

## CHAPTER TWO: THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE AND STORY

This chapter addresses the differences in language and story that are found between social classes, especially in the realms of language registers, discourse patterns, and story structure.

Every language has five registers, which are types or levels of language traditionally used in different situations (Joos, 1967). These five registers are: frozen, formal, consultative, casual, and intimate. Each register is of decreasing formality and its usage depends largely on the relationship between the two participants in any conversation. Joos also found that there are social rules about the changing of register within a single conversation: to go one register down remains socially acceptable, while dropping two or more registers is considered socially offensive. This can impact students in poverty in many ways. Usually these children do not have access to the formal register of their language, as it is not spoken at home, and often they are even unable to use this formal register. Unfortunately, standardized tests and job interviews are conducted in the formal register, which puts those in poverty at a great disadvantage. Additionally, since these students often converse casually, they frequently make use of non-verbal signals or assists that help assign meaning to the language. Thus, when attempting to express themselves in writing, students can become lost without the non-verbal strategies of communication on which they have come to rely.

Between these registers, one also finds differences in discourse patterns. There are two meanings of discourse which must be considered. The first refers to the manner in which information is organized. In the formal register, one usually gets straight to the point. In the casual register, however, it is common to find patterns that go around the point before returning to it. This means that those without access to the formal register are often hard to follow and frustrating in conversation to those more accustomed to the formal register. This can have ramifications in areas like the conversations in parent-teacher conferences and student writing.

Another meaning of discourse is attached to the differences between primary and secondary discourse, which are the language and individual first acquired and the language of the larger society that must be used in order to function, respectively. Teachers must recognize this disconnect and try to understand it, as students may not perform as well if they attend a school conducted in a language other than their primary discourse. They must essentially translate between one pattern or discourse and another. This complication requires that teachers actually teach the formal register and its patterns of discourse to the students who have not yet mastered it. It is not simply enough to expect that they will acquire the language through exposure, as true language acquisition requires a significant relationship between the learner and the modeler.

Discourse patterns are also coupled with story structure to produce an oral tradition that is quite different for those living in poverty. In the formal register, a story proceeds from beginning to end in a coherent, chronological fashion and usually has an organized plot. However, the story told in the casual register begins with the part of the story carrying the greatest emotional impact. The story is then told in vignettes separated by bursts of audience participation and often ends with a comment on the protagonist and his or her values. Characterization plays a vital role in this kind of story-telling. Cognitive studies find that this structure also applies to the storage of memories.

Dr. Payne gives many strategies for working with students who are not familiar with the formal register, which include explicit translation from one register to another, illustration of organization, concept development, direct teaching of formal register and its discourse patterns and the teaching of the implications of using different types of language.