

## Vocabulary Development for English Language Learners

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In the United States schools today, a large and growing number of students come from homes where English is not the primary language and schools, in some parts of the country, have populations of more than 90% non-native speakers (NNS) of English. “In 1979, there were 6 million language-minority students; by 1999, this number had more than doubled to 14 million students” (August & Strahahan, 2006, p.1). The legal and financial stresses of meeting the needs of ELLs have caused state governments and local school districts serious concern regarding ELL literacy issues because drop-out rates and low scores on literacy exams influence negatively the federal funding states receive. For example, in an excerpt from the Nevada Assembly Ways & Means Committee minutes it was stated that, “...the goal was that all Nevada students would pass the high school writing proficiency examination. Of the 85 percent of students that passed the examination, few were ELL students. ...the 15 percent that could not pass the writing proficiency examination were ELL and special education students” (NV Assembly Ways & Means Committee Meeting Minutes, 3/27/03).

With the tendency to serve learners in mainstream classrooms, teachers who plan and modify their lessons to accommodate all learners will find the greatest success by considering the language necessary to assess instructional objectives and learning tasks. Vygotsky (1978) refers to language as the tool used to accomplish human tasks necessary in society. The components of the language of schooling – vocabulary, structure, function, and literacy skills – become the tools used to support content learning and development of necessary academic language. Academic language can only be acquired in educational contexts in contrast to conversational language which is acquired in interactions in order to meet the daily living needs of the learner (Cummins, 2000).

Developing vocabulary in English language learners (ELLs) begins with understanding the language needs of ELLs, and one way of determining this is by comparing the language development of ELLs with that of native English speakers. At the same time, it is essential to comment on the universal language development consistent among children across language groups. That is, by age five, children are grammatically competent speakers of their mother tongue (Peregoy & Boyle, 2000). ELLs are no exception. While ELLs may begin school competent in their native language, they are often devoid of any language skills in English. By comparison, native speakers of English enter school with a productive vocabulary of approximately 2,500 words (Termon & Childs, 1912), augment their productive vocabulary by another 1,000 words each year, and consistently have a larger receptive than productive vocabulary. (The 1912 citation here indicates the long history of canonical productive vocabulary lists in literacy instruction.) To appreciate the vocabulary development of ELLs, it is necessary to discern and understand the levels of language proficiency of English

language learners. ELLs will progress in their development of English in stages, typically classified as novice, intermediate, advanced, or superior. While there are three gradations of novice and intermediate levels and two gradations of advanced levels of proficiency, the description of each proficiency level will entail only the beginning stage of each.

### **Stages of Language Development**

ELLs with no English language skills are referred to as *novice* level learners or beginners. Novice level students will begin by amassing a receptive vocabulary, whereas their productive vocabulary class will be limited to non-verbal responses. While ELLs quickly develop a receptive vocabulary in the schools' English speaking environment, the students' productive vocabulary will be slower to emerge. The novice students' language development will also proceed through a "silent period" in which students appear not to be learning much language, but teachers should not be discouraged as students are making sense of and acquiring the oral language from the English-speaking context of the classroom. Many sociocultural factors will determine the length of time students spend in the silent period. While the silent period can occur at any stage in the progression of language as students encounter unfamiliar and challenging English language forms, it is typically characteristic of the novice level.

The *intermediate* level ELL students' language will begin with one- and two-word responses and progress to simple phrase and sentence replies. To maintain conversations, they will need approximately 2,000 words (Folse, 2006). Initially, intermediate level ELL students will resort to language formulae but, with increased mastery of vocabulary, will begin to "create" with the language. At this stage, the ELL students' language begins to approximate English and while it might sound like English, it does not mirror standard English language usage. Statements like, "Is coming the student" or "What I can do for you?" are situated in the interlanguage of the learner. Interlanguage best describes the language statements which sound like English, but are not typical of statements any native speaker would make.

Interlanguage is a natural progression of language development as ELLs attempt to become coordinate bilinguals rather than compound bilinguals. Coordinate bilinguals have two separate language systems, meaning they can navigate between two languages with minimal difficulty. On the other hand, compound bilinguals have one dominant language, the mother tongue, which they use to access the second language, in this case, English. Since compound bilinguals rely on the mother tongue for understanding and speaking English, their English language use is replete with grammar errors and literal translations from L1 to L2. Because they are accessing English through their mother tongue, they require more time to understand what is said and additional time to respond. In contrast, the coordinate bilinguals' English language use is not restricted in this manner, since they can think in both languages.

ELL students at the *advanced* level have navigated through and beyond interlanguage use, are clearly coordinate bilinguals capable of producing multiple sentence responses and engaging in connected discourse, but only on topics of a concrete nature. It's not until the *superior* level that ELLs can address topics of an abstract nature, with minimal or few grammatical inconsistencies in their use of standard spoken English. Superior level ELLs are considered fluent speakers of English but their productive English

vocabulary consists of 2,000 to 7,000 words compared to fluent English speakers who possess 10,000 to 100,000 words (Burt, Peyton, & Van Duzer, 2005).

How will understanding the different levels of English language proficiency affect vocabulary instruction for ELLs? If the novice level ELL enters school with no productive or receptive vocabulary, the ELL will need to match the vocabulary development of the native English speaker and augment it by 1,000 words a year. To be comparable to an English speaking counterpart, the novice level ELLs must learn 2,500 words and add an additional 1,000 words in the first year. Yoshida (1978) found that after seven months of nursery school, the preschool child had a productive English vocabulary of about 260 to 300 words and a receptive vocabulary of about 1,000 words. In examining the vocabulary levels of 5- and 7-year olds in a New Zealand school system, Jamieson (1976) found that ELLs lagged two years behind native speakers.

How can teachers' claims that English language learners acquire English quickly and effortlessly be reconciled with the findings by Yoshida and Jamieson? To understand the discrepancy, the distinction between conversational and academic language needs to be examined. Conversational language, also known as social language, can be acquired by ELLs in 1 to 2 years and typically results in teachers mainstreaming ELLs. While ELLs may sound like native speakers, conversational language is insufficient for learning or mastering grade level concepts in English. ELLs need to develop academic language for functioning in a mainstream classroom, and it takes 5 to 7 or 7 to 10 years to develop, depending on whether the ELLs have minimal literacy in L1. Collier and Thomas (1989) have defined minimal literacy in L1 as 2 to 3 years of L1 literacy. If ELLs have minimal literacy in L1, it will take approximately 5 to 7 years in an ESL classroom to develop academic language. Without minimal literacy in L1, ELLs will require 7 to 10 years of language support in an ESL classroom to develop academic language. Thus, it is easy to see why educators confuse conversational language with academic language since ELLs acquire conversational English in 1 to 2 years and begin to sound like native speakers. But it is essential for educators not to mistake conversational language for academic language, given that academic language is vital for achieving English language proficiency and mastering grade level concepts.

A final confounding point about language proficiency needs to be addressed, since it affects the vocabulary development of ELLs. Newly-arrived ESL students and citizen (resident) ESL students will have differing English language proficiencies. Newly-arrived ESL students who have studied English as a foreign language (EFL) in their native country will have greater command of written English than citizen ESL students who will have a better developed oral language. The distinctive proficiencies can be attributed to the L1 literacy newly-arrived ESL students have and absent in citizen/resident ESL students.

Thus, in addressing the question of developing vocabulary in ELLs, it is necessary to understand the different levels of language proficiency, the disparity between native speakers' and ELLs' productive and receptive vocabularies, the distinction between conversational and academic language, as well as the time required for developing each, and the disparate language proficiencies of newly arrived and citizen/resident ESL students. English language learners have tremendous hurdles to overcome as they attempt to develop academic vocabulary in English.

Having acknowledged some factors shaping and impacting vocabulary development in ELLs, the next consideration is determining what vocabulary ELLs need to know. The answer is central to how vocabulary is presented, organized, and learned. Equally relevant is determining the goal for learning the vocabulary, along with ascertaining the first and second language literacy levels of the ELLs. For example, older ELLs who need to read and understand lectures will do well to develop a receptive vocabulary, but if encoding language skills are also needed, ELLs will need to develop a productive vocabulary of approximately 3,000 words, with an even larger receptive vocabulary (Nation, 1990). On the other hand, younger ELLs whose goal is to read would benefit from graded reading material which would increase vocabulary as well as develop reading skills. With young elementary age ELLs, a common practice is to introduce new vocabulary prior to reading a story. While teaching the vocabulary out of context has some merit, it is best if teachers not devote much time to this type of activity, since most vocabulary learning will occur in meaningful contexts that are comprehensible and relevant. How does a teacher choose which vocabulary to teach ELLs?

### **Pedagogical Guidelines for ELL Vocabulary Development**

As a means of examining critical factors in L2 vocabulary development, we propose five pedagogical guidelines that may assist teachers to plan for lessons in inclusive classrooms, by attending to the vocabulary demands of ELLs across grade levels. Drawing on classroom research observation data, as well as on a survey of the recent literature on vocabulary teaching and learning, we consider the following five guidelines to be critical to teachers' theoretical and practical knowledge as they consciously seek to provide challenging and supportive academic language learning opportunities:

1. *Vocabulary development is a critical component of reading comprehension (Grabe, 1991).*
2. *Vocabulary instruction needs to be context-based with meaningful and authentic relevance to lesson content and learner interest (DeCarrico, 2001).*
3. *Learners need time to negotiate on their own complex meanings and lexical patterns in texts rather than those meanings more transparent or simple in nature (Smith, 2005).*
4. *Multiple exposures to the same lexical items in different contexts are necessary to consolidate knowledge of those items (Kim, 2006).*
5. *Texts need to be approached in the teaching/learning transaction as a process, which takes time. (August, 2002).*

### **Five Guidelines for Vocabulary Instruction for ELLs**

#### **1. Vocabulary development is a critical component of reading comprehension.**

One way to determine the goals of vocabulary learning and vocabulary size is to examine frequency counts and decide which vocabulary is needed for particular groups of ELLs. An examination by Nation (1990) of a short text written for young native speakers

revealed 2,000 or 87 percent of the words were high-frequency words. The remaining words were either “technical words” which students would probably not encounter outside of the subject area or low-frequency words which they would not encounter again in the book. An examination of a secondary school textbook yielded similar results. High-frequency words made up 87 percent of the words in the text. In general, high-frequency words make up a small corpus of words, approximately 2,800 words, while low-frequency words total into the hundred thousands (Nation, 1990). Since high-frequency words comprise a significant percentage of words in a given text and since they constitute a small corpus, a practical strategy would be to focus initial vocabulary instruction for ELLs on high-frequency words.

Other criteria identified by Richards (1970), besides frequency and range, for determining the selection of vocabulary includes language needs, availability and familiarity, coverage, regularity, and ease of learning or learning burden. For example, a word list that emphasizes coverage and ease of learning might select the word *foot*. “Coverage is the capacity of a word to take the place of other words” (Mackey & Savard as cited in Nation 1990, p. 21). *Foot* can be used to make a definition of other words, e.g., Your arch is the curved part of your foot. The meaning of *foot* can replace other words, e.g., *the bed’s base board* can be replaced by *the bed’s foot board*. The bottom of the bed may be called, “*the foot of the bed.*” It can be combined with other words to make new words, e.g., *football, foot locker, footwear.*

We would like to present two potential problems with basing vocabulary solely on familiar, high-frequency words. For one, learners who may appear to be orally proficient in English and who use high frequency words regularly in oral communication may still lack the linguistic awareness or skills needed to decode new lexical items without explicit teaching. According to August & Stanahan (2006), “[o]ral proficiency in English is not a strong predictor of English word-level skills, although it is likely to correlate to some extent with the underlying cognitive skills (letter-sound awareness, rapid naming of words, and phonological memory) that do predict word identification skills in both language-minority students and native English speakers” (p. 10). A second, and potentially more serious problem is the absence of useful and important words in the first or second 1,000 words, which do not appear until the third, fourth, or fifth thousand word level of frequency lists. Therefore, to base vocabulary development for ELLs solely on frequency counts would eliminate many useful and important words from the beginners’ vocabulary of 1,000 words.

## **2. Vocabulary instruction needs to be context-based with meaningful and authentic relevance to lesson content and learner interest.**

Having students learn word lists is one routine way of increasing vocabulary, but for establishing vocabulary, students need to recognize words, use them in different contexts for different purposes, and employ different strategies for dealing with unknown words. The most important strategy, guessing from context, may be combined with paraphrasing, using word parts, consulting a dictionary, and employing mnemonic techniques as useful tools to discern the meaning of words. The goal of establishing vocabulary is to use new lexical items beyond the immediate context or text. We use the term “lexical items” rather than “vocabulary” here in order to include not only individual word input, but also meaningful combinations of words, which we will explore later. Students are best served

if they develop skills that make them independent of the teacher as the sole source of knowledge. Finally, real vocabulary learning comes through the meaningful use of a combination of both high and low frequency lexical items.

Many words and phrases are readily encountered in high frequency within texts, whereas others are found in low frequency, often as the “technical” terms crucial to the targeted theme or topic of the text. Technical terms relate to the academic language of the lesson. For example, a third grade teacher, Ms. Dawson, approached Elena, a bilingual paraprofessional, that she wanted Federico, a boy recently arrived from El Salvador, to understand the technical, academic concepts of “word,” “sentence,” and “paragraph” in an upcoming Language Arts lesson. Elena presented these concepts to Federico, inquiring if he comprehended them. He nodded affirmatively. She then introduced the English words, “word,” “sentence,” and “paragraph.” As Ms. Dawson stood by watching, she reiterated, “These are the things I want him to know,” and she explained that she wanted Federico to at least “recognize the words” when the class would begin to cover the concepts during the upcoming lesson. Elena then wrote W-O-R-D, S-E-N-T-E-N-C-E, and P-A-R-A-G-R-A-P-H on a piece of paper for Federico to practice at home. Upon suggestion of the teacher, Lenora pretaught the technical lexical items and made them comprehensible to Federico.

Such new lexical items should be treated as “comprehensible input.” Defined by Krashen and Terrell (1983) such input “depends on the ability to recognize the meaning of key elements in the utterance” (p.155) that is within the *context* of the spoken or written “text.” Kim (2006), in his study of college-age Korean English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students agrees; “The richer the context that surrounds unknown words in a text, the easier it is for L2 learners to guess what the word means from the context and retain the correctly-guessed words” (p. 367). In a later exchange between Elena the bilingual paraprofessional working with third grader Federico, introduced above, we can see evidence of how rich context emerged in a lesson. Elena and Federico were practicing words bilingually such as “sunny / *hace sol*, cloudy / *nublado*, cold / *frio*, etc.” relating to a lesson on weather conditions. At one point, Federico laughed at the sound of “cold” as he said it, and both he and Elena enjoyed repeating it together. As observer, I imitated cold by hugging myself and shivering. At my action, Federico laughed out loud began hugging himself as well, using his body to develop deeper understanding of the English word, *cold*, at the same time aesthetically savoring the sound of the new word.

In his description of the lexical approach, Lewis (1993) places acquisition of lexical items foremost in the learning in contrast to traditional, grammar-based language learning. It is in the *lexis*, i.e. words or meaningful combinations of words, or “chunks” that learners gain perception of how the language structures function to produce meaning. Lewis argues that lexis is the basis of the language and not the grammar or syntactic structures so often presented first to language learners. Lexis thus becomes the primary focus of meaningful instruction, replacing the traditional instructional prominence of grammar.

Vocabulary needs to be the central organizing feature of a meaning-centered syllabus (Moudraia, 2001). In the following scene, a group of five fourth graders - all ELLs - were working on oral reading with their bilingual paraprofessional, Lenora, in a pull-out tutoring session. Lenora chose what she said was an interesting article on surfing from the basal reader used in class. The illustration on the first page was a dramatic photo of

the curl of a huge ocean wave. One of the girls asked Lenora to read the “key words” first. The group defined the new words collectively. The four take turns reading parts of the article orally and all of the students read with expression and apparent comprehension; they stop to define several words such as “steep” and “slope”. Lenora used visualization and comparison to hook the meanings in her students’ minds.

Lexical items may take on a variety of forms as presented to learners. On the very basic level are individual words, which name or describe items, actions, abstractions, etc. “Polywords” are strings of individual words which function in elaborated meanings. Word partnerships or collocations present two or more individual words in meaningful chunk, which expand on the meanings of the individual words. Institutionalized utterances are those phrases which are functional in nature, such as introducing, interrupting, paraphrasing, leave-taking, rejoinding, etc. Sentence frames are also larger lexical chunks, but they often describe the purpose or sequence of process within an utterance.

### Examples of lexical items and categories:

| <b>Words:</b><br><i>traditional<br/>“vocabulary<br/>words”</i> | <b>“Polywords”:</b> <i>the<br/>whole is greater<br/>than its parts</i> | <b>Word partners:</b><br><i>meaningful<br/>combinations</i>  | <b>Functional<br/>phrases:</b> <i>Chunks<br/>that indicate intent</i>              | <b>Sentences<br/>frames:</b> <i>transition<br/>and sequence</i>   |
|--|--|--|--|---|
| environment  | Environmental<br>Protection Agency<br>(EPA)                            | Environmental:<br><ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• issues</li> <li>• Engineering</li> <li>• threats</li> </ul> | “Given the<br>political<br>environment...”<br><br>protection of the<br>environment | “First ...,<br>then..., next...,<br>finally....”  |
| protect  | protective child<br>restraint  | protect:<br><ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• rights</li> <li>• life and limb</li> <li>• surfaces</li> </ul>    | “to Serve &<br>Protect”<br><br>fight to protect,<br>take steps to<br>protect       | “Whereas certain<br>laws are in place<br>which...,<br>protection of<br>natural resources<br>would ....” |

### 3. Learners need time to negotiate on their own complex meanings and lexical patterns in texts rather than those meanings more transparent or simple in nature.

In a second grade classroom, Francisco struggles to read Eric Carle’s *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*. As he reads the list of things the caterpillar has eaten through in the story, he comes to “watermelon” and has no trouble recognizing and reading the word. Elena says that it is a big word and asks how he could read it so fast and he replies, “*Porque ¡me gusta watermelon!*” [SP: Because I like watermelon!] Later as the teacher reads the book interactively with the class, Francisco is silent but watching. When the reading comes to the part about the watermelon, he says, “watermelon” on cue with the rest of his classmates.

In his study of the use of elaborated or enhanced texts for college-age Korean EFL students, Kim found that modification of texts was presented in two types, elaboration or simplification. Elaborated texts contained more contextual clues to assist the learners in negotiation meaning as they read while simplified texts removed some of the challenges

of such negotiations by presenting more transparent definitions of new lexical items. The results of his study prove the effectiveness of elaboration and argue that such modification help learners “recognize the meanings of low-frequency L2 vocabulary from reading” (Kim 2006 p. 366). Smith (2005) agrees in a survey of the literature on computer-mediated language learning. He concluded that for new lexical items, the more elaborate the context, the greater the retention of new terms especially if done in interactions with others. “An interactionist perspective on SLA views techniques encouraging a focus on form, especially negotiated interaction, as highly favorable for language development” (Smith 2005, p. 53).

There is evidence that middle and high school language-minority students are able to take advantage of higher order vocabulary skills in the first language, such as the ability to provide formal definitions and interpret metaphors, when speaking a second language. Students are able to take advantage of cognate relationships between their first language and English to understand English words, an important precursor to comprehension (cf. Nation 1990). There is limited evidence as well that cognate knowledge is associated with the development of reading comprehension in English. Cognates are words that have similar spellings and meanings in two languages, such as “prepare” in English and “*preparar*” in Spanish. Of course, the use of such cognates only applies to those languages that have a closer affiliation with English. (English is a Germanic language, but lexically draws heavily on Latin and Greek roots based on the historical influence of French after 1066 CE, whence the large frequency of cognates between English and the Romance languages.) Additionally, some words, which may appear to be cognates, such as actual/*actual*, compromise/*compromiso*, or promiscuous/*promiscuoso*, are in fact false cognates. “On a very basic level, transfer effects caused by false cognates or near cognates can influence vocabulary recognition” (Grabe 1991, p. 387). They do not hold the same meanings across the languages. Some language teaching textbooks label such false cognates as “false friends”.

#### **4. Multiple exposures to the same lexical items in different contexts are necessary to consolidate knowledge of those items.**

Kim (2006) concurs in his study of elaborated texts that multiple exposures of the same lexical items in different contexts contribute to consolidation, or we might say “ownership” of new lexical items. This applies when learners encounter new items in the same sitting or over the course of extended time. When first presented to or encountered by learners, such vocabulary knowledge can be considered in the “receptive” vein, meaning that the learner may recognize and recall meaning, but cannot readily use the new items. However, it is not until the learner can actually *do something* with the lexical item that the new knowledge enters into the “productive” realm, that is, a more developed schema for the word and its connections with other lexical items (Nation, 1990). The notion “productive” vocabulary knowledge is reminiscent of Anderson’s (1981) knowledge frameworks of “declarative”, “procedural”, and “conditional” knowledge. In relation to our discussion of lexis, declarative knowledge refers to recognition and use of new lexical items; procedural knowledge allows the learner to use new lexical items in similar contexts; and conditional knowledge provides recourses to analyze new contexts and apply the new lexical items outside the original scope.



“Whether words are learned to be recognized (receptively) or to be produced (productively) affects their difficulty” (Nation, 1990, p. 48). Learning to recognize a word and recall its meaning (receptive knowledge) is easier than learning the word for using it (productive knowledge). Laufer and Goldstein’s (2004) hierarchy of vocabulary skills supports learners’ difficulty in developing productive vocabulary. *Passive recognition*, the easiest, is the ability to recognize the meaning given meaning options. *Active recognition* follows and entails recognizing the target vocabulary when the meaning is given. *Passive recall* is the ability to provide the meaning of the target vocabulary. The most difficult, *active recall*, involves supplying the target vocabulary. It is estimated that productive vocabulary is 50 to 100 percent more difficult to learn than receptive vocabulary (Nation, 1990).

To illustrate, graduate native English speaking students in Curriculum and Instruction we have encountered should be assumed to understand the terms “scope” and “sequence”, both technical terms related to the crafting of lesson planning and curriculum design. Previous course work would have included such important key technical vocabulary, salient to the work of teaching. Frequently though, it has not been the case during in-class discussions. When talking about “scope” as instructor, I have had to work through impromptu semantic mapping of the term, as well as other technical vocabulary terms that are likely to be part of teachers’ receptive vocabulary based on their previous course content. Problems arise when teachers (and the learners they work with) do not understand technical terms because the lexical items have not become part of their productive vocabulary. According to Lee & Fradd (1996) in their discussion of the importance of content area science vocabulary, “[l]earning specific vocabulary to communicate science concepts is not a simple matter of learning a list of terms. Rather, the process involves understanding relationships among ideas, terms, and meanings” (p. 28).

##### **5. Texts need to be approached in the teaching/learning transaction as a process, which takes time.**

An old myth about language learning posits that young children “absorb” languages, learn language rules and vocabulary quickly. The notion is false because many older ELL children and adults are already literate in L1, have well developed reading skills, and can negotiate the vagaries and patterns in L2. Younger children may not have developed such strategies, but their language learning can take place over longer periods of time. They also process mostly concrete concepts, while older children must wrestle with a myriad of abstract ideas and metaphors. Teachers need to attend to the fact that young children do need time to learn a new language; they cannot be expected to produce native-like utterances nor comprehend academic language in a short time. As Zehler states,

Despite the common view that children have special abilities for learning language, research shows that, in fact, older children and adults have the ability to learn the vocabulary and grammar of a new language faster than younger children. This is because older children and adults have already developed learning strategies and, through learning their primary language, have formed an explicit understanding of language rules and structures that can help them in learning a second language (Zehler, 1994).

One very bright Brazilian third grader, Isabela, offered a poignant suggestion to her bilingual paraprofessional during one observation. Her classroom teacher had appeared to be too impatient for Isabela to learn English although she had only been in the U.S. for about two months at the time of the observation. Isabela disliked having to memorize word lists for spelling tests. "I wish she [her teacher] could go to São Paulo and learn to speak Portuguese in two months!"

"Memorizing word lists rarely works...what is important is that teachers have deliberate strategies for clarifying word meanings and that children have opportunities to use those words in context" (Connell, 2004, p. 2). Rather than presenting vocabulary lists, teachers should focus instruction on knowledge of word families, which is especially critical to ELLs. In order to read authentic texts, ELLs will need knowledge of approximately 3,000 word families (Folse 2006).

Damaris, a highly-educated adult English language learner sat next to her classmate, Juliana, in their foundations level ESOL classroom. They were working on a cloze-style grammar exercise together as the participant observer sat across the table watching their progress. The worksheet contained discrete grammar-based examples, each lacking continuity from one sentence to another; on the whole, vocabulary items were decontextualized. Damaris was copying sentences rather rapidly from the fill-in-the-blank exercises and the verb list in the book. As observer, I asked her if she knew or processed the meanings of the words as she wrote them. She says, "*Sí, yo trato*" [Sp: Yes, I try].

As she worked, I noticed one particular word in one of the sentences, "beard." The sentence read, "Dick doesn't have a beard anymore. He \_\_\_\_\_ it three days ago." The verb list at the top of the page included the verbs, "cook" and "shave." I asked Damaris if she knew the meaning of "beard." She looked at me flatly and replied with some emphasis, "*Sí, por supuesto, PAN!*" [Sp: Yes, of course, BREAD!] Saying nothing, I then pointed to my beard and asked her what she would answer. "Cook. *Pensé que no tenía pan.*" [Sp: I thought he didn't have bread.] I then inquired if she knew the meaning of "shave" and she immediately made a shaving motion along the side of her face. Nodding and smiling broadly, she then wrote "shaved" correctly in the blank.

She apparently had transposed the letter "r" in the two words that appear very similar. Otherwise, "cook" might have been a plausible answer for Damaris who apparently did not translate to arrive at her original assumption, "bread." What is more, she processed the entire sentence as a meaningful whole. For Damaris, the grammatical structure was not the issue even though the syntactical, past tense, focus-on-form practice was the intention of the worksheet; she was more attuned to making meaning using the *lexis*, that is, the individual words and logical phrases of the entire sentence on the worksheet rather than the discrete grammatical components. She was intuitively exploring the rules through the process of negotiating meaning. The case illustrates that new words or phrases - the lexical items - form the basis of language learning through a process of negotiation rather than passively "receiving" grammar rules from a textbook or a teacher's presentation.

Traditionally, in language teaching and learning contexts, only grammatical structures have been taught, with lexical items included to fill the syntactic blanks in focus-on-form, bottom-up exercises. Hymes (1972) was among the first theorists to consider lexical

items as key to what he coined, “communicative competence.” Communicative competence requires much more than just the grammatical skills, and extends to all levels of communication in the how, why, when, and where of language use to meet personal needs. Language, as Vygotsky (1978) had written earlier in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, is a “tool” for communication, and extends far beyond the academic or intellectual pursuits of schooling.

The components of the tool are precisely the lexical items, which convey meaning. Although, vocabulary teaching/learning is still likely to be implicit within grammar-based lessons, learners in initial stages of language acquisition need direct, explicit instruction of salient lexical items. “Unless a high percentage of words on a page is known, it is very difficult to guess the meanings of new words from context” (DeCarrico, 2002, p. 289). Thus, the reading contexts in content area teaching and learning, as a whole, must also be made explicit if meaning negotiation of new items, is to be successful.

### **Implications for Pedagogy**

What can content area teachers do to support ELLs as they learn both the content of lessons and the tool – *language* – required to accomplish the learning and demonstrate it through assessment? In brief, we recommend the following pedagogical practices, which research has proven to support ELLs in mainstream classrooms.

- Teachers need to design explicit, direct instruction of vocabulary. Such teaching produces consistent gains and better retention of L2 vocabulary than incidental learning from text-based input (Paribakht & Wesche, 1997) and scaffolds ELLs’ writing task (Laufer & Nation, 1995).
- Instruction should be varied, using eclectic approaches and techniques to contextualize vocabulary content. ELLs and native English speakers develop their English vocabulary knowledge in response to different approaches. Completing a written vocabulary activity following a reading task results in higher L2 vocabulary retention for ELLs, whereas reading is sufficient for native speakers to develop vocabulary knowledge (Parikbakht & Wesche, 1999).
- Fill-in-the blank exercises based on lesson content, highly efficient for students to complete and teachers to develop, should not be discounted as lacking the deep processing typically associated with writing original sentences (Folse, 2006).
- Exercises requiring multiple encounters with or retrievals of target vocabulary facilitate vocabulary knowledge. Completing multiple fill-in-the blank tasks accommodates the goal of vocabulary learning in a compressed time period (Folse, 2006).
- Intensive vocabulary instruction prior to a writing activity improves the quality and production of higher level recognition vocabulary (Dui & Graves, 1987).

## Conclusions

English language learners readily acknowledge that English vocabulary knowledge poses the foremost language problem, affecting both their ability to understand and communicate clearly in English (Folse, 2006). Learners need a vast lexical base comprised of individual words and chunks related to target lesson content. Vocabulary size, an indicator of general language ability, is critical for reading, comprehension, and communication (Coady, 1997). Opportunities for learners to use target vocabulary, along with receiving comprehensible input, leads to better incidental vocabulary acquisition (Laufer & Hulstijn, 1998). Repeated exposure to target lexical items in different contexts also provides learners with the opportunity to manipulate and negotiate meaning.

We recommend an integrated skills approach, which integrates and contextualizes reading, writing, and vocabulary knowledge instruction as it contributes to vocabulary knowledge growth and maintenance (Lee & Muncie, 2006). Selection of instructional techniques depends largely on the learner's need for receptive or productive vocabulary knowledge, language proficiency level, and literacy in L1 and L2. All instructional techniques will not be suitable to all English language learners at all times. Teachers must take into consideration the learners' language abilities, skills, and needs for determining which instructional techniques will best match the particular ELLs at any given time.

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