Understanding Language | Language, Literacy, and Learning in the Content Areas

What Does Text Complexity Mean for English Learners and Language Minority Students?

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Text Complexity and Academic Language

We begin with questions that educators throughout the U.S. should be asking. What will the more demanding complex texts implied by the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) mean for those students who are already having trouble with existing standards? This group includes English learners (ELs), and also the language minority students (LMs)[i] who speak English only, but not the variety that is valued and promoted in the society's schools. What will the CCSS mean for the educators who work with these students? The students are unaware of what the changes in standards will mean for them, but teachers are not, and they are worried. How can they be expected to help their students handle materials that are more demanding than what already seems difficult enough?

This worry is justified. A glance at current efforts to map the CCSS onto curriculum, or at the design of sample units, suggests that there is little understanding in our community of the role played by language in the process of attaining literacy. Where any attention is given to language at all, the focus is on vocabulary, and that at the level of individual words.

We will argue that the problems English learners and language minority students are experiencing stem at least partly from educators' failure to recognize the role played by language itself in literacy. Given the language diversity in our schools and in our classrooms, any effort to make the CCSS attainable for these and many other students must go beyond vocabulary, and should begin with an examination of our beliefs about language, literacy and learning.

In ways that appear to be little understood, even by literacy experts, the language used in complex texts of the type students should be reading in school is different in numerous ways from the language of ordinary talk. Differences in vocabulary, the easiest to see, make up only a part of it. Linguists and language analysts[ii] who have studied the language of academic texts have identified *grammatical structures and devices* for framing ideas, indicating relationships, and structuring arguments, that create *substantial differences between spoken and written language*.

The language used in complex texts differs enough from the English familiar to most students that it constitutes a barrier to understanding when they first encounter it in the texts they read in school. This becomes critical in the fourth grade and beyond when the texts children read take

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on a different pedagogical function. Texts through the third grade are meant to teach children how to read, so they are composed using simple sentence patterns, decodable words and selected high-frequency words that are meant to be learned by sight, and they are accompanied by pictures that support an understanding of what the texts are about. Since the texts have minimal responsibility in bearing the meaning, they tend to lack the richness, depth and complexity found later.

From the fourth grade on, however, the texts themselves have a new purpose: children are supposed to have completed the process of "learning to read," and are ready to begin "reading to learn," as the saying goes. Reading becomes a means for learning subject matter, and texts at that point become pedagogical tools: they convey information to be read, studied and learned in such school subjects as literature, science, social studies and math. Given these new functions, texts cannot remain simple for long. To communicate complex ideas and information calls for the lexical and grammatical resources of mature discourse – students must master these if they are to succeed in school and career.

How do children learn such language? Ordinarily, language learning happens when learners come into close and frequent contact with speakers of the target language, and efforts are made both by the learners and target language speakers to communicate by use of that language. But interactional opportunities with speakers are seldom if ever available for the learning of *academic* language. It is highly unlikely that students, even "mainstream" English speakers, will find conversation partners who are inclined to interact with them in such language. In fact, very little of the language spoken by teachers in the classroom, even during explicit instruction, qualifies as instances of this register, as one discovers by studying transcripts of instructional events in classrooms.[iii] To further complicate matters, we would argue that academic language cannot be "taught" as a separate school subject, either, at least not in the way one might teach a language like English, Spanish or French. So where and how are students to learn this kind of language?

There is only one way to acquire the language of literacy, and that is through literacy itself. Why? Because the only place students are likely to encounter these structures and patterns is in the materials they read. And that is possible only if the texts they read in school are written in such language. Complex texts provide school-age learners reliable access to this language, and interacting with such texts allows them to discover how academic language works.

Herein lies a major problem for English learners and language minority students. One of the biggest roadblocks to learning is that they never get a chance to work with complex texts. Why would that be a problem? Simply put, the easy texts schools give to ELs and LMs – given prophylactically as a safeguard against failure – actually prevent them from discovering how language works in academic discourse. Simplified texts offer no clue as to what academic language sounds like or how it works. We will comment on the kind of help ELs and LMs need in order to work with complex texts, after we take a look at some samples of the language of academic discourse to see what it involves.

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Powerfully Complex Texts: An Exemplar

So what are the linguistic characteristics of academic texts? An answer can be found by looking at the texts listed in the CCSS documents as exemplars of what students should be reading in grades 4-5 and above. (Exemplars can be found in grades K-3 texts, but mostly in those listed as read-alouds.) As we would expect from the CCSS's "staircase of complexity," examples of 'complex' texts can most readily be found in materials listed for grades 6-8 and above. Consider, for example, Martin Luther King's *Letter from Birmingham Jail* (hereafter, *Letter*) included as a reading for Grades 9-10. It is demanding and complex, both linguistically and in its historical and philosophical content.

The Letter does not have abstruse vocabulary or complicated grammar when compared to more specialized discourse or to stylistic tendencies of an earlier era.[iv] Yet its linguistic demands are substantial. The study of any part of this text would result in a fairly comprehensive inventory of the basic communicative and grammatical characteristics of academic discourse. In what follows, we'll use small pieces of this text to explicate what ELs and LMs and their teachers face more generally.

A quick look at the *Letter*'s first two paragraphs reveals some key features of such writing. In these paragraphs, King responds to the charge in the white clergymen's published statement[v] that the black community's demonstrations were "unwise and untimely," and were "led and directed by outsiders."

> WHILE confined here in the Birmingham city jail, I came across your recent statement calling our present activities "unwise and untimely." Seldom, if ever, do I pause to answer criticism of my work and ideas. If I sought to answer all of the criticisms that cross my desk, my secretaries would be engaged in little else in the course of the day, and I would have no time for constructive work. But since I feel that you are men of genuine good will and your criticisms are sincerely set forth, I would like to answer your statement in what I hope will be patient and reasonable terms.
>
> I think I should give the reason for my being in Birmingham, since you have been influenced by the argument of "outsiders coming in." I have the honor of serving as president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, an organization operating in every Southern state, with headquarters in Atlanta, Georgia. We have some eighty-five affiliate organizations all across the South, one being the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights. Whenever necessary and possible, we share staff, educational and financial resources with our affiliates. Several months ago our local affiliate here in Birmingham invited us to be on call to engage in a nonviolent direct-action program if such were deemed necessary. We readily consented, and when the hour came we lived up to our promises. So I am here, along with several members of my staff, because we were invited here. I am here because I have basic organizational ties here.
>
> Beyond this, I am in Birmingham because injustice is here…[1]

[1] Full text of this letter can be found at <http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/resources/article/annotated_letter_from_birmingham/#birmingham>

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These paragraphs illustrate a hallmark of academic writing*: **informational density***. Virtually every phrase and clause tells a story, or provides a crucial piece of information regarding the circumstances leading to King's being in Birmingham. The informational load is in fact even greater than the sum of the individual parts because there are phrases that carry layered messages. The first paragraph begins with an adverbial clause which ostensibly reveals nothing more than where King was when he "came across" the clergymen's statement – *"While confined here in the Birmingham city jail…".* The subtext is a rebuke – He could not have just come across the statement while flipping through the newspaper; he was locked up, his freedom curtailed. But it was also a rebuttal to the suggestion that "honest and open negotiation" was even possible in a situation where a man could be jailed for exercising his constitutional right to free speech.

The second sentence, beginning with a fronted two-part negative time adverbial requiring an auxiliary verb before the subject ("seldom, if ever, do I pause to answer criticism of my work"), implies that writing such a letter would ordinarily be seen as an interruption of work that should not be interrupted; under the circumstances, he has time to respond. The third sentence is a counterfactual conditional sentence explaining why this is usually impossible: "If I sought to answer all the criticisms" [which I do not], important work would not get done. The fourth sentence begins with a long subordinate clause that assumes (or pretends to assume) good will and sincerity on the part of the critics, and continues with an expression that includes what is functionally a kind of parenthetical ("I would like to answer your statement in <u>what I hope will be</u> patient and reasonable terms").

The second paragraph takes on the charge that MLK is an intruding outsider, someone who doesn't belong in their community. He explains that he has legitimate reasons for being in Birmingham, and that his organization has affiliates throughout the southern states, and he ends this paragraph, and begins the next one, with several repetitions of "here" and "because": I am *here because* we were invited here, I am *here because* I have organizational ties here, I am in Birmingham *because* injustice is *here*.

A closer look at some of the phrases and clauses in these paragraphs reveals a frequently exploited grammatical device for packing information into texts: ***heavy noun phrases***, phrases headed by nouns (NPs), which are modified or expanded by phrases and clauses before (pre-nominally) and after (post-nominally) the head noun itself. The grammar of English allows multiple pre- and post-modifiers to be packed into NPs, all of which adds information to the meaning of the <u>head noun</u> itself. Here in bracketed notation are two such heavy NPs, with the head nouns underlined (preposition phrases are labeled, PP; relative clause constructions by RC):

> $_{NP}$[your recent <u>statement</u> $_{RC}$[calling our present activities "unwise and untimely"]].
>
> $_{NP}$[some eighty-five <u>affiliate organizations</u> $_{PP}$[all over the South], $_{RC}$[one being the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights.]]

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Elaboration of nouns is extremely frequent in informational and expository prose (60% of nouns are so elaborated), but is relatively rare in spoken language (15%, by one account).[vi] Pre-nominal modifiers (quantifiers and adjective phrases) are used slightly more often than post-nominal modifiers (prepositional phrases and relative clause constructions). This kind of text includes instances of NPs where *both* pre- and post-nominal modifiers appear as in the two examples above.[vii] These are very rare in spoken language.

The next sentence, "*It is easy for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say 'Wait' "*, introduces a metaphor – "the stinging darts of segregation." It is followed by a 310-word sentence that begins with the word, *But*. What follows is a cascade of *when*-clauses, piling up reasons for understanding why King – and any sensible person – would find it difficult to wait. The signers of the newspaper statement, all white, are being asked to imagine themselves sharing the experiences of black Americans, and then to imagine their willingness to be patient. In the display below, the individual clauses are truncated to make it easy to see the whole. (The full sentence is in Appendix A.)

> But
> when you have seen …
> when you have seen …
> when you see …
> when you suddenly find …
> when you have to concoct …
> when you take a cross-country drive and find …
> when you are humiliated …
> when your first name becomes …
> when you are harried …
> when you go forever fighting …
> then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait.

Within this litany are phrases that emphasize the unending nature of the suffering: *night after night, day in and day out, harried by day and haunted by night, never knowing what to expect, forever fighting*.

This sentence deserves to be examined phrase by phrase, but it is also important for the reader to appreciate the cadence of the list of grievances, followed by the conclusion, *THEN you will understand*. Readers who have gone through the Declaration of Independence will see a similarity between the two documents, but King's list is one that asks the bishops and rabbis to imagine seeing the things Black people have seen, having the experiences they have had; in Thomas Jefferson's case, it is a list of intolerable acts by the British king: *He has plundered our seas, ravaged our coasts, burnt our towns, and destroyed the life of our people*.

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A Strategic Approach: Looking Closely at Language in One Sentence at a Time

Could English learners and language minority students handle the complexity of the *Letter*? It would be a demanding text for any student, but especially for ELs and LMs. Could they handle it? Not on their own – as David Coleman has argued, it is a text that demands close and thoughtful reading and discussion.[viii] We would add that the language demands are such that many students, but especially English learners, need instructional support from teachers to discover how to gain access to the ideas, concepts, and information that are encoded in the text. Note that we do not say that students need to learn the grammatical and linguistic terms we use in explicating the examples above. Rather, they need to learn how to *gain access to the ideas* encoded in this complex language.

Over the past 5 years, one of us (LWF) has worked with educators in several cities (New York City, Denver, and Beaverton, OR) to develop a method for providing K-12 students with the instructional support they need to get such access, and to enable them to learn how language works in complex texts. It begins with close readings of complex texts related to topics in science and social studies in elementary and middle school, and in history and English literature in high school. The work began as a strategy for restarting the stalled efforts of English learners in NYC who were having trouble moving beyond intermediate-level English proficiency. At the heart of the strategy (which had many components) was a daily instructional session in which teachers led students in a discussion focused on *a single sentence* drawn from the text the class was working on.

The goal of these conversations was to help students learn to unpack the information so tightly packed into academic texts, and in so doing, gradually internalize an awareness of the relation between specific linguistic patterns and the functions they serve in texts. It begins with the selection of a sentence for each day's conversation, the best being one that is so complex it begs for explication, is grammatically interesting, and is focused on an important point in the passage.

Examining One Sentence Closely...

After the *Letter* had been published, King tacked on a kind of preamble for further publications of it, explaining what he describes as the "somewhat constricted circumstance" under which it was written.[ix] Let's consider how this sentence could be used: *"Begun on the margins of the newspaper in which the statement appeared while I was in jail, the letter was continued on scraps of writing paper supplied by a friendly Negro trusty, and concluded on a pad my attorneys were eventually permitted to leave me."* An examination of this sentence shows three different "clauses" and the way in which they are organized into a complex sentence. The subject of the sentence is *the letter*, and the three clauses all express, in passive voice, facts about the letter's creation: how it was *begun*, *continued*, and *concluded*. Superficially this sentence informs the reader about the paper on which the letter was written– what could be

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more trivial? – but when we see the details it becomes clear why we think the description *under somewhat constricting circumstance* was a staggering understatement.

Each of the verbs *begun*, *continued*, and *concluded* is followed by the preposition *on* and a description of the writing paper and how he had access to it. We can see how elaborations of the NPs add further specifications of what is being identified by imagining a dialogue suggested by the bracketed questions in the right column (and which could usefully serve as conversational starters in an instructional conversation that begins to delve into this sentence):

Begun	
on the margins	[THE MARGINS OF WHAT?]
of the newspaper	[WHAT NEWSPAPER?]
in which the statement appeared	[WHEN WAS THAT?]
while I was in jail,	
the letter	
was	
continued	
on scraps	[SCRAPS OF WHAT?]
of writing paper	[WHERE DID THAT COME FROM?]
supplied	[BY WHOM?]
by a friendly Negro trusty,	
and	
concluded	
on a pad	[WHERE DID HE GET THAT?]
my attorneys	
were eventually permitted to leave me.	[WHO PERMITTED THEM TO LEAVE IT FOR HIM?]

There is a lot of material here to support a classroom conversation about why King's situation was more than a *somewhat constricting circumstance*. King was allowed to see a copy of the newspaper in which his fellow clergymen urged him to slow down, but he had to use the blank spaces in the paper to start his letter; a fellow prisoner brought him scraps of writing paper to continue; and his attorneys were *eventually permitted* to give him a writing pad. That phrase alone gives readers a sense of the kind of world it is, one in which being in jail means you are denied even paper to write on.

The phrases and words as arrayed above provide a clear canvas for teachers to bring students' attention to structure, and the way it carries meaning in complex texts like this one. For example, each verb in the sentence above is followed by a phrase starting with the preposition *on,* a phrase that describes the paper King used to write and rewrite his Letter. Each phrase ends with a modifier – each a different example of a grammatical structure that is central to academic writing: the *relative clause*. The first one (*the newspaper in which the statement appeared*), contains a relative pronoun, *which*. The second one (*scraps of paper supplied by a friendly Negro trusty*) is sometimes called a "reduced relative" because it is missing the relative pronoun *which* and an auxiliary verb (*scraps of paper* (which were) *supplied by*...). The third is

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a so-called “bare relative”, because it is missing the relative pronoun *which*.[x]

Some might see these details as beside the point: why waste time with discussions of traditional grammar? Our experience tells us that these labels can give EL and LM students a sense of purchase on the complexity that confronts them, and that they relish the naming and the details of the important constructions. Consider, for example, fourth graders at a Queens elementary school on parent visiting night,[xi] eagerly showing their parents “relative clauses” in sentences posted on the board, based on their discussions of “juicy sentences” with such structures through the year.

The instructional conversations focus on sentences drawn, each day, from the part of the text the class is working on. These conversations require planning and thought. Preparation begins with a close examination of the focal sentence by the teacher, not necessarily in the linguistic detail shown above, but phrase by phrase to identify the information conveyed in each. Conversational starters, ideally in the form of open-ended questions or prompts, rather than ones seeking specific answers as in our analysis, are drawn up to get the discussion started. For example:

- *MLK comments that his Letter had been written under “a somewhat constricting circumstance.” What does this sentence tell us about that circumstance?*
- *Can we tell from this sentence how the clergymen's statement affected MLK when he first read it?*
- *Which part of the sentence tells us that? Explain why you think that.*

Questions Going Forward:

Is there any evidence that this approach works? How much time should these conversations take? Are students willing participants? Does it have any effect?

We have not had time to conduct formal research on the effectiveness of the approach, but teachers and administrators in the participating schools are convinced that the approach works, enough so that they have decided to use it for all students, and not just for ELs and LMs. That decision was prompted, not only by the increased numbers of ELs passing New York’s English language proficiency test, but by ELs actually outperforming non-EL students in the ELA test that is given each year at lab sites, and by increased percentages of students passing the Regent’s Global History test after teachers at our high school lab sites began working on language in their classes.

But how can 15 to 20 minutes spent discussing the language in just one sentence each day have such a great effect? That’s hardly enough time to make any difference at all, one might argue. And yet, it did. After participating in these instructional events for a time, the students behave as if they have been let in on a big secret – how to make sense of things that did not

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make much sense before. That doesn't mean they have mastered the intricacies of academic language yet, but knowing that they need to notice how language is used in text is the first step. We are sufficiently convinced, in large part by the success we have seen in schools, to recommend the approach to other educators who are trying to find ways to make the CCSS work for all students, including English learners and language minorities. This will require a focus on professional development to support teachers' work with the structures in powerful texts, but that's another paper.

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APPENDIX A

Excerpt from Martin Luther King, Jr. Letter from Birmingham Jail

"…We have waited for more than 340 years for our constitutional and God-given rights. The nations of Asia and Africa are moving with jetlike speed toward gaining political independence, but we still creep at horse-and-buggy pace toward gaining a cup of coffee at a lunch counter. Perhaps it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say, 'Wait.' But when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim; when you have seen hate-filled policemen curse, kick and even kill your black brothers and sisters; when you see the vast majority of your twenty million Negro brothers smothering in an airtight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society; when you suddenly find your tongue twisted and your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your six-year-old daughter why she can't go to the public amusement park that has just been advertised on television, and see tears welling up in her eyes when she is told that Funtown is closed to colored children, and see ominous clouds of inferiority beginning to form in her little mental sky, and see her beginning to distort her personality by developing an unconscious bitterness toward white people; when you have to concoct an answer for a five-year-old son who is asking: 'Daddy, why do white people treat colored people so mean?'; when you take a cross-country drive and find it necessary to sleep night after night in the uncomfortable corners of your automobile because no motel will accept you; when you are humiliated day in and day out by nagging signs reading 'white' and 'colored'; when your first name becomes 'nigger,' your middle name becomes 'boy' (however old you are) and your last name becomes 'John,' and your wife and mother are never given the respected title 'Mrs.'; when you are harried by day and haunted by night by the fact that you are a Negro, living constantly at tiptoe stance, never quite knowing what to expect next, and are plagued with inner fears and outer resentments; when you go forever fighting a degenerating sense of 'nobodiness'–then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait. There comes a time when the cup of endurance runs over, and men are no longer willing to be plunged into the abyss of despair. I hope, sirs, you can understand our legitimate and unavoidable impatience."

Retrieved from The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute Web Site, 13 December 2011. <http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/resources/article/annotated_letter_from_birmingham/#birmingham>

ENDNOTES

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[i] The students we are referring to as language minorities include American Indian, Alaskan natives, Latino students, and African Americans, who come from homes or communities where heritage languages are spoken, but the students themselves speak only English. Their English, however, is different enough from the standard variety on which academic discourse is based, to require instructional help getting access to the language of complex texts. The tendency in our schools when these students have literacy problems has been to see them as stemming from deficiencies in vocabulary and skills.

[ii] See especially:

Biber, D., Johansson, S., Leech, G., Conrad, S., & Finnegan, E. (1999). *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English.* Pearson Education Limited.

Chafe, W., & Tannen, D. (1987). The relation between written and spoken language. *Annual Review of Anthropology, 16*, 383-407.

Flower, L. (1990). The role of task representation in Reading-to-Write. In L. Flower, V. Stein, J. Ackerman & M. Kantz (Eds.), *Reading-to-Write: Exploring a Cognitive and Social Process* (35-74). Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.

Halliday, M. A. K. (1993). Toward a language-based theory of learning. *Linguistics and Education, 5* (2), 93-116.

Schleppergrel, M. (2004). *The Language of Schooling: A Functional Linguistics Perspective.* Routledge.

[iii] See, for example, transcripts of TIMSS science lessons which can be accessed online at the (http://timssvideo.com/)

[iv] If an example of what we mean would be useful, try this, from H. D. Thoreau's *On Walden Pond:* "*The ancient philosophers, Chinese, Hindoo, Persian, and Greek, were a class than which none has been poorer in outward riches, nor so rich in inward."* Or this, from P. B. Shelley: "*That the frequency of a belief in God (for it is not universal) should be any argument in its favor, none to whom the unnumerable mistakes of men are familiar, will assert" (*from *A Refutation of Deism,* 1814*).*

[v] Statement by Alabama Clergymen, 12 April 1963. Retrieved from Stanford University Website, November 10, 2011. http://www.stanford.edu/group/King//frequentdocs/clergy.pdf

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[vi] Biber, et al. (1999. *LGSWE* (578). Note: What we are calling informational and expository corresponds to what is described in *LGSWE* as academic prose & news writing.

[vii] There are many other grammatical means by which information can be packed into sentences, but in the interest of space, we have had to limit ourselves to a discussion of NPs. We would like to have discussed how the use of adverbial phrases and clauses tacked onto the main clause in sentences add information concerning the circumstances, reasoning behind, or the writer's stance on what is communicated by the main clause. The forms they can take (adverbs, preposition phrases, clauses), and the many places they can be inserted (preceding and following the main clause, and at virtually every interstice of phrases and clauses) make them the most varied and ubiquitous structures in this kind of written language.

[viii] **"**Bringing the Common Core to Life" April 28, 2011 webinar. *http://usny.nysed.gov/rttt/resources/bringing-the-common-core-to-life.html*

[ix] This was added to the Letter after its initial publication: "*AUTHOR'S NOTE: This response to a published statement by eight fellow clergymen from Alabama (Bishop C. C. J. Carpenter, Bishop Joseph A. Durick, Rabbi Hilton L. Grafman, Bishop Paul Hardin, Bishop Holan B. Harmon, the Reverend George M. Murray, the Reverend Edward V. Ramage and the Reverend Earl Stallings) was composed under somewhat constricting circumstance. Begun on the margins of the newspaper in which the statement appeared while I was in jail, the letter was continued on scraps of writing paper supplied by a friendly Negro trusty, and concluded on a pad my attorneys were eventually permitted to leave me. Although the text remains in substance unaltered, I have indulged in the author's prerogative of polishing it for publication." (http://abacus.bates.edu/admin/offices/dos/mlk/letter.html; retrieved 12/31/11)

[x] Notice that both of the last two relative clauses contain passives. A sentence like this one should be remembered when a young writer receives advice about avoiding passive sentences at all costs.

[xi] P.S. Q-002. The school had been involved in this work on academic language development for ELs less than a year when this observation was reported. Teacher of the fourth grade class, Ms. Olga Dourmas.

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