Chapter 1

Understanding How Students Use Language

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The words are just the tip of the iceberg.

We need language to do just about everything, especially school work. School language, often called academic language, may be the most complicated tool set in the world to learn how to use. Many students learn enough to get by, but too many don't. Millions of bright and capable students around the world struggle in school and even give up because they lack the abilities to use language in ways that are expected in academic settings.

Many of the students in the United States who perform poorly in school have been raised speaking, reading, and writing a non-English language or a variation of English that differs from the language that mainstream teachers and curricula use (Ovando & Collier, 1998). Most of these learners were not immersed from birth in the types of English that are valued by schools, teachers, texts, and tests.

Nonmainstream students have not had the same conversations or literacy experiences (including books and movies) that their mainstream middle-class peers have had. They have not been exposed to hundreds of books or play with as many educational toys, computer programs, and English-proficient older siblings. Moreover, most of the diverse students who do perform well have been immersed in academic literacy and school-like conversations in their home and community settings, which have primed them to transfer their skills into school English.

Unfortunately, most schools have made little progress in narrowing the overall academic gaps between speakers of nonmainstream versions of English and their peers who were raised speaking more school-aligned varieties of English (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011). Many middle and high school teachers have seen the gap continue to widen between students' communication skills and the language required for the many tasks that students encounter in school. These gaps might even increase in light of the robust language demands of the Common Core State Standards and other new standards.

To complicate matters, we might not identify large numbers of students with language-based academic issues: they have little or no accent, they turn in homework, they are well behaved, and they try hard. Yet they fall further behind each year, often just getting by, as they play the game of school. Contrary to what too many people consider to be common sense, simple equal treatment and basic immersion are not enough for many students who are significantly below grade level. They do not just naturally pick up academic language as easily as they pick up other types of social language (Scarcella, 2003).

In the United States, the narrow range of accents, vocabulary, and grammar typically valued by those in power (politicians, business leaders, media, and so on) is often called standard English (Gollnik & Chinn, 2002). Because this is also the type of language that most mainstream members of society speak, it is often called *mainstream English*. A *mainstream student* (in this book) is a student who has been raised speaking the dominant dialect (mainstream English, in the United States) by educated middle- or upper-class parents who have provided books, computers, academic support, and rich conversations. Mainstream students typically belong to dominant classes whose members control most of a society's economic and social institutions, including schools. By contrast, nonmainstream students in the United States, such as English learners, children of English learners, speakers of African American vernacular English (AAVE), and children from poor families, have often grown up with less academic support, fewer educational materials, and fewer school-like conversations.

THE ROLE OF HOME AND COMMUNITY

Students bring with them to school a wide range of social experiences, cultural practices, ways of thinking, and communication styles. These form powerful yet hard-to-see foundations for their learning. Diverse students are often raised learning and thinking in ways that tend to differ from the ways valued by mainstream teachers, school cultures, and test makers. Most teachers learn about these differences in preservice teacher training, but we often fail to consistently apply this knowledge when we teach and assess during full-time teaching. For this reason, this chapter briefly introduces (1) some of the significant mismatches between home and classroom, (2) how to help diverse students add on ways of thinking and communicating that will help them succeed academically, and (3) some major curricular and assessment changes that can more effectively educate diverse students.

For many diverse students, school is a large set of very new situations, with new things to learn and new ways to talk and think—and it can be overwhelming for them. As James Gee (1996) states, “It is just that only a narrow range of these culturally specific home-based skills are rewarded in school, namely those most often found in mainstream homes” (p. 24). For example, certain home-based language practices, such as storybook reading and parental questioning at the dinner table, correlate strongly with academic success (Cook-Gumperz, 1986; Wells, 1986).

When a student enters school, linguistic and conceptual mismatches can have a negative effect on learning. When a mismatch occurs, the student struggles to learn new rules of talk and literacy because these rules are implied—even invisible. That is, we teachers often take them for granted because we assume common knowledge and procedures among learners (Edwards & Mercer, 1993). It makes sense that the more school-like the tasks and communication are at home, the better students are likely to perform at school. Likewise, the more teacher-like the language of a student is, the more the student will meet our expectations and be considered successful.

In her famous ethnolinguistic study, Shirley Brice Heath (1983) found that the middle-class mainstream students had been socialized from a very young age to use many of the language patterns found in school, such as answering questions to which the speaker knows the answer, reciting facts not connected with the immediate context, and ritualizing the uses of language. Heath also pointed out that each classroom activity had its own organization and set of rules. Lesson formats, teacher-student conversations, and other learning tasks formed a classroom culture that influenced language and learning. She concluded that a significant link existed between the narrative, literacy, and communication traditions of home and those needed in school.

In another important study, Susan Philips (1972) examined the classroom language of Native American children in Warm Springs, Oregon. Teachers initially reported that children lacked appropriate language and interaction skills in the classroom and perceived these students to be overly silent and uncooperative. Philips found that the children perceived themselves to be in situations that were inappropriate for speaking. Later, when teachers understood this cultural pattern and created learning situations that more closely resembled oral participation contexts in the Native American community, student involvement increased (Philips, 1983).

And in a study on reading and text discussion behaviors of mothers with children, Williams (1999) found that the types of interactions differed greatly, despite comparable amounts of time spent reading with children and similar rates of demands for information from children. The higher-social-class group of mothers more frequently asked children to elaborate on parts of the book, connect it to their own experiences, provide explanations, evaluate the story as a text, and respond to "Do you think . . . ?" questions. During these interactions, the mothers apprenticed their children in the skill of attending to certain kinds of meaning. Not surprisingly, these types of interactions in the higher-social-class pairs strongly resemble those found in literacy activities and assessment practices at school.

These studies help us to reflect on the powerful influence that students' oral and literacy experiences outside school have on their learning in school. We need to reflect on how student backgrounds align with how we teach, what we teach, how we use language, and how we expect students to describe their learning.

DIVERSITY OF STUDENTS

Now let's zoom in on several students who experience the disconnect between background and school. These students (the names are pseudonyms) still struggle with school's differing language demands, ways of organizing and interpreting knowledge, classroom and homework expectations, and grading and feedback practices. You will likely see many similarities between the students described next and those in your own classes:

- Sara is a seventh grader who immigrated to the United States four years ago from Mexico. She had missed one year of schooling in Mexico before coming to the United States. Her family came from rural Mexico, where school days were much shorter and often canceled when it rained heavily. Few books were available at school or at home. She still scores as an intermediate English user on the state English proficiency test. She is now in mainstream English, science, and history classes with other English learners. She is a hard worker but lacks confidence in her abilities to read, write, and speak in groups. She asks very few questions even when she does not understand the assignment.
- Armando, a ninth grader who was born in the United States, doesn't like school and is easily distracted by other students. He speaks Spanish at home and in the community. His social English is fluent, but his academic English is weak, according to his teachers. The work that he does in class is just enough to receive some credit. He is not in any support classes, but teachers often say that he needs extra help, especially with his writing and test taking. He doesn't like to read or write and always prefers that the teacher read the text to him. He complains that he is not interested in any of the topics that are taught in his classes.
- Kim came from Vietnam two years ago. She is a very shy and highly motivated fifth grader. who hovers around intermediate levels in reading and writing subtests and lower on oral tasks. Her oral language has errors, but she can make herself understood in most situations. She transitioned from the beginning-English-language development program the previous semester, so this is her first exposure to mainstream classes and culture. The first year, she copied much of her written work directly from the writings of classmates. As she understood more, she took more chances with English. She had a strong academic background in Vietnam and thus comprehended many of the basic ideas being presented in her classes. Reading nonfiction was the biggest

challenge for her, particularly the history textbook and the articles assigned in her language arts class.

- David is an African American eighth grader who tends to speak AAVE in most interactions. His parents, who did not go to college, work hard, and they want David to do well in school. He likes school, but does not like to use mainstream English in front of peers in his classes. He does most of his homework and often uses social and informal language in his written responses. Teachers call attention to these uses, but he usually has acceptable organization in his writing and scores well. In conversations with teachers, David uses more mainstream expressions and grammar. He knows there is a difference but does not want "to sound so white," as he says, in front of his friends.
- Lisa, a sixth grader, comes from a mixed European American and Filipino middle-class background. This is her third school in four years because her family has moved several times. She was recently tested for special education services. Teachers often recommend her for extra tutoring and for special conditions when tested. When she reads aloud, she pauses often and misreads unfamiliar words. She offers logical ideas in class, but struggles to make them clear and academic.

These students exemplify just a few of the many thousands of backgrounds that challenge and enrich the process of learning how to do school things in school ways with school language.

CAPITALS, REGISTERS, AND EXPECTATIONS

Imagine the following scenario:

It is your first day in law school. Going to law school is now a requirement for every job, including teaching. You arrive at class and sit next to folks who have studied for many years and did well on a big standardized test to be there. As the professor starts talking, you recognize the words, but they don't mean what they usually do, and each sentence in the book takes up half the page. The professor asks a question, and four eager hands shoot up around you. One person answers in long sentences and unfamiliar words. Another person adds something about previous court cases from fifty years ago. You sit there baffled and never raise your hand.

This scenario is not unlike the experiences of many students in schools around the world. They enter settings for which they lack academic capital—the valued knowledge and communication skills that get passed on to most mainstream children and are reinforced at school (Bourdieu, 1986). Different types of capital reinforce each other to help students succeed in school.

Types of Capital

Just as money and things are unequally distributed in society, so are the less visible words, skills, and knowledge that give people advantages (Bourdieu, 1986). We can think of students as having varying combinations of four overlapping types of capital: social, cultural, knowledge, and linguistic.

Social capital consists of the amounts and qualities of interactions with adults, siblings, and peers; listening abilities; empathy skills; and appropriate behaviors and responses. *Cultural capital* tends to consist of travel experiences, wealth, parent education, music listened to, games at home, being read to, reading, race, and religion-related experiences (which are especially helpful for figurative thinking). *Knowledge capital* tends to accumulate from reading, being read to, watching educational and news programs on TV, using computers, developing organizational abilities with knowledge, word memory abilities, travel, conversations with siblings and adults, and parents who ask and answer questions about the world.

I have seen cases where knowledge and cultural capital have influenced math learning. Sara and Armando, for example, lacked the experiences with math-related topics that help mainstream students visualize what they are reading in math class. They got bogged down by less important aspects of the problems, which diverted them from solving the problems. In one math book, for example, three questions in a row dealt with scores in miniature golf, baseball, and football, which are unfamiliar sports for many English learners. Other topics in the math questions included weight loss, elevators, temperatures in Fahrenheit, savings accounts, Mount Everest, driving distances in miles, basketball, a table game with a spinner, ice cream revenues, weightlifting, skiing, snow melt, and airfares. Identifying and explaining these concepts can help students do the math and equip them with cultural capital for other situations.

Linguistic capital consists of the quantity and quality of language used by parents and peers, in TV shows, and in daily discussions; of religious interactions, which can develop abilities to use abstract language; of computer experiences and games; and of books at home, whether one is reading oneself or being read to. Regional dialects also figure in. And as we shall see in more detail in chapter 2, thinking skills are assets that help students develop linguistic capital, and vice versa. Students with such capital know what, when, and how to speak and write well in school settings.

Families pass on these different types of capital to their children, who "invest them" in school and the working world. The children then pass on old and new forms of capital to their own children. As these assets build up, students store necessary knowledge and skills for when the teacher, be it in kindergarten or in eleventh-grade biology, asks them to construct new learning on top of what is already there. If a lot is already there, then learning is much less work, with much less likelihood of failure. And as is generally true in the case of financial capital, the rich get richer.

Registers

The more capital we have, the better we are at adjusting our language according to the situation and the audience. A distinctly adjusted way of talking is called a *register,* "a variety of a language distinguished according to use" (Halliday, 1978, p. 87). We all use a variety of registers in a variety of settings such as home, school, work, meetings, interviews, sporting events, and social gatherings. The register of each setting develops and is developed by its members over long periods of time. Take a moment to think about how your language is different at a party than it is when meeting with a professor or an administrator.

Mainstream social groups tend to integrate aspects of academic registers into their children's socialization more than other groups do (Gee, 1996; Heath, 1983). For example, some parents ask their children math, history, and science questions while they are eating, reading a book, or watching TV. Other parents have children recount what happened that day, and the parents do the same with each other. Whether intentional or not, such practices can give students advantages in their development of academic registers. And school designers, teachers, test makers, and textbook publishers all use their own ideas of what is proper school language (derived from their own socialization and schooling) to create expectations for how students use language each day. Academic registers (e.g., technical, medical, and educational languages) that are acquired later in life tend to shape a person's social language, or register. And schooling experiences, work environment, travel experiences, the media, and genres of reading all reshape adult social and home registers throughout life. Parents then hand down these reshaped home registers to their children (Gee, 1996). And the cycle continues.

Sometimes registers clash. As we saw with David, students are often dealing with a dual audience: they simultaneously want to please the teacher (or at least get a decent grade) and impress their peers. These audiences can conflict, as a student might not want to appear too studious, be a teacher's pet, be laughed at, or stick out too much from the expectations of a peer group. One strategy is to give the right answer to the teacher but give it in nonmainstream English. For example, in an eighth-grade science class, a student said, "A nucleus don't have no electrons in it." In this particular case, I had heard the student use the mainstream form ("doesn't have any") with me in a social conversation, but he did not and may never use this form in front of his peers. This solves his dilemma in the present, but may not help him develop more advanced uses of academic language for when he needs them.

Invisible Criteria

Diverse students can become the casualties of invisible criteria in school. This happens when we (teachers, schools, tests) assess students on things that we haven't taught (Schleppegrell, 2004). We use criteria, invisible to us and to students, that depend heavily on background knowledge and language features, many of which come from non-school experiences. We also can make wrong and harmful assumptions about students' knowledge, background, and thinking. Understanding these assumptions and the criteria we use to teach each day is imperative if we are to create an optimal classroom environment for all students.

Many of us reward home-based skills without realizing it. We unconsciously expect certain ways of talking about texts and expressing ideas in writing—ways that are often rooted in our own cultural values and beliefs. Then we reward those ways that most align with our own expectations of evidence of learning. It would be silly, as Bartolomé (1998) points out, "for teachers to expect linguistic-minority and other minority students, including working class whites, to pull academic discourses out of a hat and magically and effectively use it across class and cultural boundaries" (p. 119). Yet this is often what happens. For example, guess which of these students got the higher grade from his or her answer:

Martin:	Like, to divide em, you turn the second one over and times it by the first one. But ya gotta see if any numbers fit into the top and bottom to cross em out and get em smaller so you don't get big numbers at the end. At the end you see if you can make the top and bottom as small as possible.
Leslie:	In order to divide two fractions, take the reciprocal of the second one and multiply it by the first. Before multiplying, though, see if any numerators and denominators have common factors that cancel out. For example, if a 9 is above and 3 below, divide by 3 and you end up with 3 on top and 1 below. Multiply the numerators across the top and the denominators across the bottom. See if the answer can be further reduced.

Both of these students understood the content, but Leslie used more academic language. Do we grade Leslie higher because of the more advanced language she used? If so, have *we* taught that language, or did she learn it at home? This is a pair of questions that we must continue to ask ourselves. Often the answer is *yes* for the first and *home* for the second.

Teachers often have invisible criteria even for very basic practices in school. In her well-known study, Sarah Michaels (1986) found that middle-class mainstream teachers considered the narratives shared by working-class African American students to be illogical and confusing. According to "standard" English–speaking middle-class teachers, children did not follow linear lines of thought, assumed too much shared background knowledge with the audience, and signaled importance with culturally based intonation and prosodic cues. Working-class African American students, especially girls, tended to tell more episodic accounts that shifted between scenes, whereas the European American students tended to tell topic-centered stories that focused on one event. What Michaels and others have shown is that ways of interpreting meaning differ greatly, depending on one's socialization and experiences with language. We must therefore be able to validate the thinking processes and languages that students bring with them, while also explicitly teaching new forms of school language.

Many of our diverse students end up doing a lot of guesswork as they figure out what it means to "read critically," "speak clearly," "write in an organized fashion," "stick to the point," or "use your own words." Although directions and prompts such as these may seem to be common knowledge and self-evident, we must make extra efforts to be clear, offering examples and modeling. For this reason it is important to analyze patterns of school language, even in what we think are basic directions and statements. Mary Schleppegrell (2004) adds, "Students' difficulties in 'reasoning,' for example, may be due to their lack of familiarity with the linguistic properties of the language through which the reasoning is expected to be presented, rather than to the inherent difficulty of the cognitive processes involved" (p. 2). That is, the words and their organization may be a more significant issue in learning than the actual content or skills that we are teaching.

Mainstream students have acquired more than just linguistic knowledge that gives them an edge in school. They have, as Gee (1992) points out, acquired knowledge about "ways of being in the world, ways of acting, thinking, interacting, valuing, believing, speaking, and sometimes writing and reading, connected to particular identities and social roles" (p. 73). If we fail to directly teach academic ways of doing and communicating to our diverse students, what can result is the "pedagogy of entrapment," a term Donald Macedo (1994, p. 34) used to refer to situations in which schools require from students the academic discourse skills and knowledge that we don't teach.

Many educators highlight the need for teachers to directly teach students how to use academic language in school settings (Bartolomé, 1998; Delpit, 1995; Scarcella, 2003). We must strive to make the criteria visible—first to us and then to our students. We then take a close look at what we expect from students as they talk, read, write, and think about our content area. By making our expectations explicit and clear, we begin the process of accelerating their progress and narrowing the gap between them and higher-performing groups of students.

THE NEED TO VALUE *AND* CHALLENGE

So why is there a preference for academic language and literacy practices in school and work settings? The social reality is that dominant socioeconomic and political groups strongly influence what is valued in a society (Freire & Macedo, 1987).

In other words, the middle and upper classes tend to define what is intellectual, logical, linguistically appropriate, academic, and organized in a given setting. Dominant groups then set up systems (e.g., certain types of testing and teaching practices) for preserving power and limiting the access of nonmainstream groups to such systems. Although these systems supposedly evaluate abilities, much of what is tested is the cultural capital and language abilities that align with mainstream expectations. For this reason, we must continuously reflect on the power that language has to separate, marginalize, and oppress.

Another problem in schools is that teachers (along with schools and surrounding society) do not value the knowledge and language skills that linguistically diverse students bring to class. Devaluing students' ways of making sense of the world also devalues those students. I have seen many classrooms and transcribed classroom discussions that show blatant teacher bias and devaluation of student language practices. Teachers, in trying to force students to change their speech drastically, actually shut down students from speaking and participating altogether (Delpit, 1995). And all of us can be susceptible to harmful attitudes, assumptions, and expectations when it comes to student language use. Consider the following conversation from a sixth-grade English learner in a language arts class:

1. *Teacher:* Okay, what did the Egyptians believe about death?
2. *Student:* In the afterlife.
3. *Teacher:* Okay, please use a complete sentence.
4. *Student:* The Egyptians believe in the afterlife.
5. *Teacher:* Bel*ieved,* past tense. Good. Now what does that mean?
6. *Student:* Like, let's say you die and they make you a mummy and—
7. *Teacher:* Okay, you can say, "When a person died, he or she was mummified." What else?
8. *Student:* Nothin'.

We must create learning spaces for our diverse students so that they build from what they have and add the knowledge and language skills they will need in future schooling and work. We must challenge students to expand their linguistic capital. Yet at the same time, we must be willing to push back against society's narrow-minded expectations (often evidenced through tests, writing samples, and grading practices) and limited perceptions of our students' abilities. Some argue, for example, that our schools should "accept wider varieties of expression, to embrace multiple ways of communicating" (Zamel & Spack, 1998, p. xi). Our diverse students' knowledge and linguistic abilities are assets that we should integrate into how and what we teach.

Being on the Same Page

No message is ever perfectly communicated between two people. My meanings of *apple* or *honesty* or *revolution* will always differ slightly from yours. All the past events and texts and images that formed my meanings for a word are different from yours. And the meanings in the minds of our students can differ even more. This becomes a difficult reality when we begin to communicate academic, abstract, and complex topics.

When ideas are transformed into speech, transmitted, and then turned back into ideas, some things are lost in the translation, so to speak. This is more pronounced the more the speaker and listener differ, such as when backgrounds differ (e.g., mainstream and nonmainstream, young and old, male and female, rich and poor). A listener, for example, has expectations about the speaker's topic and predicts what will be said. Such predictions, along with confirmations and surprises, help the listener constantly sculpt the ideas into something meaningful. Yet a common understanding between listener and speaker is doubly difficult to achieve when communicating abstract topics between two people with very different backgrounds (e.g., mainstream teacher and nonmainstream student). Both participants need to edge closer to the middle of common understanding through the use of communication strategies.

For communication to happen, each participant in the communication process must share knowledge of the language's symbols (words, sentences, gestures) and organization. For example, educators need to know what the words *access, curriculum,* and *adaptation* mean when talking about curriculum adaptation. Shared knowledge is common for a fairly homogeneous group of people with similar backgrounds and language experiences. But in school, because most classrooms are large and diverse and because students are very different from teachers, we seldom have clear agreement on the meanings of words and their arrangements, even though we might see many nodding heads. If a teacher uses too many unknown words and complex sentences for a student to understand, then communication isn't happening. If I tell you, "The fargly merglettes grooked all the mestip," you will have no idea what I am saying, even though you might be able to answer multiple-choice questions about who did what (e.g., "What did the merglettes do?"). Too often teachers and tests assume that students know the symbols and the complex ways in which symbols are organized in school (Wong Fillmore & Snow, 2000). These assumptions hurt students later when they cannot meet academic expectations in advanced courses.

An important element of communicating meaning is shared background knowledge (Cazden, 2001). Many teachers assume that students share similar images and concepts in their heads. This assumption allows teachers to default to practices such as having students listen to lectures, read textbooks, and do worksheet activities. It also allows teachers to not say or explain what they assume students already know. In such cases, diverse students must gain much more of their learning from the words in the book or by listening to the teacher than their mainstream peers need to do. Diverse students must work much harder to fill in ideas and construct meaning.

Thus, one of our tasks as teachers is to get to know the meanings that our students have for words and terms, especially the important school-based ones. Once this happens, we get our meanings and theirs to overlap enough to reach a common understanding.

Agreeing on Importance

Another level of meaning has to do with what is considered important. That which is meaningful or significant to teachers may not be to students, and vice versa. We observe and experience life's events and ideas, from which we highlight what we consider to be important. When our students have trouble seeing what we teachers believe is important and then describing it, we must remember that they might focus on different things based on their backgrounds. For example, in one diverse ninth-grade English class that I observed, an insight emerged as the teacher and I looked at the transcripts of presentations. Students presented what they considered to be important about the book they had read. Rather than following the topic-centered, linear format that the teacher wanted to hear, students went out on tangents and focused much more on personal relationships and events that connected to their lives. This is what they considered to be important.

Similarly, a study found that 96 percent of European American student narratives but only 34 percent of African American narratives were topic centered (Cazden, 2001). We need to seek to know what students think is important as they read and learn in all content areas, not just language arts. At the same time, we need to apprentice them into new ways of looking at meaning and what is meaningful to experts in a discipline.

A common teacher tactic is to take elements of student talk and use them to shift the focus onto more academic and scientific ideas (Zwiers, 2005). The teacher shifts to what he or she thinks is important. For example, when a fifth grader responded to a story with, "Yes, last week a person asked me for money and I gave him a quarter," the teacher replied this way: "So you did the same as the main character. Why do you think the author put this part in the story? What do his actions tell us about him?"

Although the teacher could have asked the student to elaborate on his philanthropic event, she directed the discussion back to the story and the academic goal in mind, trying to get the class to think more deeply about the character. When we do this type of shifting well, we build new frames of reference for thinking and communicating. When we do this shifting poorly, we can bore, confuse, frustrate, and overwhelm our students. We must seek to validate students' current perceptions of meaning and patiently guide students into the realms of school meanings and formal ways to communicate them.

Working with Diverse Ways of Organizing Knowledge

In addition to their differences in background knowledge and ways of assigning meaning, students come to us with different ideas about organizing knowledge (Costa, 2001). In the United States, for example, a hierarchical way of organizing knowledge tends to shape the thinking and language of mainstream groups. This type of organization generally involves having a main point, supporting it with several logical reasons and evidence, explaining, and then summing it up. This is, in fact, one of the major emphases of the Common Core State Standards in reading, writing, listening, speaking, and math (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, 2010). We also see hierarchical organization in expository texts in history and science, newspaper articles, magazines, and TV news programs. In these "texts," lack of clarity, lack of evidence, lack of focus, and extraneous language are not valued.

Hierarchical thinking requires students to understand subordinate and superordinate categories of knowledge. For example, a story might contain a main point, or theme, of perseverance. Subordinate points are the events and actions of the characters that support the main point. In science, the main point might be that matter changes states, while the subpoints are the examples of physical and chemical changes that occur and why. Indeed, most websites are organized in this manner, with subordinate links on every page.

Large numbers of students, however, do not organize knowledge in the same ways that teachers and textbooks do. These students have had very different home experiences, with different types of stories, messages, and categories for knowledge. And yet most teachers have been so immersed in hierarchical ways of thinking that it is almost impossible to see how others could organize knowledge differently. But as we get to know students, we can understand how they see the world and give it meaning. Then we can more effectively share new ways of communicating, comprehending, and organizing knowledge.

Getting to Know Students

We may come to know some students—often the obnoxious ones, teachers' pets, and higher performers—but many slip through the proverbial cracks. And these falling students need to be known the most.

We need to know how students think and communicate because we need to know where to start teaching. We need to find out what they think is important in life and why. This includes learning how they organize the facts and concepts of our content area and how they connect learning to life. Thus, in the first part of the year, we must come up with a wide range of ways to observe thinking and learning and language use (see chapter 9).

Here are a few ideas for getting to know students in order to gain insights into their language and thinking. For some activities, you can pick five, six, or seven focal students each week. After eighteen weeks you will know ninety students a little better. As you listen to or read their words, keep track of what they think is important and meaningful (as described earlier in this chapter). Here are some ideas for knowing students a little better:

- Have them write you a letter that tells their life story.
- Interview them.

- Have them record their thoughts about school and how it is different from home or from previous schools they have attended.
- Have them make a personal coat of arms.
- Ask them what they think, like, and dislike about science, math, history, stories, and other school topics.
- Read their learning logs or journals. Ask them personal questions. Ask about the types of language experiences they have at home and with friends. Ask them about their languages and how they talk in different settings.

Chapter 9 also offers ideas on how to keep track of language abilities with checklists and rubrics. As we get to know how students communicate, we must keep in mind that all languages, vernaculars, and registers have logical rules and grammars that govern them. Some languages, for example, do not have a passive voice construction, a structure commonly used in many science texts written in English. Awareness of these kinds of differences can help us better prepare students from diverse backgrounds to read these texts.

What many teachers hear and interpret about students at school is often constructed from a web of deeply rooted ways of being and seeing that cannot be quickly brushed aside and replaced. Our practices must adapt to work with, rather than against, the diversity of our students. Ultimately we must build the habit of always looking through a "sociocultural lens" to get to know our students. Purcell-Gates (1995) writes,

> How can we understand why so many children do not learn what the mainstream schools think they are teaching unless we can get "inside" the learners and see the world through their eyes? If we do not try to do this, if we continue to use the mainstream experience of reality as the perspective, we fool ourselves into believing that we are looking through a window when instead we are looking into a mirror. (p. 6)

CONCLUSION

Brilliant students have been marginalized and unrecognized (and left behind) because of their diverse languages, learning styles, and ways of thinking. This results from limited views that mistakenly equate a person's use of a mainstream register with intelligence and potential. Some argue that we must modify our expectations of language use in school and the way we teach, test, and accept student versions of language. Others argue that we should teach students the academic uses of language intentionally, knowing that students need to use the language of school to succeed later. This chapter has argued that we can and should do both.

For many students, their lives before and outside school have not sufficiently warmed them up for the thinking and communication practices of classroom learning. We must work alongside students to develop and add new forms of cultural and linguistic capital. The hard part for us is avoiding a deficit mentality, or a replacement approach, an all-too-common mentality in much teaching around the world that devalues home-based practices. We need to build on existing language use and thinking and help students add mainstream ways of using language to their repertoire of skills, just as we must add to our repertoire the various values and practices that our diverse students bring. Thus, in essence, we are promoting multilingualism and multiculturalism. The languages and cultures that we are helping students add are academic in nature.

CHAPTER REFLECTIONS

- Is “languageism” even more prevalent than racism?
- How can you connect classroom learning experiences to your students’ diverse backgrounds, ways of thinking about the world, and ways of using language?
- How can you get to know your students—what they think, like, and can do in your discipline?
- What are your criteria for *important* and *meaningful* in your content area?
- What influenced your own development of academic language?

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