teacher and ELL teacher for 18 years in Missouri. She was also a 7-12 principal in rural Kansas for two years. Her research interests include ESL teaching and assessment, family involvement, and summer school.

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