LEADERSHIP LETTERS

Teaching the Language of Social Studies

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The ESL Challenge

In order to understand patterns of academic development among ESL students, we must distinguish the following three very different aspects of proficiency in a language:

Conversational fluency is the ability to carry on a conversation in familiar face-to-face situations. This is the kind of proficiency that the vast majority of native speakers of English have developed when they enter school at age five. It involves use of high-frequency words and simple grammatical constructions. ESL students generally develop fluency in conversational aspects of English within a year or two of exposure to the language either in school or in the environment.

Discrete language skills reflect specific phonological, literacy, and grammatical knowledge that students acquire as a result of direct instruction and both formal and informal practice (e.g., reading). Some of these discrete language skills are acquired early in schooling and some continue to be acquired throughout schooling. The discrete language skills acquired early include knowledge of the letters of the alphabet, the sounds represented by individual letters and combinations of letters, and the ability to decode written words into appropriate sounds. ESL students can learn these specific language skills at a relatively early stage in their acquisition of English; in fact, these

skills can be learned concurrently with their development of basic vocabulary and conversational proficiency.

As students progress through the grades, they will also acquire conventions about spelling, capitalization, and punctuation as well as information about grammatical rules (e.g., the fact that pluralization in English generally involves adding –s or –es to words) and exceptions to these rules (e.g., the fact that *took* rather than *taked* is the past tense of the verb *take).*

Academic language proficiency includes knowledge of the less frequent vocabulary of English as well as the ability to interpret and produce increasingly complex written language. As students progress through the grades, they encounter far more low-frequency words (primarily from Greek and Latin sources), complex syntax (e.g., passives), and abstract expressions that are virtually never heard in everyday conversation. Students are required to understand linguistically and conceptually demanding texts in the content areas (e.g., literature, social studies, science, mathematics) and to use this language accurately and coherently in their own writing.

Acquiring academic language is challenging for all students. For example, schools spend at least 12 years trying to extend the conversational language that native-speaking children bring to school into these more complex academic language spheres. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that research has repeatedly shown that ESL students usually require at least five years of exposure to academic English to catch up to native-speaker norms. In addition to the complexity of academic language, ESL students must catch up to a moving target. Every year, native speakers are making large gains in their reading and writing abilities and in their knowledge of vocabulary. In order to catch up to grade norms within six years, ESL students must make 15 months' gain in every 10-month school year. By contrast, the typical native-speaking student is expected to make 10 months' gain in a 10-month school year (Collier and Thomas 1999).

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All three aspects of language proficiency are important. However, they are frequently confused by policy makers and the media. For example, it is sometimes claimed that children acquire language rapidly and that one year of instructional support is sufficient to enable ESL students to catch up academically. In reality, many ESL students who have acquired fluent conversational skills are still a long way from grade-level performance in academic language proficiency (e.g., reading comprehension).

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Similarly, the learning of discrete language skills does not generalize automatically to academic language proficiency. ESL (and native-speaking) students who can "read" English fluently may have only a very limited understanding of the words they can decode. The development of reading comprehension ability in the content areas requires very different forms of instruction than the forms that are successful in teaching discrete language skills.

The differences between academic language proficiency and both conversational fluency and discrete language skills are highlighted by what is commonly termed the fourth-grade slump (Chall, Jacobs, and Baldwin 1990; Snow, Burns, and Griffin 1998). The fourth-grade slump refers to the phenomenon whereby low-income students who demonstrate grade level reading performance in the primary grades (1–3) begin to fall significantly behind grade norms starting at Grade 4, with the discrepancy growing larger with each succeeding grade. Chall and her colleagues reported that Grades 2 and 3 low-income students were on grade level in tests of word recognition, oral reading, spelling, and word meaning.

However, between Grades 4 and 11, the extent of deceleration in reading performance was "overwhelming" (1990, p. 43). Chall et al. attribute these trends to low-income students' weakness in academic vocabularies. They point out that at Grade 4 and beyond, "the reading materials become more complex, technical and abstract and are beyond the everyday experiences of most children" (1990, p. 45). In the primary grades where students were on grade level in word meaning, most of the words students were asked to define were common, familiar, and concrete words. Chall et al. note:

> Whereas the major hurdles prior to Grade 4 are learning to recognize in print the thousands of words whose meanings are already known and reading these fluently in connected texts with comprehension, the hurdle of Grade 4 and beyond is coping with increasingly complex language and thought.

The development of academic language proficiency, for both ESL and non-ESL students, requires specific instructional strategies designed to enable students to harvest the language they encounter in the content areas.

In short, academic language proficiency does not automatically develop on the basis either of students' conversational fluency in English or their knowledge of discrete language skills taught by means of direct instruction in school. The development of academic language proficiency, for both ESL and non-ESL students, requires specific instructional strategies designed to enable students to harvest the language they encounter in the content areas.

Teaching the Language of Social Studies

Language is central to the teaching of virtually every school subject. Social studies concepts are not just ideas that belong within the discipline of social studies;

they are also linguistic concepts. The concept of democracy, for example, is both a linguistic concept and a concept that occupies a central place in the teaching of social studies.

Language also intersects with the teaching of social studies in another way. Much of what students are expected to learn in social studies is presented in written text. Students are required to read the text in order to get the meaning and deepen their understanding of the concepts. They are also usually required to write assignments to demonstrate their understanding. Obviously, teachers and students will discuss these concepts, but without strong reading skills, students will find it very difficult to acquire the content. Without strong writing skills, they will have difficulty demonstrating their knowledge of the concepts. Thus, strong reading and writing skills are necessary for students to make progress in social studies, particularly as they progress through the elementary school grades.

There is one final linkage between social studies and academic language. Numerous research studies show clearly that the most significant predictor of reading comprehension ability is the amount of actual reading that students engage in. If students are not reading, they are simply not getting access to the language they need for academic success. Thus, the large amount of reading that students are required to carry out in social studies plays an important role in developing students' academic language proficiency and their overall reading abilities.

We can better understand the relationship between social studies and academic language by considering four different categories of vocabulary discussed by Paul Nation (1993, 2001):

1. High-frequency words In English these consist of approximately 2,000 word families that provide coverage of more than 80 percent of most written text. These word families include words such as *put, end,* and *come,* as well as most of the function words in English

(prepositions, conjunctions, and articles such as *in, and, the,* etc.).

2. General academic vocabulary This group of words consists of approximately 500–800 word families that are common in academic texts. They provide coverage of about 8–10 percent of the vocabulary found in texts in disciplines such as science, mathematics, social studies, and so on. Words such as *consult, context, immigrate, policy, revolution,* etc., are among these common academic words.

3. Technical or specialized vocabulary This usually comprises approximately 2,000 words for a particular subject area. These words are proportionately much more frequent in a specialized area than they are in the language as a whole and develop as a result of mastery of the field. They account for about 4–5 percent of academic text. In social studies, for example, a word such as *cabinet* may refer to a government decision-making body rather than to its more common meaning—a piece of furniture.

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4. Low-frequency words Nation estimates that there remain at least 123,000 low-frequency word families in English. He notes that adult native speakers of English with a post-secondary education have a vocabulary size of about 20,000 word families. Most of this vocabulary is made up of low-frequency words that "are learned through diverse and wide-ranging contact with the language" (1993, p. 125). Nation reviews research showing that "informal spoken language does not provide much opportunity for growth in knowledge of low-frequency words" (1993, p. 129). This vocabulary

grows slowly and "requires substantial amounts of reading or listening to language that contains more low-frequency words than colloquial language does" (1993, p. 129).

In social studies, students are required to expand the high-frequency vocabulary that they have already acquired into the less traveled spheres of general academic vocabulary, technical vocabulary, and low-frequency words. For ESL students, this challenge is considerably greater since they may still be struggling to acquire even the basic high-frequency words in the language.

To get a better sense of this challenge, and the nature of Grade 5 academic language, consider the following list of 52 words extracted from two Grade 5 units of Scott Foresman Social Studies. These units focused on the American Revolution and the period immediately following.

amendment	expedition	officially
anthem	federal	oppression
assembly	frontier	patriots
boycott	imported	pioneer
campaign	inauguration	proclaimed
civilians	independence	ratify
colonel	inflation	repeal
colonist	information	representing
compromise	interpret	revolution
convention	judicial	surveyor
corresponded	legislative	tariff
delegate	liberties	traitor
density	loyalist	treason
deserters	mercenary	tyranny
diagonal	militia	unalienable
document	minutemen	veto
economy	musket	
executive	neutral	

Clearly, students are unlikely to hear any of these words on the playground! They may come across some of them in their general reading of literature or in other texts such as newspapers and magazines. Some of these words may also occur in other subject matter. For example, they may have learned the meaning of *diagonal* in mathematics or come across the word *revolution* in science when they learned about how many revolutions the different planets make around the sun. However, now, in social studies, they are faced with a different meaning of the word *revolution*.

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For both native speakers of English and ESL students, the vast majority of these words will be encountered for the first time in the context of their social studies program. The social studies content is inseparable from the linguistic concepts. The relationship between language and content is reciprocal. Students' academic language proficiency is what enables them to understand the social studies content. By the same token, as students learn social studies content, they simultaneously expand their academic language proficiency.

In short, to teach social studies effectively, we must know how to teach academic language effectively. Effective academic language instruction, and social studies instruction, is built on three fundamental pillars:

- Activate Prior Knowledge/Build Background Knowledge
- Access Content
- Extend Language

The challenge for us as teachers is to enable students,

and particularly ESL students, to harvest the language and concepts they encounter in learning social studies. Activating students' prior knowledge and building necessary background knowledge prepares the soil. When our instruction enables students to access and understand the content, we are sowing the seeds. And when we extend students' newly acquired language, we nurture strong and sustained growth of both intellect and academic language proficiency.

Activate Prior Knowledge/Build Background Knowledge

There is general agreement among cognitive psychologists that we learn by integrating new input into our existing cognitive structures or schemata. Our prior experience provides the foundation for interpreting new information. No learner is a blank slate. In reading, for example, we construct meaning by bringing our prior knowledge of language and of the world to the text. The more we already know about the particular topic in the text, the more of the text we understand. Our prior knowledge enables us to make inferences about the meaning of words and expressions that we may not have come across before. Furthermore, the more of the text we understand, the more new knowledge we can acquire. This expands our knowledge base (what cognitive psychologists call schemata) and this, in turn, enables us to understand even more concepts and vocabulary. Anna Uhl Chamot (1998) has expressed very clearly the "dramatic effect that prior knowledge has on learning new information and skills" and how this is particularly important for second-language learners:

> Nowhere is the role of prior knowledge more important than in second-language educational contexts. Students who can access their prior knowledge through the language and culture most familiar to them can call on a rich array of schemata, whereas students who believe they can only use that knowledge they have explicitly learned in the second language are limited in their access (1998, p. 197).

Thus, a major rationale for activating students' prior knowledge—or if there is minimal prior knowledge on a particular topic or issue, building it with the students—is to make the learning process more efficient. It is important to activate students' prior knowledge because students may not explicitly realize what they know about a particular topic or issue; consequently, their prior knowledge may not facilitate learning unless it is brought to consciousness.

In a classroom with second-language learners from diverse backgrounds, prior knowledge about a particular topic may vary widely. Thus, simple transmission of the information or skill will fail to connect with the prior knowledge and previous experience of many students.

Finding out what students know about a particular topic allows the teacher to supply relevant concepts or vocabulary that some or all students may be lacking but which will be important for understanding the upcoming text or lesson. Building this context permits students to understand more complex language and to pursue more cognitively demanding activities. It lessens the cognitive load of the text and frees up brain power.

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However, just as important for the learning process as these cognitive considerations is the fact that activation of prior knowledge enables teachers to validate culturally diverse students' background experiences and affirm their cultural knowledge. Inviting students to contribute what they already know to the class discussion communicates to students that the cultural and linguistic knowledge they are bringing into the classroom is

important. It also enables teachers to get to know their students much better than if students are confined to more passive roles in the classroom.

In summary, activating students' prior knowledge:

- Increases cognitive engagement and makes language and concepts more meaningful to students by enabling them to interpret new information in relation to what they already know;

- Enables teachers to get to know their students better as individuals with unique personal histories, which in turn, permits teachers to tune their instruction to the needs and interests of individual students; and

- Creates a context in the classroom where students' cultural knowledge is expressed, shared, and affirmed, thereby motivating students to invest themselves more fully in the learning process.

Access Content

How can teachers make the complex language of social studies comprehensible for students who are still in the process of learning English? One important strategy has already been noted in the previous section. Activating and building students' background knowledge is an essential part of the process of helping students gain access to the meaning. We attempt to modify the soil so that the meanings will take root. However, we can also support or scaffold students' learning by modifying the input itself.

The following list presents a variety of ways to modify the presentation of academic content to students so that they can more effectively get access to the meaning:

Using Visuals We commonly hear the expression "a picture is worth a thousand words." There is a lot of truth to this in teaching academic content. Visuals enable students to "see" the basic concept we are trying to teach much more effectively than if we rely only on words. Once students have the concept, they are much more likely to be able to figure out the meaning of the

words we use to talk about it. Among the visuals we can use in presenting academic content are: pictures/photographs, real objects, vocabulary cards, maps, and graphic organizers. Graphic organizers are particularly useful because they can be used by teachers not only to present concepts but also by students themselves to take notes, organize their ideas in logical categories, and summarize the results of group brainstorming on particular issues. Some of the common graphic organizers included in Scott Foresman Social Studies are: K-W-L charts (what we know, what we want to know, and what we have learned), T-charts (e.g., for contrasts); problem/solution charts; main idea charts; cause/effect charts; sequence charts; Venn diagrams; time lines, and word/concept webs. Teachers and students can also draw pictures, maps, and diagrams to clarify concepts and meanings. Students' attention can also be drawn to the importance of context and picture clues in the texts they are reading.

Dramatization/Acting Out For beginning ESL students, total physical response, where students act out commands, can be highly effective. Additionally, the meanings of individual words can be demonstrated through gestures and pantomime. The teacher can do this or call on students who know the meanings to act them out for other students to guess. This can also be a group activity that generates a lot of fun in the classroom. At more advanced levels, history can come alive in the classroom by having students dramatize historical events and characters. This kind of role-play is especially effective for ESL students as it enables them to take on another "persona" in the classroom.

Language Clarification This category includes a variety of strategies and language-oriented activities that clarify the meaning of new words and concepts. Use of dictionaries, either bilingual or English-only, is still the most direct method of getting access to meaning. Teachers can also modify their language to students by paraphrasing ideas and explaining new concepts

and words. They can explain new words by providing synonyms, antonyms, and definitions either in English or in the home language of students, if they know it. As discussed below, students can systematically collect these meanings in a personal or group word bank, either in the classroom computer or in a notebook.

Making Personal and Cultural Connections
Activating and extending students' background knowledge is not just a pre-reading activity. We should constantly search for ways to link the academic content with what students already know or what is familiar to them from their family or cultural experiences. This not only validates children's sense of identity but it also makes the learning more efficient. As Snow, Burns, and Griffin point out: "Every opportunity should be taken to extend and enrich children's background knowledge and understanding in every way possible, for the ultimate significance and memorability of any word or text depends on whether children possess the background knowledge and conceptual sophistication to understand its meaning" (1998, p. 219). For example, if we are discussing the American Revolution, we could ask students to interview family members to explore revolutions or coups in their countries of origin that they may know about or even have experienced.

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Extend Language

A systematic focus on and exploration of language is essential if students are to develop a curiosity about language and deepen their understanding of how words

work. Students should be encouraged to become language detectives who investigate the mysteries of language and how it has been used throughout history to shape and change society. Great leaders have frequently been powerful users of language. Martin Luther King is an obvious example. In studying social studies, students can expand not only their vocabulary and awareness of language, but also their understanding of how language intersects with all aspects of the ways in which societies are organized.

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In addition to exploring the broad issues of how human history and human societies are rooted in language, students can also explore the building blocks of language. In fact, the very complexity of academic language provides important opportunities for this exploration. As mentioned above, a large percentage of the less frequent academic and technical vocabulary of English derives from Latin and Greek roots. One implication of this is that word formation follows some very predictable patterns. These patterns are very similar in both English and Spanish. This reality gives bilingual Spanish-speaking students some additional clues to help them figure out the mysteries of academic language.

When students know some of the rules or conventions of how academic words are formed, it gives them an edge in extending their vocabulary. It helps them not only figure out the meanings of individual words but also how to form different parts of speech from these words. One way of organizing students' language detective work in social studies is to focus separately on

meaning, form, and use. This can be illustrated with reference to the word *revolution.*

Focus on meaning The *re-* prefix in *revolution* immediately gives us a clue that this word is derived from Latin and probably has a Spanish cognate. Bilingual Spanish-speaking students will be able to quickly work out that the term *revolution* has an almost identical cognate in Spanish—*revolución.* They may also be able to connect this term to the verb *volver,* meaning "to turn or change direction," and the noun *vuelta,* again meaning "a turn or change of direction." Thus, for these students (and potentially for all students) connecting with the Spanish (and Latin word origins) expands their understanding of the word and how its semantic connections evolved.

The meaning of different word forms can be explored. Thus, the verb related to *revolution* is *revolve;* the adjective is *revolutionary.* Semantically related words include the words *revolt* and *revolting.* Students could be challenged to figure out how the word *revolting* acquired its meaning of "disgusting." Similarly, students could explore semantic linkages between *revolution* and *revolver.* Finally, they could also be challenged to figure out the semantic relation between the ways the term *revolution* is used in social studies as compared to science.

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Another aspect of semantic exploration involves demystifying the meanings of the prefixes that many Latin and Greek origin words have. Thus, the prefix *re-* typically carries the meaning of "doing something again." The prefix *trans-* derives from the Latin preposition meaning "across." Thus, the word *transportation* means "to port or carry something across."

Categories that can be explored within a focus on meaning include: L1 equivalents, related words in L1 (e.g., cognates), synonyms, antonyms, homonyms, meaning of prefix, meaning of root, and meaning of suffix.

Focus on form Most of the root words that come from Latin/Greek form not just one part of speech; we can make nouns, verbs, and adjectives from many of them. If we know the typical patterns for forming nouns and adjectives from these verbs, we can recognize them when they appear in text. The implications for expanding students' vocabulary are clear: rather than learning just one word in isolation, students are enabled to learn entire word families, a process that can dramatically expand their working vocabulary. Take the words *information* and *informed* that appear among the Grade 4 Social Studies words listed previously. If students know that words that end in *–tion* are typically abstract nouns that have predictable relationships to verb and adjective forms, it opens up for them the meanings of the verb *inform* and the adjective *informative.* They will also be able to work out the four verb forms that regular English verbs take: *inform, informs, informed, informing.* The teacher can point out that another word on the list, declaration, follows exactly the same pattern (declare [v], *declares, declared, declaring; declaration* [n], *declarative* [adj]). Students can also discover that the person or thing that carries out the action is typically referred to by adding the suffix *–er* or *–or* (e.g., *informer).*

Categories that can be explored within a focus on form include: word family, grammatical patterns, words with same prefix, words with same root, and words with same suffix.

Focus on use Students can explore the range of uses of particular words through brainstorming as a class or small group; looking words up in dictionaries, encyclopedias, or thesauri; or asking parents or other adults. For example, in exploring uses of the word

information they may come across the phrase *The Information Society* that could open up all kinds of inquiry into the nature of current societal trends. In exploring the word *brewing,* they can learn how the metaphorical use of the term (e.g., unrest was *brewing)* relates to the more literal use of the term (e.g., the coffee was *brewing).* Other metaphorical uses such as the storm was *brewing* can also be identified.

Categories that can be explored within a focus on use include: general uses, idioms, metaphorical use, proverbs, advertisements, puns, and jokes.

> **Students who are systematically exploring the meanings, forms, and uses of the language they encounter in their social studies program will develop a much richer knowledge of, and appreciation of, language.**

Conclusion

Instruction must shift from simply teaching facts and discrete language skills to opening up ideas and the language in which they are expressed for active exploration and investigation. Students who are systematically exploring the meanings, forms, and uses of the language they encounter in their social studies program will develop a much richer knowledge of, and appreciation of, language. This rich language foundation will be evident in their ability to discuss and debate complex issues, in their writing about these issues, and in their performance on standardized tests. Regardless of their social class, income, cultural, or linguistic backgrounds, these students will leap over "the fourth-grade slump" and their academic language proficiency will expand rather than contract.

However, for this to happen, we must understand the nature of academic language proficiency and how it differs from both conversational fluency and discrete

language skills. Academic language proficiency develops in contexts where social studies content is systematically related to students' background knowledge, where support is provided for all students to access content, and where students are encouraged actively and systematically to harvest the language of academic success.

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