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Academic Talk: A Key to Literacy *by Nonie K. Lesaux*

To develop stronger readers in classrooms across the country, we need more productive noise—the sounds of students talking and working together on academic tasks. Talk is, in fact, one of the most crucial tools in the classroom to promote critical reading and thinking. Consider the following statistics that clearly demonstrate we must strengthen our reading instruction for *all* students:

- On one International Student Assessment, only 30 percent and 12 percent of U.S. students scored in the highest category on the reading and problem solving sections, respectively (Wagner, 2008).
- According to the National Center on Education Statistics, over 40 percent of students in community colleges and 20 percent of students in four-year institutions require remedial instruction (NCES 2004b).
- Educators in colleges and universities, including elite institutions, report a steady decline in students' critical thinking, reading, and writing skills (Baum & Ma, 2007).

So why focus on academic talk? Well, we know that reading words is necessary to support comprehension, but it's only a first step. While the reader must be able to successfully decode, he or she must also recognize the meaning of the words themselves and especially the concepts those words represent. To do this, the reader draws on his or her background knowledge, constantly applying what he or she already knows about the text's topic while making his or her way through the word-covered pages. But if the words or the topic are completely unfamiliar or just too difficult to grasp independently, then sounding out the words may look like "reading," but it is simply an exercise, unresponsive of learning.

The specialized, sophisticated language and abstract ideas featured in text prove challenging for many readers—not just those who are struggling. In fact, we may have a false sense of security that students who reach proficiency in early grades are inoculated against later difficulties and destined for success.

The following guiding principles will help teachers design effective academic language instruction to promote students' academic reading and writing skills:

- Provide daily opportunities for academic talk.
- Go beyond comprehension questions.
- Facilitate rich discussion.
- Connect academic talk to academic writing.

Provide daily opportunities for academic talk

Despite national calls for instructional frameworks that focus on *Reading, Writing, Listening, and Speaking*, and although talk is one of the most powerful tools for comprehending and analyzing text, research tells us very clearly that speaking is the neglected standard. For hundreds of years, students have been taught to listen quietly as the teacher talked, so that they would learn; still today teachers dominate classroom talk (Cazden, 1988; Heath, 1978; Snow, Tabors, & Dickinson, 2001). When attention to developing oral language does occur in most classrooms, it tends to be in preschool and kindergarten. So, ironically, as the texts and the language needed for academic success become more difficult, less instructional time, if any, is devoted to academic talk and oral language development. For students to succeed as readers and writers, we need to focus on developing their sophisticated language skills.

And if speaking is the neglected standard, listening is the misunderstood standard. *Passive* listening, like following directions, is the norm. *Active* listening is needed. Teachers can help students develop *active* listening and speaking skills through structured dialogue and debate activities that center on rich concepts. These practices also build the reasoning skills and background knowledge that are at the core of strong reading and writing.



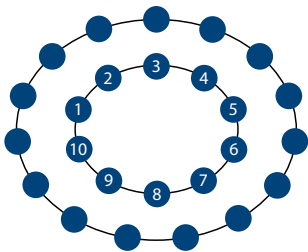
Reach for Reading is designed to infuse reading time with significant opportunities for students to develop their academic speaking and listening skills. In every unit, and across the lesson cycle, students are presented with

- Big Questions that focus on interesting cross-curricular topics to talk about
- interesting ways to engage in academic discussion (cooperative learning structures, book discussion groups, and more).

By placing academic talk at the core of good literacy instruction, *Reach for Reading* not only builds students' speaking skills, but their active listening skills also. Teachers are guided to support students to participate in academic talk effectively with structured opportunities to do so.



- ◀ Big questions provide interesting, cross-curricular topics for reading, writing, listening, and speaking.



Talk Together

- ◀ Cooperative learning and partner work facilitate active engagement involving every student.

Go beyond comprehension questions

When students are given opportunities to speak during reading instruction, they most often answer low-level questions with one or two word replies, and usually during the whole-group lesson. Consider the read-aloud: the teacher reads a story, pausing every now and again to pose a question to the group. Some students raise their hands, and the teacher calls on one to respond. This practice is widespread. Researchers have found that questions about the here and now or questions with answers easily found in text are used between 50 percent and 80 percent of the time in classrooms (Watson & Young, 1986; Zwiers, 2008). But these questions serve primarily one purpose—to evaluate students' understanding about something relatively concrete and literal. It's our strongest readers who can engage effectively with the question-answer format. Overall, however, very few students benefit from this.

To promote academic talk, we can't just have whole-group settings, and we can't rely almost exclusively upon teacher questioning as our tool to do so. Effective instructional practices to promote academic talk in the service of reading comprehension and writing development focus very seriously on *dialogue*—engaging conversation about rich topics and ideas featured in text—in order for students to develop their ideas and informed opinions.

When they engage in academic talk, students make claims and justify them with evidence, articulate causes and effects, compare ideas. They work as a whole class and in pairs or small groups. Students may have roles to play so they consider perspectives other than their own, or they may share opinions and work to build consensus. In classrooms focused on academic talk for improved literacy, teachers model good academic discussions. Teachers might also work with students on turn-taking or constructive disagreement with another's opinion.

In *Reach for Reading*, instruction to broaden academic talk centers on a Big Question featured in every unit and is anchored in rich text, which is key to building comprehension skills. Instruction draws significantly on the teacher's and students' personal connections to topics. At the end of each unit and throughout the course of study, students take a stance and debate a point of view, or do some research as part of a collaborative project, and report out to their peers as experts. In conjunction with a high-quality literature and nonfiction selections, students pose questions and find answers or apply their knowledge to new situations.

In structured discussions, we ask students to learn from their peers by observing and listening, exposing them to rich and engaging text that features academic language. *Reach for Reading* also teaches and provides repeated exposures to cross-curricular and academic language registers and vocabulary words to improve their academic language skills. The scaffolded instruction on language frames moves students from forming basic sentences to making comparisons, giving opinions, and justifying choices to their peers. Students pull together their emerging skills and practice academic talk in all of the unit projects as well. Overall, the instruction is dynamic and engaging. It qualifies as much more than basic communication and prepares students for the rigorous academic environments in middle school, high school, and beyond. Academic language frames scaffold students to promote participation at all levels.

Facilitate rich discussion

If our students are going to advance to the next level, they need to actively construct their own knowledge. This means we need a paradigm shift in the role and actions of the teacher. If students are to deeply understand new texts and topics and generate new conceptual knowledge, lessons need to be designed accordingly. This means much less stand-and-deliver or step-by-step instruction to show students how produce the “right” answers, and more lessons designed around an open-ended question or big idea, connected to a long-term plan for content learning, and student collaboration. As a facilitator of students' own active learning, the teacher leads discussions on topics and texts. She is skilled at managing the process of inquiry—which doesn't always go in the direction planned—and, over time, supports students' unpacking of difficult text and big ideas (Goldenberg, 1992).

Reach for Reading supports this shift in roles through the gradual release of responsibility. Its design was guided by the principle that teachers are facilitators of student learning, guiding students on how to construct their own knowledge through in-depth interactions with text and abstract ideas. For this reason, the program supports teachers in leading fertile discussions about big ideas. Teachers model what good conversations look like and how one builds on the ideas of others. Rich discussion is fostered by enabling students at all levels to engage with authentic fiction and nonfiction texts that extend social studies and science questions beyond the shared reading in the anthology. After reading, heterogeneous groups meet to share and compare knowledge and insights gained from the different books. Cross-text sharing enables students to apply reading in authentic ways in a context that facilitates contributions by all participants.

Name _____ Date _____

Discussion Guide

Connect Across Texts

Share the story words with your group. Then take notes as you listen to each summary.

Miss Ramphus

Everest: The Climb, Part 1

The Coy, Part 1

Compare and contrast the books you have read. Discuss these questions with your group:

1. What helps each character imagine the world? How do these books help readers imagine the world?
2. How does each author help you visualize each amazing place?
3. What is similar about the settings in each book? What is different? What makes each of the places in these books amazing?

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▲ Students at varied reading levels explore different content-rich texts and novels. Heterogeneous groups share and compare thematically-related books creating an authentic context for academic discussion.

The *Reach for Reading* teacher's edition offers effective whole-group and small-group lessons to increase academic talk in our classrooms, encouraging teachers to take advantage of built-in opportunities for peer scaffolding to push students forward, while paying careful attention to groupings. Every unit features numerous occasions for teachers to foster academic language, including the end-of-unit collaborative projects that focus on the Big Questions.

Connect academic talk to academic writing

Recent research is very clear that writing is a significant weakness for many students in our classrooms. For example, in a recent study in urban middle schools, participating teachers agreed that writing a paragraph is a difficult exercise for 6th graders (Kelley, Lesaux, Kieffer & Faller, 2010). How does increasing academic talk relate to promoting students' writing skills? It does so at least three ways:

1. Effective pre-writing work begins with teacher direction and modeling and encourages structured academic talk as students generate and organize ideas with the help of a classmate.

2. Effective writing assignments provide a platform for developing students' academic language skills; when students can accurately use new vocabulary or sentence structures in writing, clearly they have a sound understanding of the meaning and mechanics.
3. When writing instruction is embedded into the overall unit of study, and therefore linked to texts, it's another chance to have students grapple with academic language. Students gain the scaffolded support they need to generate and organize ideas, incorporate appropriate academic words and sentences, and move from notes or a graphic organizer to a flowing paragraph.

The *Reach for Reading* writing approach provides opportunities for increased academic talk and peer-learning. This is especially the case during the prewriting and editing phases when students share ideas with a partner and when students edit each other's work and learn how to give feedback constructively. In addition, all writing instruction is embedded in the unit of study and connects to rich text, providing further opportunities to develop academic language.

Language Frames

Tell Your Ideas

- Something in nature I know about is _____.
- One tall tale I know is _____. I could write something like that.
- The problem could be _____.

Respond to Ideas

- How would you turn _____ into a tall tale?
- _____ sounds funny. What will make your tale different?
- What will _____ do to solve the problem?

Conclusion

If we are to support all students' literacy development, prevent reading difficulties, and close achievement gaps, our classrooms should be filled with academic talk—talk that centers on big ideas and complex concepts worthy of discussion and debate and is engaging for our students. To do this we need to increase student talk and decrease teacher talk (Cazden, 2001; Fisher, Frey, & Rothenberg, 2008; McIntyre, Kyle & Moore, 2006; Saunders & Goldenberg, 1992). We need to expand teachers' repertoires to go beyond questioning to get students speaking. The dialogue that promotes reading comprehension and writing skills engages students to work and think together about a complex problem, to see others' viewpoints, and to better understand the knowledge and experiences they bring to the issue.

For **research citations** see page R27.