

Wordly Possession

Katharine Davies Samway and Dorothy Taylor offer strategies for developing word consciousness in English Learners



Dorothy teaches adult English learners and one day she was talking with Ali, the young son of one of her students, Asha, a refugee from Somalia. While Asha was practicing questions for her citizenship interview on a classroom computer, Dorothy was chatting with Ali, while leafing through a picture book with photos of common North American fruits and vegetables, such as apples and carrots. The little boy was fascinated by the pictures, but when Dorothy would ask him, “Do you know this fruit?” he would look at her silently. That is, until he came to a picture of strawberries, when he excitedly called out, “Strawberry.” “Yes, those are strawberries,” Dorothy replied and asked him, “Do you like strawberries?” Asha looked over at Dorothy, smiled, and called out, “He love strawberries,” as Ali nodded his head. Dorothy was curious to know if Ali was familiar with the fruits and vegetables or whether he just didn’t know the words for them in English. When Asha had finished her work on the computer, Dorothy talked with her and it quickly became evident that Ali knew most of the names of the fruits and vegetables in his native language, Somali.

This anecdote addresses an issue that teachers of English learners (ELs) often encounter—students do not know the vocabulary of even fairly common concepts in English, and teachers do not know if this is

due to a lack of conceptual knowledge or a lack of English vocabulary. It is inevitable that ELs will not have the same wide vocabulary in English as their native speaking peers. After all, English-speaking children with average or above average verbal ability enter school with a receptive vocabulary of between 5,000 and 10,000 words (Blachowicz, Fisher, Cole, & Watts-Taffe, 2006). And, by the time average and above average native English-speakers leave high school, they have acquired approximately 40,000 receptive words, more than 3,000 new words for each year that they have been in school (Nagy & Herman, 1987). This means that newcomers to English have a lot of catching up to do, even when they come with extensive vocabularies in their home languages.

How can teachers help ELs catch up? First, strategies that do not appear to have a major impact in developing the vocabularies of ELs are those on which teachers often rely. Some of these less effective strategies include asking students to use the dictionary as the first and most important resource, giving lists of words and asking students to define them, and teaching a few Tier 2 words (i.e., high frequency words that are often complex or abstract terms, such as theme) and Tier 3 words (i.e., low frequency words, such as amoeba, that tend to

appear in a very specific context). Instead, a word consciousness approach appears to be more effective as it provides a solid foundation for exploring words and building knowledge about words (Scott & Nagy, 2004). Word conscious classrooms are those that foster a cognitive and affective disposition toward words; build a curiosity about and appreciation for words and how they are used; and develop students' knowledge about words, including understanding that many words have different meanings. See Samway & Taylor (2007, 2008) for more detailed discussions on how to develop ELs' word consciousness and vocabulary.

General Strategies that Support Word Consciousness

General strategies and activities that support word consciousness include the following:

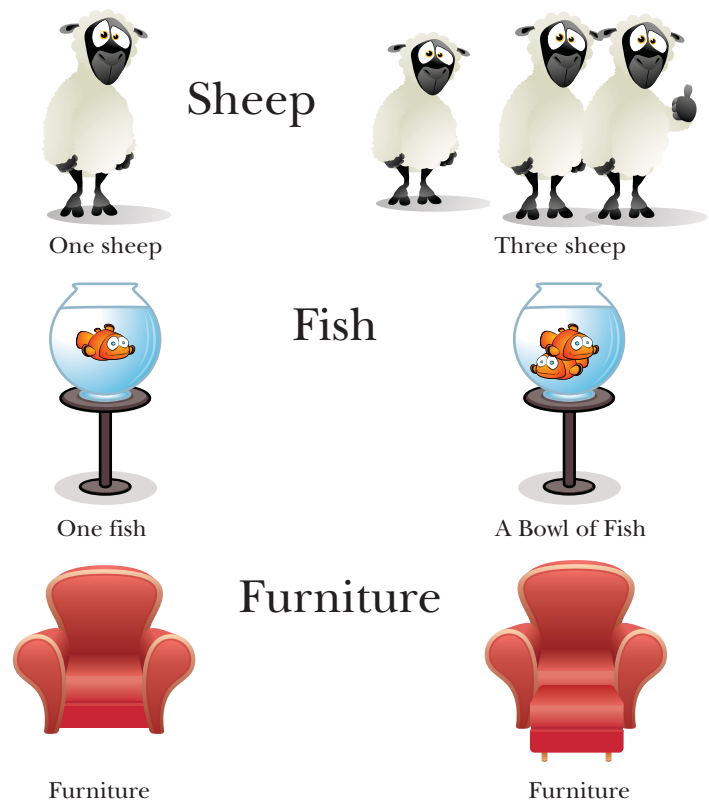
- Lots of talk about vocabulary throughout the day - all curriculum areas are rich in both planned and spontaneous opportunities for discussions around words/terms, including mathematics, P.E., and art. For example, a group of students was discussing fractions and at one point a student said, "It's like quarterback in football," which led the group to wonder why this position carried quarter in its name; the group then sketched a football field and, through discussion, they decided it was because the quarterback stands about a quarter of the way down a field when receiving the ball. The teacher overheard the conversation and suggested that the students make a list of all the uses of quarter that they could find, and the group listed quarter (the coin), quarter-final (as in a soccer tournament), and quart (of milk); two days later, one of the students shared that his uncle was in the army and was a quartermaster - the student explained that his uncle was in charge of where the soldiers lived or quarters. A couple of weeks later, the students were reading an article about horses and they were excited to see a labeled photo of a quarter horse. After much laughter (e.g., in response to one student saying, "It's just little part of the horse!"), they went on the Internet and discovered that this horse got its name because of its speed at the quarter mile distance.

- Valuing words and inquiry around words - when teachers are fascinated about words and share their passion for words, students often also develop an interest in and a passion for words. When students are encouraged to notice and get excited about words, they will often take that curiosity outside of the classroom and later return to share their findings (e.g., coming into the classroom in the morning to excitedly report, "We talk about licorice yesterday, and I see it on a bag in a store" or "I ask my dad about Chinese words that in English too. He says chow mein and ketchup and wok"). Exposure to an inquiry approach to words, where students are encouraged to construct knowledge about words by seeking answers to their own questions rather than rote learning lists of words, can help build resourceful and successful speakers, readers, and writers.

Teachers can celebrate and support students' powers of observa-

tion and use of interesting words/terms through displaying and continuously adding to charts. Some charts we've seen in inquiry-based classrooms are Words to use in place of fun, Multiple meanings for leaf, and Spanish/English cognates. Individual students or an entire class can also keep word consciousness journals in which they record their observations (e.g., about idioms and multiple meanings of words) and questions (e.g., Why is it girl/girls, but child/children?). See Figure 1 for an example of an excerpt from a chart about nouns that do not take plural forms, which was developed with a group of fourth graders who were initially confused about how some words didn't change when pluralized; they added little sketches to help remember the meanings-sketching in this way is a particularly helpful strategy for ELs.

Figure 1
Chart of Nouns with no Plural Form



- Assessing students' knowledge of words/terms through Knowledge Rating Guides (KRGs). Knowledge Rating Guides allow students to analyze their understanding of words or concepts from a text or unit of study by rating their level of knowledge of words in a three- or four-column rating chart. Figure 2 is an example of a KRG completed at the beginning of a study of space; the student added sketches to help her remember the meaning of the terms.

Figure 2 A Student's Knowledge Rating Guide for Science Unit on Space

We have found that, after students have independently completed their KRGs, the conversations that follow are highly important as they allow students (and the teacher) to collaboratively construct meaning and understanding. It is also useful for students to revisit their KRGs at the end of a unit of study, complete it again in a different color, and then compare their responses—students are often excited to see their growth.

An important issue when developing KRGs (as well as preparing activities for a unit of study or when reading a text) is deciding which terms to focus on. It is most helpful to ELs if one selects words and terms that:

- Are essential for understanding a passage or unit of study (e.g., in a unit on magnetism: magnet, pole, attract, opposite).
- Are encountered multiple times in different forms in various texts (e.g., migrant, immigrant, migratory, migration).
- Are likely to confuse students. These include expressions (e.g., in order to), idioms (e.g., “under the weather” or go “out on a limb”), and homophones (e.g., whole and hole; vein, vain, vane).
- Are not known by most students.

The following short passage about the Plymouth Colony illustrates differences between ELs' knowledge of vocabulary and that of English-speaking students. We have italicized key words and terms an English-speaking student in an intermediate grade classroom in the U.S. may not know, and we have underlined additional words and terms that may be tricky for ELs.










Plymouth

The Plymouth Colony was established in the northeast of the North American continent. It was established by immigrants from England, who left England to escape religious persecution. Today, they are called Pilgrims. In their first year, the colonists faced many hardships, such as sickness, hunger, and extreme weather conditions. They had to learn how to hunt, fish, and plant crops in a new environment in order to survive.

Understanding which additional terms ELs may not know and preparing in advance for any misunderstandings can make a huge difference in whether or how they interpret a text. For example, while teachers are likely to recognize the need to focus on the concepts of immigration and religious persecution, they may not appreciate the difficulties that ELs often have with multiple meanings of words such as face, or frequent misunderstandings between words such as hunger and anger.

Specific Strategies for Developing Word Consciousness

There are many word consciousness strategies that support ELs, but we will focus on just three of them here: shades of meaning, cognates, and idioms.

	Words I know and can use	Words I've heard or seen	Words I don't know
rotation 			✓
planet 	✓		
asteroid 		✓	
Black Hole 			✓
atmosphere 		✓	
astronomy 		✓	
telescope		✓	
star	✓		
gravity 			✓
satellite 			✓
observatory 			✓

Shades of Meaning

Teachers often refer to words and phrases that have similar meanings as synonyms, when in fact they have distinct meanings. For example, like, be fond of, love, adore, and worship are not synonyms as they connote different meanings, albeit sometimes subtly. When students are familiar with several words that have similar or related meanings, they can work in groups to collaboratively figure out how the terms differ and where they belong on a continuum. A procedure for this that we have found works well follows:

1. Students work in groups of about five.
2. Each group receives a category card (e.g., Movement, Talk, Texture, Age).
3. Each group generates words and terms that correspond with their category and writes each word/term on a card (e.g., for a group with the Talk category card, terms generated might include yell, whisper, bellow, shout, and murmur).
4. Each group sorts itself into a continuum (e.g., the Talk group might sort itself in the following way according to how loud the talk would be: whisper, murmur, shout, yell, and bellow).
5. Group members stand in the order of their continuum, while holding their cards in front of them.
6. Each group shares its continuum (e.g., Movement and Talk groups can act out their words, whereas Color and Temperature groups may simply call out their words and explain the differences).

If students have all been working with the same category, discussions around differences in continuums can also lead to valuable conversations.

Cognates

Cognates are words in two languages that look alike, sound similar, and have the same meaning (e.g., *rose* in English and *rosa* in Spanish). In addition to cognates, there are also partial cognates and false cognates. Some words look alike in two languages and sometimes, but not always, mean the same in both languages (e.g., in Spanish, *admirar* means “to admire,” but it also means “to astonish” or “to surprise”); pairs of words like these are called partial cognates. Sometimes, words look like they are cognates, but actually aren’t, and are called false cognates (e.g., the Spanish word *pie* means foot, not a dessert made with pastry).

Latin-based languages share the most cognates with English and this is a valuable resource for ELs who speak languages such as Spanish, Portuguese, and Italian. Also, many academic words are cognates (e.g., geology/*geología* and anthropology/*antropología*); however, ELs may not be aware of this linguistic resource and/or may not be familiar with the terms in their home languages (Flinspach, Scott, & Samway, 2008). For these reasons, it is important to alert students to cognates (as well as false cognates and partial cognates) and spend time exploring them.

Some useful ways to support cognate awareness include the following:

- Keep lists of cognates (the terms in English and the native language) and their meanings, which can be generated from a variety of sources, such as written texts, the community, TV, and print media. Students can use bilingual dictionaries and Web sites to verify that the identified words are actually cognates. Students’ findings can be displayed on charts or stored in three-ring binders.

- Students talk about how they know that certain words are cognates, which can help enhance their metalinguistic knowledge. An example of this type of metalinguistic talk occurred in a social studies class focused on the Great Depression, when one student said, “In this sentence, ‘The nation reeled from the loss of jobs and loss of income, which put many families below the poverty line,’ nation is like *nación* in my language. Is nation like country? I check the dictionary”).

- Students can talk with family members about cognates in their home language and English, and share them with the class.

- The teacher lists pairs of cognates on paper or a chart, and students identify differences in the cognate pairs. For example, in the English/Spanish cognate, *desert/desierto*, the Spanish word has two additional letters, an *-i* after *des* and an *-o* at the end of the word. The teacher and students can take turns circling or underlining the differences.

- The teacher implements a two- to three-week unit of study on etymology and includes cognate study.

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Idioms

Idioms are expressions that mean something other than the literal meaning of their words (e.g., *He's just not that into you*, *Last night's game was called off because of bad weather*, and *Did you make this cake from scratch?*). It is essential to address idioms with ELs as these expressions can severely impede understanding. For example, one study showed that at least 36 percent of all utterances produced by K-8 teachers contained at least one multi-meaning expression (Lazar, Warr-Leeper, Nicholson, & Johnson, 1989). Some idioms are referred to as transparent idioms as their meanings are fairly easy to figure out (e.g., *You're skating on thin ice* and *He feels like a fish out of water*). However, other expressions are difficult to understand without prior knowledge and are known as opaque idioms (e.g., *She kicked the bucket* and *Stop beating around the bush*). Younger students may need to have both transparent and opaque idioms explained, whereas older students may be able to decipher transparent idioms, but may have difficulty with opaque idioms.

It is important to underscore that idioms are integral to fluent use of a language and, if ELs are to become expert users and consumers of their non-native language, they need lots of comprehensible exposure to them. Sometimes, teachers decide not to use idioms with ELs because they may cause confusion for their students. However, a much better idea is to use and explore idioms, but monitor that ELs understand them. Some strategies that work well for building ELs'

idiom repertoires include the following:

- Rather than assuming that ELs will not be able to understand idioms, treat idioms as an opportunity for inquiry and invite students to figure out meanings from context, wherever possible. For example, although the expression *raining cats and dogs* is rather opaque, in context, ELs may be able to figure out the meaning (e.g., in a passage that includes "The weather was awful. The rain came down heavier than I've ever seen it. *It was raining cats and dogs*," ELs may be able to figure out that the expression means raining heavily).
- Explain idioms in context — when ELs are unable to "crack the code" of idioms that are essential for understanding a text, explain them in context. This is particularly true of opaque idioms. These explanations often need to be accompanied by gestures, demonstrations and/or sketches
- Introduce important idioms before reading or listening — it is important that teachers are familiar with the content and words/terms that are in a text with which ELs will be interacting.
- Have students keep a record of idioms, to which they can refer to when necessary and to which they can add to on a regular basis. Encourage students to use sketches, whenever appropriate, to help them remember idioms.

Although ELs have a lot of catching up to do in order to attain the same levels of vocabulary knowledge as their native English-speaking peers, teachers can make a difference. A classroom that focuses on word consciousness is likely to foster students' curiosity about words, enhance their knowledge of words and how to use them, and increase the range of strategies to which they have access to when encountering unfamiliar words. ■

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