

Teaching Academic Content and Literacy to English Learners in Elementary and Middle School

Instructional Tips Based on the Educator's Practice Guide

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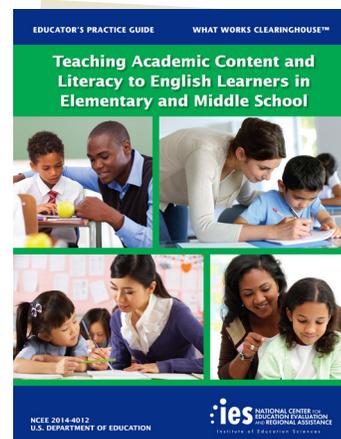
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Teachers of science, history, mathematics, writing, or other content areas may find it challenging to build the English language and literacy skills of English learners in their classrooms while also teaching content-area material. However, students with varying levels of English proficiency, including students currently or formerly classified as English learners and students whose first language is English, can benefit when teachers provide explicit instruction and other learning opportunities to use and practice the English language.

The *Teaching Academic Content and Literacy to English Learners in Elementary and Middle School* practice guide was developed by the [What Works Clearinghouse™](#) (WWC) in conjunction with an expert panel to support teachers in providing language instruction. The practice guide provides teachers with guidelines and examples of ways to systematically and explicitly build students' English language proficiency and literacy by providing English learners more opportunities to speak, listen to, and write about academic topics ranging from literature to science to history in daily classroom instruction.

The instructional tips translate the practice guide recommendations into actions that educators can use with students in whole class, small group, or one-on-one settings and with students at all levels of English proficiency. However, some variations



Instructional tips for:

- Teaching a set of academic vocabulary words intensively across several days using a variety of instructional activities
- Integrating oral and written English language instruction into content-area teaching

may be needed to meet the needs of students with lower levels of English language proficiency. For example, some English learners may need more small group or one-on-one instruction or more modeling before independent practice is encouraged.

For a full description of the recommendations and more implementation tips, download your [free copy of the guide](#).

Tips for teaching a set of academic vocabulary words intensively across several days using a variety of instructional activities

State and district standards for English Language Arts emphasize teaching students academic language and, in particular, academic vocabulary. Academic vocabulary represents words that are used primarily in academic disciplines. Teachers can introduce and teach academic vocabulary along with content material in science, history, mathematics, and writing to English learners during regular classroom instruction. Instructional activities that are focused on a small set of words over several lessons and that provide various opportunities for students to use the words in writing, speaking, and listening, can help students learn and correctly use grade-level general academic and domain-specific vocabulary.

Tip: Identify which words will be taught explicitly and in-depth in order to maximize instructional time

When students are taught a small number of words at a time, they can retain new vocabulary better. By teaching a smaller set of words in depth and across multiple subjects, teachers can help students learn nuances associated with a given word, and students will have time to practice using words through writing, speaking, and listening activities in the classroom.

Engage English learners with an informational text to teach new vocabulary and provide concrete examples of key points and issues related to a given topic or unit. Because informational text often contains many challenging words, choose which words to teach to students. The practice guide describes **how to identify which words will be taught explicitly and in-depth.**

- **Start by finding** all of the potentially unfamiliar or challenging words in the instructional text.
- Then, **narrow the list** of challenging vocabulary by removing words that students likely already know. Remind students of these terms during or immediately prior to instruction.
- **Choose** approximately five to eight words from those remaining on your list using the six criteria below.

Select words for explicit and in-depth instruction by considering whether they address any of the six criteria:

- ✓ Words central to understanding the text
- ✓ Words frequently used in the text
- ✓ Words that might appear in other content areas
- ✓ Words with multiple meanings
- ✓ Words with affixes
- ✓ Cross-language potential

Tip: Teach student-friendly definitions and provide examples

Providing students with age-appropriate definitions and background knowledge is crucial to making new vocabulary and related text accessible and to anchor content instruction in a common shared experience. The practice guide recommends **teaching student-friendly definitions**.

- **Teach** brief, student-friendly definitions that help students understand how a word is typically used.
- **Provide examples and non-examples** for the new vocabulary.
- **Ask students** to develop their own working definitions.

Example: Ask students to develop their own definitions.

Ms. Hunter was using a text about zoos to teach academic vocabulary to her fifth-grade students. On the first day of instruction, she read through the zoo text with her students and briefly presented target academic words. The next day, Ms. Hunter and her students started by examining the student-friendly dictionary definitions of their target words from the text.

For example, one of the academic vocabulary words Ms. Hunter was teaching to her students was the word *pursuit*. The text included the following passage:

“Zoo design expert Jon C. Coe recommends more investigation into the impact of larger, more natural exhibit environments on animal health. With this new pursuit of creating more natural environments in zoo exhibits, Coe sees a happier and healthier future for many zoo animals.”

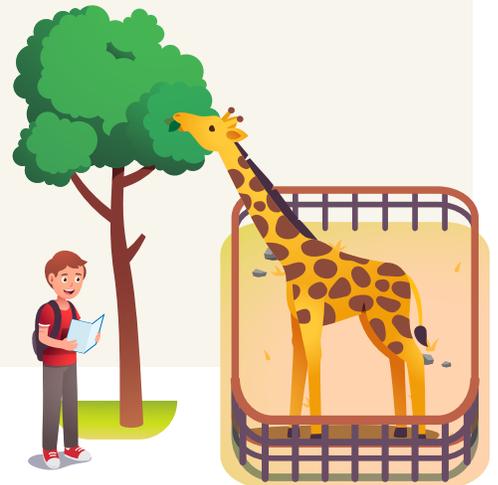
She introduced the following student-friendly definition for the academic word, *pursuit*.

[Pursuit] (noun) 1. The act of trying hard to achieve something. [After winning the first playoff game, our team continued our pursuit of the championship.] 2. The act of following or chasing someone or something. [My dog is in pursuit of my neighbor’s cat as it runs across the street.] 3. An activity, hobby, or interest. [Mario spends most of his free time on outdoor pursuits like riding his bike and playing football.]

After reviewing the definitions, students compared what they knew about target words to the dictionary definitions and composed their own definitions.

For example, when asked to write what they knew for the word *pursuit*, some students wrote:

- Trying to get happiness: Pursuit of happiness
- Trying to find



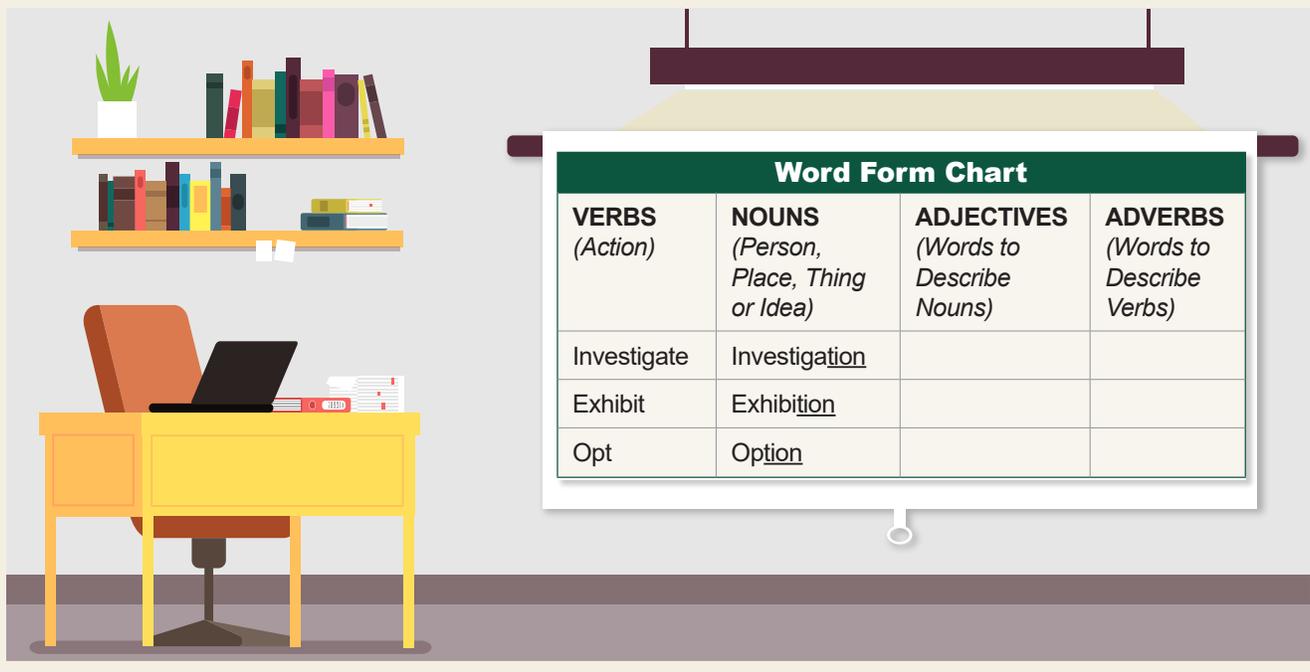
Tip: Teach academic vocabulary in depth using graphic organizers

Graphic organizers can help students understand the patterns and relationships among terms and concepts. The practice guide recommends **using graphic organizers** to make sense of new vocabulary and related concepts.

- **Select a graphic organizer** that is best suited for the vocabulary being taught, and that works best with the students' grade and level of need. Begin by using one particular graphic organizer type until students are comfortable with its structure and application before moving on to other types.
- **Model interpreting and completing** graphic organizers. Use a think-aloud to demonstrate how to pull essential information from the text and any other media used. While completing the graphic organizer, explain why given facts or pieces of information are important, and why other pieces of information are less important.
- **Complete parts of new graphic organizers** in advance. During instruction, have students finish the partially completed organizers based on material they have read or viewed.
- **Keep examples** of completed graphic organizers around the classroom.

Example: Use a graphic organizer to teach different suffix applications.

Ms. Ambrosio taught students the suffix *-tion* by first showing them simple examples of *-tion* words (e.g., *invite* and *invitation*, *celebrate* and *celebration*, *imagine* and *imagination*) and then asking them what the words have in common. She explained that the suffix *-tion* can change words from an action into a thing or idea. To deepen students' understanding of the target words, Ms. Ambrosio explained how adding or taking away the suffix *-tion* can change how the words are used (e.g., *investigate* and *investigation*). She displayed a Word Form Chart (such as the one below) on the wall and asked students to complete the chart together with their partner. The teacher then called on student pairs to provide the word forms and recorded their responses on the Word Form Chart, providing feedback when necessary.



The illustration shows a classroom setting. On the left, there is a yellow desk with a brown chair, a laptop, and some papers. Above the desk is a bookshelf with several books and a small potted plant. On the right, a Word Form Chart is displayed on a screen. The chart has a green header and four columns: VERBS (Action), NOUNS (Person, Place, Thing or Idea), ADJECTIVES (Words to Describe Nouns), and ADVERBS (Words to Describe Verbs). The chart is partially filled with the words 'Investigate', 'Exhibit', and 'Opt' in the first column, and their corresponding noun forms 'Investigation', 'Exhibition', and 'Option' in the second column.

VERBS (Action)	NOUNS (Person, Place, Thing or Idea)	ADJECTIVES (Words to Describe Nouns)	ADVERBS (Words to Describe Verbs)
Investigate	Investigati <u>o</u> n		
Exhibit	Exhibiti <u>o</u> n		
Opt	Opti <u>o</u> n		

Tip: Develop a toolkit of word-learning strategies that students can use to independently figure out word meanings

Developing students' independent word-learning skills helps them to engage with challenging text and new vocabulary on their own.

The practice guide outlines a handful of word-learning strategies and describes a framework that can be useful for **building students' independent word-learning skills**. These strategies can collectively form a toolkit that students can use to learn words and their meanings independently.

Word-learning skills are sometimes referred to as decoding skills.

- **Introduce** multiple word-learning strategies for students to use. Word-learning strategies include techniques that may help the reader create a working definition, such as context clues, word parts, or cognates. Begin by using one word-learning strategy at a time until students are comfortable with its application.
- **Model** new word-learning strategies using think-alouds, walking students through the thought process of applying each new strategy.
- **Encourage students to use multiple word-learning strategies** to figure out a word's meaning. For example, if students cannot determine a word's meaning using context clues, they can try by analyzing the parts of the word.

Examples of word-learning strategies

Context Clues: Students can derive personal, yet workable definitions of words using the surrounding text that they understand.

- ▶ **Encourage students to read** the sentence that contains the unknown word and determine whether the sentence includes any information that will help them define the word.

Word Parts: Students can focus on prefixes, suffixes, and root words to find familiar patterns in unfamiliar words.

- ▶ **Give students practice** using various word forms by having them revise sentences to include different forms of a root word.

Cognates: Occasionally, new words have a shared origin in one or more languages, which can be used to help English learners link English words to their primary language.

- ▶ **Show students how** they can determine an unknown word's meaning by looking for similarities between an unknown word and parts of the word or the whole word in their primary language.



Tips for integrating oral and written English language instruction into content-area teaching

Increased expectations for students' oral and written academic communications pose challenges for English learners, who are learning a second language and complex grade-level content simultaneously. Teachers can support English learners to build English language skills while learning challenging new content by providing structured opportunities for engaging students in academic discussions about the content and using instructional tools strategically to clarify and anchor the content.

Tip: Use instructional tools to help students make sense of content

Instructional tools—including videos, pictures, demonstrations, and 3-D models—anchor content in a common shared experience and help stimulate discussions among students. The practice guide recommends **using instructional tools** to engage students, prepare them with necessary background knowledge, and lead into small group or pair discussions.

- **Choose engaging and interesting instructional tools** that provide necessary background knowledge and bring up issues and themes that may be relevant to the lesson.
- **Select and pre-teach words/phrases** that are present in or relevant to the instructional tools.
- **Provide opportunities for students to discuss** thought-provoking questions in pairs or small groups after showing a picture or video that represents new vocabulary. Create questions that help students make connections between the concrete examples and vocabulary representing abstract concepts, and ask students to preview the questions before viewing the video or picture.

Example: Pre-teach words and share discussion questions before watching a video.



Mr. Dang, an eighth-grade social studies teacher, plans his lesson on Rosa Parks and the Montgomery Bus Boycott using a short 5-minute video to anchor instruction.

Mr. Dang started by first selecting three words/phrases—*boycott*, *refuse*, *Colored Section*—to pre-teach before students viewed the video. He then reviewed a list of questions/prompts the students would be responsible for answering after watching the video:

- Why was Rosa Parks arrested?
- Why did Rosa Parks refuse to give up her seat?
- Choose an adjective to describe Rosa Parks.
- Why do you think Rosa Parks was arrested this time, and not previously when she rode the bus?

After viewing the video, Mr. Dang asked his students to pair up. (Each pair was made up of students with different levels of English proficiency.) In pairs, students shared their response to the first question, discussed ways that they agree or disagree, and wrote a response to share with the whole group. After sharing with the group, students got back into pairs to repeat the process for the other three questions.

Tip: Provide daily opportunities for students to talk about content in pairs or small groups

When students have daily opportunities to discuss academic content in collaborative activities, they can practice the English language, use academic vocabulary in conversation, and build confidence. By listening to students during these collaborative activities, teachers can check how well students are understanding and processing new content and vocabulary and provide feedback where needed. Collaborative activities work best when teachers clearly structure the activity and actively monitor student groups. The practice guide describes **how to provide multiple opportunities every day for students to talk about content in pairs or small groups**.

- **Provide multiple, brief opportunities** to discuss content every day.
- **Model the collaborative activity** using a think-aloud, walking students through the steps, and provide time for them to practice.
- **Scaffold instruction** to tailor discussion questions to students' level of English proficiency.

How teachers can structure collaborative activities to support emergent English learners

- Allow students to discuss class topics in their primary languages, which could help students clarify ideas before trying to express them in English.
- Group students with different levels of English proficiency together so that students with stronger English skills can provide a language model for less proficient students.
- Provide language supports or scaffolds, such as prompts to help students begin their responses.

Case study: Use pair reading to develop emerging readers' oral language skills

During a third-grade lesson about plant life cycles, Mr. Syed paired English learners with students who were proficient in English. He provided students with a short text that explained each phase, including seed, germination, seedling, young plant, and adult plant. To support students' language development, Mr. Syed asked students to take turns reading each passage to their partner, summarizing each passage after reading it, and then predicting what the author might say in the next passage. Mr. Syed displayed prompts such as 'I believe that ___ might happen next because ___' in order to help students make predictions. After students read the entire selection, Mr. Syed asked them to summarize the whole text out loud with their partner. Students wrote down any questions that came to mind as they discussed the text with their partner. Then, Mr. Syed led a class discussion about students' summaries of the text and student-generated questions. Mr. Syed allowed students to use their primary language when writing down their questions and encouraged them to use English when engaging in the class discussion.



Case study: Use a collaborative activity to build language skills in history class

In a seventh-grade lesson about different women’s experiences in colonial North America, Ms. Desoto used a collaborative activity known as jigsaw, in which students are assigned to be part of two groups. In **home groups**, students individually learned about different women’s experiences and taught their home group what they learned. In **expert groups**, students met with classmates who studied the same text in order to become an “expert” on that woman’s experiences.

To carry out this collaborative activity, Ms. Desoto placed students in home groups of four. Within each **home group**, she assigned each student one document—a letter written by a formerly enslaved woman, a member of the Daughters of Liberty (a group of American patriot women), a wife of a British loyalist, or a matriarch of an Iroquois community.

Ms. Desoto gave students 10 minutes to individually read their letter, record two key takeaways about the letter writer’s experiences, and highlight supporting text. Students then moved into their **expert groups** to talk about what they learned. Ms. Desoto posted guiding questions on the board, including: “What stood out to you most about your letter writer’s experience in colonial North America? Did anything surprise you? Why?” Students recorded additional notes during conversations with their expert group.

Back in their **home groups**, students took turns teaching their peers about their writer’s experiences. Students worked together to compare writers’ experiences using a graphic organizer.



Examples of other collaborative activities

Rally Coach

Use when students are working on procedural skills such as math problems or technological skills

- Set up pairs of students and give them a list of problems or tasks.
- Student A solves a problem or completes a task, narrating their step-by-step process out loud, while Student B coaches.
- Students switch roles for the following problem or task.



Level up: Display sentence starters on a poster to scaffold students' coaching skills, such as:

- ☑ "You did a great job with..."
- ☑ "What if you tried...?"
- ☑ "Why did you...?"

Four Corners

Use when students are taking a position on a question or issue with no correct answer.

- Post a sign in each corner of the room that represents an answer to a question. You may use *strongly agree*, *agree*, *disagree*, and *strongly disagree*, or A, B, C, and D while providing various answer choices for each question.
- Pose a question to the class with four answer choices.
- Students move to the corner that corresponds to their answer choice and discuss their answer with others in that corner.
- Allow students to explain their position to the class or ask students to pair with someone from a different corner to discuss their different viewpoints.

Level up: Place a "discussion token" at each corner. Only the student with the token can talk, and everyone must have the token once before any student can repeat.



Some of the collaborative activities for this tip have been adapted from Kagan Publishing & Professional Development. Reference: Kagan, S., Kagan, M., & Rodriguez, C. (2009). *Kagan Cooperative Learning (2nd Edition)*. Kagan Cooperative Learning.

For more practical tips and useful classroom examples, download a copy of the *Teaching Academic Content and Literacy to English Learners in Elementary and Middle School* practice guide at <https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/PracticeGuide/19>.

The Institute of Education Sciences publishes practice guides in education to provide educators with the best available evidence and expertise on current challenges in education. The What Works Clearinghouse™ (WWC) develops practice guides in conjunction with an expert panel, combining the panel's expertise with the findings of existing rigorous research to produce specific recommendations for addressing these challenges. The expert panel for this guide included Scott Baker, Esther Geva, Michael J. Kieffer, Nonie Lesaux, Sylvia Linan-Thompson, Joan Morris, C. Patrick Proctor, and Randi Russell.

See Appendix A in the practice guide for a full description of the series.

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