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Hallmark 4 of Advanced Literacies Instruction: Academic Vocabulary and Language

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Hallmark 4:
Study a small set of high-utility vocabulary words to build breadth and depth of knowledge

Why is this important?

Vocabulary knowledge is a key part of language development and academic success—it involves understanding the meanings of words and phrases heard or read, as well as using those words and phrases to communicate effectively in speech or writing. Vocabulary, language, and knowledge, therefore, go hand in hand—it is through words and sentences that ideas take shape and knowledge is communicated.

Academic vocabulary is used primarily in school, civic, and professional settings—the language of text, academic success, and of power and influence. Distinct from everyday vocabulary, it includes general vocabulary words that are used across many content areas (e.g., *research, exhibit, investigate*) as well as content-specific academic vocabulary words that are unique to a particular subject (e.g., *fraction* in math; *chemical* in science). Acquiring and building knowledge through reading means not just recognizing academic words, but having a deep understanding of them— reading for meaning demands an understanding of the concepts that the words represent and an ability to integrate these concepts with prior knowledge. For comprehending school texts, having a deep understanding of academic vocabulary words is essential. By focusing on the role of academic vocabulary in content-

What is Academic Language?

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area teaching and learning, educators can transform academic words from the *gatekeeper* between word reading and comprehension to the *gateway* for deep understanding.

What Does This Look Like in Linguistically Diverse Classrooms?

Using Home Language Resources

English Language Learners and Multilingual Learners bring knowledge of words (and their concepts) acquired in a home language to the classroom. The task for educators is to use instructional strategies and supports to help students establish connections between this knowledge and their developing knowledge in an additional language. In designing learning and teaching to support ELLs/MLLs, it is crucial to consider that word knowledge develops for students as they connect what they know about a word, in any language, with new information being taught.

Quick Tip: Allow students to use home language resources as they are learning an additional language. If educators are not speakers of students' home languages, they can make students the experts by having them share the connections they are establishing across languages.

Academic vocabulary instruction is especially important in linguistically diverse classrooms. Many struggling readers and English learners demonstrate shallow and narrow vocabulary knowledge; they have enough knowledge of words and concepts to engage in day-to-day conversations or get the gist of a story, but they need an even deeper understanding of many academic words and concepts for independent reading comprehension and to engage in academic dialogue, written or oral.

To promote students' academic vocabulary in a linguistically diverse classroom means new and intensive opportunities to develop their oral (skills and knowledge that go into listening and speaking) and written language skills across content areas. This can be done by taking a knowledge-building approach—one that brings the world to students in meaningful ways and supports them as they acquire both knowledge *and* language.
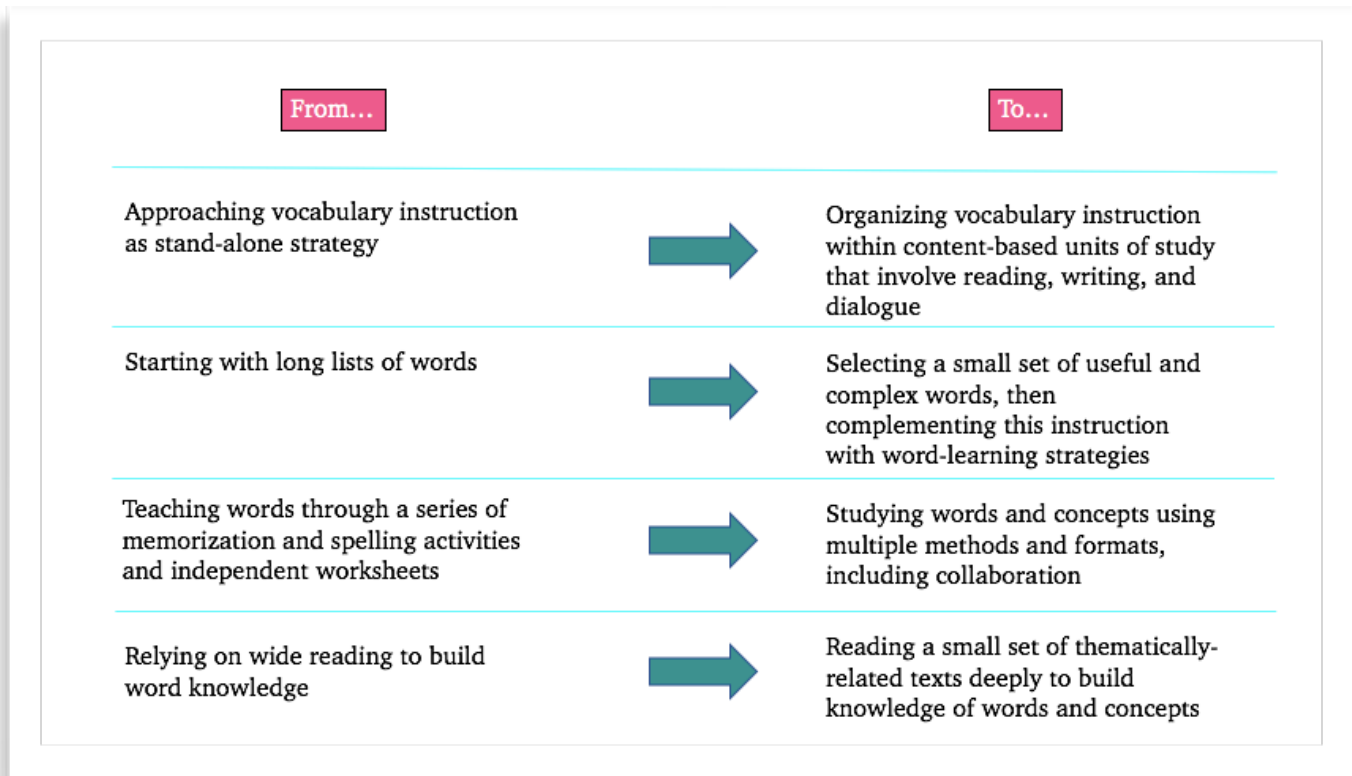
Shifting How We Think About Vocabulary Instruction

Principles of Effective Vocabulary Instruction:

Principle 1. Use **content-based, thematic units of study that include rich texts**, and organize the units so that they each focus on a multifaceted topic with potential for student engagement. If we are going to have students engage with language and build knowledge, we need a long-term plan and juicy or meaty content to do it with. For example, a life-science unit for third-graders might focus on how animals survive in their environments, a topic that is both content-based and engaging. Here, texts-of-choice might be Mike Unwin's *Why Do Tigers Have Stripes?*, Nic Bishop's *Butterflies and*

Moths, and a *Time for Kids* article about how elephants survive in their environment. These texts are relevant to the unit's big idea, on-grade-level for listening comprehension, and feature **academic vocabulary.** As a result, they act as a springboard for learning and discussion throughout the unit.

Principle 2. Choose a **small set of academic vocabulary words to teach**. As part of the unit, we

From...	To...
Approaching vocabulary instruction as stand-alone strategy	Organizing vocabulary instruction within content-based units of study that involve reading, writing, and dialogue
Starting with long lists of words	Selecting a small set of useful and complex words, then complementing this instruction with word-learning strategies
Teaching words through a series of memorization and spelling activities and independent worksheets	Studying words and concepts using multiple methods and formats, including collaboration
Relying on wide reading to build word knowledge	Reading a small set of thematically-related texts deeply to build knowledge of words and concepts

should select a small set of academic vocabulary words to teach, so that we're building language and knowledge in authentic, content-rich contexts. By focusing on fewer words and devoting more time to studying them in context, students have the opportunity to learn concepts and nuances associated with a given word and a chance to practice using words through writing, speaking, and listening activities in the classroom. The words under study should help students understanding the text in which they are featured, learn and talk about the unit's theme, and comprehend material across content areas.

Principle 3. Use **multiple modalities, formats, and methods.** Developing deep vocabulary knowledge requires a combination of explicit instruction and opportunities for more informal, authentic practice. It

Spotlight: Math and Academic Vocabulary —Dependent Variables

Mathematics instruction relies on academic language to convey knowledge and concepts just as much as other content areas, since learning math is verbally mediated through oral and written language, as well as the association of verbal labels to mathematical forms and expressions.

Quick Tip: Create opportunities for students to **Think Aloud.** These moments allow students to practice academic language and become more aware of their peers' thinking.
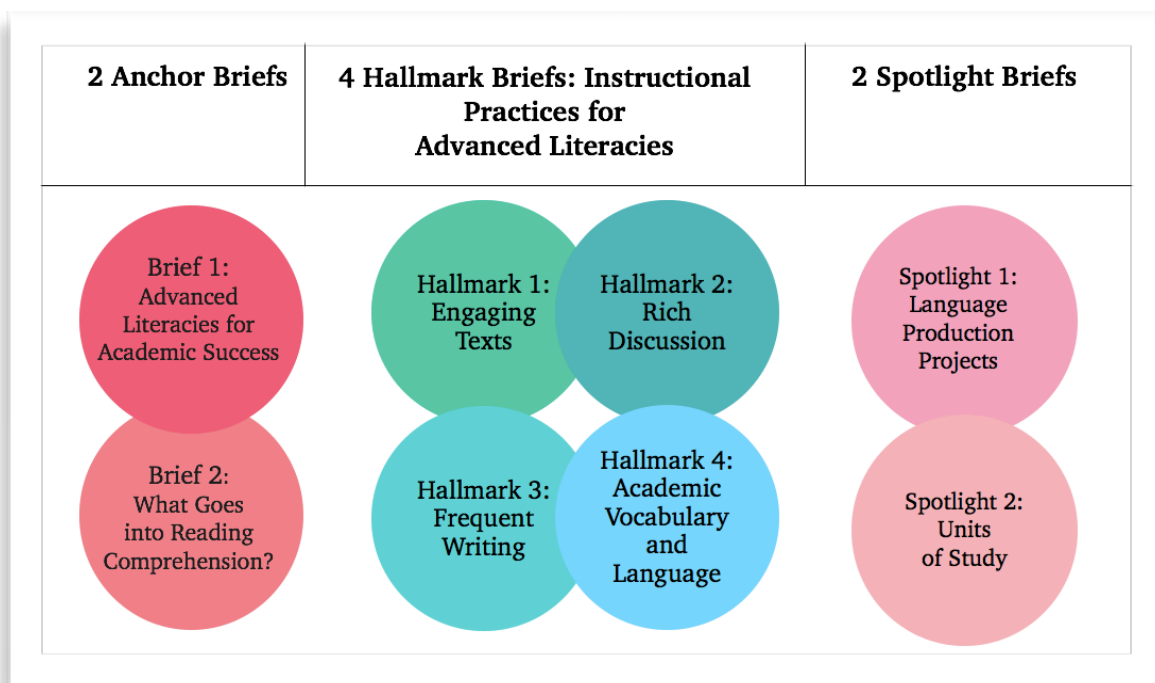
also demands varied opportunities to encounter and use the words and concepts— from familiar to novel contexts and across literacy domains (reading, writing, and speaking). For example, each unit culminates in a project that requires students to craft an extended oral or written product.

Principle 4. Unlock language by developing **word-learning strategies.** It is not possible to provide direct instruction in all of the words that students will need to know as they move up through the grades, but we can help them to become strong word learners who have the tools and skills to unlock the meaning of unfamiliar words. As students practice the cognitive steps and develop the morphological knowledge it takes to unlock language, their vocabulary and reading skills also benefit. Strategies in this area include: 1) Breaking words into meaningful parts (roots, suffixes, and prefixes), 2) using clues present in surrounding text (i.e., context clues), and 3) consciously attending to words (e.g., encouraging students to share interesting word encounters in their everyday life).
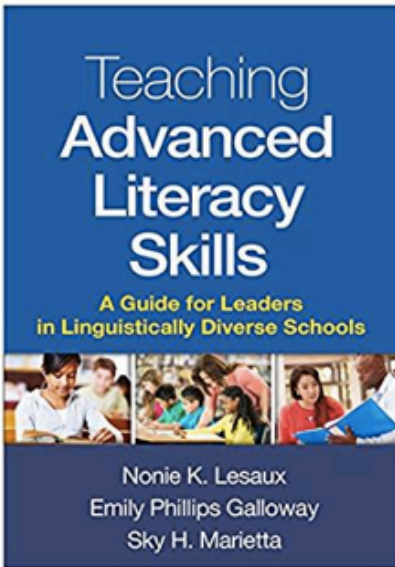
Principle 5. Organize thematic units within an **instructional cycle.** For vocabulary knowledge to deepen and accumulate, learning opportunities should be organized within a consistent instructional cycle—a lesson sequence made up of varied core learning tasks (Principle 2) that build from one to the next, enabling the study of content-based themes (Principle 1), academic words (Principle 3) and word-learning strategies (Principle 4).

A Map of this Brief Series

This is Hallmark 4 in a series of briefs designed to aid New York State educators in implementing the revised standards, particularly in settings serving linguistically diverse learners. This series includes:

2 Anchor Briefs	4 Hallmark Briefs: Instructional Practices for Advanced Literacies	2 Spotlight Briefs
Brief 1: Advanced Literacies for Academic Success	Hallmark 1: Engaging Texts / Hallmark 2: Rich Discussion	Spotlight 1: Language Production Projects
Brief 2: What Goes into Reading Comprehension?	Hallmark 3: Frequent Writing / Hallmark 4: Academic Vocabulary and Language	Spotlight 2: Units of Study

For more on this, see...

Teaching Advanced Literacy Skills
A Guide for Leaders in Linguistically Diverse Schools

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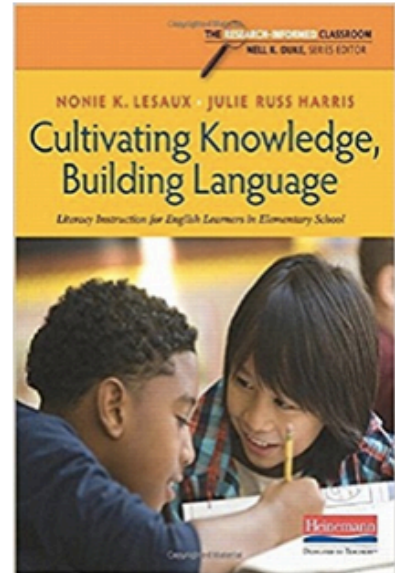Sky H. Marietta

Language Diversity & Literacy Development
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The **Lead for Literacy** initiative is a series of one-page memos that revisits assumptions that guide current policies and practices, outlines common pitfalls, and presents feasible solutions to pressing issues.

Access these briefs at https://langlit.gse.harvard.edu/lead-for-literacy

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