Academic Vocabulary: Engaging Activities for English Learners (and Others!) K-8

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One of the most persistent findings in reading research is that the extent of students' vocabulary knowledge relates strongly to their reading comprehension and to their overall academic success.

(Lehr, Osborn, & Hiebert, 2004)

Social or conversational language is generally more concrete than abstract, and it is usually supported by contextual clues, such as gestures, facial expressions, and body language.

“Academic language is the set of words, grammar, and organizational strategies used to describe complex ideas, higher-order thinking processes, and abstract concepts”

(Zwiers, 2008, p. 20)

Academic Language

Self-Talk: Thinking & Knowing

English Syntax

Language for Writing

Language for Reading

English Grammar

Academic Vocabulary

Oral Academic Discourse

Prosody

Language for Reading

Academic Vocabulary: Three Legs on a Stool

Content Vocabulary: Subject Specific & Technical Terms

Word Parts: Roots & Affixes

General Academic Vocabulary: Cross-Curricular Terms/Process & Function

MaryEllen Vogt
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Academic Vocabulary

(Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2012)

- **Content vocabulary:** Subject Specific & Technical Terms: Key vocabulary words, terms, and concepts associated with a particular topic being taught; they’re typically found in informational and expository texts that students read; frequently are highlighted or in bold in texts. Examples include:
  - Social Studies lesson on Revolutionary War: democracy, freedom of religion, Redcoats, Patriots, Paul Revere, George Washington
  - Life Science lesson on Plant Life: xylem, phloem, chlorophyll, stomata, respiration
  - Language Arts lesson on story elements: characters, setting, plot, rising action, falling action, denouement, climax, conclusion

- **General Academic Vocabulary:** Cross Curricular Terms/Process & Function... are academic words students must learn because they’re used in all academic disciplines. Often, they’re not explicitly taught, yet they are the ones that frequently trip up English learners and struggling readers...and they’re often found on state tests.
  - Words with multiple meanings: table and chair (social use);
  - Cross-curricular terms: measure, chart, model, structure, symbol, predict, infer, effect, result, conclusion, in reference to,... situation, source, evidence, modify
  - Language processes & function: discuss, skim, scan, question, argue, describe, compare, explain, list, debate, classify, support your answer, provide examples, summarize, outline, give an opinion, therefore, in conclusion, whereas, moreover, and furthermore; words that indicate sequence such as first, then, next, finally, and at last.

- **Word Parts:** Roots and Affixes: These enable students to learn new vocabulary, primarily based upon English morphology (affixes, roots, base words).
  - Example: Photosynthesis: photocopy, photograph, photography, photoelectron, photo-finish, photogenic;
  - Students learn how these English words are related by both structure (prefix + root + suffix), and meaning. The root *photo* means “light,” thus providing a clue to a word’s meaning if it has this root.
  - English words related by structure are almost always related by meaning (Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton, & Johnston, 2011).

Teaching Academic Vocabulary

Finding Academic Vocabulary in Content Standards

K-2 English-Language Arts

- Match oral words to printed words.
- Identify and describe the elements of plot, setting, and character(s) in a story, as well as the story’s beginning, middle and ending.
- Distinguish between complete and incomplete sentences.

Teaching Academic Vocabulary

Finding Academic Vocabulary in Content Standards

3-5 English-Language Arts

- Ask questions and support answers by connecting prior knowledge with literal information found in, and inferred from, the text.
- Identify and use past, present, and future verb tenses properly in writing and speaking.
- Make and confirm predictions about text by using prior knowledge and ideas presented in the text itself, including illustrations, titles, topic sentences, important words, and foreshadowing clues.

Key: **Underline** = academic vocabulary (process/function); **Bold** = content vocabulary
Finding Academic Vocabulary in Content Standards 6-8 English-Language Arts

- **Determine** the adequacy and appropriateness of the evidence for an author's conclusions.
- Support all statements and claims with anecdotes, descriptions, facts and statistics, and specific examples.
- **Analyze** the relevance of the setting (e.g., place, time, customs) to the mood, tone, and meaning of the text.

Key: *Underline* = academic vocabulary (process/function); **Bold** = content vocabulary

General Academic Vocabulary in Common Core ELA

- **Kindergarten**: Associate the long and short sounds with common spellings.
- **Second**: Tell a story or recount an experience with appropriate facts and relevant, descriptive details, speaking audibly in coherent sentences.
- **Fourth**: Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions with diverse partners on grade 4 topics and texts, building on other’s ideas and expressing their own clearly.
- **Sixth**: Engage and orient the reader by establishing a context and introducing a narrator and/or characters; organize an event sequence that unfolds naturally and logically.

Teaching Content Vocabulary

Subject Specific and Technical Terms

4-Corners Vocabulary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Illustration (1)</th>
<th>Sentence (3)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Definition (2)</td>
<td>Word (4)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Vogt and Echevarria, 2008, pp. 40-41)

4-Corners Vocabulary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Illustration (1)</th>
<th>Sentence (3)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Definition (2)</td>
<td>Word (4)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A white billowy cloud type with a dark flat base (from the Latin *cumulus*, meaning “heap”)

(Vogt and Echevarria, 2008, pp. 40-41)

Semantic Feature Analysis

*(Fisher & Frey, 2008)*

**Topic: Transportation**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Words</th>
<th>Features</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Semantic Feature Analysis**
(Fisher & Frey, 2008)

**Topic:** Immigration in the Early 1900's

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Words</th>
<th>Features</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Seeking better life</td>
<td>Escape religious persecution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Escape religious persecution</td>
<td>Brought against will</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brought against will</td>
<td>Suffered prejudice in U.S.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suffered prejudice in U.S.</td>
<td>Lived in tenements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russia</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Europe</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>El Salvador</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Africa</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Teaching General Academic Vocabulary:** Cross-Curricular Terms/Process & Function

**Signal Words**
(Vogt & Echevarria, 2008, p. 36-39)

- Create posters with the following Signal Words. As ELs (and other students) are reading and writing, draw their attention to the posters for specific text structures. Clip art illustrations further enhance student understandings. For example, for Cause and Effect:

**Signal Words: Compare and Contrast**
(Vogt & Echevarria, 2008)

If you are asked to compare two or more things, use these words:
- as well as
- also
- too
- like
- much as
- similarly
- similar to

If you are asked to contrast two or more things, use these words:
- however
- but
- on the other hand
- while
- although
- different from
- less than
- yet
- whereas

**Signal Words: Cause and Effect or Problem and Solution**
(Vogt & Echevarria, 2008)

If you are asked to describe cause and effect or problem and solution, use these words:
- because
- since
- therefore
- consequently
- in order that
- so that
- as a consequence
- as a result
- then
- if...then
- thus
- due to

**Signal Words: Sequence or Order**
(Vogt & Echevarria, 2008)

If you are asked to describe the sequence or order in which things happened or occurred, use these words:
- first
- second
- third
- in the first place
- first of all
- then
- before
- after
- last
- meanwhile
- now
- finally
- for one thing
- next
Signal Words: Description or List  
(Vogt & Echevarria, 2008)

If you are asked to write a description or list, use these words:

- to illustrate
- for instance
- in addition
- and
- again
- moreover
- also
- too
- furthermore
- another
- first of all

Contextualized Academic Vocabulary List

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discuss</th>
<th>to speak with others about a topic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Summarize</td>
<td>to present the main points of a topic</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Teaching Words Parts:  
Roots and Affixes

Which of these words are related to the meaning of the root -port?

Word Generation  
(Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2008, p. 66-67)

Common Word Roots

- See attached list.
- Note that the roots with asterisks are clues to over 100,000 English words!
- These are for your use...to raise students’ awareness of English structure (not for students to memorize...☺).

Picture and Words Sorts:  
It’s All About Contrasts  
(Bear, et. al, 2007)

- Sorting Pictures
- Sorting Words: Sound, Pattern, Structure, Rhyme, Concept
- Open Sorts (kids choose)
- Closed Sorts (teacher chooses)
- Blind Sorts (kids sort w/o knowing pattern in advance)
- Speed Sorts (kids sort as quickly and accurately as they can)
Closed Word Sort: Sound

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ran</th>
<th>table</th>
<th>oddballs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>apple</td>
<td>taste</td>
<td>paid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fan</td>
<td>cape</td>
<td>freight</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alan</td>
<td>paste</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>can</td>
<td>cake</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Word Sort: Sound/Structure

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>hoped</th>
<th>frosted</th>
<th>oddballs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>walked</td>
<td>tasted</td>
<td>ran</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>peeped</td>
<td>fretted</td>
<td>slept</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>leaped</td>
<td>pasted</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wiped</td>
<td>toasted</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Word Sort: Structure (American Revolution)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>-tion</th>
<th>-sion</th>
<th>-tation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>revolution</td>
<td>tension</td>
<td>representation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>taxation</td>
<td>passion</td>
<td>plantation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>frustration</td>
<td>mission</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>participation</td>
<td>vision</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>solution</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>transition</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>nation</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Word Hunts (Bear, et al, 2011)

Students search through free-reading books, content texts, picture books, newspapers and magazines to find examples of other words that exemplify the pattern being studied.

Vocabulary Self-Assessment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vocabulary words</th>
<th>I know it.</th>
<th>I have seen it or heard it.</th>
<th>I don’t know it.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>taxation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>self-governance</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>right to bear arms</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Word Play Develops Word Consciousness (Stahl & Nagy, 2006, pp. 147-148)

Include activities in which students manipulate words, sort words, laugh, and giggle about funny and tricky words and phrases:
- A bike can’t stand alone because it’s two-tired.
- Time flies like an arrow. Fruit flies like a banana.
- A chicken crossing the road is poultry in motion.
- Those who get too big for their britches will be exposed in the end.

Homographs:
- We polish the Polish furniture.
- He could lead if he would get the lead out.
- The present is a good time to present the present.
- I did not object to the object.
Things to Ponder (Barone, 2008)...

- Not all words need explicit instruction, but many do.
- Children need many exposures to good literature, including nonfiction and informational texts (many picture books do not include unfamiliar words).
- Struggling readers read less, read less-complex texts, and thus are exposed to fewer words.
- Proficient readers read more complex texts and encounter more words.
- Thus, the gap grows between struggling and proficient readers.

So...

- Read-aloud from a wide variety of books at different reading levels, on different topics, and include both narrative and expository texts.
- Develop word consciousness (awareness and love of words) in your students.
- Teach academic vocabulary, including content words, cross-curricular and language process/function words, and word parts (roots and affixes) that develop knowledge of English structure.

Selected References

Barone, D. (2008). So many words? What is a teacher to do? Session presented at the International Reading Association Annual Convention, Atlanta, GA.


