The importance of vocabulary knowledge for reading and school success is widely recognized (e.g., August & Shanahan, 2006; National Early Literacy Panel, 2008; National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000). In particular, recent research highlights the central role of academic vocabulary and language in enabling students to access the content of their disciplinary texts (e.g., Nagy & Townsend, 2012). It also reveals that English learners (ELs) and children from lower socioeconomic-status backgrounds often lack such necessary vocabulary to succeed in school (August, Carlo, Dressler, & Snow, 2005; Graves, August, & Mancilla-Martinez, 2013; Hart & Risley, 1995).

Given the established importance of vocabulary knowledge, it’s not surprising that vocabulary development is a key focus of the Common Core State Standards (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010) and other state standards. Common Core requires that primary-grade students be able to ask and answer questions about vocabulary to figure out the meanings of unknown words; use linking words, also known as connectives (Crosson & Lesaux, 2013), such as because, also, and for example; use context clues; accurately apply new word meanings; and understand nuances or shades of meaning. And, starting in grade 3, students need to be able to determine the meanings of academic vocabulary and phrases in grade-relevant texts (ELA-Literacy. RI.3.4). The work of preparing students to meet this last challenge must start early. This is evident in the new What Works Clearinghouse Educator’s Practice Guide Foundational Skills to Support Reading for Understanding in Kindergarten Through Third Grade (Foorman et al., 2016), which calls for teaching academic vocabulary in kindergarten, and in other published research, which includes teaching it in preschool (e.g., Barnes, Grifenhagen, & Dickinson, 2016).

Scholars have advocated various approaches for advancing vocabulary knowledge, including analysis skills, text interactions, and oral language. They have also encouraged early interventions (Marulis & Neuman, 2010). Snow and Uccelli (2009) argued that given the difficulty of academic language, educators of all students need to consider how to effectively promote its development and to uncover the contexts and experiences that best support academic vocabulary development. Others have pointed out the lack of vocabulary instruction in the primary grades (Wright & Neuman, 2014), except perhaps during reading or vocabulary lessons, and called for research to investigate the potential of non-read-aloud times (spelling, phonics, and writing) for advancing students’ vocabulary knowledge (Carlisle, Kelcey, Berebitsky, 2013; Silverman & Crandell, 2010).

Learning sophisticated vocabulary is not easy, but the sooner students do so, the more ready access they will have to it later on (Beck & McKeown, 2007). They need to learn new words but also deepen their understandings of familiar words (Hadley, Dickinson, Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, & Nesbitt, 2016). Besides explicit teaching, vocabulary instruction for young learners should include rich discussions of word meanings, read-alouds, and opportunities for meaningful talk across the day (Wright & Neuman, 2013). The discussions can provide a scaffold for
students’ thinking (Malloy & Gambrell, 2011) and inform teachers of what students know and don’t know. These conversations should be planned and purposeful (Ganske & Jocius, 2013; Wasik & Iannone-Campbell, 2012).

Word study instruction is typically carried out in homogenous small groups, a structure that is an essential component of literacy instruction in the primary grades (Williams, Phillips-Birdsong, Hufnagel, Hungler, & Lundstrom, 2009). Traditionally, instruction has focused on developing students’ understandings of sound, pattern, and meaning relationships through categorization activities. However, word study affords an opportunity to advance not only students’ orthographic knowledge but also their vocabulary knowledge. Both general academic vocabulary (e.g., analyze, evidence, link, survey) and knowledge of the meanings and nuances of everyday words (e.g., pond, ring, thorn, trunk) can be advanced through engaging discussions and focused inquiry as students learn the graphophonic aspects of words. Despite its potential, word study has remained a relatively untapped source for developing these understandings.

Rather than meaningful discussion, an Inquire, Response, Evaluate (IRE) model tends to be the “default pattern” (Cazden, 1988, p. 53) for the interactions. This generally results in the following: The teacher asks a question, the student responds, and the teacher evaluates the response with a comment such as “Good job!” Although IRE can serve meaningful purposes, overreliance on the model often turns what could be rich discussions with accountable talk (Michaels, O’Connor, & Resnick, 2008) into small interrogations. Sessions that are overly brief (7–10 minutes) further erode the possibilities, as does limited attention to engaging the learners in meaningful and motivating thinking to expand their vocabularies, develop their orthographic understandings, and enable them to envision connections to reading and writing (Ganske & Jocius, 2013)—connections that some students need explicit instruction to build (Williams & Phillips-Birdsong, 2006).

To help teachers better mine the potential of small-group word introductions, I developed an instructional framework for the lessons: SAIL, an acronym for the four lesson components, which are Survey, Analyze, Interpret, and Link. In the remainder of this article, I describe the framework and its use with first-grade letter-name spellers, namely, students who have recently started to read and who, as writers, typically represent initial and final sounds in words with some accuracy and include a vowel in the middle (bop for bump, sep for ship, and mak for make). I first provide a brief overview of SAIL and then present transcribed vignettes to show SAIL in action in a classroom. I should note that although this article focuses on early grades, the SAIL framework can be applied across the elementary grades.

The students and teacher highlighted in the vignettes were part of an exploratory study in which several kindergarten and first-grade teachers implemented SAIL with their letter-name spellers for a six-week period toward the end of the first semester. There were nine students and two groups (six white students, one African American student, and two Hispanic ELs) in the class featured here. Half of the school population received free or reduced-price lunch. All names are pseudonyms.

**SAIL Overview**

As with typical small-group word study instruction, SAIL groups are differentiated according to students’ performance on an informal, dictated word inventory. Inventory results reveal students’ stages of spelling development and their grasp of specific orthographic features such as blends and digraphs or short vowels at the letter-name stage. This information enables teachers to target instruction for each small group of students at their zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978), namely, where they are beginning to accurately represent particular features in words but do so inconsistently. It is here that learning can be optimized.
SAIL groups meet with the teacher for 20 minutes per week. Teachers also provide follow-up practice opportunities across the rest of the week or cycle. Generally, the latter tasks are completed as independent work or at centers or stations and may be incorporated into a Daily 5 routine (Boushey & Moser, 2014). Practice is brief: 10–15 minutes. Students may complete notebook activities, in which they illustrate word meanings and label words, write some of the words in sentences, and recategorize the pictures or words according to feature. They may also play folder games or work with manipulatives to reinforce knowledge of the features, or search through texts for examples of words with the same features.

**Teaching and Reinforcing Academic Vocabulary**

Prior to the small-group SAIL meetings, teachers introduce or review one or two general academic vocabulary words with the whole class. Words chosen have high utility in the classroom to ensure plenty of opportunities for reinforcement and use during word study conversations and instruction and at other times of the day, including during the Morning Message (see Figure 1). Four academic vocabulary words are represented in the SAIL acronym: survey, analyze, interpret, and link. These provide good starting points. Other possibilities that primary- and intermediate-grade elementary teachers have identified from Coxhead’s (2000) academic word list are shown in Table 1. Although two words were introduced each week during the study, teachers might opt to introduce just one word a week, or even one every two weeks, depending on their students. The key is utility. It’s important that there be lots of opportunities across the day for teachers and students to use the words. It’s also important that students have a working understanding of the words before they are integrated into the talk of a SAIL lesson so that students aren’t grappling with too much information at once.

Gestures, coupled with having the students say the words, as well as illustrating word meanings can help ELs and other students understand and

---

**Table 1**

A Selection of Academic Vocabulary Chosen by Elementary Teachers From Coxhead’s Academic Word List

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>accurate</th>
<th>demonstrate</th>
<th>locate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>adjust</td>
<td>detect</td>
<td>method</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>affect</td>
<td>different</td>
<td>modify</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>alter</td>
<td>error</td>
<td>obvious</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>analyze</td>
<td>evidence</td>
<td>overlap</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>appropriate</td>
<td>explicit</td>
<td>previous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>brief</td>
<td>feature</td>
<td>process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>category</td>
<td>final</td>
<td>refine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>challenge</td>
<td>focus</td>
<td>remove</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>clarify</td>
<td>identify</td>
<td>respond</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>comment</td>
<td>illustrate</td>
<td>revise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>consider</td>
<td>indicate</td>
<td>select</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>consult</td>
<td>infer</td>
<td>similar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>context</td>
<td>initial</td>
<td>specific</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>contrast</td>
<td>insight</td>
<td>strategy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>convince</td>
<td>justify</td>
<td>survey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>definite</td>
<td>label</td>
<td>team</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>definition</td>
<td>link</td>
<td>transfer</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

recall the words (Silverman & Crandell, 2010; Tellier, 2008; see Figures 2 and 3). Drawing on what children know to develop their understanding of a new word is important. For example, in discussing the word accurate, a teacher might state that it means “exactly right” and then pose a question such as, “If a weather person says it’s going to be about 70 degrees today and it turns out to be 95, was the weather person accurate?” Or, “If you put down the answer of 5 for 2 + 2, would your answer be accurate?”

**Survey**

During this portion of SAIL, teachers introduce the cycle’s words and/or pictures and ensure that students can identify them. Part of this process includes engaging the learners in discussing the meanings of two or more of the sort words. Words are chosen because (a) they are unfamiliar, or children have misconceptions about them; (b) they have multiple meanings; or (c) they afford opportunities to develop nuances of meaning.

Next, or as part of the word identification process, teachers guide students to categorize the words and/or pictures according to their orthographic features. They think aloud and model with two to four words to reveal their process, then invite the students to try. Scaffolding is varied through the amount of explicit explanation and telling provided. It’s important to determine “just right” scaffolding for each group. Giving away too much information is likely to decrease students’ motivation and turn what could be inquiry into humdrum sorting. For instance, if necessary, a teacher could begin the modeling by placing in front of the learners header cards that let students know the categories are s, t, and st, or she might reserve the cards until after the sorting and use only exemplar pictures of the sun, the numeral 10, and a star for starting clues. It may take a few trials and errors to find the right fit for each group. However, the effort is well worth it because students then have the chance to engage in more purposeful thinking and talking.

**Analyze**

After the sorting is complete, teachers help students analyze the categories to make sure each word matches its category’s sound, pattern, or sound and pattern. Students name the words and/or pictures in each category while thinking about the sound, and in the case of words, also looking closely for a common pattern. This process sometimes includes motions. In Figure 4, first graders slide their hands down their arms as they blend the pl in plate to check their placement of pictures in the category. During follow-up discussion, learners point to category evidence to support their decisions.

**Interpret**

After students have analyzed the categories, teachers guide them to interpret how the categories are different or alike and to share their insights with the group. It is important that the group gain a “so what”
or takeaway. All of the words in a category share a common feature or features. What can the students learn from this to help them be better readers and writers in the future? For example, letter-name spellers might realize that writers need to really listen to the /n/ sound before a final consonant to be sure they include the n, or they might realize that although trip starts with /chr/, the sound is spelled tr. Teachers prompt with questions such as these:

- What feature did you notice in this category?
- Where did you notice that feature?
- Where did you notice that sound in the words?
- What do you need to think about as you write words with that sound (or pattern)?
- When you see that pattern in a word you are trying to read, what sound will you try first?

**Link**

Teachers close the lesson by helping students connect their new understandings of features to reading and/or writing. Students may write transfer words, as in Figure 5, or they may read or write a sentence or phrase that includes at least one word with a targeted feature (see Figure 6). Linking helps students solidify their understandings and apply the targeted feature, thereby bringing an important closure to the lesson.

**SAIL in Action**

This section includes transcribed excerpts of audio- and video-recorded week 6 lessons from the study to show some of the meaningful talk and student thinking that surfaced during the first-grade SAIL lessons. I created the lesson plans for each session of the study. The plans were not scripted but did include specific teaching suggestions. Also, at the start of our work, I shared examples of scripted lessons to give teachers a mind-set for what the sessions could be like. Teachers followed the plans but incorporated elements of their personal teaching styles. For instance, the teacher featured in this section held both elementary and EL certifications and often integrated gesturing and peer consultation to support students’ language and learning.
Segue to the Lesson: A Review of Academic Vocabulary

Ms. P., the teacher, begins a small-group meeting with three students, including an EL student, by reviewing new academic vocabulary.

Ms. P.: This morning, we learned two new words. One of them is categories [holds up a sheet of paper with categories written on it and a student illustration underneath].

Students: Categories.

Ms. P.: So categories is when there is a group of people or things that are similar in some way. This is the motion that we created: categories [She gestures, moving outstretched arms up and down like columns; students copy it]. Let’s remind ourselves of the other new word that we learned today. My turn, your turn [holds up feature with a student illustration underneath]. Feature.

Students: Feature.

Ms. P.: Feature. It’s an interesting or an important part, like a part of a face. One of Mateo’s features on his face is his nose [reaches over and touches Mateo’s nose]. One of Aniyah’s important features on her face are her eyes [gestures to Aniyah’s eyes]. Feature.

The SAIL Lesson

The series of vignettes that follow show the same first-grade teacher’s interactions with another group of students as they complete a SAIL lesson. The sort is focused on words ending with mp, nd, and nt (see Figures 7 and 8).

Survey

Ms. P.: So, let’s get started talking about our words. The first thing that we want to do is we want to survey. Remind me what survey looks like. [A girl makes a surveying gesture, and the others follow her lead. The teacher then holds up word cards for the students to identify; they discuss the meanings of stump and pond.] Stump. So what do we know about the word stump?

Dylan: There is a stump on the tree…. It’s a noun.

Ms. P.: OK, it’s a noun. I’m not sure there’s a stump on a tree. What do you mean by that?

Dylan: It’s kind of like a hill.
Ms. P.: [She draws a tree on the dry-erase board to clarify.] So, there’s a tree, and someone comes along, and they cut off the top of the tree [erases the upper portion], and what’s left there?

Dylan: A stump.
Ms. P.: Could you maybe sit on that little stump?
Ryan: [interjects] Without fire ants on it, or termites.
Ms. P.: What if I said to you, “I’m going to try to stump you.” What do you think I mean by that? [Students share their ideas, which include confusion with stub (as in stubbing your toe) and confusion with stomp (as in stomping on someone’s foot).]

Ryan: That means “I’m going to try to trick you.”
Ms. P.: I’m going to puzzle you; I’m going to challenge you. [She hands the card with stump to a student to sort, and discussion continues with another word, pond.

Ms. P.: All right, so I noticed something. While you guys were talking about slant, Tyler was concentrating really hard on the different categories of words that we have, and he said to me, “Ms. P.” [points to the word rent and then to the Oddball category, for words that don’t fit in other categories], “I think this is an oddball.” [Ms. P. invites the group to share their thinking.]

Ryan: When Tyler said that rent is an oddball, it was making me think, if it was an oddball, then how come all of the other nts...maybe they would be the oddball, if rent was an oddball.

Ms. P.: So, is rent an oddball?
Ryan and Dylan: No.
Ms. P.: [to Tyler] So, is rent an oddball?
Tyler: [shakes his head]
Ms. P.: OK, so we figured out it’s not an oddball [points to rent] because it has a common feature. It has a common consonant blend at the end of the word. What’s the consonant blend at the end of this category that you’re noticing, Riley? [Riley pauses, so Ms. P. asks Tyler to help her out.]

Riley: nt.
Ms. P.: nt. What sound would that make?
Students: [Some respond /nt/, others /nent/]
Ms. P.: Rent, rent; be careful we don’t add a vowel at the end. Let’s try reading it and see if this is a category. We want to look for evidence; let’s test it.

All: [Teacher points to each word.] Print, want, went, hunt, rent.
Ms. P.: Do we agree with this category? Is everything just right? [All but one student show agreement by patting their heads.]

Dylan: I disagree. I think the t is a bossy t because it doesn’t let the n say its sound.
Ms. P.: Ooh—
Madison: Me, too [pats her head].
Ms. P.: Ooh, you, too! Let’s listen to Dylan. Why don’t you say more about that, please?
Dylan: The n doesn’t say much, it just goes for like a second, and then the t says more than the n, so the t is bossy.

Ms. P.: I agree with you. It is a little bit of a bossy t; it takes up more of the time... [Discussion continues as Mia is asked to provide evidence for the next category.]

The student’s point about /t/ being the more dominant sound is well taken. M and n are nasal consonants that are difficult for sound-conscious letter-name spellers to hear before a final consonant, as in the final blends in this sort. As a result, novice spellers tend to omit these consonants until the end of this stage.

**Link**

Ms. P. wraps up the lesson by connecting the students’ learning to writing (see Figure 6).

Ms. P.: So, what was the sentence that you just said to us, Dylan?

Dylan: I saw a stump by the pond.

Ms. P.: All right. Let’s plan it.

All: [counting words on their fingers] I... saw... a... stump... by... the... pond.

Ms. P.: How many words is that?

Students: Seven!

Ms. P.: All right. [draws a horizontal line on the dry-erase board for each word, saying the word as she does so] I... saw... a... stump... by... the... pond. [Then, guided by students’ input, Ms. P. begins to write the words on the lines, making an occasional error, such as starting the sentence with a lowercase i, so that students remain thinking and engaged. A student suggests bye for the word by. The group discusses the two words and their meanings. After each word, the group chorally rereads the sentence.]

All: I saw a... stump...

Ms. P.: Let’s stretch it out [makes a stretching motion].

All: Ssstuuuummp.

Ms. P.: What are the first two letters of the word stump? Could you please write it for us? [Riley records the beginning blend, and Ms. P. continues.]

Ms. P.: What vowel do you hear in the middle there?

Ryan and Tyler: U!

Ms. P.: U! Then what is the final consonant blend that you hear?

Dylan: Mp.

Ms. P.: Mp. Let’s see if she got it: st-u-mp. “I saw a stump.” Agree or disagree with how she wrote it? [Students pat their heads in agreement. Writing of the sentence continues; Ms. P. remarks about how well the students know their sight words.] Madison, would you please write pond for us? Let’s see how she does with the final consonant blend. [to the rest of the group] You know what we’re going to do ‘cause we want to make sure we grow our brains? We’re going to write it on the table. Let’s first stretch it out.

All: [stretch their arms while saying] P-ooonnnnd.

Ms. P.: OK, here we go.

All: [They whisper and finger-form the letters on the table.] P-o—

Ms. P.: Use your best handwriting. Magic fingers:

All: n-d. P-o-n-d.

Ms. P.: We all know how to spell it. Let’s see how she [Madison] does.

All: [chorally read] I saw a stump by the pond.

Ms. P.: Did she get it?

Students: Yes!

Ms. P.: [sings] G-double-o-d j-o-b...

All: Good job, good job!

Ms. P.: [She closes the lesson by asking students to identify the final blends in their sentence; she then summarizes the major takeaway.] So, when you are writing and you are reading, you want to think about the sounds that you see [hear] throughout the whole word. You want to read through the whole word; you want to stretch it out. With final consonant blends, you definitely want to make sure that you think about the sounds you are hearing, and maybe the final consonant will be a little bossy to the previous consonant.

**Conclusion**

Small-group word study instruction is a time teachers can leverage to help students actively develop the kinds of knowledge, skills, and dispositions they will need to understand and write complex texts and engage in thoughtful discussion of ideas. These expectations are, and likely will continue to be, part of students’ learning landscape. There are a number of ways word study can benefit students in meeting these rigorous aims. As the classroom SAIL vignettes
TAKE ACTION!

1. Identify one or two high-utility general academic vocabulary words to target. Teach deeply to the whole class through gestures, drawing, acting, literature, examples, discussion, and explanation. Apply often.

2. Identify two or three sort words to target for vocabulary building. Choose words that (a) students don’t know or have misconceptions about, (b) have multiple meanings, or (c) offer potential for developing nuanced understanding.

3. Survey: Check to see that students in the small group can identify the words and/or pictures and discuss meanings of the targeted words. Model sorting of some of the words; engage learners in categorizing the rest.

4. Analyze: Guide students to examine the categories to ensure that the words all fit together.

5. Interpret: Help students to consider the categories and to articulate an understanding to take away that will help them to be better readers and/or writers in the future.

6. Link: Challenge students to read or write a sentence or phrase that includes words with the targeted feature. Interactive writing works well for this.

7. Provide follow-up practice activities.

reveal, the potential is there for stimulating talk and inquiry that enable students not only to learn how words work but also to expand and deepen their vocabulary knowledge in a collaborative learning environment. Furthermore, during Link, students have opportunities to solidify and apply their new understandings through discussion, reading, and writing. When leveraged, the word study interactions also afford teachers opportunities to discover much about their young scholars’ learning that can inform their teaching. President Franklin D. Roosevelt (1938) once said, “To reach a port, we must sail—sail, not drift” (para. 74). It’s time for us to set a course for robust word study instruction that reflects the demands of today and anticipates those of tomorrow.

REFERENCES


MORE TO EXPLORE


■ TextProject’s website (www.textproject.org) provides free downloads and excellent information.

INTERNATIONAL LITERACY ASSOCIATION

Take a sneak peek inside all of ILA’s journals – for FREE!

■ Sample issues of The Reading Teacher, Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy, and Reading Research Quarterly

■ Virtual issues on key themes in literacy education

■ Peer-reviewed open access articles by leading researchers in the literacy field

■ Additional free articles in Wiley Education Collections

Discover these free resources and more at literacyworldwide.org/journalresources.

To add a journal to your current membership, contact ILA Customer Service at customerservice@reading.org, 800.336.7323 (U.S. and Canada), or 302.731.1600 (all other countries).