

THE LINK BETWEEN INSTRUCTIONAL LANGUAGE AND STUDENT READING

David Costello

There is a significant link between the language teachers use in the classroom and its effect on student learning. The instructional language of teachers shapes the classroom experiences of students. One example of such is students responding to classroom activities using the language of instruction. Often students discuss the strategies they used as opposed to commenting on likes, dislikes, or making personal connections. In recent years, the language elementary teachers use to teach and talk about reading has changed. The main topic of teacher conversation no longer focuses on the students as readers, but instead relies heavily on the behaviors of reading. This language not only frames reading instruction but influences how students think about and communicate about reading. This change in language is due, in part, to the spotlight placed on student reading achievement. Before delving into this relationship between language and learning, it is important to provide some background context to the growing focus on literacy education and the practices that are taking the stage in most elementary classrooms.

The focus on literacy continues to grow as a demand for higher literacy achievement is called for by multiple and varied facets of society – minimum job requirements call for higher levels of literacy, and universities are calling for stronger literacy skills upon entrance. Such demands place pressure on schools to increase their literacy standards. As a result, the topic of literacy has become the focus of both public and professional debate. Not only is this a hotly contested term in the media as it relates to provincial and national education performance, but it is also a significant aspect of educational policy. Currently, the concept of a balanced reading approach is garnering much support amongst educational professionals. There are multiple definitions of balanced reading, but perhaps most common in schools is the notion of balance between four types of reading: teacher read aloud, shared reading (teacher and class read texts together), guided reading (small-group instruction with teacher support), and independent reading (Rog, 2003). Within this balanced reading approach, teachers scaffold reading instruction through these four reading formats. There is a developmental progression through which teachers gradually decrease the amount of support they provide to beginning readers to promote student independence.

At all four levels of reading, teachers explicitly stress effective strategies such as, predicting, summarizing, and fluency. During read aloud and shared reading, teachers model and name effective reading strategies so that students *see* and *name* the strategies in action. During guided reading, teachers pre-select the specific reading strategies students need instruction on and select texts that are at an appropriate level of difficulty. During independent reading, where there is little to no teacher support,

students are expected to use the reading strategies while reading silently. In some cases, students are to identify and explain the strategies they used while reading silently.

The reading instructional program selected by the teacher plays a significant role not only in student reading development but also reading experience. As Manning (1991) pointed out:

[T]he view (model, theory) of reading we subscribe to does make a difference. It determines how we organize and carry out instruction, what we judge to be successful reading (evaluation), what are considered to be problems in reading and how we remediate them. (p. 13)

As captured within this quotation, teachers instruct, assess, evaluate, and base classroom reading decisions on the reading program in place. Students are instructed to read a specific way—using effective reading strategies—and are assessed and evaluated based on these strategies.

The balanced reading program is situated as reading to both students and parents, and learning is communicated using the language of the reading program. The lived experience of the student is the reading program, and as such they make meaning based on what is happening in their classroom. Thus, students take the instructional language as the meaning of reading. For parents, the language of reading instruction replaces dialogue on student reading interest and student reading questions. Parents are informed as to the reading strategies emphasized during reading instruction.

As reading instructional language permeates the classroom into parent and student dialogue, the reading experiences of students are transformed. Student language morphs into professional, instructional reading language. This transformation is monumental as it not only reflects language, but also thinking.

It is more likely to hear students refer to the strategies they used while reading – repeating the language the teacher uses while instructing and modeling – than it is to hear them discuss the book itself. In this way, students are discussing *how* they read versus *what* they read. This pattern/trend may be cause for concern as it illustrates a view of reading as process or procedure rather than reading as meaning making. In this way “a good reader is seen as one who accesses a fixed set of strategies to arrive successfully at the outcome” (Aukerman, 2008, p. 52).

What is the definition of a good reader? Is a good reader a child who loves to read? Or, is a good reader one who is able to access strategies? What we talk is what we teach. We need to ensure that the language we use to instruct reading encompasses all aspects of reading. We need to model and talk about not only strategies, but emotions and purpose as well. We need to remember that teacher language is linked to student learning, and as such, we want students to learn not only to read, but to love to read.

References

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Biography:

David Costello worked as an elementary school teacher for six years prior to his current role of Numeracy Consultant for the English Language School Board of Prince Edward Island, Canada. He is currently a PhD Candidate at the University of South Australia where he studies literacy, educational policy, discourse analysis, and the relationship between literacy and numeracy. He can be reached at dacostello@edu.pe.ca.