Implementing Common Core Speaking and Listening Standards to Improve Student Academic Vocabulary

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Abstract

Intentionally teaching students how to take turns talking, listening, and responding to each other's comments improves their acquisition of academic vocabulary through sustained and purposeful conversation about subject-matter topics. This case study examines a fifth-grade classroom and the process of teaching students how to improve their acquisition of academic vocabulary using a variety of best practices. This article includes a literature review of pertinent sources as well as a demographic description of the case-study class. In addition, the study examines several practices deemed highly effective by research studies and explains how they were implemented to help students increase their academic vocabulary. The study concludes with a discussion of lessons learned in implementing these practices.

Keywords: Speaking and Listening State Standards, collaborative learning

Responsible educators recognize the importance of integrating Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in their classrooms. This is especially true of the CCSS Speaking and Learning State Standards, which, when properly implemented, allow students multiple opportunities to cultivate a deeper understanding and meaning of words through the intentional conversations they have with their classmates. Allowing students to take turns talking, listening, and responding to each other's comments improves their academic vocabulary through sustained and purposeful conversations about subject-matter topics (Zwiers & Crawford, 2011).

But teachers must not simply allow students to merely participate in these activities; teachers must actively structure classroom instruction to help students refine these crucial skills. According to Roake and Varlas (2013), being able to naturally hold a content-based conversation with a peer takes social maturity, time, and lots of practice. In the process of learning to do so, many students require intentional instruction to master this ability. As Sprenger (2013a) has observed, assisting students in making meaningful definitions of academic vocabulary will help them tackle complex text, learn to read more closely, augment their existing vocabulary, improve their speaking and listening skills, and become well-rounded learners and members of society.

1. Review of Literature

With the recent shift to integrating the CCSS in elementary and secondary classrooms, speaking and listening have become a major part of a learner's daily routine. One aspect of these skills is academic vocabulary. According to Marzano and Kendall (1996), 85% of test scores are based on how well students know the vocabulary of the standards. But academic vocabulary as a concept is slippery, as researchers differ in their definition of it.

Zwiers (2008), for instance, defined academic vocabulary as "the set of words, grammar, and organizational strategies used to describe complex ideas, higher-order thinking processes, and abstract concepts" (p. 18). Chamot and O'Malley (1994) had a different take on the meaning of academic vocabulary: "the language that is used by teachers and students for the purpose of acquiring new knowledge and skills—imparting new information, describing abstract ideas, and developing student's conceptual understanding" (p. 18). Although definitions vary, there is some overlap and the essential idea is clear. Students must be actively involved in making meaning, one of the hallmarks of Dewey's (1916) philosophy of education.

The acquisition of academic vocabulary also has a sociological perspective. Hirsch (2006) asserted that when it comes to vocabulary, "the rich get richer and the poor get poorer" in a phenomenon he labeled "the Matthew Effect" referring to the New Testament gospel passage (Matthew 5: 29), which was originally coined by Robert K. Merton in 1968. Similarly, Hart and Risley (1995) asserted that "[b]y age three the children in professional families would have heard more than 30 million words, the children in working-class families 20 million, and the children in welfare families 10 million" (p. 132).

1.1 The relation between Common Core State Standards and academic language. The first anchor of the CCSS Speaking and Listening State Standards expects students to "prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively" (National Governors Association, 2010). This anchor allows educators to use discretion in creating activities to help students develop a range of interpersonal skills. Within the Common Core and in other standards, academic language serves three interrelated and broad-ranging functions by describing complexity, higher-order thinking, and abstraction. Although these functions are similar in purpose, the way in which they are taught will differ according to specific content area and grade level.

The majority of words that students must have a concrete understanding of are ones they encounter through reading and learning new content. These words are often found in written materials and are heard in school. Participating in intentional academic discussions is a critical step in providing students the opportunity to add to their knowledge and make connections with and meaning of the vocabulary. These discussions also allow for deep engagement within the classroom (Johnston, 2012).

Beck, McKeown, and Kucan (2002) created the Three-Tier Model, which describes the levels of vocabulary. Tier 1 consists of basic words such as sight words, function words, and words that name objects and are used in daily conversation. Tier 2 comprises general academic and multiple-meaning words that are important for understanding text, used across the curriculum, and have several meanings. Tier 3 encompasses specific content words that are discipline specific, have technical meaning, and are not part of daily use. According to Beck et al. (2002), the distinction between academic-vocabulary words and content-specific words has a significant bearing on a student's language success. Sprenger (2013a, 2013b) observed that academic vocabulary is essential for students to master so that these words do not take up their precious working memory. Academic vocabulary, then, must come automatically for students if they are to effectively analyze their subject-specific reading and academic information.

1.2 The importance of language-meaning constructs. Vygotsky (1962) suggested that an individual's thinking eventually develops into speech through a series of steps. Essentially, our understanding and use of language develops as a result of our thinking and how we process information and remember. Once an individual starts making meaning of language, it is imperative for the individual to converse with others to establish language-meaning constructs. Stahl and Fairbanks (1986) found that when students are immersed in academic conversations, focused on the content-based vocabulary, such vocabulary instruction directly improves students' reading comprehension of textbook content.

When students are given a variety of strategies to better understand content vocabulary, they are able to incorporate these strategies before, during, and after reading, in effect using the strategies as a familiar set of tools. According to Marzano (2007), academic vocabulary, specifically the language that may occur in multiple contexts or the precise words that are presented in a specific context, can help students acquire new learning strategies and skills. And this becomes evident especially in classroom discussion, a powerful tool that "forces students to stop, reflect, process, repackage, and deliver whatever they're learning in a way that adds to their small-group discussions and to their bigger understandings of the content" (Himmele & Himmele, 2011, p. 5).

1.3 The need for practice. A crucial component of implementing discussion using academic vocabulary is practice. As Fisher, Frey, and Rothenberg (2008) asserted, providing the time and practice for purposeful classroom discussion allows students to own both the words and the ideas of content. Targeted discussion scaffolds must become a part of students' routine so they may participate in a content-based conversation. Allowing students to take turns talking, listening, and responding to each other's shared thoughts and ideas can improve their academic vocabulary through sustained and purposeful conversations focused on content-area topics.

Creating a classroom content word wall is an engaging visual tool to help students retain and use the vocabulary in their writing and discussions. Repetition is another valuable tool when introducing and using new academic vocabulary. With this tool, teachers can select a few content-based vocabulary words that are critical to the students' understanding, and provide multiple exposures to the words before giving students opportunities to practice using the vocabulary themselves.

1.4 The need for clear expectations. Clear expectations must set the stage for collaborative classroom discussions. Fisher et al. (2008) suggested planning lessons by defining the content, language, and social objectives. This allows for the posting of each lesson's learning target, the academic vocabulary students must properly use during the lesson, and the expectations or norms that students are required to use during conversations. The use of instructional supports, such as rubrics and key vocabulary words relevant to the topic, will remind students of the metacognitive skills they need to maintain throughout their academic discussions. Creating an environment where students feel safe and empowered is essential. Students need to feel as if their ideas and suggestions are valued as well as being open to their classmates' ideas and suggestions. Fisher et al. (2008) suggested assigning roles in classroom discussions to help students interact meaningfully while still focusing on the academic content.

Two problematic situations for students deal with class and deportment. According to Beck et al. (2002), "there are profound differences in vocabulary knowledge among learners from different ability or socioeconomic groups" (p. 1). Students who lack academic vocabulary comprehension are at a greater disadvantage in learning than their more-affluent classmates. Consequently, as Newton, Padak, and Rasinski (2008) observed, their lack of academic vocabulary is often the main barrier that stymies their text and oral comprehension. In addition, students who demonstrate proper behavior, turn in their homework on time, and follow directions often fall behind in acquiring academic language because they are frequently not identified as a having a deficit solely on account of their good behavior. Effective classroom teachers must not confuse good behavior with success in acquiring academic language.

2. Method

Before academic language can be effectively integrated in the classroom, students must understand and practice what it means to be academically social.

2.1 Participants. The target population for this project is a fifth-grade class in a rural area of eastern Washington State. The class is located in an elementary school serving grades preK through 5. According to the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, this school enrolls 404 students, of whom 219 (54.2%) are male and 185 (45.8%) are female. Of these 404 students, 19.1% are ethnically diverse spanning these groups: American/Indian, Alaskan native, Asian, Pacific Islander, African American, Hispanic, and two or more races. In addition, 103 (25.5%) of the students receive some form of special services. Currently, 226 (55.9%) of the students qualify for the free and reduced-price meals rate.

2.2 Site. The school is staffed by 26 certificated classroom teachers, 23 of whom teach academic classes. All of the teachers meet the Elementary and Secondary Education Act's (ESEA) definition of highly qualified (HQ). Of the 26 certificated classroom teachers, 18 (69.2%) have earned a master's degree. The school's instructional staff is relatively young with a mean teaching experience of about eight years.

The fifth-grade classroom in which the study was conducted consists of 20 students, 14 boys and six girls. Two of the students receive special-education services, two more have been identified as Highly Capable, and one student is on a behavior plan. The assigned classroom teacher instructs all subject areas except for library, music, physical education, and world language. The classroom contains four large tables, each accommodating five students, which allows for group discussions. Students also have assigned carpet spots where they are strategically placed for "turn-and-talk-to" partners. Seat assignments at both tables and carpet are changed periodically to allow for more diverse academic conversations.

3. Best Practices for Improving Student Academic Vocabulary

Several research-based practices were implemented with the class during the Spring 2014 semester in order to increase the students' ability to work cooperatively as a means of increasing their academic achievement and specifically their command of academic vocabulary. These practices addressed professional development for the instructional staff as well as incorporating active-learning practices in both English language arts and mathematics.

3.1 Professional learning community. Hargreaves and Fink (2006) posited the concept of the professional learning community (PLC) almost a decade ago. They contended that having teachers meet regularly to discuss curriculum, assessment, and students is crucial to developing sustainable leadership and professionalism among educators. The PLC for grades 4 and 5 met every Friday morning for an hour. Each meeting had an agenda, and the teams worked on common assessments. Each teacher brought student work samples that the group evaluated, using the Common Assessment Analysis Protocol (see Figure 1). This tool allowed the team to reflect on the students' use of communication and their developing abilities to use appropriate academic vocabulary. Another aspect of professional development for the team was consulting with the school's speech and language pathologist. This individual organized a book study for the group on a work that focused on the importance of academic conversations with the classroom.

3.2 Classroom discussion norms and scaffolding. Each teacher in the PLC for grades 4 and 5 spent time at the beginning of the school year focusing on creating a safe and positive learning environment in the classroom. Each teacher had students discuss an intriguing topic and then had students comment on what worked and what didn't in the discussion, recording their responses on a T-chart. The teachers then introduced the concept of collaboration norms. Using their comments on the T-chart, each teacher guided students in creating a list of collaboration norms that was appropriate for the classroom. This scaffolding process included having students break into small groups and compile a list of norms from the ones the entire class suggested on the T-chart. Students next met as a whole class and then decided as a group which five norms appeared most often. These then became the collaboration norms for the classroom (see Figure 2). These were posted in the class and students also kept a copy of them in their notebooks.

3.3 Development of writing rubrics. The instructional staff of the target school collaborated in developing writing rubrics for the narrative, informative, and opinion modes of discourse. Each of these aligned with the Common Core State Standards in English Language Arts and included the criteria of purpose, organization, development, and elaboration. In addition, each mode of discourse had a customized rubric addressing conventions: sentence formation, punctuation, capitalization, grammar usage, and spelling. Finally, the PLC for grades 4 and 5 developed two specific summary rubrics that relied on a holistic scoring plan of four benchmark levels: 4, 3, 2, and 1. The expository summary rubric listed specific transition words for each of the two grades, and the narrative summary rubric listed transition words to be used by both grade levels. All of these allow the assessor to determine if students are using appropriate academic vocabulary in their writing.

3.4 Passion Project presentation rubric. While preparing for the ELA passion projects in the fall, students were walked through the rubric for the passion project itself, students volunteered to create a separate rubric to be used for the presentation of the passion project. The result (see Table 1) was an assessment instrument having five criteria: (a) present to your audience, (b) use appropriate language and behavior, (c) voice level, (d) body language, and (e) speak fluently. These criteria were assessed using four levels: exceeds expectations, meets expectations, needs more practice, and needs support. This rubric also determines if students are using appropriate academic vocabulary in their presentation. After the presentation, students self-assessed their work and reflected on what went well and what they could do differently.

3.5 Math carousel. This formative assessment instrument is aligned with the Common Core State Standards in mathematics for Grade 5 which focuses on solving real-world problems involving multiplication of fractions and mixed numbers. Moreover, it is an ideal vehicle for addressed the Speaking and Learning standard SL.5.1.a-d: "Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussion (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 5 topics and texts, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly." In this activity, students in groups rotate through a series of stations, each having a different math problem. They are able to demonstrate their ability to use academic vocabulary in the process of working together to solve the problems. Students have the option of re-doing any or all stations if they need additional help in figuring out the answers. The math carousel also has a reflection component for students to evaluate their performance during the activity.

3.6 Learning walks. All members of the PLC for grades 4 and 5 at the target school regularly visit each other's classrooms to observe and provide feedback on their observations. Before teachers observe a classroom, the observed teacher provides the observers with specific information: (a) description of student learning to be observed, (b) context for the student learning, and (c) any framed questions the teacher may want additional assistance on from the observers (Lewis, 2002). Following each observation, the teachers observing provide the observed teacher with feedback so that each teacher has the opportunity to reflect on the lesson, making adjustments as needed.

4. Discussion

Providing opportunities for students to learn, understand, and use academic vocabulary is critical for student growth. Before students can be successful, a foundation for safe academic conversation has to be put into place. Students will struggle how to apply new academic vocabulary if they don't know how to conduct collaborative academic conversations. The best practices listed above provide the opportunity for students to have intentional talk among themselves using appropriate academic vocabulary. These practices also allow for building a supportive classroom community, a necessary precursor to academic achievement.

Another aspect that is crucial to helping students develop their use of academic vocabulary is to structure PLC time as a non-negotiable in the school schedule. Otherwise, other matters will take priority and, as a result, important professional discussions will become haphazard. Furthermore, there must be an agenda and a rotating responsibility for hosting the PLC. We discovered that having specified duties for the host is imperative and makes for a much smoother meeting time. These responsibilities include collecting agenda items, sending the agenda out in advance of the meeting, typing the minutes, and emailing them not only to PLC members but also building or district-level specialists and administrators who might benefit from knowing what the PLC is doing to strengthen instruction and help students achieve academically.

Classroom teachers must ensure that academic vocabulary is taught in a fruitful, sustainable way in every lesson of every unit of instruction. It's sobering to remember Marzano and Kendall's (1996) statement that 85% of test scores are based on how well the students know the vocabulary of the standards. These practices will help us ensure that our students are meeting the standards and succeeding academically in a supporting, collaborative classroom environment.

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Figure 1

Common Assessment Analysis Protocol:
Literacy Performance Tasks

Prior to engaging in the protocol, as a PLC:
- Determine the focus area from the common rubric and presort student work prior to the collaborations.
- Identify a device to keep time so all individuals can focus on the conversation.
- Assign a recorder to create a "parking lot" of ideas to ensure the conversation remains focused on student work and not instructional strategies/practices.

Setting the Foundation (5 minutes)
Review what aspect of the rubric will be the focus of the conversation. Discuss standards being assessed and the language within the rubric. Confirm a common understanding of language and expectation.

Sharing of Student Evidence—Meeting Standard (15 minutes [shared equally among PLC])
Each PLC member shares one or two samples of a level 3. Allow each person time to just talk through their students' evidence and what they specifically notice. Remember to save questions/ comments for the next part of the discussion.

Discussing Students' Evidence (10 minutes)
Allow each PLC member to question or comment regarding the "meeting standard" student work shared. This could also include presenting a sample that a teacher wasn't sure about. Lay out student work identified to discuss samples as a collective whole. Discuss observations and questions, and then agree upon student work that is meeting standards of focus.

Identifying Student Evidence—Above Standard (5 minutes)
Determine student work that would represent a level 4. Identify specific examples.

Recognizing Interventions Needed (20 minutes)
Each PLC member should bring samples of student work that don't meet standards of focus. Discuss and identify patterns of support needed among the collection of samples. Generate a list of possible interventions.

Revisiting the Standard and Rubric (5 minutes)
Review the rubric according to the standard. Collectively answer the following questions: Does the prompt help us to assess this standard? Does the rubric help us collect the necessary evidence for student learning? What adjustments should be made?

Figure 2
Collaboration Norms

- Do not interrupt others.
- Speak fluently and clearly.
- Face your audience (partner, small group, whole group)
- Come to an agreement through the process of collaborating.
- Have a good attitude.
- Include everyone.

Table 1

Passion Project Presentation Rubric

	Exceeds Expectations (4)	**Meets Expectations (3)**	**Needs More Practice (2)**	**Needs Support (1)**
Present to Your Audience	Presenting your information by looking at your audience during your WHOLE presentation	Presenting your information by looking at your audience MOST of the time	Presenting your information by looking at your audience SOME of the time	Presenting your information by not looking at your audience at all
Use Appropriate Language and Behavior	Using proper grammar your WHOLE presentation; demonstrating respectful behavior during your WHOLE presentation	Using proper grammar MOST of your presentation; demonstrating respectful behavior during MOST of your presentation	Using proper grammar SOME of your presentation; demonstrating respectful behavior SOME of your presentation	Proper grammar not used AT ALL; respectful behavior is not used AT ALL
Voice Level	Voice Level 3—presentation voice	Voice Level 2—conversation voice	Voice Level 1—whisper voice	Voice Level 0—quiet voice **or** Voice Level 4—outside voice
Body Language	Stands straight your WHOLE presentation; pointing to your presentation for better comprehension	Standing straight MOST of your presentation; pointing to your presentation for better comprehension	Standing straight SOME of your presentation; pointing to your presentation SOME of the time for better comprehension	Standing straight ALMOST none of the time; pointing to your presentation NOT AT ALL
Speak Fluently	Presenting your information using different tones in your voice, heeding punctuation, and presenting as if you are having a conversation the WHOLE presentation	Presenting your information using different tones in your voice, heeding MOST punctuation, and presenting as if you are having a conversation MOST of the time	Presenting your information using FEW tones in your voice, heeding SOME punctuation, and presenting as if you are having a conversation SOME of your presentation	Presenting your information using one tone in your voice, BARELY heeding punctuation, and having many pauses throughout your WHOLE presentation