How Can Cognates “Beneficiar” English Language Learners (ELLs)?

Did you know that about 30%-40% of all English words have a related Spanish word (such as benefit and beneficiar)? Words in two languages that have similar pronunciation, meaning, and spelling are called cognates. Some more examples of English/Spanish cognates are: appreciate/apreciar, unusual/inusual, difficult/difícil, and giant/gigante. More than 70% of all ELLs in the United States are native Spanish speakers. Teaching native Spanish speaking ELLs cognate awareness accelerates their English language vocabulary development. Cognate awareness is the ability to use cognates in a primary language to help understand words in a second language.

Many ELLs do not automatically recognize cognates in their second language and need explicit cognate instruction. On the other hand, even kindergarteners can be taught to use cognates. Any teacher can teach cognates; you do not have to speak Spanish. Teachers can look up English words in a bilingual dictionary or in the NTC's Dictionary of Spanish Cognates by Rose Nash.

For the first time, DSC is supporting teachers in using this effective ELL strategy. We are providing cognates in our new vocabulary program, Words in Action: Building Vocabulary Together. Words in Action is similar to the Making Meaning Vocabulary program except that it is a “stand-alone” program for teachers who do not use our Making Meaning comprehension program. Like our other programs, the vocabulary program is unique in its blend of academic instruction and support for students' social and ethical development. It teaches the students high-utility words found in carefully selected read-aloud texts and strategies they can use to unlock word meanings when they read independently.

Words in Action will provide developmentally appropriate cognates for the program's target vocabulary words (in grades 2-6) and ELL vocabulary words in the read-alouds (in grades K-6). The program will include information for teachers about how to use cognates for English Language Learners and pronunciation of the Spanish cognates (for non-Spanish speaking teachers). In addition, many teacher notes in the lessons will be specifically targeted to making the vocabulary content and activities more accessible to ELLs. The program will also offer “More ELL Support” activities almost weekly to give ELLs additional vocabulary practice. Teaching cognates is just one effective strategy to help ELLs deepen their English language vocabulary (see “Use of Cognates for English Language Learners” and “Using Cognates to Develop Comprehension in English” for more information on cognates).

As a former Spanish bilingual teacher in dual-immersion classrooms, I am very excited not only about the ELL strategies, activities, and notes but the pedagogy of the Words in Action program itself, which epitomizes the type of vocabulary instruction that ELLs need. ELLs need direct and explicit vocabulary instruction, a variety of opportunities to use and practice new vocabulary, ways to integrate new words with existing vocabulary, lots of review of new vocabulary, and words taught in context, all guiding principles of the Words in Action program.

For more information about effective strategies for ELLs, see “Teaching English Language Learners: What the Research Does-and Does Not-Say” by Claude Goldenberg.