

# ACCESS: Building Literacy Through Learning™

## R e s e a r c h B a s e

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### Introduction

The number of English language learners (ELLs) in mainstream classrooms continues to increase throughout the United States. These learners must be able to comprehend content-area instruction in a language that they have not yet fully developed in order to catch up with their mainstream peers (Short, 1991). Because of the changing demographics of American classrooms, teachers need to modify and adapt their instruction so that language learners can receive both language and content instruction in a manner that is comprehensible and meaningful to them. Well-made, professionally-developed materials that take into account ELLs' specific needs in an integrated manner are essential to construction of the linguistic and content-area knowledge demanded in a high-standards curriculum.

By integrating language and content instruction, ELLs are provided the opportunity to participate in the curriculum as they are in the process of mastering the English language. This instruction must necessarily be enhanced and facilitated by materials that take both linguistic and content-area needs into account. The materials developed in the ACCESS series are an example of how high standards and high-quality content-area text can be modified and adapted to meet the specific needs of ELLs.

### Visual scaffolds help to increase comprehension of content for ELLs.

When learning both a language and content area information at the same time, ELLs need constant support and assistance. This support can come in the form of scaffolded instruction. Scaffolding can be provided through activities that build on one another in a meaningful and consistent way. When students encounter a format that is predictable and prevalent in their materials, this can enhance their ability to understand the content. The repetition of certain formats gives learners an idea of what to expect and thereby an opportunity to prepare themselves to receive instruction (Peregoy & Boyle, 1990).

Graphic organizers provide a visual indication to students of how to organize the content that they are in the process of learning. Graphic organizers are also beneficial in activating schema and facilitating retention of text-based information (Crandall, 1992). The activities in the ACCESS program provide a built-in scaffold for learners in the form of graphic organizers and visual presentation of information. Story mapping and cognitive mapping are included to help students visualize the basic structure of a

text and, therefore, understand the text (Boyle & Buckley, 1983). Graphs and charts are also provided to convey the main ideas of a reading to students. This allows for the full participation of ELLs in activities that are present throughout the materials.

The ACCESS materials include a large number of illustrations and diagrams that provide visual models for what is being discussed in the text. Key concepts are frequently reinforced with a visual scaffold such as a line graph, bar graph, timeline, or chart. The use of other graphic organizers further enhances the comprehensibility of the materials. The use of bold type emphasizing key words, headings that divide the reading sections, semantic webs, Venn diagrams, and captions all work together as visual scaffolds. The newcomer materials are particularly rich in visual scaffolds. In this manner, the materials accommodate learners who have a lower level of language skills with increased support for comprehension.

### **Cooperative learning and small group activities promote learning through active interaction.**

Research in the area of second-language acquisition has led to the understanding among educators that a low-anxiety environment is an optimal environment for learning language (Krashen, 1981; Dulay, Burt, & Krashen, 1982). According to Krashen (1981) a language is best acquired when learners are in a low-affective filter environment in which comprehensible input is introduced. Teachers can encourage this type of relaxed environment by promoting active interaction among students that encourages risk taking and takes the focus off of the specific language being practiced and onto the completion of a learning task.

When students are encouraged to interact and work collaboratively in small groups, the likelihood of a low-anxiety learning environment is enhanced. When students work with peers, multiple opportunities for interaction occur that can help build peer relationships. In addition, small group work that revolves around specified tasks leads to peer teaching and tutoring opportunities as students work together to negotiate both linguistic and content-area information (Crandall, 1994).

Cooperative learning activities provide students with numerous opportunities for language and skills development. Both social and academic language use are encouraged and increased with small group interaction (Cohen, 1986; Kagan, 1986). Optimal small-group activities for ELLs involve the cooperation of all group members. This cooperation includes face-to-face interaction, positive interdependence, and the use of specific language to accomplish a task. Activities that incorporate these characteristics give learners increased opportunities to both practice language and clarify understanding of content-area topics.

Cooperative learning activities can be found throughout the ACCESS materials. Students are asked to work collaboratively to solve problems, formulate opinions, and interpret text. These student-centered and student-led activities empower learners to assume an active role in the learning process and thereby increases their responsibility for their own learning (Short, 1991). Furthermore, the small-group activities scattered throughout the lessons in each content area increase the likelihood that students will be engaged and motivated by the content. These activities help to individualize instruction within a group context while concurrently making the learning more engaging. Partnered activities in the ACCESS materials can be found in the newcomer materials and each of the subject areas. Students are given the opportunity through task-based cooperative activities to share insights, test hypotheses, think critically, and jointly construct knowledge in an interactive manner (Crandall, 1994).

### **Social and academic language development helps promote student success.**

There is a marked difference between the language that individuals use to socialize and the language that is used in schools and places of employment. Although language learners may be able to converse in their developing language with ease, they often continue to have severe difficulties both producing and comprehending academic language. Cummins (1981) discusses the idea that individuals develop two types of language proficiency, basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) and cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP). BICS is the social language that is used on an everyday basis both within and outside of school, while CALP is the more formal language that is used primarily in schools and professional work environments. Research indicates that social language can be expected to be acquired in about two years, whereas academic language can take students five to seven years to acquire (Collier, 1987).

The integration of cooperative-learning activities that incorporate both social and academic language greatly increases students' opportunities to interact in the target language using important content-area information. The specific vocabulary, grammar, and key content knowledge that is integral to understanding subject matter needs to be approached, practiced, and reinforced through a variety of learning activities that work together to build a context for understanding content.

The school as an institution demands that both formal and informal language be used. The informal language of the playground, hallway, cafeteria, and sometimes classroom is characterized by shorter sentences, simple sentences, incomplete sentences, slang, contractions, frequent interruptions, and a heavy reliance on context. The formal language of the classroom, textbook, principal's office, and

educational videos is characterized by more complex and lengthy sentences, the use of technical vocabulary, infrequent interruptions, and the lack of context clues.

Teachers not specifically trained in ESL instruction are often confused about the level of mastery of the English language that ELL students have. This is because students often acquire a native-like accent and become proficient in informal language quickly. While they may be very successful in social activities and while performing less academic activities in the classroom, their limited academic language skills can compromise their ability to comprehend content (Cummins, 1989). The potential difficulties of academic language and how these difficulties can affect student comprehension and academic performance are areas that teachers of language minority students need to recognize and address.

The first step in this process is to recognize what academic language is and how it differs from non-academic language. The ACCESS materials address the academic language component of content-area lessons by implementing strategies that teach this language at the same time content material is being taught. Without these types of strategies—including advanced organizers, semantic webbing, visual aids, journals, and others resources—many ELL students would quickly fall behind their native speaking peers. It is important to remember that ELL students are continually learning both language and content simultaneously and thus need to be supported in their efforts in both areas.

### **Academic vocabulary building within context increases retention and motivation.**

Academic language is characterized by specialized vocabulary and grammar. The introduction of new vocabulary in context is fundamental to providing students with the necessary tools to comprehend academic vocabulary (Chamot & O'Malley, 1994). Meaning should be illustrated whenever possible in the form of pictures or diagrams that accompany text (Peregoy & Boyle, 2005). The teaching of semantically similar words concurrently allows learners to develop a cognitive “net” in which they can capture new vocabulary and store it for later use (Peregoy & Boyle, 2005). Good teaching materials take all of these vocabulary-building measures into account.

The ACCESS materials are written clearly and simply. The brief, focused text allows students the chance to negotiate manageable pieces of information rather than attempting to digest large quantities of dense text without sufficient support. The large number of pictures and graphics that are incorporated throughout the materials are closely related to the written text and therefore serve as important scaffolds for the learner. Furthermore, the text is clearly arranged with headings, subdivisions, and bold print that emphasize the key vocabulary that is being learned.

## **ELLs can meet the same high academic standards as mainstream students with adequately supported instruction.**

Standards-based instruction helps to develop consistency and relevancy in teaching and materials development. Content standards delineate what students should know and be able to accomplish at a certain level of learning. When materials are created with standards-based instruction in mind, those materials provide teachers with the necessary content objectives to ensure that students are prepared to meet appropriate grade-level expectations. Performance indicators are built into standards-based instruction as a vehicle to allow students to demonstrate that they are able to meet the standards in question (Laternau, 2003). Similarly, language objectives can best be organized and accomplished through a standards-based approach.

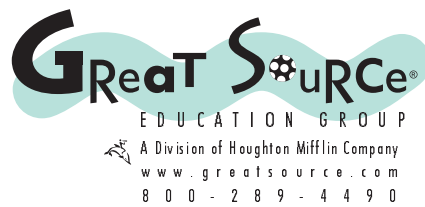
In order to ensure that ELLs are able to successfully participate in standards-based instruction, the Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) organization has created standards for ESL instruction (TESOL, 1997). These standards correlate with curricular standards being implemented nationwide and allow for flexibility and functionality in content-based language learning. The TESOL standards are derived from three primary goals: to use English to communicate in social settings, to use English to achieve academically in all content areas, and to use English in socially and culturally appropriate ways (Short, 2000).

The ACCESS materials have been developed to meet TESOL, as well as state content and ESL standards. Cooperative learning and small-group activities ensure that the first goal of using English in social settings is achieved through using the materials. Furthermore, students are given multiple opportunities throughout the lessons to use English to construct knowledge in specific subject areas in order to achieve academically as stated by the second goal. Finally, the variety of activities present throughout the different lessons in each content area assures that English will be used for a multitude of purposes and in different socially and culturally meaningful ways.

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