Language learning and discourse have been studied in a range of ways that continue to offer exciting insight into how communication is and can be studied in classrooms. When we speak or write, we adjust or design what we want to say to fit the context. At the same time, the context is shaped by the very words we use. For example, if a child says, “I like studying turtles,” just this phrase shapes how learning is happening for this child at this time. In turn, this child’s statement may shift the teacher’s learning and encourage her or him to recreate or extend this same experience to another area of study in the curriculum.

Work around language and discourse in action and across modes is significant to language arts. Children use gestural, visual, sound, written, and spoken language that shapes how we as teachers respond. Our responses then shape how they will interact in our classrooms and with us. Awareness of discourse patterns and how language works within and across modes and across time enables us to more thoughtfully construct spaces in which language in use is not always routine and expected, but affords children space to build and rebuild their worlds with an understanding of how language works.

Alongside actions, movements, images, objects, and digital technologies, language is routinely used to create and recreate the very spaces we inhabit (e.g., home, classrooms, faculty meetings). In essence, discourse is language in use, and reflects the social reality in which we live (Gee, 2005). Shirley Brice Heath’s (1983) 10-year classic ethnography *Ways with Words* is a case in point. Heath studied the relationship between culture and how language was used within two nearby communities: Roadville, a white working class community, and Trackton, a Black working class community.

Among her many insights, Heath found that Roadville children were read to, taught to listen, and used standard language that prepared them for working with adults (in school, church, work). On the other hand, Trackton children, like the adults around them, were taught to be storytellers and to use detail through their talk. Although children brought these varied language experiences to school, the language used by the Roadville children was the more valued discourse in school. Children in Roadville, then, were set up to be more successful in school, while those in Trackton negotiated their own use of language to make sense of how language was used and experienced in school.

In another classic text, *Classroom Discourse*, Courtney Cazden (1988) studied the complexities of classroom talk, the situated nature of language use in classroom settings, and patterns that emerged in classroom talk. Cazden observed such things as different desk arrangements, teachers’ gaze, types of questions asked, and pacing, and noted how particular discourse patterns emerged. For example, desks in straight rows situate students to respond in one way, while desks arranged in circles invite a different response. She also found that patterns within questions emerged: the teacher initiated a question, the student responded, and the teacher then evaluated this response.

In a more contemporary setting, Compton-Lilly’s (2007) work is interesting; she studied the language patterns in several families across 10 years. She examined how time operates as a contextual...
factor in children’s language (e.g., “last week,” “when I was four,” “when my mom was little,” “when I grow up”). How children (and their parents) judiciously drew on past events as they created and recreated patterns of talk across time inspired her to wonder and theorize how meaning is constructed across time and how these constructions contribute to the ways students become literate and construct literate identities.

These studies help us understand that language use in and out of classroom settings (e.g., home, work, play, institutions) matters in how children take up different language patterns—in different discourses—in different contexts, and to what extent they can participate (or not). Across time, in many classrooms, language use becomes routine; children know what teachers expect them to say or the seating arrangement lets them know how talk and learning will occur. They learn to read the social setting and adjust their language accordingly.

From such classic research, a number of scholars have studied discourse patterns in and out of classroom spaces, not only in speech and written communication, but across modes and time. In 1996, Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) articulated a grammar of visual design that precipitated studies in how visual language is used in and out of classrooms, and how the language within these texts makes visible larger discourses (e.g., gender, race, sexual orientation, religion) (Albers, 2007; Albers, Vasquez, & Harste, 2011; Janks, 2005; Pahl & Rowsell, 2010; Serafini, 2010). These studies showed that children learn to read visual language that they experience in their everyday lives and recreate them in their own visual renderings. The Scollons’ work (2004) in mediated discourse analysis (MDA) focused on how language and meaning are created and recreated through action in social settings. That is, they studied how even the smallest of actions, like a young child’s pointing to pictures, constitute key meaning-making practices and signal literate abilities and identities. Karen Wohlwend (2009; 2011) has drawn upon MDA and studied how, for example, two young boys recreate a video game on paper or how children recreate larger discourses of Disney and Star Wars through play and language.

Bodies also are created and recreated to make visible discourse patterns through shape, tattoos, styling, and positions (Mallozzi, 2012). Consider the TLC hit show Toddlers and Tiaras, a series that showcases the competitive pageant circuit for children. Children learn the language of pageants and are trained in their social settings (e.g., family, pageant circuits, pageant shows, etc.) to communicate this language through their body shapes, designs, and stylings to resemble adult counterparts. In one show, a mother padded her child’s chest to resemble Dolly Parton’s and another was asked to smoke fake cigarettes. In an episode of Storage Wars, a five-year-old female pageant contestant was considered an “expert” who discussed and assessed the value of a set of tiaras found in a storage unit.

In this issue of Language Arts, we invited articles that examined how people use language (visual, gestural, written, spoken, etc.) in social settings (e.g., classroom, community, Internet). We asked readers and authors to consider questions such as, How does the interrelatedness of language and literacy play out in classroom life? In our feature articles, the authors address discourse and interaction patterns in young children’s writing and talk. Efleda Preclaro Tolentino’s article, “‘Put an explanation point to make it louder’: Uncovering Emergent Writing Revelations through Talk,” studies what emergent writers discovered about print and themselves as writers through talk. In “Small-Group Word Study: Instructional Conversations or Mini-Interrogations?” Kathy Ganske and Robin Jocius focus on how small-group word study interactions promote greater student talk and thinking. David Bloome and Arlette Willis, our featured scholars for “Conversation Currents,” engage in an animated discussion about literacy and discourse as social practice, and what this means in the contexts of classrooms. We know you’ll enjoy our departments, and we want to welcome our new Research and Policy department editors, Maren Aukerman.
and Jessica Zacher Pandya, who address the history and nature of discourse analysis across time. Enjoy this issue!

References


2013 NCTE Election Results

In NCTE’s 2013 elections, College Section member Douglas Hesse, University of Denver, Colorado, was chosen vice president. Hesse will take office during the NCTE Annual Convention in November. Elected to a two-year term as Elementary Representative-at-Large was Lisa Martin, Clark County School District, Las Vegas, Nevada.

The Elementary Section also elected new members. Elected to the 2013–2014 Nominating Committee were Thomas Marshall, Stony Lane Elementary School, Paramus, New Jersey, chair; Koomi Kim, New Mexico State University, Las Cruces; and Sandra L. Osorio, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.

On the NCTE website, see additional 2013 election results as well as details on submitting nominations for the 2014 elections (http://www.ncte.org/volunteer/elections).