

## **STRATEGY ONE**

# **Revising Roles: Every Teacher Becomes an Active Language Teacher**



Language capacity is the root of all student performance. The success of a classroom learning experience rests on student language capacity. Whether it is listening to directions, reading a passage, writing a response, or discussing a point of view, the individual student's ability to perform and grow in a classroom rests squarely on his or her corresponding language capacity. The reading, writing, speaking, and listening strategies necessary for student engagement cut across disciplines. In the world of formal education, these strategies are requisite at every level for Johnny, Maria, Abdul, and Rachel. The need to read, write, speak, and listen effectively is fundamental to every subject, in every grade, and in every class these learners will ever attend.

The fulfillment of this need is complicated by standards developed at the state level that are written as if all children are fluent in standard English. I have often thought that the adverb *independently* should be added to the end of every benchmark and standard, because ultimately Johnny is on his own. It should be no surprise when test scores plummet in a school. Every standardized test, whether it is state or national, is first and foremost a *reading* test. If Johnny can't read the math problems, then he can't do them. Explanations of mathematical procedures and principles are written in sentences and with polysyllabic words. If he cannot comprehend basic prompts like "select" or "summarize" or "determine," then he will fail on the test item. Johnny's difficulties with comprehension arise not only from his unfamiliarity with

simple fundamental words; they are compounded by the fact that explanations of mathematical procedures and principles are written with precise terminology.

Elementary teachers launch children into a world of words by devoting hours of instruction to increasing their language skills. Knowing there is a narrow window of opportunity to get our youngest learners off and running, these teachers feel enormous pressure. Secondary teachers rely heavily on their students' ability to bring home reading material at night and carry out homework. Middle and high school teachers often deal with over a hundred students in a day, and they base their assignments on the assumption that the students *can* read and react to the text. Teachers are very dependent on each other to build and sustain these fundamental tools. Academic literacy in our public and private schools is a K–12 problem. It is critical to revisit the role of the teacher and the way teachers communicate with each other about their learners.

## **Every Teacher Is a Language Teacher**

If you are an eighth grade math teacher, then you are a speech teacher. If Johnny cannot describe in conversation with you what confuses him in computing an algebraic equation, then he will be a frustrated learner. He needs practice with oral explanations in math, or he will *become* a child left behind. He needs practice in listening to you and knowing how to ask a clarifying question. He may be using conversational language rather than academic language, referring to the denominator as the “bottom thing” and the numerator as the “top thing”; he may refer to mathematical operations using imprecise language, muddling mathematical thinking in his own mind. He is only thirteen and self-conscious. How can you help him speak and listen thoughtfully?

If you are a third grade teacher presenting your social studies unit on Japan, then you are clearly a writing teacher. Maria needs your help. She is trying to convey her point of view about how the fact that Japan is an island affects people there. Her writing seems clichéd. You know it, and so does she. How can you coach her to choose very specific words that will make her writing come alive? How can you help her write and reread her work? She needs an academic inventory of words that will help her think in the language of social studies.

If you are a high school physics teacher and you rely heavily on student lab reports, you must teach your students how to employ an empirical style of writing. Abdul might say “this” when he needs to say “that.” Now the majority of your 120 students write labs as if they are doing you a favor. The labs look copied—not the thorough response you had hoped for. Rather than getting angry with your students, perhaps you need to help them with notetaking. Do they even know what makes a note noteworthy? They need your help.

You are a physical education teacher working with kindergarten students, and their ability to listen carefully to your directions will affect their actual safety. If Rachel doesn’t understand your words but just smiles at you, she cannot progress. Listening capability is critical to her success on the playing field. She needs to demonstrate her understanding of your coaching words on the playing field and in the gym. Every teacher is a language teacher.

## **Seven Essential Strategies: Revising Current Practice**

In this book I provide a set of seven cross-curricular strategies that address the root problems that directly affect student

performance. These strategies have the potential for assisting learners if every teacher employs them. This is not to say that all teachers will instruct their students in the same way. The point is that the vast inconsistencies in language standards and approaches among teachers are contributing factors to the vast inconsistencies in student performance.

The focus in this book is through the lens of curriculum design and articulation for grades K–12 and is addressed to classroom teachers. My contention is that there is a need for fundamental revision. Many of our current practices inhibit the effectiveness of teachers and produce some of the factors leading to academic illiteracy. These need to be replaced with more effective approaches. This book does not purport to be a resource guide for reading specialists. It attempts to give classroom teachers, many of whom have not had the benefit of special reading training, the tools they need for integrating critical language skills into their daily operational curriculum. The needed skills are laid out in a planning model to be implemented in a school or district under the assumption that learning is cumulative and skills spiral over time. Curriculum Mapping (Jacobs, 1997, 2004) as a critical schoolwide and district-wide tool for implementing and monitoring these strategies is described at the end of the book as a vehicle for formally integrating and monitoring the strategies. The strategies are as follows:

1. Revising and expanding the role of all teachers (all subjects and levels) so that they see themselves as language teachers
2. Separating vocabulary into three distinctive types with distinctive instructional approaches in *every* classroom K–12
3. Building creative notetaking strategies for extraction and reaction as opposed to a passive-receptive approach

4. Designating and employing a consistent editing and revision policy for writing for every class on a developmental level K–12
5. Using a formal approach to speaking skills through four discussion types that are assessable
6. Employing direct technical instruction that promotes the use of the human voice and body as a speaking and communication instrument to develop poise, confidence, and power for each student in every classroom
7. Using Curriculum Mapping as a unifying schoolwide vehicle to develop formal benchmark assessments for active literacy in every subject and on every level

These seven strategies can be woven into each classroom through the use of Curriculum Mapping, which provides a technological means of communicating and designing instructional solutions. Curriculum Mapping is in itself a strategy for implementing the other six strategies and is described in the last chapter of this book.

In order to contextualize the strategies, let us consider some of the intrinsic causes that have created the literacy gaps in our curriculum. These gaps help to explain why students in the United States are not performing at levels worthy of their ability and, subsequently, why they do not meet standards. Consider the findings of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, an international organization representing 29 of the world's most prosperous countries, which issues the *Progress for International Student Assessment* report every three years. The United States ranked 24th on the ability of 15-year-old students to respond to real-life mathematical applications (NCES, 2004). I believe a key reason for this disappointing performance is that too many American students have weak reading, writing, speaking, and

listening skills in all of their subjects. The following are some fundamental root causes for these language deficiencies.

## What Is Missing?

### Missing: Text Interaction Skills

Consider the following:

*You are sitting in an airport terminal waiting for your plane and reading a magazine article. You look up at the monitor to check flight departure times. Suddenly you realize that you don't remember a thing that you just read. Your eyes saw the words, but your mind didn't register them.*

Every day this is precisely what happens to Maria and Abdul when they are home facing a textbook. It's time for homework. Maria sees the words, but they don't register. It's as if it were another language. If Maria cannot say the words "fraction," "numerator," and denominator," then she certainly cannot read them, let alone carry out her fourth grade math assignment. When a biology teacher requests that Abdul review the chapter on mitosis, the assumption is that he can and will read with care. If he cannot make meaning from the text, then the text may as well not be in his hands. Unfortunately, many learners who are struggling with words do not ask questions in class because they are self-conscious. Instead of asking their teachers to help them make meaning, they simply watch their teachers talk at them.

### Missing: A Pervasive Recognition That Reading Is a Coin with Two Sides

Reading is a coin with two sides. One side is phonemic awareness: the learner's ability to decode the sound-symbol

relationship of the written or spoken word. The other side of the coin represents text interaction: the student's ability to make meaning from aural or written text. As Billmeyer (1998) points out, "the meaning of the text is not contained in the words on the page. Instead, the reader constructs meaning by making what she thinks is logical, sensible connection between the new information she reads and what we already know is stored in knowledge frameworks called 'schemata'."

One of the best sources of evidence that students are interacting with both aural and written text is their notes. Yet taking notes has become something of a farce. Most children view notetaking as copying. It is not active but passive. The magic marker industry made a brilliant move when it generated translucent neon colors. Underlining text has replaced text interaction. We wonder why students retain so little when, in fact, their initial reading and listening experiences are so blatantly superficial. How do we determine that Johnny is listening meaningfully? One of the strongest forms of evidence is in the responses that he creates. A thoughtful review of his notes will tell much about his comprehension.

Despite the fact that reading and writing in the content areas is the bedrock of academic success, it is difficult to locate a university that prepares teachers adequately in reading, writing, speaking, and listening in the content areas. The expectation in teacher preparation programs is that if you are an aspiring math teacher, you will learn how to teach math. The reality is that aspiring math teachers in teaching programs do not learn how to teach Johnny to read math, discuss it, understand what he is hearing, and certainly not how to write about math. Underneath the lack of attention to language capacity in teacher education is the message that comprehension is Johnny's problem. Sad to say, the underlying assumption is that Johnny's lack of language capacity is own, or his English teacher's, problem.

## **Missing: Consistent Editing and Revision Strategies— Grades 4–12**

From fourth grade through middle and high school, reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills *are not formally taught and assessed consistently across curriculum areas*. For example, it is rare for teachers in different departments to target specific grammatical conventions and revision techniques to improve the quality of student writing. Unfortunately, the commonly held view is that this is the job of the English teacher. Most adolescents need all the help they can get, and, when only one-eighth of their day focuses on the most basic of all of their skills, this is a problem. This view is further compounded by the reality that, by necessity, English teachers spend much of their time on literature. They examine various literary genres, authors, classics, and new voices. Reading skills for literature, which include reading for inference and figurative language, demand specialized teaching, the kind delivered by English teachers. If the average high school English class runs forty minutes a day, five days a week, equaling 200 minutes, then a realistic estimate is that formal time spent on structures and grammar might be 30 minutes in a week. And this precious little time is undermined when a student also attends a science class, a math class, or even a history or sociology class in which the teacher does not care whether a student uses a complete sentence or not.

## **Missing: Consistent and Ongoing Vertical Planning—Grades K–3**

In many individual elementary schools in the United States, inconsistent and competing philosophies of teaching reading plague the early childhood programs, pre-K through

grade 3. These tensions create an erratic and piecemeal experience for students. The battle over *whole language* vs. *phonics* has been fierce in our primary grade programs. Compelling arguments can be made for a return to the basic phonics approach and for the opposing holistic camp's use of contextual meaning to motivate learners. But the heart of the problem is the battle itself.

More recent writing on the subject points to the need for a full arsenal of strategies that serve learners from the beginning in their reading programs. The phrase *balanced literacy* has emerged, representing a resolution to the tension through the philosophy that the whole is the sum of its parts. It is difficult to be critical of a literacy program that is "balanced," just as it would be difficult to be an advocate for "imbalanced" literacy. My review of early childhood curriculum maps indicates that teachers go into their self-contained classrooms and do the best they can without connecting regularly, formally, and vertically for grades K–3. Meetings among grade level teachers may establish a common interpretation of balanced literacy, but this literacy may not be vertically integrated with other grades, even among teachers with the best of training and the best intentions.

As a result, when Johnny moves through elementary school, he is apt to have an uneven journey moving from one teacher who encourages him to "discover" the letter *b* sound in nature and a first grade teacher who tapes the letter to his table or on his shirt as a kind of in-your-face approach. On more than one occasion I have seen angry "reading skirmishes" in elementary schools. Educators care deeply about their beliefs and responsibilities regarding literacy. But if these differences are not resolved, Abdul is likely to be tossed from grade to grade without a careful and seamless building of his emerging language skills. All the while he is getting older and older and outgrowing the short window of opportunity for introducing reading.

There is a particular fascination among children aged three through seven years with sound-symbol relationships, making them responsive to guided instruction about those very relationships. It is only during the first few years of schooling that children like to make letter shapes with clay, that they will say rhyme schemes over and over out loud, and that they will sing made-up melodies to themselves unself-consciously as they cut out shapes at the table. Sit in any first grade classroom during an open activity period with your eyes closed, and the sounds will astonish you. The rhythmic patterns and flow of vocal inflections create a kind of classroom music. There is the repeated and practiced recitation: "Make the 'b' sound" contrasts with random outbursts from a five-year-old child. But when students are a few years older, much of their spontaneous openness has stopped, and it becomes more difficult to get them to play with the basics of language, even though children, teenagers, and adults have a natural love of language and language play.

It is critical that teachers between grade levels and within grade levels collaborate on approaches to reading in these first few years; otherwise, precious time is wasted. We all know how to read. Johnny does not. He will only be four, five, six, and seven years old once.

### **Missing: Intense and Formal Instruction and Assessment of Speaking and Listening Strategies**

Only minimal attention and "lip service" are paid to speaking and listening competencies in any formal fashion in most subjects, creating a schism between the four basic language capacities: reading, writing, listening, and speaking. This separation of the four basic language skills suggests another root problem. One cannot read unless one can say the words out loud. One cannot write unless one can read the

words. Listening is the first language capacity developed in the infant. How do we assess listening as a child enters school? All teachers know that there is a big difference between hearing words and listening with engagement. The dearth of opportunities for assessing speaking and listening capacities contrasts dramatically with the many reading and writing assessments. The student who has the confidence and poise to ask a question, provide a detailed response, and find the words to engage in discussion has an enormous advantage. I believe we are not formal enough in our development, monitoring, and expansion of these two human and necessary skills.

I have often noted in my workshops with educators that teachers in our educational environment habitually use the four capacities in a stock sequence—reading, writing, speaking, listening—when, in fact, the order should be reversed. As infants we begin by listening, then speaking, then reading, and then we move on to writing.

## **How Can We Bring These Strategies Together at the School or District?**

In many school districts, no forum exists for meeting and hammering out skill work both horizontally and vertically. As a result, communication about language skills across disciplines has been hampered. Curriculum guides are often well-intended fictional accounts. They propose what ought to happen in the course of a year with model children as if all children were moving at a lockstep identical pace. If teachers build their plans on guideline assumptions rather than on what actually occurs, students fall through the cracks.

A key vehicle for integrating these strategies is Curriculum Mapping. The difference between a curriculum *guide* and the curriculum *map* is like the difference between the

proposed itinerary and the real trip. Guidelines lay out goals to “guide” our decision making. In contrast, maps document electronically produced document curriculum in real time, reflecting the ground that each teacher actually traverses with the learners through the months of a school year. Data are housed electronically on internet-based software, making the information accessible from any computer at home, in school, or on the road. Through mapping, teachers can find out precisely what is being taught down the hall or in a building across town. They can find what the operational curriculum was in past years. The formidable combination of examining unpacked assessment data with curriculum maps allows us to describe how our learners are performing, how they got there, and what we need to revise in order to improve their performance.

Despite the genuine hope of creating better communication, curriculum committees are often part of the problem. Educators attend far too many meetings with the aim of establishing bureaucratic documents, but these documents do not reflect the realities of what Johnny encounters in the classroom. Teachers in secondary buildings rarely sit together across disciplines to deal with these questions. When they do meet (as in a middle school interdisciplinary team meeting), the conversation usually breaks down into a discussion of the ten most-wanted students. It is not because cross-disciplinary meetings are rare that team meetings degenerate into discussions of problem students. It may be because cross-disciplinary meetings lack the leadership to focus attention on relevant curriculum issues. Educators need to learn how to establish curriculum-based agendas. Curriculum Mapping is detailed as a meaningful and effective tool to address these problems in the last chapter of this book.

The ensuing chapters discuss specific and practical strategies for the classroom teacher that can be integrated into the

classroom curriculum. On the institutional level, I propose using Curriculum Mapping as the key tool for integrating the seven strategies consistently throughout the school and on a district level, along with staff development and curriculum revision that will result in demonstrable assessment results in student work. Curriculum Mapping provides a vehicle for addressing the problems presented here and is set up in such a way as to provide flexibility within each specific school setting.

One great gap in the professional preparation of teachers is the provision of strategies for all of us, at all levels and in all subjects, to develop the instructional tools necessary to help all of our students with engaged literacy. That task may seem daunting for a classroom teacher who has not spent time or had training to accommodate language strategies. It may seem like a burden. The strategies that I propose are not meant to be intrusive or demanding adjustments; they are designed to serve as helpful tools that will enable students to become more independent learners. Our students need us to operate always in the present tense. They need good teachers who have the flexibility to work collectively, consistently, and imaginatively to make revisions in their approach to teaching and learning. The seven cross-disciplinary strategies presented here can be employed actively across the curriculum. In the final chapter of the book, I show how Curriculum Mapping provides a means of formally documenting these revisions. The outcome will be language-rich environments where each student develops concrete tools to become an independent and engaged learner. Thus, in this first chapter, I present my case for the first strategy. Teachers need to redefine themselves as language coaches even as they promote the material, concepts, and facts that are the underpinnings of knowledge.

*Each teacher—at every grade level, in every subject—needs to embrace the notion that he or she is a language teacher.*

