

POINTS MENU¹

(the bullets under each point build up to it)

Can ELs & LMs handle the complex texts required by the CCSS?

- They can, but only with help, and only if the help they are provided is the kind they need.
- They need help learning how to unpack the information that is conveyed by words, phrases, clauses and constructions used in complex texts.
- They need their attention called to how language works in the texts they read, because only then are they in a position to acquire the language of academic discourse.
- They need

Complex texts

- What makes a text complex? Complex for whom? ("the ideal reader" of a given text is someone who knows just what the writer assumed the reader would know, and would need just what the writer thought the reader would need in order to fully comprehend the text)
- Can complexity be avoided? (the writer's dilemma)
- Differences between text demand and text complexity.
- Language features, structural features, and why kids in general need help.

The language of complex texts and of learning

- Academic language—what is it? In what ways is it distinctive? How academic language is different from ordinary conversational language
- Many registers—different registers by subject areas, by genre type
- Each genre type has an associated text structure—students have to learn how informational, explanatory, and argumentative texts are

¹ There is so much that could and needs to be said about providing the language support ELs and many other students need for learning how to navigate complex texts as required by the CCSS, that I gave the CGCS team this menu of points in the hope of trimming it down to a manageable set of points. We thought you might find it useful as you think through the needs of the students in your school districts. --LWF

structured—such knowledge supports reading, and is crucial in learning to write.

- Academic language is much more than vocabulary, technical or otherwise.

How do students acquire academic language?

- No one is a native of academic language
- Academic language can be learned only from texts:
 - by interacting with them in non-superficial ways:
 - by noticing how language works in materials one is reading,
 - by discussing language and meaning in those materials with others,
 - by writing.
- Why? Because the suite of grammatical and rhetorical features that figures in academic discourse can be found only in written texts; thus, the only way it can be learned is by interacting with such texts.
- *The academic language paradox: it is learned primarily through literacy (reading, writing, and argumentation) but at the same time, it is prerequisite to learning to read and write efficiently and successfully!*

To learn any language---

- One must have access to data (language samples) that reveal how the language works in communicating thoughts & information;
- The data must be true to the target--if the target is academic language, then the data must provide adequate and sufficient representation of its various types;
- One must take notice of the relationship between forms & structures & meaning.

That's why the only way to learn academic language is through literacy---i.e., by interacting with complex texts in which it figures.

Crucial to language learning:

- Cooperation and support from more competent others in noticing the relationship between form, structure and meaning, and help in gaining access to meaning in the linguistic data.
- Children do not on their own notice the language used in texts---it

is just so much background—like paper the text is printed on.

- What they want is access to meaning; what they need is to discover how meaning relates to form!
- This is where teachers come in. *Peers do not know enough to provide this kind of support.*

The help LM & EL students need

- Students require instructional support from teachers who are well prepared to provide necessary guidance:
- Their teachers must know:
 - what academic English is,*
 - *how it works in texts, and*
 - *how to call students' attention to the relationships between words, phrases, clauses and meaning in text.*

Method: Instructional conversations

- The conversations are part of larger instructional events---rich and engaging units, for example, focused on topics related to science, math, technology, social studies, or language arts.
- These conversations are specially designed discussions, focused on language and meaning, in which teachers engage students in talking and thinking about the language used in texts the students are working on.
- Each day, teachers take a sentence or two, or a short passage even from the materials students are working on, plan conversational starters that focus on aspects of the language which they have decided are worth talking about, and guide students in talking about them, and seeing how it all works.

The conversations

- Each begins with the selection and study of the text that will serve as the basis of a conversation (ca. 15-20 minutes per day)!
- Ideally, the excerpt is a sentence (or two) that gets to the heart of things, and is so crammed with information---*that it begs for discussion.*

- The first step is for teachers to take a close, close look at the parts of the sentence or two. What are the parts, and what does each contribute to meaning? (This is instructional preparation).

How do instructional conversations work?

- They work only if the conversations really are conversations, but they do NOT if teachers just tell student how language works, or try to teach them how it does!
- It works when teachers guide students in unpacking meaning from parts of the text, and get them to consider and talk about how meaning can be conveyed by words, phrases, clauses, etc.; and ultimately to see how it all works together to communicate ideas, thoughts and information.
- Why not just teach students the grammar of academic language?
- Fact is, teaching grammar doesn't help. Making kids aware of language does. The aim is to make attention to language a habit of mind. That's when learning really does happen!

For ELs, but not just for ELs!

- About the only kids who will not need much help the high flyers in advanced placement classes---kids who are voracious and omnivorous readers. (They need help learning to write in such language, but for the most part, they have a pretty solid understanding of how the academic register works in the materials they read.)
- Everyone else will need help in discovering how to deal with the language they encounter in the complex and demanding texts the CCSS will have kids reading at each level.
- Is this mostly for kids from middle school on? Absolutely not. It should begin at the earliest level, well before kids are actually reading--say at the preschool level with read-alouds.