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Language, literacy, and the needs of the multilingual child

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In this article, I first take on the issue of standards and the degree to which they do or do not contribute to the improvement of language and literacy outcomes for children in multilingual societies. Then I consider the relation of standards to language and, finally, raise the vexed issue of content knowledge and its relation to standards, on the one hand, and to language, on the other.

Keywords: standards, accountability, language development, second language learners

Standards in South Africa and the United States

In many countries, South Africa and the US among them, the default approach to improving educational outcomes for all children and to reducing gaps in academic achievement associated with language background, socio-economic status, parental education, and other such factors is to raise standards. Standards can be used, in the ideal policy setting, as a way of creating a vision of excellence, of building buy-in to a shared view of what children should learn and how teachers should teach, and of guiding the distribution of resources to schools in need. In the US, though, standards have often been used as a basis for punishing the schools or the students who do not live up to expectations and in some places as one factor in decisions about teacher retention and pay raises. In particularly perverse cases, resources are distributed such that schools that meet the standards get more and those that fail get fewer – as if access to fewer resources could in any way lead to a greater likelihood of success.

Though the education systems of the US and of South Africa differ in striking ways, there are similarities that may make the recent US experience with standards the preferred policy for driving educational improvement informative to a South African audience. Both countries are characterised by particularly high levels of income inequality though, of course, the inequality in the US centres on a higher per capita income than in South Africa. Both countries are dealing with the fallout of decades

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of inequalities in educational opportunities that have particularly disadvantaged nonwhite children. Both countries are now dealing with the challenge of providing education to a very high proportion of children who must learn English if they are to have access to full resources of the educational system. These challenges galvanised policy reactions in the US somewhat earlier than in South Africa: schooling was legally if not yet actually desegregated in the US in 1954, and language diversity was increasing rapidly due to immigration in the 1970s and 1980s. The brutal facts of insufficient and unequal educational outcomes had become matters of public discussion in the US by 1983 with the publication of A Nation at Risk (a 'Report to the Nation' written by The National Commission on Excellence in Education).

In 1995, the US Department of Education and the National Governors Association issued a set of educational goals and invited each of the 50 states to develop standards associated with those goals. (Under the US constitution, there is a limited federal role in education; primary responsibility rests with the states, which can then delegate responsibility to local educational authorities.) Thus, a system was developed in which each state sets its own standards, but those standards were not universally enforced with state assessments. This lack of enforcement led to a federal response in 2002. For the next eight years, during the George W Bush administration, the US educational policy was dominated by No Child Left Behind (NCLB), federal legislation passed with bipartisan support which prescribed that every school be rated according to level of success on the relevant state test, and that schools be held accountable to increase the percentage of students in each school and in each identified demographic subgroup passing the state test.

The laudable goals of NCLB were undermined by its unrealistic expectations for rapid progress in response to sanctions, but also by huge variation across the states in the rigour of their standards and, thus, the ease of passing their state tests (Linn, Baker & Betebenner, 2002). Strikingly, states that could demonstrate high pass rates and great progress on their state tests were often those that scored lowest on the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP), the nationally administered benchmark tests. In other words, many states had gamed the system by undermining the educational achievement of their students.

NCLB had firmly established in US educational policy making the principle that standards were an effective improvement tool. Therefore, when its flaws became obvious, the response was not to reject standards as a lever for reform but, in fact, to strengthen the standards. Thus was born the current US policy initiative, the Common Core State Standards (CCSS; see http://www.corestandards.org/the-standards). The CCSS differ from the NCLB-era standards in a number of ways. First, the standards articulated are much more rigorous – established by a process of determining the skills needed for successful entry to university or the workplace, and then working backwards in reasonable increments to determine how much a student would need to learn at each earlier grade. Second, the standards were developed by two groups (National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers) that

embody the constitutional authority of the states over educational policy, but that have the power to work together on a common agenda. Thus, the CCSS were made available for state adoption, but with prior buy-in by the governors and education leaders in many states. Ultimately, almost all the 50 states have adopted the CCSS, making them a national if not a federal system of expectations.

More specifically, the CCSS represent five major shifts in thinking from the NCLB-era standards:

1. Spotlighting text complexity. A major focus of the CCSS is that students must be expected to read larger quantities of more complex text than is currently required. The standards define a 'staircase of text complexity' up which students should climb, and the staircase brings with it a focus on teaching/learning the academic vocabulary that characterises complex texts of all sorts. While the CCSS commit the common error of reducing the challenges of academic language almost entirely to the sub-problem of academic vocabulary, they do bring attention to the domain of academic language. Most importantly, the CCSS transcend the NCLB focus on discrete reading and writing skills by shifting to a description of the reading and writing tasks students should be able to accomplish.

2. Increased emphasis on informational text and on building knowledge. The explicit identification of the reading and writing tasks students should be expected to complete in history/social studies, science, and technical subjects complements existing content standards for those domains; at the same time, it must be mentioned that the challenging literacy tasks prescribed are also, to some extent, in conflict with current content standards, which specify lists of topics, facts, and issues so long that no time for the in-depth analysis and synthesis required by the CCSS remains. The CCSS place a premium on building knowledge from reading, using informational texts (anticipating the reading required in college and workforce training programs). Thus, in kindergarten through 5th grade, a 50-50 balance between informational and literary reading is prescribed, whereas in Grades 6–12 even more informative reading is prescribed, including much more literary nonfiction in ELA than is currently assigned. The CCSS also specifies the need for a coherent general knowledge foundation in K-Grade 5 – though without much guidance about precisely what that entails.

3. Using evidence from text in writing. A major shift in the CCSS is away from the emphasis on narrative writing, in particular writing personal narratives, to a focus on writing with sources, i.e., using evidence from texts to present careful analyses, well-defended claims, and clear information. Relatedly, good reading comprehension questions are redefined in the CCSS as those that depend on careful reading of the text rather than just responding to it in general ways. Readers are expected to construct knowledge primarily from the text, so questions are meant to downplay the value of prior knowledge (a task many of us would argue is quite inconsistent with what we know about the natural process of reading comprehension). Nonetheless, the salubrious shift to teaching the importance of close reading in order to grasp information, arguments, ideas and details based on text evidence should serve students better than invitations to respond to texts with affective or evaluative comments. It should be noted, though, that the focus on drawing inferences and conclusions primarily by paying careful attention to text is in some conflict with the admonition to build a strong knowledge base, particularly for younger students and for those with poorer reading skills.

4. Connections across skill areas and integration of competencies. One of the strengths of the CCSS is its insistence that all the processes of communication are intertwined though, for conceptual clarity, the standards are divided into Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening, and Language strands. For example, Writing Standard 9 requires that students be able to write about what they read, and Speaking and Listening Standard 4 sets the expectation that students will share findings based on reading and research orally as well as in writing. Thus, the CCSS' specific expectations for accomplishments in reading, writing, speaking, and listening are not meant to define separable targets for instruction or assessment. A single rich task would include both teaching and testing of several standards. For example, when drawing evidence from literary and informational texts per Writing Standard 9, students are also demonstrating their comprehension skill in relation to specific standards in Reading. When discussing something they have read or written, students are also demonstrating their speaking and listening skills.

5. Shared responsibility across content areas for reaching the standards. In U.S. schools ELA teachers have traditionally had the sole responsibility for teaching literacy and, thus, were solely to blame if students struggled. The CCSS make explicit that instruction in reading, writing, speaking, listening, and language is a shared responsibility within the school. In K-5, where students typically have a single teacher, standards include expectations for reading, writing, speaking, listening, and language across subjects, including but not limited to ELA. In Grades 6–12, where teaching responsibilities are shared across many content area teachers, standards specify content area literacy skills to be taught and practiced in history, science, and technical subjects.

Another way of conceptualizing the major difference between the state-specific and the new common standards is depicted in figure 1. The challenge of acquiring sufficient literacy for academic success involves many domains, some of which are small in size and constrained in possibility. Learning the 26 letters of the English alphabet can be a challenge for a reception-class child but, ultimately, it is a very constrained task – no new letters will be encountered once the 26 have been learned. Similarly, the mapping of letters to sounds, while not absolutely straightforward in English, can be represented with a set of spelling rules that numbers only in the few hundred. Vocabulary, on the other hand, is a large domain (an estimated 80,000 words are needed to read introductory university-level texts), and one that continues to grow with the discovery of new phenomena and the invention of new artefacts. The language structures needed to read, write, speak, and comprehend academic language, and the knowledge base needed for reading comprehension, are huge and unconstrained domains. As figure 1 suggests, the NCLB-era literacy standards tended to focus on the smaller literacy domains – accurate word reading and fluency in reading aloud – whereas the new common core standards focus much more on the unconstrained domains, of which language is one.

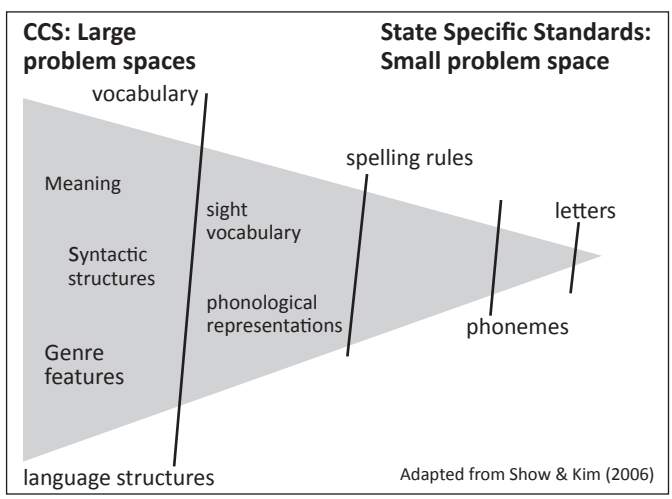

Figure 1. A schematic representation of the size of various domains of knowledge required for success in literacy tasks.

The relation of standards to language

One of the challenges in discussing the role of language in education is the several roles it plays. Language is not only a medium of education, but also an outcome of education – creating one of those difficult situations in which one has to know something before one can learn it. I will argue that a particular form of language, namely discussion, is a key tool for learning both language and content but that, at the same time, academic forms of language may have to be an explicit target of instruction for some children. The underlying assumption in the argument to follow is that we are talking about a system of education with high standards for student performance – standards like those articulated in the CCSS, in which the capacity to engage in analysis, synthesis and critique are central goals.

Language as medium

The language to be used as a medium of instruction is a recurrent question, in the U.S. as in South Africa. The U.S. is struggling with a huge achievement gap associated with language background. Children from non-English-speaking homes fall, on average, about .5 standard deviations below children from English-speaking homes in nationally administered comprehension assessments. On the other hand, accumulating evidence suggests they do not differ in word reading. The biggest persistent differences occur in the domain of vocabulary where, despite rapid acquisition during the early grades, they never catch up with English-only peers (Mancilla-Martinez & Lesaux, 2011). Targeted instructional programs can shrink the gap in domains explicitly taught (see, for example, Carlo, August, McLaughlin, Snow et al., 2004; Lesaux, Kieffer, Faller & Kelley, 2010; Snow, Lawrence & White, 2009), but the size of the vocabulary domain and of the domain of knowledge which it indexes frustrates efforts to eliminate skill differences that have accumulated over several years.

The U.S. has been a test bed for efforts to eliminate the gap associated with language background through the use of home languages in education. Bilingual education was a popular and widely implemented approach in U.S. schools in the 1970s and 1980s. It has since declined in popularity – ironically, just as the evidence indicates clearly that, other things held equal, bilingual education works better than confronting children with complex tasks in a completely unfamiliar language (Francis, Lesaux & August, 2006). Of course it must be pointed out that other things are never held entirely equal. Program quality is almost certainly a better predictor of outcomes than program type, and it may well be that, in the U.S. context at least (where bilingualism is not a societal norm), high-quality bilingual programs are more difficult to deliver than high-quality English-only programs.

As noted above, English-only programs seem to be more efficient in ensuring success in the constrained-domain skills (word reading accuracy and fluency) than in the unconstrained domains. One interpretation of this pattern of findings

is that the degree to which use of the home language is crucial and/or productive depends on the challenge level of the task. Learning to read initially is moderately challenging and might be facilitated by home language use, although home language use is not crucial. Learning to read for knowledge acquisition, analysis, synthesis and critique is much more challenging and might be a domain in which home language use is more crucial and/or productive. At least, such a hypothesis is worth testing. A complementary hypothesis is that, if home language instruction is not available, then instruction in a second language has to be of very high quality to help students acquire the unconstrained-domain skills.

Language as an educational outcome

Research consistently shows that severe deficits in vocabulary are associated with second-language-learner status for students growing up in poverty and attending under-resourced schools (Snow & Kim, 2006). Academic language is an area of considerable educational concern for such children, and many practitioners as well as researchers attribute their reading difficulties to a lack of familiarity with academic language. Unfortunately, the default definition of 'academic language' is academic vocabulary, ignoring the reality that many of the manifestations of academic language are related to syntax and discourse structures, and that some of them are not even language specific. In other words, students could learn academic language skills in a home language and be expected to transfer those skills easily to a second, school language.

My colleague, Paola Uccelli, and her collaborators have developed an inventory of academic language skills as a basis for designing an assessment (Uccelli, Barr, Dobbs, Galloway, Meneses & Sanchez, 2013). They are working in the context of a larger project in which the power of academic language to predict reading comprehension is being tested (see ccdd.serpmedia.org for more details about the larger project). Uccelli's team has identified four key testable components of academic language: information packing, linking ideas, discourse structure, and awareness of the academic language register. They have designed assessments for skills that fit into all these domains and demonstrated developmental regularities as well as reasonable correlations with state assessments of ELA skills. The imminent task of the larger project is to determine how much variance in reading comprehension outcomes is explained by these academic language factors.

Discussion as a context for learning academic language and other academic skills

As noted in the discussion of the CCSS with which I began, oral language skills, collaboration, and effective communication are explicitly mentioned as part of the speaking and listening standards. Our research with an instructional program called Word Generation (www.wg.serpmedia.org) strongly suggests that engaging in oral communication in the classroom, in particular issue-focused discussions, is itself a

context for developing the reading and writing skills highlighted by the CCSS – noting key ideas and details, integrating background knowledge with new information, critiquing arguments, and understanding perspectives expressed in the text.

Why do I argue that discussion is such a powerful instructional strategy? Because its affordances are rich and directly relevant to the skills we would like to nurture in our students. Discussion creates high levels of student engagement, opportunities to practice reasoning skills (providing warrants for claims, evaluating quality of evidence), a need for perspective taking (understanding the audience, anticipating counterarguments), an epistemic orientation (academic language use, a distanced stance), and rich possibilities for the incidental acquisition of knowledge. For students with reading problems, the opportunities for incidental content learning and for full participation in classroom activities are particularly valuable, and for second-language students discussion creates opportunities to speak in class that are otherwise often unavailable. Furthermore, if discussion is carried out in small groups rather than by the whole class, then home language use, with its potential to deepen understanding, also becomes possible.

There is now considerable evidence in the literature that classroom discussion works to promote critical thinking skills, reading comprehension, and involvement with big ideas (e.g., Applebee, Langer, Nystrand & Gamoran, 2003; Chapin, O'Connor & Anderson, 2003; Gamoran & Nystrand, 1991; Lawrence & Snow, 2010; Murphy, Wilkinson, Soter, Hennessey & Alexander, 2009). The challenge is that teachers are often ill-trained in running good discussions and, thus, also reluctant to do so. In our current work we are exploring the degree to which well-structured issue-focused curriculum can support teachers to generate more and richer discussions and, in turn, support the development of reasoning, perspective taking, academic language, and reading comprehension. Results from initial designs of the discussion-based curricular intervention are very promising (Lawrence, Capotosto, Branum-Martin, White & Snow, 2012; Snow, Lawrence & White, 2009); therefore, we are optimistic that the current design, which supports richer discussion by providing a more extended relevant knowledge base, will promote students' language and literacy skills.

Content knowledge as related to standards and to language

Our initial efforts to introduce discussion into U.S. classrooms relied on presenting discussable dilemmas in the context of relatively brief informative passages – 300 words or so, in which a few facts that could be used to support each side in the dilemma were provided. This led to quite satisfactory discussions in cases where the students could supplement those few facts with their own knowledge, e.g., when discussing questions like 'should rap music be censored?' or 'should school uniforms be obligatory?' Some of the topics, though, could not be adequately presented in a one-page text, e.g., 'Should undocumented immigrants be given amnesty?' or 'Should stem-cell research be federally funded?' Observing discussion of these more

challenging topics reminded us of the central importance of background knowledge in reading comprehension and effective argumentation.

Unfortunately, background knowledge is a site of deep inequality. We know about the differences in vocabulary between children from homes with low parental education and more middle-class homes (e.g., Hart & Risley, 1995). But responding to those differences in vocabulary by simply teaching lists of vocabulary words is demonstrably unsuccessful. The underlying difference is not whether a child can find a synonym for eruption, tide, or income. The big difference is the conceptual structures associated with those and thousands of other such words. Middle-class children who have the opportunity to engage in extended conversations with adults about topics such as volcanoes, tidal pools, and budgeting, not to mention elections, kinship, historical events, and the solar system, are automatically learning words like lava, brine, debt, franchise, genetic, revolution, and orbit, and acquiring information about the concepts they refer to in the context of related words and rich contextual knowledge. These conceptual structures (acquired in a home or a school language) are then available for use in reading comprehension, in thinking about the social and physical world, and in discussion.

A looming worry about the implementation of the CCSS in the U.S. is that these new standards will focus on the skills of analysis, synthesis and critique so heavily that opportunities in classrooms to build student knowledge are being ignored. This danger starts in early childhood programs, where pressures to teach English to speakers of other languages and to teach the basic, small-domain literacy skills may well leave no time for knowledge-building activities such as reading aloud and discussing topics introduced through the books read, or taking field trips, or engaging in science observations and conversations. We will have done our students no great service if we teach them to read words accurately and fluently but deprive them of the information they will need to truly comprehend complex texts.

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