



# The LeafLIT

## A Literacy Publication

### Building Vocabulary and Comprehension With English Language Learners

Jennifer Moon Ro

English Language Learners (ELL) in the US schools are the fastest growing population and *vocabulary* and *comprehension* are especially difficult for ELL students. For some ELL students, school context may be one of the few places in their lives where they might encounter rich English vocabulary.

Teaching vocabulary to ELL students requires special attention on the part of the teacher. Therefore, the idea that "good teaching for native speakers is good teaching for ELL students" can be a misconception. In other words, they may not have the same characteristics of difficulty as native speakers "struggling" with literacy. ELL students need careful monitoring & scaffolding for them to develop their vocabulary and comprehension.

Beck, McKeown, and Kucan (2002) suggest selecting words that they will encounter and use often.

Below are some ideas to help ELL students develop their vocabulary to improve reading comprehension. They can be used alone or combined with other approaches to reinforce the learning of the target words.

#### "Find That Word!"

After the target words have been introduced, invite students to look for the words all around them. When they hear or see the word, they write down the sentence and bring it to class. The teacher asks students to read the sentence and displays it as a collection for continued reference.

#### "Matching Card Games"

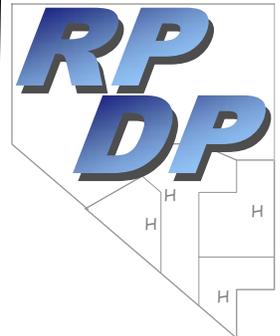
The students can build on their first language knowledge to

learn their new English words. Help students create cards with target words in English and in their first language. Include illustrations on the cards to help them remember the words. Allow students to play the matching game at home and at school with others who speak the same language.

#### "Digital Book Extensions"

This approach can be used as a culminating activity. Have students act out a story using props if they wish to do so. Take photographs. Work with students to select photos to compose their retelling of the story. Have students retell the story using the target vocabulary words. Print out the story and make it available for the students.

For more information, visit [www.reading.org](http://www.reading.org)



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### Quick Tip

Promote the maintenance of home languages. Encourage the parents of your ELL students to develop literacy skills in their native language. Whatever your students learn in their home language will eventually be transferred to English.

## Feeling, Hearing, Seeing Before Writing

By Ruth Devlin

Those who have the privilege of working with language learners know that it is a tremendously exciting job in which there are endless rewards and endless challenges.

Children who are learning English bring experiences to the classroom which can provide a wealth of writing topics. These prior experiences can find a home in pieces written using the writing process. Remember that language learners benefit from a great deal of time for prewriting activities.

One common activity for accessing prior experiences involves the use of the 5 senses and art along with writing.

Have students:

1. List five memories.

2. Add a sense that is most clearly remembered with that event.
3. Add the name of a person that is most clearly remembered with that event.
4. Choose one of the memories and draw a picture of it. This drawing will not only help the ELL student to "see" the event, but more pieces of the memory will become apparent in the drawing.
5. Begin writing the piece and work on it through the writing process.

For those students who are not yet using English orally, step 4 will be a great beginning. The drawing can be labeled and/or used to learn new vocabulary. Art is one of the sign systems that we all use to make meaning.

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## Some ELL Resources

Meeting the Needs of Second Language Learners by Judith Lessow-Hurley, ASCD 2003.

Scaffolding Language Scaffolding Learning - Teaching Second Language Learners in the Mainstream Classroom by Pauline Gibbons, 2002, Heinemann.

Fast Start for Early Readers by Nancy Padak and Timothy Rasiniski, Scholastic, 2005.

Making Content Comprehensible for English Learners (SIOP), by Echevarria, Vogt, and Short, 2004.

Fifty Strategies for Teaching English Language Learners by Adrienne Herrell, 2000, Prentice-Hall, Inc.

### I don't speak a language other than English. What strategies can I use to help my English Language Learners?

Academic instruction/conversations can be modified in several ways to make the content accessible to second language learners.

- 1. Create a predictable classroom environment.** Establishing routines, procedures, making transitions between activities, and using clear signals (gestures, facial expressions, etc.) assist the second language learner in understanding expectations. Consistent routines help learners make connections between activities and the language that accompanies them.
- 2. Build academic language skills.** Become familiar with the 5 general stages in learning a new language. Words such as *list*, *compare*, *describe*, or *explain* may be unfamiliar to newer learners and should be reviewed for students working in a new language.
- 3. Provide context for activities.** Use visuals, pictures, real objects, hands-on activities, and plenty of interaction opportunities whenever possible to help provide
- comprehensible language input.
- 4. Use questions effectively.** Be sure to leave enough time for a response because they may need more time than native speakers to understand and formulate responses. Sometimes answering in a whole group setting can be intimidating. Give opportunities to work/answer in pairs or small group settings as possible.
- 5. Facilitate understanding.** Check your comprehension of what a student says. If necessary, repeat and rephrase questions and answers. Listen for communication, not correctness. Model back appropriate speech without seeming to 'correct' the student. Modeling will bring about more and quicker change than correcting.

Submitted by: **Robyn Covey**,  
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