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LANGUAGE AND THE COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

Borrador

(Documento complementario)

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Los autores reflexionan sobre el papel del lenguaje en los Common Core State Standards (CCSS) de Estados Unidos, dado que parece ser transversal a todos los estándares. En efecto, no se trata únicamente de los aprendizajes respecto de la comprensión lectora y las expresiones oral y escrita, o el conocimiento sobre el lenguaje mismo, sino también existen requerimientos lingüísticos en todas las asignaturas del curriculum. Por ello, sea hace necesario repensar el lenguaje, desde ciertos aspectos sugeridos en el documento.

ESTÁNDARES DE APRENDIZAJE / COMUNICACIÓN / LENGUAJE

Language and the Common Core State Standards

Draft – Leo van Lier and Aida Walqui

Language in the CCSS

The question we address in this paper is, what is the place and role of language in the CCSS? A related question is, what does a focus on language add to the various standards? We are asking this question because it seems that language permeates all the standards, in many ways, without even mentioning the word "language."
Let us just take an example to start off with, before we look at language in particular.

This is an example from mathematics, a subject that might seem to rely less on language than other subjects do. Here is an excerpt from the section on functions from the grade 8 standards for mathematics (http://www.corestandards.org/):

> Compare properties of two functions each represented in a different way (algebraically, graphically, numerically in tables, or by verbal descriptions). For example, given a linear function represented by a table of values and a linear function represented by an algebraic expression, determine which function has the greater rate of change.

What does it take for a student, especially (but not only!) an EL, to accomplish such a task? It may be that this student understands algebraic, graphical, and numerical tables, but very likely he or she needs to listen to descriptions, discuss the functions with peers, and develop ways of expressing comparative information and results so that other students can understand them, and so that the teacher is satisfied that the student understands them as well. In sum, the student has to work verbally through the problem, under the guidance of the teacher and peers, and then be able to express his or her understanding through language, possibly accompanied by graphs and formulas. In all of this work, thinking and language are intimately intertwined.

This is clearly not an isolated example. Nor is it limited to mathematics, but it applies equally to all other subjects, from social studies to science and literature. Academic understandings and skills are permeated by language, both in terms of understanding concepts and accepted subject-specific procedures, and in terms of processes of learning to understand, to share, to consolidate, and to present. All of this is hard to do in your own language, the language you grew up with in your family and in your community. But it is much harder in a language that you are still in the process of developing, a long-term task for which you need steady assistance, encouragement and support. Think what would happen if you moved to China, or Turkey, and had to take an 8th grade mathematics class in Chinese or Turkish. Even if you were able to chat with your neighbors, shop in the market, and follow the soap operas on TV in Chinese or Turkish, I think you would face difficulties and stresses in your 8th grade Chinese or Turkish math class, even if you were a college-educated adult from the US.

Language standards

The CCSS standards as they relate to language can roughly be divided into three categories of concern, the third of which is explicitly addressed in the language standards themselves. Area 2) is part of the ELA standards, and area 1) – the most important, arguably – is embedded implicitly in the subject standards:

> 1) The language requirements of all subjects (as exemplified above)
>
> 2) The skill-specific requirements in the traditional four-skills areas of speaking, listening, reading and writing, applied across the curriculum.
>
> 3) The requirements for explicit knowledge about language. This is divided into conventions (grammar, punctuation, spelling, etc.), knowledge of language (understanding how language functions in different contexts, apply style choices, etc.), and vocabulary acquisition and use (e.g., using context to determine meaning, understanding figurative speech, using academic and domain-specific words and phrases).

In general terms, when explicitly addressing ELLs, the CCSS provide the following advice:

> The National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and the Council of Chief State School Officers strongly believe that all students should be held to the same high expectations outlined in the Common Core State Standards. This includes students who are English language learners (ELLs). However, these students may require additional time, appropriate instructional support, and aligned assessments as they acquire both English language proficiency and content area knowledge.
> (Retrieved 12/20/2011)

According to the above passage, CCSS refers to two aspects of concern for ELLs: *English language proficiency* and *content area knowledge*. The integration of these two aspects requires "additional time, appropriate instructional support, and aligned assignments." We feel that with this guidance as a mandate, we can begin to discuss the overall role and place of language in the CCSS.

(Re)defining language

Language as action

Traditionally, language theories have been formal or functional in design. Formal theories have emphasized sentence patterns, grammatical rules, parts of speech, word formation, and so on. The study of language from this perspective has focused primarily on correct memorization and production of words, sentences and essays. The emphasis is on accuracy, and teaching is heavily occupied with explanation and error correction.

Functional theories, in contrast, have focused on meaning, on what is done with the language. "Can I have a latte?" is first of all a request, and only in a secondary sense

an interrogative structure, because the request could equally well be accomplished by "A latte, please" or "I think I'll have a latte." In language education, a functional perspective is characterized by a focus on fluency (defined as the ability to convey meanings effectively), and courses are communicative or task-based, content-based, and so on, where the focus is on the meaning that is conveyed, rather than matters of correct grammar, punctuation, spelling, and so on (accuracy).

In practice, language courses have struggled to try and combine form and function (or accuracy and fluency) in some systematic fashion, and much of present-day discussion is focused on finding an effective – yet often elusive - fusion of form and function.

A third perspective on language, and one that is currently gaining in importance, is language as *action*. This view takes the functional perspective one step further. It argues that language is an inseparable part of all human action, intimately connected to all other forms of action, physical, social and symbolic. Language is thus an expression of agency, embodied and embedded in the environment. Agency can be defined as the ability to act, which is facilitated or debilitated by a range of individual and social factors, including sociocultural, historical, economic and political ones.

In a classroom context, an action-based perspective means that ELs engage in meaningful activities (projects, presentations, investigations) that engage their interest and that encourage language growth through perception, interaction, planning, research, discussion, and co-construction of academic products of various kinds. During such action-based work, language development occurs when it is carefully scaffolded by the teacher, as well as by the students working together. The goals and outcomes specify academic and linguistic criteria for success, and the road to success requires a range of focused cognitive and linguistic work, while at the same time allowing for individual and group choices and creativity.

Casting language learning in such a contextualized and action-based way requires a different way of thinking about what language *is*, and what it *does*. Firstly, it presupposes a view of language as action, as argued above, and in this view form and function are subservient to action. Secondly, language learning becomes usage-based rather than grammar-based (Ellis & Larsen-Freeman, 2010). Thirdly, language ceases to be an autonomous system; these changes have far-reaching consequences for the language curriculum, as we will detail in the next subsection.

Language without borders

Inside and outside of education, language is usually regarded as a subject in its own right, with its own systems and rules, and taught and learned separately from all other subjects. In reality, however, language is part and parcel of every human endeavor, whether everyday and practical or academic and scholarly. It is impossible to draw a clear boundary between language and what is done with or talked about through language. Teaching language as if it were disconnected from the contexts in which it is used and the topics it addresses is therefore a highly artificial and ineffectual pursuit. Yet, the way the school calendar and its curricula are set up, it seems that the only way to teach language is to treat it as a separate subject, in parallel with all other subjects, whether this makes sense or not. It is possible of course that, if we didn't accord it separate and autonomous

subject status, it would disappear between the cracks of the other, more easily framed subjects.

Language is part of the rest of life and the rest of the world in many ways. First, it is embodied, that is, it is a function of the human body, part of movement, posture, expression, gesture and rhythm. Secondly, it is tightly integrated with the physical world around us, in space and time, always locating and referring to somewhere and some time, tying the word to the world, as it were. Thirdly, language is embedded in the social world of human relationships and identity. Fourthly, language represents the historical, cultural and symbolic worlds that humans create.

So far, we have talked about language as a general human mode of action and functioning, a way of making sense of the world and our place in it, and as a range of ways of doing things. We can also talk about "a language," a specific manifestation of language as used by a particular group. In this way we can identify Chinese, Arabic, English, Urdu, Hausa, and several thousand other languages. Language in this sense is identified with a specific ethnic group or a nationality. But this is of course problematic: Which Chinese? Mandarin, Cantonese, Hakka, or another variety? Which English? British? Australian? American? And so on. This brings to the fore all the old questions of standard versus non-standard, official, native, and so on. Should Spanish be taught in the US the way they speak it in Spain, or in Mexico? When teaching French, should only Parisian French be considered, or also Quebec French? And what about Francophone Africa?

One concept that has been much debated in recent decades is the idea of "native-like." According to one collection of discussions among linguists, published in 1985, "the native speaker is dead" (Paikeday, 1985). Recent research has demonstrated that babies may be born bilingual (Kuhl, 2010; Werker & Byers-Heinlein, 2008). Are such babies native speakers of two or more languages? Many people lose the language they grew up with and can only speak the language of school or of the dominant society. The arguments around this issue are endless, but the question concerning us here is, how does this affect the issue of language standards in our multilingual, multi-ethnic schools? Is it feasible, realistic, effective to adhere to a "monolingual ideology," when more and more people in the world speak English as a lingua franca, and increasingly hybrid languages are used in business, music, literature, the visual arts, etc.?

To express the growing idea that language – or a language - is not a fixed, ready-made code, but a process that is always changing and developing, a number of researchers have increasingly adopted the verb *languaging* (and the related verb *translanguaging* to indicate the use of resources across languages). It is argued that the multilingual reality of the world is not adequately served by a monolingual ideology that assumes the existence of a "native speaker," whose perfections all learners should strive to attain. The very idea of linguistic purity is brought into question (Cenoz & Gorter, 2011; Garcia, 2009; Garcia & Kleifgen, 2010).

Language across the curriculum

Ever since the beginning of the Language Awareness movement in the 1980s (see van Lier, 1995; 2001 for historical overviews), there have been calls for a curriculum stressing a consistent focus on language across the curriculum, to recognize the fact that

language permeates all educational and pedagogical activity. However, apart from such rather peripheral attempts as "word of the day" announcements broadcast into high school classrooms, or writing across the curriculum course in undergraduate programs, such a language awareness curriculum has, to our knowledge, never really succeeded. The reason for the difficulty in implementing such a cross-curricular approach may at least partly lie in the existence of strongly *classified* and *framed* subject matter boundaries, as explicated in Bernstein's sociological theory of pedagogy (2000). Whether or not the CCSS can weaken entrenched boundaries and achieve more linguistic and cognitive depth across a school, and across entire school systems, is an open question.

Language as a basis for learning, and some implications

In his influential paper of 1993, Michael Halliday proposes a *language-based theory of learning*, in which he argues that all learning is mediated by language. This is similar to the role of language in Vygotsky's theory of development.
Important in Vygotsky's work is the idea of interfunctionality, that human functions increasingly transform one another into higher-level interfunctional systems (Vygotsky, 1987a; 1987b).

Beginning with perceiving new sights and sounds, learning begins by not just perceiving, but also talking about what is perceived, and then thinking with others about what it means, and what they can do with it. Thus, perceiving, talking about perceiving, thinking about it, and acting in various ways to accomplish more and more complex tasks, all these daily activities serve to connect perception, speech, thinking, emotion and action in multiple ways, thus achieving expertise and proficiency at ever higher levels (Gibson & Pick, 2000; van Lier, 2009).

Looking at learning from a language-based perspective requires an active learner in an action-based environment, in which challenging puzzles, explorations and projects are supported by carefully scaffolded activities and autonomy-supporting interactions (Allwright & Hanks, 2009; Deci & Flaste, 1995; Walqui & van Lier, 2010).

As noted early on in this paper, the language and subject standards are open to being interpreted in a rather narrow, accuracy-based way, or in a broad all-encompassing way that encourages the development of cognitive, linguistic, and affective strengths in ELs, thus enabling their academic success through connecting language, subject matter knowledge, and the physical, social and symbolic worlds of the learners.

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