

What Elementary Teachers Need to Know About Language

Over the past decade, education reforms have raised the educational bar that all children in the United States—including newcomers—must clear to finish school and participate in the economic and social world of the 21st century. These reforms place tremendous pressures on children and teachers: In addition to mastering the content-area curriculum, children must become skilled users of language. They must be highly competent in reading and writing to pass the various assessments that constitute gateways for completing school, getting into college, and finding jobs. Teachers need a wealth of content and pedagogical knowledge to ensure that they are providing appropriate instruction to all students. Teachers also need a thorough understanding of *educational linguistics*—how language figures in education. This foundation would support teachers' practice overall, and in particular, it would help them teach literacy skills (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998), especially to English language learners (August & Hakuta, 1998). If approached coherently, preparation in educational linguistics would cover many items on lists of teacher competencies, such as skills in assessing children, individualizing instruction, and respecting diversity. This Digest summarizes some basic aspects of oral and written language about which elementary teachers need expertise in order to promote literacy. However, it is only one part of the formula for effective teaching. How literacy skills should be taught and how teachers can learn what they need to know about language are beyond the scope of this Digest.

What Should Classroom Teachers Know About Language?

Classroom teachers and other educators should be able to answer a basic set of questions regarding oral and written language. Underlying their knowledge should be an understanding that oral language proficiency developed first in the native language (and often in a second language) serves as the foundation for literacy and as the means for learning in school and out. Teachers need to know how written language contrasts with speech so they can help their students acquire literacy.

1. What are the basic units of language?

Teachers need to know that spoken language is composed of units, the smallest of which are sounds, called *phonemes* if they signal meaning differences (e.g., *bet* and *met* have different meanings because they start with different phonemes). Next come *morphemes*, sequences of sounds that form the smallest units of meaning in a language (*cat* is a morpheme of English and so is *-s*); *words*, consisting of one or more morphemes (*cats*); *phrases* (one or more words); and *sentences*. Crucial to an understanding of how language works is the notion of *arbitrariness*: Language units have no inherent meaning. A sequence of sounds that is meaningful in English may mean nothing at all in another language—or something quite

different. Understanding the variety of structures that different languages and dialects use to show meaning can help teachers see the logic behind the errors in their students' language use.

2. What is regular, and what isn't? How do forms relate to each other?

Proficient English speakers take for granted language irregularities that can be puzzling to younger and less fluent language users. An important part of acquiring a vocabulary suitable for academic contexts is knowing how to parse newly encountered words into their morphemes, rather than simply treating them as "long words." Teachers need to be aware of the principles of word formation in English since such knowledge can aid students in vocabulary acquisition.

3. How is the lexicon (vocabulary) acquired and structured?

Most classroom teachers recognize the need to teach vocabulary. Often, they identify and define technical or unusual words in texts. But knowing a word involves more than knowing its definition: It takes many encounters with a word in meaningful contexts for students to acquire it. It also requires understanding how the word relates to similar forms, how it can be used grammatically, and how it relates to other words and concepts. Effective vocabulary instruction requires that teachers understand how words are learned in non-instructional contexts through conversation and reading.

4. Are vernacular dialects different from "bad English" and if so, how?

To realize that differences among regional and social dialects of English or another language are a matter of regular, contrasting patterns in their sound systems, grammar, and lexicons—rather than errors—educators need a solid grounding in sociolinguistics and in language behavior across cultures. Schools must help children who speak vernacular varieties of English master the standard variety required for academic development, and they must respect the dialects that children use in their families and primary communities. Recognizing how language influences adults' perceptions of children and how adults relate to children through language is crucial to teachers' work. Educators need enough knowledge to keep speakers of vernacular dialects from being misdiagnosed and misplaced in school programs. In addition, they need knowledge about language variability in order to make sound decisions about instruction.

5. What is academic English?

Academic English is a cognitively demanding and relatively decontextualized register (Cummins, 1984). It relies on a broad knowledge of words, concepts, language structures, and interpretation strategies. Skills related to mastery of academic English include summarizing, analyzing, extracting and