Language, literacy and knowledge for EAL pupils

Pupils with English as an Additional Language need explicit instruction in language and literacy, particularly to help them with the challenges they face at secondary school. To meet their needs schools need joined-up thinking, writes Margarita Calderón

SCHOOL 319 was established in New York in 2005, to replace a school that was closed due to poor performance. Despite having the same students, School 319 was last year recognised as the middle school (lower secondary-age) where students had made the most improvement in the city! This success may be attributed to their approach to literacy. The halls are filled with newspaper clippings, comments from pupils about current affairs, and even vines hanging from the ceiling with prepositional long phrases, idioms, and other processing words, words that about 40% of the pupils are still learning. Inside the classrooms, pupils with English as an Additional Language (EAL) receive strong support. For example, in maths, vocabulary is pre-taught before lessons are presented, and at the end of the session pupils take a test on an interactive whiteboard and cheer if they see “100% correct” for the class. Specialist EAL teachers also sit in on lessons, and offer feedback to teachers.

Supporting EAL pupils in this way is vital. There are many types of texts that upper primary and secondary school pupils are expected to read, write and comprehend, not only literature (eg poetry, novels, essays) but also scientific writing, historical documents, a range of mathematical texts, and reference material. This variety is complicated enough for mainstream pupils, but triples in complexity for those with English as an Additional Language.

A recent report from the US National Literacy Panel on Language Minority Children and Youth found that the components necessary for successful reading comprehension for mainstream pupils also become the building blocks for EAL language and literacy development: phonemic awareness, decoding, fluency, vocabulary, background knowledge, and comprehension. However, the panel found that EAL pupils need more explicit instruction and more time for comprehension.

The diversity of EAL pupils
Adolescent EAL pupils are diverse. They differ in levels of oral English, literacy ability in both their native language and English, cultural backgrounds, and schooling experience. They may be newcomers with interrupted formal education in their country, newcomers who were highly schooled in another country, or those who have grown up here and have conversational language abilities in English but lack academic language proficiency. Unfortunately, these pupils are typically placed in the same classroom with teachers who have not had sufficient preparation for addressing this variety of needs.

The diversity of EAL pupils and their instructional needs were the focus of a four-year study, funded by the Carnegie Corporation, in 20 New York secondary schools. Expediting Comprehension for English Language Learners (ExC-ELL) was designed as a professional development programme for mainstream teachers of maths, science, social studies (a US subject combining geography, history, government, and sociology) and language arts. Intensive professional development by experts helped teachers integrate vocabulary and reading comprehension skills development into daily lessons. At the same time, Reading Instructional Goals for Older Readers (RIGOR), a curriculum for secondary school EAL pupils reading at age five to eight level, was developed as an intensive intervention for children with low literacy levels in their native language and other struggling readers.

The programme used science and social studies levelled readers to develop reading skills and basic and academic language.

Both ExC-ELL and RIGOR emphasise explicit instruction of vocabulary, reading comprehension strategies, and writing templates for content instruction. The programmes were piloted with 900 pupils from diverse language backgrounds, and matched schools were selected as “control groups” (where pupils were taught as normal). The schools that implemented ExC-ELL and RIGOR school-wide moved from low-performing to high-performing schools in two years.

Vocabulary instruction as the basis of success
Extensive explicit vocabulary instruction became the basis of EAL success in these schools. In our observational studies we found that, the larger the vocabulary, the deeper the comprehension – and, thereby, the higher the test scores. Without understanding 80 to 90% of the words in sentences or tests, a pupil could not grasp the concepts to be learned, respond to questions, and much less enjoy reading. Furthermore, without specific academic vocabulary (eg for maths or science), EAL pupils could not keep up with their subject classes.

There were also non-EAL pupils who were struggling readers because their word knowledge was limited. Teachers reported that teaching rich vocabulary and reading integrated into maths, science and social studies helped all pupils perform better.

Instructional strategies were adapted
Many of the instructional approaches used to teach vocabulary to mainstream pupils were adapted or changed to guide the
teachers’ delivery and lesson plans:

- Teach important words before reading, not after;
- Teach as many words as possible before, during and after reading;
- Teach simple everyday words (Tier 1) along with information processing words (Tier 2), and content specific/academic words (Tier 3);
- New words must be used within the context of reading, talking and writing within the same class period. Even level 1 pupils can begin reading and writing from day one;
- Lexical items (eg tense, root, affixes, phrasal and idiomatic uses) should be emphasised and used as strategic learning tools;
- Teach EAL pupils key words for a reading assignment, testing them at the end;
- Avoid sending EAL pupils to look up words in the dictionary. This doesn’t help; and
- Avoid having a peer translate for EAL pupils – this doesn’t help either.

Explicit vocabulary instruction for EAL pupils became a seven-step process that could be taught as a whole class or small group process. The teachers used PowerPoint presentations and interactive whiteboards to present the steps:

1. Teacher says and shows the word, and asks pupils to repeat three times;
2. Teacher reads and shows the word in a sentence (context) from the text;
3. Teacher provides the definition(s);
4. Teacher explains meaning with pupil-friendly definitions or gives an example that pupils can relate to;
5. Teacher engages 100% of the pupils in ways to orally use the word and concept (eg Turn to your partner and share how...; Which do you prefer...? Answer in a complete sentence...). Writing the word, drawing, or other word activities should come after reading. Before reading, pupils need to use the word orally several times in a variety of ways;
6. Teacher ends by highlighting an aspect of the word that might create difficulty: spelling, multiple meanings, cognates/false cognates, prefixes, suffixes, base words, synonyms, antonyms, homophones, grammatical variations, etc. More in-depth word study will come later. The seven steps should be the opportunity for oral production on meaning, and exposure to the written word in context. Steps 1–6 should move quickly, with no more than 10 to 15 minutes spent in pre-teaching key vocabulary; and
7. Teacher assigns peer reading with oral and written summarisation activities, and further word study where EAL pupils can practise applying the new words.

EAL pupils read every day

EAL pupils need to read, discuss, and start some writing to anchor new words just learned. For EAL pupils in beginning stages, text should be broken into small segments. This way, they are reading something different every day but are engaged in greater analysis and application as they learn and apply new vocabulary, grammar and writing. Repetitive reading of the same long passages does not help EAL pupils develop fluency or comprehension.

Teacher modelling think aloud

It is important for teachers to conduct think alouds to model strategic reading. The reading comprehension strategies that benefit native English speakers are the same strategies EAL pupils need to develop: predict, determine important information, summarise, make inferences, visualise, ask and answer questions, make connections, and monitor comprehension. However, EAL pupils cannot be expected to make predictions, inferences, or visualise if they do not have sufficient words to understand, or the sentence starters or discourse protocols for making and testing predictions. It is easier for EALs to begin with asking and answering questions, determining important information, summarisation, and monitoring comprehension, and this strategy works especially well with a partner. Furthermore, using think alouds can benefit all pupils.

Anchoring reading and learning

Partner reading is more effective than silent reading for EALs and works best immediately after the teacher models, when a strategy or flow of narrative is fresh in their minds. Alternating reading sentences aloud with another pupil, followed by a think aloud, is particularly effective. Co-operative learning also gives pupils opportunities to practise their new language in safe contexts with peers, and most language, literacy and information processing activities lend themselves to co-operative learning.

The final piece in the sequence is writing about what is being learned. Small pieces of writing, related to what pupils are reading, can be introduced daily with one summative piece each week.

Recommendations from the head

The head of School 319 was asked how he turned it around. He cited extensive professional development, and expert coaching and peer coaching on teaching vocabulary and reading comprehension. Furthermore, he emphasised that as many schools have increasing populations of EAL students, all the teachers need opportunities to learn how to integrate language, literacy and subject matter.

About the author

Margarita Calderón is a professor and senior research scientist at Johns Hopkins University in the US. She is also a member of the National Literacy Panel for Language Minority Children and Youth.

Further reading
