

Language Strategies for Active Participation and Learning

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A Rationale for Systematically Teaching Classroom Language Functions

Given the increasing linguistic and cultural diversity in our schools nationwide, teachers across the grade levels and subject areas must assume responsibility for developing academic language competence in all their students. Language competence entails considerably more than a critical mass of new words to comprehend a reading selection, lecture or video. Language proficiency in a challenging, standards-conscious secondary English language Arts classroom includes not only the relevant vocabulary to access lessons content, but also the various language forms or structures needed to discuss the content.

Reading researchers (Chall, 1996; Hirsch & Moats, 2001) have long bemoaned the drastic widening of the already-wide reading and academic language gap in the upper grades between rich and poor students. There exist vast and well-documented differences between middle-class and low-income students' familiarity with complex syntax and vocabulary for classroom contexts. Academic language is strikingly different from everyday conversation. It includes the language of text in diverse fields of study and the conventions of various genres. It also entails linguistic strategies for a wide range of communicative purposes.

Scholars in the instruction of K-12 second language learners (Doughty & Williams, 1998; Dutro; & Moran, 2002; Scarcella, 1996) point to an equally disheartening void in the linguistic competence of upper-grades and adolescent English learners. Because second language students at intermediate and advanced levels of English proficiency commonly receive only incidental explicit language instruction

(California Department of Education, 2000), they may gain superficial oral fluency but never learn English well enough to be academically competitive with their native English-speaking peers.

Though much everyday vocabulary and syntax may certainly be acquired through informal interactions within and outside the classroom, the linguistic skills necessary to make inferences during a class discussion about the meaning of a poem is not picked up by osmosis. And while there are numerous opportunities for language learning over the course of a week in a secondary Language Arts classroom, merely being exposed to and engaged in English speaking activities by no means assures development of what Johnson (1995) refers to as "classroom communicative competence."

Despite the complexities of daily classroom communication, all too frequently secondary students are placed into an interactive learning format without having been adequately prepared for the linguistic demands of the task. Language acquisition researchers (Halliday, 1973; Johnson, 1995) and cooperative learning practitioners (Kagan, 1992; Olsen, 1992) both emphasize the importance of formally teaching students the *language functions* they need to successfully achieve an array of classroom communicative purposes. *Language functions* refer to ways in which we use language to accomplish various communicative goals, ranging from asking for clarification, to rephrasing, to expressing an opinion.

As crucial as these language functions are to both social and academic success, TESOL curriculum scholars Sarosy and Sherak (2002) emphasize that English teachers routinely overlook these vital communicative competencies in their second language lesson planning, operating from relative benign neglect, a lack of awareness of their daily

classroom utility. These TESOL practitioners contend that native English-speaking students tend to acquire and utilize these language functions naturally and spontaneously as they progress in their schooling, which may make their pivotal communicative role seemingly “unremarkable” to teachers. Competent adult users of the English language may not consciously avail themselves of formal language conventions at a faculty meeting in order to diplomatically interject a point or to acknowledge a colleague’s contribution. We need, however, to become critically aware of the linguistic demands of the various communicative contexts in our Language Arts lessons if we have any commitment to narrowing the verbal gap. Our students clearly enter secondary school with differential preparation for the linguistic and literacy expectations of the core curricula, including the language functions to successfully participate in either unified-class discussions or small-group activities. For both native English speakers and second-language learners, acquiring a range of academic-language skills to achieve long-term success in school is a protracted endeavor. Unless teachers in every subject area integrate purposeful language strategy instruction in tandem with ample opportunities to apply these communicative tools, the verbal scores of less advantaged students will maintain the same disappointing trajectory.

Guidelines for Integrating Communicative Language Strategy Instruction

One concrete way to narrow the verbal gap in mixed-ability classrooms is to create meaningful daily contexts for interactive learning and devote generous class time to preparing students for the communicative demands of specific tasks. The participation structures outlined in this course are powerful mechanisms for structured and democratic discussion and learning. However, without relevant linguistic preparation, a second language learner or less proficient reader can flounder in any one of these promising interactive structures just as easily as in a

traditional lecture-discussion format.

Because these structures involve students in dynamic and responsible interaction, they understandably require a range of language skills that may be unfamiliar to many if not most students. Native English-speaking students and second language learners alike enter secondary classrooms with both appropriate and inappropriate language strategies for even casual social interactions. While it may not raise eyebrows to request clarification by exclaiming “I don’t get it!” or “What?!” within a group of adolescent peers, these responses would have a predictable ulcer-inducing impact on a teacher, administrator, law officer or job supervisor. Regardless of their socio-economic or linguistic background, all students benefit from mentoring in appropriate language strategies to achieve communicative goals in more formal contexts such as the classroom or workplace.

And given the range of linguistic abilities evident within the contemporary heterogeneous Language Arts classroom, conscientious educators will need to infuse language strategy training both patiently and systematically throughout the academic year. Students will not develop classroom communicative competence as the outcome of a “spray and pray” exposure to a few relevant expressions. In a class of 35 students, each approaches the communicative demands of interactive learning formats with varying degrees of familiarity with lesson concept, vocabulary, and language functions. Language strategy training must therefore be integrated in a developmental and recursive fashion, allowing students at various language learning stages to make observable strides.

Steps in Integrating Language Strategy Training Within a Lesson

- 1. Select a participation structure that lends itself well to the lesson content and desired learning outcome.** For example, prior to guiding your students in reading the informational article *Burning Out at Nine*, which

continued on next page...

addresses the impact of chronic over-scheduling on youngsters, you ask students to keep a record of their daily activities over the course of a week. As a follow-up task, students analyze their completed schedules to determine the ratio of scheduled and unscheduled time, and then decide whether their typical weekly agenda is well balanced, impacted by too many school and familial responsibilities, relatively devoid of productive extracurricular free-time activities, etc. Students then report the results of their analysis within an Idea Wave. Specifically, students share the two ways in which they seem to be regularly spending their free time: reading, participating in organized sports, watching television, talking on the phone, drawing, etc. In so doing, every student will have an opportunity to contribute relevant data, and the unified class can make inferences about their overall scheduling patterns, constraints, and priorities. Students are thus conceptually primed for the focus of the reading selection, and in a more informed position to grapple productively with the author's contentions.

- 2. Identify the language functions embedded within the communicative tasks.** If students will be engaged in face-to-face small-group or partner interaction, will they be brainstorming ideas, synthesizing ideas, making inferences, reaching a consensus, comparing responses? If students will be engaged in a unified-class discussion format, will they be expected to actively listen and respond to each other's ideas, pointing out similarities and differences? Scrutinize the various components or stages of a task for the most vital language functions, then plan how and when you will explicitly teach these prerequisite strategies. For example, in order to effectively report the outcomes of their independent schedule analysis within an Idea Wave, students would benefit from strategy training in at least two critical areas. They would first need training in language strategies to make observation from data, including expressions such

as the following; I observe that....; I infer that....; I conclude that...; I can see that... They would additionally require strategies to demonstrate active listening by acknowledging similarities in perspectives and building upon their classmates' contributions. While most students would be comfortable with everyday usage My idea is the same as..., many are apt to be less familiar with more formal language strategies to achieve this communicative function like the following; My idea is related/similar to..., My idea builds upon____'s.

- 3. Consider the range of language proficiency in your class.** If you have dramatically under-prepared readers and English language users sitting side by side with academically-gifted learners who read at or above grade level, you will need to include a developmental array of relevant language strategies that can stretch students at various starting points. You might initially offer three ways to achieve the same communicative goal, making sure that your examples range from a more accessible entry-level usage to a more sophisticated variety. As an illustration, when introducing students to strategies to acknowledge their peer's contributions before offering a personal perspective within a class Idea Wave an entry-level tool kit might include these three introductory expressions: My idea is similar to...; My idea is related to...; My idea builds upon____'s.

In a subsequent lesson including a class Idea Wave, student should be reminded of these three initial expressions, then taught one or two new and more challenging strategies such as the following: My idea dovetails with... or Unlike___, I believe that... The instructional goal is to better equip students at their current developmental level, and this will necessitate patiently revisiting familiar strategies for less prepared learners and routinely energizing the familiar list with new strategies to stretch more prepared learners.

- 4. Hold students accountable for copying new strategies in a notebook in a systematic and organized fashion.** Have them keep a dedicated section in their binder or notebook exclusively for these language strategies. Pages could be devoted to specific language functions. In other words, ask students to keep a separate page for each of the target language functions: making predictions, requesting clarification, rephrasing, reporting someone else's ideas, etc. As you introduce a target language function and an initial series of strategies, students should create a new reference page. In subsequent lessons necessitating this same language function, students can be asked to turn to this reminder page for a brief review before being introduced to any new relevant strategies, which can then be added to the list. In this manner, your language strategy training won't all be entrusted to their auditory memory, and in one ear and out the other before the next class session.
- 5. If you have the luxury of teaching in the same classroom throughout the day, it helps to create strategy posters which students can easily refer to during lessons.** You can create these reminder lists with simple butcher block paper, adding new strategies to each highlighted language function as you introduce them over the course of the school year.
- 6. Many adolescents are likely to be more impressed with the utility of robust linguistic repertoire for the work place and social mobility than for the classroom or for interacting with peers.** It doesn't really matter what serves as a viable incentive for students to acquire a more sophisticated and flexible range of language strategies. What truly matters is that we devote instructional primacy to this process. In so doing, long after our diverse students may have forgotten a relatively obscure lexical item from a short story or their SAT test preparation, they will be empowered with the communicative competence to successfully navigate, if they so choose, both academic and professional milieus.

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