

## Identifying and Addressing Students' Language and Literacy Issues

1. *What are the causes of poor language and literacy (including reading comprehension) in secondary school students?*

Research has shown that there are a number of personal and sociocultural factors that impact negatively on a student's language and literacy abilities. There is a strong correlation between low socioeconomic status and poor literacy skills and thus, compared to high-income families where educational development is generally more highly valued, students coming from low-income homes are often disadvantaged. These students commonly have less experience engaging in literacy building tasks such as reading and writing and are also less likely to receive sufficient support for the development of their vocabulary, (Hart & Risely, 2003, p. 7; Snow, 2002, p. 21).

A second significant factor that greatly impacts on a student's grasp of literacy and language concepts is whether they are native English speakers or learning English as a second language (ESL) (Kelley et al., 2010, p. 5). The extent to which ESL students are impeded will depend on when English was introduced to them, their access to English texts in a home environment and the degree of support provided to them in learning it (Snow, 2002, p. 21). A lack of direct instruction focused on academic vocabulary to allow these students to 'catch up' means that literacy issues for these students only becomes more obvious and problematic by the time they enter secondary school (Kelley et al., 2010, p. 6).

Other factors that can cause poor language and literacy include a lack of motivation in students to engage in reading, as well as students harboring negative perceptions of their own reading ability (Snow 2002, p. 22).

2. *In general, what are common indicators of poor language and literacy (including reading comprehension) in secondary school students?*

Indicators of poor language and literacy in students include gaps in vocabulary (Hart & Risley, 2003, p. 9) and an inability to confidently decode words or comprehend content-related texts. Significant gaps in students' prior knowledge and lowered cognitive capacities are a further impediment to comprehension and literacy abilities (Snow, 2002, p. 23).

A student's reluctance to read or engage in activities is indicative of their own negative self-perceptions of their ability as readers. Harboring such perceptions blocks students from engaging with or advancing their literacy skills (Snow, 2002, p. 22).

3. *Using the samples of work provided, what language and literacy (including reading comprehension) issues can you identify? What could have led to such weaknesses?*

By examining [redacted] understanding of and response to the test, it is clear that he struggles with a number of language and literacy issues and has low reading comprehension. His vocabulary is poor and he has trouble decoding words fluently. Words that indicate difficulty include 'evolutionary' and 'parasites'. [redacted] syntactic knowledge is also an area of concern, with clear grammatical errors in the terms 'evolution pressure' and 'causes'.

[redacted] also seems unable to utilise reading comprehension strategies to make sense of the question. His misinterpretation of the term 'presence or absence' shows he had difficulty breaking down the question.

[redacted] hasn't been able to make important links between the question and what he has learnt in science. It can be assumed that his semantic knowledge around evolutionary processes and sea life is inadequate to respond to the questions of the task. Gibbons (2009, p. 7) proposes that "literacy is subject related" and hence it is vital for [redacted] to understand content-specific words to access this biology test.

[redacted] engagement with the text seems to be limited, as he hasn't offered a full answer to the second question. This apparent lack of interest could be connected to his minimal understanding of the topic. Tobias (1994, p. 44) presents that there is a "strong, essentially linear interest-prior knowledge relationship".

Reflecting on the link between low socioeconomic status and poor vocabulary (Hart & Risley, 2003, p. 7), it could be assumed that [redacted] comes from a low-income family, where he has probably not had adequate support in developing his literacy skills or access to texts. Additionally, his failure to attempt a

guess at the second question could be an indicator of low motivation and/or low confidence in his ability as a reader (Snow, 2002, p. 22).

A further important factor that may have led to such weak responses by ██████ is the complexity of the text and the questions within the test. According to Snow's (2002, p. xiv) Heuristic for Thinking about Reading Comprehension, effective reading is reached when a large part of the interrelated elements of reading, the reader, the text and the activity, are well matched. It appears both the test and the activity may be incompatible with ██████ skill level. Thus, for improved reading comprehension, the test needs to be altered.

██████: ██████ writing reveals weaknesses in his syntactic knowledge. He sparingly uses paragraphs and he has not consistently employed proper punctuation (e.g. "victoria"). There are also number of grammatical and spelling mistakes throughout ██████ response, for example "I founded" and "sait". ██████ has also failed to draw on basic comprehension strategies such as double-checking to correct these mistakes.

There are also problems with ██████ semantic knowledge. The task was centered on a unit of Australian exploration with students asked to assume the role of an explorer and write a narrative about their journey and discovery (Davidson, 2017). It is clear ██████ has not grasped concepts of venturing into the unknown (since the explorer knows he is going to discover Victoria) therefore revealing gaps in his knowledge of Australian exploration. There is also no mention of Aboriginal people, an important aspect of Australian history and exploration stories.

██████ is an ESL student who moved from Lebanon recently (Davidson, 2017). Snow's (2002, p. 20) Heuristic for Thinking About Reading Comprehension and more specifically, her recognition of the significant influence of sociocultural context on students' identity as readers and writers, explains the direction of ██████ piece. Recognising that ██████ has been raised within an Arabic tradition that emphasizes the oral language, with grammar and punctuation less regarded, helps explain why although his narrative is strong, he misuses and leaves out important language techniques.

██████ sociocultural background also explains his inability to grasp ideas around Australian exploration, specifically the concept of venturing into the unknown. Since Lebanon has been developed for centuries it is unlikely their curriculum would include a unit of work centered on the discovery of Lebanon (Davidson, 2017).

TES displays sensitivity in relation to variation across language, culture, religion and socioeconomic background

4. *As a teacher, what concrete steps would you take and what specific strategies would you use to improve these students' language and literacy (including reading comprehension)? What questions would you ask to better understand these students' language and literacy (including comprehension) difficulties?*

██████: I would initially have a discussion with ██████ to determine the extent of his background knowledge on the topic at hand and ask a number of questions such as "do you know what evolution is?" and "do you know what predatory means?"

To help support ██████ limited vocabulary, I would draw on Kelley et al.'s (2010) proposed strategy to focus on teaching a small number of high utility words to struggling readers. I would choose 5 words, including subject specific and academic terms, such as 'evolutionary' and 'explain', and pre-teach these words before testing. Strategies to do this could include having a class discussion to create student-friendly definitions, using visual aids, or pairing exercises where students practice vocalising the learned words in different contexts (Kelley et al., 2010, p. 10).

I would help ██████ gain an understanding of task specific words such as 'blenny' and 'wrasse' by showing side-by-side pictures of each fish, as well as a diagram/video of the wrasse eating parasites off the predatory fish, so ██████ can understand the evolutionary benefits of looking like the wrasse, for the purpose of the task.

To support ██████ poor literacy skills, I would modify the task, by spreading out the use of challenging words and breaking down the questions into smaller, more accessible parts. For example:

1. Does the wrasse look like the blenny?

TES shows an awareness of the need to differentiate teaching strategies based on student diversity.

2. What does the wrasse do to the predatory fish?
3. What does the blenny do to the predatory fish?
4. From an evolutionary standpoint, would it be helpful to the blenny to look like the wrasse? Why? /Why not?
5. Would it be helpful to the wrasse to look like the blenny? Why? /Why not?

I would still incorporate terms like ‘evolutionary’ and ‘predatory’ because of the vocabulary pre-teaching exercises I would employ.

█:

The first step I would take to help improve █ language and literacy would be to focus on the value of language techniques such as grammar, spelling, punctuation and the use of paragraphs.

I would ask █ questions such as “when do you use capital letters?” and “when do you use a paragraph?” to help me understand the extent of his knowledge of language concepts. Based on █ writing, I suspect that he is familiar with the concepts but just does not understand their significance for the English language.

To encourage and assist him to improve his use language techniques I would hand out a checklist, as outlined below.

Check List	✓
• Write using paragraphs	
• Use capital letters for names of people, places, things (proper nouns only)	
• Check spelling	
• Check grammar	

I would also communicate with the school’s ESL teacher to collaborate on the curriculum and receive support in teaching English skills to █. Further, I would incorporate pre-teaching exercises that more deeply explore the concept of the unknown in Australian exploration to improve █ semantic knowledge. This could include studying diary entries from Australian explorers, and stories that include important aspects of Australian exploration, such as relations with Indigenous Australians.

5. *Explain how the strategies described in your response to question 4 address the difficulties you identified in question 3.*

█:

An important activity I have incorporated to address █ vocabulary difficulties parallels Kelley et al.’s (2010) successful vocabulary program. An understanding of high-utility academic words is vital for understanding the requirements of the test (Kelley et al., 2010, p. 12). It is also essential to create understanding around content-specific vocabulary, particularly if █ prior knowledge is lacking. A greater interest in the task could be evoked by this additional knowledge, having a positive effect on █ comprehension of the task (Tobias, 1994, p. 45).

The activities that draw on communication and clarification through the use of oral skills, such as the one-on-one discussion with █ and the partnered vocabulary tasks, will allow further insight into the extent of his subject-related knowledge and encourage language and literacy development (Kelley et al., 2010, p. 10).

The revised, lead-in style questions of the test will help activate █ schema and guide his understanding of the text. Incorporating visual aids in the test will further clarify and make accessible the test for █. █ situation reflects Snow’s (2002, p. 24) proposed correlation between texts that are too challenging and low comprehension rates. This revised version gives instruction appropriately matched to █ skill level, an important influence on literacy and reading comprehension (Snow, 2002, p. 26).

█:

Discussion with [REDACTED] will enable the development of a more personal connection with him, which may be effective in sparking his further interest in classroom activities (Kelley et al., 2010, p. 12). It will also allow me to reinforce the importance of grammar, punctuation and paragraphing. The use of a checklist would further remind [REDACTED] of the importance of these language skills, and also encourage working as a “self-regulated, active learner”, a characteristic recognised by Snow (2002, p. 27) as a trait of a successful learner.

Since [REDACTED] was a very capable student excelling in his first language in Lebanon but has only been in Australia for 6 months (Davidson, 2017), collaboration with the ESL teacher is essential for ensuring he is assisted in transferring these skills to the English language. Hurst and Davidson (2005) advocate that more involvement by ESL teachers across the curriculum is crucial to improving the educational success of English language learners.

Building [REDACTED] semantic knowledge around concepts of exploration in Australia will help improve his reading comprehension and thus enable him to complete the task at hand in a way that more accurately addresses it’s key elements (Snow, 2002, p. 23).

6. Write a 300-word self-assessment of your own work explaining how you meet each of the criteria in the assessment rubric

Within my response, I have displayed deep understanding of the language and literacy issues faced by [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] and have drawn on relevant parts of the readings, particularly Snow’s (2002) Heuristic for Thinking about Reading Comprehension, to create solutions to these weaknesses and support my main points.

However, since this task requires me to draw conclusions about the causes of and problems with [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] literacy and language issues with the limited information I have been given, some of these assumptions may be incorrect. For example, I concluded that [REDACTED] has little to no prior knowledge on the content being tested. However, since his literacy levels stopped him from effectively accessing the question, it is not possible to properly determine the extent of [REDACTED] content knowledge without further, more accessible testing/discussion.

Similarly, I assumed that [REDACTED] has had adequate exposure to language techniques and hence to improve his language skills, he only needs the importance of these techniques reinforced to him. If it were the case that he actually possesses little understanding of basic language skills, more explicit teaching of these techniques would be necessary.

I struggled to go into the detail that I would have liked on a number of questions, particularly Question Two, given the 2000 word-length constraint. However, I feel that I was eventually able to use this constraint to succinctly emphasis the points I concluded to be the most important and relevant to the task.

Overall, I believe I have completed this task to a high standard and in doing so, have acquired skills and strategies that I can confidently use in my future teaching practice to understand and address students’ language and literacy needs.

### References

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