

A Summary of the Research Basis for e-Lective Language Learningⁱ

- Conversational fluency and academic language proficiency represent distinct aspects of proficiency in both first and second languages (L₁ and L₂);
- Peer-appropriate conversational fluency is generally acquired within about two years by immigrant school-age students but at least five years are typically required for immigrant students to catch up to grade expectations in academic aspects of the second language;
- Academic language proficiency includes knowledge of the less frequent vocabulary of a language as well as the ability to interpret and produce increasingly complex written language. As students progress through the grades, they encounter far more low frequency words, complex syntax (e.g. passives), and abstract expressions that are virtually never heard in everyday conversation. Students are required to understand linguistically and conceptually demanding texts in the content areas (e.g. literature, social studies, science, mathematics) and to use this language in an accurate and coherent way in their own writing.
- Because academic language is found almost exclusively in written texts (and minimally in conversational interactions), we encounter this language primarily when we read. Therefore, reading extensively is of crucial importance for the expansion of vocabulary and the growth of reading comprehension abilities in both L₁ and L₂ (Day & Bamford, 1966; Elley & Manghubai, 1983; Krashen, 2004).
- Nation and Coady (1988) summarize the relationship between vocabulary knowledge and reading as follows: “In general the research leaves us in little doubt about the importance of vocabulary knowledge for reading, and the value of reading as a means of increasing vocabulary” (p. 108).
- In order to catch up to native speakers in academic language proficiency, second language learners are faced with a paradox: typically, their academic language proficiency lags behind that of native speakers for at least five years after they start learning the L₂; consequently second language learners are unable to read texts that are at their grade level, cognitive level, or interest level with the same ease as native speakers. How then can they catch up when they are unable to read texts of the same level of difficulty or sophistication as the students they are trying to catch up to? If they do read these difficult texts, it is likely to be a frustrating and time-consuming process that again puts them at a disadvantage.
- Within the computer-mediated environment that e-Lective creates, listening and electronic dictionary supports are provided to help students *gain access* to written texts that would otherwise have been beyond their level of English proficiency. The fact that students can import and read texts that are of high interest to them also increases their motivation to read. These supports reduce at least some of the frustration involved in reading difficult texts. e-Lective also incorporates a learning system that supports students in *harvesting* the language they encounter in the texts they read. Thus, as students read texts that (ideally) are of high interest to them, they are enabled to internalize and reinforce their knowledge of the vocabulary in these texts. In addition, as students read more, they encounter an expanded range of grammatical and discourse features of the language. This exposure expands students’ awareness of these features of their second (or first) language. Writing supports within e-Lective further help students to deepen and consolidate their knowledge of the language.

References*

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