

Vocabulary Development for Multilingual Learners (MLLs)

**Primary Grades
(K-2)**

**Upper
Elementary (3-5)**

1.

Teach for Depth of Understanding

Students learn words best when instruction focuses on meaning and use, not memorization.

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Oral explanations using simple language • Acting out words and using pictures • Using words in short oral sentences | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student-friendly definitions • Examples and non-examples • Using words in complete spoken and written sentences |
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2.

Use Multiple Modalities

Vocabulary learning improves when students **hear, see, say, and interact** with words.

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pictures and gestures • Songs, chants, and movement • Choral repetition | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Visuals and anchor charts • Structured partner talk • Acting out abstract concepts when possible |
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3.

Provide Repeated and Spaced Practice

Students typically need **12-14 meaningful exposures spread over time** to learn a word well.

- Daily review of previously taught words
- Revisiting vocabulary across reading, writing, and content areas
- Using words in different contexts

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4.

Teach Words in Meaningful Groups

Students learn words best when instruction focuses on meaning and use, not memorization.

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concept groups (colors, emotions, actions) • Word families (run, running, ran) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Academic word families (analyze, analysis) • Conceptual categories (cause/effect words, compare words) • Prefixes, suffixes, and roots |
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5.

Emphasize Oral Language

Oral language development is essential for vocabulary growth, especially for MLLs.

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Repeating sentences aloud • Turn-and-talk with sentence starters • Whole-group oral responses | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sentence frames and discussion stems • Partner and small-group discussions • Oral rehearsing before writing |
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6.

Leverage Students' Home Languages

Connecting English vocabulary to students' first language strengthens understanding and accelerates learning.

- Identify cognates
- Allowing translation or explanation in the home language
- Encouraging bilingual discussion when appropriate



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Practices to Avoid

- Isolated word lists
- Dictionary-only definitions
- Weekly vocabulary tests without review
- Instruction that is only written and not oral

Positive Indicators

- Increased use of vocabulary in speaking
- More precise and detailed writing
- Improved reading comprehension
- Increased confidence and participation

Research Citations

1. Beck, I. L., McKeown, M. G., & Kucan, L. (2013). Bringing Words to Life: Robust Vocabulary Instruction. Guilford Press.
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