



What Research Says About Conversational Discourse

“It is easy to imagine talk in which ideas are explored rather than answers to teachers’ test questions provided and evaluated; in which teachers talk less than the usual two-thirds of the time and students talk correspondingly more; in which students themselves decide when to speak rather than waiting to be called on by the teacher; and in which students address each other directly. Easy to imagine, but not easy to do.” —Courtney Cazden (2001)

Academic language is a lot like an ocean. We have a much better idea of its surface features and the things that swim around near the top, but go a little deeper and things get murky. You can’t clearly define academic language, and it’s always changing. And yet, it is the deeper and murkier depths of language use that can make the biggest differences in student success, both positive and negative. Students can be overwhelmed by it and struggle to survive in school and career, or they can use it like a submarine that rides its currents and diversity to succeed in academic life and beyond.

It might also help to have a less metaphorical working definition. For now, let’s use this one: Academic language is the language used for describing the thinking skills, complex processes, and abstract ideas that are valued in school. This definition, of course, covers an extremely wide range of words, sentences, paragraphs, and ways of putting them together to communicate academic ideas.

In recent decades, numerous resources and ideas have emerged for developing students' academic language and literacy across disciplines. Common strategies include "explicit" teaching of academic vocabulary and grammar, sentence frames, analysis of text features, "close" reading, graphic organizers, computer-based reading programs, and more. Whereas most of these can and do play roles in developing academic language, this book zooms in on a less common and, to be honest, more challenging approach for fostering academic language: conversation.

Many of our students have been labeled according to their language abilities. These include: English ELLs learners, most of whom were not raised in English-speaking homes; long-term ELLs, who have been in U.S. schools for more than four years and are not as proficient as they should be; SELs, who grew up speaking variations of English that do not heavily overlap with the language used for school tasks; and fluent English speakers, who benefit greatly from the aforementioned overlap. Yet it is more accurate to say that every student is on a variety of continuums of English proficiency. A student might be higher on the reading continuum than speaking or lower on the listening continuum than on the writing one. A student might be higher on the science language continuum than on the history continuum, lower on the math continuum than the English one, and so on. The power of using conversations is that all students, regardless of where they are on the continuums, can benefit from talking with others.

LANGUAGE ACQUISITION RESEARCH

Let's start by digging into the research foundations for language acquisition. First, second, and academic language acquisition are not the same, but they do have several key dimensions in common. Picture a 2-year old with his mother at the zoo, an American college student in Rome with his Italian girlfriend, and a high school summer intern working at a physics laboratory. Odds are very high that all three learners will learn first, second, and academic languages quite well. Why? Because they want to and need to—especially the college student—to connect with others and do things with ideas in each setting.

In all three cases (first, second, and academic), we seldom know exactly when the person acquires a certain word, grammar skill, or

conversation skill. Language learning is, in a nutshell, the result of immersion in messy and meaningful communication over time. A 2-year old wants to have something and tries out different ways to ask for it; the fifth-grade English learner has many conversations at lunch with fluent speakers; and the high school native English speaker (an academic EL) reads, writes, listens to, and speaks increasingly academic words and phrases over time, both at home and at school. All of these experiences push, in a good way, these learners' minds to expand and deepen how they can use language to understand and explain ideas.

Three dimensions contribute to language acquisition. The first is input (Krashen, 1985). This input, often in the form of listening or reading, needs to be comprehensible for the brain to be able to process it to make meaning. As meaning is made, the words and grammar begin to stick in the brain. As a person receives more similar input, the aspects of language used in the input are reinforced and stick even more. Another key dimension is output (Swain, 2000), which is usually in the form of speaking and writing. Output challenges the brain to put ideas into words and sentences that others can understand. It pushes a learner to try new ways of constructing and clarifying messages. As the learner succeeds in communicating meaning to others, the language used tends to stick. And the third dimension is interaction or conversation (Long, 1996). Interaction often includes lots of speaking and listening but also includes a wide range of communication skills that just input and output alone don't foster.

Students have had a fair amount of input in school in the forms of listening to teachers and reading texts, and they have produced a fair amount of output in school in the forms of speaking and writing. Granted, we can improve in our teaching all of these, but what we haven't done much of is work on helping students have rich peer-to-peer interactions, particularly in the form of extended conversations among students. One purpose of this book, in fact, is to describe the value of conversations—why they are worth precious class time—as well as how to use them in classroom settings to develop academic discourse skills and literacy.

CONVERSATIONAL DISCOURSE

The word *discourse* is commonly used in academic texts and presentations, but what is it, really? Like academic language, it has multiple

overlapping meanings. Here we don't attempt to define it but instead present several terms that most often emerge in discourse's wide range of definitions in the literature: *extended, communication, discussion, argument, orderly, formal, reasoning, conversation, social practice, beyond the sentence level, how language is used in a discipline, and language in use*. These terms cover a lot of ground, so we have chosen to focus on one area under discourse's broad umbrella: conversation.

Thus, this book focuses on what we call *conversational discourse*, which is the use of language for extended, back-and-forth, and purposeful communication among people. Whereas this type of discourse can and does happen through the use of visual and written messages, we highlight oral conversations in this book. And we zoom in even further to focus on paired conversations because of the high concentration of listening and talking per minute that they offer to each student.

A key feature of conversational discourse is that it is used to create and clarify knowledge, not just transmit it. Too many people view language as just as a tool for transmission and reception of static ideas and knowledge. Language is not one solid tool but a dynamic and evolving mix of resources and flexible tools used to communicate, build, and choose ideas at any given moment. Conversation, as Theodore Zeldin (1998) writes, "is a meeting of minds with different memories and habits. When minds meet, they don't just exchange facts: they transform them, reshape them, draw different implications from them, engage in new trains of thought. Conversation doesn't just reshuffle the cards; it creates new ones."

THE CLASH OF LEARNING PARADIGMS

In recent decades, policies and testing practices have had a large influence on what learning looks like and how it is fostered. Especially in schools with diverse populations, huge emphasis was placed on choosing right answers on tests and raising test scores. Curricula, lessons, and classroom assessments were tailored to help students do well on these high-stakes tests. Learning, in the eyes of many students, teachers, and curriculum guides, meant memorizing word meanings, grammar rules, and the easiest-to-assess standards. Too many students have come to think that learning equals amassing

points, which come from getting answers right on homework, quizzes, and tests. This is much like Paolo Freire's (1970) "banking model" of education in which teachers are supposed to deposit learning into student's passive minds.

Many educators are now working hard to move beyond this "memorize-for-points," quantity-focused paradigm of learning that still shapes instruction. This paradigm is deep-rooted because of the large amount of time it has been in place. Many teachers currently in the workforce were students in schools—and then teachers in training—under this paradigm. Moreover, the recent pushes for "data-driven" practices and spreadsheet-based results also tend to favor the quantity-focused paradigm. The messier collaboration-focused "quality" paradigm struggles to win in such a battle. We hope that this book will help to strengthen this messier, yet deeper, paradigm and also describe how to effectively assess growth along the way.

CONVERSATIONAL PURPOSES, MAXIMS, AND DISPOSITIONS

In an effective conversation, the participants, for the most part, have an agreed-upon purpose for talking with one another. Yet, many students don't know what the purpose of conversing is. Indeed, purposes beyond "to get points" are often lacking in school activities, including conversations. Students might view conversation as free time, a time to share or get answers, show off, and so on, but too many students don't see conversation as a chance to clarify and fortify ideas with another person or to engage in collaborative argumentation to make an important decision about an issue.

A foundational principle for any effective conversation is cooperation (Grice, 1975). This principle, called the cooperative principle, depends on several maxims (often called Grice's maxims), summarized here:

- Make your contribution not more or less informative than is required at the current stage of the conversation.
- Don't say ideas that you think are false or ideas that lack evidence.
- Be clear.
- Be relevant to the current stage of the conversation.

These maxims seem obvious at first, but upon closer inspection of them—and of typical conversations in classrooms—we see how important they are. Many students still need to learn how much they need to share, how to use evidence to shore up their ideas, what it means to be clear to different conversation partners, and how conversations work.

It also helps students to have certain interactional mind-sets, or dispositions, as they enter into conversations. These dispositions help to extend and enrich conversations. We have turned these into several “I will try” statements for students (many adults should try these, too). Look at each one, and consider what happens in a conversation if one or both partners don’t have that particular disposition.

- I will try to help my partner think more deeply about this topic.
- I will try to allow my partner to help me think more deeply about this topic.
- I will try to understand this topic better during our conversation.
- I will try to work with my partner, not against, even if we disagree at times.
- I will try to be open to learning new ideas and having my ideas change.

Of course, in the messy world of real discourse—especially student discourse—we will see a wide range of quality when looking at the purposes, maxims, and dispositions in conversations. This is due, in part, to the overall expectations that students have about learning and about the role of discourse. If students have been conditioned over many years to think of learning as memorizing answers, then suddenly having them “think together” (Mercer, 2000) with others to build or negotiate ideas can clash with their theories of how they learn. This is a major shift in instruction and assessment that, in the minds and practices of both students and teachers, will take lots of work, time, and patience. Another shift is from a focus on self to more focus on others. Students should have in mind that they are not just in school for themselves but also to help others grow academically and socially. Most big assessments don’t promote this view, but our daily lessons must do so if our students are to succeed in being collaborative members of society.

Students need teachers with a working knowledge of the many things that make classroom conversations effective, such as their

purposes, prompts, maxims, dispositions, and skills. And students need hefty amounts of conversational experiences to maximize these things. But how do students learn, for example, how much information is typically required in a conversation, or how much evidence is needed to warrant sharing an idea, or what it means to be clear to peers who aren't friends, or what it means to share relevant information at the right times in a conversation? They need teachers who draw attention to these things, model them, and provide loads of practice and support throughout the year.

BUILDING IDEAS WITH THE “GIVEN” AND THE “NEW”

Now let's zoom in a bit to look at the more intricate gears of conversations. Most partner turns include two parts: the “given and the new” (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2013). The given is a mention of things already talked about. It might be a paraphrase, a recap, or a zooming in on information just shared in the conversation. It might be a reference to common knowledge or something experienced by both partners before this conversation. For ELLs, the given information is familiar, allowing them to more easily process the language used to describe it.

The “new” within a turn is information that is new to the conversation. Why talk if nothing new results? The new is usually connected to the purpose of a conversation and is vital for the building of ideas. Participants benefit from understanding and articulating new ideas, variations, perspectives, and so on. For ELLs, the generating and understanding of new ideas pushes them to use new language. Notice the given and the *new* in the following conversation:

- (1) Bijila: All that gold? I think I would *buy a big house give some money to friends.*
- (2) Manny: Yeah. Me too. Maybe *buy a nice car or jet plane. Maybe I could buy the school and make them give me good grades.*
- (3) Bijila: I don't think they would do that. You could *give them money to buy new stuff, like desks and science stuff.*
- (4) Manny: No, I don't know. Maybe. *But I'll leave school cuz I never gotta work, and/*

- (5) Bijila: */But then you don't learn things for life. School is not just for jobs. So you get the gold, and buy a house, and what, watch TV all day?*
- (6) Manny: Yeah.
- (7) Bijila: *What about doing good, like the teacher said, with it? I want to give it to friends and maybe to buy like food for hungry people in other countries. I might/*
- (8) Manny: */Maybe to some to friends and to my uncle but not my cousins. They're lame.*

Think about how this conversation and others like it can shape students' language and thinking. Both students are engaged in trying to go beyond just the givens and build new ideas. New ideas might include new ways to harness energy, solve a geometry problem, view a historical person, learn from a character in a story, and so on. Student minds have a need to go beyond the givens to connect, create, choose, and improve their lives and the world around them. As they push themselves to clarify given ideas and describe new ones, students push themselves to understand and use increasingly academic language.

CHOOSING THE BEST THING TO SAY NEXT

With few exceptions, each turn in a conversation is spontaneous. It depends on the previous turns and the current development of the ideas in the conversation. Thus, several conversations could start with the same initial idea, but given the amount of choices and "avenues" that keep branching off each with each turn, the conversations will likely diverge significantly.

Let's say you are in the middle of a conversation with one other person. Out of many possible things to say in your next turn, what is the best thing to say to realize the purpose(s) of the conversation? Although there are many choices, some are more likely than others to help the conversation along. There is never one "right" thing to say, of course, but as you learn more about conversations, you will see that some moves have more potential than others to realize their academic purposes, foster disciplinary thinking, and cultivate language.

As you are listening to your partner's current turn, you are doing several things in your mind. You are thinking about what new things he or she is adding and how well you understand what your partner is saying. You are thinking about what has been said so far in this conversation, what you already know about the topic, and what questions you might ask. You are thinking about what you might say next to build on your partner's current turn and how to make what you say as clear as possible. Other types of responses might also be emerging in your mind, such as encouraging your partner to clarify or support ideas, paraphrasing what your partner said to see if you understood, adding details or examples, evaluating evidence, negotiating, and respectfully challenging what your partner said. There are many others, but these moves, which are described in more detail in Chapter 3, are most of the most-likely-to-be-effective options in classroom conversations.

THE EFFECT OF CONVERSATIONAL DISCOURSE

So, what effect does conversational discourse have on students? Students' language, literacy, and thinking develop as a result of academically rich conversations that include the things described in this chapter. Content understandings and skills also develop. On a wider scale, the world becomes a better place because all of our students are becoming better prepared to engage in rich conversations with each other and future people with whom they interact in their colleges and careers. The next chapter describes these effects in more detail and how they can be leveraged in classroom settings.

REFLECT AND APPLY

1. How do you think conversations have influenced your knowledge, thinking, and language?
2. Why is conversational discourse rare in many classrooms?
3. Use this chapter to create a checklist of the features that you would like to see and hear in your students' conversations. Observe several conversations, and consider the features that are in most need of development.