

## CHAPTER TWO



# *Connecting the Research on Academic Vocabulary and Discourse*

Teaching vocabulary is not an end in itself. It is only a precursor into reading, writing, and conducting rich discussions in every content area.

### **WHY IS VOCABULARY SO IMPORTANT?**

A rich language repertoire for any student is key for college and career readiness. What is more exciting is the opportunity that some students have to develop rich oral and written discourse in two or more languages. As the world becomes more and more interested in mastering second and third languages, our schools do not have to lag behind countries where many languages are valued and spoken. We have the potential in the United States for a multilingual and biliterate population.

Our country has a great advantage in developing high levels of language and literacy in two or more languages either simultaneously from early childhood or in quality, structured immersion programs for older students. We have evidence-based approaches for both (Slavin, Madden, Calderón, Chamberlain, & Hennessy, 2011).

We have the technology. We have the willing participants and their parents. What we need is the willpower and the courage to implement such programs that stress the development of a rich and comprehensive repertoire of vocabulary for all academic subjects and occasions (Hiebert & Kamil, 2005).

A recent trip to China was a wake-up call in several ways. First, we saw how teacher-training institutions are investing in preparing their faculty for developing and using academic English but not the written-only English as it was taught in the past, not the English that will simply help students pass the TOEFL to be accepted into U.S. universities, and not touristy English. On the contrary, they are focusing on the academic English that targets oracy and rich discourse. They want the English of business negotiations, scientific discussions, joint research investigations and publications, and instruction in their elementary and secondary schools.

Isn't this the type of English that we want to develop in our elementary, middle, and high schools? As more students from Asia and Europe are able to enter our top universities, isn't it time to prepare our own students to be just as competitive as those students are? Our English learners are already on their way.

Language is the instrument to achieve intellectual, social, and economic success. Language is the means to express our ideas, reflections, and thoughts in speech and writing. Language expresses the ways we think and learn. It mirrors our personality as we express ourselves and interpret our critical thinking and ideas about people and the world we live in and continuously encounter. Language is what we share to build community. The more languages that we speak, the more communities we share. The more words we own to navigate new situations, the better we survive within those situations.

At the most basic level, oral language means communicating with other people. But when we talk about academic oral language development across the curriculum, we do not mean just teaching students to speak as much as we mean improving their ability to communicate more effectively. At higher academic levels, effective speech and communication involve thinking, content knowledge, and skills development—which require a context for continuous practice and training in every subject in every classroom, particularly in secondary schools.

In our work with schools, we define *academic language* as a combination of words, phrases, sentences, and strategies to participate in class discussions, to show evidence of understanding and express complex concepts in texts, and to express oneself in academic writing.

State standards emphasize the development and use of academic language and discourse. For example, the California English Language Development (ELD) Standards state:

[A]ll students are expected to participate in sustained dialogue on a variety of topics and content areas: explain their thinking and build on others' ideas; construct arguments and justify their positions persuasively with sound evidence; and, effectively produce written and oral texts in a variety of informational and literary text types. (California State Board of Education, 2013, p. 9–10)

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) mention the word “vocabulary” more than 200 times. The section of the CCSS on college and career readiness and anchor standards for listening and speaking, Grades 6 through 12 (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010) address two anchor standards: (1) comprehension and collaboration and (2) presentation of knowledge and ideas. Each has subcategories defining what a student should understand and be able to do by the end of each grade. For the most part, these are general statements that focus on the following:

- Engaging effectively in collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher led) with diverse partners on topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly:
  - Recounting, describing, or summarizing key ideas or details from the text
  - Asking and answering questions about what a speaker says

- Summarizing what a speaker says and acknowledging new information, modifying one's own views
- Presenting an argument with claims and counterclaims

California's Critical Principles for Developing Language and Cognition in Academic Contexts require the following:

While advancing along the continuum of English language development levels, English learners at all levels engage in intellectually challenging literacy, disciplinary, and disciplinary literacy tasks. They use language in meaningful and relevant ways appropriate to grade level, content area, topic, purpose, audience, and text type in English language arts, mathematics, science, social studies, and the arts. Specifically, they use language to gain and exchange information and ideas in three communicative modes (collaborative, interpretive, and productive), and they apply knowledge of language to academic tasks via three cross-mode language processes (structuring cohesive texts, expanding and enriching ideas, and connecting and condensing ideas) using various linguistic resources. (California State Board of Education, 2013, p. 46)

### **REFLECT AND APPLY**

What do the CCSS and CA ELD standards call for which we haven't focused on before?

How do our curriculum, student reading texts, and my own instructional strategies address the standards?

## **FROM VOCABULARY TO DISCOURSE**

Vocabulary is the centerpiece of discourse. Discourse is the spoken, written, or visual way of communicating. Academic discourse is guided by the information a teacher presents, the texts students are reading, and the intellectually engaging interactions with peers—all of which entail summarizing verbally and in writing. Without classroom opportunities to read, discuss, and summarize orally and in writing, ELLs cannot progress in their academic English development.

Vocabulary instruction is guided by context—the audience, the text structures, the author’s purpose, and the discipline or content area. It is the role of the teacher to select key vocabulary and discourse features that students will need for comprehending and making meaning within a variety of communicative contexts (Graves, 2006; Nagy, 2005). The way we talk and write about science is different from the way we communicate in both modes in math. Math problems are succinct, and the language is very precise. The language of science is *tentative* in the sense that scientists always *suggest* rather than *assert* an answer. New math now asks for three or four ways of solving a problem, which means that more connectors and transition words need to be used such as *on the other hand* or *similarly* to connect the comparisons or contrasts. History books, and social studies texts in general, tend to have longer sentences and move back and forth between present, past, and future tenses. Literature, on the other hand, has a little of all these syntactical features but also uses more metaphors, similes, foreshadowing, rhyme, rhythm, and other features that distinguish it from the other subject areas. Hence, key vocabulary guides comprehension, quality discussions, and cohesive compositions for each content area. Most important, it anchors knowledge about the subjects students are studying.

### **How Do We Begin to Address These Language Demands?**

To address these verbal and written demands of ELLs and SELs, teachers need to create repeated opportunities for ELLs to be engaged in high-level technical oral language discourse in student teams, one-on-one, or whole-class discussions around thought-provoking texts and topics. The process of becoming proficient begins with teachers identifying the small units of language—the vocabulary—followed by modeling how to use those vocabulary units within oracy, reading comprehension, and writing.

Notwithstanding the significance of vocabulary, the activities throughout a lesson require that students be knowledgeable about the topic to reiterate what they learned; affirm their knowledge; analyze, summarize, or synthesize information; restate facts; provide conclusions; and provide points of view. These common skills across the content areas must be explicitly taught to ELLs and SELs. ELLs benefit greatly from additional guided practice,

corrective feedback, and instructional sequences that are taught systematically (Crawford-Brooke, 2013). Two of the best ways to teach these skills are for the teacher to model the words to express that skill through a Think Aloud and for students to interact with peers using that approach (Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007). (See examples in Chapter 4.)

**THINK ABOUT IT**

Why is it important to pre-teach five or so words before each subject lesson and not just in language arts or ELD/ESL classes?