

# Creating sentence walls to help English-language learners develop content literacy

**KAREN A. CARRIER**  
**ALFRED W. TATUM**

doi:10.1598/RT.60.3.10

Acquiring content literacy, the ability to use reading, writing, speaking, and listening to gain new knowledge (Alvermann, Swafford, & Montero, 2004; McKenna & Robinson, 1990), presents a special challenge for students who are acquiring English as a second language as they are learning content. For many English-language learners (ELLs) content literacy, as well as other literacies, depends on proficiency in the language of the text, which in the majority of U.S. classrooms is English (Burkhardt et al., 2003). Teachers can help their ELLs develop both academic language proficiency and content literacy by expanding the well-known concept of word walls (Cunningham, 1995) to create sentence walls. Sentence walls, like word walls, are teacher- or student-prepared displays that are prominently placed in the classroom. Whereas word walls contain lists of words to nurture students' sight and meaning vocabulary, sentence walls provide visual displays of well-formed phrases and sentences. They help ELLs participate in the classroom learning activity by providing the language needed for talking and writing about the topic being studied. Sentence walls also provide opportunities for ELLs to become familiar with vocabulary and sentence structures in their content reading.

Albeit visually similar to cloze passages, in which words are systematically removed to assess students' comprehension monitoring or use of cue,

sentence walls display language structures that ELLs need for immediate use during lessons in the content areas. They help ELLs expand their use of language, from labeling and simple phrases to more complex and grammatically correct utterances, and demonstrate their knowledge of new concepts in the content areas.

## Sentence walls for language and content

Sentence walls are based on Lewis's (1993) view that an important part of acquiring a language comes from understanding and producing phrases as unanalyzed chunks of language, rather than building phrases up from their component parts. Nattinger (1980) referred to these chunks as "prefabricated speech routines" (p. 337). For example, young children and beginning second-language learners are not aware that *gimme* is formed from the combination of a verb and an indirect object. *Gimme* is simply an utterance that gets them what they want. As children become more familiar with the structure of their language, hearing and seeing it used in many different and natural contexts, they eventually realize that there is a verb and indirect object in the utterance and that they can expand the utterance by adding other words, such as *Gimme that toy*

and *Give it to me*. This process takes more time to develop for ELLs and requires situations where their attention is directed to the form of the utterance. They also must have opportunities to use the language for authentic purposes of communication.

## Why do sentence walls help ELLs?

Textbooks and articles on developing content literacy focus on vocabulary building techniques but rarely on grammatical structures because it is assumed that students have already acquired a basic knowledge of the grammar of their first language. However, ELLs are still in the process of developing the language found in content area texts written in English. Sentence walls provide a visual scaffold of language (e.g., phrases, sentences) to help students communicate in classroom discussions about content. With instructional support, ELLs become active users of the language when they are taught how and when to insert phrases from the sentence wall. Essentially, sentence walls provide a template of the kind of vocabulary and language structures that ELLs will encounter when they read about the topic they are studying. Using the sentence wall, ELLs also can participate immediately in the classroom learning activity and interact with their English-speaking peers, talking and writing about the topic. This classroom interaction is a key ingredient in academic content learning as well as second-language development (Boyd & Rubin, 2002; Hall & Verplaetse, 2000; Swain, 1985).

## Using sentence walls to support students in the content areas

The first step in creating sentence walls is to consider what kinds of questions or statements the students will be expected to make when they participate in the lesson. These should be tied directly to the content objectives of the lesson. For example, consider a typical lesson on the water cycle in which content objectives might be for students to describe the continuous movement of the earth's

**FIGURE 1**  
**Sentence wall for inquiry questions**

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Ask questions about the water cycle

- What happens when \_\_\_\_\_?
- What causes \_\_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_\_?
- How does \_\_\_\_\_?
- How is/are \_\_\_\_\_ made?
- What is \_\_\_\_\_ made of?
- How does \_\_\_\_\_ happen?

**FIGURE 2**  
**Sentence wall for statements**

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Talk and write about the water cycle

- When the sun heats surface water, the water \_\_\_\_\_.
- Snow falls when water \_\_\_\_\_.
- When water evaporates, it \_\_\_\_\_.
- When water condenses, it \_\_\_\_\_.
- When water \_\_\_\_\_, it \_\_\_\_\_.

water in a cycle and to name and explain the stages of that water cycle.

The sentence wall should provide sentence frames or templates to help ELLs create questions and statements that describe, name, and explain the water cycle and its stages. For example, What happens when \_\_\_\_\_? and What causes \_\_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_\_? (See Figure 1.)

To answer these questions on the basis of observations made during the activities, students will need to make statements such as these: When the sun heats up surface water, the water \_\_\_\_\_. and Snow falls when water \_\_\_\_\_. (See Figure 2.) These model questions and statements are printed on the sentence walls and strategically placed around the room for easy student access and use. ELLs then have well-formed English sentences into which they can insert appropriate vocabulary and phrases. The blank spaces in the sentence templates allow one sentence to function as the template for different statements about the same concept—for example, What happens when water heats up? or What happens when water cools down?

Teachers also can link the sentence walls to key vocabulary on word walls. In the case of the lesson on the water cycle, the companion word wall

might contain the words *cycle, evaporation, condensation, precipitation, gas, vapor, liquid, and solid* (Figure 3). Additional vocabulary may be necessary depending on the language proficiency level of the ELLs (e.g., *rain, snow, rises, heats up, falls, cools down*).

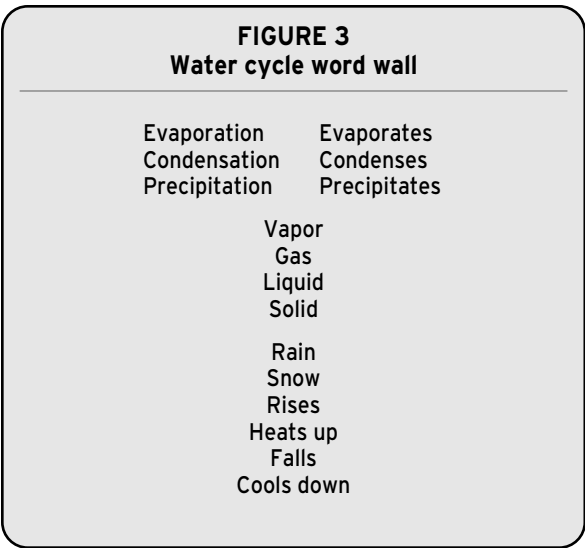
The key sentences on the sentence wall and their connection to content area vocabulary on the word wall form the language objectives for the lesson, as recommended for teachers using a sheltered approach for instructing English-language learners (Chamot & O'Malley, 1994; Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2004).

It may be challenging to develop questions and statements for the sentence wall in advance. Teachers tend to think in more abstract terms about the concepts they want students to express rather than the specific language they expect to hear. Role-playing a question-and-answer session about the activity with a colleague or the ESL teacher can help reveal the questions students need to ask and statements they need to make when discussing the contents of a lesson. With the infinite variety of sentences that can be created with language, there appear to be many choices, but the focus should be on basic sentence structures for the functions (e.g., describing, explaining, analyzing) that are needed to participate in the lesson.

The sentences on the sentence wall should give ELLs an entry point to group and classroom conversations and an opportunity for authentic use of their developing English. These learners have something to say about the subject, and with the aid of the teacher and the sentence wall they have a way to say it that simultaneously develops their academic language and literacy skills. What is equally important is that ELLs also engage in observable behaviors that teachers can assess to determine their progress. Sentence walls are helpful not only to ELLs but also to native English speakers who may need additional support in constructing well-formed English sentences, especially in their writing.

## Teach ELLs how to use sentence walls

It is important to take time to teach ELLs how to use sentence walls. They must receive guidance for inserting vocabulary into these sentences in the



same way students are given support to take advantage of word walls. Simply posting sentence walls in the classroom is not enough. As with vocabulary, the best way to introduce sentence walls is in the context of the lesson. As a prelesson activity, teachers can call attention to the sentence wall language and supporting word wall vocabulary. Teacher modeling of the sentences provides ELLs with examples of when and how to use the sentence walls (e.g., during whole-class discussion look at the sentence wall to construct a comment or answer to a class question; during group work use the sentence wall to talk or write about an observation). Teacher modeling also supplies appropriate pronunciation and intonation.

It is highly recommended that classroom teachers share sentence walls with their school's English as a second language (ESL) teachers whenever possible. This is a perfect opportunity for classroom and ESL teachers to work collaboratively to enhance their ELLs' language and literacy development. The classroom and ESL teachers can construct the information for the sentence wall, with the classroom teacher providing the content information and the ESL teacher assisting with knowledge of the ELLs' language development needs.

The ESL classroom is a safe environment in which ELLs can practice their vocabulary and sentences prior to the content classroom. If the classroom teacher wishes, the ESL teacher and ELLs also can work together to make the sentence walls for the content classroom. This teacher-student collabora-

tion presents another opportunity for ELLs to develop their content literacy and language proficiency.

This type of literacy support for ELLs provides them with the language needed to participate in the classroom learning environment. Teachers can help ELLs develop their literacy and language skills by creating sentence walls with templates of content-based language structures that complement vocabulary word walls. The development of content literacy and English language proficiency are key elements in the academic success of English-language learners, and the use of sentence walls can help teachers and students achieve that success.

**Carrier teaches at Northern Illinois University (Gabel Hall 147, DeKalb, IL 60115, USA). E-mail kcarrier@niu.edu. Tatum teaches at the same university.**

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