

Vocabulary Instruction for English Learners

Part I: Foundational Skills



What You Need to Know

Vocabulary plays an important part in learning to read. Students need to be familiar with the words they are learning to decode. Otherwise, it will be hard for them to figure out words that they don't recognize as they read them aloud. Keep in mind that ELLs' decoding skills may not be an accurate predictor of comprehension.



Classroom Strategies

- **Use familiar vocabulary** in phonics instruction and decoding practice.
- **Pre-teach vocabulary** used for phonics practice with visuals and translated terms if needed.
- **Focus on oral language** by giving students a chance to hear, say, and use new words in conversation and peer activities.
- **Embed writing activities** throughout lessons. This allows students to practice spelling and writing new words in context.
- **Front-load lessons** with materials that appear in a unit so that students get familiar with targeted skills, sounds, and words. These might include:
 - Vocabulary lists and activities
 - Text passages
 - Writing tasks

See related tips and videos in the [online version](#) of this article!



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Part II: Comprehension



What You Need to Know

Understanding vocabulary words is a key step in [reading comprehension](#). The more words students know, the better they will understand the text. ELLs need direct instruction of new vocabulary words, as well as multiple opportunities to use the words through reading, writing, speaking, and listening.



Classroom Strategies

- **Make learning hands-on** by [bringing words to life](#) with visuals, gestures, real objects, and multimedia.
- **Develop [critical thinking skills](#)** by using word sorts, graphic organizers, visual thinking routines, and matching/sequencing activities.
- **Teach students to recognize [cognates](#)** – words related across two languages. English and Spanish share many cognates, such as map/*mapa*.
- **Use [comprehension checks](#) regularly** such as visuals, gestures (thumbs up/thumbs down), entrance/exit tickets, and games.
- **Teach students to recognize word parts** such as roots, prefixes, and suffixes. Show them connections across words and point out cognates.
- **Teach [academic vocabulary](#)** that students will need to understand a text or passage. Keep an eye out for advanced words, words with multiple meanings, and common words ELLs may not yet have learned.

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