Scholastic Reading Counts!® **Research**

# Reading: Voluminously and Voluntarily

*The unique language of books and literacy is learned the way any language is learned – by using and living it as a way of life.*

## Literacy as a Way of Life

Reading volume—the amount that students read in and out of school—significantly affects the development of reading rate and fluency, vocabulary, general knowledge of the world, overall verbal ability, and, last but not least, academic achievement (Cunningham and Stanovich, 1998a; Cunningham and Stanovich, 1998b). Yet students across all grade levels differ dramatically in how much they read. Anderson, Wilson, and Fielding (1988) estimate that fifth graders' voluntary reading outside of school ranges from over two million words a year to under 8,000 words a year—a two hundred-fold difference!

In this paper, I explain the above relationships and patterns in terms of academic language which is the language of books, writing, and more formal communication but not the same as the language of everyday "talk" and conversation (Cummings, 1984; Shefelbine, 1998). The unique language of books and literacy is learned the way any language is learned—by using and living it as a way of life, day in, day out, year after year. A critical part of living literacy is to read a lot (voluminously, if you will). Reading voluntarily is also a relevant condition because it is self-sustaining and leads to life-long reading.

In the sections that follow, I first review characteristics of academic language and then discuss how voluminous and voluntary reading contribute to its development.

## Academic Language

Why is written language so different from conversational language? Two major reasons involve differences in function and degree of contextualization. While a common purpose of conversational language entails "the negotiation of interpersonal relationships," written language more often seeks to communicate novel or cognitively demanding information (Snow, 1991). The task of written communication is further complicated because it is decontextualized. Writers do not know their readers, are not speaking to them in person, cannot use contextual cues such as gestures and intonation, and cannot negotiate meaning interactively. A key characteristic of written language (and academic language), is its ability to convey meaning through linguistic conventions alone, without the benefit of interaction and shared contextual sources of information.

Explicitness. Lacking the interaction, shared understandings and contexts of conversational language, written or academic language avoids ambiguity by being more explicit (Wells, 1986).

Explicitness is increased by:

- choosing words carefully (vocabulary)
- organizing information in logical patterns, and
- connecting thoughts through more complicated sentence structures (syntactic complexity)

Vocabulary. Words play a particularly critical role in communicating ideas more precisely (Chall, Jacobs, and Baldwin, 1991; Corson, 1995). Unlike conversational vocabulary, which is often limited and repetitive, written vocabulary includes a large number of words, many of which occur infrequently. These two characteristics make learning written vocabulary a challenging, long-term task. Understanding academic language is an essential skill for school achievement. Yet, parents and teachers often overlook the distinctive characteristics and role of academic language and mistakenly equate adequate conversational language abilities with overall language proficiency (Cummins, 1984). Snow (1991) concludes that "only the more decontextualized language skills have been found to relate to literacy" (p.7).

### Reading Voluminously

One of the strongest predictors of reading comprehension in general and vocabulary development in particular is the amount of time students spend reading to themselves (Anderson, Wilson, and Fielding, 1988). A major reason for this powerful relationship is that books are much more likely to contain the vocabulary, text structures, and complex sentence patterns that are so characteristic of decontextualized language—the language of schools and higher education.

Simple reading is not enough. Texts must be carefully selected to find the "just-right" match: one that is not too hard but not too easy. Chall, Jacobs, and Baldwin (1990) emphasize that challenging but comprehensible reading materials need to be part of students' reading diets. High interest, easy-vocabulary reading, while sometimes appropriate for building fluency, is not as likely to result in academic language growth.

### Reading Voluntarily

Reading for pleasure is the missing link in frameworks that simply contrast learning to read with reading to learn. Pleasure reading encourages the development of reading as a life-long habit and pastime while strengthening both academic language and fluency. Conditions for promoting this kind of reading include

- the ability to read accurately and with some level of ease and fluency (precondition)
- at least some degree of self-selection (Gambrell, 1996)
- a wide variety of materials to read, including trade books and magazines (Gambrell, 1996), and time

In an informal survey of middle school students in Texas, I found that a majority of students were willing to read if there were plenty of books to choose from and if there was nothing else to do. In a booklet, I suggested parents create a little "boredom" by turning off the TV and slowing down the hectic pace of their children's lives (Shefelbine, 1991).

## Some Final Thoughts

The critical role of reading widely at increasingly more challenging levels cannot be overemphasized. Many parents, administrators, and teachers still believe that literacy is primarily a matter of skill instruction. The importance of practicing, using, and "living" literacy is often overlooked. Perhaps this is partly because we live in a society that does not always practice the literacy it preaches and supposedly values—libraries are underfunded, television is the predominant source of entertainment and information, and 70 percent of all reading is done by only 10 percent of the population (Sanders, 1994).

Still, there is room for hope and optimism. We know that parents, teachers, and communities can dramatically affect how much children read (Gambrell, 1996). We also know that a relatively simple intervention -- reading -- can have a powerful effect on students' comprehension, thinking, knowledge of the world, and choices in higher education and life careers. Much of the research in this paper is based on Dr. Shefelbine's talk, Academic Language and Literacy Development, which was presented at the 1998 Spring Forum on English Language Learners.

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