

StrategramTM

Strategic Instruction Model

Volume 18 • Number 4 • The University of Kansas Center for Research on Learning • March 2006

Language of Literacy

Thinking about words & world views

Julie Tollefson
KU-CRL

Barbara Ehren understands the magic of language—the ability to find just the right words to express your thoughts and to have meaningful conversations. She is passionate about the power of language and has spent a professional lifetime thinking deeply about the importance and implications of matching the right words to the situation at hand to enable effective and productive communication.

Barb's passion has pushed us at the University of Kansas Center for Research on Learning to consider the effects of the terminology we employ. Recently, she has led a conversation about the words and phrases we use in discussing the literacy needs of adolescents. We should be clear that we are not quibbling over words, here. Developing a shared vocabulary is foundational to

conducting meaningful conversations, but the implications of our word choices go beyond that. Carefully reflecting on and choosing the words you use can, in effect, change your perceptions, Barb says.

Among linguists, the Linguistic Relativity Principle holds that the words we use actually shape our thinking. Thus, this

conversation about language and literacy among SIM professionals is important, Barb says, “because it may very well change the way we view the world of adolescents, especially those who struggle.”

Barb poses three important questions to guide our discussions of the language of literacy. Each question casts a slightly different light on the importance of choosing the right words.

Are we using language that helps us conceptualize literacy in a way that is helpful to us in our professional roles?

Through the years, word choice has been key in shaping how we think of our role and our work here at KU-CRL. Our name, Center for Research on Learning, is a prime example. First

known as the Institute for Research in Learning Disabilities, we changed the name when the scope of our work expanded. Likewise, the more recent shift to the terms “professional development” and “professional developer” from “training” and “trainer” reflect a different approach to helping people grow. Adopting these new terms

This conversation about language and literacy among SIM professionals is important 'because it may very well change the way we view the world of adolescents, especially those who struggle'
—Barbara Ehren



has helped refine our mission and has influenced the way we conduct our business.

Similarly, the words we use in our discussions about the literacy needs of adolescents should help us refine our understanding of those needs as well as our understanding of our roles as teachers, researchers, and professional developers.

Are we using language that helps others to think about our work in ways that are consistent with our goals?

In much the same way that language can influence our thinking about our roles, the words we choose to represent ourselves and our work to others affect how others respond to us, Barb says. Finding the right words to hook adolescents is important to our success in working with them. Likewise, selecting words that other literacy professionals will respect is important to maintaining our standing within the education community.

In recent years, for example, we have adopted the term “content literacy” to refer to the listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills and strategies that adolescents must acquire to successfully learn in multiple academic disciplines, Barb says. Our choice of words was not accidental. Secondary teachers often think of themselves as content teachers first and foremost and identify closely with the word “content.” “Literacy,” to many, is something students learn in other classes. By emphasizing content and establishing a relationship between it and the literacy skills students must have to succeed in all classes, we are conveying the message that literacy is everyone’s concern.

At the same time, however, we know that the term preferred by many in the field is “adolescent literacy.” Its advocates say this term makes the adolescent, not the textbook, the focal point of literacy. It also allows for consideration of different types of literacy, such as the skills required for text messaging and surfing the Internet.

Given this verbal divide, we must consider whether our use of language sends the right message, says Barb. Does our word choice—content literacy is just one example—evoke the appropriate impression of our work and our professionalism? Does it hook students? Does it resonate with teachers? Does it aid

Photosynthe—huh?

Courses become increasingly complicated through high school, and the complex ideas students are expected to grasp become more complex. In addition, vocabulary becomes more subject-specific as students advance through school, and although texts do share some commonalities, specific text structures and ways of presenting information linguistically differ across content areas.

“We know, for example, that science is just loaded with technical terms,” says Barb Ehren. “There are some really important relationships that are expressed in science texts which require a different kind of inferencing.”

The reading comprehension strategies of the Strategic Instruction Model, though certainly effective in many situations, may not meet all of the needs of students struggling to make sense of the information before them.

“Even though kids have learned *Visual Imagery*, that doesn’t really get you very far with science text literacy,” Barb says, as an example. “It’s very difficult to form visual images in the field of science without distorting the integrity of what it is you’re trying to grasp.”

A survey of the skills students must have to make sense of science can be troubling for those who work with students with learning disabilities and other struggling students:

- generating inferences
 - solving problems
 - making decisions
 - integrating ideas
 - synthesizing new ideas
 - decomposing ideas in subparts
 - forecasting future occurrences in a system
 - applying knowledge in practical situations
- “Just look at that list,” Barb says. “The kids that we worry over have problems with many of those things to begin with.”

As we work to address these increasingly complex realities, she says, we may need to answer the question of whether different methods are needed for different subjects.

communication within the community of SIM professionals?

Are we using language that helps us get the job done?

The job, in this case, is promoting literacy achievement, especially for adolescents who struggle, says Barb. As students approach adolescence, the academic demands placed on them become more complex. They must read longer works. They must be able to discuss plots and themes, not just recall facts from their reading materials. They encounter increasingly specialized vocabulary in different fields of study. They must be able to obtain and understand information presented in mixed media formats.

“The kinds of things that have to be accessed are not just personal narratives or not just stories,” she says, “but really much higher level processing demands with respect to learning in the various environments in which they are found.”

Barb refers to the following quote from Donna Alvermann (2001), which underscores the dramatic changes students face as they enter secondary school:

Middle and high school students encounter academic discourses and disciplinary concepts in such fields as science, mathematics, and the social sciences that require different reading approaches from those used with more familiar forms, such as literary and personal narratives. These new forms, purpose, and processing demands require that teachers show, demonstrate, and make visible to students how literacy operates within the academic disciplines.

The language we choose to help us promote literacy achievement must address these changing needs for adolescents. At the same time, cultural influences, such as global economic competition and public policy initiatives, add another dimension to our view of what constitutes literacy. Clearly, our ability to inspire students and

to encourage collaboration among teachers, researchers, and professional developers will be enhanced if we find the right words to build a strong shared understanding of what the job ahead entails.

Continuing conversations

As we continue our conversations about the language of lit-

Language of Literacy Resources

Alvermann, D.E. (2001). *Effective literacy instruction for adolescents*. Chicago, IL: National Reading Conference. Retrieved July 10, 2005, from http://www.readingonline.org/editorial/edit_index.asp?HREF=/editorial/november2002/.

Lou, D.J. Jr. & Kinzer, C.K. (2000). The convergence of literacy instruction with networked technologies for information and communication. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 35, 108-127.

Luke, A., & Elkins, J. (2000). Special themes issue: Re/mediating adolescent literacies. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 43, 396-398.

Moje, E.B, Young, J.P., Readence, J.E., & Moore, D.W. (2000), reinventing adolescent literacy for new times: Perennial and millennial issues. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 43, 400-410.

North Central Regional Educational Laboratory and the Metiri Group (2003). *enGauge® 21st Century Skills: Literacy in the Digital Age*. Retrieved July 14, 2005, from www.ncrel.org.

Otero, J., Leon, J.A., & Graesser, A.C. (2002). *The psychology of science text comprehension*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Peterson, C.L., Caverly, D.C., Nicholson, S.A., O'Neal, S., & Cusenbary, S. (2000). *Building reading proficiency at the secondary level: A guide to resources*. Austin, TX: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory.

The Many Meanings of Literacy

Barb Ehren offers this review of some of the meanings associated with the term “literacy” in different contexts today.

“In order for us to have important conversations about the literacy ability of adolescents, we really need to be speaking the same language and we need a common ground for establishing shared meaning,” she says.

The following list suggests the definition of “literacy” has evolved in a variety of dimensions to help people more accurately reflect on the needs of our society.

General public. If you say literacy to the public, they think reading.

Dictionary: Dictionaries define literacy as reading and writing.

Broadest-Broader-Broad-Narrow:

• *Broadest sense:* People talk about different kinds of literacy, meaning a person is knowledgeable in a particular subject. Examples are cultural literacy, historical literacy, and biblical literacy.

• *Broader sense:* Getting a little bit narrower, we have literacy as the ability to understand and use symbols—text, formulas, codes, statistics. This sense includes listening, speaking, reading, and writing; numerical and mathematical skills; computer skills; and other technology skills.

• *Broad sense:* Getting narrower still, we have verbally oriented symbolic language, including text, visual, audio, and video sources.

• *Narrow sense:* Print literacy—using printed and written information. This is where schools usually focus.

World view: Around the world, in addition to talking about literacy in terms of reading, writing, and arithmetic, worldwide discussions of literacy include more global components of knowledge, problem solving, and life skills needed to help adults become independent people. These are referred to around the world as basic learning competencies.

(continued on page 5)

eracy, Barb outlines a number of considerations to help us conceptualize the needs and challenges:

- Young people deal with an array of texts, including textbooks, digital texts, and hypertexts.
- Young people find their own reasons for becoming literate that go beyond the reading of academic texts.
- Students need opportunities to engage with more complicated text along with support in how to use background knowledge and text structure to determine relationships among ideas and draw conclusions.
- Although discipline-specific texts share some similarities,

they can differ in substantive ways. Adolescents need to be taught to manipulate the variety of texts that occur across disciplines.

- The language processes of listening, speaking, reading, and writing are integrally and reciprocally related and need to be addressed in relation to each other. Working and developing in one enhances working and developing in the others.

What we need, Barb says, is language to shape our thinking about our work as teachers, professional developers, and researchers. We need language to shape the way others think about

our work. We need language to get the job done, and we need to find the words that will hook adolescents.

“This conversation needs to continue beyond today because we need to have a lexicon that helps us to focus on what it is we need to do and allows us to be at the table with other people in the literacy arena,” Barb says. “The bottom line here is that the magic words are the ones that will open the door for adolescents who struggle with literacy. We have to find the magic words to help us do our work.”

(continued from page 4)

National view: The National Literacy Act of 1991 (Public Law 102-73, 1991) defines literacy as “an individual’s ability to read, write, and speak in English and compute and solve problems at levels of proficiency necessary to function on the job and in society to achieve one’s goals, and to develop one’s knowledge and potential.” (Section 3)

School view: Historically, the terms that have been used are “secondary reading” and “content area reading.” The terms are oriented toward helping students access the text they have to read and understand to learn content. Increasingly, the term that is rising to the top is “adolescent literacy.”

High literacy: J.A. Langer (1999) introduced this term to convey that students need more than basic literacy to succeed in secondary settings. They must be thoughtful processors of information who are able to work with information obtained from print and other media.

Specific text genre literacy: This term refers to the literacy

skills and strategies students need for specific subject areas, such as math or social studies.

North Central Regional Educational Laboratory: NCREL, in defining its enGauge 21st Century Skills, discusses students’ needs in terms of digital age literacy, inventive thinking, effective communication, and high productivity. Digital age literacy areas encompass basic literacy, scientific literacy, economic literacy, technological literacy, visual literacy, information literacy, multicultural literacy, and global awareness.

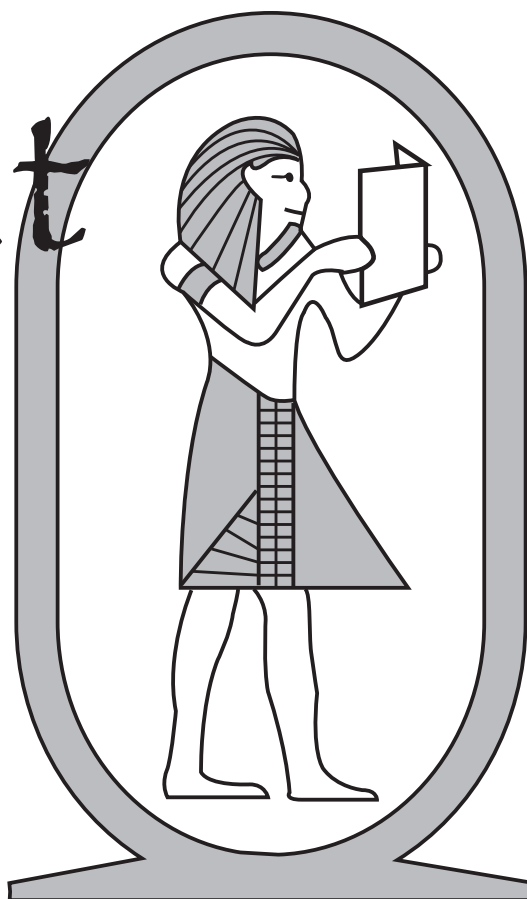
NCREL’s *basic literacy* includes language and numeracy; components are traditional print literacy skills as well as mass media, computer, and Internet. NCREL’s focus is listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

Information and technological literacy: These terms refer to how to access information from a variety of sources that are rooted in technology and how to evaluate those sources. *Technological literacy* often refers to negotiating the way through technology. *Information literacy*

refers to skills required of a lifelong learner to find needed information. For example, if you want to buy life insurance, do you have the ability to find and evaluate information about different life insurance options? Although the two terms have been used separately, the Information and Communication Technologies Panel, convened by the Educational Testing Service in 2002, combines information and technology literacy.

Barb notes another interesting set of words cropping up: Secondary and tertiary illiteracy. Around the world, some research indicates that people are losing literacy skills because they are not practicing them.

Framing King Tut



When Ginger Williams began thinking about a topic to use in modeling how she presents the Framing Routine to students, she let history be her guide.

Ginger, a SIM Professional Developer from California, presented a session for the 2005 International SIM Conference in which she modeled for participants how she uses current events and hot topics to teach new Strategic Instruction Model interventions.

Although she abbreviated her explanations for her SIM-savvy audience, the activities and steps she followed in using the Framing Routine during this presentation can be applied to classroom settings with modifications to meet the needs of your students.

Finding the right topic

As Ginger prepares to teach a new strategy or routine to students, she begins by identifying a high-interest topic that will draw in students.

"I think, what's really hot out there? What's going to be cool? Where do they want to go? What do they want to find out about?" she says.

Last summer, this process led her to consider King Tutankhamun—a traveling exhibit of related artifacts had arrived recently in Los Angeles and National Geographic magazine published a cover story about King Tut in its June 2005 issue.

Ginger, whose own lifelong interest in ancient Egypt had been kindled by one of her former teachers, knew King Tut had the potential to pass the coolness test with high school students.

Setting the stage

Ginger begins by introducing the topic: King Tut.

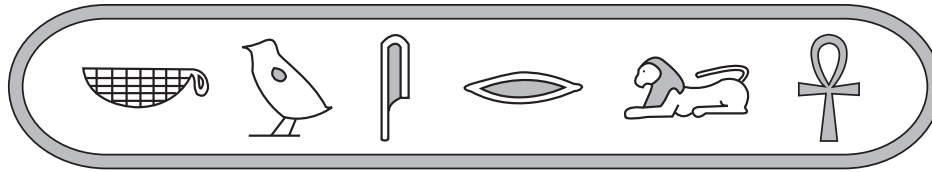
"Let's now find out what you know already about King Tut before you get a chance to do some research," she says.

Using a flip chart, Ginger solicits a number of ideas from the group—King Tut died young, he was from Egypt, and he lived on the Nile.

Piquing interest

Ginger then presents some basic information about King Tut, including photos and brief descriptions of his mummified remains. She also divides participants into teams of "detectives" and distributes a different article about King Tut to each team.

Before turning to their readings, Ginger asks participants to take 10 minutes to partially complete a Frame (see figure 1 on page 7). She asks



them to label three columns: “What we know already,” “What we expect to learn,” and “What we want to know.”

Investigating further

The next step is for participants to read their articles and select important information. Ginger displays a PowerPoint slide reminding participants of the job at hand:

Here’s your team’s task: Help us fill in the details of this mystery. With the other detectives in your team, after reading your article, decide on the most important main ideas and the essential details that will help us solve the case. Hint: Write “King Tut” in the box for Key Topic. Pick 3 main ideas. Fill them in. Then agree on the Essential Details for each.

Coming back together

Ginger then engages participants in a whole-group discussion of the content of the articles. Again using the Frame for structure, participants add to the three columns.

This approach spurred lively debate and conversation as participants discovered discrepancies among their articles. One person, for example, wanted to know whether King Tut had been murdered. The group learned that one article said his death was caused by a blow to the head, while the authors of others rejected that conclusion and put forth theories of death by natural causes or chariot accident.

“When you have all these different sources, you have a lot of opportunities to seek out and to verify and to check other sources,” Ginger says.

Completing the puzzle

Ginger concludes the King Tut activity by asking participants to consider the “Is about” and “So what?” sections of the Frame, asking participants to discuss these with their team members, agree on what should be written in each section, and prepare to discuss their conclusions with the larger group.

Adapting the Frame

Ginger calls the Frame a fabulous tool that you can adapt for many purposes. In this example, Ginger illustrated its utility for taking notes and organizing thoughts, but she finds it equally useful for planning to write. In her work with students, she says, she has found those who use the Frame before writing are able to write many more words per page.

The Framing Routine (1998) by Edwin S. Ellis is published by Edge Enterprises.

The FRAME Routine

Key Topic		
Is about...		
Main idea	Main idea	Main idea
Essential details	Essential details	Essential details
So What? (What's important to understand about this?)		

Figure 1: The Frame

Strategram
 Vol. 18: Issue number 4. Published six times per year by The University of Kansas Center for Research on Learning, Joseph R. Pearson Hall, 1122 West Campus Road Room 521, Lawrence, Kansas, 66045-3101. Subscription rate: \$15 per year. No part of this publication may be reproduced without written permission from the publisher, unless otherwise stated.

©2006 by The University of Kansas, Lawrence, Kansas, 66045-3101. All rights reserved.

Editor
 Julie Tollefson

Consulting Editors
 Keith Lenz
 Don Deshler
 Jean Schumaker

Graphic Designer
 David Gnojek

www.kucl.org

The University of Kansas
Center for Research on Learning
Joseph R. Pearson Hall
1122 West Campus Road, Room 521
Lawrence, Kansas 66045-3101
1-785-864-4780

Address service requested

Non Profit Org.
U.S. Postage
PAID
Lawrence, Kansas
Permit No. 65



Strategram Back Issue Form

Name: _____

Address: _____

City, State, ZIP: _____

Volume/issue # request: _____

**\$15 per volume
or \$3 per issue**
Mail to KU-CRL Order Desk
Joseph R. Pearson Hall
1122 West Campus Road, Rm.
517
Lawrence, KS 66045-3101

Strategram Subscription Form

To subscribe to *Strategram*, complete this form and send it with your check for \$15 to KU-CRL Order Desk, Joseph R. Pearson Hall, 1122 West Campus Road Rm. 517, Lawrence, KS 66045-3101

Name: _____

Address: _____

City, State, ZIP: _____

Phone Number: _____

Your subscription entitles you to all six issues of the current volume.
The current volume is No. 18, publication period September 2005-
August 2006.

www.kucrl.org

**The University of Kansas Center for Research on Learning
on the World Wide Web**