

Using a functional linguistics metalanguage to support academic language development in the English Language Arts

Jason Moore

Abstract

This article reports on a design-based research project that used grammatical metalanguage from Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) to support primary level English Language Learners' engagement with academic language in English Language Arts. Researchers and teachers developed lessons to support students' ability to interpret and evaluate characters' attitudes in literary texts through an explicit focus on language. An analysis of classroom conversations shows that SFL metalanguage has the potential to support students' content learning in the context of dialogic interaction during meaningful curricular activity supported by scaffolding artifacts. We show that the metalanguage supports elaboration and enactment of meaning and exploration of patterns in language and author's purpose in the texts students read. This results in extended discourse by students in which they also connect text meaning to their personal experiences. We suggest that this approach offers new affordances for supporting ELLs' engagement in challenging curricular tasks at the same time they develop academic language.

Introduction

Academic language is the language through which learning in schools is accomplished, but to be a useful construct, it needs to be specified in relation to the goals of the curriculum across the school years. The forms and features of academic language vary by task, subject matter, and grade level, so those who want to support children's development of academic language need to situate that support in particular contexts of use and in the service of content area learning.

In this article we focus on the academic language of English language arts¹ (ELA) in the primary school, with a focus on meaning in the literature

students read. Two major foci of the ELA curriculum are the study of language and the study of literature, making the ELA classroom unique in including in its subject matter an explicit focus on language. However, that focus is seldom linked meaningfully to other classroom activities, as explicit instruction about language is often realized as the teaching of isolated decoding skills or as labeling parts of speech. As a result, some of the most important and challenging goals of the curriculum, such as literary interpretation, remain a mystery to many students, leaving them ill-equipped to read and respond to literature in the analytical ways valued in later grades.

This is a particular problem for students learning English as an additional language. In the U.S. context, students classified as English Language Learners (ELLs) are more likely to achieve “adequate performance” on word-level reading and decoding than on measures of vocabulary, comprehension, and writing (August & Shanahan, 2006, p. 633). Research suggests that these students need opportunities for explicit focus on language itself in the context of meaningful interaction about curricular topics (August and Shanahan, 2006, Genesee et al., 2006, Gersten et al., 2007). But outside of traditional literary terminology (metaphors, similes, and figurative language more generally), ELA teachers typically have few resources that support them in this endeavor.

In this article, we show how the functional linguistics metalanguage of systemic functional linguistics (SFL) offers tools for supporting the goals of ELA, providing explicit and concrete assistance to students in learning to interpret literature and evaluate characters in stories. We draw on data from an ongoing design-based research project that is using SFL theory to develop tools for talk about text across the elementary school years. In this work we take the perspective that dialog about texts and their meaning is the primary context through which learning is accomplished, and we offer evidence from classroom talk that shows how grammatical metalanguage and related artifacts can support ELLs in meaningful discussion that extends both their language and content knowledge.

Section snippets

Theory of language and grammar

Talk about the meaning of texts calls for *metalinguage*, language for referring to the choices authors have made in writing those texts. In the ELA classroom, teachers often draw on two metalanguages, each serving different purposes. When reading and discussing literature, teachers and students have a *literary metalanguage* (terms such as *symbol*, *metaphor* and *characterization*) to help make meaning of stories and discuss author's craft. When responding to writing, teachers often use the

Context and purpose

The work presented here comes out of a larger project exploring the affordances of SFL constructs in supporting the academic language development of ELLs. Our goal was to develop curricular materials that use SFL to engage bilingual elementary students (grades 2–5) in talk, reading, and writing about disciplinary texts in both ELA and science. Data presented here focus on the ELA lessons implemented during the second year of a three-year project. Research was conducted in five elementary

Overview

The following section first explains the ways in which SFL terms were modified and applied to narrative texts, and then provides evidence that the activities supported student talk in different ways. Section 4.2 illustrates how the SFL-inspired metalanguage of *positive/negative*, *turned up/turned down*, and *process types* was introduced in order to help students explore the ways authors use language to develop characters by presenting their attitudes in implicit and explicit ways. In Section 4.3,

Discussion

In beginning this article we made the point that academic language varies according to situation and purpose. The same can be said for metalanguage, as its role in facilitating classroom talk changed in response to the situation and the goals of the unit and individual lessons. As teachers and students engaged with new, challenging tasks and language features, teachers used

SFL and literary metalanguage to ask pointed questions about meaning and author's craft (Sections 4.3.1 Beyond “happy” and

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