# Imagining a New Kind of Self: Academic Language, Identity, and Content Area Learning

When we teach a subject, or any topic or text within that subject, we must teach the "academic vocabulary" necessary for dealing with it—not just the words, but also the linguistic processes and patterns for delving deeply into and operating upon that content.

Several of the articles in this issue remind us that vocabulary is only really learned in meaningful contexts. As we consider the next steps in our vocabulary teaching journey, I'd suggest that since we teachers must think about motivating and equipping our students to use academic language to engage in various kinds of disciplinary work, we need to conceive of "context" as the specific situations in the world (whether directly mirrored or simulated in our classrooms) in which disciplinary language and problem solving are necessary.

Further, we need to think of teaching vocabulary (and anything else) as inducting students into new ways of being, apprenticing them into new roles and identities, acculturating them into new "communities of practice" (i.e., groups of people who do real disciplinary work). To learn vocabulary and the conceptual and strategic tools that accompany it means to imagine yourself as a new and particular kind of person, the kind of person who can use language to do science, math, or ethics, and who can become a person who takes on the role and identity of a scientist, mathematician, ethicist, etc. As Gee (1990) maintains, academic language and processes imply and enable "ways of being in the world, ways of acting, thinking, interacting, valuing, believing, speaking, and sometimes reading and writing, connected to particular identities and roles" (p. 143).

## The Correspondence Concept

Framing instructional units or curricular topics as inquiry helps to provide a meaningful context for learning and to promote the forging of new literate and academic identities (see Wilhelm, 2007). For instance, reframing a social studies or language arts unit on civil rights into the question "Can freedom and security be balanced?" would tap students' preexisting interests in their own rights, and connect them to issues of fairness as questioners, connection makers, and socially aware problem solvers. These students would have to learn necessary vocabulary (civil rights, bias, prejudice, marginalization, ethnicity, etc.) in the context of a question that historians, journalists, social commentators, and others have long debated. They would repeatedly use this vocabulary to read, think, talk, and problem-solve like a historian, building their sense of possibility and identity as a person who can *do* history.

Let's be clear: if students are not learning to do and talk about history (or any other subject) in the way historians (or other practitioners from another community of practice) do it, they are not learning history. In any discipline, the learner's doing and thinking is expected to gradually approximate that of the experts. This "correspondence concept" holds that at the end of any instructional activity or reading, the learner should have something in her head that more nearly and identifiably approaches (or corresponds to) what an expert has in hers. If not, then learning and competence have not been achieved (Bereiter, 2004; Nickerson, 1985). The takeaway: academic language is part of a cognitive toolbox for undertaking real content area tasks in the same or analogous ways to experts.


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## Ritual Structures and the Marginalized Student

I worry the most about my marginalized students, those who are already behind or who suffer from various lacks of social status, background, or cultural capital. Merely immersing them in rich language and the best of daily classroom activity, though essential, will not catch them up. Teachers must be conscious about considering and using academic language, and they must help students to be conscious about how academic language works and does not work. Schleppegrell (2004) expresses that student difficulties with disciplinary thinking "may be due to their lack of familiarity with the linguistic properties of the language through which the reasoning is expected to be presented . . ." (p. 2).

To make all our students keenly aware of how academic language works, we should use ritual structures to promote conscious understanding. Many of the techniques featured in this issue work to this end, but we must ritualize their use in all of our work. Ritualization means that 1) you will naturally begin to incorporate the techniques in your teaching, and 2) students will recognize and know how to use the technique to promote their own understanding and performance. Better to use well-chosen techniques repeatedly then to use them intermittently or, worse yet, to use a different one every time.

## Conscious Output

Students cannot learn all of the necessary linguistic processes by simply listening or reading, because these activities do not require the same depth of understanding or the same generative abilities regarding how language is structured to express meanings. So students need opportunities to talk and write, to compose meanings in various modalities, and to reflect upon how this meaning was expressed and the various other possibilities for expressing it. Inquiry contexts provide a meaningful setting and purpose for discussion (e.g., What are civil rights and how can you best protect them? What did this author or situation have to say about that?) and imply both formal and informal kinds of writing that address relevant issues (extended definition of civil rights, a classification scheme of rights, a digital story about how certain rights were gained or lost).

## Context, Concepts, and Process Co-produce Understanding

When completing the classroom research for *Getting It Right* (2007) with my colleague Michael Smith, we explored how to promote correct language use in student writing. We were struck with how learning language went well beyond vocabulary. It involved a sense of purpose and urgency that could only be provided by an environment that encouraged personally relevant inquiry. It required using language in particular kinds of global structures: the kinds of sentences, paragraphs, and text-types necessary for particular kinds of problem-solving like defining, classifying, analyzing data sets, seeing implied relationships, arguing with scientific or qualitative data, etc.

In other words, language, conceptual tools, and strategies were most effectively learned when used together to do specific, purposeful tasks. A working knowledge of academic vocabulary is essential to learning, but that cannot be achieved outside of the kinds of reading, writing, discussion, and problem solving that practitioners do within the disciplines we teach.

## References


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