To comprehend a text, readers need to understand up to 95% of the vocabulary. Where does this leave English language learners? With the help of simple, research-based strategies, vocabulary instruction can be less daunting, more successful — and even fun.

Last week, I witnessed a scenario all too familiar to teachers of English language learners. A second-grade teacher was preparing to read a story about George Washington’s wife, Martha, to her class. She anticipated all the unfamiliar vocabulary she thought they would encounter. She told them what colonies and colonists were. She spoke of the American Revolution and the Declaration of Independence. Then, shortly after she began reading, a girl raised her hand with a puzzled look on her face. “What’s a wife?” she asked.

My colleagues and I find two generally recognized statistics particularly daunting. The first: Readers need to know 90% to 95% of vocabulary in a text in order to understand it. The second: College-bound seniors have working vocabularies of 60,000-100,000 words. The problem: ELLs enter our classrooms starting from scratch. Where does one begin?

Thanks to the research of Isabel Beck, Margaret McKeown and Linda Kucan, we have new knowledge of not only how students acquire vocabulary, but how to more effectively teach it to ELLs.

I have taught ESL for 15 years at PS 11, a K-6 elementary school in Queens. PS 11 has a large population of ELLs. This year, 340 of our 1,175 students were eligible for the New York State English as a Second Language Achievement Test. Approximately 80% of the student body speaks a second language at home. While we have had great success in teaching decoding skills using explicit, multisensory strategies and programs, teaching vocabulary has remained an obstacle. Even the simplest decodable or predictable text contains words unknown to ELLs. Take, for example, a story titled “The Bet.” A colleague asked her third-graders to predict what the story might be about. Members of the class confidently raised their hands. The first student she called on thought it would be about an animal doctor (confusion with vet). The second suggested the book might be about someone sleeping (confusion with bed). They were clearly unfamiliar with the word “bet.” Given their initial misunderstanding, what kind of meaning could these students have constructed if they had read the text on their own?

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As ESL teachers, we knew our students needed explicit vocabulary instruction. We knew that asking our students to look up words in dictionaries would not work — they could not understand the words used in the definitions. We were also frustrated by the quality of sentences students would hand in as their vocabulary or spelling homework — “Shop: I shop every day. Rush: I rush every day.” It was evident that we were not helping students to internalize the meanings of words at all.

We knew we were not alone. In the spring of 2003, the entire issue of the American Federation of Teachers’ research journal, American Educator, was devoted to words and the role that weak vocabulary plays in the “fourth-grade comprehension plunge.” Fortunately for us, that issue included an article by Beck, McKeown and Kucan titled “Taking Delight in Words: Using Oral Language to Build Young Children’s Vocabularies.” In this article, and in their book from which it was excerpted, Bringing Words to Life: Robust Vocabulary Instruction, the authors provide strategies that have proven...
Sentence stems are a miraculous scaffold for English language learners. Instead of requiring students to start from scratch to create context, meaning and syntax simultaneously in one sentence, sentence stems serve to isolate meaning.

effective in our ESL classrooms. Their suggestions for selection and instruction of words, as well as a follow-up activity based on “sentence stems” (see related article) have been particularly useful. What follows is a description of how I have incorporated their strategy for early literacy instruction for ELLs.²

In brief, there are six steps (see sidebar at far right).

I use these steps regularly with a group of second-grade beginning and intermediate-level ELLs, as determined by the NYSESLAT. The story I last read to them was the classic *Caps for Sale* by Esphyr Slobodkina. The first step was to choose three to five words. Beck suggests picking words that are unknown, but that will be useful to students in other contexts.⁵ As I planned the lesson, I anticipated that many students would not know the words *long* (in reference to time), *leaned*, *upset*, *peddler* and *checked* (as in fabric design). I decided that the first three words were of broader importance to my second-graders, and that when it came to *peddler* and *checked*, I would just provide a quick synonym or explanation as I read the story aloud.

One generally accepted best practice for ELLs is to preview vocabulary. So, in the first lesson, I introduced the words to students with user-friendly definitions. It is important to clarify the meaning of the word as it is used in the text. I defined *long* as “not quick, taking a lot of time.” *Lean* was “to bend a little so you are not straight” (we all acted this out, of course). *Upset* does not have its usual meaning, but rather is used in the sense of “to make things fall over.” Once we had covered all the words, I was able to read *Caps for Sale* aloud, without interrupting the flow of the story.

As Beck and her co-researchers stress, it is not enough for students to have passive word knowledge.⁵ Therefore, steps 4 through 6 help students transfer words from a page of a book into their own experiences and active wells of language. To begin this process, I re-read the book the following day, then discussed one word at a time. First, I used the targeted word in the context of the story. For example, “Let’s talk about the word *long*. In *Caps for Sale*, we read that the peddler slept for a *long* time.” Next, I demonstrated that *long* can be used in different contexts. “My train was late yesterday. I had a *long* wait before it came. While I waited, I read for a *long* time.” Students have now had the opportunity to hear the word “*long*,” with the same meaning, in a completely different context and using different language structures.

The final step was to give students an opportunity to use the target word in terms of their own lives. I provided
my students with the scaffold, “I wait-
ed for a long time. What is something
you have done for a long time?” Their
responses allowed them to practice
while giving me a window to assess
whether they thoroughly understood
and could use the word correctly.

If students are to fully internalize new
words, however, they need to have
repeated interactions with them. In
Bringing Words to Life, the authors
state, “The vocabulary research
strongly points to the need for fre-
quent encounters with new words if
they are to become part of an individ-
ual’s vocabulary repertoire.” It is my
goal to systematically infuse my
instruction with newly taught words.
I plan to create a vocabulary word
wall and challenge myself to use as
many words as possible, as many
times as possible, throughout the
school day and year. It is a challenge I
will make to my students, as well.

We reap the rewards of vocabulary
instruction daily. It may come after a
teacher mentions the long weekend
coming up and a buzz goes around the
room: “Did you hear that word?
Long?” It may be when we ask the stu-
dents to work slowly and carefully dur-
ing a test and one asks, “You mean
don’t rush?” It may be when a bilin-
gual kindergarten student points to an
energetic group of his peers and know-
ingly says to the teacher, “boisterous!”
It is stories like these that excite us
and challenge us to keep our
expectations high.

Robust vocabulary instruction shows
great promise in our K-6 ESL classes.
It is free; it is fun; it can be adapted to
any text or literacy program. The
more English words students know,
the more they can understand and
speak. The more they can understand
and speak, the more they will be able
to comprehend what they read and
develop their writing abilities.

No, we can’t teach 100,000 words in
a year, but teaching five today is a
great start.

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ENDNOTES

1. Beck, I.L., McKeown, M.G. & Kucan, L.
   (2002), Bringing words to life: robust
   vocabulary instruction. New York:
The Guilford Press.

   comprehension requires knowledge —
   of words and the world. American
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