We all know the excitement we experience just after we finish a really good book and can’t wait to share it with someone. That is how I felt after reading the new book, *Cultivating Knowledge, Building Language*, by Nonie K. Lesaux and Julie Russ Harris. They are both at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Lesaux is a professor and director of the Language Diversity and Literacy Development Research Group and her collaborator, Harris, is the manager. That group has been conducting research in large urban districts on increasing opportunities to learn for students from diverse linguistic, cultural, and economic backgrounds. The subheading of their book is *Literacy Instruction for English Learners in the Elementary School*. The quote that they shared on the back of the book clearly states the purpose of their work: “Unless we support educators to design instruction to match the demographics of today’s students, as the EL [English learner] population continues to grow and to grow up, so too will the number of students experiencing difficulties.”

This book, published by Heinemann, is part of The Research-Informed Classroom series edited by Nell K. Duke. In her introductory message, Duke says that the authors call for building the curriculum for English learners around content-rich big ideas. Duke goes on to say, “many practices described in this book, while particularly important and well-suited for English learners, can be beneficial for monolingual English speakers as well” (p. x). The key focus here is strong practices for language development, an essential understanding for teachers across all content areas.

The title of the opening chapter, “What We Know About Reading Development Among English Learners,” captures the concept that reading and language development are closely interrelated. This immediately led me to think about what Marie Clay says about language development and literacy learning in *Change Over Time* (2001):

> If we harness the established power of children’s oral language to literacy learning from the beginning, so that literacy knowledge and oral language processing power move forward together, linked and patterned from the start, that will surely be more powerful. (p. 95)

The chapter does an outstanding job of contrasting the English learners’ code-based skills development with their meaning-based skills development. The authors review the research from August, Shanahan, Lesaux and others supporting the point that “typically developing ELs perform comparably to their monolingual English-speaking peers on measures of phonological processing skills … and research even suggests that ELs may outperform monolingual learners on measure of rapid naming speed and phonological awareness” (pp. 9–10). However, a wide gap occurs in meaning-based skill development.

Their definition of oral language broadens the field and sets the purpose for the work. The definition is presented in a diagram on page 16 and unpacked in chapter 2. It includes phonological skills, syntax, morphological skills, pragmatics, and semantics or vocabulary. However, while phonological skills—defined as an awareness of sound such as syllables and rhymes—are part of the broad oral language definition, Lesaux and Harris clearly argue the perspective that phonological skills do not present lasting sources of difficulty for ELs. They go on to say that second language acquisition is by nature an uneven developmental process. They say, “ELs’ facility with the different components of oral language typically varies at any given time point, and it is common for ELs to be stronger in some dimensions than others” (p. 17).

They spend a great deal of the first part of the book defining and expanding academic language, relating but distinguishing it from oral language. In their definition of academic language they include syntax, mor-
What is essential to understand is the connection they explain between academic language and reading comprehension. Using *A House for Hermit Crab* by Eric Carle as one of many text examples, they carefully unpack the definition in a section titled “Academic Language in Action.” Because they explain academic language from beginning book levels up through the grades, and then go on to indicate implications for design of literacy instruction, I found that discussion compelling and most relevant for teachers of all ages. This is no longer “a learn to read then read to learn” perspective, but clearly about integrated processes from the beginning.

Academic language is, therefore, a contributor to this learning from the earliest interactions in the read-aloud to independent reading; it is part of understanding what needs to be part of interventions as well. However, academic language is not a stand-alone instructional component, but clearly integrated into making meaning in the context of reading continuous text.

Home language doesn’t easily lend itself to the language used in text; this is true for all languages. We demand an academic register that is very different than we use every day, so need to impact language from print during reading. Most students have a fairly well developed day-to-day conversational language, but when they read independently and have to learn from text, there is a gap. This again led me to think about Clay’s work:

> Change in grammar takes time, and I doubt if we know why.  
> The child reads easy grammars well, reads more, and has more exposure to alternative ways of varying the construction of sentences. Talking and writing alone may not introduce enough exposure to literary variations of language use. (2004, p. 3)

The concept of *deep learning* is presented in the literature in the late 90s from the works of several different authors. Lesaux and Harris refer to a number of those resources as they explain making sense of depth versus breadth, all the time keeping academic language in focus. While they reference the Common Core Standards, their points focus more on the English learner perspective and acquiring academic language.

Over half of the book is devoted to detailed ideas for lesson planning to help teachers learn how to design lessons that both build knowledge and develop language. The authors provide a range of examples from planning knowledge-building cycles to protocols to in-depth discussion of vocabulary development. It is a marvelous resource, solidly built on theory and field-based research.

In the last chapter, Lesaux and Harris suggest a design for what they term *language production projects*. They identify five ways that these projects extend learning: written language, oral language, reading comprehension skills, context area knowledge, and academic motivation.

While focused on English learners in the elementary school, there is so much that teachers of all students at a wide range of age and experience levels will find useful. Reading Recovery teachers will find very helpful foundational information in this solidly researched book.

### References


### Children’s Book Cited