

Annotated Guide for Teaching Academic Content and Literacy to English Learners in Elementary and Middle School

Purpose

This document was developed by the Agency of Education (AOE) to support supervisory unions and districts (SU/SDs), educators, and the Advisory Council on Literacy in performing their duties as defined in Act 28 of 2021. What follows is an annotated summary of the [Teaching Academic Content and Literacy to English Learners in Elementary and Middle School](#) practice guide from What Works Clearinghouse (WWC). This practice guide, as summarized below, is designed to assist classroom teachers and specialists in improving the literacy skills of English learners and contains recommendations and strategies to help students acquire academic vocabulary and improve oral and written English.

Background

On the WWC website, it states:

This practice guide provides four recommendations that address what works for English learners during reading and content area instruction. Each recommendation includes extensive examples of activities that can be used to support students as they build the language and literacy skills needed to be successful in school, including examples of how the recommendations align with Common Core and other contemporary state standards. The recommendations also summarize and rate supporting evidence. This guide is geared toward teachers, administrators, and other educators who want to improve instruction in academic content and literacy for English learners in elementary and middle school.

Recommendations

The two recommendations that have the strongest evidence include:

- **Recommendation 1:** “Teach a set of academic vocabulary words intensively across several days using a variety of instructional activities” (7).
- **Recommendation 2:** “Integrate oral and written English language instruction into content-area teaching” (7).

One recommendation with “moderate” evidence includes:

- **Recommendation 4:** “Provide small-group instructional intervention to students struggling in areas of literacy and English language development” (7).

The recommendation with “minimal” evidence is:

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- **Recommendation 3:** “Provide regular, structured opportunities to develop written language skills” (7).

More information about these recommendations can be found below, organized by level of evidence. See pages 8-12 of the guide for more information about what the levels of evidence mean and how they are calculated.

Recommendations with the Strongest Evidence

Recommendation 1: Teach a set of academic vocabulary words intensively across several days using a variety of instructional activities (pages 13-30)

Many English learners lack opportunities to develop the sophisticated, abstract, academic vocabulary necessary to support reading, writing, and discussion of the academic topics covered in school. This can, and frequently does, lead to struggles with complex texts that are loaded with abstract content and academic vocabulary. The Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts require that students acquire grade-appropriate general academic and domain-specific vocabulary, and use these words accurately. This provides a window of opportunity for English learners and their teachers because building academic vocabulary is now a key part of the core curriculum in most states. (13)

A summary of the evidence can be found on page 13.

How to carry out the recommendation:

- “Choose a brief, engaging piece of informational text that includes academic vocabulary as a platform for intensive academic vocabulary instruction” (14-15).
- “Choose a small set of academic vocabulary for in-depth instruction” (15-18).
- “Teach academic vocabulary in depth using multiple modalities (writing, speaking, listening)” (18-21).
- “Teach word-learning strategies to help students independently figure out the meaning of words” (21-24).

A sample lesson can be found on pages 24-29 in a section called “Putting It All Together.”

Potential roadblocks and solutions can be found on page 30, including a suggestion for how to deal with time constraints.

Recommendation 2: Integrate oral and written English language instruction into content-area teaching (pages 31-46)

Students are expected to read, comprehend, and articulate the meaning of increasingly complex informational texts, write opinion pieces justifying their arguments and conclusions by citing evidence from these texts, and participate in discussions with their peers about issues resulting from their work...[The Common Core State Standards] pose a unique set of challenges not only for English learners, who are already facing the double demands of building knowledge of a second language while learning complex grade-level content, but also for teachers who must find effective ways to make challenging content comprehensible for students. The rigors posed by the

[Common Core] provide an important window of opportunity for teachers to help English learners build English language skills while learning challenging new content. (31)

A summary of the evidence can be found on page 31.

How to carry out the recommendation:

- “Strategically use instructional tools—such as short videos, visuals, and graphic organizers—to anchor instruction and help students make sense of content” (32-36).
- “Explicitly teach the content-specific academic vocabulary, as well as the general academic vocabulary that supports it, during content-area instruction” (37-39).
- “Provide daily opportunities for students to talk about content in pairs or small groups” (40-41).
- “Provide writing opportunities to extend student learning and understanding of the content material” (41).

A sample lesson can be found on pages 42-44 in a section called “Putting It All Together.”

Potential roadblocks and solutions can be found on pages 45-46, including dealing with feelings of pressure to “cover” a lot of content.

Recommendation with “Moderate Evidence”

Recommendation 4: Provide small-group instructional intervention to students struggling in areas of literacy and English language development (pages 59-68)

Some students require instructional support in various aspects of literacy and/or English language development above and beyond what typical classroom instruction provides... The panel recommends using these and other types of systems, which emphasize providing small-group instructional interventions for early intervention and support with English learners, because evidence suggests that such interventions are often beneficial to English learners. (59)

A summary of the evidence can be found on page 60.

How to carry out the recommendation:

- “Use available assessment information to identify students who demonstrate persistent struggles with aspects of language and literacy development” (60-61).
- “Design the content of small-group instruction to target students’ identified needs” (61).
- “Provide additional instruction in small groups consisting of three to five students to students struggling with language and literacy” (62).
- “For students who struggle with basic foundational reading skills, spend time not only on these skills but also on vocabulary development and listening and reading comprehension strategies” (62-65).
- “Provide scaffolded instruction that includes frequent opportunities for students to practice and review newly learned skills and concepts in various contexts over several lessons to ensure retention” (66-67).

Potential roadblocks and solutions can be found on page 68, including the problem of “one-size-fits-all” interventions.

Recommendation with “Minimal Evidence”

Recommendation 3: Provide regular, structured opportunities to develop written language skills (pages 47-58)

A key expectation of the Common Core State Standards is that all students, starting as early as first grade, will engage in analytical writing activities, during which they will learn to support their opinions, arguments, and claims with evidence from texts. In response to these Standards, all students, including English learners, will be assigned challenging writing assignments, ranging from short writing prompts extending over a day or two, to long-term writing projects extending over many days, for a variety of tasks, purposes, and audiences. Note that the Standards ask that teachers move away from primarily assigning writing projects that rely largely on students’ personal reflections and responses. Personal writing, at best, captures only what a student already knows and is thus less likely to prepare students for writing that requires analysis or interpretation—the type of writing that leads to academic success in high school and college. As they move up through the grades, English learners increasingly need to respond to informational texts through writing and, in doing so, generate well-organized essays that are progressively longer and more complex. The purpose of this recommendation is to provide concrete guidance on how to accomplish this goal for English learners. (47)

A summary of the evidence can be found on pages 47-48.

How to carry out the recommendation:

- " Provide writing assignments that are anchored in content and focused on developing academic language as well as writing skills" (48-49).
- “For all writing assignments, provide language-based supports to facilitate students’ entry into, and continued development of, writing” (49-51).
- “Use small groups or pairs to provide opportunities for students to work and talk together on varied aspects of writing” (51-52).
- “Assess students’ writing periodically to identify instructional needs and provide positive, constructive feedback in response” (52-54).

A sample lesson can be found on pages 54-57 in a section called “Putting It All Together.”

Potential roadblocks and solutions can be found on pages 57-58, including determining where to begin instruction in the face of many different types of errors.

Resources

Resources from WWC Related to this Practice Guide:

- [Resources for Educators](#) (webpage)
- [Webinar Presentation](#)

Supporting Young English Learners at Home – [Family and Caregiver Activities](#): This resource from IES REL provides simple, fun activities for families and caregivers to use with their English learner children at home, using their “cultural and linguistic assets and knowledge to strengthen language development in either the home language or English” (REL West). The website includes an [Educators’ Guide](#) as well as nine activities to send home:

- [Questions About Stories](#)
- [Questions About Informational Text](#)
- [Questions About Experiences](#)
- [Word Play](#)
- [Guess My Object](#)
- [Word Detective](#)
- [Making a Meal Together](#)
- [Interviewing a Special Person](#)
- [Writing Notebooks](#)

Reference

Baker, S., Lesaux, N., Jayanthi, M., Dimino, J., Proctor, C. P., Morris, J., Gersten, R., Haymond, K., Kieffer, M. J., Linan-Thompson, S., & Newman-Gonchar, R. (2014). *Teaching academic content and literacy to English learners in elementary and middle school* (NCEE 2014-4012). Washington, DC: National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance (NCEE), Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. Retrieved from the NCEE website: http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/publications_reviews.aspx.