

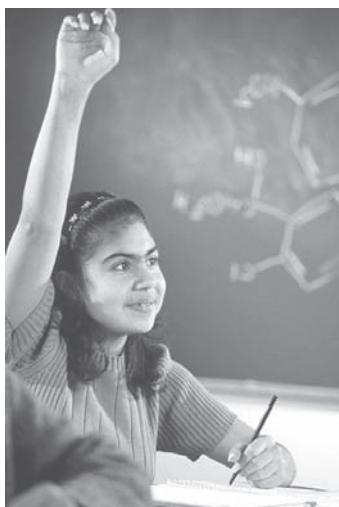
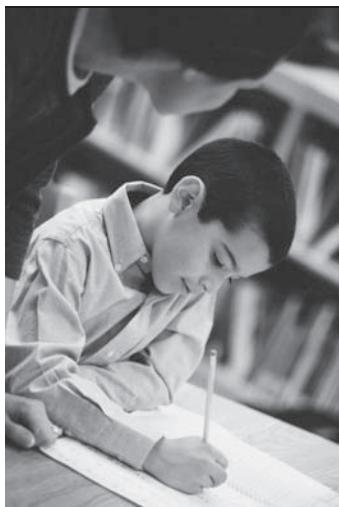
# Aiming High

A COUNTYWIDE COMMITMENT TO CLOSE  
THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP FOR ENGLISH LEARNERS

## Aspirando a lo Mejor

## RESOURCE

A SCOE Publication, October 2005



### *Preparing for Effective Vocabulary Instruction*

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**M**any students who are not succeeding in upper elementary, middle, and high school are young people who have had most or all of their formal schooling in this country and did not have the opportunity to develop literacy in their primary language. While these students may be able to converse comfortably about everyday topics in their home language, they do not have the linguistic resources to accomplish complex academic tasks in the language they speak at home. At the same time, they are hindered by impoverished academic language foundations in English.

These students are referred to in the literature as **protracted English Language Learners**. Despite uninterrupted years of schooling in the United States, they have salient gaps in English vocabulary, syntax, and grammar. They are challenged throughout the school day by the academic discourse demands of textbooks and literature, essay assignments, lectures, and formal class discussions. Moreover, they lack the academic language competence they need to move on to a community college or university and successfully navigate the post-secondary curriculum in reading and writing.

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*This is Part 1 of a two-part brief based on a presentation about how to effectively select and teach academic vocabulary to protracted English Language Learners. It is based on a presentation that Dr. Kinsella made at the ELL Administrator Conference hosted by the Sonoma County Office of Education in April 2005. As part of its Aiming High initiative, SCOE is providing this resource to teachers throughout Sonoma County with a goal of helping them close the achievement gap for English Learners.*

Research on second language learners illustrates that vocabulary knowledge is the single best predictor of academic achievement across subject matter domains. Because of the pivotal role academic vocabulary knowledge plays in overall school success and mobility, elementary and secondary teachers alike must devote more time and attention to selecting and explicitly teaching words that will enable English Language Learners to meet the demands of today's standards-based curricula.

I've taught academic literacy classes for protracted English Language Learners at several Bay Area high schools through San Francisco State University's Step to College Program. One particularly memorable student, Consuelo, came to the U.S. in the early elementary grades with interrupted literacy foundations in Spanish. She attended my class during eleventh- and twelfth-grade and is now a community college student with a goal of pursuing a nursing degree. What does Consuelo need to achieve her dream and how can we, as committed educators, help her do it?

Looking at Consuelo's writing will tell us a lot about what she needs to be successful in the post-secondary learning environment. A student's formal writing in response to a nonfiction reading is a key predictor of how protracted English Language Learners will navigate the complex literacy demands of college. Quite often, their writing looks like written-down spoken English. They may reflect thoughtfully on the curricula, but do not express their ideas using the academic discourse that's necessary for higher education coursework.

This is what Consuelo wrote in response to a journal entry prompt asking students to analyze the kinds of environments that make them feel active or passive in the classroom:

The class where I think I'm a passive person is my English class because in English I can't express what I want. I can't say as many things as I want to say. Yes, I do say a little, but not how I would like to. I don't feel like participate because I am afraid to say something wrong or pronounce a word badly. I don't like to be wrong and I think is better to be quiet than to be wrong. That's why I think I am a passive learner in English class, because I don't want to be shamed.

Consuelo has poignantly communicated one of the strongest perspectives I have collected from English Language Learners in the course of my career. She is painfully aware of her shortcomings in English. It's evident she needs routine opportunities not just to talk, but to engage in highly structured and well-supported academic discourse.

Consuelo needs thoughtful, intentional academic language development every hour of the day in every class. Bolstering

her academic language will take a dedicated and coordinated effort, but it can be done if her teachers work from a thoughtful instructional framework and there is a schoolwide effort. Every teacher in every classroom needs to address her English language

development needs. This commitment to vocabulary instruction is pivotal to a schoolwide effort confronting the achievement gap in language and literacy.

▼ *This publication focuses on the importance of teacher preparation for vocabulary instruction, including how to select the words to teach and some strategies for academic language instruction. The second publication in this series, also based on Dr. Kinsella's presentation, will address the specifics of vocabulary instruction and assessment of student learning.*

### ***Teacher preparation vs. “on the fly” instruction***

Effective vocabulary instruction requires careful planning. Preparation is one of the major differences between offering vocabulary *activities* to students and delivering vocabulary *instruction* to them. Many teachers ask students to acquire critical word meanings through independent dictionary work or by completing skill sheets and crossword puzzles—activities that have

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limited instructional value and require little preparation.

Quite often teachers will come to the classroom having done no advance preparation and engage in what I call “on the fly” teaching of vocabulary. They read a passage, come to a word students

don’t know, and improvise a definition or ask students to define the word. Relying on students is, at best, an inefficient way to teach a new word. You can teach the word first and call on them for an example, but don’t call on them to try to teach it.

Sometimes, teachers will tell students to look for context clues to determine what a word means. This may work if students are reading fourth-grade level

engineered material that’s structured to include synonyms and examples. With more authentic and demanding text, there are rarely sufficient clues for students to successfully grasp the word’s meaning. Even when the passage does provide partial clues, most students lack the analytical skills necessary to exploit the context without confirming the word’s meaning in a dictionary.

Teachers often tell students to look up words in a dictionary. I’m a fan of dictionaries, but all dictionaries are not the same. For example, if Consuelo’s science teacher tells her to “categorize” some objects and she looks up “categorize” in a standard dictionary it will tell her “to arrange in categories, to classify.”

However, if she looks up “categorize” in *Longman Advanced American Dictionary*, it will say “to put people or things into groups according to what type, level, etc. they are; to say what group they are in.” This is not a definition, but rather an explanation accompanied by an example. Consuelo needs explanations from dictionaries and from us—explanations and examples that use language she understands.

## ***Six components of successful vocabulary instruction***

What is it that students need but do not get with impromptu or “on the fly” instruction? What is it that teachers need to include in their class preparation?

- 1. An advanced organizer.** An advanced organizer gives students a sense of what’s coming and what’s important for them to retain. The teacher is letting them know that he or she is going to teach some important vocabulary. “There are six words I’ve underlined in red chalk on the board. These are words I plan to teach right now. Please get out your notebook, open it to the vocabulary section, and get ready to jot down some of this information.”
- 2. A consistent instructional process.** Some teachers use a different strategy for each vocabulary word. The students don’t know if the teacher is going to give an example, a list of synonyms, or ask them for a definition. This chameleon pedagogy makes it difficult for students to know what’s going on and to take notes for study and review.

## **For further study**

**For teachers** interested in additional reading on the topic of vocabulary development, SCOE recommends the book, *Bringing Words to Life: Robust Vocabulary Instruction* (2002, Guilford Press). “This is an excellent resource for vocabulary development in grades K-12,” says Jane Escobedo, director of ELL Services at SCOE. Authors Isabel Beck, Margaret McKeown, and Linda Kucan suggest strategies for selecting words for instruction, developing student-friendly explanations of new words, and creating learning activities. Concrete examples and sample classroom dialogues are included. ■

- 3. A well-organized presentation.** The most important thing English Language Learners need is clear, intentional, and recognizable language instruction. If the teacher is extemporaneously moving around and using random strategies, students get the impression that the teacher isn't prepared and that the lesson really isn't important.
- 4. More time dedicated to important academic words.** High-use academic words should be given the same level of attention as words that are simply eye-catching or unusual. Teachers who embark upon a lesson without preparing for vocabulary instruction tend to devote as much or more time to unusual, low-frequency "stumblers" as they do to critical words that drive reading comprehension or to high-utility academic words that students will encounter in many academic contexts.
- 5. Visual representations of the words being taught.** If critical information about a word is entrusted primarily to auditory processing, it often results in linguistic approximations. The teacher may be saying "precise" as a synonym for "accurate," but if Consuelo hasn't seen the word, she may be hearing "rice."
- 6. Their own written record.** If students have to expend all their intellectual capital just to keep up with a teacher who is teaching on the fly, they will not be able to take the notes they need for review and mastery. For almost every student, academic English is a second language and they must have some sort of written record to learn this challenging material.

### *Choosing vocabulary words and planning to teach them*

#### ■ Which words to teach?

Teaching a word well takes planning and it takes time. All words won't merit that level of rigor. How can teachers determine which words should be taught? This is actually the hardest part of vocabulary instruction—being able to analyze the lesson and pull out the words to teach. Almost all teachers need some help with this task.

#### Vocabulary Teaching Priorities

- Big idea words that relate to lesson concepts
- High-use and high-frequency academic toolkit words
- High-use disciplinary toolkit words
- Words to engage in literate discourse about topic

Of course, teachers need to launch the big concepts for the lesson. These big idea words are usually called out in bold face at the beginning of the chapter. However, publishers rarely highlight what I would call high-use and high-frequency academic toolkit words that are not lesson-specific. These are words like "consequence," "issue," and "analyze." Being able to use these academic toolkit words will help Consuelo achieve her dream of becoming an R.N.

Each discipline has its own particular toolkit words. A literature-driven language arts curriculum is the hardest for teaching vocabulary because the most important words to be taught are not in the story. These are words like "metaphor" that Consuelo must use in order to engage in literate discourse about the topic or the story. They are the words she needs to discuss the issues, themes, and consequences.

Chapters on the American Revolution in history books all pull out similar lesson-related words to teach: colony, colonist, patriot, loyalist, neutralist, Stamp Act, and traitor. These are the words Consuelo will be explicitly taught and assessed on during the unit. But what about words like independence, perspective, or protest? These are high-use words that she will see again and again in subsequent chapters, but they are not taught.

Teachers have to do more than call out the words that are directly related to the standards at the expense of important high-use academic words. In the high school academic literacy class I teach, I put most of my instructional emphasis on toolkit words and infuse some lesson terms. My litmus test for picking the right vocabulary to teach is to look at the words that would be needed to write a synopsis of the reading for a literate peer.

If you're teaching an important word, it's critical to really teach it and this means teaching word families. If you teach "accurate," teach "accuracy" as well. If you teach "signify," which is an important academic word,

**High-use academic words should be given the same level of attention as words that are simply eye-catching or unusual.**

be sure to teach "significant" and "significance" as well—both of which are high-frequency words. Averil Coxhead has compiled *The Academic Word List*, which consists of 570 word families that appear frequently in academic

materials in secondary schools and higher education (see <http://language.massey.ac.nz/staff/awl>). These are not specialized discipline terms, but rather generic academic words like "issue," "quality," and "factor."

They are the kinds of words not present in Consuelo's writing, but ones she needs to acquire so she can pass the writing proficiency exam and comprehend readings and lectures across the disciplines.

When I look at writing samples of freshmen entering San Francisco State University who are protracted English Language Learners or recent immigrants, it is immediately obvious when they don't know word families. In response to a reading on discrimination, one student writes:

I am absolutely oppose. My boss discriminations me all the time at Macy's. She salaries me lower than other people and prejudices at me sometimes.

The student understands the words semantically, but not syntactically.

In working with under-prepared students, teachers have to be able to justify how they select the words to teach. An important part of teaching vocabulary is being able to look at a reading and know which words students need to understand because they drive comprehension of

the content and which words they need to have in their academic toolkit.

## ■ Creating teacher notes and a note-taking scaffold

Once you've selected the words to be taught, the next step is to prepare notes for teaching the word. As we'll see later, these notes can also be the basis for creating a note-taking scaffold for students.

In order to teach a word, the teacher has to know how to pronounce it, how to divide it into syllables, and what part of speech it is. It's also a good idea to have some easily understood synonyms for the word and some relevant examples. The box below shows how I would organize my notes for teaching the word "lexicon."

No matter how clear, consistent, and coherent your instruction is, English Language Learners like Consuelo will need some sort of note-taking scaffold in order to be able to follow along. The vocabulary note-taking scaffold I use is similar to my own notes, but with blanks that students can fill in as I present the lesson. For example, the explanation for lexicon in the note-taking scaffold

Sample Teacher Preparation Notes		
Term	Synonym/Explanation	Example/Image
lexicon, n. lex' i con	SYN: a dictionary  DEF: all the words in a particular language; the special vocabulary of a profession, hobby	Medical lexicon Navajo lexicon Skater lexicon

might read "the special \_\_\_\_\_ of a profession or hobby." Students would be responsible for filling in the blanks as I teach the word.

This is a scaffold in every sense of the word—it's a tempering mechanism you put into place for students to complete a challenging task they would not otherwise be able to complete. It's not intended to be a permanent crutch; it's meant to be a gradual release model. It also shows how I consistently teach vocabulary: I pronounce

If you're teaching an important word, it's critical to really teach it and this means teaching word families.

the word, I give the part of speech, a synonym, and an example.

### ■ Planning backwards

I've found that one of the most helpful things in developing a unit is to ask myself, "What

do I want them to eventually produce? What are the writing tasks I want to engage students in?" Then, I backtrack and see how I can engineer the structured, focused opportunities for them to use the academic vocabulary in the unit I'm teaching. If they'll be getting a writing assignment to summarize information or to take a position on an issue, I find ways to have

a class discussion where they use the academic syntax, including the target words. I find ways to weave in opportunities for students to create and use the kinds of sentences they'll need for the writing assignment.

The hardest part of vocabulary instruction is not learning the process for teaching a new word; it is learning how to analyze the lesson and pull out the words that need to be taught. Planning the instruction, including the preparation of a note-taking scaffold for students, is time-consuming but necessary. Teachers may need coaching in these tasks, but they are easily learned and, once implemented, will yield tremendous long-term benefits for English Language Learners. ■

## Vocabulary Instruction Checklist

### Teachers should plan to:

- Explicitly teach 5-7 instructionally important words per lesson
- Provide examples of the target words in curriculum-focused contexts
- Teach the "word relationships" of the target words—cognates, synonyms, antonyms, multiple meanings, roots, affixes, etc.
- Expose students to target words multiple times

### Students should be engaged in:

- Expressing definitions in their own words
- Recording the words, their definitions, and visual representations
- Learning to use the words by talking, comparing, analyzing, and writing
- Reviewing and practicing the words through learning activities that require discourse

## Teacher Activity: Lesson Planning Practice

1. Read the assigned selection for your lesson and underline any words you anticipate will be either relatively or totally unfamiliar to many of your students.
2. **High-Priority Lesson Terms:** Identify 4-6 of these unfamiliar words that are central lesson terms—words that are related to the focal lesson concepts and main ideas.
3. **High-Utility Academic Toolkit Words:** Identify 4-6 of the unfamiliar words that you consider to be high-utility academic words that students will encounter across subject areas and grade levels.
4. Identify 2-4 of the unfamiliar words that are neither central to comprehension of the main ideas nor highly useful words for general academic purposes. These words should not be pre-taught; they should be dealt with quickly while working on a text by providing a brief simple synonym or explanation and possibly an example.
5. Prepare to teach two words that you have determined to be instructional priorities: one "lesson term" and one "academic toolkit" word. Prepare to teach these two words using the note-taking chart illustrated on page 5.

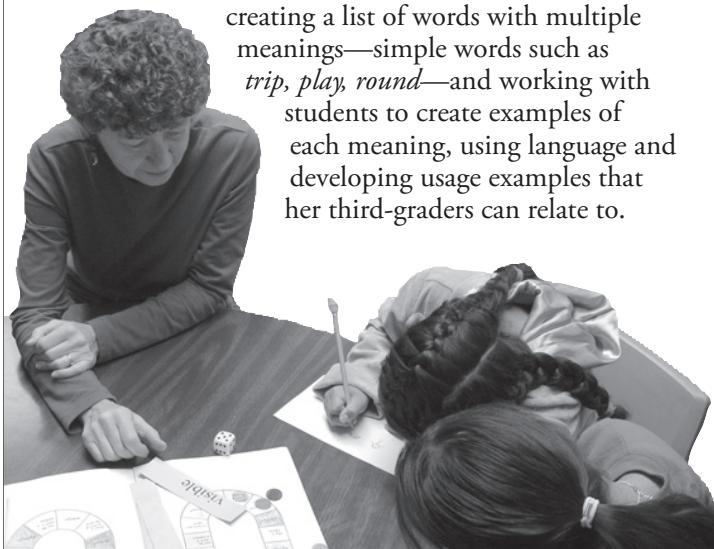
## *Local example: Brook Hill School*

**Third-grade teacher brings research-based strategies to life**

**B**onnie Raines, a third-grade teacher at Brook Hill School in the Santa Rosa City School District, attended the California Vocabulary Forum in Southern California last January, where she had the opportunity to hear cutting-edge researchers present their ideas about vocabulary development. Although she had already been concentrating on vocabulary with her students—three-quarters of whom are second language learners—Raines broadened her perspective at this statewide conference, picked up some new ideas, and is now in the process of applying those ideas in her daily work with students.

Recognizing that she needs to be strategic about the words she chooses to teach, Raines uses researcher Isabel Beck's framework of Tier 1, 2, and 3 words to make her decisions. (Tier 1 words are the most basic and rarely require instruction—*clock, baby, happy*; Tier 2 includes high-frequency words for mature language users—*coincidence, industrious, impact*; less frequently used Tier 3 words are generally limited to specific domains and can be learned as needed in a content area—*isotope, lathe, peninsula*.) Raines tries to select words that students can apply across the curriculum—they provide the biggest bang for the buck—and she provides opportunities for students to use the words in different contexts.

She and other teachers at Brook Hill are also concentrating on teaching words that have multiple meanings, a strategy that helps students build a deeper understanding of words. She's creating a list of words with multiple meanings—simple words such as *trip, play, round*—and working with students to create examples of each meaning, using language and developing usage examples that her third-graders can relate to.



Another vocabulary-building activity centers on a photographic “states of mind book” that Raines developed to help students expand their repertoire of words used to convey emotions and feelings. The book provides simple definitions and includes photos of students acting out vocabulary sentences that demonstrate feelings or stances that frequently appear in literature. Students bring the words to life through play-acting, then use the words they’re learning by applying them to different settings. For example, they might debate what kind of incidents would make someone suspicious, annoyed, astonished, or dismayed. There are plans to turn this photo-vocabulary concept into a schoolwide effort with photos and the words they represent posted in the school’s multi-purpose room.

Students in Bonnie Raines’ class have also started keeping vocabulary notebooks this year. Her hope is that by devoting a notebook specifically to vocabulary, it will convey the importance of this learning to students and heighten their awareness of and excitement about words.

Staff at Brook Hill are currently working to make students aware of cognates that allow Spanish-speaking students to more easily access academic English. The Spanish “frio” is a cognate of the English word “frigid,” which can lead students to the knowledge that frigid means cold. “Many students don’t recognize the connection between cognates naturally,” says Raines. “They need to have them pointed out.” Once they see the connection, they can infer word meaning and learn the English word with greater ease. It’s a powerful strategy, which teachers intend to teach in every grade, with schoolwide articulation of grade-level lists.

As with all vocabulary instruction, repetition is important in Raines’ class. She’s always looking for ways that students can use the words she’s teaching in different contexts and content areas. Although it’s too early in the school year to say how the class as a whole is responding to her most recent instructional strategies, Raines does notice former students using vocabulary spontaneously in everyday situations, thus showing deeper understanding of the words she explicitly taught. ■

## Vocabulary instruction should be part of your intervention toolkit

### Local Resource: Framework for Intervention

**A**s Kate Kinsella remarked in her presentation, “The commitment to vocabulary instruction is pivotal to a schoolwide effort confronting the achievement gap in language and literacy.” She urged educators *in every classroom* to address the language development needs of second language learners. But what should schools do to help students who have fallen far behind in their learning, students who need more than good in-class vocabulary instruction to reach proficiency?

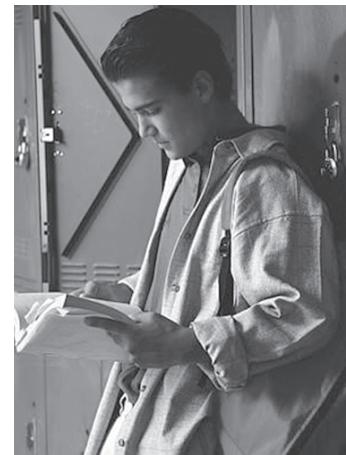
Educators committed to closing the achievement gap are wrestling with this issue, says Don Russell, SCOE’s assistant superintendent for instruction. “Local schools generally have some sort of intervention program in place, but what we’re all realizing is that one intervention strategy does not fit the needs of all students. We need to be more strategic—and more effective—in using intervention if we are serious about closing the persistent learning gap we’re seeing across the county.”

Russell is heading a SCOE team of curriculum specialists who are designing a *Framework for Intervention* and pulling together resources to help local educators provide strategic, targeted intervention to struggling students. Their cyclical framework is organized around five essential intervention components. For each component, SCOE is gathering the latest research,

information about effective models, and real-life examples showing how those models are being implemented. These resources are being compiled electronically, so instructional leaders will have point-and-click access to the areas that are most relevant to their school. The hope is that this comprehensive tool will give schools the information they need to significantly strengthen their intervention efforts.

How does vocabulary development fit into this mix? According to Jane Escobedo, director of ELL Services at SCOE, English Learners who are below grade level and identified for intervention *always* benefit from explicit vocabulary instruction. “Whenever interventions are provided to second language learners, the components of effective vocabulary instruction—like those outlined by Kate Kinsella—should be incorporated into the program. Lessons should include explicit vocabulary instruction and lots of opportunities for students to use the vocabulary through speaking, reading, and writing activities.”

For her part of the Framework for Intervention project, Escobedo is assembling a variety of resources to help schools determine when students need additional support to develop and expand their vocabulary. Also included will be outlines of strategies for delivering vocabulary-focused interventions, tools for monitoring student progress, and ideas for adjusting instruction based on student performance.



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▼ *SCOE plans to have the Framework for Intervention resource available to schools this spring.*