

TOTAL

Literacy

TECHNIQUES

**TOOLS TO HELP STUDENTS ANALYZE
LITERATURE AND INFORMATIONAL TEXTS**

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Introduction: Tools for engaging thinkers, readers, and writers

In today's educational landscape, it's easy to get caught up in the every-day demands of checklists and isolated skill-sets. It's easy to lose sight of the interconnectedness of the development of academic language, higher-order thinking, reading, writing, and the power of well-planned text-based classroom interactions. The goal of this text is to provide a context for re-evaluating that interconnectedness as a more complete picture in attempting to engage students as thinkers, readers, and writers. In essence, this text is about helping students celebrate words and the potential power that well-chosen words can carry. In a practical sense, it aims to provide teachers with more than 50 tools and techniques for addressing the following questions:

- How might we foster environments and plan lessons aimed at growing academic language using what research tells us works?
- How might we help students explicitly and implicitly develop and monitor their ability to think using higher-order thinking as they engage with text?
- How might we ensure that students are not just consumers of powerful words but producers of powerful words?
- How might we frame our interactions with text so that all children provide evidence of processing using higher-order thinking via well-planned peer interactions?
- How might we support students so that they are able to not only cite text-based evidence but also coherently interpret its relevance for the reader?

In our previous book, *Total Participation Techniques: Making Every Student an Active Learner*, we used the term *total* to refer to the percentage of students

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actively participating and cognitively engaged with the content of the lessons. This text does include a chapter on text-based *Total Participation Techniques* (see Chapter 6), however, in this text we use the term *total* to refer to the interconnectedness of the roles of deeper thinking processes, academic language development, peer interactions, and reading and writing. Each of these roles enhances overall literacy development in a way that provides students with the type of success that is long-term and sustainable. This book provides a more complete picture of literacy as a pathway to whole-child development which embeds social and cognitive growth processes.

Through teacher-tested tools and student voices, we provide tools and techniques for helping students comprehend, analyze, discuss and create text that enhances students' growth as reflective learners. Throughout much of this book, we will introduce you to students who reflect on their literary practices and journeys. We hope that you find these tools and techniques, as well as the student and teacher insights, to be helpful in supporting your students in their development as lifelong, independent, and critical thinkers, readers and writers.

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Growing Academic Language: Building Foundations for Academic Literacy

Perhaps the story in the book is just the lid on a pan: It always stays the same, but underneath there's a whole world that goes on.
—Inkheart (Funke, 2003, p. 1470)

Have you ever been lost in a really good book? So lost, you didn't even notice the type of vocabulary that the author used to draw you in, compelling you to read on well into the night, even though you should have long ago gone to sleep? Many students can't experience the pleasure of being lost in a good book because of the intense focus that is necessary for them to successfully decode their way through the text. The frustration of repeatedly stumbling as they make their way through text will preclude any enjoyment students experience in reading. And aside from the misfortune of missing out on a great literary experience, this phenomenon has linguistic and academic implications that can negatively affect students' academic growth throughout their entire academic careers.

In fact, without the prerequisite ingredients of what it takes to get lost in a good book, we can forget all about the lofty goals that we hope to accomplish through more rigorous and well-meaning standards that are related to students independently and critically reading grade level literature and informational texts. Being able to do that still requires simple comprehension as a precursor to analysis and to using other higher-order thinking skills exercised in processing what was read.

For many students, helping them make the crossover into deep reading will require a strategic scaffolding of students' interactions with text, student to student interactions around text, and pointed support in effectively writing about the text. It will also require our carefully setting the stage for students to critically interpret what they read within the text. If we're serious about providing all students with

meaningful access to all aspects of the curricula, it's going to take a well-thought out game plan that is informed by who the students are, where they are, and what they'll need. We won't be able to get there if we ignore the necessary scaffolds.

Navigating the Language of the Text

There is a profound difference between the language we speak and the language we read. The language in books is often perfectly crafted to convey precise meanings. It is typically more grammatically complex than spoken language. And for most non-illustrated chapter books, it is void of any supports that are not solely linguistic. There is also quite a difference between the language that students read in fictional stories and the type of language that they come across in informational text. Unlike stories, informational text doesn't reward readers with the promise of a good ending to conclude a narrative that has drawn them in or captivated them for several hours. According to 7th grader Selena, "I haven't been as successful with nonfiction, because there's nothing to enjoy in it." And unlike spoken words, the language in informational texts is not accompanied by hand gestures, facial expressions, and situational contexts that support the recipients' understandings. Informational text has a different structure to it. In most cases, all that readers have to hang their comprehension on is words put together in unfamiliar patterns and structures that deal with technical, often unfamiliar, material that will often fail to pique students' interests.

According to Nagy and Townsend (2012), among the unique challenges that academic language presents are complexities like grammatical metaphor and informational density. Grammatical metaphor refers to parts of speech that are used in contexts that do not apply to their typical meanings—for example, the term *boils down to*. Adults familiar with this term may not even notice that it could be a source of confusion for students. Students, on the other hand, may be left wondering how anything they are reading has to do with boiling liquids.

Academic language also contains morphologically complex words and a high degree of technicality and abstractness. It packs all of these complexities into meaningfully dense sentences that are structurally complicated and that are unlike spoken language. For example, they contain more ideas using fewer words, requiring more focus and more rereadings on the part of the reader. The more difficult the words and the more complex the structures, the more

experiences students will need with those words, and the more motivation they'll need to make sense of what they read. While 7th grade Hayley enjoys reading fiction, she finds non-fiction much more of a challenge. "When I read nonfiction it doesn't always make that much sense. I don't really understand it. I don't understand how they word things." In preparing students to succeed with informational texts, we will need to address approaches to helping students understand the academic language that can so often cause them to stumble.

The Vocabulary Gap

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) results point to a persistent and growing vocabulary gap by socioeconomic status as well as by race and ethnicity (NCES, 2012). School-like experiences at home divide children long before they actually enter school. We know that children who are exposed to more sophisticated school-like or academic caretaker speech end up having a larger school-like vocabulary (Weizman & Snow, 2001; Hoff, 2003; Roberts & Kaiser, 2011). This is true even when the increase in the amount of exposure to linguistically and cognitively complex speech is relatively small. Ruston and Schwanenflugel (2010) found that a twice weekly 25-minute intervention of exposure to more sophisticated academic language was followed by an increase in the complexity of expressive vocabulary for children in the study's experimental group. We also know that children who have experienced read-alouds (stories read to children) have a larger academic vocabulary than their peers who have not participated in read-aloud experiences (Elley & Mangubhai, 1983; Roberts, 2008; Sharif, Ozuah, Dinkevich, & Muklvihiill, 2003; Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002; Meehan, 1999).

We acquire language through experiencing it in contexts we understand. Books provide that comprehensible linguistic experience. So, not surprisingly, there is strong evidence of a positive link between vocabulary development and the read-aloud experience. Subsequently, students with stronger early language development learn to read more quickly and develop better reading comprehension (Shany & Biemiller, 1995; Biemiller, 2003; Shany & Biemiller, 2010; Rodriguez & Tamis-LeMonda, 2011; Dickinson & Porche, 2011). In short, exposure to academic language in contextually rich environments, such as the read-aloud experience and sophisticated caretaker speech, has a direct influence on academic vocabulary growth, which in turn effects reading development.

It's Not Just About Language

If it were just a matter of some students having a different kind of speech, or fancier academic speech than others, the growing vocabulary gap outlined in the NAEP study might not matter as much. But the impact of the vocabulary gap affects every aspect of schooling that is dependent upon reading ability. Additionally, timing matters. Stanovich's (1986) synthesis of reading studies points to evidence of a snowball effect that occurs both for those who develop literacy skills early and for those who develop them later. This phenomenon is often referred to as the "Matthew effect" in reference to a Bible story found in Matthew 25:14-30. The story contrasts a wise and a foolish investor. It concludes, "for whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them." In essence, the Matthew effect points to the phenomenon of the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer. The Matthew effect has a substantial impact on all areas of literacy development, and subsequently, academic achievement. Those that develop literacy skills sooner continue to progress, while those that develop them later continue to fall behind (Biemiller & Slonim, 2001).

Allow us to focus on how the Matthew effect works when it comes to vocabulary growth. Isabel Beck, a well-known author and researcher, has written extensively about vocabulary development, but it's this personal account of her own experience with vocabulary that we feel best describes how children use selective attention to tune in and out of conversations that contain unfamiliar words, and the resulting snowball effect that vocabulary growth has on additional vocabulary growth.

I remember learning the word *earnest*; it was in the fourth grade and a character had been described as earnest. . . . At about the time I learned about earnest, I began to notice that other people were catching on to it, too. I started noticing the word in newspapers and even overheard it in a conversation. It was amazing to me that I was somehow a part of a group of people across the country who had simultaneously discovered the word earnest!" (Beck, McKeown, Kucan, 2002, p. vii)

What we like about this personal account is the way it cleanly portrays how when we learn new words it opens up new conversations to us. The conversations that Beck had heard prior to her learning the word *earnest* still existed.

She had simply tuned them out. Our students do that, too. When they learn new words, that conversation then opens up other new words embedded within conversations that would have otherwise been tuned out. Because the context of these once inaccessible conversations are now clearer because of new known words, additional words can be picked up based on their being embedded within that meaningful context. In other words, the more vocabulary children know, the more vocabulary they'll learn. The less vocabulary they know, the less vocabulary they'll learn. According to Biemiller, "unfortunately, slower learners do not 'catch up.' If we could avoid the growing vocabulary gap during kindergarten to grade two, and possibly fill in some words already missing at the beginning of kindergarten, reading comprehension, perhaps, could be improved" (2003, p. 328). Rather than taking lack of academic vocabulary development as a given and unchangeable circumstance, the classroom itself needs to be a place where all children are immersed in opportunities to soak in comprehensible academic language in ways that can help bridge that vocabulary gap. In other words, academic language development needs to be an academic priority in schools for students of all ages.

The Blah Words

Just how much of an impact does the lack of academic language have on a student's comprehension of informational texts? When we asked a particularly well-read eighth grader what she found confusing about informational text, she guided us to this chapter in her history book, which she indicated was one example of the many that left her with a frustrating lack of understanding. A sample paragraph reads as follows:

Under the terms of the Compromise, popular sovereignty would be used to decide the question of slavery in the rest of the Mexican Cession. People in the states created from that territory would vote whether to be a free state or a slave state when they requested admission to the Union. Also, in return for agreeing to outlaw the slave trade in Washington D.C., southerners got a tough new fugitive slave law. (Davidson & Stoff, 2007, p.486)

We asked her to read the paragraph out loud, substituting the word *blah* when she got to a word she didn't understand. This process gave us a better

feel for how she understood this paragraph and provides insight into the importance of particular words for understanding the paragraph.

Under the terms of the *Blah*, popular *blah* would be used to decide the question of slavery in the rest of the Mexican *Blah*. People in the states created from that territory would vote whether to be a free state or a slave state when they requested admission to the Union. Also, in return for agreeing to outlaw the slave trade in Washington D.C., southerners got a tough new *blah* slave law.

These same words, represented by *blah*, were unknown to another boy who also unknowingly struggled with the word *admission* in the phrase ‘admission to the Union.’ The original sentence reads: “People in the states created from that territory would vote whether to be a free state or a slave state when they requested admission to the Union.” Knowing the word admission in the contexts of movie theatres and amusement parks, he erroneously interpreted the sentence to mean the following: “I understand that they need a ticket to get into the Union. So these people probably want to leave their states to go and move to the Union.” He could not understand the sentences containing the *blah* words, and because of his lack of exposure to words in different contexts, he also misunderstood the only sentence which contained no *blah* words. We’re not sure which is worse: not knowing what something means, or not knowing that you don’t know what something means. Clearly, we will not be able to reach our goal of helping students independently and critically read grade level literature and informational texts if we do not also address the hurdles associated with acquiring academic language. Our classrooms need to become places that foster academic language growth both implicitly and explicitly. By implicit language growth, we mean that students acquire understandings of these words and structures based on a comprehensible context. By explicit language growth, we mean that the teaching of academic vocabulary and language is spelled out and consciously addressed for and by students.

What Are We Really Asking of Students?

While the goal of preparing students to be able to independently and critically read grade level literature and informational texts seems like a simple set of expectations, it entails a whole series of skill sets and a whole lot of

experiences with texts. In addition to that, it must be addressed within the context of child development and the practical context of everyday schools within everyday realities. What is reasonable to expect of children at certain ages? What is most important to develop at certain ages? What about struggling readers? What about reluctant readers? What about students with minimal exposure to the type of academic language found in informational texts? What about English language learners? What about students who have learning disabilities? Where do we begin? When it comes to more rigorous expectations for all students, these are the questions that teachers are asking. While exploring the answers to these questions will take a great deal of teacher intuition, we do know that a good place to begin is with a conscious and strategic effort toward building the academic language of all students, so that they can make sense of what they read.

Academic Vocabulary vs. Academic Language

Building students' academic language involves more than just racking up sophisticated words. Academic language is complicated. We want to make a distinction between academic vocabulary and academic language. For the purposes of this text, we define academic vocabulary as referring to non-content-specific academic words that would be considered low frequency words but are high utility words for the audience being discussed. In other words, they are “fancy” words, but not ridiculously so. They are low frequency words, because they are typically not spoken by students in conversational contexts. But they are somewhat high utility words because we can be confident that students will encounter these words again in their future readings. For example, there is very little point in focusing time and energy on a vocabulary word like *esurient* if the next time we can expect students to come across this word is when they are 40, if at all. Academic vocabulary refers to words like *impending* and *crisis* that realistically may be encountered in texts. Academic language, on the other hand, refers to the whole package of how words are put together to create meaningful cognitively complex messages. For example, consider this sentence written by 9th grader Kinsey: “Books carry truth, whether that truth be light or dark; and by reading these books, we build our hearts out of words.” Intense, no? Yet the sentence uses only non-academic high frequency words for a 9th grader. But, because of the complexity of how the words are put together to create imagery

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and to cause readers to think deeply about the statements she makes, we would characterize this sentence as making use of academic language.

So, academic language is not just words, it also refers to the way words are manipulated to carry cognitively complex messages. Ninth grader Alison addresses this skill when she described what she loved most about a favorite book. According to Alison, “one of the best things about the book for me was that it was a challenge. There were new vocabulary words, of course. There were also words and phrases put together in ways I would have never thought of.”

The distinction between academic language and academic vocabulary is an important one, because throughout this book we will use samples of text and student work that use academic language but not necessarily academic vocabulary. Both Kinsey and Alison are referring to beautiful words found within the pages of literature. However, the academic language found in informational texts may not be so much beautiful as it is baffling. For example, a sentence like, “Likewise, investigators found culpability on the part of the ship’s crew, in that the ratio of life jackets to passengers was negligently low” may cause readers to need to double back and reread. Our goal is to help students be able not only to read and comprehend academic vocabulary and language found in literature and informational texts, but also to analyze and recreate academic language in effective ways toward meeting their academic goals. In order to do that, we will need to address the topic of academic language, both explicitly and implicitly. We will need to immerse students in language that, in 9th grade Kinsey’s words, are words and phrases that “I connect to, or that I think hold brilliance, such as metaphors, symbolic meanings or things that make me wish that I had come up with them.”

Where Is Academic Language Found?

Where can teachers find academic vocabulary? And, where does academic language come from? If we view academic vocabulary as more than just content-area-specific words, we can more clearly understand what it is in content reading that stumps children, especially those with fewer reading experiences. For the most part, content-area-specific words such as *colony*, *Puritan* and *Pilgrim* are introduced and taught to children at about the same times in their schooling careers. These content-specific words are not typically spoken by 4th graders, for example, on a playground. As a result, the teacher is often alert to the fact that all of the students will need to be given an overview

of these words at some point prior to or within the lesson. The non-content-specific vocabulary is another matter altogether. Words like *conscientious*, *presume*, *resemble*, and the thousands of other words that often stump readers, may never directly be taught in school.

These same words are not at all likely to be experienced in everyday conversations on the playground with peers, or even with teachers. But for some students, repeated prior exposure to these words in the form of independent reading and read-aloud experiences have provided a boost to comprehension, so that whether or not students are actually ready to use these words in their own speech, they are more likely to comprehend them when they see these words in the context of an academic text. This is less likely to be the case for students who have had fewer independent reading or read-aloud experiences (Cunningham & Stanovich, 2001). While the content-specific vocabulary is generally introduced to all students at the same time by the teacher who is teaching in that specific content area, non-content-specific vocabulary is subject to the literary experiences and to the exposure that each child has had to words in books and through sophisticated conversations with the adults in their lives.

Literature as an Indispensable Component

Quite a bit happens when students get lost in a good book. Beyond just providing an enjoyable literary experience, both fiction and nonfiction can be excellent sources of academic language. The types of words that authors use to add texture and imagery to stories are often the same types of words that inhibit students' comprehension of content-based academic texts. Certain types of words are harder to learn than others. Concrete nouns, for example, are easier to acquire than adjectives and adverbs (Elley, 1989). But it's the adjectives and adverbs that add to the unique attributes of the characters, the setting, and the plot. In stories, these words become gradually understood through repeated exposure within meaningful contexts. Informational texts have less time to present a meaningful context. They are often brief and extremely focused in their intent. Informational texts are also loaded with the types of words that students would consider to be difficult words. But while great stories allow students to hang comprehension of more difficult unknown words on known words and the contexts surrounding them, informational texts rarely are able to do that.

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In stories, the context itself begins to paint a picture for students that allows readers to fill in the blanks that would normally be left by unknown words. An informational text that makes use of words like *conscientious*, *resemble*, *presume*, *region*, and *rare* might leave 4th graders with comprehension glitches that inhibit student understandings. However, consider the language that is plentiful in books like *The Mysterious Benedict Society and the Perilous Journey* by Trenton Lee Stewart (2008). It uses the words *conscientious*, *resemble*, *presume*, *region*, and *rare*, along with other words and sentence structures that are not typical in everyday conversation.

Reynie's brow wrinkled. That conscientious goat was not the first unusual thing he'd seen this morning. He was reminded of something else—something curious to which, in his excitement, he hadn't given much thought until now. Reynie shaded his eyes and searched the sky. There, circling quite low overhead, was the falcon he had noticed earlier. He could just make out its facial markings, which resembled a black cap and long black sideburns. Reynie didn't presume to know much about birds (though in fact he knew more than most people), but he felt sure that this was a peregrine falcon – and in this region, at this time of year, peregrine falcons were very rare indeed. (Stewart, 2008, p3, 4)

Within this paragraph alone, students are exposed to non-content-specific academic words not typically spoken by 4th graders to 4th graders, and yet, a child independently reading this book or experiencing this book as a read-aloud would be introduced to these words within a context that is enjoyable as well as comprehensible. In contrast, an informational text using the same academic words would likely leave students flustered, in large part due to its brevity and lack of contextually rich imagery. Increased exposure to literature that is rich in academic vocabulary, like the book noted above, can support students by providing contextually meaningful repeated exposure to the type of academic language that they will eventually find embedded throughout informational texts. Seventh grader Jaycie said it best when discussing her ability to read through a narrative chapter book which contained quite a bit of complex vocabulary. "There were some difficult vocabulary words, but I thought that the way the author put some context clues around it made it easy to understand. And I've noticed that I've grown to use those words a lot more than I did."

Exposure to vocabulary within the meaningful contexts of leisure reading and read-alouds is an important backdrop to growing academic language. Nagy, Herman, and Anderson (1985) found that students who had been exposed to passages that contained certain complex target vocabulary scored better on tests containing the target vocabulary that had appeared in the passages, even though the words had never been explicitly taught. Elley and Mangubhai (1983) found that children who were in a storybook-based program progressed in reading and listening comprehension at twice the rate of students learning language through a more traditional non-reading-based program. The growth was not only sustained, but continued to outpace the language growth made by students in the control group. Elley's later studies confirmed his earlier findings. Vocabulary acquisition was accelerated significantly through high interest reading and the read-aloud experience (1989, 1991, 2000). This was true whether or not the readings were accompanied by teacher explanations of new vocabulary. Pairing the read-aloud experiences with timely teacher explanations led to even greater vocabulary growth (Elley, 1989). The advantages of teaching vocabulary implicitly through leisure reading as compared to through direct instruction was one of the components of language acquisition examined by Stephen Krashen in his book *The Power of Reading*, (2004). In his review of numerous reading studies, Krashen makes a strong case for leisure reading as the best way to acquire vocabulary. According to Krashen, "teaching vocabulary lists is not efficient. Time is better spent in reading" (p.19). Krashen's statement takes on greater significance when we evaluate the full complexity of academic language and not just academic vocabulary.

Consider the following reading conference interview with 8th grader Gabriela, who was asked to select an excerpt to share, along with a favorite line (underlined). Notice the amount of language that she is able to understand from what is implied. Notice how she correctly determines the meaning of the word *unobtrusive* using contextual clues. Also notice that she is able to analyze the author's craft and make inferences with regard to the purpose of the particular style employed by the author in order to achieve a specific tone. Chapter 3 contains a suggested list of these and other questions to ask during a reading conference (see Figure 3.1).

Gabriela's chosen excerpt, with her favorite sentence underlined:

Hobbits are an unobtrusive but very ancient people, more numerous formerly than they are today; for they love peace

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and quiet and good tilled earth: a well-ordered and well-farmed countryside was their favorite haunt. They do not and did not understand or like machines more complicated than a forge-bellows, a water-mill, or a hand-loom, though they were skillful with tools. Even in ancient days they were, as a rule, shy of ‘the Big Folk’, as they call us, and now they avoid us with dismay and are becoming hard to find.” (J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, page 1)

Interviewer: Tell me about the language he used in the excerpt.

Gabriela: I didn’t understand what a forge-bellows or a hand-loom was, but they were obviously tools that they used in the olden days. But, I liked it because it’s so specific, it’s ridiculous. It’s obviously saying that they are a simplistic people. I also like how he said, ‘and they were shy of the Big Folk’, I thought that was kind of funny, just because, it was so specific and it makes them seem so ridiculous.

Interviewer: What do you notice about what the author is doing with language?

Gabriela: He’s making it so real, like when you would use that kind of language, you’d be talking about American history, or something more real. And it’s all this useless information that doesn’t pertain to the book at all, but it helps the reader to believe that it’s a real world and that it’s got an actual history, and it’s not just a story. On page six, he spends two pages describing a drought, and plagues, and it’s just like you would do if it were a real history book.

Interviewer: Were there other words you didn’t understand?

Gabriela: “I didn’t understand the word *unobtrusive*, but from looking at the context clues, I’m guessing that it means that they don’t get in people’s way. And because it said that they avoid us, I’m guessing that’s what it means.”

Interviewer: That's exactly what it means.

Leisure reading immerses students in contextually rich uses of academic vocabulary within the larger contexts of effective and beautiful academic language that is acquired with minimal effort on the part of the reader. It also provides modeling for how authors use words to achieve specific purposes within their texts. If our goal is to help students independently and critically read through grade level literature and content-area texts, then it would behoove us to start with leisure reading, where academic language is less painfully acquired. We cannot overstate the powerful effects that leisure reading has on building students' vocabulary. A critical foundation to reaching advanced levels of literacy is that we begin by immersing children in academic language within the context of great stories where they can painlessly acquire the vocabulary and sentence structures, which can facilitate their understandings of more complex readings, and even support their ownership of these words.

Cunningham and Stanovich's (2001) review of the research provides a compelling argument for the powerful effect of reading on overall vocabulary and cognitive development. When looking at student performance as it correlates to leisure reading, they provide this startling comparison: "the entire year's out-of-school reading for the child at the 10th percentile amounts to just two days reading for the child at the 90th percentile!" (p.141). What's more alarming is that the out-of-school leisure reading gap is not being bridged by in-school reading. Gambrell, Wilson and Gantt (2001) found that during the school day, good readers spent more time actually reading, while poor readers spent more time learning about reading and practicing isolated decoding skills outside of the context of meaningful stories.

There is also evidence that reading novels causes physiological changes in the brain's neural connectivity. Berns, Blaine, Prietula, and Pye (2013) set out to investigate the measurable impact that reading novels has on the brain using MRI analysis. According to the researchers, "it seems plausible that if something as simple as a book can leave the impression that one's life has been changed, then perhaps it is powerful enough to cause changes in brain function and structure." Their study found both short term and long term changes to the brain as a result of pretests, followed by a nine day reading period, and follow-up tests taken 5 days later. Immediately following the readings, researchers found a significant increase in neural connections centered around the regions of the brain that are associated with perspective taking

and story comprehension. Long-term changes in connectivity pointed to the impact that reading novels had on overall language. The researchers conclude, “our results suggest a potential mechanism by which reading stories, not only strengthen language processing regions but also affect the individual through embodied semantics in sensorimotor regions” (p.599).

We have not addressed the power of leisure reading on overall reading development, writing ability, and grammar development. Krashen’s review of the literature found that, with regard to all of these skills, leisure reading is nearly always superior to direct instruction (2004). With the rising emphases placed on the reading of informational text, it is critical that we not lose sight of the importance of the read-aloud and of building up strong foundations in leisure reading.

A Tale of Two Countries

The role of leisure reading in the United States is seeing a marked decline. While reading for nine year olds is at an all-time high, the older that students get, the less they read. Though the amount of reading within homework and schoolwork has remained the same in the United States, “the percentage of 17-year olds who read nothing at all for pleasure has doubled over a 20 year period.” Literature reading among college graduates has also had a substantial decline, and Americans are spending less on books than at any other time in the last 20 years (National Endowment for the Arts, 2007). Most disturbing of all is that even strong readers are reading less. Some of this is influenced by the role of social media in the lives of adolescents, teens, and college graduates. McKenna et al. (2012) surveyed middle schoolers to get a feel for how reading attitudes have changed over time. They found that much of the middle schoolers’ out-of-school literacies are now comprised of text produced by peers via social media. While they argue that this may create more opportunities than it does obstacles, they do emphasize that, where traditional reading is concerned, attitudes about reading have changed and gradually worsen over time.

In a New York Times Op-Ed titled *The Country that Stopped Reading*, Mexican author David Toscana provides a passionate and scathing reproof to his fellow countrymen for allowing the role of literature to become less prominent among its citizens. Toscana writes, “Even if baseline literacy, the ability to read a street sign or news bulletin, is rising, the practice of reading an actual

book is not. Once a reasonably well-educated country, Mexico took the penultimate spot, out of 108 countries, in a Unesco assessment of reading habits a few years ago... Despite recent gains in industrial development and increasing numbers of engineering graduates, Mexico is floundering socially, politically and economically because so many of its citizens do not read.”

Toscana’s essay is rife with concern over the marginalization of literature in society. In describing a conversation that he had with a political leader in his home state, and emphasizing the problem with children being taught to read, but not actually reading, the political leader “wondered what the point of the students’ reading *Don Quixote* was. He said we needed to teach them to read the newspaper.” According to Toscana, literature has become so marginalized that at the age of 15 his daughter’s literature teacher actually banned all fiction from the classroom, “We’re going to read history and biology textbooks,” she said, “because that way you’ll read and learn at the same time.”

Toscana concludes his essay with sarcastic eloquence. When referring to the educational system, he believes, “it needs to make students read, read and read. But perhaps the Mexican government is not ready for its people to be truly educated. We know that books give people ambitions, expectations, a sense of dignity. If tomorrow we were to wake up as educated as the Finnish people, the streets would be filled with indignant citizens and our frightened government would be asking itself where these people got more than a dishwasher’s training.” Toscana’s essay may simply be one man’s opinion in a country where people have had substantially different experiences with literature, and views about literature than the ones he has had, but one cannot deny that he raises important questions regarding the importance of literature in public schools.

Literacy in both informational texts and literature are important. However, we’d like to focus for a moment on the merits of literature, and on why literature ought to retain a vibrant role in our schools and in our lives. Both informational texts and literature provide opportunities for higher-order thinking, but literature does so in a very different way than informational texts do. And, both are equally important. Informational texts are more compact, more dense, more technical, more focused in providing readers with solutions. Literature draws readers in to alternate realities, and it can do so for extended periods of time. And, reading for extended periods of time is important, because if we don’t get students to read for extended periods of time their reading skills fail to progress (Cunningham & Stanovich, 2001). The National

Endowment for the Arts (2007) indicate that the older students get, the less they involve themselves with leisure reading, and there is also a striking parallel in the decline of their reading scores.

Literature and Higher-Order Thinking

Literature provides opportunities for readers to reflect on society to critically analyze life from various perspectives. For a few hours, we see through the eyes of others. In the often quoted words of C.S. Lewis, “Literature adds to reality, it does not simply describe it. It enriches the necessary competencies that daily life requires and provides; and in this respect, it irrigates the deserts that our lives have already become.” Literature allows us to add to our reality, by opening different realities which we could not practically experience without it. In seeing life from different perspectives it adds to what we know about life, and prompts us to step back, compare, and reflect.

We remember reading an abridged version of *Oliver Twist* to our daughter, who was in the midst of experiencing some minor unpleasant social experiences with a few 2nd grade peers. While reading of Oliver’s troubles, our daughter interrupted us and said, “His life is so hard. Are other people’s lives that hard?” This led us to a discussion about life’s inequities, and how difficult life can be for so many people. Her social dilemmas paled in comparison. The power of a different perspective allowed her to begin exploring that reality. Great books, and subsequent discussions about great books, lead students to analyze their own reality and realities as they exist for others.

Ninth grader Alison explained that she is continuously exploring these realities as she reads. According to Alison, “books taught me things that no one could ever teach in class. Books taught me how to relate to people. They taught me that I didn’t have to be the gothic girl to understand the gothic girl; I don’t have to be the popular girl to understand the popular girl; I don’t have to be physically hurting to understand other’s pain. Even though I haven’t lived the exact life as others, I can relate to them.” Alison discovered her love for reading in Keely Potter’s class. It was during her 7th grade year that she found her literary first love, the book that spoke to her and that made her fall in love with reading. Potter noticed that because Alison became such an avid reader and heavily analyzed the books that she read, “her ability to think and articulate her thinking just blossomed.” Ninth grader Ian also discovered his love for reading in Potter’s class. When asked to describe how he had seen himself

grow as a reader, he said, “I improved as a reader by using analytical skills such as inferencing, predicting, identifying theme. As for why, I’m not sure. A brilliant work can do that to you.”

Comer and Castano (2013) conducted five experiments in an effort to examine the effect of reading on specific social competencies. They compared the reading of preselected examples of literature to the reading of preselected examples of popular fiction, nonfiction and reading nothing at all. They found that scores on tests aimed at measuring emotional intelligence and empathy were increased as a result of participants’ reading of literature. In their study, the reading of literature was superior to that of reading popular fiction, nonfiction and nothing at all, in terms of measures of empathy and emotional intelligence. The study received both praise and criticism. Much of the praise came from the reliability of scores conducted over five experiments. Criticism stemmed primarily from the researcher’s narrow definition of literature vs. popular fiction, and the sample texts that they selected. Our own interviews with children point to evidence that both literature and popular fiction affect student perceptions of their increased empathy. To repeat what ninth grader Alison stated, books “taught me that I didn’t have to be the gothic girl to understand the gothic girl.” Empathy, while being a critical element to success in so many fields (for example, the field of medicine), is not an attribute that can be easily distributed, practiced, or developed in a classroom environment. Yet there is evidence that it can be increased through the pages of a book.

Literature provides us with case studies in life. These case studies present unique opportunities to analyze characters, themes, and authors’ choices. They provide opportunities to help students make connections, understand people, understand life, and question, analyze, and critically evaluate societies. Toscana is right. Reading does give people ambitions, expectations, and a sense of dignity. Reading Toscana’s passionate rant, in light of the data on the declining levels of leisure reading in the United States, we couldn’t help but wonder if, to a certain extent, we weren’t also reading the words of the Ghost of Christmas Future.

Implicit and Explicit Vocabulary Development

Implicit vocabulary development is done by immersing children in comprehensible environments that are rich in academic language that is embedded in meaningful contexts. For example, using read-alouds is a way to foster

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vocabulary development implicitly. Explicitly teaching academic vocabulary involves directly teaching vocabulary. Research shows us that both implicit and explicit vocabulary teaching hold merit when they are done within a meaningful context. Because of the complexity of language and the amount of vocabulary coverage that would be necessary, a combination of both approaches toward language growth is important. Remember the history paragraph that was introduced earlier? Explicitly teaching every academic word that had been replaced with “blah” would leave little time for teaching anything else. This is especially true in light of the fact that the paragraph only makes up a small portion of what was assigned to be read. Additionally, lack of exposure to words in different contexts on some students’ parts can often lead to misunderstandings of which they and we are unaware. While the one student knew that admission meant entry, the context in which he knew admission caused him to misunderstand the meaning of the sentence.

In light of what is practical, implicit vocabulary development really ought to be a critical piece of what we intentionally pursue. One of our favorite quotes regarding the complexity of language is this: “Language is too vast, too complex, to be taught or learned one rule or word at a time” (Krahsen, 2004, p.18). When it comes to effectively teaching academic language, we will need to allow for students to soak in it. Helping students acquire academic language will require that we lay a thick foundation for understanding. It takes a strategic approach toward intentionally using both implicit and explicit vocabulary development.

It’s also important to note that in real life and in the research, the distinction between implicit and explicit vocabulary development is not always that clear. For example, though Elley’s studies included read-alouds and leisure reading, they also included interaction around the text through shared reading experiences where teachers added to students’ comprehension, making the text relevant. While there was implicit language development occurring, where students *soaked* in the language, there was also explicit language development occurring, where teachers explained the meanings of words. Helping students get lost in the linguistically meaningful contexts of books will require that we do both, and know when to do both. We’ll review some strategies for using a healthy combination of both implicit and explicit vocabulary development within teaching contexts. We will need to be explicit in our teaching but, because of the complexity of academic language, we’ll also need to allow for students to simply experience the words.

What About English Language Learners?

According to a national survey (EPE, 2013), teachers showed the greatest trepidation in teaching toward the Common Core State Standards with English language learners (ELLs). Next in line were students with special needs. Let's focus on ELLs for a moment. On average, 12.9 percent of ELLs are exited from programs annually. At that rate, it would take eight years to exit the current pool of ELLs that entered during this school year. Consider that number paired with the fact that 65 percent of ELLs were born in the United States or its territories (Swanson, 2009). (Note: Children born in Puerto Rico are US born and included in that percentage, but they make up only 3 percent of the population of English language learners.) So, why is success in school so hard for ELLs? Why will it take about 8 years to exit, or reclassify, the current pool of English language learners, especially in light of the fact that the majority were born in the US, and are likely to be conversational? The answer is simple: Academic Language. According to middle school English as a Second Language teacher (ESL) Georgia Jones, "The first impression that people get when I tell them that I teach ESL is that I sit in a little classroom with students, running through flashcards, 'Car,' 'Red,' 'The car is red.' No. That type of teaching is for the rare two or three students that come in mid-year, and it only lasts for a few months. The majority of ELLs in my district have been in ESL for a few years already. Most of what I do is teach metacognitive skills and content reading strategies. I teach academic language. I teach kids how to ace their history class. And with most of my students, you can't even tell that they qualify for ESL because they can talk your ear off. But they can't legally exit, because they can't pass exit tests that measure academic language." In order to help ELLs succeed, especially under new more rigorous state standards, it will take a concerted every-day effort of engaging them in text, and in interactions around text, because that is where the academic language is found.

ESL teacher Carmen Rowe explains it this way: "When you're talking about English language learners, all of the challenges that native English speakers have in becoming avid readers are magnified because they are reading in a language in which they are weaker. My job as the teacher is to help students engage in reading so that they grow to love it. And the more they love it, the more they'll do it. They need practice, practice, practice, or actual time spent reading. So every minute that they have with me is spent in books. We practice reading books, talking about books, and writing about books. I see it. Without

exception, the more they read, the more linguistic and academic progress they make.” Though the task of ESL teachers may seem as though it involves unfamiliar linguistically enlightened practices that focus on things like *schwas*, *bilabials*, and *fricatives* (we love that word), focusing on those types of things would actually make for a very poor use of a student’s time. We are talking about time that ELL students simply do not have. The fact is, most of the skills that ELLs need are found within the pages of books: listening to books, reading books, talking about books, and writing about books. For students who can carry on even the most basic conversations, there are no better language models than the language found in books.

What about Students with Special Needs?

The principles in this book are for all students. While you will need to closely monitor the progress of students with unique needs, we have found that the best ways to teach students in diverse classrooms that include English language learners, students with special needs, and struggling or reluctant readers is to really engage the students in literature and informational texts. In order to succeed, it will take lots of positive interactions around text, because that is where the academic language is found. Preus (2012) found that in environments that fostered higher-order thinking and authentic learning, students with special needs performed better. Practices such as “asking open-ended questions, expecting students to provide evidence to support their answers, asking students to write down their thinking, building on student questions, modeling the thinking process, and providing specific feedback” were found to benefit all students regardless of whether or not they had disabilities (p. 76). According to Preus, “there was actually very little difference between how teachers treated students with and without disabilities. Differentiation, such as scaffolding and flexible grouping, was provided to anyone who needed it. Students without disabilities were, on average, somewhat more successful in the work than those with disabilities, but the important fact is that students with disabilities did the same work. Work was not watered down for those with disabilities” (2012, p.76).

Former special education and inclusion teacher Ashley Miller now teaches methods courses for graduates and undergraduate education majors at Millersville University. According to Miller, “when talking about students with special needs, particularly individuals with decoding, fluency, or

comprehension challenges, the key for me was to provide them with extensive opportunities to build and sustain a positive relationship with literacy. In working with high school students in learning support, I first had to apprehend that reading provoked negative feelings. At some point in their lives, reading became unexciting, frustrating, and embarrassing. To combat this, I purposefully created moments where the student could see my level of respect for his reading struggle, while setting the stage for him to be successful and also to academically shine in front of his peers. Some of this involved individually preparing the student for what we would be learning in class that day, so that he or she could prepare for it ahead of time. It only took me a few minutes to do this.”

Miller points out the importance of the relational role of the teacher in inspiring children to take risks within a safe environment. “Throughout every lesson, regardless of the subject, all teachers have endless opportunities to have students with special needs engage in reading and build a positive experience with it. Building their self-esteem in small ways initiates the momentum necessary to open their minds and hearts to reading. With each piece of successful moments, no matter how minute, the barriers begin to fall. They begin to enjoy it, and eventually are more willing to take risks and push themselves to improve.”

The Answers Are in the Texts

Academic language development needs to be a priority in schools for students of all ages. This is especially true for students raised in poverty, who are least likely to be exposed to sophisticated school-like speech. In order to address this area of critical need, we need to provide students with meaningful access to where the academic language is found. Academic language is most plentiful in text. This is true of well-selected literature and informational texts. We can help students accelerate their academic language growth by increasing the exposure that students have to academic language placed in meaningful contexts within texts. Subsequent chapters in this book will be aimed at providing you with tools for helping students gain meaningful access to deeper comprehension and analysis of what they read.

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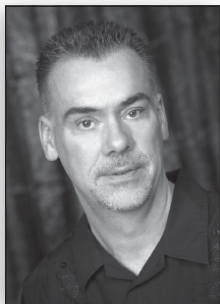
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Keely Potter is a National Board Certified Teacher who currently teaches Language Arts to 5th through 8th graders at Dodson Branch School in Jackson County, Tennessee. Half of her time is spent in the role of “Master Teacher,” which allows her to work with teachers in an instructional coach setting. Prior to teaching in her current rural district, Keely was a teacher, a literacy coach, and a reading specialist. She has also served as a professional developer, and as a literacy consultant—which she continues to do. Most of her 21 years of teaching experiences have been in an urban setting, where we observed her weaving the same literary magic that she now currently performs in a rural setting. She was a contributor to our former book, *Total Participation Techniques: Making every student an active learner*, and served as an instrumental consultant on this project. As such, her “stamp” can be felt throughout this book and we are so thankful for that. Her passions lie in supporting a culture of inquiry in teachers’ learning communities, and in encouraging all students to see themselves as lifelong writers, who lose themselves and find themselves in the act of writing. Keely would be happy to hear from you, and can be reached at keelypotter@me.com