

Building Background Knowledge and Supporting Vocabulary Development in English Language Learners/Multilingual Language Learners: Introduction

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Overview

Specialists at the Center for English Language Learners at the American Institutes for Research (AIR) developed background activities and glossaries to support ELLs/MLLs in understanding grade-level anchor texts used in Expeditionary Learning and Public Consulting Group lessons. The anchor texts are listed at the end of this introduction. The AIR lessons include hyperlinks to the anchor texts. Attaining Core Competencies for ELLs/MLLs (ACCELL) is an approach that was used to scaffold these lessons. ACCELL was developed by AIR staff to support ELLs/MLLs in mastering course content delivered in English. This approach is described fully in the Overview of Resources. In the following section we describe ACCELL methods used to build background knowledge and develop vocabulary in ELLs/MLLs.

Building Background Knowledge in ELLs/MLLs

In the ACCELL approach, auxiliary texts, short video clips, and other types of visuals—such as pictures, photos, maps, timelines, tables, and graphic organizers—are used to build students’ background knowledge about the anchor text. For example, if ELLs/MLLs were going to read *The Diary of Anne Frank*, background information presented to them prior to reading *Anne Frank* might include the treatment of Jews in Holland during the period in which Anne and her family were hiding, as well as a visual diagram of the living space showing that the Franks occupied a hidden, cramped attic at the top of an office building.

If students are reading an excerpt of text rather than the complete text, another type of background is information about the portions of the text students have not read. In some cases background is a translation of the English excerpt into ELLs’ home languages. During reading, ACCELL also uses methods that capitalize on students’ background knowledge through questions that ask them to draw on that knowledge by answering questions related to anchor texts.

ACCELL uses these guiding principles in developing materials to build students’ background knowledge:

- Ensure that the background knowledge provided does not summarize or give away the anchor texts. An important goal of close reading is for students to learn from the text (Shanahan, 2013).
- Limit the time allocated to developing students’ background knowledge. The central focus of the lesson should be on the anchor text.
- Provide background information applicable to the specific text being studied, rather than general information related to the text.
- Consider the knowledge students bring to the classroom, which may differ considerably across students depending on their prior experiences. ELLs/MLLs may need background knowledge that students schooled in the United States may already have (e.g., U.S. civil

rights movement)—but they may also have had experiences in their home countries that U.S. students have not had (e.g., first-hand knowledge of living through a civil war).

- Ensure that background materials prepared to complement an anchor text are comprehensible by defining words in context and using grade-appropriate syntax that is not unnecessarily complex.
- Provide examples and include glossaries for key terms to help students understand the supplementary background resources. Include visual images if necessary.

Supporting Vocabulary Development in ELLs/MLLs

In the ACCELL approach, there are three main criteria for selecting vocabulary for instruction and/or glossing:

1. the word is important for understanding the text;
2. the word is important for acquiring the skills indexed by the New York State Next Generation English Language Arts Learning Standards (e.g., learning about figurative language);
3. the word appears frequently in texts.

AIR staff reviewed the anchor texts for words and phrases that were likely to be confusing to ELLs/MLLs and were critical to understanding the text. They also examined the frequency of words in the text using the AIR First 4,000 Words Text Analyzer. The analyzer is based on work by Graves, Sales, & Ruda (2012) and Hiebert (2005) that identified the roughly 4,000 most frequent word forms from the most recent large-scale frequency count of American English. When text is inserted into the AIR analyzer, words in the text that are among the 4,000 most frequent words in English texts are highlighted with colors that indicate level of frequency by quartile (e.g., words in the first quartile are highlighted in green).

The words identified through this process were put in a glossary. For each word in the glossary, there is a Spanish translation (for some texts), a student-friendly definition, and a sentence from the text in which the word appears. Teachers can use the glossaries as a resource for directly teaching the words. Students can use the glossaries to help them understand the anchor texts.

Anchor Texts¹

- GR 3 *My Librarian is a Camel
- GR 3 *Peter Pan
- GR 4 *Love that Dog
- GR 4 Birth of the Haudenosaunee
- GR 5 *Esperanza Rising
- GR 5 *Most Beautiful Roof in the World
- GR 6 *If

¹ Grades marked with an asterisk have bilingual Spanish/English glossaries.

GR 6 *Lightening Thief
GR 7 *Long Walk to Water
GR 7 *Chávez’s Commonwealth Address
GR 8 *To Kill a Mockingbird
GR 8 *Vietnam Wars
GR 9-10 Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Inaugural Address
GR 9-10 Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Day of Infamy Speech
GR 9-10 The Palace Thief
GR 9-10 Black Swan Green
GR 9-10 Raleigh Was Right
GR 9-10 Columbus’ Journal
GR 9-10 *Animals in Translation

References

Graves, M.F., Sales, G.C., & Ruda, M.A. (2012). *The first 4,000 words*. Minneapolis, MN: Seward. Available at <http://thefirst4000words.com>

Hiebert, E. H. (2005). In pursuit of an effective, efficient vocabulary program. In E. H, Hiebert & M. Kamil (Eds.) *Teaching and learning vocabulary: Bringing research into practice*. Mahweh, NJ: Erlbaum

Shanahan, T. (2013). Letting the text take center stage: How the Common Core State Standards will transform English Language Arts Instruction. *American Educator*, 37, 4-11

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