Words That Matter: A Study of the Situated Word Consciousness of Postsecondary Reading Students

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ABSTRACT

Vocabulary instruction in transitional reading classrooms is often approached from a deficit perspective, but sociocultural theory and the construct of word consciousness offer an opportunity to more accurately identify and utilize the vocabulary knowledge of students. The purpose of this study was to investigate the word consciousness of two former transitional reading students and to offer a reflective analysis of how to revalue students' existing vocabulary knowledge and integrate it into postsecondary literacy classrooms to make vocabulary instruction more effective. Ethnographic methods were used to consider the role that word consciousness played in an on-campus social event for two participants. Linguistic analysis, including critical discourse analysis, revealed that students used a situated form of word consciousness to both consciously and subconsciously attend to word choice and to achieve social aims. This paper offers concrete suggestions to teachers and researchers who wish to integrate sociocultural theory into the discussion on the best pedagogical approaches to vocabulary development in transitional reading classrooms.

It's not just about the words. You've got to change…your whole self to go with them. I think that's what all of us are trying to figure out—whether it's worth it.

> —*Jennifer, First Year Student*

As a transitional, or developmental, reading teacher in a large, urban community college, I often work with students who, like Jennifer, struggle with taking on the literate identities associated with being a college-level learner. In theory, open access institutions aim to democratize higher education by making college accessible to all students. In practice, however, many open access institutions utilize placement practices which can reinforce and institutionalize the labeling of students. Most of my students, for instance, are required to take transitional coursework before they can begin their college-level work. This requirement, tied to their performance on the reading portion of the Accuplacer Placement Test (College Board, n.d.), rests on the questionable assumption that literacy is an objective, quantifiable, and singular construct, a perspective that has persisted in spite of research that demonstrates that such placement tests have a low predictive value (Scott-Clayton, 2012). Beyond that, these test scores also have a tendency to support inaccurate judgments about students and their literacy knowledge, judgments that are often internalized by the students themselves.

These assumptions about literacy and the reliability of standardized placement tests align with a deficit model of instruction and thus have far-reaching implications for classroom practice. Many transitional college reading classrooms propose to "remedy" students' literacy deficits through explicit and typically decontextualized skill instruction like

vocabulary instruction, the focus of this article. This type of remedial instruction is highly problematic, both because it minimizes the literacy knowledge of transitional learners and because isolated skill instruction generally does not transfer to new contexts (Gersten, Fuchs, Williams & Baker, 2001). In fact, research suggests that the most beneficial form of reading strategy instruction is that which is "more attuned to particular contexts, purposes and texts" (Kucan & Beck, 1997, p. 271), such as college and career-based literacies.

The counter-argument to the deficit model—that literacy learning is a complex and socially contextualized practice—is not only affirmed by Jennifer's remark above, but is also a major tenet of the sociocultural model of literacy. In the sociocultural tradition, acts of literacy take on specific meanings within the social communities in which they occur. A key theorist in this tradition is Gee, who used the term "Discourse" with a capital "D" to describe how people integrate "ways of talking, listening, writing, reading, acting, interacting, believing, valuing, and feeling (and using various objects, symbols, images, tools, and technologies) in the service of enacting meaningful socially situated identities and activities" (2001, p. 719). According to sociocultural theory, one significant weakness of placement tests is that they overlook the inherently social dimensions of literacy learning.

The promise of sociocultural theory for better understanding the contextualized nature of literacy learning is perhaps particularly evident in transitional reading classrooms. To cite an example, two of my former students, Monica and Mike (pseudonyms), were identified through standardized testing as demonstrating middle-school reading levels. In class, however, both students were able to effectively and critically make meaning from a range of texts, especially when they were engaged with the material or found it relevant to their college study or future careers. In light of their classroom successes, Monica and Mike found it difficult to see the value in some of the mandatory assessments they were required to pass, such as departmentally imposed

vocabulary tests, where students had to score 70% or higher in order to exit the course.

To better understand Monica and Mike's lack of success with placement testing and their disengagement with traditional vocabulary instruction, I turned to one aspect of vocabulary learning that draws on the tenets of sociocultural theory. Graves (2006) has identified four elements of an effective vocabulary curriculum: (1) wide reading, (2) generative word-learning strategies such as structural roots and context clues, (3) teaching individual words, and (4) word consciousness. These four components have been shown to work in tandem to support the vocabulary development of readers. Several of these elements—including strategy instruction on structural roots, context clues, and teaching individual words—are featured prominently in college transitional reading classrooms and textbooks. However, *word consciousness*, which is viewed as playing a critical role in guiding and augmenting the other three components of vocabulary growth (Graves, 2006; Scott, 2005), is as yet undertheorized, especially in transitional college reading classrooms.

Word consciousness is defined as a heightened awareness and positive disposition towards word learning that includes "various aspects of words—their meanings, their histories, relationships with other words, word parts, and most important, the way writers (and speakers) use words effectively to communicate" (Nagy, 2005, p. 30). This particular aspect of vocabulary learning is important because it highlights the centrality of student engagement and motivation when acquiring new words.

While it may be tempting to view vocabulary learning as a neutral, decontextualized process, sociocultural theories remind us that language is always connected to particular social groups and identities. Hence, students are more likely to value and attend to language, or exhibit word consciousness, when it serves a social purpose. For example, words can help students to construct identities in social contexts, such as in college classrooms, in the workplace, or in peer groups. Social groups

also play a role in establishing and negotiating the kinds of words that are valued within these social contexts.

The importance of tapping into the social motivations underpinning vocabulary learning can be illustrated through a concrete example taken from our transitional reading classroom. One vocabulary lesson from our reading textbook that Monica and Mike especially disliked included a series of words that shared the root of "voc, vok" meaning "to call." One word, vociferous or "making a noisy outcry" was quickly adopted by these two students and used whenever the other students were being too noisy through comments such as: "Hey, stop being so vociferous!" Another word, however, "avocation" meaning "a hobby or second calling" was not embraced by either student. Social motivations were at work when Monica and Mike chose to value "vociferous" and reject "avocation." Monica and Mike had a positive experience with the word "vociferous" in a meaningful social context and felt that the word helped them to effectively communicate with their classmates, one aspect of word consciousness (Nagy, 2005).

On the subsequent test over this group of words, Monica and Mike successfully answered the question about "vociferous" but did not earn an overall passing score on the test because they did not have a strong social motivation for learning the other words assessed on the test. Like many publisher-created vocabulary assessments, this test featured a range of question types such as fill-in-the blank questions and synonym/antonym questions. In studying for this test, Monica and Mike memorized the textbook-provided definitions for the words featured in the lesson for the sole purpose of passing the test because they were not convinced that the words served any other meaningful purpose. Their pragmatic approach to word study would have been better suited to a multiple-choice test that asked them to select a definition for each word. This particular vocabulary assessment, however, tapped into a different form of word knowledge.

Vocabulary scholars (Nagy & Scott, 2000) posit that word knowledge develops incrementally and includes many different forms of knowledge. Word knowledge can include the various meanings of a word, the relationship between the word and other words, and connotations associated with a word. To illustrate Nagy and Scott's theory, students might be successful with a multiple-choice test question that asks them to identify a definition of a word, but may not be successful with a test question that asks them to match a word with a synonym. These questions assess qualitatively different forms of word knowledge.

In order to pass the vocabulary test described above, then, Monica and Mike would need to successfully answer fill-in-the-blank and synonym/antonym questions that require a deep knowledge of a word like "avocation." Mastering these kinds of test questions requires students to do much more than memorize definitions; they must understand the meanings of new words in complex ways. Students must notice similarities and differences between words and connect known words to unknown words. For instance, the test requires students to identify the relationship between "vocation" and "avocation." Given the complexity of such vocabulary assessments, it is clear that students must actively construct a deep understanding of these words in order to be successful with such assessments. As informative as Nagy and Scott's (2000) model might be for clarifying the nature of vocabulary learning, it does little to elucidate more effective ways to work with students' own social motivations.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the word consciousness of two former transitional reading students and to offer a reflective analysis of how to revalue students' existing vocabulary knowledge and integrate it into postsecondary literacy classrooms to make vocabulary instruction more effective. I used ethnographic methods including interviews, field notes, observation, and audio recording to gain insight from the events outside of class where Mike and Monica naturally engaged in activities related to developing their word consciousness. This "situated" form of word consciousness included dimensions such as thinking about the connections between words,

talking about the history of words, and choosing words to effectively communicate in a given context. The study's observational data were triangulated with a written survey and two interviews where the participants were asked to discuss their word-learning motivations.

These data were collected in order to propose a theoretical model of word consciousness at the postsecondary level. This theoretical model offers an account of how word consciousness and other vocabulary learning processes are driven by the social aims of transitional readers. This model could be used by college reading teachers who wish to design a vocabulary curriculum that is more compatible with the social motivations of transitional students.

This study was guided by the following research questions:

1) What vocabulary words do postsecondary students deem relevant to their lives?
2) What linguistic tools do postsecondary literacy students utilize in their efforts to acquire and retain new vocabulary words?

Too often, college students placed into transitional reading courses have hovered over the artificial border between the words that serve them well in their social lives and the words that construe academic discourse. By bringing sociocultural theory to college-level vocabulary instruction, transitional reading teachers can invigorate vocabulary research with new insights about the social motivations that drive word learning. This move, coupled with an emphasis on a critical awareness of academic language, holds potential for enabling students to expand their linguistic resources to accommodate their ever-expanding social worlds.

Relevant Literature and Conceptual Framework

Learning through Language

Effective vocabulary instruction plays a critical but often unrecognized role in the success of college students. Language is a powerful mediator in the learning process or a "process by which experience becomes knowledge" (Halliday, 1993, p. 94).

Vocabulary knowledge, in particular, has been shown to impact students' ability to extract meaning that is conveyed through print (Scarborough, 1998). Since textbooks are typically used either to present or to supplement college instruction, mastery of course content is partially contingent on strong reading comprehension (Farley & Elmore, 1992; Martino & Hoffman, 2002). As a result, vocabulary-related course objectives are a common staple in transitional reading classrooms.

For example, specialized vocabulary is used to access conceptual frameworks that are conveyed through language in the content areas. From the perspective of linguists, scientific or academic language has evolved to carry out the specific cognitive demands required by a discipline (Halliday, 1993). While this may be true, it also bears mention that there is a fine line between language choices that are functional in nature and those that are simply more privileged or more conventional. The distinction between function and convention is significant because students have differential access to the language variations encountered in academic institutions and, more significantly, to the knowledge conveyed through this language. In particular, students who are cultural or ethnic minorities or students who are economically disadvantaged often have vocabularies that differ from those of students more closely aligned with the dominant culture (Heath, 1983).

As Heath's (1983) work with children growing up in two working-class communities indicated, language variations found within less economically advantaged communities are complex and well suited to the needs of specific social contexts. Nevertheless, these differences have been pathologized through constructs like the "vocabulary gap" based on Hart & Risley's (1995) immensely popular study that demonstrated quantitative and qualitative differences in the language production of young children based on economic class status. A number of assumptions are implicit in the vocabulary gap construct, including the idea that language features prominent in the

dominant culture are ideal, superior, and thus the natural choice for delivering course content. In an effort to bridge this perceived gap, some researchers and educators have turned to deficit models of language learning that prescribe remediation as a solution, often through decontextualized, skill-based language activities (Halliday, 1993). However well-intentioned, this kind of logic suggests that the language experiences of minority and working class students are inferior and masks the language resources that all students bring into the classroom (Achugar, Schleppegrell, & Orteiza, 2007; Halliday, 1995). Transitional college learners seem particularly vulnerable to the consequences of such deficit thinking (Maloney, 2003). In light of the inadequacy of deficit models, new perspectives on the extant language resources of students are needed.

Honoring Their Language Legacies

A current trend in literacy education is to replace rigid conceptualizations of the language boundaries between home and school with a more fluid approach to help students navigate between social worlds (Lu, 1990; Orellana, 2001). In entering these new Discourses or social spaces, students can exhibit *agency* through "the strategic making and remaking of selves" (Moje & Lewis, 2007, p. 18). By attending appropriately to agency, educators can both validate the extant language resources of students and expand these resources by engaging them in new discursive practices. Building on Fairclough's (1992) model of *interdiscursivity,* Wenger (1999) proposed that the boundaries between intersecting discourses offer fertile ground for learning and for constructing identities. According to these theories, in order to better support students like Monica and Mike, a starting place is to gather data on how they use word knowledge in their daily lives and then help them to transfer this knowledge to academic settings.

Word consciousness, in particular, is a form of vocabulary knowledge that all students possess and, as such, can be leveraged to transfer to the tasks associated with academic literacy learning. As Halliday (1994) explained,

language development tends to become more specialized and complex with exposure to a particular discourse, which suggests that students will develop word consciousness through sustained engagement with a social group. Traditionally, assessments of vocabulary knowledge have privileged the language distinctions associated with academic language over those found in other social contexts. This assessment bias is unhelpful and reinforces a deficit model of vocabulary knowledge. Three examples of the privileged language distinctions that often appear on standardized assessments include valuing less common synonyms (such as "query" rather than "asks"), words with Greek or Latin origins (such as "adipose" or "dexterity"), and taxonomies associated with academic disciplines (such as "vertebrates" and "invertebrates" in biology).

To be sure, language distinctions exist in all social contexts. For instance, a basketball player might make distinctions between forms of dribbling through language, such as a "crossover dribble" as opposed to a "change of pace dribble," a highly nuanced distinction that likely holds little relevance to the average person's word knowledge. By more closely attending to these distinctions in language use, however, literacy teachers and researchers can gain a better understanding of the word knowledge of students. Language distinctions are a key component of word consciousness (Nagy, 2005) and by observing them as situated in meaningful social contexts, transitional reading teachers and literacy researchers can also gather data about the social purposes they serve, such as the desire to enact an identity or build a relationship.

A sociocultural approach to vocabulary learning aligns with an integrated approach to vocabulary instruction that cultivates word consciousness. Nevertheless, little data is available about the degree to which college students already use these components to move within and between their social worlds. Without this critical data, transitional reading teachers are unable to identify the *border practices* that unite the language tasks of college study with the language tasks found in the home,

workplace, and community (Ivanic et al., 2009). However, in making space for these resources in our classrooms, transitional reading teachers can shift their focus from remediation to an affirmation of our students' identities and their contributions to academic discourse. In support of this endeavor, this article explores the linguistic tools that two transitional reading students used to enact identities, create meaning, and realize social aims in two situated sites of learning (Kress, 2011). These findings are interpreted through the lens of sociocultural theory using critical discourse analysis tools.

Methods

Research Site and Participants
Midland Community College.

This study took place at Midland Community College (pseudonym), a large, urban Midwestern community college. I teach students in the two-course transitional reading series at this college. The participants were randomly selected from a pool of former transitional reading students. Demographically, the students in the two courses represent a variety of ages, races, and temperaments, but have a shared culture of working class, first-generation college students who tested into DEV 064, the first of the two-course transitional reading sequence. While four participants originally took part in this study, only two participants are featured in this research report. These participants were selected, in particular, because their experiences offer rich insights on the idea of word consciousness and how alternate approaches to vocabulary instruction can benefit transitional college learners.

Participants.
Mike. At the time of the study, Mike was a nineteen-year-old, African American, first-year college student from an urban location in southwestern Ohio. In class, Mike was an outgoing, verbose, charismatic, and humorous young man. His searing insights about social institutions and hegemonic structures made him well-suited for the Criminal Justice Program in which he was enrolled. The social event where Mike's word knowledge was under observation was part of a Service Learning project where he read to preschoolers on campus. Mike selected this social event because he enjoyed interacting with the children and felt that the children would be more likely to attend college if they had a positive experience with a college student.

Monica. At the time of the study, Monica was an eighteen-year old, African American, first-year college student who lived in an urban location in southwestern Ohio. Monica easily filled the role of a leader in her large extended family, in classroom settings, and in the Bible study she formed on campus. The social event where Monica's word knowledge was under observation was her participation in her Bible study group. Monica selected this social event because she felt at ease with her friends and valued the time spent exploring spiritual topics with them.

Research Design and Data Sources

The research design for this study was qualitative and employed a case study approach. The research methodology was influenced by the work of ethnographic microanalysts (Erikson, 2009), researchers who analyze each word of a text or transcript rather than just identifying broad themes that emerge from the data. This fine-grained analytical method was necessary to garner detailed information about the participants' word knowledge. In order to identify the vocabulary words that these students deemed relevant to their lives, critical discourse analysis was used to explore the relationship between individual word choices and the students' social aims. Researchers from the critical discourse analysis tradition (Gee, 2011; Rogers, 2011) are interested in looking at the relationship between specific word choices and society and, as such, use different methodologies based on the research questions and the purpose of the study (Rogers, 2011).

A variety of data sources were gathered for each participant over the course of an eleven-week quarter, including a pre-observation survey, observations conducted in naturalistic

settings, field notes, transcribed audio recordings, post-observation interviews, and member checking. It is outside the scope of this research report to address the entire pool of data; instead, this report will narrow the focus to the analysis and reflection data gathered from the observations of the study's focal participants, Monica and Mike.

Data Analysis

The unit of analysis for this research—or the person or thing that is being studied—was one representative social event for each participant. In Mike's case, the social event was reading to preschoolers on campus. In Monica's case, the social event was an on-campus Bible study. These social events were chosen because the two participants considered them to be the most meaningful activities they participated in on campus. By limiting the scope to these two social events, it is possible to offer rich detail about the complex social dimensions underpinning vocabulary learning as situated in a meaningful activity.

In analyzing the linguistic data from this study, I used two critical discourse analysis techniques to better understand the students' social aims and to identify any shifts in their language that might indicate a new social aim. In order to answer my first research question about the word-learning motivation of postsecondary transitional students, I turned to Gee's (2011) "seven building tasks of language": *significance, activities, identities, relationships, politics, connections, sign systems, and knowledge* (see Appendix A). I examined these seven building tasks for evidence of the students' social aims and to theorize about why they might appropriate, reject, or modify new vocabulary. I blended this technique with Lewis and Ketter's (2011) foundational work on the impact of interdiscursivity on social learning. Lewis and Ketter theorized that interactions between discourses play a pivotal role in identity work and in the transformation of social spaces. Hence, I was particularly attuned to any shift in the participants' linguistic behavior that might indicate interdiscursivity or

a moment where discourses interact, overlap, blend, or even compete.

To answer my second question about the linguistic tools that postsecondary literacy students utilize in their efforts to acquire and retain new vocabulary words, I used typological analysis (Hatch, 2002), a form of coding in which themes emerge from data-driven categories. Data were collected under several typologies, including techniques for learning new words and artifacts, such as dictionary apps, that students used to learn new words. For the purpose of this article, however, the typology under consideration is word consciousness, as it was particularly prominent in these social events and thus most relevant to this conversation. Typological analysis was helpful in highlighting evidence of the participants' situated word consciousness, like the use of context clues, structural analysis, or matching word choice to context to support their social aims (Nagy & Scott, 2000).

Findings and Discussion

The data analysis revealed that these two students exhibited an acute sense of word consciousness and were found to both consciously and subconsciously attend to word choice to accomplish several of Gee's (2011) building tasks of language. In doing so, the participants were found to have utilized a number of linguistic tools, such as context clues, matching word choices to contexts, word relationships, structural analysis and etymology, visual images, and verbal prompts for clarification to support their social motivations. These linguistic tools were used to help support the participants' social aims in the two representative social events.

In order to explore how the two participants demonstrated word consciousness, employed linguistic tools, and achieved several building tasks of language, a description of both Mike and Monica's social events is presented below. Each social event will be used to highlight the building tasks of language (Gee, 2011) that were most prominently featured in each participant's observation. In addition,

detailed information about the forms of word consciousness that can be found in the observation will be offered. Finally, the participants' reflections from the post-observation interviews will be shared to offer their perspectives on the social dimensions of language learning.

Mike: Drawing lines with language

Mike's chosen social event was reading to a group of preschoolers as part of a Service Learning project. Mike valued this act of service to the college and the Midland community, particularly because many of the children were not economically advantaged and did not have parents who attended college. Consequently, Mike wanted the students to enjoy their time with him and have a positive impression of college.

In the examples to follow, Mike used three of Gee's (2011) seven building tasks: connections, significance, and politics. Appendix A offers a detailed guide of the critical discourse analysis procedures. Relevant portions of this table will be integrated into the discussion of the findings.

Connections. One building task Mike often utilized during this social event was

connections, which occurs when speakers connect or disconnect things through language. According to Gee's (2011) framework, the guiding question for locating connections in the data is: *How are words used to connect, disconnect, or ignore connections between things?* This question can be answered by attending to discursive markers that show conjunctive relationships, either causal (e.g., because, as a result), temporal (e.g., first, next, last), additive (e.g., like, also) or adversative (e.g., unlike, in contrast).

Mike's initial social aim was to engage the students, so he bridged connections between the storybook discourse and the assumed life experiences of the preschoolers. This bridging often manifested itself through frequent repetition of the word "like," particularly toward the end of the dialogue. In order to achieve the aim of connecting these preschoolers to the book, Mike used a specific form of word consciousness or an expansive semantic network that is needed to reword sophisticated language for this target audience.

In Sample Text A, Mike employed the language building task of connections by selecting the word "like" to create links

Sample Text A

Speaker	Transcript	Building Task (see Appendix A)	Form of Word Consciousness
Mike	*Then just hit submerge!* Submerge? What's that car going to do?	*Significance* (repetition and questioning strategies)	Matching word to context (understands submerge is less familiar to preschoolers).
Joe	Go underwater!		
Alaina	Go…it's going to…it will go to the other side.		
Mike	No….(*reconsidering*) what?		
Alaina	It's going to merge to the side.		
Mike	Oh, like a car?	*Connections* ("merge" and "car" are connected)	
Alaina	Yes.		
Mike	He's not merging. He's *sub*merging. Like a submarine. Like a sub. Like a boat that can go underwater.	*Connections* (connections between "merge" and "submerge") *Connections* ("like a submarine," "like a sub," "like a boat that can go underwater")	Structural Analysis (sub=under) Synonyms/Semantic Relationships Matching Word Choice to Context

between Alaina's comment and driving. At this moment, Mike and Alaina had shared background knowledge about transportation, which Mike built upon on by linking the word "submerge" to a submarine and a boat. Mike also emphasized the structural root "sub" to offer it as an additional meaning-making resource that highlights his understanding of structural analysis, another facet of word consciousness and metalinguistic knowledge.

While this social event was full of instances where Mike attempted to help the children connect to unknown vocabulary words, in other instances he placed distance between the children and particular words or weakened their significance, the next building task that will be explored in this report.

Significance. Gee's (2011) guiding question for the building task significance is: *How are words used to build up or lessen significance for certain things and not others?* Several discursive markers are related to significance. Intensifiers (e.g., especially, very) can be used to build significance, while qualifiers (e.g., somewhat, kind of) can be used to lessen significance. Attitudinal language can also be used to share the speaker's opinions, such as through evaluative language (e.g., good, bad).

In Sample Text B, an abrupt shift in Mike's narrative style marked his move to lessen the significance of the word "catamaran." Unlike the previous words which Mike seemed to have appropriated, the word "catamaran" represented not just story talk but an outside discourse—that of a "rich person." Mike gave only enough information about the word "catamaran" for the students to understand its literal meaning. He used the language task of significance to minimize its importance and to imbue it with a negative connotation. However, it is equally important to understand why Mike minimized the significance of the word "catamaran" for the children, a linguistic action which is related to the building task of politics.

Politics. Gee's (2011) guiding question for the building task of politics is: *How are words used to define what counts as social goods and to distribute them or withhold them from listeners or others?* Several discursive markers are indicative of the building task of politics, but two of the most common markers will be detailed. One type of linguistic marker is using conjunctive

Sample Text B

Speaker	Transcript	Building Task (see Appendix A)	Form of Word Consciousness
Mike	*My car can do something that very few can. The fenders will float like a catamaran!*		
	Now, don't let them talk over your head!	*Relationships* (Mike shifts his role through an exclamatory sentence which marks a command and "them.")	Matches word choice to context (views "catamaran" as an unknown and unnecessary word for preschoolers)
	A "catamaran" is what rich people call a boat.	*Significance* (diminishes significance of "catamaran" by calling it synonym used by "rich people")	Synonyms/Semantic Relationships (catamaran is a type of boat)
		Politics/Sign System (reference to the language ("calls"=*sign system*) of "rich people" *politics*	
	And it's not a catamaran anyway. It's just a boat car.	*Significance* (decreases through "not" and "just")	Nuanced Understanding of Meaning (catamaran is a specific type of boat different from the one in the text; used picture clues to make this judgment)

relationships or being verbs (e.g., is, am, are) to connect individuals, groups, or institutions with social goods. Conjunctive relationships can be causal (e.g., because), temporal (e.g., first, next, last), additive (e.g., also, like) or adversative (e.g., whereas). For instance, in the sentence, "Girls are hardworking whereas boys are lazy," the being verb "are" is used to offer the social good of "hardworking" to girls and to withhold it from boys. Similarly, "whereas" is used to emphasize their differences. Other possible linguistic markers include intensifiers (e.g., very, extremely) and qualifiers (e.g., barely, hardly) to either distribute or withhold social goods. For instance, a person can be described as "very pretty" or "hardly attractive" to either extend or withhold the social good of beauty.

The building task of politics is at work when Mike conveyed that the word "catamaran" not only seemed inaccurate but functioned to make those with less wealth feel inferior. He emphasized the politics behind the word "catamaran" and of specialized language globally,

especially when it serves to weaken people's relationships with those who are less privileged.

In the post-observation interview, Mike further elaborated on his stance, as shown in Sample Text C.

A similar trend emerged in the example in Sample Text D, this time with a word provided by one of the children.

A few factors converged to influence Mike's linguistic choices in this example. First, Mike and Alaina did not negotiate a shared discourse as they did in the previous example with the word "submerge." Gee's (2011) language building task of significance seems equally relevant for analyzing this interchange. Mike pointed out, albeit in jest, that such specialized discourse would be more appropriate in the crayon factory workplace because there, he reasoned, it would have a useful function and be comprehensible to the other workers. Given that Mike listed a career as his primary motivator for and source of word learning,

Sample Text C

Mike: I wanted them to know that this was just a boat, just something that they knew about. We don't have to draw a line between boats.

Heather: Is there ever a time when it's appropriate to draw lines with language?

Mike: Uh, with medicine. Details matter when you're talking about medicine.

Sample Text D

Speaker	Transcript	Building Task (see Appendix A)	Form of Word Consciousness
Alaina	My eyes are chartreuse.		
Mike	Chartreuse? Where did you learn that word?		
Alaina	Blue's Clues. Chartreuse was on the show and they had to find the colors that made her and it is the same as my eyes. The exact same.		
Mike	I should have known that Blue had something to do with that. But they named him just plain Blue, not like Magenta or your girl Chartreuse. She needs to get herself a job at the Crayola factory where people will understand them colors.	*Significance* (builds significance for "plain Blue" and decreases significance for "chartreuse" which people may not "understand"	Deliberate word choice related to context ("chartreuse" not appropriate in preschool but in a workplace such as a crayon factory)

this comment highlights his interest in words that have a practical value.

In this social event, Mike used several building tasks including significance, connections, and politics. Mike valued words that were directly connected to college and careers and questioned the utility of words that were simply more prestigious. As a result, Mike also used language to consider the politics behind language.

Mike's interrogation of the relationship between language and power may have served as a way for him to exhibit agency. His use of the building task of politics also contrasts with Monica's use of the building task in the social event that follows. Like Mike, Monica exhibited a heightened sense of word consciousness and used several building tasks of language in her Bible study. However, Monica both relied on different building tasks than Mike and used others, like politics, in qualitatively different ways.

The next section explores the chosen social event of the second participant, Monica, and offers an additional opportunity to investigate the deeply personal nature of word consciousness in the lives of transitional readers.

Monica: Diggin' deep

Monica's selected social event was an on-campus Bible study that she both founded and led for her friends Ja'Nica and Tatiana (pseudonyms). In this social event, Monica relied on the building tasks of identities, activities, and significance. In the post-interview discussion of the social event, she also used the building tasks of politics and sign systems to talk about her experience. During her Bible study, Monica utilized sophisticated, specialized vocabulary as markers for important spiritual concepts to mark her identity as a Christian engaged in the activity of Bible study. Monica and her friend Tatiana disagreed over the intended meaning of a passage and worked through this conflict through the building task of significance. Even more impressively, Monica wove together a number of texts and discourses to craft a deeply intertextual word concept that highlights her enhanced sense of word consciousness.

While many of these building tasks were introduced in the analysis of Mike's focal event, the building tasks of identity and activity have not yet been explored in detail and so are further clarified here.

Identity. The building task of identity was evident throughout Monica's social event. Identities are socially constructed, in part, by the verbal feedback that people offer one another. Unlike in Mike's social event, where he was reading to preschoolers he had just met, Monica's social event took place with close friends. Since Monica enjoyed spending time with her friends and regularly did so, they had more opportunities to offer her feedback about her identity and she might be more invested in their beliefs about her. Therefore, Gee's (2011) guiding questions for this building task are especially relevant. These questions are: *What socially recognizable identity or identities is the speaker trying to enact or get others to recognize? How do the speakers position one another?*

The way people position a speaker can be observed by attending to linguistic markers such as adjectives used in conjunction with "being" verbs (e.g., is, am, are) or nouns such as singer or child, as exemplified in the following sentences, "You are annoying," or "You are a terrific artist." In Monica's case, these questions are of vital importance because she interacted with these friends regularly and thus was more likely to be impacted by their positioning of her.

In a Bible study, the connection between the identity of "Christian" is intertwined with the activity of "leading a Bible study." Hence, it is also important to unpack the building task of activity.

Activity. The building task of activity is identified through Gee's (2011) guiding questions: *What activity or activities is this communication building or enacting or seeking to get others to recognize as being accomplished? What social groups, institutions, or cultures support and norm whatever activities are supported or being enacted?* One way that this building task can be identified is by noting activity-specific vocabulary such as "palette" or "easel" for an artist who is

painting. In Sample Text E, for instance, the building tasks of identity and activity intersected in important ways as Monica negotiated a leadership role within this activity.

In order to create a richly contextualzed account of what it means to be "sanctified," Monica rapidly drew connections between several Bible verses and church sermons. This complex, well-reasoned argument is not unlike those required in college position papers. Beyond that, Monica used the word "sanctified" as a tool to co-build a schema for representing these dense and interconnected life experiences. The specialized lexicon such as "righteousness," "rebuking," "wrath," and "repentance" served as linguistic markers to aid these young women in constructing the identity of born-again Christians who were engaged in the activity of a Bible study.

In this social system, Monica was also proffered the identity of a deeply spiritual, abstract thinker when Tatiana claimed that she

Sample Text E

Speaker	Transcript	Building Task (see Appendix A)	Form of Word Consciousness
Monica	What shocked me was where it says in (Romans) verse 5, "Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance, and patience, not realizing that God's kindness leads you toward repentance?" I could not stop thinking about that verse. That's the problem with me. I think I judge others cause I judge my own self and that does keep me…that keeps me from feeling that kindness and patience. So it ain't just about being hurtful and judgmental to other people. That gets in the way of you feeling your own measure of grace. You got a bitter heart full of judgment and you ain't got no room for nothing else.	*Activities* (activity-specific language: e.g. "repentance")	Deliberate word choice according to context.
Tatiana	Girl, you diggin' deep today. But I don't know about all that. 'Cause you jump down to verse 8 and we got talk about wrath and anger for being evil.	*Identities* (Monica positioned as "diggin' deep")	
Monica	You taking that out of content. If you gonna jump down, you need to jump all the way down to verse 12. You talking 'bout "all who sin apart from the law" so that's not even relevant. Not even. You been sanctified. The law don't apply to you.	*Significance* (minimizes through use of "out of context," "not," "don't")	
Ja'Nica	So why we even looking at this then?		
Monica	"All scripture is God breathed and useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness," 2 Timothy 3:16.	*Significance* (builds through "all," "useful")	Intertextual Connections
Tatiana	She told you.		
Monica	Naw, Pastor John drilled that in. But look. Just because this is to help the Jews understand that you can't brag about carrying out the law better than your brother don't mean you don't have nothing to learn from it. 'Cause when Ja'Nica was talking about the God's kindness I know I sensed the presence of His Spirit. I do know that. We judge others and we judge ourselves and when we stop judging others that's gonna end that. But rest assured—you been sanctified.	*Significance* (significance of "sanctified" built through "I know I sensed the presence of the Holy Spirit," "I do know that," repetition of "we") *Connections* ("stop judging" = "end that")	Deep knowledge of "sanctified" as evidenced from intertextual comparisons such as links between other words.

was "diggin' deep," although, admittedly, this positioning was somewhat diminished by the qualifying temporal addition of "today." The language task of activities underscores the essential role that these social supports played in this social event. Indeed, throughout the extended transcript, Monica's friends appeared to respect her wisdom and prompted her to share her insights with them as identified through their use of cognitive verbs such as "think" ("What do you think this verse is about?"), "know" ("Do you know what he be trying to say?") and "shed light" ("Can you shed light on that for me?").

The positive feedback Monica's friends offered her in the quotations above, combined with Monica's skillful maneuvers with words and language found in Sample Text E, affirm Monica's talents with language. As Monica's former teacher, it is concerning that these

affirmations do not appear to transfer to Monica's overall sense of agency or intelligence. In fact, Monica's self concept changed very little from her pre-observation interview, where she portrayed herself as a young woman without an "especially big vocabulary" and with a "learning disability," to her post-observation interview where she continued with this logic. An excerpt of this interview is shared in Sample Text F so the reader can examine Monica's views in detail.

Monica seemed to understand what goes unvoiced in my line of questioning which is that I am interested in her use of "sanctified" because I find it a legitimate and sophisticated word choice that has important social and spiritual benefits for her. Monica rejected this offer of a different social identity and, to use Gee's parlance, forfeited the "social goods" that go along with them by maintaining that it was

Sample Text F

Speaker	Transcript	Building Task (see Appendix A)	Form of Word Consciousness
Heather	Do you remember talking with the girls about being sanctified?		
Monica	Oh, sure. That's just church talk. I grew up in the church so that's just how we talk. My grandma even says sanctified. It just gets drilled in you…you hear it in the songs and anything you sing sticks with you. I can't honestly say I knew what I was singing about when I was little but it came in handy once I grew up.	*Connections* ("sanctified"="just church talk") *Politics* (connections above serve to deprivilege "sanctified")	Context Clues (association of "sanctified" with contextual origins in church and music) Metacognitive awareness of how "sanctified" was learned.
Heather	Can you tell me more about your comment that even your grandmother knew the word sanctified? Is there a particular reason why this is surprising?		
Monica	Uh…she is just…well she..she's not so educated. And she's from the south.	*Connections* ("sanctified"="south"= "not educated") *Politics/Sign Systems* The connections made above deprivilege southern and church-based language as opposed to "educated"/academic language.	Understanding of relationship between "sanctified"and context (south/church).

"just church talk." Monica also seemed to weaken the significance of her experiences with church and music as forms of literacy, although this is not entirely surprising given the narrow focus of most literacy approaches in current educational climates. Monica also seemed to believe that formal education and geographic location are indicators of an advanced vocabulary. Her words serve as a haunting example of how language can be used to devalue or deprivilege sign systems and/or a particular person's ways of knowing.

The data sources seemed further to converge and support the hypothesis that Monica did not question the institutionalized identity of "learning disabled," at least in academic settings. Monica appeared comfortable shaping and reshaping identities within less hegemonic structures, such as in a supportive social system like the Bible study group, but otherwise seemed to accept the prescribed identity in educational settings where power imbalances prevail. In other words, Monica used language for social aims, such as enacting identities, but did not have a strong sense of agency. Monica's story reminds me of the incredible harm that can come from labels given by authority figures and educational systems that serve to solidify rather than disrupt differential academic performance.

Implications

The study findings reported here provide educators and researchers with an opportunity to reconceptualize the vocabulary needs and strengths of postsecondary literacy students. Unlike elementary students who may be less conscious of the utility and power of individual words, the participants in this study demonstrated a heightened awareness of words and a consistent ability to use them effectively to achieve specific social aims. In particular, Mike and Monica valued words that were relevant to meaningful pursuits, such as career-specific vocabulary for Mike and religious vocabulary for Monica. Indeed, as the sample texts reveal, the students' word consciousness and their social aims generally went hand-in-hand. The findings also hint at the often

subconscious and highly complex role that social aims play in guiding word learning.

For all postsecondary students, the language learning requirements of college coursework can be arduous. This task, however, is especially difficult for students who have been prescribed negative identities in academic institutions, such as in the case of Monica. Her story speaks volumes about the need for students to identify with and appropriate academic language, to see their cognitive and linguistic strengths validated, and to have adequate social supports. Similarly, Mike's worldview that having a particular social role "should" automatically result in full access to an associated vocabulary suggests the need to better convey the incremental nature of vocabulary learning and the occasional inadequacy of the generative vocabulary tools that literacy instructors espouse. Both Monica's and Mike's stories stress the central role that social aims play in guiding decisions about word learning.

Transitional reading instructors can be encouraged by the two stories shared here as they offer both great promise and direction. Students like Mike and Monica are interested in having access to language tools, such as vocabulary, that will support them with their social aims. However, neither Monica nor Mike strongly valued the vocabulary tasks that they encountered in their textbooks. The mismatch between a traditional vocabulary curriculum and the needs of Mike and Monica implies that they require socially situated experiences with language in order to experience more success with vocabulary learning in the classroom.

Due to the standardization of curricula, many transitional reading teachers are not always able to choose the vocabulary words that they teach, but they can create learning tasks designed around these targeted words. For instance, a word like "avocation," or the kind of word that is commonly featured on some transitional vocabulary assessments, might become more appealing if used as a part of a meaningful conversation such as in a discussion question like: "What are your three favorite avocations?" Similarly, collaborative

work such as writing and acting out a script that includes the targeted vocabulary words, playing games such as charades, or creating visual representations of the words, could also be useful. Simulated word-learning activities such as these are an important move toward creating the socially situated encounters with words that many students need in order to build the deep word knowledge that is expected on vocabulary assessments. It is important to extend these opportunities to students since these assessments can play a gatekeeping role in determining who can move forward with their college studies.

Another pedagogical possibility is to use students' situated word knowledge to help them better understand the nature of language learning itself. For instance, the transcripts show that Mike and Monica were skillful at noticing relationships between unknown words, as well as the various connotations of known words. To build from this knowledge, graphic organizers, such as a word spectrum, could be used to visually connect known words to unknown words in order to build a deeper understanding of new words. For instance, the word "avocation" could be connected with synonyms such as "hobby" or "pastime" and paired opposite from words such as "vocation," "work," or "obligation." Into this spectrum, the life experiences of students, such as their current and previous "vocations," could be added.

In spite of their talents with language, neither Monica nor Mike strongly identified with the specialized form of language often seen in college known as "academic language." I propose that making a more conscious effort to invite academic discourses into college life would strengthen the social motivations that lead to the eventual appropriation of these discourses. Immersing students in novel career and college-related language experiences could prove to be especially fertile ground for promoting students' vocabulary growth. Specifically, discussion groups, guest speakers, service learning, video and multimedia presentations, field trips, and exposure to authentic texts are potentially viable ways to help students to build knowledge about the language practices of specific college disciplines.

Another possible avenue is to teach students the universal metalanguage of functional linguistics to support the transfer of vocabulary tools into new settings and to elicit a critically reflective stance toward academic discourse. One such example is the California History project (Schleppegrell & Oliviera, 2006) in which teachers explicitly teach students discourse analytic questions that can be used to guide students through a close analysis of content-area texts. This approach covers the same curricular content of teaching signal words to identify patterns of organization, but encourages students to closely examine academic discourse and to question the ideology embedded in linguistic choices. This fine-grained analysis of word choice in content-area texts would enable a critical thinker like Mike to show interest in academic language because it would build from his interest in analyzing the politics of language. Similarly, these activities would allow Monica to take a more critical look at the relationship between language and power and potentially reframe her understanding of her language strengths.

A closely related pedagogical implication is to integrate readings into the curriculum that honor the language histories of students. This move seems particularly important for students like Monica who are prone to deprivileging their language experiences. One shining example is Tan's essay "Mother Tongue" (1990/2008) in which she explores the intersections between language, culture, and identity. James Baldwin (1979) and George Orwell (1946) have also written essays on language that can stand alone or could be paired with history textbooks to offer an account of how language attitudes are intertwined with contextual factors. In response to these essays, students could spend time observing and reflecting on how they use and develop language resources to meet their social aims. These language explorations serve several purposes such as promoting word

consciousness, agency, and self-awareness, and would also enable teachers to better understand the language resources of their students.

Each of these implications for the classroom, however, will fall short without continued attention to the faulty assumptions that perpetuate deficit models of vocabulary instruction. This study offers an alternative to the "vocabulary gap" construct by examining the sophisticated vocabulary knowledge of two transitional college students who were initially unsuccessful with standardized assessments. It also joins new theoretical perspectives and research on literacy and language that urge transitional reading instructors to act on new insights about vocabulary instruction.

As these data show, there is great promise in contextualizing vocabulary instruction. A key part of this contextualization is creating space for the vocabulary knowledge that students bring from their other social worlds. This contextualization also involves welcoming transitional learners into the new communities of practice they will encounter in college and in their careers. Most importantly, this contextualization entails shifting the focus of vocabulary instruction to the language pursuits that transitional readers find most meaningful. Through these efforts, college campuses can become more equitable and culturally sensitive in order to better serve the students who enter their doors believing in the promise of higher education. JCLL

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Building Tasks and Guiding Questions (Gee, 2011)	Potential Linguistic Markers
Significance: How are words used to build up or lessen significance for certain things and not others?	1) Identify theme/rheme (order of clauses). 2) Identify modifiers : Intensifiers to build significance and qualifiers to lessen significance 3) Attitudinal language: Evaluative (good, bad) and comparative (adjectives, adverbs). 4) Shifts in topics or moments of interdiscursivity. 5) Words that are appropriated/rejected or highlighted/ minimized for others. 6) Repetitions which build significance.
Activities: What activity or activities is this communication building or enacting or seeking to get others to recognize as being accomplished? What social groups, institutions, or cultures support and norm whatever activities are supported or being enacted?	1) Identify activities that the speaker participates in during the observation. 2) Note activity-specific lexical items (hypothesis, piston, easel). 3) Note any reference to the presence or absence of social support in carrying out these socially recognized activities such as direct references or negative/positive word choices.
Identities: What socially recognizable identity or identities is the speaker trying to enact or get others to recognize? How do the speakers position one another?	1) Examine personal pronouns, adjectives, articles and determiners to assess whether they are personal or impersonal. 2) Examine adjectives, labels, or other descriptive phrases that the speaker uses or others use to describe the speaker. 3) Identify nominalizations that deemphasize human agency. 4) Identify traditional and more subtle cause/effect relationships that either convey or obscure agency of the speaker or others.
Relationships: How are words used to build and sustain or change relationships between the speaker and other speakers, other people, social groups, cultures, and/or institutions?	1) Examine personal pronouns, adjectives, and determiners to gauge whether a personal or distant the relationship is being enacted. 2) Look for conjunctive relationships such as causal, temporal, additive and adversative. 3) Look for words that indicate hierarchal relationships, affection, or tension. 4) Identify sentence type (declarative, interrogative, imperative) to see how the speaker positions himself/herself.
Politics: How are words used to define what counts as social goods and to distribute them or withhold them from listeners or others? How are words being used to share or create a viewpoint on how social goods are or should be distributed in society?	1) Look for evidence of a position related to social goods: Statement of belief, modality related to social goods, or hypothetical statements. 2) Identify conjunctions used to link individuals, groups, or institutions with social goods. 3) Identify words used to convey modality such as expressing degree of certainty 4) Identify words that are selected to convey or obscure agency in the speaker or others.
Connections: How are words used to connect, disconnect, or ignore connections between things?	1) Look for conjunctive relationships such as: causal, temporal, additive and adversative.
Sign Systems and Knowledge: How are words being used to privilege or de-privilege specific sign systems or different ways of knowing or believing or claims to knowledge and belief?	1) Identify words that indicate the speaker's position on how knowledge is distributed or reference to the tools or institutions that norm them through personal pronouns combined with thinking or feeling verbs. 2) Note references to languages, dialects, modalities, and other semiotic tools.