

## CREATING A VISUALLY RICH CLASSROOM

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Language teachers already know that students learning a new language need visual support, but it is especially beneficial to young learners. Visual support helps young learners associate images with new vocabulary, grasp concepts, and understand classroom routines. Visual support is especially important for young students who are still learning to read.

How can teachers create a visually rich classroom that will support students' language learning? This week in the Teacher's Corner, we present some ideas for materials to post in the classroom as well as ideas about how to encourage student interaction with each one.

### ILLUSTRATED POSTERS

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Many stores that sell educational materials sell pre-made posters that illustrate key vocabulary, concepts, and even classroom routines. However, if you do not have access to a store like this, posters can easily be created for this purpose. If you create your own posters, it is helpful to make a quick sketch on a regular sheet of paper first so that you can plan how to arrange the content. Once the plan is ready, the information can be neatly written on large poster paper. The poster should present images and/or content for students to learn in an organized way. Words and images should be clear and large enough for students to see from far away. Vocabulary such as color words, shapes, sizes, numbers, the alphabet, animal names, types of weather, and seasons are commonly displayed in classrooms for young learners. As content is covered throughout the school year, teachers can add posters to illustrate concepts such as daily routines, the water cycle, and animal or plant life cycles.

In order for a poster to be useful, it should contain the key vocabulary or information in words and illustrations. For each vocabulary word, there should be an accompanying illustration or example. For every piece of information, such as steps in a cycle or process, there should be a visual that illustrates the concept.

While posters create a colorful and visually stimulating environment for young learners, simply hanging them on the wall does little to support language development. Instead, teachers should try to incorporate the posters into lessons. For example, if you are teaching a unit on fruits and vegetables, you can incorporate a discussion about colors into the lesson. Ask students to locate the color of each fruit or

vegetable on the poster with colors as you discuss each one. Similarly, if you create classroom posters about routines that students should follow, you can use them to review expectations. (There will be more ideas about how to utilize posters in Week 2 of this month's Teacher's Corner.)

The Sing out Loud collections are available for free on the American English website and are excellent resources for young learners. Both collections, [Sing Out Loud Children's Songs](#) and [Sing Out Loud Traditional Songs](#), include a poster for each song to add visual support as students sing. These ready-to-use collections can help you create a visually rich classroom that will build the vocabulary of young learners.

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### ANCHOR CHARTS

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When teaching new information to young learners, it is helpful to create a visual representation of ideas or examples as you discuss content. To do so, it helps to have chart or poster paper on an easel or hung on your chalkboard so that you can easily create illustrated lists or diagrams.

Continuing with the fruits and vegetables theme, you can begin by asking students to name fruits and vegetables that they already know in English. As they raise their hands, you can quickly write down the name of each fruit or vegetable they say and then draw a picture. Even phonics concepts, such as letter sounds, are a great opportunity to create illustrated lists. If you are reading a book with your students, create a graphic organizer on the chart paper to review the events or concepts from the text.

The charts you create can be displayed in the classroom to help learners recall concepts and information throughout the year.

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### WORD WALLS

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The vocabularies of young learners grow very rapidly and word walls are a great reference tool and visual reminder to use throughout the school year. A word wall is an area of your classroom where vocabulary words are displayed in an organized format. The most common ways teachers choose to organize them is alphabetically or by theme/unit.

To create a word wall, you must first choose your organization method. Whether it is alphabetical or thematic, you should create labels that are legible (easy to read) from a distance. For alphabetical

organization, create one label for each letter of the alphabet. For thematic organization, create labels based on your units of study, such as “weather” or “animals.”

For each set of vocabulary words you introduce, create an illustrated card for each word. Write the word neatly with a marker and, if possible, large enough that students can read the words from their seats. Include a picture or create an illustration on the card. The picture can be to the left, right, above, or below the word, but it is helpful to keep the position consistent so that the word wall is neat and students understand the format.

Depending on the age of your class, you can ask your students to create the vocabulary cards that you will display on the word wall. They can find pictures for the cards in magazines, newspapers, or on the internet, or create their own illustrations. For students at the higher end of the young learners age range, you can also include brief definitions on the vocabulary cards that will be displayed on the wall.

As with posters, to promote language development, word walls should be incorporated into lessons and classroom activities. You can refer to the word wall when teaching, have students come up and read words from the wall, or use the wall to play matching games. To play a matching game, you can verbally state a definition and have students come up to the word wall and point to the word that matches what you say. You can give additional clues about the word, such as the part of speech, how many letters it has, an example sentence with the word missing, or something that rhymes with the word. The goal of the activity is to help students interact with the word wall often so that they can recall the words and meanings in order to use them independently.

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### PROPS AND REALIA

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Young learners enjoy when teachers bring concepts and stories to life with real objects or props. Not only does this provide real life examples of content, it also helps learners feel more connected to the information they are learning.

Incorporating these types of visual support can be quite easy, and you can even involve your students in the process. For example, if you are reading a book or story with new vocabulary related to a particular topic, you can bring in the items from home or have your students bring them. For example, if you are reading a book about morning routines, bring in a toothbrush, toothpaste, soap, a towel, and a hairbrush.

Interacting with these objects will bring the story to life for young learners, and they will make connections to the content. If you are studying the names of different clothing items, use your students' clothes as visuals or ask them to bring in items to associate with the words.

Whenever possible, have students interact with the objects rather than just look at them on display. For instance, in the daily routines example, pass the objects around the class and have students pantomime the actions associated with each one (pretend to brush their hair, wash with soap, etc.). In the clothing example, you can choose a student volunteer to "get dressed" and then have the class name all of the clothing items the student chose to wear.

By including visual representations of the content young students are learning, you will enrich their learning experience and create a visually stimulating classroom environment. If your young learners are old enough, you can also get them involved in the process of creating materials. If you teach the same content each school year, it is helpful to laminate the materials you purchase or create so that you can use them again year after year. If you do not have access to a laminating machine, try to use sturdy poster paper or card stock to help make your materials last. Take care of the materials by asking students to use pointers, rather than their hands, to interact with the posters. Many things can be used as a pointer, such as a ruler, a marker with the cap on, or even the eraser side of a pencil. This will help to keep the materials clean and enable you to use them over and over again.