An extensive vocabulary—particularly, an extensive academic vocabulary—is essential to success both in and out of the classroom. To prepare students for academic rigor and ensure success in the classroom, students must be able to comprehend academic vocabulary. This is especially challenging for English language learners (ELLs). In a classroom of both ELLs and English Only (EO) speakers, ELLs are at a distinct disadvantage. Not only are they learning new content, but they are doing so while having to comprehend a language that is at least somewhat unfamiliar.

To facilitate successful learning, teachers must remain cognizant of their students’ goals and individual needs. With these instructional strategies, teachers can utilize academic vocabu-
lary in ways that make it accessible to students of variable English proficiencies.

**Word walls:** Word walls are organized collections of words prominently displayed in a classroom to highlight important vocabulary words that are relevant to current instructional content and to facilitate classroom interaction between ELLs and EOs. They also serve to remind students to utilize particular academic vocabulary words in regular communication. They are an inexpensive and easy tool to implement in the classroom, can be tailored to different levels of proficiency and subjects, and can constantly evolve.

**Sentence walls:** While many teachers use word walls, Carrier and Tatum (2006) recommend using sentence walls. Sentence walls involve posting lists of sentences using common sentence structures that students can use as shells or prompts to speak or write about a particular subject. Visually, sentence walls look like a cloze passage because they involve sentences with blank spots. Like word walls, sentence walls can be easily and inexpensively implemented, tailored to varying levels of English proficiency and subject content, and can facilitate communication in the classroom. Carrier and Tatum recommend helping students by connecting items on the sentence walls with key vocabulary words, such as the words that may be on a word wall. Sentence walls help build vocabulary by placing the words in the context of meaningful communication.

**Frontloading vocabulary:** Frontloading vocabulary before a lesson by using explicit instruction and visual illustrations is another strategy to consider (Wilhelm, 2013, p. 50). Before a lesson, a teacher determines the academic vocabulary critical for comprehension of the content. The vocabulary is then explicitly explained and supplemented with the use of visual examples. For example, the word overseas, as found on Coxhead’s (2000) Academic Word List, could be represented using a map to literally explain that overseas means traveling “over the sea” (p. 234). This method is inexpensive and easy to implement. Frontloading vocabulary is extremely helpful and can prove very effective in creating meaning for ELLs.

**Meaning inferences from context:** Teach students how to use context to infer the meaning of a word. Have students read a sentence that contains a nonsense word, such as “I took my snarfblatt for a walk and he wagged his tail the whole time.” Students would then be instructed to use context clues such as “look for a walk” and “wagged his tail” to guess the meaning of “snarfblatt.” This type of instruction could be taken a step further by using graphic organizers. The students would be given a sentence or passage with a particular word or list of words highlighted. They would then be instructed to write down as many clues to the meanings of those words as possible. For instance, they might be asked to determine the part of speech and other words that modify the vocabulary. This is very easy to implement in any classroom, and can be modified to fit any level of instruction or content.

**Grouping students:** Grouping students together for task work is especially effective in classes comprised of students of varied English proficiency. EO students can be grouped with ELLs to discuss vocabulary words and guess their meanings. This can be modified as necessary, bearing in mind factors such as level of proficiency, available resources, age, and course material. Groups are instructed to discuss context clues to make an educated guess regarding the vocabulary definitions. They could also be directed to materials with which they can do research on the subject. If groups then give presentations, their oral language skills will improve.

Academic vocabulary can be intimidating, but by using these methods, teachers can help students grow their academic vocabulary and practice their communication skills in a meaningful context. With these easy-to-implement strategies, you can make academic vocabulary comprehensible for all your students! 🌟

**References**

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