

English Language Development: Acquiring the Language Needed for Literacy and Learning

Learning English – How Hard Is It, Anyway?

Although the learning of English as a second language is a process many Americans have experienced themselves, or witnessed in others, there remain numerous misconceptions about the process of second-language learning itself, as well as about the kinds of instructional support students need in order to attain the level of English required for success in school. Voters in California, Arizona, and Massachusetts were persuaded that the learning of English as a second language could happen quickly and successfully if English learners were submersed in English. Voter initiatives were passed in these states declaring that “Young immigrant children can easily acquire full fluency in a new language, such as English, if they are heavily exposed to that language in the classroom at an early age” and limiting the kind and amount of help that could be given to students who need to learn English. Supporters of these laws declared that English learners should be able to learn enough of the language in one year to allow them to move into regular classes and that no further attention should be needed.

Educators, however, know from research on language learning and from their own experience that most students require considerably more time and support to master English. They recognize that acquiring a second language is not an automatic process, nor does it depend strictly on the willingness and efforts of the learner. What has to be learned is a complex, multidimensional skill that can be acquired only through meaningful interactional experiences with speakers and materials that offer access to and practice with the forms and functions of the language itself. They recognize too that while students may learn English up to a certain point, without appropriate support, they often cannot achieve the level of proficiency required for successful subject-matter learning and true literacy.

What are the language skills required for literacy and school language, and what kinds of help do English learners require from their teachers to acquire those skills? These are the questions addressed in this monograph.

Language for Literacy and Learning

How does the language required for literacy development and school learning differ from the language students ordinarily acquire? In the past several years, frequent reference has been made to “academic English” in discussions of educating English learners. There is little clarity or specificity to be found in such discussions, however, as to what academic English is. Advanced vocabulary is an obvious component, but academic English is much more than that.



Lily Wong Fillmore

The importance of the distinction between the linguistic forms that are crucial to literacy and learning and those that suffice for everyday conversation was first emphasized by Jim Cummins (1979) three decades ago. He argued that the reason so many English language learners fail to thrive educationally after they have been judged to be proficient in English is that true language proficiency is more complex than is commonly assumed. Until then, knowing a language was viewed as a unidimensional skill and ability. It was assumed that as soon as English learners were able to communicate easily with their classmates and teachers, they would be able to handle school subjects taught in English without further linguistic support.

Cummins argued persuasively that language proficiency is not unidimensional but multidimensional, comprising at least two distinct types of linguistic skills. The first skills to develop, whether in a first or a second language, are those that figure in face-to-face interpersonal communication—what he characterized as “basic, interpersonal communication skills,” or BICS. The communicative skills and underlying linguistic abilities that constitute BICS depend as much on context for interpretation and understanding as they do on the precise words and structures used, and they are therefore relatively easy to acquire.

In my own research on second-language learning in young students in school, I found that within weeks of their first contact with English, the students were able to adopt phrases and expressions they heard their classmates and teachers using. By using these expressions in the contexts in which they had learned them, the students gave the impression that they knew and understood English well before they had actually learned much in that language. This turned out to be a crucial social strategy for the young learners I studied more than three decades ago (1976, 1979). The language skills that figure in BICS are learned in the context of meaningful social interactions with speakers of the language. The problem the learners faced was how to interact meaningfully with English speakers when they did not know the language. One solution was to pick up certain expressions and adopt them formulaically; for example:

- “Tunno.”
- “Dyu’wanna play?”
- “Wu’zat?”¹

Using these expressions enabled them to interact socially with their classmates, who could then provide further exposure to the new language, in contexts that offered them yet more useful phrases.

But, as Cummins argued, BICS was just the beginning. What children like the ones I studied had to do in order to deal with academic learning was to acquire

¹“I don’t know,” “Do you want to play?” and “What’s that?” are but several of the many expressions the learners I studied acquired and used early on in the process of learning English. I characterized them as “formulaic expressions” and argued that the students used these expressions more or less appropriately, but that they had little idea of the words or structures involved in them. Such expressions did, however, provide the students with the first step in cracking the code to the language they were learning. Once the expressions were in their speech repertoires, the learners were able to notice how parts of the expressions they knew figured in the language they heard others using, and in that way, they gradually sorted out first the words and then the structures that figured in them.

a second, more demanding kind of language proficiency. This second kind of linguistic knowledge Cummins characterized as “cognitive, academic language proficiency,” or CALP.² CALP is not supported by vivid motivating social contexts, but by knowledge of the language itself, words, and the structures of sentences and texts; it is most readily developed when students encounter cognitively demanding tasks when they already have a firm grounding in BICS-level skills. CALP, in this view, is developed primarily through literacy and instructional experiences at school. This constitutes an important theoretical argument for primary language literacy development and bilingual instruction for English language learners. Once CALP-level abilities have developed in students’ first language, they appear to transfer readily to a second language. CALP is harder to learn in a second language if it is underdeveloped in the first. But as we have seen, this approach has been circumvented by voter initiatives that have banned bilingual instruction in California, Arizona, and Massachusetts.

Of course, it is not *impossible* to develop the academic register in English without prior development in the primary language; for many children there is no other choice. It does mean, though, that English learners who have not had the benefit of primary-language literacy development will require special instructional attention to the academic register in school. But what is it about the academic register that learners and teachers need to attend to, and how might teachers provide the help English learners need?

The Academic Register of English

There is more talk about academic English these days than there are clear proposals on what it involves. Most efforts to characterize it mention its role in academic discourse on subjects such as history, literature, and science.

Others mention grammatical complexity and the use of technical and abstract vocabulary. This is all true, but how does the language used for talking about academic subjects differ from the language used in talking about everyday things and happenings?

It is certainly true that words such as *exponent* and *photosynthesis*, used in talking about math and science, are not familiar ones used in everyday discourse. And the linguistic structures used in talk about math and science are more complex—but in what way, and for what purpose? These questions have practical implications. With few details to work on, writers who are preparing texts for students who might have difficulty understanding the academic register tend to avoid using terminology that is unfamiliar or technical and stay with simple, unelaborated sentence patterns.

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² He has revised that initial terminology since then, but his first characterization is more memorable and apt than the subsequent description, which is why I continue using it. See Cummins (2000) for an extended discussion of his theory of proficiency and how it has developed over time.

This is the language we find in materials written for young readers; it is not greatly different from the language children hear spoken in the classroom. Texts that are used in school up through the third grade are written for children who are learning to read. Writers try to keep language simple and to avoid unusual words in the belief that children cannot handle more complex language until they are proficient in reading. When technical terms are unavoidable, writers provide glossaries or define the words in context.

By grades four and five, however, texts take on a different look and function. They are meant to serve as instructional tools, to teach, expand, or support learning. Fourth graders are assumed to know how to read well enough to use written texts by themselves as instructional materials. This is the grade at which “learning to read becomes reading to learn,” as Jeanne Chall described the transition that takes place at the fourth grade (Chall, 1983, 1996). Fourth-grade textbooks are less complex than those used at the eighth grade, of course, but the fourth grade is where writers begin to use forms and structures that are more complex than the language of spoken discourse. The language is complex by necessity. A text from which children are expected to learn content must be specific and unambiguous. In such texts the writer’s purpose is to introduce new facts and ideas and to show connections between these facts and ideas. To do that, authors must include as much background information as readers might need for interpretation, and this results in informationally dense texts, with a great deal of content packed into words, phrases, clauses, and sentences.

More importantly, such texts are meant to expand students’ background knowledge about the world, historical events, people and their lives, situations and experiences, and artistic expression, adding up to the broad knowledge base that supports successful reading comprehension. Children can only augment their knowledge base when they read *if* they can make sense of what they read. Children who are unable to understand the language used to convey information in texts are barred, not only from the information they contain, but also from the means to learn the kind of language in which the texts are written. It is a real dilemma: the linguistic forms and structures needed for true literacy can only be learned by reading, and attentive reading can only be carried out by someone who is already literate. This is a catch-22 in language and literacy development that will be discussed in detail below. But first, let us consider an example of a text from which students can, with instructional support, discover useful facts to expand their background knowledge of life in the nineteenth century in the American West, and the language used in conveying it.

A Middle-School Example of Academic Language

The following text is an excerpt from a fifth-grade reading passage, “Ghost Towns of the American West” by Raymond Bial, reprinted in *Pearson Reading Street*, Grade 5 anthology:

“In the typical western town, the buildings were often skirted with a sidewalk of wooden planks, along with hitching posts and water troughs for horses. There might be a bank made of solid brick to assure depositors that their hard cash or gold dust was safe from robbers. There might also be a mercantile store, an early version of

the department store, as well as a general store. The town certainly had to have a blacksmith shop and livery stable, as well as corrals for horses and cattle. Some towns had a telegraph office and their very own newspaper. The town might be lucky enough to be on a stagecoach route, a Pony Express station, or, better yet, a railroad stop.”

Although many students have visual images of mid-nineteenth century western towns gleaned from western movies or museums, few are likely to be familiar with the somewhat archaic terms this writer has used to give texture and authenticity to this passage. For example, the text tells us in the first sentence:

“In the typical western town, the buildings were often skirted with a sidewalk of wooden planks, along with hitching posts and water troughs for horses.”

This sentence invites the reader to imagine the hollow echo of boot heels on those sidewalks of wooden planks as townfolk went about their business. It invites the reader to consider what it means to say the buildings were often *skirted* with those sidewalks. Is that another way to say they were joined or bridged by wooden sidewalks? The reader who looks the word *skirt* up in a dictionary might discover that *skirt* is an archaic word for “edge” or “border” and further notice that a present day usage, *outskirts*, derives from that word. In so doing, readers add to their knowledge and relationships of words in the English lexicon. *Skirt* is but one of a number of words in this passage that anchor it and what is being described to an earlier period.

Terms such as *general store*, *mercantile store*, *hitching post*, *water troughs*, *livery stable* and *blacksmith shop* come from America’s past century, when travel was by horse or horse-drawn vehicles such as stagecoaches or by rail, and essential goods were sold in small businesses like the ones mentioned in this passage. How useful are these terms to the middle-school students who are the intended readers of this piece? Not only are these old terms no longer used, but in fact the establishments they refer to are no longer around or at all frequent.³

Do students need to know that the mercantile store was an early version of stores like Macy’s or K-Mart, where not only clothing, but ranch supplies, farm equipment, animal feed, and seeds could also be purchased? How useful is it for students whose preferred mode of communication with others is text messaging to know about the Pony Express and the telegraph office? Such vocabulary may not be essential for everyday purposes in their daily lives, but it provides students specific words to attach to aspects of a historical schema, which can then serve as the basis for elaboration and connection to related schemata.

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³ It should be noted that a part of the image most people have of typical western towns is the saloon, but, not surprisingly, that has been omitted from this description.

Through Internet projects, classrooms across the country and world can communicate and learn together.

It is through reading that students become familiar with worlds that they have not experienced. And research tells us that the more such background knowledge students have, the better is their ability to make sense of the texts they read.

In addition to familiarizing students with time-relevant vocabulary, texts like this passage also expose students to grammatical structures and textual devices that are characteristic of academic English. For example, the second sentence in this excerpt reads:

“There might be a bank made of solid brick to assure depositors that their hard cash or gold dust was safe from robbers.”

As is typical of academic writing, there is a great deal of information packed into this sentence. It presupposes that a reader can derive from the choice of words and the sentence structure the following ideas:

Clauses and phrases in sentence	What the reader has to understand or bring to the interpretation of this sentence
<i>There might be a bank</i>	The word <i>might</i> says that although these towns didn't always have a bank, they were likely to have one.
<i>made of solid brick</i>	Buildings constructed of “solid brick” were more secure than ones built of wood or merely faced with brick. Solid brick was the equivalent of today's FDIC in these western towns.
<i>to assure depositors</i>	The reason for building banks of solid brick was that people who used them might have had doubts about safety that needed to be dispelled.
<i>that their hard cash or gold dust</i>	In addition to <i>hard cash</i> , meaning actual money, people had gold nuggets or dust to put in the bank; in those days, prospectors might have gold to trade for goods or for cash money.
<i>was safe from robbers.</i>	People were afraid robbers would steal their money if it wasn't kept in a secure bank.

Informational density is a hallmark of academic language, where a great deal of information is packed into individual sentences. The grammatical devices that enable this include:

- modification of nouns in complex noun phrases; for example, “a bank made of solid brick,” in which a reduced relative clause, “made of solid brick,” is attached to the head of the noun phrase, “a bank,” as a post-nominal modifier
- “corrals for horses and cattle,” in which a preposition phrase, “for horses and cattle,” specifies the purpose of the *corrals*

Such grammatical devices are used more frequently in academic writing than in literary writing (say, in story texts), and are only infrequently used in conversational language, according to linguists who have compared spoken and written language of various types (Biber, Conrad, & Reppen, 1998; Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad, & Finegan, 1999).

Informationally dense discourse and complex noun phrases made so by clauses and phrases that elaborate and modify head nouns are just two of the key features of academic English. Other notable features include:

- specificity of reference, in which full noun phrases are preferred over pronouns, except in references that refer to something that has just been mentioned⁴
- frequent use of nouns that derive from verbs and adjectives; for example, *information* from *inform*, *conversation* from *converse*, *moderation* from *moderate*, and so on.
- use of the passive voice; for example, the buildings “were often skirted” with a sidewalk of wooden planks, a bank “made of solid brick,” and so on. (Twenty-five percent of all finite verbs in academic writing are in the passive voice.)
- grammatically complex sentence structure, made so by subordination, coordination, and adjunct phrases and clauses

How Do Students Acquire the Academic Register?

For the most part, the acquisition of the academic register, for second-language learners and native speakers alike, takes place in school through literacy experiences. Few students leave home with any facility in it, although there are students who have a leg up on learning it because they are already familiar with its forms, structures, and features. These are students whose caregivers have been telling stories or reading storybooks to them and have engaged them in discussions about the stories and about the ideas, feelings, and thoughts the stories have evoked. Students who have had such experiences understand the relationship between the printed and the spoken word well before they learn to read, and they know the difference between everyday conversational language and story language.

Four-year-old Iva is such a child. Her mother and father have been reading to her since she was an infant. By the time she was three, her favorite stories included *The Tales of Beatrix Potter*, and she had memorized many phrases that she found interesting or amusing. Among her favorites were ones she gleaned from *The Tale of Tom Kitten*:

- “‘I am affronted,’ said Mrs. Tabitha Twitchit” (when her kittens were disobedient and made a mess of their clothes).
- “Somehow there were very extraordinary noises overhead, which disturbed the dignity and repose of the tea party.”

⁴ In conversational language, pronouns are frequently used as the main referring expression to participants and to entities in the context of the immediate environment of the discourse.

Projects such as Internet Inquiry support students as they learn to use the Internet independently.

Reviewing various classroom

Web pages can guide teachers to use the Internet in their own classrooms.

Who can say why a child would find such lines memorable or noteworthy? But Iva did, and she frequently talked about being “affronted” by one thing or another. One day, her parents overheard her talking about “Captain Pugwash,” a character from another favorite story, who was “affronted by noises” that “disturbed the dignity and repose” of his pirate ship!

Students like Iva who have been engaged in rich and lively experiences with stories and ideas, whether as oral narratives or read-alouds by parents, in English or in any other language, have a special advantage when they arrive at school. Literacy is a natural next step for them. Their early experiences have grounded them in the ideas that stories are pleasurable, that they provide access to the realm of the imagination, and that they can stimulate conversation and interaction with others. Such students take readily to reading and writing, once they are in school and receive instruction in these skills. They will have little difficulty dealing with the intricacies of the academic register when they encounter it in the texts around the fourth or fifth grade.

English learners who have had similar experiences in the language of the home will, if they are schooled in English only, take a little longer to make the transition into English literacy. They must first learn enough English to understand the materials they are reading; but once they do, they too are on their way to English literacy and all it entails. For students who already have the most important prerequisites for literacy, reading in a second language, even one they have yet to master, is a temporary inconvenience. It is one they can overcome with a little help.

Learning to Read Without the Prerequisites for Literacy

But what about students who have not had such literacy experiences in the early years of life? A lot depends on how successfully they learn to read in the first few years of school. There are students who do so easily enough and who discover the pleasure of reading early on. Those who do, and who read widely and enthusiastically, have little difficulty dealing with the academic register when they encounter it in the texts they read.

A more frequent and likely outcome, however, is this: When students whose early experiences have not prepared them for literacy enter school, they learn basic reading skills without knowing their purpose. Ones who are also beginners in English are at a special disadvantage, since not only do they begin reading without a framework for literacy, they may even lack the linguistic framework that would allow them to differentiate the sounds and words they are being taught to decode. The consequence for far too many such students is that even if they do—against the odds—manage to learn to decode, they do not experience reading as a gateway to new worlds, experiences, and ideas. The reading skills they acquire may take them through the simple narratives of early reading materials, but their progress is halted at the point when simplification is no longer possible. And that happens at the point when the texts they read become the means for learning about subject matter. When the materials they “read” make little or no sense, students come to believe that reading is a meaningless exercise that must be done in school, but that it has no real purpose.

Comprehension of subject matter in texts requires not only strong reading skills but also knowledge of the linguistic structures and devices by which the information and ideas are encoded into texts. Only then can readers unpack and consider the ideas, arguments, and information the texts are meant to convey. What readers must be able to do is make use of structural cues to map not just words, but phrases and clauses too, onto meaning. They must recognize when words invite presuppositions or particular phrasings require that inferences be drawn and when they need to call on background knowledge and knowledge of text structure to do so. If students understand such texts, they have access to academic language, and the texts can serve as the basis for learning it. At present, many students, including native speakers of English, cannot do this because they do not have an adequate command of the academic register in which school texts are written. And because they cannot, they are barred from access to the means for learning this kind of language. This is the catch-22 in language development alluded to earlier. A solution for this problem begins with the recognition of the importance of language development in literacy instruction.

First Steps in Tackling the Catch-22 in Academic Language Learning

For many students, the problem of access to the language of literacy and learning stems from their not having had opportunities to experience what is possible with books. Can schools improve literacy instruction by helping students acquire the prerequisites that are foundational to learning? Educators recognize that students who are at educational risk have special needs, but too often they arrive at the wrong conclusion as to what it is the students need. The strategy most often adopted for students who are deemed to be at risk educationally is remedial instruction, whereby they are drilled in the basic skills of literacy—the letters of the alphabet, the sounds that make up words, which words rhyme, and the like. Such skills used to be taught in kindergarten, but in recent years, they have been pushed down into the preschool curriculum, especially for students from poor and minority families, whether or not they really are at risk. But is that what these students, or any students for that matter, need at this early stage in their schooling?

I will argue that the best way to prepare students for literacy in the early years of life is to provide them with the experiences that enrich the lives of all students. What they need are opportunities to get acquainted with books, the print world, and the language of literacy. The 1985 report of the Commission on Reading, *Becoming a Nation of Readers*, after reviewing a quarter-century of research on reading, declared that “the single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading is reading aloud to children.”

In preschool, students should be treated to stories from books; conversations about those stories with adults and schoolmates; dramatic plays with props that are centered on the stories; and artistic and musical activities that encourage students to play with the concepts, themes, and language from those

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stories. Students who have had several years of such experiences enter school with an enthusiasm for books that will take them into literacy. What they do not need is an early start on believing that learning at school is drudgery and that the skills they learn in school are unconnected with anything else that is going on in their lives.

Learning activities centered around read-alouds promote language development for preschool students, but what is required for supporting academic language development as students begin reading instruction? What about struggling readers?

“What struggling readers need most while they are in the process of learning to read are books and literature to which they would not otherwise have access.”

How useful is time spent reading to students for whom every second of instructional time has to count? If these students are struggling precisely because they began reading without a clear understanding of the purpose of the skills they were learning, then this practice may be one of the most powerful tools available to teachers for setting these students on the path to literacy.

Students who have not found it easy to read often have low self-esteem. They suspect that there must be something wrong with themselves—they are not as smart as the other students in their class. Struggling readers are

usually grouped together for reading instruction. When they attempt to read, the result is a tentative, halting, and effortful sounding-out of syllables and words that yields no rhythm, no flow or music, and little or no sense. Reading to such students helps them see that it might be worth the time, effort, and trouble of learning to read on their own.

What struggling readers need most while they are in the process of learning to read are books and literature to which they would not otherwise have access. They need opportunities to discover the worlds of experiences and information that are available to them in books and to discover the sheer pleasure of hearing words someone wrote in the hope of delighting the reader’s mind and ear. Most of all, these struggling readers need to know that books use forms and structures that are different from ordinary spoken language, but that they can be understood and made meaningful, with help and discussion.

Developing Academic Language in School-Age Students

Reading materials for young readers are selected or prepared with their developmental needs in mind. The earliest books in a reading program are decodable and draw on words young readers are likely to know. They become meaningful, even to students who are relatively new to English, as teachers guide discussions focusing on elements of the stories, linking these to specific words and phrases that occur in the texts.

For English learners, such kind of help is mainly available when they are new to English, but not when they are believed to have learned enough English to get by in school. For students who begin school as English learners, this usually happens after about four or five years. By that time, most students are able to communicate easily enough with teachers and classmates; they have made progress in learning the basic skills required for English literacy and can generally understand the simple texts they have been reading in school.

As we have seen, however, the materials students read in school change when they reach the fourth or fifth grade. The language gradually takes on the complexity and characteristics of academic language discussed above. This change disconcerts many students when they discover that—suddenly—the materials they read become harder to follow and less transparent in meaning. Much has been written about the famous fourth-grade nose-dive in reading test scores. This shift to the academic register must surely be a contributing factor. For students who have already discovered the joy of reading and are doing so eagerly and widely, this change is hardly noticed. For those who do not yet realize that reading can be pleasurable and are not reading except what must be read in school, the linguistic transition is likely to be much more difficult. These are the students whose reading test scores fall off at the fourth grade. With effort and encouragement, some eventually get back on track and move on. Many others do not; these include both native speakers of English and English learners alike. Students who have not received along the way the instructional support required to help them deal with the language demands of literacy tend to fall further and further behind.

So what can educators do to prevent this from happening? What kind of instructional support is needed, and how is it to be provided? Grammar instruction? Vocabulary instruction? More ESL? Work on comprehension skills?

The answer is that all of those approaches are useful, but none deals directly with the problem of academic language. What do students do when they encounter it in the texts they are reading? They first try to sort out what the individual words mean, with the idea that the meaning of text is the sum of the words it contains. And when that approach yields little that is meaningful, they simply move on, without taking much if any notice of the structural properties of the text. They are confused by the text but assume that it may not matter whether or not they understand it. And they move on.

The problem here is that difficulties in comprehension abound when students do not notice or know how to interpret the often complex structural properties that are characteristic of academic language. How, then, do students gain the structural knowledge that enables them to deal with such language?

I will argue that the most effective method for helping students learn the language needed for text understanding at this level is through *instructional conversations* (Tharp and Gallimore, 1991; Goldenberg, 1991) focused on language in the materials students are reading in school. Such teacher-guided conversations need to occur at various points during instructional events, where teachers draw their students' attention to how language is used in the texts they are reading. The conversations focus on the relationship between structure and meaning and between form and function of words, phrases, clauses, and larger segments in texts, with teachers providing students many opportunities to participate in these discussions. Ideally, these conversations should appear to be spontaneous, although they should in fact be planned and carefully integrated into the instructional program. The passages selected for such instructional conversations

“How, then, do students gain the structural knowledge that enables them to deal with such language?”

should be preselected for informational density, and conversation starters should be planned that focus on various aspects of its structure and their contribution to the meaning of the whole sentence and the larger text from which it is drawn.

The following is an example of such an instructional conversation, based on the ghost town passage discussed earlier, where a teacher might begin:

“Okay, so these ghost towns were living towns in the 1800s, when people were just moving out to the western states. Let’s see what the text tells us about life in those towns. Hmmmm . . . ‘In the typical western town, the buildings were often skirted with a sidewalk of wooden planks, along with hitching posts and water troughs for horses.’ Whoa! This sentence is chock-full of information. Let’s see if we can figure out what it is telling us.”

The focus of the conversation and the conversational starters a teacher might use are these:

Focus	Conversational starters
<p><i>In the typical western town</i></p> <p>This phrase tells us that what follows is descriptive of the features that are representative of the towns being discussed in this text.</p>	<p>What do you think it means to say, “In the typical western town”? How else have you heard this word used? If I tell someone that “a typical day at school begins with roll-call, the salute to the flag, and so on,” what am I saying? So—“In the typical western town” must mean . . . ?</p>

Focus	Conversational starters
<p><i>the buildings were often skirted with a sidewalk of wooden planks</i></p> <p>The verb in this passivized clause is an archaic form, meaning “border” or “edge.” It would be pointless to try to elicit the definition by asking students what it means or to guess at the meaning through context. Instead, it invites a demonstration of how readers might work with dictionary definitions.</p> <p>Students will probably not be troubled by this, but the word <i>often</i> here doesn’t mean that particular buildings sometimes are, and sometimes are not, surrounded by wooden sidewalks, but that in a sample of “typical” western towns, many of those towns will have such properties.</p>	<p>I wonder what it means to say, “the buildings were often skirted with a sidewalk of wooden planks . . . ” Skirted? Surely they weren’t wearing skirts! We’re going to have to look this up!</p> <p>Okay—so here is what our dictionary* says:</p> <p><i>(noun):</i> “a piece of clothing worn by women and girls, which hangs down from the waist like the bottom part of a dress.” What do you think?</p> <p>“the skirts (British English) the outside edge of a forest, etc. [= outskirts].” Does that work?</p> <p><i>(verb):</i> “to go around the outside edge of a place or area: <i>The old footpath skirts around the village.</i>”</p> <p>Whoa! What about this one? Let’s try that out. We have to turn things a little to test it out, but: a sidewalk goes around the outside edge of buildings? How does that sound to you? So <i>skirt</i> must mean . . . ?</p> <p>* (These are from <i>The Longman Online Dictionary of Contemporary English Advanced Learner’s Dictionary</i>, http://www.ldoceonline.com/dictionary/skirt_2)</p>
<p><i>with a sidewalk of wooden planks</i></p> <p>Notice that this phrase is composed of two prepositional phrases (“with a sidewalk” and “of wooden planks”) with “of wooden planks” an integral part of the noun, <i>sidewalk</i>. For that reason this phrase should be discussed in its entirety rather than deconstructed further for discussion.</p>	<p>Let’s see what this sentence is telling us the buildings were skirted with. What do you think a sidewalk of wooden planks means? What are sidewalks made of today? But this phrase says a sidewalk of wooden planks. What are planks, anyway? So sidewalks must have been made of wooden planks in those days.</p>

Focus	Conversational starters
<p><i>along with hitching posts and water troughs for horses</i></p> <p>This continues the set of objects the text says the buildings are skirted by.</p>	<p>Hmmmm—it says here, “along with hitching posts and water troughs for horses,” so it sounds like both of these things are for horses. But what do you imagine a hitching post is used for? Why are water troughs needed?</p>
<p>the entire sentence</p> <p>Since this sentence is descriptive, asking students to describe the picture they would have of the town, drawing on the description in the text, would be a good summary.</p>	<p>Okay, so it sounds like people must have been riding horses in those towns. So let’s see if we can tell from this sentence what we might see if we were to visit one of these old western towns back in the 1880s or 1890s. What would you see? What would you hear? What does it sound like when people walk on those wooden sidewalks?</p>

In this way, teachers draw their students’ attention to how words, phrases, sentences, and paragraphs work, with the goal of helping them unpack meaning from text; understand how language works in various types of texts; and discover the relationships between form, function, and meaning in written language.

How much time should an exercise like the one outlined here take? Probably not more than ten or fifteen minutes. But such exercises should occur every day, in one curricular area or another. A discussion might be based on a sentence or

two from the language arts curriculum one day and from math or science on another. Students who are finding the language in the texts they are reading difficult to understand need help with reading across the curriculum, and they need to discover that the same strategies can be applied to text understanding irrespective of the area. But why just one sentence, as in this outline, and why such a short time for these discussions? The object of language-focused discussions is to make language an abiding and continuing instructional concern but not the central focus in the curriculum.

Done regularly enough, though, these conversations will lead to students’ themselves noticing the way language

works in the texts they are reading, and they will lead to students’ applying the strategies to those materials. Over time, students will begin to see how academic language works and, one hopes, begin to use the linguistic resources they are discovering in their own communicative efforts. This is how language learning works.

“The object of language-focused discussions is to make language an abiding and continuing instructional concern but not the central focus in the curriculum.”

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