

# Mastering Language and Literacy through High-interest Content



**Kevin P. Colleary, EdD**

Adjunct Professor Graduate School of Education  
Fordham University, New York

The multilingual/English learners (EL) in our classrooms are first and foremost ... kids. Like all our students, they are young people who have fascinating, loving, and sometimes complicated families and lives. However, our EL students have a set of unique, additional challenges around language acquisition. They must learn about the world in a language that isn't their mother tongue. We expect them to learn the same content and meet the same standards (math, science, social studies, etc.) as every other student, but to do it in a language not their own—and ALSO to learn English, that new language. In other words, our EL students have two jobs instead of just one. Anyone who has simultaneously worked two jobs (as, sadly, many teachers have) knows the challenges and difficulties it entails. So how do we support our EL students as they navigate this terrain? What does the research tell us about the best ways to help them succeed?

The research and practice of how we teach reading in the United States is, once again, undergoing a major shift. Many US states and hundreds of districts are implementing processes in reading instruction based on the “science of reading.” (Schwartz, 2022).

While a complete discussion about the science of reading lies outside the scope of this paper, one key shift happening in our classrooms as a part of these changes is a greater focus on content as a tool to help students succeed in English language arts (ELA)/reading and writing. (Boryga, 2022).

A growing number of scholars and educators are arguing that the use of thoughtful, planned, sequenced content inclusion and the use of texts that “stretch” our students—rather than an exclusive reliance on leveled or “just-right” books that do not fit into any focused content plan or may only randomly touch on content topics—is a more successful way to build both vocabulary and comprehension capacity, keep our students excited about learning, and support higher achievement results on standardized tests (Halverson, et al., 2012; Lupo, et al., 2019; Wexler, 2019; Shanahan, 2020).

*“One key shift happening in our classrooms ... is a greater focus on content as a tool to help students succeed in English language arts, reading and writing”*

Three areas where research has shown that content inclusion and the use of a combined content and language instructional plan are most helpful are: 1) using content to build literacy success; 2) vocabulary development; and 3) academic discourse and oral language

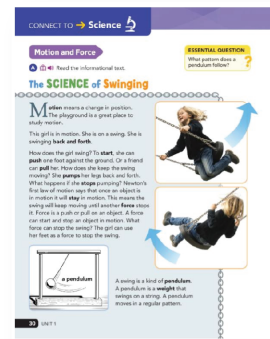
## 1) Content Instruction and Literacy Success

Educators and content scholars have been warning about the lack of time and effort given to content area instruction and the subsequent narrowing of the school curriculum for many years (Hirsch, 1987; Jerald, 2006; Pace, 2012; Fitchett, et al., 2014; Colleary, 2022). In recent years, reading scholars and researchers have also joined the chorus of those who argue that solid content instruction in the elementary grades should not be ignored. Some suggest that it can actually help increase reading proficiency (Pondiscio, 2014; Shanahan, 2020; Hwang et al, 2022). Research has shown that students who are exposed to thoughtful, progressive, grade-level appropriate content instruction show greater gains in vocabulary, comprehension, and writing. (Snow, 2005). Some have argued that student achievement gains have also been seen on standardized tests in reading when, for example, more social studies content is taught. (Tyner & Kabourek, 2020). Our multilingual/English learners—those who are, remember, working two jobs—can be especially positively impacted. (August & Shanahan, 2006; Proctor, et al, 2011; Baker, et al., 2014).

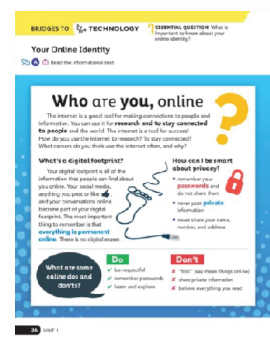
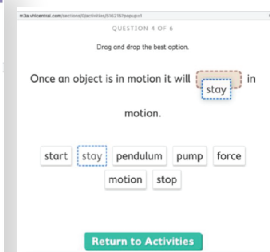
In Vista’s **Connect** and **Bridges** programs, we see a consistent pattern of units built on engaging and motivating science and social studies content topics.

These science and social studies topics, such as Our Country, The Animal World, Making the World a Better Place, and Our Earth, grow and develop across grade spans for stronger progressive instruction. Each unit has a “Big Idea” question to focus learning, and all units have a consistent content structure and routines to help students organize and retain information. We see clear student goals along with repeated opportunities for students to build background and deepen content knowledge.

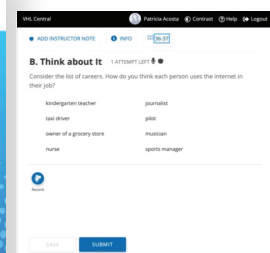
Students and teachers are provided strategies, which are used to learn content and apply the content to their ELA practice, thus marrying the goals of ELA success and content instruction. Authentic texts and content-driven lessons are offered through print and digital resources to build capacity and address the proficiency needs of each student.



Connect 3, Unit 1



Bridges B, Unit 1



## 2) Vocabulary Development

Research clearly shows the positive impact of strong vocabulary development on the academic success of multilingual/English learners (Gerston, 1996; Carlo, et al, 2004; August, et al, 2005; Echevarria & Goldenberg, 2017).

Helping students build a strong toolbox of vocabulary words and phrases in English can affect all elements of a student's life and helps build the necessary foundation for a lifelong fluency in English. Explicit teaching of vocabulary words and academic vocabulary is critical to help students learn. (Proctor et al, 2011). Students must also have multiple exposures to new vocabulary words. Basic skills around context clues and morphology (the study of word parts) are also critically important ways to help all students, but most especially English learners, increase their vocabulary knowledge (Echevarria & Goldenberg 2017).

In Vista's **Get Ready!** program, built especially for newcomers, vocabulary development is woven throughout each grade level. Multiple opportunities exist for students to experience, practice, and review new words, as well as utilize them in the context of their content learning. Throughout the program, students develop essential language and literacy skills as well as academic concepts and vocabulary. Using a variety of multimedia platforms, program elements such as dramatic presentational videos and animated tutorials introduce students to life in a US school, bring unit vocabulary and grammar to life, and allow for self-checks and personalized learning.

Connect 3, Unit 1

Bridges B, Unit 2

Get Ready! 6-8, Unit 3

### 3) Academic Discourse and Oral Language

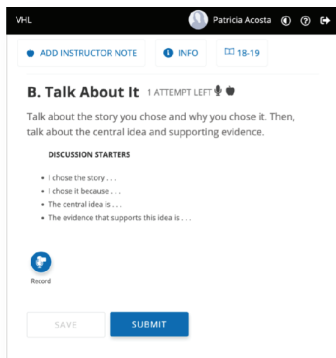
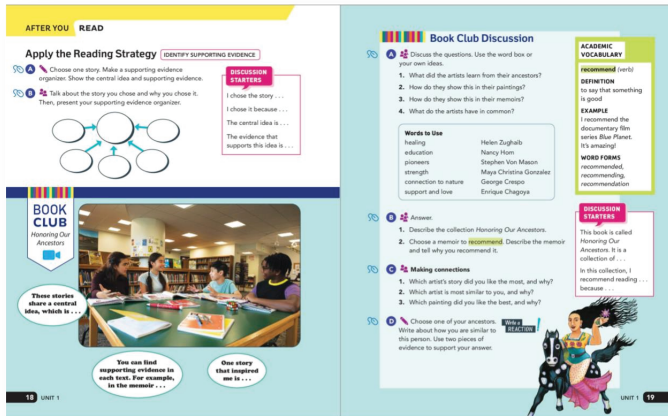
A third critical element in students' educational success can be found with the use of academic language and its role in improving oral language capacity. While sight word and social vocabulary are important, we know that the use of academic language can have especially positive impacts on all elements of a student's learning (Sherris, 2008; Zweirs & Crawford, 2011). Building rich academic language should be one of the cornerstones of every student's school experience. Providing multilingual/English learners the opportunity to also build oral language and have conversations around the new academic words and phrases they learn can be a key to their success. Using a range of strategies and media can also be helpful.

As Echevarria and Goldenberg state, "We begin with building academic vocabulary and then broaden to academic language more generally. As students strengthen vocabulary and other oral language skills, their reading and writing skills are more likely to improve." (2017, p. 2). Weaving together the development of academic vocabulary and oral language skills can be a powerful tool to help all students, but most especially those learning English at the same time as content. In Vista's Bridges and Connect programs, the use of academic vocabulary and oral language development practice is seamless and integrated.

Multilingual/English learners are provided critically important multiple practice opportunities while deepening their understanding of the academic content. Listening strategies allow teachers to demonstrate active listening—a very important piece of oral language practice—while monitoring student understanding. Students can then share their understanding of the listening strategy by sharing their thoughts via audio and video. Writing, literature-based discussions, and other practice opportunities are also offered to help build student capacity with every unit. Language frames are provided to give students the scaffolded support they need to succeed in this challenging but necessary type of academic dialogue.

Connect 3





Bridges B, Unit 1

**Dr. Kevin Colleary** is an adjunct professor at Fordham University's Graduate School of Education in New York. His research and publications focus on social studies education, knowledge curricula, content area reading, critical thinking, digital literacy, second-language learners, diversity issues, best practices in teaching and learning, and helping teachers understand how to develop content-driven literacy instruction at all grades. Dr. Colleary's most recent publication is *Ensuring a Better Future: Why Social Studies Matters*, published by Gibbs-Smith Education. He has authored numerous chapters in a wide variety of educational texts and has been published in a variety of professional journals. Dr. Colleary received his BA in history from Siena College, Albany NY. He also earned both his master's and doctorate in education from Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.

Helping our multilingual/English learners succeed is one of the many important goals teachers face each day. Every teacher wants their students to soar, and by utilizing quality materials such as those provided by Vista, and by focusing on key elements supported by research, every teacher can achieve that goal. When thinking about our multilingual/English learners and the second job or "double duty" they are tasked with every day, let's try to remember the importance of content and literacy instruction, building strong vocabulary, and the use of academic language and oral language skills as ways that we can make a difference in every student's life and educational experience.

## REFERENCES

- August, D., Carlo, M., Dressler, C., Snow, C.E. (2005 February). The critical role of vocabulary development for English language learners. *Learning Disabilities Research and Practice*. 20(1) 50–57. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5826.2005.00120.x>
- August, D., & Shanahan, T. (Eds.). (2006). *Developing literacy in second-language learners: Report of the national literacy panel on language-minority children and youth*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Baker, S., Lesaux, N., Jayanthi, M., Dimino, J., Proctor, C.P., Morris, J., & Newman-Gonchar, R. (2014). *Teaching academic content and literacy to English learners in elementary and middle school*. National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance (NCEE), Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education.
- Borgya, A. (2022, July 28). *Rethinking how we teach reading in elementary school*. Edutopia. <https://www.edutopia.org/article/rethinking-how-we-teach-reading-elementary-school>
- Carlo, M.S., August, D., McLaughlin, B., Snow, C. E., Dressler, C., Lippman, D. N., Lively, T.J., & White, C.E. (2004). Closing the gap: Addressing the vocabulary needs of English-language learners in bilingual and mainstream classrooms. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 39(2), 188–215. <http://doi.org/10.1598/RRQ.39.2.3>
- Colleary, K. (2022). *Ensuring the future: Why social studies matters*. Gibbs-Smith Education.
- Echevarria, J., & Goldenberg, C. (2017). *Second-language learners' vocabulary and oral language development*. Literacy Leadership Brief, International Literacy Association.
- Fitchett, P., Heafner, T., & Van Fossen, P. (2014, December). An analysis of time prioritization for social studies in elementary school classrooms. *Journal of Curriculum and Instruction (JoCI)* 8(2), 7–35.
- Gersten, R. (1996). The double demands of teaching English language learners. *Educational Leadership*, 53(5), 18–22.
- Halvorsen, A. L., Duke, N. K., Brugar, K. A., Block, M. K., Strachan, S. S., Berka, M. B., & Brown, J. M. (2012, May). Narrowing the achievement gap in second-grade social studies and content area literacy: The promise of a project-based approach. *Theory & Research in Social Education*, 40(3), 198–229. <http://doi.org/10.1080/00933104.2012.705954>
- Hirsch, E.D. (1987). *Cultural literacy: What every American needs to know*. Houghton Mifflin.

- Hwang, H., Cabell, S. Q., & Joyner, R. E. (2022). Effects of integrated literacy and content-area instruction on vocabulary and comprehension in the elementary years: A meta-analysis. *Scientific Studies of Reading*, 26(3), 223–249. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10888438.2021.1954005>
- Jerald, C. D., (2006, August). *The hidden costs of curriculum narrowing* [Brief]. The Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement.
- Lupo, S., Tortorelli, L., Invernizzi, M., Ryoo, J. H., & Strong, J. Z. (2019, March). An exploration of text difficulty and knowledge support on adolescents' comprehension. *Reading Research Quarterly*. 54(4), 457–479.
- Pace, J. (2012). Teaching literacy through social studies under No Child Left Behind. *Journal of Social Studies Research*, 36(4), 329–358.
- Pondiscio, R. (2014, Winter). Literacy is knowledge: Why teaching reading means teaching content. *City Journal*. <https://www.city-journal.org/html/literacy-knowledge-13623.html>
- Proctor, C. P., Dalton, B., Uccelli, P., Biancarosa, G., Mo, E., Snow, C., & Neugebauer, S. (2011). Improving comprehension online: Effects of deep vocabulary instruction with bilingual and monolingual fifth graders. *Reading and Writing*. 24(5), 517–544. doi:10.1007/s11145-009-9218-2.
- Schwartz, S. (2022 July 20). Which states have passed 'science of reading' laws? What's in them? *Education Week*. <https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/which-states-have-passed-science-of-reading-laws-whats-in-them/2022/07>
- Shanahan, T. (2020, Summer). Limiting children to books they can already read: Why it reduces their opportunity to learn. *American Educator*. 44(22). <https://www.aft.org/ae/sumer2020/shanahan>
- Sherris, A. (2008, September). *Integrated content and language instruction*. Center for Applied Linguistics. <https://www.cal.org/publications/integrated-content-and-language-instruction/>.
- Snow, M. A. (2005). A model of academic literacy for integrated language and content instruction. In E. Hinkel (Ed.), *Handbook of research in second language learning*. (pp. 693–712). Erlbaum.
- Tyner, A., & Kabourek, S. (2020, September 24). *Social studies instruction and reading comprehension: Evidence from the early childhood longitudinal study* [report]. The Fordham Institute. <https://fordhaminstitute.org/national/resources/social-studies-instruction-and-reading-comprehension>
- Wexler, N. (2019). *The knowledge gap: The hidden cause of America's broken education system—and how to fix it*. Penguin Random House.
- Zwiers, J., & Crawford, M. (2011). *Academic conversations: Classroom talk that fosters critical thinking and content understandings*. Stenhouse Publishers.