

## **Less Is More for ELLs' Common Core Success**

by [Renee Rubin](#) and [John A. Sutterby](#)

Teachers and students today seem to be asked to do more and more, covering everything from digital literacy to gun safety. The U.S. Common Core State Standards are often viewed as just one more thing added to the curriculum. The increase in the curriculum comes at the same time there is more emphasis on high-stakes testing, and the result is a curriculum that is a mile wide and an inch deep and often does not prepare students well for the type of thinking required by the Common Core, advanced education, or careers. Many educators, especially teachers of ELLs, are realizing the need to do less, but do it better.

### **Case Study: Central Elementary School**

Teachers at Central Elementary School worked hard and pushed their students to succeed on the Common Core assessments, but many students were still struggling. The teachers knew the root of the problem was vocabulary, especially for the ELLs. The lack of vocabulary caused students problems across the curriculum. One fourth-grade teacher told a story of a student who gave up on a math problem because she didn't know what "lemonade stand" meant in the scenario. The teachers had tried adding more vocabulary to the weekly list, more vocabulary worksheets, and more vocabulary strategies. The students might learn the words briefly, but they didn't seem to remember them. There was no time in the day to add anything more.

Then one of the teachers came across our book, [\*Less is More in Elementary School\*](#). It has ways of preparing students for the Common Core by actually covering less material each year. The principal agreed to support a pilot project that focused on vocabulary development. She even gave up some of the weekly staff meetings for teacher planning time.

### **Changing the Approach: Thematic Units**

The book suggests using thematic units to develop vocabulary. Students would spend two or more weeks on each theme and encounter the concepts and vocabulary of the theme over and over again in different contexts. This seemed to make sense, but it was a major change from the way teachers were currently teaching. They decided to start slowly. Teachers looked for texts in the reading book that correlated to units in the social studies or science book. They made this the basis for their units. They wouldn't cover all the selections in the reading book or units in the social studies or science books, but they would spend more time on the units they did study. Although math might be reinforced during the units, it would still be primarily taught separately.

For example, there was a text about endangered pandas in the reading book and a unit about habitats in the science book. The fourth-grade teachers decided to do a unit about endangered species, including habitat loss as one of the major reasons for endangered species. The whole class read the texts in the reading and science books.

## Classroom Management

Students were carefully paired to support ELLs. Pairs of students chose an endangered species to study and made a poster and wrote a summary to present information about where the animal lives, what it eats, and why it is endangered. Teachers noticed ELLs talked more in the pairs because they weren't being asked to answer questions in front of the whole class.

## Supplementing Materials

One of the teachers found a useful website, [watchknowlearn.org](http://watchknowlearn.org). It had 40 videos for young people about endangered species, including the panda. Not only did the class view some videos together, but students also used the videos as part of their team research, which was especially beneficial for ELLs. Another fourth-grade teacher brought in samples of bamboo so the classes could see what the pandas eat. Students worked in small groups to describe the bamboo. Without any vocabulary lists or worksheets, students were accurately using words such as *describe*, *example*, *endangered*, *species*, *habitat*, *carnivore*, *herbivore*, *omnivore*, *predator*, and *prey* in their own presentations and writing. One pair asked to study a dinosaur, so the class learned about extinct species as well as endangered ones. They were learning from each other as well as the teacher and texts.

## Why Thematic Units Work

Teachers, such as the ones in the above scenario, feel less rushed with thematic units. They have time to find resources outside the classroom such as photos, artifacts, videos, and speakers that will support the learning of ELLs and others who struggle with academic texts. Educators can find materials on the same topics in native languages for those ELLs who have developed skills to read academic texts in their home language. They can walk around the room answering and posing questions while students work in pairs or small groups. This type of immediate feedback and coaching of students has been shown to be one of the most important factors in improving student achievement (Hattie, 2012).

Developing ELLs' reading vocabulary through multiple exposures to the same vocabulary and concepts during thematic units will allow them to achieve the higher levels of reading comprehension required by the Common Core, including making "logical inferences" and "integrating and evaluating information" (Drake, 2012). In order to increase multiple exposures to vocabulary, teachers can make connections to topics that were previously studied. For example, "remember when we read the book that mentioned wolves in Florida? What do you think happened to those wolves?" Teachers also will have more opportunities to scaffold learning for students who may be struggling with a specific concept and to provide extensions for those who need a challenge.

## Thematic Units Across the Content Areas

While the example given was for elementary school, thematic units can be used within subject areas as well as across subject areas to reinforce concepts, vocabulary, and skills. Math teachers can teach a unit on the use of mathematical concepts in sports or construction. A language arts teacher might do a unit on persuasion and have students read and write persuasive pieces, including real letters or emails about matters of concern to them. A history teacher could look at civil rights issues throughout U.S. history rather than focusing on different time periods separately. As students are reading or viewing materials during a unit, teachers can help students understand U.S. cultural references. References to hippies, boom boxes, big hair, and disco dancing are just a few examples.

Subject area teachers also can place events in context. For example, if a class is reading a 19th-century novel, such as *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876), the teacher could help students understand what life was like at that time. An interesting homework assignment would be to have students spend 1 hour at home without using anything that was not available in 1876—no food from the refrigerator, no electric lights, no rides in the car, and, of course, no TV, computers, or electronic games.

Science teachers might look at [ViralNova](#) for examples of inventions by teens that fit into a current topic. For example, Elif Bilgin, a 16-year-old from Turkey, discovered how to make plastic from banana peels rather than oil. She began this research when she was only 14. Units like these will engage students and encourage them to make personal connections with the concepts and vocabulary, which in turn helps them to remember them.

As educators, we cannot keep adding more and more to the curriculum. Instead, we should be cutting and combining in order to do less but do it better. All students, especially ELLs, will benefit through higher achievement and a greater love of learning.

## References

Drake, S. M. (2012). *Creating standards-based integrated curriculum: The Common Core State Standards edition* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

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