Academic Language vs. Content Knowledge

Don Bouchard: So, so my question to you folks is this. Question, how does this relate to the notion of academic language and content knowledge, this optical illusion?

Participant 1: One thing I noticed when I looked at it is when I have seen this design in black and white, it's harder for me to shift between the two, but when there's color, all I have to do is shift my gaze and I can see both of them quickly.

Bouchard: Mmm, ok.

Participant 1: So I think the color adds context.

Bouchard: Mm-hm. Yep. I mean this is either very simple and/or very difficult to identify, um, the two, um, images in this particular illustration.

Participant 2: [inaudible behind Bouchard] it's somewhat difficult to describe it to people to help them see it; if, like, you, for example, if you're talking about the girls hair, it's the hair on the old woman and the hair on the girl, so you can't really use like the hair, necessarily, so you have to

Bouchard: True

Participant 2: use other indicators.

Bouchard: Yep. How does this relate to academic language and content knowledge?

Participant 3: What does the Victorian mean, when you look, immediately look to, I first of all saw a Victorian lady. Being from England, I automatically link with Victorian piece, and not many people would recognize the symbols of the Victorian lady with the little necklace and the hat.

Bouchard: Ok, but because of your background knowledge…

Participant 3: Exactly. That's what I saw

Participant 4: So, so, you could, you could use a study of history in your social studies content for the North Carolina Essential Standards. You could use this picture to study the Victorian Era.

Bouchard: Ok. So there's one dimension.

Participant 4: I know that because I've been watching the Murdock mysteries [laughter] from Canada.

Bouchard: Yes. That's one dimension, yes.

Participant 5: Well, in order for students to access content knowledge, the academic language has to, they have to become proficient at it; it has to be interwoven in everything, and these two pictures are interwoven.

Bouchard: Yeah, that's a good choice of words, inter-, interweave, interwoven, because the two

Participant 5: I got that from [inaudible; points to neighbor]

Bouchard: the two are very, very closely connected to each other aren't they? These two pictures, and as a result, it can be very difficult to separate one's gaze and focus on one as opposed to the other. Well, that's parallel to the notion of academic language and content knowledge. The two… WIDA attempts to separate the two. The two are really, in many real ways, are inseparable, but I think that, unlike any other framework, the WIDA framework is able to do this to an extent that at least, um, involves educators in deeper thinking and conversations around the notion. But it does make the point, and that point is that the two issues of academic language and content knowledge are so so closely united and that is a reason why mainstream content teachers often

don't pay much attention to the language because it is so assumed, and we need to, I think, as part of this conversation about English language learners, draw attention to language, and of course we, we do this in a whole variety of other ways, which we will be exploring. But it has that ripple effect helping understand the language for all students, and you can make that rationale, I think, very clearly as well.