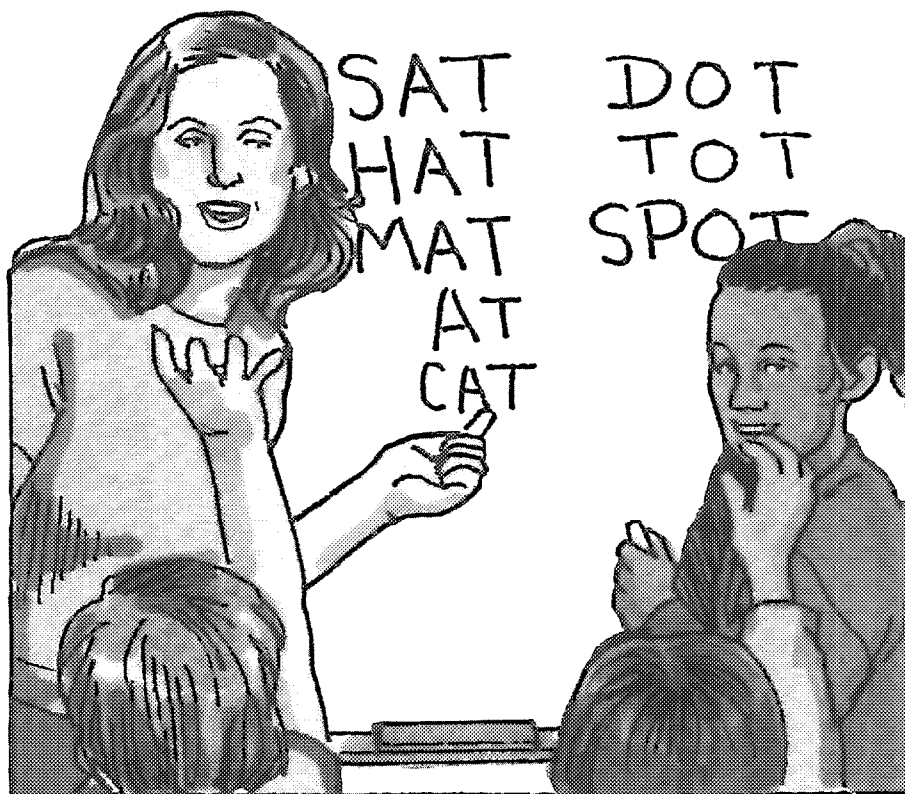# Influence Vocabulary Acquisition for English Language Learners

ELIZABETH A. SWANSON AND DAUNA HOWERTON

The skills of vocabulary acquisition and reading comprehension are key for second language learners. Indeed, when students are taught vocabulary in an explicit manner, their reading comprehension improves (Beck & McKeown, 1991; Beck, Perfetti, & McKeown, 1982; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000). By the end of second grade, there is a 4,000 word difference in vocabulary knowledge between readers in the upper quartile and those in the lowest quartile of the class (Biemiller & Boote, 2006). This gap in vocabulary and reading achievement widens in later school years (Baker, Simmons, & Kame'enui, 1995).

Classrooms across the nation have English language learners (ELLs) who are learning to hear, speak, read, and write a new language. These students require a teacher's particular attention to the development of vocabulary knowledge. Following are 20 ways in which teachers can influence the vocabulary acquisition of the students who are ELLs.

1 **Keep language acquisition in mind.** Students are able to engage in conversational English long before they are fully able to function with academic proficiency. Although peer-appropriate language skills develop in about 2 years, academic proficiency in English takes considerably longer (Drucker, 2003).

2 **Provide opportunities to say new words.** Consider using choral reading in Grades 1 through 6 to provide good models of academic English. In upper grades, repeated readings provide opportunities for practice.
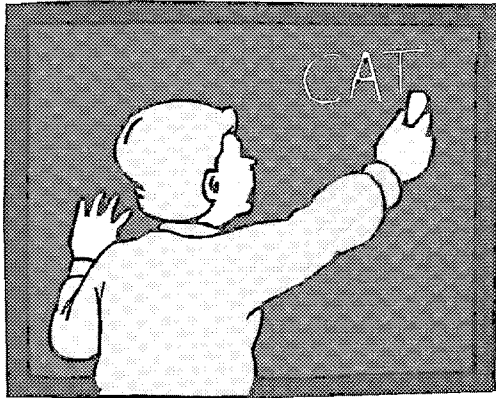
3 **Provide opportunities to write new words.** Students' vocabulary knowledge is reciprocal between spoken and written forms of a language (Bear & Helman, 2004); therefore, systematically teach any differences in written forms of the primary and secondary languages. For example, the /p/ sound is represented by P in English and П in Russian.

4 **Provide opportunities to read new words.** Allow students the opportunity to choose from a wide variety of reading materials, such as magazines, local newspapers, pamphlets, and other literature of interest that covers a range of reading levels. Wide reading has been found to be an effective way to expand vocabulary (Sternberg, 1987). To put it simply, the more children read, the more words they learn.

5 **Use word walls.** It is important for students to use new vocabulary words. Posting new words and their definitions on a word wall creates a public record of new learning. Students may refer to the wall during class discussions and while writing and reading.

6 **Use word maps.** Helping students develop complete knowledge of a vocabulary word is important if they are to remember it over the long term. Using word maps gives students an opportunity to think of a word in a variety of ways. See Figure 1 for an example of a word map.

7 **Use keywords and pictures to help students make connections.** Nouns are particularly well suited to the use of pictures in vo-

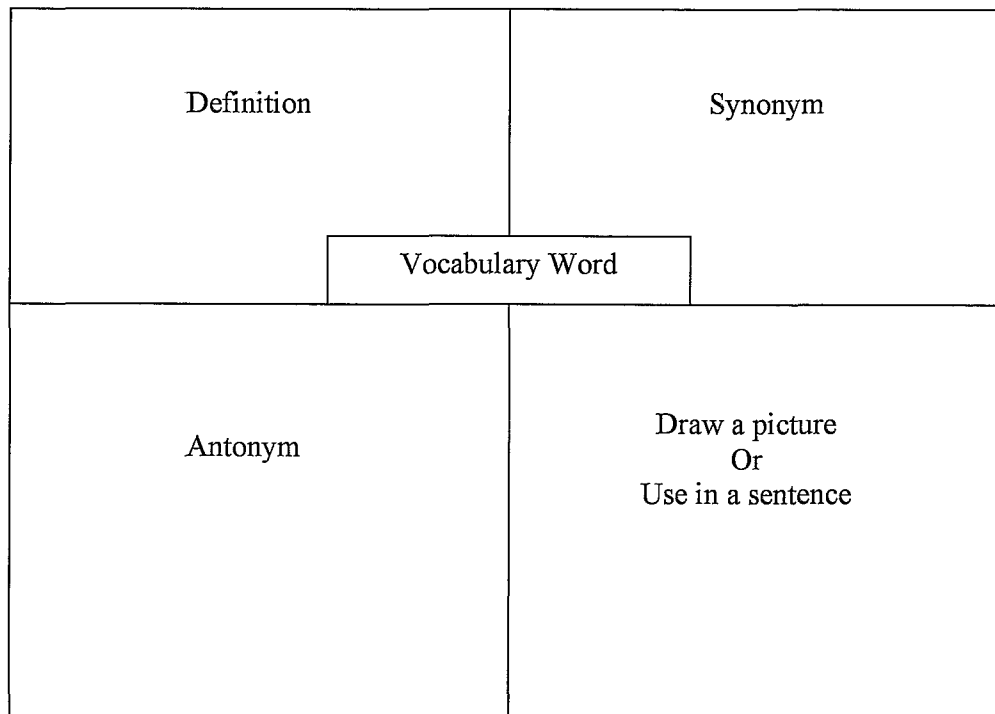| Definition	Synonym
Vocabulary Word	
Antonym	Draw a picture Or Use in a sentence

Figure 1. Vocabulary word map.

cabulary instruction. Teachers can present both examples and nonexamples of the vocabulary word.

8 **Understand which common sounds in English correspond to the first language.** English has deep orthographic structures, meaning that irregular letter–sound correspondences are common. Conversely, Spanish contains more regular letter–sound correspondences. Therefore, teachers should initially select vocabulary words that are easy for ELLs to pronounce correctly in English. For example, the following consonant sounds exist in both languages: *p, t, b, k, d, g, m, n, f, s, w, y, ch, l.* Conversely, the following English consonant blends do not appear in Spanish: *st, sp, sk, sm, sl, sn, sw, tw, qu, scr, spl, spr, str, squ* (Helman, 2004).

9 **Provide context.** Engage in a preview strategy whereby the teacher provides introductory material prior to reading. Previews begin with a few statements designed to capture the students' attention and make a connection between what they already know and what they are about to read. Next, ask a discussion question to promote student involvement, followed by a brief overview of the upcoming reading selection (Chen & Graves, 1998).
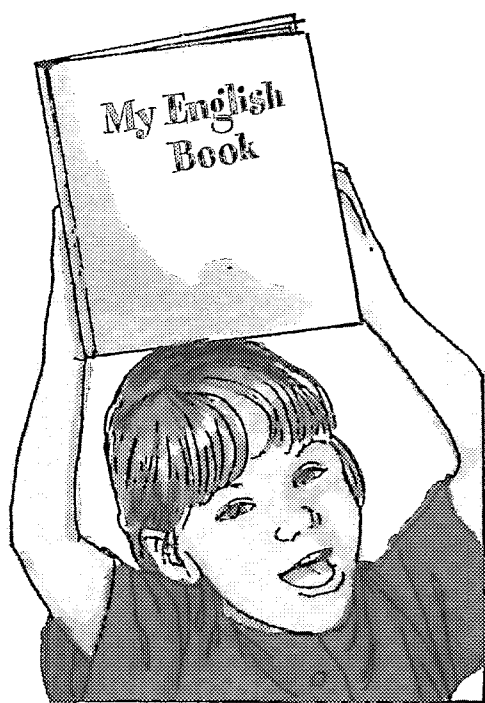
10 **Use new words outside of class.** The more students realize how words can be used in different settings, the more likely they are to use new vocabulary words outside the classroom (McKeown & Beck, 2004). Consider challenging students to find the ways in which new vocabulary words are used outside of class. They can report and record their discoveries during class.

11 **Use cognates: from the known to the unknown.** The origins of many English words are from the romance languages. Illustrating the commonalities between a student's first language and English through roots, prefixes, suffixes, and cognates supports moving from known words to acquiring new words (Helman, 2004).

12 **Connect examples from a world the student knows.** As students acquire English language skills, initial use will be for practical purposes at school and in the community. With this initial use of language comes an understanding of how language changes from context to context. For example, teachers should make concrete connections among abstract, academic content, and students' burgeoning knowledge of the English language used for practical purposes.

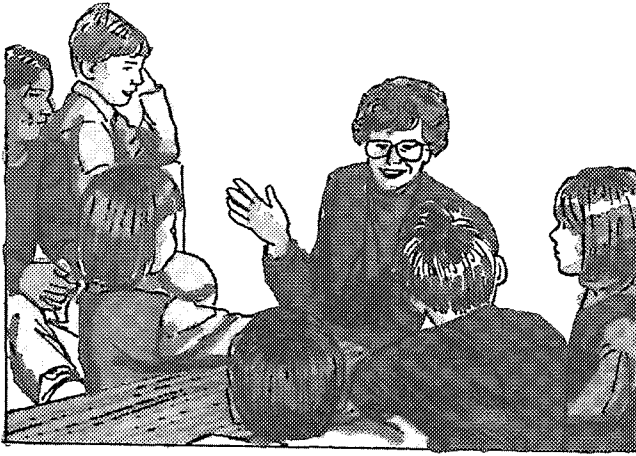**13** **Learn words that will appear across academic areas.** Learning words that will be useful for understanding in other academic areas will increase opportunities to practice hearing, speaking, reading, and writing (August, 2002).

14 **Inform students that copying out of the dictionary has little learning value.** Looking up a word in the dictionary has value but not if the activity is to copy a definition (Feldman & Kinsella, 2003). Reserve dictionary use for discovery of orthography and not to copy definitions.

15 **Practice in a safe environment.** Make the environment where vocabulary is practiced as comfortable as possible. When students are fearful of criticism they are less likely to attempt practice, even if they know the word. Never use the phrase "We speak English here." This discounts what a child knows and discourages practice.

students. Select an appropriate number of words to learn and create activities that provide multiple and diverse ways of practice (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002).

Learning a second language takes time and must follow the same course of learning a first language: hearing, duplicating, and practicing saying the sounds and words; learning to attach the sounds to print; and writing the words. Forcing students to learn English before they are academically ready to participate does not result in academic success (Thomas & Collier, 2001). When you support students through meaningful instruction and practice, you will help them close the language gap.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Elizabeth A. Swanson, MEd, is a former school teacher and current doctoral candidate in the Department of Special Education at the University of Texas at Austin. Her research interests are teacher education and effective reading instruction for students with learning disabilities and behavior disorders. **Dauna Howerton**, PhD, has worked on numerous research projects with K–12 teachers who work with struggling readers. Her interests are beliefs about secondary reading instruction and professional development for secondary teachers. Address: Elizabeth A. Swanson, University of Texas, Sanchez Bldg. 408G, 1 University Station, Austin, TX 78712.

AUTHORS' NOTE

REFERENCES

August, D. (2002, March 8). *Literacy for English language learners: Four key issues.* Power Point presented at the videoconference on literacy for English language learners.

Baker, S., Simmons, D., & Kame'enui, E. (1995). *Vocabulary acquisition: Synthesis of the research.* National Center to Improve the Tools of Educators (Tech. Rep. No. 13). Retrieved March 2, 2004, from http://idea.uoregon.edu/%7Encite/documents/techrep/tech13.html

Bear, D. R., & Helman, L. (2004). Word study for vocabulary development in the early stages of literacy learning: Ecological perspectives and learning English. In J. F. Baumann & E. J. Kame'enui (Eds.), *Vocabulary instruction: Research to practice* (pp. 13–27). New York: Guilford Press.

Beck, I. L., & McKeown, M. (1991). Conditions of vocabulary acquisition. In R. Barr, M. L. Kamil, P. Mosenthal, & P. D. Pearson (Eds.), *Handbook of reading research* (Vol. 2, pp. 789–814). White Plains, NY: Longman.

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

Beck, I. L., Perfetti, C. A., & McKeown, M. G. (1982). Effects of long term vocabulary instruction on lexical access and reading comprehension. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 74,* 506–521.

16 **Teach comprehension monitoring skills.** Often students think they know something when it is actually new and unclear. Through teaching comprehension monitoring skills, students become aware when they do not understand and are able to ask for help (August, 2002).

17 **Ask students what they need to know.** Older students may be more willing to express what it is they need to know in English, but younger students are also aware of what they do not understand, even if they do not express that confusion. When working on conversational skills, don't be afraid to ask them what words they would like to learn how to say in English.

18 **Idioms are not universal.** Idioms can be very confusing to ELL students. Literally understanding precedes higher-order thinking. Initially, be mindful of the idioms used in casual classroom conversation. When teaching idiom, ask students about the idioms common in their language as a way to move away from literal to figurative understandings of words.

19 **Understand language.** In such a diverse world, teachers must understand language. Every year more teachers encounter more ELL students. Having linguistic knowledge of English and the relationship between English and other languages will benefit every teacher and every child (Dutro & Moran, 2003).

20 **Make meaning stick.** The more opportunities for saying, using, reading, and writing the words, the more likely the words will stay with

Biemiller, A., & Boote, C. (2006). An effective method for building meaningful vocabulary in primary grades. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 98,* 44–62.

Chen, H. S., & Graves, M. F. (1998). Previewing challenging reading selections for ESL students. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy, 41,* 570–571.

Drucker, M. J. (2003). What reading teachers should know about ESL learners. *The Reading Teacher, 57,* 22–29.

Dutro, S., & Moran, C. (2003). Rethinking English language instruction: An architectural approach. In G. Garcia (Ed.), *English learners: Reaching the highest level of English literacy* (pp. 227–258). Newark, DE: IRA.

Feldman, K., & Kinsella, K. (2003). *Narrowing the language gap: Strategies for vocabulary development.* Santa Barbara, CA: Sonoma County Office of Education.

Helman, L. A. (2004). Building on the sound system of Spanish: Insights from the alphabetic spellings of English-language learners. *The Reading Teacher, 57,* 452–460.

McKeown, M. G., & Beck, I. L. (2004). Direct and rich vocabulary instruction. In J. F. Baumann & E. J. Kame'enui (Eds.), *Vocabulary instruction: Research to practice* (pp. 13–27). New York: Guilford Press.

National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. (2000). Report of the National Reading Panel. *Teaching children to read: An evidence-based assessment of the scientific research literature on reading and its implications for reading instruction* (NIH Publication No. 00-4769). Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.

Sternberg, R. J. (1987). Most vocabulary is learned from context. In M. G. McKeown & M. E. Curtis (Eds.), *The nature of vocabulary acquisition* (pp. 89–106). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

Thomas, W. P., & Collier, V. P. (2001). *A national study of school effectiveness for language minority students' long-term academic achievement.* Center for Research on Education, Diversity & Excellence. Retrieved April 1, 2004, from www.crede.ucsc.edu/research/llaa/1.1_final.h