

Language Anchors: A Flexible Strategy to Support EAL Learners with Academic Language

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Across educational contexts, English as an Additional Language (EAL) learners often face the dual challenge of mastering academic content while acquiring the language needed to access and express that content. This can be particularly demanding in English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) or inquiry-based classrooms, where students are expected to engage in abstract thinking, academic discussions, and extended writing in English.

To bridge this gap, I developed a flexible strategy called Language Anchors, which blends visual scaffolding and structured talk routines to help EAL students develop confidence and academic fluency. Language Anchors are a practical, adaptable set of tools for integrating linguistic development with content-area instruction. This approach has been classroom-tested in international settings, and it is intentionally simple enough to be adapted across grade levels and educational contexts. “We don’t just learn the words. We use them like real tools.”

That comment, from a student in an English language acquisition class, captures what Language Anchors aim to do: give EAL learners not just exposure to academic vocabulary, but a genuine command and practice of it.

LANGUAGE ANCHOR TOOLS

The Language Anchor system helps EAL learners access academic content and associated language by focusing on:

- **Key Vocabulary** – subject-specific terms essential to understanding the content topic (e.g., *resilience*, *bravery*)
- **Key Phrases** – common expressions that guide student thinking (e.g., *One cause of this was...*, or *One difference is...*)
- **Sentence Frames** – scaffolds that help students express complete

academic thoughts (e.g., *I agree with ____ because...*)

The system includes four components: (1) Anchor Maps, (2) Anchor Talks, (3) Anchor Challenges, and (4) Anchor Boards. Each Anchor component supports academic vocabulary development through visual references, structured discussion, application, and ongoing classroom use.

1. Anchor Maps

Anchor Maps are student-created or teacher-scaffolded vocabulary concept maps that contain four parts:

- A key academic term (an “Anchor word” or “Anchor term”)
- A student-friendly definition, synonym, or related word
- A visual or symbol associated with the term
- A contextualized example sentence

For example, an Anchor Map for the term *resilience* might include the anchor term, related vocabulary, key phrases from the text, and sentence frames students can use in discussion or writing. In this example, students connect *resilience* to related words such as *perseverance*, *determination*, and *overcoming adversity*. They also connect the term to text-based phrases such as “people shouted, but she kept walking,” and then use sentence frames to explain the idea in academic language.

Anchor Maps function as a reference tool that students can consult independently during reading, discussion, and writing. What makes Anchor Maps unique is their revisability and student ownership. Anchor Maps can be created in about 10–15 minutes, depending on the number of terms and the students’ language levels. In my classes, I usually begin by modeling one Anchor Map with the whole class before

asking students to create their own. Students may work individually, in pairs, or in small groups. For example, one pair might create an Anchor Map for *resilience*, while another group creates one for *justice*. Anchor Maps can be completed on paper, in student notebooks, on chart paper, or in a shared digital document. Before students begin, the teacher should choose 3–6 important academic terms from the lesson, model a student-friendly definition, and show how to connect each word to a visual and an example sentence from the text.

Sample Anchor Map with Color Coding & Icons (Language Anchors for *Through My Eyes*)

Text: *Through My Eyes* by Ruby Bridges

Subject/Topic: ★ *Resilience in Through My Eyes*

Key Vocabulary (Synonyms & Related Words):

1. 🦁 Perseverance
2. 🎯 Determination
3. 🏆 Overcoming adversity

Key Phrases (Examples from Text):

1. 🦁 She continued despite obstacles.
2. 🎯 People shouted, but she kept walking.
3. 🏆 Holding my mother's hand tightly.

Sentence Frames (Language Anchors):

1. [Character] demonstrates resilience when they [action] because [reason].
2. [Character] Despite [challenge], [character] continues to [action].
3. [Character] remains determined by [example].

Figure 1. Example Anchor Map

2. Anchor Talks

Anchor Talks are structured oral routines where students use teacher-supplied sentence frames to express academic ideas in partner or group discussions. Anchor Talks provide students with guided opportunities to explain ideas and justify responses using target vocabulary.

Unlike generic speaking prompts or Think-Pair-Share activities, Anchor Talks

emphasize repeated practice using sentence stems tied to target vocabulary and academic

- Writing a comic strip using three Anchor terms

Unlike traditional word walls, which display vocabulary passively, Anchor Boards are built and updated by students themselves.

phrasing, with an emphasis on fluency, reflection, and peer modeling. Examples sentence stems used in an Anchor Talk might include:

- “_____ is important because...”
- “One example of _____ is...”
- “I see _____ when...”

Anchor Talks are usually introduced after students have created or reviewed an Anchor Map. The teacher first models one response aloud, points to the sentence frame, and shows how the target vocabulary fits into the sentence. For example, after reviewing the Anchor Map for *resilience*, students might respond to the prompt, “How does Ruby show resilience in this scene?” using the frame, “Ruby shows resilience because ____.” Another prompt could be, “Which action best shows resilience?” with the frame, “This action shows resilience because ____.” The stems can be displayed on the board, included on a slide, or kept on the Anchor Board for students to reuse during discussion and writing. During the activity, the teacher listens for use of the target vocabulary, invites a few students to share strong examples, and adds one or two student responses to the Anchor Board.

3. Anchor Challenges

Anchor Challenges deepen learner engagement with vocabulary by integrating content knowledge and language use in new contexts. These are not typical workbook exercises. Instead, students engage in mini-projects like:

- Acting out a skit with Anchor terms
- Writing a speech or short story using sentence frames and Anchor terms

For example, students can complete a “Theme Match-Up” Anchor Challenge connected to the *resilience* Anchor Map. The teacher gives small groups several short sentence cards from the text, such as “She kept walking” or “People shouted outside the school.” Students match each sentence card to an Anchor term, such as *resilience*, *bravery*, or *justice*, and then write a one-sentence explanation using a frame: “We chose ____ because ____.” During the challenge, students are encouraged to use their Anchor Maps to check definitions, related words, and example sentences. They may also use the sentence frames from the Anchor Board to explain their choices orally or in writing. This helps students move beyond recognizing vocabulary to applying it with evidence from the text.

4. Anchor Boards

Anchor Boards are evolving classroom hardcopy or digital displays that visually reinforce Anchor terms, sentence stems, and other student-generated content.

Unlike traditional word walls, which display vocabulary passively, Anchor Boards are built and updated by students themselves. They incorporate their own definitions, examples, reflections, and even audio or video recordings of language in use. For example, they can include photographs of individual or group Anchor Maps, sticky

“The Anchor Map helped me write my final paragraph. I finally knew how to use the word resilience in my own sentence.” — A quiet student's reflection

notes with student Anchor term definitions and questions about them, or QR codes or links to audio or video recordings of themselves using the target language in context. Anchor Boards are referenced and updated by students throughout the unit.

A low-tech Anchor Board can be created on chart paper, a classroom wall, or the whiteboard. For a unit on *Through My Eyes*, the board might include the Anchor words *resilience*, *bravery*, *injustice*, and *equality*; student-created Anchor Maps; sentence frames such as “This shows ____ because ____”; and sticky notes with student examples from the text. Students can add to the board throughout the unit as they find new examples or revise their understanding of the words.

A digital Anchor Board can include the same information in a shared slide deck, Padlet, or learning platform. Students can post digital Anchor Maps, short written reflections, or QR codes linking to audio or video recordings where they use Anchor terms and sentence frames to explain their thinking.

LANGUAGE ANCHOR TOOLS IN LOW-RESOURCE CONTEXTS

Digital technology and pre-printed materials are not required to use Language Anchors. In low-resource classrooms, students can create Anchor Maps in notebooks or on paper, while sentence frames for Anchor Talks can be written on the board and copied into student notebooks. Anchor Challenges can be done with handwritten word cards, sentence strips, or oral role-play tasks. A simple Anchor Board can be made with pinned paper, student drawings, or labeled examples from the text. These low-resource

Students can record a short audio or video reflection after the activity, explaining their thinking with the Anchor terms and sentence frames. The QR code can then link to that recording so the Anchor Board shows both the vocabulary and how students used it.

adaptations allow teachers to keep academic vocabulary visible, repeated, and actively used without relying on digital tools.

TRACKING GROWTH OVER TIME: LANGUAGE LOGS AND REFLECTION PROMPTS

Over the years, I’ve found simple ways to formatively assess how Language Anchors are helping students acquire academic language. One method is a student language log—a simple notebook entry or chart where students catalog Anchor terms, collect examples of where the terms are encountered, and record how they used the terms themselves in Anchor Talks, Anchor Challenges, or other contexts. Every few weeks, we review these logs as a class and talk about which words became easier to use, and which still feel tricky.

I’ve also asked students to write journal reflections at the end of each unit related to learning with Language Anchor tools. Prompts like “Which Anchor term do you use most?” or “Which Anchor term or sentence helped you sound more academic?” can provide powerful insights. For instance, after one unit, a quiet student reflected that: “The Anchor Map helped me write my final paragraph. I finally knew how to use the word *resilience* in my own sentence.” These small reflections remind me that vocabulary growth isn’t always loud—but it is meaningful.

CLOSING ADVICE

Language Anchors are meant to complement existing learning routines, not replace them. Here are a few tips to help you begin using the Language Anchor approach in your classes:

- Begin by creating a routine with just one Language Anchor tool, like Anchor Maps or Talks. For Maps, choose 3–6 academic terms related to your current topic; for a Talk, introduce 2–3 sentence frames that students can reuse in speaking (and perhaps later in writing).
- Keep Anchor routines short but regular—5 minutes a day can be enough.
- When practical, encourage students to create visuals, definitions, or examples collaboratively.
- Adjust sentence frames to match the proficiency levels and content focus in your class.
- Use everyday moments (e.g., exit tickets, group tasks, class discussions) to reinforce Anchor terms and academic language sentence stems.
- Celebrate progress visibly—feature student quotes or drawings in Anchor Boards or other places in class.

Together, the four Language Anchor tools can support a classroom environment where academic vocabulary is visible, repeated, and used in authentic communication—all of which empower EAL learners across subjects and classrooms.

About the author: Wyndell R. Williams, an EAL/TESOL educator and U.S. English Language Fellow based in Mongolia, has

over 12 years of international teaching and leadership experience. He has worked with multilingual learners and teachers across Asia and Africa and is completing an Ed.D. in Curriculum and Instruction.