

Worked Example: Yu-Gi-Oh!

Main Claim:

A. Today many popular culture activities involve complex language, more so than they did in the past.

This claim and a related one that many popular culture activities involve complex thinking have been made recently by a variety of researchers from different areas and by more popular-press authors, as well. They are, I argue, one of the central arguments being made these days in the emerging field of digital media and learning.

B. Young people's engagement with such complex language is relevant to their success in school and society.

One Piece of Evidence for Main Claim (and the Subject of this Worked Example): Yu-Gi-Oh!

Relevant Version of Main Claim: Yu-Gi-Oh! involves complex language that is relevant to young people’s success in school and society.

One serious problem at the outset: I treat learning in Yu-Gi-Oh! here as an individual and mental phenomenon, when (as I argue in my work on literacy and learning) it needs to be seen as social, cultural, and distributed. It would be important to develop relevant worked examples dealing with the social, cultural, distributed knowledge aspects of Yu-Gi-Oh! and link them to this one. On the other hand, my approach here is one way to gain surface validity for emerging work in digital media and learning from more well-established disciplines.

Comment: As a linguist I try to get at thinking through language—because different uses of language indicate different sorts of thinking—and so I here concentrate on language.

Clarifying Meaning/Significance of the Claim:

A. Yu-Gi-Oh! is a card game played, by people from about the age of 7 and up, face-to-face and via video games. It also is depicted in movies, television shows, and books; is described and discussed on many Web sites; and is a source of fan fiction.

Why This Is Interesting: Yu-Gi-Oh! is a case where young people engage in a set of activities that are spread across different media, digital and nondigital. In this respect it is an example of what Henry Jenkins calls “media convergence.” Such media

convergence is held to be typical of young people's popular culture today and is one aspect in which it is different and more complex than in the past. Further, Yu-Gi-Oh! is part of a global youth culture centered on anime, another new and arguably important phenomenon, especially in an increasingly global world.

My Agenda: I picked Yu-Gi-Oh! because I wanted my analysis to bear on the wider issues of (a) media convergence; (b) the mixture of the digital and the nondigital; and (c) global youth culture in a global world. I see Yu-Gi-Oh! as typical of the sort of out-of-school practices most central to the emerging area of digital media and learning

B. The term *complex* in *complex language* can have many different meanings. Here I am concerned with language that is “specialist” or “technical” in comparison to “vernacular” language (“everyday language” or “informal language,” the style of language people use when they are communicating as “everyday people” and not in a role as a specialist or expert of any sort). Of course, in my analyses below I need to be specific about what makes specialist language—in this case, the language of Yu-Gi-Oh!—complex and why this sort of complexity is important for young people's school success and success in society after school.

Why This Is Interesting: The styles of language used in school connected to “content” areas like mathematics, science, and social studies—as well as the styles of language connected to academic disciplines—are called *academic language*.

“Academic language” is a big topic these days in educational linguistics. It has also been pervasive in current work on ESL and the education of immigrants and other nonnative speakers of English. I do not deal with this important issue here. A worked example, similar to the one here but dealing with ESL, would be important.

Academic language (composed of different styles for different domains) is one form of specialist or technical language. It has been claimed that the ability to read, write, speak, and comprehend academic language is one crucial key to school success. It is also arguable that being able to deal with specialist and technical forms of language is crucial for success in the public sphere and the work world young people will face after school. Our high-tech, science-driven, global culture creates such specialist and technical forms of language at a fast clip and demands facility with such forms of language.

My Agenda: I want to contrast learning a specialist style of language (like the one connected to Yu-Gi-Oh!) out of school with learning an academic language in school.

The contrast between learning outside school and learning in school has become a major motif in work in the emerging area of digital media and learning. Some controversy is beginning to grow over this contrast.

I want to do this in order to make claim two things:

(a) Although categories like poverty and race affect the learning of academic language in school, they do not, in the same way, affect the learning of a specialist language like that connected to Yu-Gi-Oh! out of school. Thus, such out-of-school learning is more equitable and may give us a guide to how to create such equity in school and out-of-school learning environments involving academic content.

We are in desperate need of more research on how equity works in out-of-school learning. A worked example here, linked to this one, would be important.

(b) Learning a specialist style of language like that connected to Yu-Gi-Oh! will transfer to, or serve as “preparation for future learning” for, learning academic styles of language in school and dealing with specialist and technical styles of language after school in the public sphere and at work.

The transfer question needs to be dealt with, and I have not done so. I am suggesting here that a “preparation for future learning” view of transfer would be a good way to go (Bransford and Schwartz 1999). A worked example here, linked to this one, would be important.

(i) Rationale for Why Yu-Gi-Oh! May Be Relevant to Success in School:

It is interesting that in outline form these two points are deeply embedded. But I must admit that one of my main goals in using Yu-Gi-Oh! has been to get these two points, common in the literacy literature, onto the table of the emerging area of digital media and learning.

(a) Early Vocabulary: Research on early literacy learning has indicated that a child's early vocabulary at age 5 is one of the most important predictors of school success after the child has learned to decode and thereafter for the rest of schooling. As a linguist I have argued that this finding is not about "everyday" words, but the words associated with books and schooling, that is, more formal and specialist vocabulary. Yu-Gi-Oh! involves a great deal of the sort of formal and specialist nonvernacular vocabulary associated with books, school, and academic content.

(b) Fourth-Grade Slump: Research over decades has indicated that many children who pass reading tests in the early grades cannot read well enough to learn school content by fourth grade, when the complex academic language connected to school content areas begins to become central to schooling. This leads to failure that stretches through middle school and high school. Yu-Gi-Oh! is a practice where young people have to read complex language in order to learn, but where the learning is lucid because it is associated with clear rules, actions, and images.

(ii) Rationale for Why Yu-Gi-Oh! May Be Relevant to Success after School:

I have done, in my work, a poor job of developing these rationales.
Worked examples here, linked to this one, would be important.

- (a) Technical and specialist styles of language are an important part of many modern professional and work practices.
- (b) Civic participation as a global citizen requires mastery of complex vocabulary and other language forms associated with many complex issues.