

The Currency of Learning

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I'd like to begin with a quote from Allan & Clarke, they say that "In the rapidly changing environment of the 21st century ... subject knowledge risks becoming defunct, it makes sense to promote the learning of reflective strategies to give students the confidence to become independent and life-long learners" (2007. p. 65). This means we have to change how we conceptualise study skills – we shouldn't see them as bolt-on activities needed to up performance in exams. We need to see them as the very stuff of learning itself. This makes study skills as relevant for teachers of children aged four as for teachers of fourteen or forty year olds for that matter. Re-framing study skills in this way has wide-ranging implications for the way we deliver lessons and syllabus content. At any level, at any age, we need to consider what the learner brings to the learning situation, we must not assume that learners know how to learn and we must remember to take the learner's interests into account. McLennan & Keating consider the chief responsibility of educators to be the development of "the ability to learn effectively in a wide range of environments and to apply that learning throughout life" (2005, p.5).

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Many writers over the past twenty-five years have focused upon the changing needs of learners and the need for academic institutions to adequately reflect these changes. A quote from an article published back in 1994 by L.F. Gardiner, is illuminating. In the *Foreword* to the piece, Martin Finkelstein expresses deep concern about the inadequacies of the American collegiate system back in the early 1990s, but the points he raises seem as crucial for us to understand today in many countries as we as teachers need to be able to adapt, to flexibly accommodate a far more diverse range of learners for a number of social, political and cultural reasons. It's useful to think of Bourdieu's notions of 'cultural' and 'social capital' here (p. 47) – these set out how the knowledge we have from our upbringing and experience can make acquiring further knowledge either relatively harder or relatively easier depending upon how that knowledge fits within the society in which we live. So he is, in fact, comparing our family background, schooling, linguistic competence and so on to a form of currency. In a sense the more you have the more you can 'buy'. Bourdieu explains the resultant inequality like this: "It is what makes the games of society – not least the economic game – something other than simple games of chance offering at every moment the possibility of a miracle" (p. 47). This inequality is what drove Finkelstein's passion to ensure 'high-quality [provision]' was available for a wider range of students because such provision "...focuses on each student's specific developmental needs" (Gardiner, 1994, p. vi). When we talk of needs here, he must widen the scope of discussion to include not simply learners with dyslexia and literacy-related difficulties, but also learners who are learning English as an additional language, and learners whose social and/or cultural background could also create additional barriers to learning, and as we are all aware there are learners whose complex needs arise from mixtures of cognitive, linguistic, cultural and socio-economic factors. But there are ways to address these complex issues and Finkelstein was aware of these, he reports: "... striking success with elementary and high school students of modest academic origins and high-quality methods of instruction in college demonstrate students' potential for high achievement, provided we adapt to their needs rather than demand they adapt to our traditions. *The higher the quality of instruction, the lower the correlation between the students' assessed ability and the quality of their learning*" (in Gardiner, 1994, p.vi-vii).

Finkelstein is suggesting that back in 1994 there was already a considerable body of research that addressed some of the inclusion and access issues that he and Gardiner are outlining. This makes it amazing really, that provision today is not often found to be adapted to suit the requirements of what I will henceforth call 'diverse learners' – by this I mean learners who experience certain sorts of barriers to accessing curricular information and/or find certain barriers blocking their ability to efficiently and effectively express their thoughts about and responses to a wide range of curricular subjects.

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A central consideration of 'high-quality instruction' is the need to explicitly build understanding of academic discourse and the language used in academic endeavours. Gee (n.d) cites two key aspects when he outlines what 'discourse' means: firstly, he talks of distinctive ways of speaking and listening (as well as writing and reading) and, secondly, distinctive ways of "acting, interacting, valuing, feeling, dressing, thinking, believing, with other people and with various objects, tools, and technologies, so as to enact specific socially recognizable identities engaged in specific socially recognizable activities" (p.6). The distinctive way of speaking, writing, reading and so on needs to coincide with the associated distinctive way of acting and thinking – otherwise we would simply be witnessing mimicry or lip-service.

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Before I look at the elements that we need to focus upon at an instructional level, I need to mention the motivational/emotional aspects that affect learners. There isn't space to go in to this in any detail here, but motivation can be an issue when a learner has faced knock-back after knock-back. Often it can be emotionally self-protective to present as not caring any more. We will touch on this later when we consider how a lack of linguistic competence and a different cultural background can exclude learners from curriculum content.

So to enable learners to become academically literate, we need to consider three elements (setting aside motivational issues for now). We need to:

1. give them an understanding of the terminology needed to discuss language learning ('syllable', 'noun', 'phrase' etc). this is best summed up as metalinguistic awareness
2. give them the language of learning itself: the words and phrases associated with academic discourse.
3. give them distinctive ways of acting and thinking

We must not underestimate the extent to which understanding of syllabus content can be impeded by a lack of familiarity with academic language and subject-specific terminology that is part and parcel of the content. Similarly, we must be aware that understanding of everyday language and conversation need not reflect the ability of learners studying English as an additional language to fully access the curriculum. Learners of EAL have to "learn new concepts in a new language within a new cultural reference" and this can profoundly affect what they can achieve (Tangen & Spooner-Lane, 2008, p. 64). Learners with literacy-difficulties, who have developed reading skills later than their peers, can have considerably circumscribed experience of academic texts and face similar access problems. This is commonly known as the Matthew Effect after the passage from The Bible: "For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away" (Matthew, 25:29).

“Slow reading acquisition has cognitive, behavioural, and motivational consequences that slow the development of other cognitive skills and inhibit performance on many academic tasks. In short, as reading develops, other cognitive processes linked to it track the level of reading skill. Knowledge bases that are in reciprocal relationships with reading are also inhibited from further development. The longer this developmental sequence is allowed to continue, the more generalized the deficits will become, seeping into more and more areas of cognition and behaviour. Or, to put it more simply-and more sadly - in the words of a tearful nine-year old already falling frustratingly behind his peers in reading progress, “Reading affects everything you do” (Morris, 1984, p. 19).

This devastating quote from Stanovich reminds us that learners with literacy-related difficulties (and those from other linguistic traditions) can often be relatively impoverished by this lack of access to more advanced reading materials, just as Bourdieu’s theory of cultural capital predicts. We must “continually reflect on the power that language has to separate, marginalise and oppress” (Zwiers, 2008, p. 11) and on how learners who are excluded or face language barriers must feel. It must be terribly hard to keep on focusing, to keep on paying attention when you feel so disempowered and frustrated.

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Applebee (cited in Zwiers, 2008) shows that what potentially aggravates this already grave situation is when learners of EAL and those considered ‘weak writers’ tend to be set less challenging, less conceptual writing tasks, for example, personal interpretations. Zwiers (2008) quotes research that demonstrates that less proficient speakers are generally given feedback that concentrates upon the mechanics of speech, rather than the academic or conceptual content that the speaker is trying to express. Wong-Fillmore and Snow (2000) report how a student’s lack of capitalisation was the only aspect of a piece of writing commented upon by a teacher (p. 30). It’s easy to see how learners get caught in a vicious circle: unable to progress because teacher feedback focused too strongly on grammatical constructions, forgetting that they are a means to an end, not ends in themselves (Wong-Fillmore & Snow, 2000). (We will come back to this when we discuss types of text and register). Here is a shocking example of this from some of Geneva Smitherman’s research in the 1970s. A student starts to relate an exciting story to her class teacher: “Miz Jones, you remember that show you tole us about? Well, me and my momma -nem...” but the teacher interrupts and says “Bernadette, start again. I’m sorry, but I can’t understand you” this exchange proceeds with the teacher correcting grammar in a thoroughly damaging way, concluding with “Now Bernadette, first of all, it’s Mrs. Jones, not Miz Jones. And you know it was an exhibit, not a show. Now, haven’t I explained to the class over and over again that you always put yourself last when you are talking about a group of people and yourself doing something? So, therefore, you should say what?” Bernadette at this point nobly continues “My momma and me” only to be rebutted “No! My mother and I. Now start again, this time right.” Finally a completely dejected Bernadette replies: “Aw, that’s okay, it wasn’t nothing” (Smitherman, cited in Wong-Fillmore & Snow, 2000). I’ve recently heard an exchange, not as bad as this but, similar in the teacher’s quest for good grammar over the sharing of meaning. This exchange demonstrates the potential vicious circle created if we do not give learners better access to more academic forms of discourse.

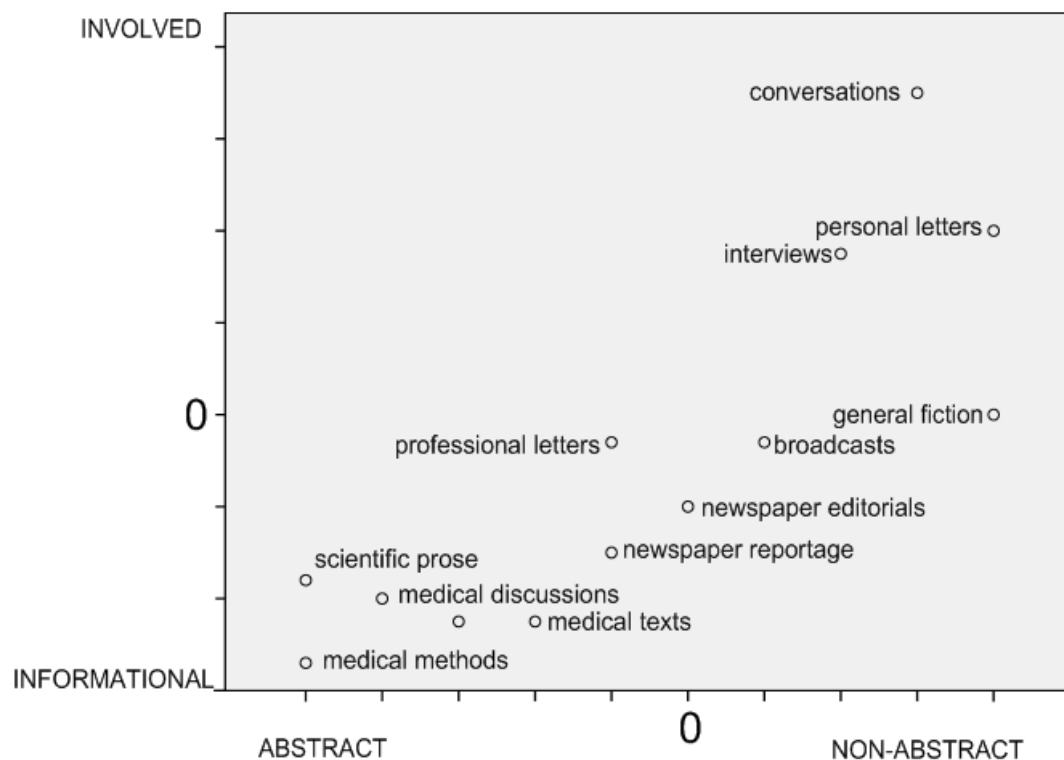
Research done by Biber (1988) used computer analysis of various sorts of speech and written text to examine underlying patterns of use of roughly 70 sorts of linguistic items (for example, relative clauses, past tense) and so on. Particular text genres tend to have particular clusters of these linguistic items in common. Biber delineated four main dimensions which could be used to think about text types:

1. 'Involved' to informational
2. Narrative to non-narrative
3. Context dependent to context independent
4. Abstract to non-abstract

The use of the word 'involved' here needs further explanation and really is the crux of the matter for our particular purpose at least. Biber defines 'involvement' as those linguistic features which reflect the fact that speaker and listener typically interact with one another, while writer and reader typically do not. Due to this interaction, speakers often make direct reference to the listener (by use of second person pronouns, questions, imperatives, etc.), and they are typically concerned with the expression of their own thoughts and feelings (e.g., marked by use of first person pronouns, affective forms such as emphatics and amplifiers, and cognitive verbs such as *think and feel*). As a result of this concern speech often has a distinctly non-Informational and imprecise character (marked by hedges, pronouns, and other forms of reduced or generalized content). These features can be considered together as the characteristics of involved text. In contrast, detachment refers to the characteristics of typical writing which result from the fact that writer and reader usually do not interact (e.g..marked by agentless passives and nominalizations)" (1988, p. 43).

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Kennedy (2003) graphically represents the interplay of the two most pertinent dimensions for our purposes in his book *Structure and Meaning in English*. On screen you can see an adapted form of an analysis of samples of speech and written text and how they differ in where they fall along two dimensions: the 'involved to informational' and the 'abstract to non-abstract'. This to me suggests that if we do not explicitly teach the linguistic items that are features of speech and writing towards the informational end of the dimension then we could be excluding learners as we rob them of the experience of using this more objective form of language. But also, we need to pay attention to abstract concepts too because, as you can see from the visual, technical/academic/medical texts and speech are packed in the quadrant of the graph that represents high levels of 'informational' and 'abstract' linguistic items. Furthermore, if we as teachers tend to focus upon mechanical issues with learners whose written or spoken English is not fluent then we are blocking their engagement with conceptual issues in a way that is likely to be detrimental to their overall academic development. This is especially true if we tend, as Applebee's (cited in Zwiers, 2008) and Zwier's (2008) research suggests, to focus on mechanical aspects of speech and 'involved' aspects of writing with students whose literacy skills are not strong. This is analogous to Ann Watson's (2005) findings in maths, namely that learners who were poor at maths tended to be taught 'quick fixes' to make superficial gains that did not increase their understanding and still left them vulnerable to the vagaries of memory. This was chiefly because they were often coached by teaching assistants who had not the specialist knowledge or experience to explain the conceptual background to them.



(Based on research by Biber, as cited in Kennedy, 2003)

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That might have seemed a slight detour, but its purpose was to show why it is so important to consider the need to consider 'register' when we teach, specifically 'academic register' meaning the use of a particular group of words and phrases for a particular purpose or in a particular situation, in this case an academic one (Kennedy, 2003). The phrases 'academic English' or 'the language of academic discourse' are often used, yet seldom reflected upon. The work of Dutro & Moran (2002), various works by Zwiers (e.g. 2005; 2008) and various works by Wong Fillmore and Snow are exceptions to this tendency. Wong Fillmore (1999, cited in Wong Fillmore and Snow, 2000, p.20-21) analysed an American High School graduation exam paper; she concluded "whatever else was being assessed, competence in the register that we refer to as academic English is necessary to pass (Wong Fillmore & Snow, 2000, p. 20). I've split her list in to the following subskills. So learners would need to be able to:

- Summarize texts
- Use linguistic cues to interpret the writer's agenda
- Relate the meaning extracted from texts to other ideas and information
- Evaluate arguments presented in texts and the evidence used to support them
- Analyze the language used in texts, in terms of rhetorical & aesthetic purposes
- Analyse the language used in texts to convey the writer's perspective and mood

- Recognize and analyze the conventions used in different textual genres (and registers)
- Monitor own use of grammar, punctuation etc when writing academically
- Use knowledge of parts of speech and other aspects of grammar to combine idea units in to concise sentences.
- Use knowledge of extended texts to combine sentences to form coherent and cohesive texts
- Compose an extended, well-developed argument suitably supported by evidence
- Know that in written maths/problem-solving words such as 'evaluate' or 'share' have specialised meanings and identify the correct 'triggers' within such problems. For example "Jo shared 24 sweets equally between the himself and three friends. How many did each of them receive" would trigger a division by four.

I hope it is now becoming clearer why I am dealing at length with academic language. Very few children will naturally acquire these sorts of language skills, the 'academic register', if you like. Perhaps only those with academic parents or relatives who regularly discuss and debate matters in certain ways, thus modelling the use of such language can hope to develop this type of discourse – to have large amounts of 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu, 1986, p.46). This is why teaching academic language explicitly is not only a help to learners with dyslexia and/or learners with EAL, structured tuition in such matters is likely to assist most learners in the class. So why, when this list of subskills so closely resembles a checklist of good study skills, is academic English not routinely and explicitly taught in our schools? "Written texts are a reliable source of academic English, *but they serve as the basis for language development only with instructional help*" (Wong Fillmore & Snow, 2000, p. 21, my emphasis). Learners will find it far easier to deconstruct text i.e. take notes, find main ideas, summarise and so on, if they know how to purposefully build text.

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The promotion of metacognition should be a prime concern for all of us working in education. Flavell (1979) foresaw this more than 30 years ago when he said: "It is at least conceivable that the ideas currently brewing in this area could someday be parlayed into a method of teaching children (and adults) to make wise and thoughtful life decisions as well as to comprehend and learn better in formal educational settings"(p. 910). But this does not mean that we can effectively teach metacognitive skills in isolation, rather we need to teach subject skills in a metacognitive way: to promote enhanced awareness of how something is being learned and the purpose of learning it. Meaningful and purposeful engagement is crucial (Gee, n.d; Biggs, 2003). "Just asking students to complete a checklist won't discover students' personal theories and applications about learning (Hubbard & Simpson, 2003). To rely only on demonstrations and lectures about study skills, to assume that students can put them into practice independently, or that students will see their importance, is a fallacy" (Richardson , Robnolt, Rhodes, 2010, paragraph 18). One meta-analysis of the outcomes of study skills research done by Purdue and Hattie (1999, cited in Richardson, Robnolt & Rhodes, 2010, paragraph 18), found that it is only when "students learn effective study behaviors and incorporate them into a meaningful approach to learning, [that] they experience academic and affective results. Ramsden (1987) in an important article, which is still blisteringly to-the-point, mounts a scathing attack upon those who try to superimpose study skills upon learners who do not appreciate the relevance of them. He

relates how this tends to promote the development of superficial learning strategies like memorisation rather than promoting relational understanding, which grows from deeply engaging with subject-matter and linking / comparing it to known areas of knowledge¹. It is worth quoting Ramsden at length, as it contains many valuable points.

He reports the results of an experiment he and some colleagues conducted at the University of Melbourne back in 1986. Contrary to expectations the students who attended the study skills sessions increased their reported use of “surface- atomistic approaches and marginally decreased their use of deep-holistic ones. They did not perform any better or worse than the students who did not experience the learning skills sessions in their first-year assessments” (Ramsden, 1987, p.279). After quoting the results of a separate study Ramsden goes on to suggest: “These results do not disprove the possible utility of general learning skills programmes, but they cast doubt on the value of attempts to improve student learning that do not take account of how students think about specific content within particular contexts. The results are in accord with a relational theory of student learning. The interviews of the Melbourne learning skills students revealed that students used the experience of the sessions to adapt their approaches to the demands of first-year assessments. In their perception, unlike their teachers', first-year learning mainly required students to memorise large amounts of uninteresting and unconnected material. The motivation to plough through learning materials in this way, plus techniques of organising time to make such work possible, was provided by the programme. So was, for some students, the dubious 'skill' of impressing staff. The students seem to have learned to select 'appropriate' strategies which are at variance with their lecturers' aims. A lot of sustained effort is needed to 'learn' reproductively. As two students, speaking about two very different subjects, put it:

“I don't think you have to understand, you just have to be able to recite, which is unfortunate.. you can spend all your time memorising things and then you'll go really well but you might not know as much about it . . . I used some of the techniques they suggested [in the learning skills groups] and they were excellent . . . I had a motivation problem to get down and do the work. I just wasn't doing it, I wasn't blowing all my hours away doing rote learning. So I thought that maybe if I got motivated to go to that I might be able to put myself into a frame of mind to pick up some hints and some practical advice.

[2nd student] I find that with [this subject] you are being thrown lots of snippets of information, lots and lots of them, and you've got to devise ways to remember little isolated pockets of information . . . I've got to devise different ways to enable me to memorise these little bits and pieces of information, isolated things . . . Sometimes lecturers don't express things awfully well, and you've got to work out what they're trying to say. And then most importantly taking your notes, taking as clear notes as you possibly can and then rewriting them when you get home or when the lecture is finished as a memory technique. Now that last technique was one that I didn't apply last year. I felt that as a result of the study skills course it became clear that it was necessary. And that's what I'll be doing next year”.

Students actively and critically extract from intervention programmes--as from other aspects of teaching--what is useful to them. 'What is useful' is a function of their perceptions of the requirements of the remainder of their programmes. If the strategic use of surface approaches

¹ This links back to the work that Mellin-Olson and Skemp have done in mathematics on relational understanding (Mellin-Olson, 1981; Skemp, 1989, 1989a).

seems appropriate in a particular teaching and assessment environment, it is not surprising that students may derive such an educationally doubtful advantage from learning skills sessions (Ramsden, 1987, p. 279-280).

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To summarise: we need to consider the part that thinking plays in learning and in academic development. We need to consider the currency of learning: the academic register. If we do not carefully prepare learners by using structured and cumulative approaches that build and consolidate their understanding of and familiarity with both curriculum content and the skills needed to analyse and transform that content, then slapping on some 'study skills support' close to exams will perhaps amount to little more than organised neglect. I say this because often we can simply be showing learners 'good ways to memorise' to pass tests. Of course, there are situations where this could be necessary, but such situations might be rarer if we built our lessons and designed our long-term plans differently. Additionally, we need to think about the learner's future and how the world is changing, how the internet has changed the balance of power with reference to 'KNOWLEDGE'. To turn full circle and go back to Allan and Clarke's (2007) message: we need to promote the use of reflective strategies, to give learners the ability to question, analyse and explore what they hear and what they read: only then will they become independent, lifelong learners. No-one sums this up better than Biggs, in his illuminating article that warns against the use of extrinsic study skill tuition. He says: "... study skills are part of the teaching system and therefore should be supported by the context in which they will be used. It then becomes clear why those strategies are useful. Building knowledge is so much more effective when the tools needed for building are used on the spot, thoughtfully" (Biggs, 2003, p. 94).

Gill Cochrane, 2012 (revised 2019)

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