Word Walls to Language Walls: A Natural Evolution in the Balanced Literacy Classroom

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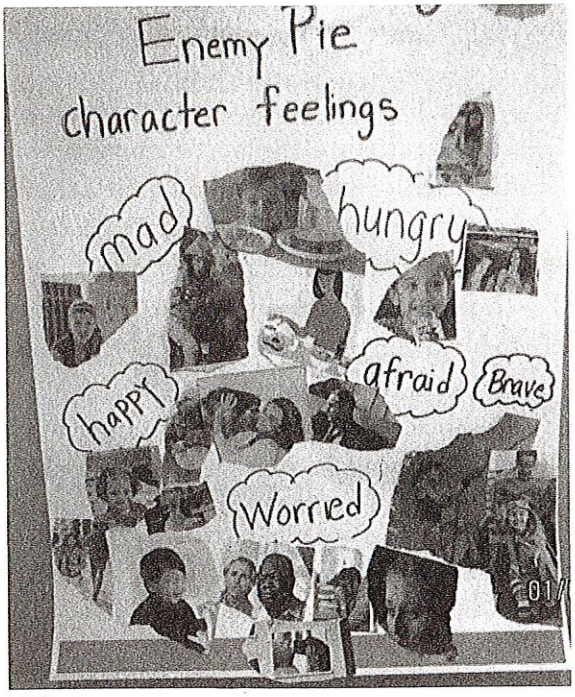
Walking into a balanced literacy classroom, one is sure to be greeted by the rich language that is taking place between the students and teacher and/or student to student. Often, the children are in classroom conversations and interactions that have been elicited through the instruction (e.g., read-alouds, guided reading, language and literacy centers, and independent reading and writing), and the teacher now steps back to allow the classroom discourse to unfold naturally.

In a recent visit to a 1st-grade classroom, the teacher had just finished reading aloud the book *Enemy Pie* by Derek Munson (2000), and the children were having a discussion about the emotions of the characters which was the purpose of the lesson. Some of the children were up at the large white dry-erase board where the teacher had displayed visual pictures of feelings and emotions along with the words that they were talking about—for example, which characters felt which ways in the story. Some of the children were looking together at the book that had just been read to them and discussing the faces of the characters, talking about when they felt like the characters. They were matching the characters in the story with the images and words displayed on the large easel. Still others were having conversations with the teacher about the book that was just read and referring to the images and words displayed. The next day during the read-aloud, the children listened to the ending of the story and made a collaborative collage about the feelings of the characters on a language wall (Figure 1). The language wall was filled with character emotion words that were part of the lesson. The children cut out pictures from magazines of people representing the different feelings such as "happy," "afraid," "worried," "hungry," and "mad"—some of the feelings that were depicted in the story characters. This activity promoted much discussion as the children searched for photographs and images of feelings.

Figure 1.* Enemy Pie *Language Wall



It was wonderful to see how the teacher facilitated these language interactions after the story had been read. These types of scenarios take place often in classrooms where language is the vehicle that drives literacy and literacy instruction.

Balanced literacy classrooms are rich in print; and words abound in many ways. Although word walls can provide an opportunity to systematically organize words within the classroom environment, this article is about transitioning to language walls and expanding to a more sophisticated level and larger unit of thought. This larger unit includes ideas, notions, images, and much more, allowing for rich conversations, interactions, and discussions to ensue. A language wall allows for conversations within the classroom discourse to occur, and it allows the teacher to observe and document certain aspects of language and language development. In the example above, the teacher was able to observe and document how the children understood emotions and feelings of different characters. The rich conversations that centered on the words and images from the story provided extended opportunities for interactions and responses in getting at the purpose of the lesson. All of these examples bring forth expanding words to a larger unit—language. Therefore, the purpose of this article is threefold:

1. To highlight the importance of language and specifically classroom discourse during the tenets of balanced literacy (read-alouds, guided reading, language and literacy centers, and independent reading and writing).
2. To use language and discourse as a means to build complex vocabulary and enrich the literacy skills of students.
3. To provide examples of how to implement language walls in a balanced literacy classroom and across content areas.

Why Highlight Language as a Lens to Literacy?

Language walls grew out of the idea of reconceptualizing the tenets and notions of balanced literacy (read-alouds, guided reading, centers, word walls, and independent reading and writing) to align with the shifts required for success with the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). Balanced literacy is a philosophical orientation that assumes and writing achievement are developed instruction and support in multiple envirc in which teachers use various approach differ by level of teacher support and child (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996; Frey, Lee, Tc Pass, & Massengill, 2005). This philos orientation or perspective means that ther one right approach to teaching reading (Fit 1999) but, rather, a balanced approach to development. An essential element witl balanced literacy pedagogy is that the te making decisions moment by moment on ways to proceed with the instruction (Polic McTague, 2015; Policastro, McTague, & M 2016). More recently, Tompkins (2013) d the balanced approach to instruction as " prehensive view of literacy that combines instruction, guided practice, collaborative ing, and independent reading and writing all developed through instruction and sup multiple environments" (p. 18).

Through our Improving Teacher C state grant and in working in schools anc rooms with school leaders and teachers, th of classroom discourse and how to have i trate the balanced literacy curriculum w ognized as an important need for succes the CCSS. In reconfiguring the new mc balanced literacy, a focus on language as a unit of thought emerged and was integrate each of the tenets of balanced literacy (Poli 2015). Word walls were reconceptualiz embark on and highlight the importar language and specifically classroom disc Consequently, through our grant, we c *language walls* for the partner schools. language walls are large-scale posters creat dry-erase boards. There are certainly many ways to create language walls, but the exa provided here are of this format.

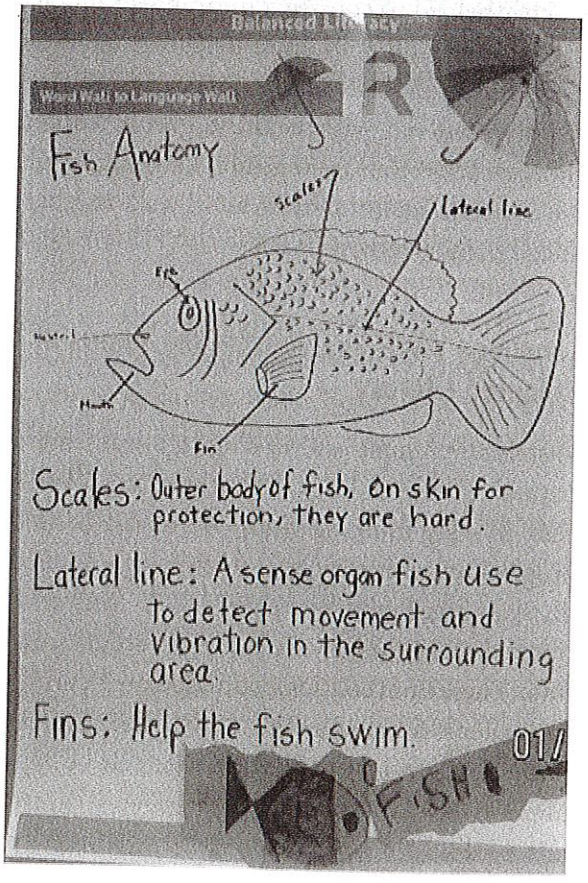
An increasingly growing challenge i new notion between the connection of lan and language development and the imp role it plays in all aspects of literacy and li

instruction. Language is the underlying foundation of not only literacy development, but also it is the means to mediate instruction in all content and skill areas. According to Van Lier and Walqui (2012), "language is an inseparable part of all human action; it is intimately connected to all forms of action, physical, social and symbolic" (p. 4). Unsworth (2001) views "learning about language as a resource for literacy instruction" (p. 1). Thought and language are intricately tied together and, as such, contribute to all aspects of the learning process. The ELA CCSS require high levels of cognitive rigor that place new learning demands on students, requiring the highest levels of Bloom's taxonomy for learning and, thus, demanding new insights and directions into the teaching and learning of these standards. Moreover, in order for students to be successful with the CCSS, they are required to develop sophisticated levels of thought and language such as in finding evidence to build both argument and debate and much more. Filmore and Filmore (2012)

> *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.*

Halliday's (1969, 1993) language-based theory of learning captures the idea of making meaning as a semiotic process—that is, the resource for making meaning is language. He went on further to state that the learning of language for children happens simultaneously as they learn about language and learn through language. From this perspective, his general theory of learning is interpreted as "learning through language" (Halliday, 1993, p. 93). Most importantly, intentionally learning about language to inform all of literacy instruction is critical for both teachers and school leaders entering into the implementation of the CCSS. Language from this perspective takes on many different forms. For example, one primary teacher recently completed a unit about fish, and the children had done research on the topic during center time and independent reading and writing. They had informational books on fish read aloud to them, had activities at language and literacy centers on fish anatomy, and did much independent reading and writing on the topic. Small guided reading groups worked with informational text on fish. In order to carry out this instruction, the teacher introduced the different topics by using a language wall. The language wall grew and evolved as the unit progressed. As part of the lesson, children drew pictures of different kinds of fish which led to a compare and contrast discussion (see Figure 2). As the students studied the anatomy of fish,

Figure 2. Fish Anatomy Language Wall



the language wall expanded and included words and images of fish anatomy that were completed by the students. The fish anatomy discussion and activity brought forth complex vocabulary that included words such as scales, gills, lateral line, fin, nostril, and much more. The teacher used the language wall as a means to review what had been studied and introduce the topics yet to be learned. During this time, students had rich dialogue and spontaneous discussions about what they had learned. One discussion that ensued focused on whether or not fish made good pets and debated if it was fair to the fish. They even discussed the pros and cons of buying fish from a pet store and if it was the right thing to do. At one point the children even used their facial expression and body movements to be "pretend fish." Important here is the language that took place during all aspects of the lessons. Language was clearly in action here, and it became apparent that the responses were constructed from more than just words. The actions of the students and the teacher helped to construct meaning and guide interactions and responses. The teacher took time during the lessons for these discussions to happen and was patient as the group worked through conversations together. Language walls are a natural evolution from word walls in a balanced literacy classroom.

Language Walls Evolve from the Tenets of Balanced Literacy

From the example above, language walls are a natural evolution in a balanced literacy routine. Moving from individual words is a natural progression with the focus now being centered on language and discourse. Rich conversations abound during the entire classroom routine. These conversations occur before, during, and after read-alouds and evolve and expand from words to larger discourse that can be captured in the language wall. Varelas and Pappas (2006) discuss the utilization of read-alouds for opportunities to promote the development thought and language. Wiseman (2011) st that "The interactive read-alouds created a sp where meaning was constructed through dialo and classroom interaction, providing an opp tunity for children to respond to literature i way that builds on their strengths and exte their knowledge" (p. 431). Like read-alou language walls work well during guided re ing time as the teacher can pause for discou once again and highlight the discussion wit language wall. When children do work and sc problems with partners or independently at l guage and literacy centers, the work can m from small groups into a larger discussion at language wall. Language walls are a collaborat inquiry process that evolves between the child and the teacher. Forman and Cazden (1985), exploring Vygotskian perspectives, discuss collaborative nature of educational tasks:

> *Exposure to this form of social regulation can enable children to master difficult problems together before they are capable of solving them alone. More importantly, experience with social forms of regulation can provide children with just the tools they need to solve problems on their own.*

This form of collaboration can take place in ea of the tenets of balanced literacy and evolve in language walls. When instruction evolves in language walls, teachers have the opportun for optimal formative assessment possibiliti Teachers can informally observe students a collect important data and information wh providing feedback to the students. Furth they can help students self-monitor their lear ing during the process of language wall exp riences (Policastro, 2015). Table 1 shows ea tenet of balanced literacy and how a langua wall can be managed.

Paramount to student success is deliberat re-examining best practices in literacy instru tion with a powerful new lens and shifti

Table 1. Tenets of Balanced Literacy and Language Walls

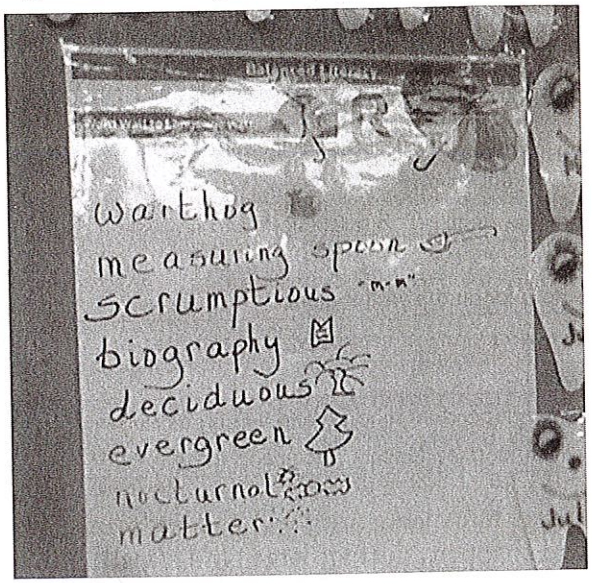
Read-Alouds	• Language walls evolve from the collaborative inquiry discussions from the information in the text; words, pictures, images, graphics, ideas, and concepts can all be constructed and displayed. • Language walls can begin before, during, and after the read-aloud selection, and children can contribute at each stage.
Guided Reading	• Language walls evolve from the small group discussions and instruction during the reading lesson. • Children and teacher create a language wall together.
Language and Literacy Centers	• Language walls evolve from work done at centers which generate conversations, debates, etc.
Independent Reading and Writing	• Language walls evolve from independent reading and writing as students make contributions to the wall, and the teacher documents these.

awareness to language development which, from the examples, incorporates language as action, and language and learning as social cognition and discourse. The term *discourse* is inferred prominently in the academic language portion of the CCSS instructional shifts. For example, "students engage in rich and rigorous evidence based conversations about text" (EngageNY, 2015). It is these evidence-based conversations that are all about discourse. Gee (2001) defines "discourses" (p. 716) as the ways of combining and coordinating words, deeds, thoughts, values, bodies, objects, tools, technologies, and other people so as to enact and recognize specific socially situated identities and activities. Classroom discourse typically refers to the language that students and teachers use to communicate with each other, including talking, discussions, conversations, and debates. Although this is a complex term to understand and put into classroom use, Rudell and Unrau (2004) state that classroom discourse is about creating an abundance of oral texts that the students and the teacher interpret. This interpretation of how to comprehend the message, the source of the message, and the truth or correctness of the message is central to classroom discourse.

These forms of discourse take on many different formats within the classroom setting and happen during large and small group instruction along with students working in pairs and are paramount to all classroom conversations. Cazden (1988) states that classroom discourse is about interindividual communication which affects the unobservable thought processes of participants and what students learn. Language walls provide the perfect situated context for discourse. As both large and small group discussions grow and evolve, they can move to the documentation of words, concepts, phrases, images, pictures, and more.

In Figure 3, the classroom teacher used the word wall to help the Kindergarten class see new words and have a discussion that includes what they look like through drawings alongside of the words displayed. Discourse now becomes observable and can be documented with a language wall. Boyd and Smyntek-Gworek (2012) discuss how teaching and learning cannot be scripted and how teacher talk shapes student language, reasoning, and critical thinking skills. Moreover, they emphasize how this happens during instruction as the teacher makes thoughtful decisions about how the content is delivered to have the most impact on student learning. Through language walls, classroom discourse evolves and is facilitated by the teacher who makes the moment by moment decisions on how to proceed and

Figure 3. Kindergarten Language Wall



guide the language learning. More importantly, unlike a word wall, children can contribute to the language wall with words, phrases, pictures, graphic organizers, and more.

One example of the children contributing to the language wall is seen in Figure 4 for which the purpose of the lesson was on figurative language, and each child contributed an example of figurative language. The flexibility within a language wall allows for the "action" of the figurative language to come alive with meaning as the children illustrated the notions behind onomatopoeia. Embedded within these rich conversations are the socially situated identities of classroom communities. Visiting a classroom recently, the teacher had a word wall that had expanded to a language wall about a theme from "around the world" (Figure 5). This language wall evolved from the children doing their own research with books about a culture and that culture's traditions. The language wall was the culmination of their "found" information from their research. This activity was completely student driven, and the students did this activity as part of their independent reading and writing time. You can see that it begins with the word "Wok: Chinese dish," and there is a drawing which captures the wok. When language walls are in process, they easily invite limitless opportunities for responses, often taking the discussion to a new path or different than anticipated level of thought as each entry in this example is unique and different from the others.

Figure 4. Figurative Language Wall

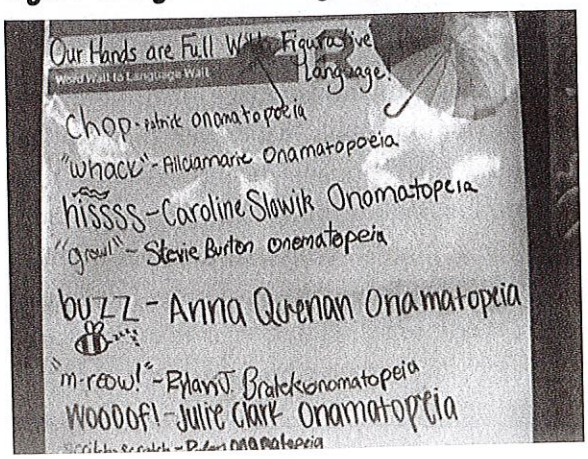
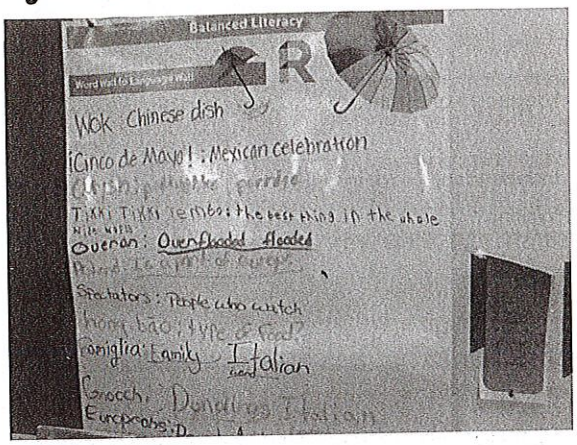


Figure 5. "Around the Word" Language Wall

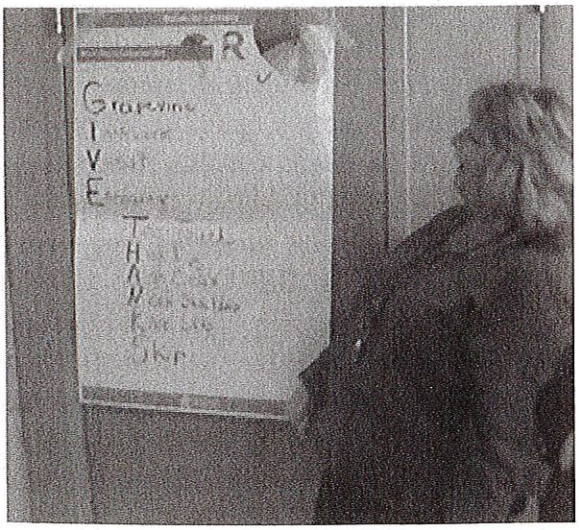


Creating Classroom Spaces for Language Walls

Language walls are ongoing and can evolve on a daily basis. There are many ways that the language walls can be created. Dry-erase boards and posters work well and allow for a tremendous amount of language to transpire during the course of a day. The teacher can decide how long the language wall will remain in the classroom. With dry-erase boards, the wall can

change and grow instantly depending on the purpose of the lesson. Language walls help to support the purpose or target of the lesson as the teacher can constantly redirect the children to the language wall and the instruction that is purpose driven. In addition to the dry-erase format, bulletin boards, walls, and hallways all provide space on which the language wall can be created. Figure 6 displays a language wall that the physical education teacher created for her class. Teachers who have transitioned from word walls to language walls are provided with added flexibility in teaching a lesson. The language and discourse grows and evolves within the lesson, forever changing and transitioning into the next discourse study. Language walls are now seen in physical education (PE), art, music, and math classes, with each of the content areas creating language walls that work best within their discipline.

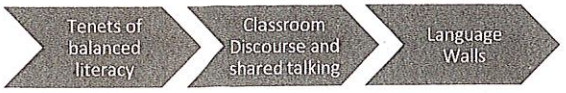
Figure 6. Physical Education Language Wall



Conclusion

In a balanced literacy classroom where read-alouds, guided reading, language and literacy centers, and independent reading and writing are part of the literacy routine, moving from word walls to language walls is a natural evolution (Figure 7). Language walls provide the material for rich dialogue, conversations, and

Figure 7. Evolution of a Language Wall



interactions. Through language walls, ideas, concepts, and notions can be communicated in more than just words to include pictures, diagrams, graphics, phrases, thoughts, and more. Language walls are the perfect addition to all classrooms and content areas. Classrooms can be transformed into rich spaces where language is shared, documented, and displayed for all to see.

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