

The Language of School

Eric Williamson

Teachers College, Columbia University

May 1, 2018

The language of school is an invisible culture that only serves privileged middle and upper class white students. It is institutionalized in lessons, curriculums, and approaches to teaching in early childhood spaces. There is an assumption that students can adjust to these new means of communicating when they enter formal schooling. The biggest argument is home language differs from school language. Issues of class and race influence the divide between the two. Christie (2002) addresses racial and class barriers of the language of school in her work by stating,

“Michaels also provided evidence that teachers, who tended to hold essentially white, literate models of what constitutes acceptable narrating or telling about experience, were inclined to privilege those children (normally white) who held similar models, while often failing to recognize and support the models for topic choice and discourse structure of the children of the more oral, Black social groups. Young children operate with very different modes of meaning making and communication, depending upon social class background, familial status and/or ethnicity, and they are in fact differentially rewarded by schooling.” (p. 34)

Christie highlights the issue of white students receiving a reward for acclimating to this language of school which already aligns with middle and upper class culture. This isolates and penalizes minority students whose culture does not coincide with the language of school. The vernacular of black culture is not apart of the teacher model nor is it recognized as an important cultural difference. Teachers perpetuate these fallacies by not integrating or differentiating the language of homes of minority cultures from the language of school. Consequently, minority students are at a disadvantage in learning the language of schools compared to their white counterparts.

The language of school dominates curriculum. Social communication skills and interactions are not recognized as legitimate learning tools to teach academic English. This is especially difficult for ELL (English Language Learner) students. Schleppegrell (2004) highlights the barriers of school grammar and how connections are not made to what is happening at home,

“The variety of English expected at school differs from the interactional language that students draw on for social purposes outside of school...A functional grammatical analysis reveals the challenges that the ‘language of schooling’ presents to student unfamiliar with this variety, including nonnative speakers of English, speakers of nonstandard dialects, and other students with limited exposure to academic contexts outside of school” (p. ix)

In addition to learning English, students from ESL (English as a Second Language) households are expected to immediately understand the context of academic English individually. Their household language culture is social. Schleppegrell (2004) argues that this approach silences the rich culture of the language of home. Halliday (2007) also discusses the limitations in access to the language of school for ESL students,

“This essential component in the children’s educational success is often denied to them, simply through the impoverished view of language that prevails in education, where all writing activities are reduced to ‘telling a story’ and even then the learners are given no guidance on what constitutes effective story writing.” (p. 350)

In most early childhood learning environment, students are expected to engage in storytelling as part of their daily routine. These activities do not support ESL students with the necessary tools

to deconstruct their stories using the language of school; no connections are made, their culture is excluded, and the students are not successful in navigating academic registers.

Academic register is functional school grammar. Halliday (2007) states, it can be deconstructed into three metafunctions: ideational, interpersonal, textual. Each metafunction serves as an aide to utilizing language to understand the world, relationships, and constructing reality. (Halliday, 2007). Academic register is also situational context meaning language varies in different context.

“Halliday (1978) defines register as a “set of meanings that is appropriate to a particular function of language, together with the words and structures which express these meanings. Register variation is responsive to differences in the context of situation.

Halliday describes in terms of *field* (what is talked about), *tenor* (the relationship between speaker/hearer or writer/reader), and *mode* (expectations for how particular text types should be organized).” (Schleppegrell, 2004, p. 46)

Field, tenor, and mode aide us in deconstructing written and spoken text. It allows for the speaker and reader to organize the ideas presented. Academic register is also formal school grammar. Schleppegrell (2004) continues to build upon this idea in the quote below,

“Developing the kind of knowledge that comes through schooling requires that students learn to use language in new ways. Even brief observation of any classroom shows the role that language plays both in managing activity and presenting academic content. It is through language that school subjects are taught and through language that students’ understanding of concepts is displayed and evaluated in school context. In addition, knowledge about language itself is part of the content of schooling...” (pg. 1)

Academic register helps us to understand the functional role of language in school. It is heavily integrated into every subject that is taught and eventually becomes part of how students learn and interpret information. This is problematic because teachers are not efficiently connecting this function of language to student's level of experience with it.

Academic English is different from English (or non-English) spoken at home. Academic English is a skill that must be taught, learned, and internalized. Halliday (2007) explicitly states this in saying,

“There is a significant difference between home and school, in how language is used to enable children to learn. In school language becomes a thing in itself; it is something that has to be worked on, first of all in learning to read and write, and then increasingly as a “subject” with spelling, grammar, composition, foreign language, and so on. In the course of all this, language becomes a David Butt puts it “detached from culture”. (p. 356-357)

The ‘detachment from culture’ is dangerous for minority students to engage in. Culture is heavily connected to identity and is the stimulus of all learning for children prior to formal learning in school spaces. There is educational value in the language patterns, phrases, and expressions students use that are not utilized enough in school. Potentially, teachers can utilize these resources to aid students in learning the language of school through a culturally responsive curriculum. Schlepegrell (2004) provides some insight on what a culturally responsive curriculum is,

“Language use is always socially and culturally situated. What we learn and how we learn it depends on the contexts in which we learn. Not all students come to school with the same background and ways of using language. School language tasks are not familiar

to all students from their experiences in their homes and communities. For some children, the socialization contexts in which they have participated have prepared them well for the ways of using language they encounter at school. For other children, however this is not the case...By focusing on language as a means of understanding pedagogical content, pedagogical practice can respect the language students bring into the classroom at the same time they are offered tools for developing new linguistic resources” (pg. 4)

Social context are not considered universally for all students in academic English. They often cater to students whose social class have prepared them to navigate academia successfully.

Schleppegrell argues here that the shift in academic language should respect, engage, and include the language students bring into the classroom. That is a culturally responsive curriculum.

Academic register is not inclusive, but elitist. Students who are able to assimilate or conform to the dominant culture (white middle and upper class) of academic English are rewarded and celebrated. Students who do not use language in this manner are mislabeled and stereotyped. Schleppegrell (2004) expands upon this in stating,

“When student use linguistic styles typical of ordinary conversational interaction to present information or make an argument in schooling contexts, they may be judged illogical or disorganized in their thinking. Students who do not use language in the ways expected in school may even be thought to have learning difficulties, especially if their English is fluent...” (pg. 2)

This type of stereotyping does not consider how academic English is culturally situated to favor White middle class students. It also silences the culture of minority students whose background is highly influenced by the conversational interactions at home. This approach does not guide us

toward a universal pedagogy or grant students access to this type of learning. Conversely, Schleppegrell (2004) provides insight in how to flip the script,

“Some children’s ways of making meaning with language enable them to readily respond to the schools’ expectations, but the ways of using language of other student does not...For this reason, it is important to value a wide range of ways of using language at school, giving different languages, dialects, and ways of meaning more social value by having them shared in schooling context. But it is also important to provide all students with access to academic ways of using English so they can participate in new kinds of learning at school.” (pg. 21)

Inclusion of different languages and dialects can drastically change the trajectory of students who are not apart of the dominant culture. Placing value on social interactions and dialect will allow students with a flexible and holistic way of approaching academic register. It is the duty of the teacher to make meaning and validate students’ experiences so they can learn the material. Halliday (2007) brilliantly highlights this distinction between teachers and parents,

“What distinguishes teachers from parents is not that teachers are teaching and parents are not, but that teachers are reflecting on the process and ongoingly monitoring its outcome. Furthermore, in order to understand and promote the learning that takes place in school, the teacher/researcher has to understand the learning in home and neighborhood that preceded it - and which of course is going on all the time.” (p. 357)

Understanding the process of student’s learning and monitoring are essential for student success. Not enough research of student culture and communities are conducted by teachers of the students they serve. This is a major fault in the teaching model and the approach to academic

register. Understanding the learning culture of the home will create space for a universal pedagogy and inclusive education for the students.

In the next section, I will describe several different genres and how they mean. According to Rose and Martin (2012), within a genre analysis there are three types of genre families engaging, informing, and evaluating.

A simple recount includes an orientation (character and setting) and a record of events (sequence) which includes transitional words. The transitivity system explains this as participant, process, and circumstance. Children make meaning with recounts during activities such as “morning news” where they are asked to recount what they did over the weekend or other relative life experiences they would like to share with their peers. It is an engaging genre. Within the context of a music class, I have used a simple recount for assessment and evaluation in my lesson with early childhood students. Here is an example below:

T: Wow we did so many wonderful activities in class today about the Spring. Can someone tell me how we started class today?

S: We sang a song about the Spring!

S: Yea, my eyes can see it's Springtime, my eyes can see it's Springtime!

S: Then we sang about the green grass, the wind blowing, and picking flowers.

T: Did we sing loud or soft?

S: Loud and soft. We did both.

S: We sang loudly for the grass and softly for the wind.

T: Excellent, what else did we do?

S: We did a flower dance and then we went to the zoo

In the example above, I am guiding my students to recount the musical activities we did through our 45 minute class period together. The participants are the students and myself, the process is singing and making music, and the circumstance is the classroom. Recounting information is helpful in aiding students assess their own progress and recall what they learned in a lesson. Simple recount is a skill that must be learned if a student is going to be successful navigating the language of school. The primary purpose of a recount is to engage.

A recount is different from a narrative. A narrative includes an orientation, problem, complicating event, and solution. It is another engagement based pedagogy. There are four parts of a narrative: the orientation explains the characters and setting, the problem is the central issue, the complicating events moves the story forward, and the solution brings closure to the story. Through narrative activities, students are able to recount their personal experiences, speak using the imperative mood, and discover new problem solving skills. The example listed below is from an interaction between one of my after school choir students and I:

S: I'm sorry I missed chorus last week Mr. Eric.

T: What happened? Is everything ok?

S: Yes. I was on vacation with my family and we got back to the city very late. I could have come to chorus, but I was too tired. I decided to stay home.

T: Why didn't you tell me this last week?

S: My mom was supposed to email you, but I guess she forgot.


T: Next time, I want you to send me an e-mail. You are in chorus, not your mom.




In this example, the orientation is the classroom, the student, and myself. There are two problems in this narrative. The problems are she missed chorus and she did not communicate that

she would be absent. The complicating event is her mother also did not send me an email or communication informing me that her child would be absent. The solution in this narration is my student will need to send me communications regarding lateness and absences moving forward. The primary purpose of a narrative is to resolve a complication. Lastly, the student is speaking using the imperative mood. Although this is not clearly stated, it can be inferred from her apologetic language. She was sad and sorry that she missed rehearsal. As a teacher, I have the opportunity to help my student make a connection between this social interaction and this genre of narrative. Rose and Martin (2012), discuss preparing the text in their article “*Learning to Write, Reading to Learn*”. In this example, I prepared the student to give me a pointed response, thus preparing her to provide me with a narrative explanation of why she missed chorus.

How to and procedural activities are informative; they serve a purpose, there are materials, and steps to accomplish a goal. This genre helps students expressive themselves and make meaning of different task i.e. how to dress up or how to tie your shoes. The order of events are crucial in this genre. Students generally write how-to procedures in the declarative mood. These type of activities assist students in building sequential skills. An example of this was demonstrated in my 4th grade music class:

How to read simple rhythmic notation

1. Figure out what the time signature is i.e. 
2. The number at the top tells you how many beats per measure.
3. The bottom number tells you what type of note gets the beat
4. Look at the different symbols; how many sounds does each symbol get?

5. Label all the symbols that get 1 beat 
6. Label all the symbols that get 2 beats 
7. Label all the symbols that get 0 beats 
8. Read the rhythm together

Although the steps in this example are extensive, the sequence of these events are relatively clear. In addition, the student that gave this example provided a visual aide along with the example. This is a common feature of music activities and it allows students the opportunity to visually represent the sequence of events. Students were also prepared prior to providing their own how-to. Another advantage of this activity is we were limited to only 3 types of music notes, which allowed students to grasp the smaller context in order to have fluency and mastery in the activity.

Science reports and reports are part of the informative family genre. They are factual accounts that include classifications and descriptions of a specific event or topic. The primary goal of a science report is to inform. The general mood of the text within a report are declarative since they are factual statements. Reports provide students with the opportunity to use descriptors, compare and contrast, and sequence information.

In the next section I will analyze the children's book, "*A Mother for Choco*" by Keiko Kaszo. The orientation in this story is a yellow bird named Choco. The central issue of the story is Choco did not have a mother. Throughout the story, Choco goes to various animals where he sees a similarity between them, but are not his mother. Choco met the giraffe who was yellow

like Choco, but did not have wings. He met the penguin who had wings, but did not have round cheeks like Choco. Last, he met the walrus who had round cheeks, but not striped feet. When Choco was about to give up hope, he met Mrs. Bear. She asks Choco why he was upset and he explained that he did not have a mother. Mrs. Bear noticed how upset he was and demonstrated motherhood through various actions. Mrs. Bear held Choco, kissed him, and danced with him until he felt better. After Mrs. Bear stated that she did not look like Choco, she inferred that she could be his mother. Choco agreed and went home with Mrs. Bear. At her home, he met all of her other children who also did not look like her and they lived happily ever after.

A new rewrite of the story is called, "A Father for Rodo". The orientation of the new story is Rodo the rat who lives in a New York City sewer. He is fatherless and goes on an adventure around New York to see who can be his father. He meets a dog in the subway who has a tail like Rodo, but he barks. Then, he went to Central Park and met a squirrel who has similar fur to Rodo, but Rodo is afraid of heights. Next, Rodo went to the zoo and met a monkey who has small ears like Rodo, but the monkey could swing from trees. When Rodo was about to give up all hope, he met Mr. Cat. Mr. Cat demonstrated all the qualities of a father. He held Rodo, he kissed him, he danced with him to make him feel better, and he invited him home. Mr. Cat knew he was not Rodo's father because he did not look like him. However, Rodo was happy he looked the way he did. Mr. Cat invited Rodo home to his apartment to meet his other children the gerbil, the goldfish, and the turtle who also did not look like him. They were one big happy family.

The flow of the narration was steady and did not utilize a rhythm or rhyme scheme which is common through children's literature. The phrases used throughout this story were "I'm sorry" and "I don't" statements. These phrases occurred whenever the main character came into contact

with another animal. This sequence allowed the story to progress in an anticipatory manner as these type of statements are declarative.

Teachers are failing in making culturally relevant connections in teaching the language of school. Although there are cultural and racial barriers within the institution, the stories we use to introduce these concepts have universal meanings. This exercise helped me understand that if we prepare our students to read the material we provide and make connections, they will have more success. I will use the story mentioned above as an example of how we can prepare students to understand the language of school. Prior to opening the story, we could discuss what it means to be a parent or guardian. This allows for students to think critically about the attributes of a guardian prior to reading the story. Also, allowing for student input will provide a variety of cultural and social responses that aide the teacher in assessing the culture of the students home. Finally, it prepares the students with a foundation of what to think about prior to reading the story. Rose and Martin (2012) mentions how a language based approach can “guidance through interaction in the context of shared experience into literacy teaching practice”. In the story, the animal that exhibited the most parental qualities was the new parent. This was the inferential meaning of the story. Using this as a guide, students are already navigating this central theme of book and will have an easier time applying their personal experience with the narrative. We could do the same exercise for the literal meaning and the interpretive after reading the story. The literal meaning of the story was that none of the animals could be the parent because they were different species. A guiding question after reading would be to recount the characters in the story and discuss why they could not be the parents. Then, we can connect that to our individual differences within the classroom. In addition, this could easily become a report activity on

different animal species. Lastly, a wrap up activity would be a rewrite focusing on the interpretive meaning of the story which focused on inclusion, belonging, and love. Everyone wants to be included or belong to something. Our class could discuss places or activities that make us feel special. The possibilities are endless in terms of scaffolding into several different community and class building activities utilizing the language of school.

It is important to make connections to our students while teaching any subject. Our students are the curriculum. This exercise helped me realize how relevant that philosophy is. If we are not making connections for our students, they will not be successful. There are some external factors that we can not change i.e, institutional racism, classism, and sexism in the our institutions. However, we can change how our students are accessing, comprehending, and applying the material. If we keep the needs of the student first, they will have more success navigating the curriculum.

References

- Christie, F. (2002). *Classroom discourse analysis: A functional perspective*. London: Continuum.
- Halliday, M.A.K., (2007). *Language and education*. London: Continuum
- Kasza, K. (1996). *A Mother for Choco*. New York: Paperstar.
- Rose, D. & Martin, J.R. (2012). *Learning to write, reading to learn: Genre, knowledge and pedagogy in the Sydney School*. Sheffield: Equinox
- Schleppegrell, M. (2004). *The language of Schooling. A functional linguistics perspective*. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum.