

# Using Sentence Frames to Develop Academic Vocabulary for English Learners

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Teaching in today's classrooms is challenging on many levels. Students need instruction in comprehension strategies, vocabulary, and learning the English language, to name just a few. As Kinsella (2005) reminded us, many English learners (ELs) lack sufficient academic language in both their home language and English to be successful with complex academic tasks. Beck, McKeown, and Kucan (2008) have taught us to think about the words that we select for rich instruction and how we can explain their meanings in powerful ways. Furthermore, English-language development (ELD) lessons must be based on structured language practice that matches students' English-language proficiency levels (Sonoma County Office of Education, 2006). However, infusing ELD and academic vocabulary throughout the curriculum is not an easy task for teachers, particularly when the ELs in our classrooms come to us with widely different language levels and vocabulary knowledge.

In our work with teachers, we have noticed a tendency to view ELD as a separate instructional activity taught during a different time of day rather than as a critical aspect of core subject matter instruction. This view may come from current policies that require schools to provide separate rather than infused ELD instruction. We suggest that both separate and content-based ELD instruction are necessary for students to fully participate in content area instruction.

In this article, we use a fourth-grade social studies lesson called "How and Why Did People Travel to California?" (Pearson Scott Foresman, 2006, pp. 71–74) to demonstrate how teachers can include ELD instruction in the context of content area instruction. We describe how to determine the core concept from the text, match the concept to the appropriate language function, select and explain critical academic vocabulary, and use structured language practice to

provide students with opportunities to use language to think, talk, and write about concepts that they are expected to comprehend.

## What Is the Concept That Students Need to Understand?

Backward planning (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005) is the first step in successfully infusing ELD instruction into core curricula. We analyzed the lesson, including questions and tasks in sidebars and assessments, to determine the concepts that students were expected to learn based on state standards, as well as the necessary comprehension strategies. The opening question in the lesson, also serving as the title, was "How and why did people travel to California?" Also on the first page was a sidebar, "Reading: Compare and Contrast," that explained the terms *compare* and *contrast* and instructed students to notice sentences that contrast the reasons why people went to California. Although the compare/contrast structure was explicitly pointed out to students as a comprehension strategy at the beginning of the lesson, the opening question also implied elements of cause and effect (i.e., reasons why something happens). Continuing to read through the chapter, we noted questions requiring comparison, description, inference, and making judgments.

Next, we analyzed test questions at the end of the lesson. The first question required students to fill in a prelabeled Venn diagram (i.e., compare/contrast). Filling in the diagram did not require students to either talk or write about the concept that people traveled to California in different ways. Other questions asked students to recall and list reasons why people migrated to California (i.e., cause/effect),

select the route they would have taken and tell why (i.e., support a position, infer), write a persuasive statement (e.g., why families should move to California from the eastern United States), and write a letter to a friend describing an immigration experience (i.e., describe, infer). From our analysis of questions and tasks included in the lesson and the assessment, we determined that the core concept for the chapter was, Settlers migrated/immigrated to the west (California) via different routes in search of work, opportunities, or adventure. Our next step was to identify appropriate academic vocabulary from the textbook lesson.

### **What Are The Vocabulary Words That Students Need to Know to Understand the Concept?**

We read through the lesson to select the academic vocabulary that students would need to know to comprehend the core concept (see Table 1). Focusing on Tier 2 (i.e., found in written text but less common in everyday conversation) and Tier 3 (i.e., domain specific) words (Beck et al., 2008), we selected eight words and developed student-friendly explanations, including examples and nonexamples, with the help of the *Collins COBUILD Student's Dictionary Plus Grammar* (HarperCollins, 2005). Explanations are used to introduce vocabulary before students read the lesson, as well as in structured language practice activities. Next, we developed sentence frames to be used for structured language practice.

### **What Is the Language Function That Students Need to Use to Think, Talk, and Write About the Core Concept?**

Although it is apparent that description, cause/effect, persuasion, inference, and making judgments are all necessary to comprehend information in the lesson, we selected the compare/contrast structure as the overarching language function necessary to

## **PAUSE AND PONDER**

- Preparing ELs to understand concepts in content area textbooks is a challenging task. Reflect on the decisions that need to be made: What are the key concepts? Which text structures and vocabulary words do students need to understand to think, talk, and write about these concepts? What can classroom teachers do to support ELs of differing language levels during content area instruction?
- ELs need practice using academic English to become more fluent. Think about who uses academic language in the classroom: Is it the teachers or the students? Reflect on how teachers can provide ELs with practice using academic language.

comprehend the core concept. We developed two sets of sentence frames for the compare/contrast structure. The first set, using familiar vocabulary, is used prior to the lesson with students who may not be familiar with the English language necessary to express compare/contrast statements (see Table 2). Additional support for this lesson would include the use of realia (e.g., actual fruit, pictures of fruit) along with the sentence frames and word banks. The second set of frames, used for the main lesson, incorporates some of the academic language that we selected from the text (see Table 3).

To develop sentence frames, first write sentences that express the target language function (e.g., compare/contrast), then replace target vocabulary with blanks (see Tables 2 and 3), and finally, create a word bank or a list of the words that were eliminated from the original sentences. The resulting materials are sets of sentence frames with fill-in spaces that are appropriate for different language levels and a word bank. Lower level frames

are less complex than higher level frames (see Sonoma County Office of Education, 2006, for more examples).

For instance, level 2 language learners are expected to use simple sentences to express the target language function of compare/contrast (e.g., two separate sentences: Oranges are sweet. Lemons are sour). Level 3 language learners are expected to use more complex sentence structures (e.g., Oranges and lemons are both fruit, but oranges are sweet, and lemons are sour). Finally, level 4 language learners are expected to use the most complex structures (e.g., The main difference between oranges and lemons is oranges are sweet while lemons are sour). Note that students of all three language levels are expressing the compare/contrast function; the difference is the level of complexity. As students progress in their language learning, they should work with more complex language structures.

**Table 1**  
**Vocabulary From a Fourth-Grade History Lesson With Student-Friendly Explanations, Examples, and Nonexamples**

Word	Tier	Textbook definition	Sentence from the textbook	Student-friendly explanation	Student-friendly example (E) and nonexample (NE)
immigrate	3	"v. to come to another country to live"	"To immigrate means to come into another country to live. Some American settlers immigrated to Mexican California to find land they could farm."	When people immigrate, they move from one country to another country to live.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ E: The Xiong family immigrated from Thailand to the United States to live.</li> <li>■ NE: The Xiong family moved from Fresno to Stockton to live.</li> </ul>
migrate	3	"v. to move from one place to another"	"To migrate means to move from one place to another."	When people migrate they move from one place to another place because the new place has more opportunities for work or jobs.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ E: The Smith family migrated from New Jersey to California because there were more jobs in California.</li> <li>■ NE: The Smith family traveled from New Jersey to California to visit Disneyland for a week.</li> </ul>
challenge	2	None	None	A challenge is something that is very difficult to do because it takes a lot of time and effort.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ E: The rope course in gym class is a challenge to complete.</li> <li>■ NE: Walking slowly around the playground is not a challenge to complete.</li> </ul>
compare	2	None	"When you compare two or more things, you tell how they are alike."	When you compare two or more things or people, you describe or tell how they are alike.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ E: Lemons and oranges are alike because they are both fruit.</li> <li>■ NE: Lemons and oranges are different because lemons are yellow and oranges are orange.</li> </ul>
contrast	2	None	"When you contrast two or more things, you tell how they are different."	When you contrast two or more things or people, you describe or tell how they are different.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ E: Lemons and oranges are different because lemons are sour and oranges are sweet.</li> <li>■ NE: John and James are not different because they are identical twins.</li> </ul>
danger	2	None	None	A danger is the chance that someone could be injured or killed.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ E: Traffic is a danger to children riding their bikes on the side of the road.</li> <li>■ NE: Fresh, clean drinking water is not a danger to your health.</li> </ul>
land traveler	2	None	None	When people travel from one place to another place on roads or railroads, we say they are land travelers, or they have traveled by land.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ E: Because the Ramirez family traveled by car to California on Interstate 80, they traveled by land.</li> <li>■ NE: Because the Ngo family traveled to California on American Airlines, they traveled by air not by land.</li> </ul>

(continued)

**Table 1 (continued)**  
**Vocabulary From a Fourth-Grade History Lesson With Student-Friendly Explanations, Examples, and Nonexamples**

Word	Tier	Textbook definition	Sentence from the textbook	Student-friendly explanation	Student-friendly example (E) and nonexample (NE)
water traveler	2	None	None	If people travel from one place to another place by boat, we say they are water travelers, or they have traveled by water.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ E: Because the Prasad family traveled from India to the United States on a boat, they traveled by water.</li> <li>■ NE: Because the Fritz family traveled from New York to Florida on a bus, they were land travelers.</li> </ul>

Note. The lesson is "How and Why Did People Travel to California?" from *Early History to Statehood: Our California, History-Social Science for California: Teacher Resources Grade 4 Unit 3* (pp. 71–74), by Pearson Scott Foresman, 2006, New York: Author.

**Table 2**  
**Compare/Contrast Sentence Frames Using Familiar Content**

Language level	2	3	4
<b>Expected outcome</b>	<b>Simple sentence</b>	<b>Comparative sentence</b>	<b>Complex comparative sentence</b>
Sentence frame with vocabulary underlined	<u>Oranges</u> are <u>sweet</u> . <u>Lemons</u> are <u>sour</u> .	<u>Oranges</u> and <u>lemons</u> are both <u>fruit</u> , but <u>oranges</u> are <u>sweet</u> , and <u>lemons</u> are <u>sour</u> .	The main difference between <u>oranges</u> and <u>lemons</u> is <u>oranges</u> are <u>sweet</u> , while <u>lemons</u> are <u>sour</u> .
Sentence frame with vocabulary removed	_____ are _____.	_____ and _____ are both _____, but _____ are _____, and _____ are _____.	The main difference between _____ and _____ is _____ are _____, while _____ are _____.

**Table 3**  
**Compare/Contrast Sentence Frames Using Academic Language**

Language level	2	3	4
<b>Expected outcome</b>	<b>Simple sentence</b>	<b>Comparative sentence</b>	<b>Complex comparative sentence</b>
<i>Vocabulary: migrate</i> <i>Additional vocabulary: east, west, work, land, adventure</i>	People <u>migrated</u> to the <u>west</u> . People <u>migrated</u> from the <u>east</u> . People _____(ed) to the _____. People _____(ed) from the _____.	People <u>migrated</u> to the <u>west</u> from the <u>east</u> . People _____(ed) to the _____ from the _____.	Three reasons people <u>migrated</u> from the <u>east</u> to the <u>west</u> were <u>work</u> , <u>land</u> , and <u>adventure</u> . Three reasons people _____(ed) from the _____ to the _____ were _____, _____, and _____.
<i>Vocabulary: immigrate</i> <i>Additional vocabulary: other countries, Europeans, California</i>	People <u>immigrated</u> to <u>California</u> . People _____(ed) to <u>California</u> .	Some <u>Europeans</u> <u>immigrated</u> to <u>California</u> . Some _____(ed) to _____.	Some <u>Europeans</u> <u>immigrat(ed)</u> from <u>other countries</u> to <u>California</u> . Some _____(ed) from _____ to _____.



## Putting It All Together: Structured Language Practice

It is often the case that teachers, rather than students, use academic language in the classroom. However, our students won't learn academic vocabulary solely by listening to us; they need to practice using it themselves (Kinsella, 2005). Structured language practice provides opportunities for students to orally practice using academic language to express language functions (see Sonoma County Office of Education, 2006, for more details).

After developing sentence frames, group students of similar language levels together in pairs, present frames that match their language levels on sentence strips, and provide a word bank of the target vocabulary words. Support students in learning how to select vocabulary, insert it into the frame, and read the frames aloud. Teach students the following routine: Listen to me say the sentence; now you say it with me; now say it to me; finally, say it to your partner. After guiding students through the process several times, have them practice with each other. Note the primary purpose of the activity is to provide oral practice; however, it is also suitable for written practice.

## Conclusion

The research on reading instruction and meeting the needs of ELs is plentiful. One area where the two meet is content-based ELD instruction. In this article, we presented one way to use structured language practice to introduce and practice content vocabulary and language functions or structures. Knowing how to include explicit ELD in content area instruction will not only enhance students' comprehension but also build necessary language skills and vocabulary to increase students' content knowledge.

## References

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## Take ACTION!

- 1. Take stock**—Analyze assessment data, particularly for ELs, and divide students into groups based on proficiency levels used in your school. Determine proficiency with academic English for all other students by thinking about their oral vocabulary and how they speak and write in the classroom. Include English-only students in EL groups, matching language levels as closely as possible.
- 2. Look back**—Analyze a recent assignment to determine what roles academic language and vocabulary played in student scores and use this to refine

grouping. It would be helpful if the assignment included constructed responses.

- 3. Look ahead**—Select an upcoming unit and determine the concept(s) that students are expected to understand. Determine the appropriate language function for each concept (e.g., compare/contrast, problem/solution, cause/effect, description). With these in mind, select Tier 2 and Tier 3 vocabulary words and write student-friendly explanations. Write sentence frames at different levels using the selected Tier 2 and Tier 3 words.

- 4. Plan ahead**—If students are unfamiliar with the selected language functions, prepare a second set of sentence frames using familiar content and provide practice, so students have the opportunity to focus on learning the language functions. Prepare activities for teaching the Tier 2 and Tier 3 words that you selected, so students have the opportunity to become familiar with the vocabulary.
- 5. Put it all together**—Provide students with opportunities to use the appropriate frames with the new vocabulary before, during, or after reading the new unit.

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## MORE TO EXPLORE

### IRA Books

- *Dynamic Read-Aloud Strategies for English Learners: Building Language and Literacy in the Primary Grades* by Peggy Hickman and Sharolyn D. Pollard-Durodola
- *Guiding Readers Through Text: Strategy Guides for New Times* (second edition) by Karen D. Wood, Diane Lapp, James Flood, and D. Bruce Taylor
- *One Classroom, Many Learners: Best Literacy Practices for Today's Multilingual Classrooms* edited by Julie Coppola and Elizabeth V. Primas

### IRA Journal Articles

- "Developing Academic Language: Got Words?" by E. Sutton Flynt and William G. Brozo, *The Reading Teacher*, March 2008
- "English Vocabulary Instruction for English Learners" by Patrick C. Manyak and Eurydice Bouchereau Bauer, *The Reading Teacher*, October 2009

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