



**LITERACY LEADERSHIP BRIEF**

# Second-Language Learners' Vocabulary and Oral Language Development

**B**y definition, second-language learners are still in the process of acquiring the language spoken in school. Whatever the target language—English, Mandarin, Catalán, German—the principles for developing second-language proficiency are the same, particularly regarding the language used for academic purposes. Many second-language learners might be conversant in the target language and speak comfortably in social settings, but they may still struggle with academic language.

Academic language is the language required to participate in academic instruction and to be able to read texts and write original academic and literary compositions. It is typically more formal, abstract, and challenging than language used in common nonacademic settings. Components of academic language include the following:

- Language structures (e.g., “Despite the absence of any pressing need, they decided to...”)
- Genres (e.g., lab report, research paper), academic vocabulary (e.g., *analyze, concept, data, research*)
- Discourse patterns (e.g., “You make a good point, but you’re forgetting an important factor...”)
- Strategic competencies for dealing with spoken and written academic texts (e.g., disagreeing firmly but not rudely, providing an overview for a presentation).

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Most second-language learners lack exposure to academic language and have few opportunities to use it; thus, the onus is on educators to create appropriate learning environments for these students.

Oral language proficiency is critical for advancing second-language learners’ academic success; vocabulary is a particularly critical aspect of oral proficiency. Students’ word knowledge is the driver of language production and reception (i.e., speaking and listening) and is critical for learning new information. We begin with building academic vocabulary and then broaden to academic language more generally. As students strengthen vocabulary and other oral language skills, their reading and writing skills are more likely to improve.

## Building Vocabulary

Having a robust vocabulary is essential for school success: Students who have and can use an expansive vocabulary do best in school. In fact, the ability to comprehend a text read independently requires knowledge of at least 95%, and more likely 98%, of the words. Building students' vocabulary requires explicit teaching of specific words, helping students develop word learning skills and strategies, and promoting students' wide reading of and listening to interesting texts, which then contributes to incidental vocabulary learning.

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*Explicit teaching* involves selecting a specific set of words and then providing multiple exposures to the words to deepen understanding in addition to offering students opportunities to use and practice the words in varied contexts such as peer discussions, individual activities, and teacher-led groups. How should teachers decide which words to teach explicitly? There are two main strategies: First, look in texts and other reading materials students will be expected to read and choose strategically. Second, refer to academic word lists to select words that are useful across curriculum areas, such as *analyze*, *concept*, *data*, or *research*. (Academic word lists can be found at <https://wordsift.org/wordlists.html>.)

There is no known upper limit for how many words to teach. Depending on age, teachers can teach five to 20 or more words a week. The words should be related either conceptually or because they appear in texts students have read or will be reading. They should not be random groups of words.

*Word learning skills* include a range of strategies to help students infer or at least approximate the meanings of words they do not recognize. Perhaps the most fundamental of these strategies is developing word consciousness, which is an explicit understanding that words have meanings and these meanings are knowable. Too often, students, particularly second-language learners, do not understand what they read and are unaware of why they do not understand. Teachers should help students become aware of when not knowing one or more words is interfering with their comprehension and understand that they need to do something about it.

Two important word learning strategies that teachers should help students learn are context clues and analysis of word parts. Context clues are hints in the text, often near the unknown

word, about the word’s meaning. Inferring the meanings of unknown words from context clues is not always possible, but students should be made aware of the possibility. For example, by considering context clues, a student could come close to inferring what *elated* means in this sentence: “The team was elated when it won the trophy.”

Analysis of word parts, generally roots and affixes, is known as morphological analysis. As with context clues, students must first become aware that they have come across an unfamiliar word and then use a set of strategies to try to infer the word’s meaning. Here, teachers should help students to understand that words comprise components (known as “morphemes”) that each carry meaning.

For example, *cat* is a single morpheme indicating a four-legged animal; add an *-s*—a second morpheme—and you now are referring to more than one cat. When an *s* appears at the end of a noun, it typically means more than one of something. (Not always, of course. Think of *circus*.) When referring to a person or an animal, *run* means to go quickly on one’s own legs. Add an *-ing* (after doubling the consonant *n*), and *running* now means something that is happening right now. There are many useful morphemes that can help students unlock the meanings of words: prefixes such as *un-*, *re-*, *dis-*, *mis-*; suffixes such as *-ism*, *-ist*, *-istic*, *-cy*; and roots from Latin or Greek, such as *therm*, *meter*, *cred*, *prim*, *equi*.

*Incidental vocabulary learning* is learning the meaning of words from coming across them in print or orally. Second-language learners can, in fact, learn words incidentally as a by-product of reading or listening widely to interesting texts. But they must come across the words more than once or even twice—there must be multiple exposures in meaningful contexts. This makes engaging in meaningful reading experiences, accompanied by discussion and writing, an important aspect of classroom practice for these students, as it is for students in general. As words are learned, more is learned about the concepts and images with which the words are associated, which then contributes to facilitating further learning and deeper understanding of words’ meanings.

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## Oral Language Development

An essential component of second-language learning is helping students (a) understand what is being said (input) and (b) formulate appropriate verbal utterances (output). Vocabulary is an important part of this, but other dimensions of oral language are required for communicative competence, for example, syntax, pronunciation, and what is sometimes called “pragmatics,” which refers to how language speakers reach their communicative goals, sometimes through more than what is said explicitly. One conclusion we can reach from worldwide research on second-language acquisition is that learners benefit from explicit and intentional opportunities to learn how a second language functions and how to become an increasingly proficient user of the target language. As with vocabulary, second-language learners learn about the target language incidentally, through use, but intentional learning tends to be more effective and efficient. All students, not only second-language learners, should be provided with ample intentional and incidental opportunities to develop not only their vocabularies but also other aspects of language as well.

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To progress in developing both receptive and productive language skills, students also need ample opportunities for language use in authentic and communicative contexts. During the act of speaking, students practice using words and other features of the language in a specific order to create logical, meaningful utterances (sentences or phrases); test hypotheses about how language works; and become more comfortable using terms that initially might be unfamiliar or abstract. When listening, they hear others engaged in the same verbal behaviors that they are expected to engage in. Therefore, second-language learners will almost certainly benefit from classroom settings where oral language use is emphasized and student-to-student interaction is promoted.

Various techniques may be employed to create opportunities for second-language learners to use academic language for interactions among themselves and with the teacher. Unfortunately, we have surprisingly little research on the impact of these techniques on second-language development beyond relatively short-term outcomes. These techniques are, however, worthy of exploration and experimentation by teachers. Common techniques include using sentence frames to give an opinion (e.g., In



my opinion \_\_\_\_\_, because \_\_\_\_\_), asking students to share their answers or a summary of their work with peers (e.g., turn and talk or think-pair-share), and making presentations (e.g., presenting information on a topic individually or as a group, with each student responsible for a part of the presentation).

A deeper level of oral language development is likely to come from more extended discourse, allowing students to engage in authentic discussion about topics and offering them a chance to grapple with ideas, make connections between others' ideas and their own, build on a peer's contribution, express disagreement, or make a counterargument. For example, after reading a passage, students in small groups are asked to take a position about the central idea in the text. After one student expresses an opinion, a second student follows up with a comment that supports or refutes the first. A third student might restate what was said and build upon a comment or extend what has been said. Students in the group use the text as a basis for their ideas but express their own positions, connecting their comments to those of others.

Because many second-language learners might be unlikely to encounter much academic language in their everyday lives, the language-learning opportunities provided in school are critical for their academic achievement. Creating many such opportunities for these students will accelerate their vocabulary and oral language skill development and, in so doing, increase their chances of school success.

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## International Literacy Association: Literacy Research Panel 2016–2017

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