

Language and the Common Core State Standards

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Language in the CCSS

This paper addresses the place and role of a focus on language in the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). We examine three aspects of language. First, the comments that are made specifically about language; secondly, the treatment of language as part of the English Language Arts (ELA) standards; and thirdly, the language demands that are made in other subject areas, specifically mathematics and science.

We are asking these questions because it is clear that language permeates *all* the standards, in many ways, even in those cases where the word “language” is not explicitly mentioned.

Before we address language in particular, we would like to start off with an example from mathematics, a subject that might seem to rely less on language than other subjects do. Here is an excerpt from the section on functions from the grade 8 standards for mathematics (<http://www.corestandards.org/>):

Compare properties of two functions each represented in a different way (algebraically, graphically, numerically in tables, or by verbal descriptions). For example, given a linear function represented by a table of values and a linear function represented by an algebraic expression, determine which function has the greater rate of change.

What does it take for a student, *any* student, but especially an ELL, to accomplish such a task? It may be that this student understands algebraic, graphical, and numerical representations, but very likely he or she needs to listen to descriptions, discuss the functions with peers, and develop ways of expressing comparative information and results so that other students can understand them and so that the teacher is satisfied that the student understands them as well. In sum, the student has to work verbally through the problem under the guidance of the teacher and peers, and then be able to express his or her understanding through language, possibly accompanied by graphs and equations or tables of values. In all of this work, thinking and language are intimately intertwined.

This is clearly not an isolated example. Nor is it limited to mathematics, but it applies equally to all other subjects, from social studies to science and literature. Academic understandings and skills are permeated by language, both in terms of understanding concepts and accepted subject-specific procedures, and in terms of processes of learning to understand, to share, to consolidate, and to present. All of this is hard to do in your own language, the language you grew up with in your family and in your community. But it is much harder in a language that you are still in the process of developing, a long-term task for which you need steady assistance, encouragement and support. Think what would happen if you moved to China, or Turkey, and had to take an 8th grade mathematics class in Chinese or Turkish. Even if you were able to chat with your neighbors, shop in the market, and follow the soap operas on TV in Chinese or Turkish, we think you would face difficulties and stresses in your 8th grade Chinese or Turkish math class, even if you were a college-educated adult from the US.

Language Standards

The Common Core Standards address different areas of concern about language, at roughly three levels. The first level relates to the realization that language is a key contributor to the requirements of all subjects. The second area is that of the ELA standards, which specifically focus on the development of communicative and academic language skills, both within the subject area of ELA itself and across all other subject matter areas. Thirdly, those standards that focus specifically on language emphasize primarily linguistic conventions, knowledge of language, and vocabulary acquisition.

This tripartite layering of linguistic subject matter into distinct focal areas, each with its own array of language descriptors needs to be explicit, carefully interconnected, and motivated by a well-articulated curriculum detailing pedagogical approaches. A concern can be raised that the interconnections between these three areas may not always be clearly worked out or transparent. To summarize the language requirements briefly:

- 1) The language requirements of all subjects (as exemplified above) which require cognitively- and linguistically-complex academic practices, as illustrated in the standards for science and mathematics.
- 2) The skill-specific requirements as laid out in the ELA standards, which are framed in terms of the traditional four skills of speaking, listening, reading and writing, applied across the curriculum. The four-skills approach, also referred to as the separate-skills approach, has a long history in second- and foreign-language teaching. It can be traced back to early structural-situational models of teaching, in which the curriculum is broken down into discrete aspects of language (William Rutherford [1987] referred to this approach as “accumulated entities,”) that are addressed in some sequential order.
- 3) The requirements for explicit knowledge about language in the ELA standards. This is divided into conventions (grammar, punctuation, spelling, etc.), knowledge of language (understanding how language functions in different contexts, apply style choices, etc.), and vocabulary acquisition and use (e.g., using context to determine meaning, understanding figurative speech, using academic and domain-specific words and phrases).
www.corestandards.org/the-standards/english-language-arts-standards, pp. 25-30; 51-56. (Retrieved 12/20/2011)

In general terms, when explicitly addressing ELLs, the CCSS provide the following advice:

The National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and the Council of Chief State School Officers strongly believe that all students should be held to the same high expectations outlined in the Common Core State Standards. This includes students who are English language learners (ELLs). However, these students may require additional time, appropriate instructional support, and aligned assessments as they acquire both English language proficiency and content area knowledge.

(www.corestandards.org/assets/application-for-english-learners.pdf) (Retrieved 12/20/2011)

According to the above passage, CCSS refers to two aspects of concern for ELLs: *English language proficiency* and *content area knowledge*. The integration of these two aspects requires “additional time, appropriate instructional support, and aligned assignments.” We feel that with this guidance as a mandate we can begin to discuss the overall role and place of language in the CCSS.

(Re)defining Language

Traditionally, language theories have been formal or functional in design. Formal theories have emphasized sentence patterns, grammatical rules, parts of speech, word formation, and so on. The study of language from this perspective has focused primarily on students’ ability to use these forms correctly. As a consequence, curricular progressions are built on a sequencing of syntactic structures arranged along a continuum from what has been considered simpler to more complex, filled in with vocabulary determined useful for everyday activities. For example, courses in English as a Second Language (ESL) typically begin with the verb *be* in its simple present form, followed by present progressive, past, present perfect, future, etc. The content tends to vary from lesson to lesson, but it seldom involves students in a coherent development of deep understandings, nor creative or critical thinking. As Valdés (2009, 2010) points out, a negative outcome of this type of language understanding is the “curricularization” of ESL language courses, the idea that unless students use the language contained in the syllabus correctly, they should not pass to the next level ESL course. Studies carried out in California (Walqui, Hamburger, Koelsch, et al 2010; Linqianti, Crane & Huang, 2011) point to the devastating consequences of such a mastery approach, to its contribution to the “intermediate plateau” and to the increasing numbers of long term ELLs, students who have been classified as Limited English Proficient for seven years or more (Olsen, 2010) .

Starting in the 1970’s, functional theories, in contrast, focused on meaning, or on what is done with the language. “Can I have a latte?” is first of all a request, and only in a secondary sense an interrogative structure, because the request could equally well be accomplished by “A latte, please” or “I think I’ll have a latte.” In language education, a functional perspective is characterized by a focus on fluency (defined as the ability to convey meanings effectively), and courses are communicative or task-based, content-based, and so on, where the focus is on the meaning that is conveyed, rather than matters of correct grammar, punctuation, spelling, and so on (known as “accuracy”). However, this functionalist approach does not lead to discursive competence, the idea that social exchange is accomplished by coherent sequences of interactions that bounce ideas back and forth in a discussion, before reaching an agreement or compromise. Because in these early functional perspectives language was seen as accomplishing discrete functions, teaching was not focused on conceptual understandings, skills, or the multiple ways of communicating emerging understandings in subject matter classes. While the functional/notional approach was as a revolutionary move at the time proposed (Wilkins, 1976), Henry Widdowson pointedly questioned whether the shift from structures to functions and notions had in fact changed anything. As he stated, “in both cases the essential design is an inventory of language units in isolation and in abstraction” (1979, p. 247). In functional/notional language learning, curricular progressions were determined by a sequencing of the most important functions to perform in a language in order to survive in an environment where the target language was used.

Also in the 1970’s, the field witnessed the emergence of English for Specific Purposes (ESP, academic, professional, or occupational), and the notion of analyzing learning needs to propose curricular progressions that met the needs of the students learning the language. This latter approach has contributed significantly to the foundation of academic and professional literacies.

In practice, language courses have struggled to try and combine form and function (or accuracy and fluency) in some systematic fashion, and much of present-day discussion is focused on finding an effective – yet often elusive – fusion of form and function. Added to this, in recent years a third ingredient in the design of teaching and learning communicatively has been added: the notion of complexity (Skehan, 2009). Thus, current work on task design commonly addresses complexity-accuracy-fluency as determinants both of the appropriateness of tasks, and of the demands of tasks on learners.

It is relevant to point out though that these two approaches and their respective curricular progressions were developed for the teaching of foreign languages, that is, for situations in which the target language was not indispensable for students' participation in valued everyday societal practices.

Language as Action

A third perspective on language, and one that is currently gaining in importance, is language as *action*. It regards language as a form of human action. This view takes the functional perspective one step further. It argues that language is an inseparable part of all human action, intimately connected to all other forms of action, physical, social and symbolic. Language is thus an expression of agency, embodied and embedded in the environment. Agency can be defined as the ability to act, which is facilitated or debilitated by a range of individual and social factors, including sociocultural, historical, economic and political ones.

In a classroom context, an action-based perspective means that ELs engage in meaningful activities (projects, presentations, investigations) that engage their interest and that encourage language growth through perception, interaction, planning, research, discussion, and co-construction of academic products of various kinds. During such action-based work, language development occurs when it is carefully scaffolded by the teacher, as well as by the students working together. The goals and outcomes specify academic and linguistic criteria for success, and the road to success requires a range of focused cognitive and linguistic work, while at the same time allowing for individual and group choices and creativity (van Lier, 2007).

A good example of such action-based work is provided in Walqui & van Lier (2010), and includes a description of the work of Anthony DeFazio, who has taught course in linguistics at International High School in New York. In one such course, learners (all of them ELLs) have to write five letters about language to a person of their choice (a family member, a friend, a teacher, etc.). During a lesson described in the book, students begin drafting their first letter at their tables, individually or in pairs, while five volunteers write the first part of their letter on poster sheets, which are put up in front of the classroom. Afterwards, discussions ensue about various topics, such as whether animal communication is language or not. One of the students, Julio, vocally disagrees with one of the students who, in her letter, claims that animal communication is not a language. Later on Julio requests to read the first part of his letter, even though he was not one of the original volunteers. As he reads, he uses his body and arms to kinesically underscore what he is saying, and even interjects in his reading markers of oral communication:

Julio: First of all I think that language is a way to inform others around you, your feelings or just a simple thing that you want to let know people what is the deal. And it can be expressed by saying it, watching a picture, or hearing it, you know what I'm saying? I don't know if you have heard about the kangaroo rat that stamps its feet to communicate with other rats. It's really funny 'cause we humans have more characteristics to

communicate to each other, but we still have problems to understand other people. Characteristics like sound, grammar, pitch and body language are some of them, while the rat only uses the foot (he stamps the ground).

Class: Excellent. (claps)

DeFazio: I never even heard about the kangaroo rat. Nice job, nice job.

Julio's letter is not 100% grammatically correct, and his reading mispronounces a number of words, but he has successfully performed a communicative action, as recognized and celebrated by his peers and teacher.

Casting language learning in such a contextualized and action-based way requires a different way of thinking about what language *is* and what it *does*. Firstly, it presupposes a view of language as action, as argued above, and in this view form and function are subservient to action. Secondly, language learning becomes usage-based rather than grammar-based (Ellis & Larsen-Freeman, 2010). Thirdly, language ceases to be an autonomous system, but is part of larger systems of meaning making; these changes have far-reaching consequences for the language curriculum, as we will detail in the next subsection.

Language Without Borders

Inside and outside of education, language is usually regarded as a subject in its own right, with its own systems and rules, and taught and learned separately from all other subjects. In reality, however, language is part and parcel of every human endeavor, whether everyday and practical, or academic and scholarly. It is impossible to draw a clear boundary between language and what is done with or talked about through language. Teaching language as if it were disconnected from the contexts in which it is used and the topics it addresses is therefore a highly artificial and ineffectual pursuit. Yet, the way the school calendar and its curricula are set up, it seems that the only way to teach language is to treat it as a separate subject, in parallel with all other subjects, whether this makes sense or not. Of course it is possible that if we didn't accord it separate and autonomous subject status, it would disappear between the cracks of the other, more easily-framed subjects.

Language is part of the rest of life and the rest of the world in many ways. First, it is embodied, that is, it is a function of the human body, part of movement, posture, expression, gesture and rhythm. Secondly, it is tightly integrated with the physical world around us, in space and time, always locating and referring to somewhere and some time, tying the word to the world, as it were. Thirdly, language is embedded in the social world of human relationships and identity. Fourthly, language represents the historical, cultural and symbolic worlds that humans create.

So far, we have talked about language as a general human mode of action and functioning, a way of making sense of the world and our place in it, and as a range of ways of doing things. We can also talk about "a language," a specific manifestation of language as used by a particular group. In this way we can identify Chinese, Arabic, English, Urdu, Hausa, and several thousand other languages. Language in this sense is identified with a specific ethnic group or a nationality. But this is of course problematic: Which Chinese? Mandarin, Cantonese, Hakka, or another variety? Which English? British? Australian? American? And so on. This brings to the fore all the old questions of standard versus non-standard, official, native, and so on. Should Spanish be taught in the US the way they speak it in Spain, or in Mexico? When teaching

French, should only Parisian French be considered, or also Quebec French? And what about Francophone Africa?

One concept that has been much debated in recent decades is the idea of “native-like.” According to one collection of discussions among linguists, published in 1985, “the native speaker is dead” (Paikeday, 1985). Recent research has demonstrated that babies may be born bilingual (Kuhl, 2010; Werker & Byers-Heinlein, 2008). Are such babies native speakers of two or more languages? Many people lose the language they grew up with and can only speak the language of school or of the dominant society. The arguments around this issue are endless, but the question concerning us here is, how does this affect the issue of language standards in our multilingual, multiethnic schools? Is it feasible, realistic, and effective to adhere to a “monolingual ideology,” when more and more people in the world speak English as a *lingua franca*, and hybrid languages are increasingly used in business, music, literature, the visual arts, etc.?

To express the growing idea that language – or a language – is not a fixed, ready-made code, but a process that is always changing and developing, a number of researchers have increasingly adopted the verb *linguaging* (and the related verb *translinguaging* to indicate the use of resources across languages). It is argued that the multilingual reality of the world is not adequately served by a monolingual ideology that assumes the existence of a “native speaker,” whose perfections all learners should strive to attain. The very idea of linguistic purity is brought into question (Cenoz & Gorter, 2011; Garcia, 2009; Garcia & Kleifgen, 2010).

Language Across the Curriculum

Ever since the beginning of the Language Awareness movement in the 1980s (see Svalberg, 2007; van Lier, 1995; 2001, for historical overviews), there have been calls for stressing a consistent focus on language across the curriculum, to recognize the fact that language permeates all educational and pedagogical activity. However, apart from such rather peripheral attempts as “word of the day” announcements broadcast into high school classrooms, or writing across the curriculum courses in undergraduate programs, such a language awareness curriculum has, to our knowledge, never really succeeded. The reason for the difficulty in implementing such a cross-curricular approach may at least partly lie in the existence of strongly *classified* and *framed* subject matter boundaries, as explicated in Bernstein’s sociological theory of pedagogy (2000). Whether or not the CCSS can weaken entrenched boundaries and achieve more linguistic and cognitive depth across a school, and across entire school systems, is an open question.

Language as a Basis for Learning, and Some Implications

In his influential paper of 1993, Michael Halliday proposes a *language-based theory of learning*, in which he argues that all learning is mediated by language. This is similar to the role of language in Vygotsky’s theory of development. Important in Vygotsky’s work is the idea of interfunctionality, or the notion that human functions increasingly transform one another into higher-level interfunctional systems (Vygotsky, 1987a; 1987b).

Beginning with perceiving new sights and sounds, learning proceeds by not just perceiving, but also talking about what is perceived, and then thinking with others about what it means, and what they can do with it. Thus, perceiving, talking about perceiving, thinking about it, and acting in various ways to accomplish more and more complex tasks, all these daily activities serve to

connect perception, speech, thinking, emotion and action in multiple ways, thus achieving expertise and proficiency at ever higher levels (Gibson & Pick, 2000; van Lier, 2009).

Looking at learning from a language-based perspective requires an active learner in an action-based environment, in which challenging puzzles, explorations and projects are supported by carefully scaffolded activities and autonomy-supporting interactions (Allwright & Hanks, 2009; Deci & Flaste, 1995; Walqui & van Lier, 2010).

As noted early on in this paper, the language and subject standards are open to being interpreted in a rather narrow, accuracy-based way, or in a broad, all-encompassing way that encourages the development of cognitive, linguistic, and affective strengths in ELs, thus enabling their academic success through connecting language, subject matter knowledge, and the physical, social and symbolic worlds of the learners. The Common Core Standards provide us with an opportunity to reconceptualize our pedagogical view of language and the ways in which it can be taught. Given that learning progressions in language and subject matter content have not been empirically tested, it would make sense to explore progressions based on language as action in the education of English Language Learners. As Shavelson & Kurpius (forthcoming) remind us, “progressions are not developmentally inevitable but dependent on instruction interacting with students’ prior knowledge and new-knowledge construction.” The CCSS provide us with an opportunity to engage students in valuable actions, such as in English Language Arts, engaging with complex text and using evidence when interacting with others; and in Mathematics, maintaining high cognitive demand, developing beliefs that mathematics is sensible, worthwhile, and doable. A purely grammatical or functional progression will not get students to engage in these acts, or to become engaged, motivated, develop their autonomy, and succeed. It is essential that we do not miss this opportunity to integrate language, cognition, and action deeply and coherently.

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