

# Academic Language for English Language Learners

## Featuring

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## What is academic language?

- Academic language is:
  - the language used in the classroom and workplace
  - the language of text
  - the language assessments
  - the language of academic success
  - the language of power



## Why is academic language so important?

- Students who master academic language are more likely to:
  - be successful in academic and professional settings
- Students who do *not* learn academic language may:
  - struggle and drop out of school



# Academic language in action

## writing example by a university ESL student

### Letter #1: Before Academic Language Instruction

Dear Mrs. Robbin,

I really not need humanity 20 writing class because since time I come to United State all my friend speak language. Until now everyone understand me and I dont' need study language. I don't know Vietnam language. I speak only English. I have no communication problem with my friend in dorm. My English teacher in high school key person to teach me.

My teacher explained to me that how important the book was for the student and persuaded me read many book. I get A in English through out high school and I never take ESL. I gree that some student need class but you has not made a correct decision put me in English class. Please do not makes me lose the face. I have confident in English.



## Academic language in action (cont.) writing example by a university ESL student

### Letter #2: After **Academic Language Instruction**

Hi Robin, I am apologize for having to send you this information at the last minute. I still need a letter. This letter should discuss my qualifications, skills and accomplishments. It should be written on letterhead and addressed "To Whom It May Concern" and submitted with a Recommendation Form (which I will give to you tomorrow).

Please write a letter that addresses my academic achievement, seriousness of purpose, personal maturity, and whether or not I possess the skills necessary to adapt to a new environment. Also, please address my ability to think analytically, my aptitude, my overall maturity and my independence. Thank you so much Robin for doing this for me. I truly appreciate it. Let me know if you have any last minute questions.



## The difference between social and academic language

- When using social, or informal, English in daily conversation, it's possible to communicate by using slang and without using English in a grammatically correct way.
- You can be understood without using:
  - articles
  - prepositions
  - sophisticated vocabulary
  - pronoun reference



## Do students need to first master social language?

- In the United States, we tend to teach informal “survival” English first and then academic language.
- However, it is possible to lay the foundation for academic language while teaching conversation skills.



## Recognizing social v. academic language

Some of the differences between social and academic language that students should look for include:

Informal Language	Academic Language
repetition of words	variety of words, more sophisticated vocabulary
sentences start with “and” and “but”	sentences start with transition words, such as “however,” “moreover,” and “in addition”
use of slang: “guy,” “cool,” and “awesome”	No slang







## Activity Idea:

### Recognizing social v. academic language

1. Give students a passage using academic language, and a passage using informal English.
2. Compare the passages in groups or with a partner.
3. Have groups write and discuss the differences between the kinds of languages used, practicing with difference passages.
4. Repeat this exercise with numerous passages until students are able to recognize the differences between social and academic language.



## Academic language in oral expression

- Academic language is also a part of speaking
- Mastering oral academic language will allow students to participate in:
  - academic discussions
  - debates
  - presentations in front of their peers





## Activity Idea:

### Practicing oral academic language

1. Prepare students to speak in front of others by teaching them academic words and grammatical features that would be used in a presentation, such as:
  - “The topic of my presentation is...”
  - “First, I will provide some background information”
  - “In conclusion...”
  - “Are there any questions?”





## Activity Idea:

### Practicing oral academic language (cont.)

2. Put students in to pairs so they can practice these expressions together before doing an oral presentation. Helping students prepare for presentations will increase their confidence and give them more opportunities to practice using their academic language.



## Using academic language in a student's native language

- If students have acquired language in their first language, they will be able to acquire academic language much more quickly in their second language



## At what age should academic language instruction begin?

- Preschool through 3<sup>rd</sup> grade
  - students need to learn age-appropriate vocabulary and language that will give them a strong foundation for academic language in the future
- 4<sup>th</sup> grade through 8<sup>th</sup> grade
  - instruction should transition in order to teach students more sophisticated academic language skills, including vocabulary and grammatical structures

*Note: Formal academic language instruction should begin in 4<sup>th</sup> grade.*



## At what age should academic language instruction begin? (cont.)

- 9<sup>th</sup> grade through 12<sup>th</sup> grade
  - students need to know a large vocabulary of academic words used across academic disciplines, and they need to have access to and use more complicated grammatical structures

*Note: Formal academic language instruction should begin in 4<sup>th</sup> grade.*



## Instruction for young children

- What does age-appropriate instruction look like for young children?
  - young children are eager to learn new words and participate in conversation
  - they don't need to learn skills learned by older students yet, such as literary analysis
  - however, teachers of young students can build a foundation for future academic language skills





## Instruction for young children (cont.)



### Example: **Show and Tell**

1. When organizing a Show and Tell session, teach young children the phrase: “I’m going to share an experience I had.”
2. From this phrase, children learn two new words:
  - “share” – rather than “tell” or “talk about”
  - “experience”



## Linguistic concepts and academic language

- Academic language includes many areas of language:
  - phonology and spelling



### Examples:

Anthroppology v. anthropological

Morphhology v. morphological

manipulate v. manipulation

Although these words are closely related and look very similar, they have spelling and pronunciation differences that may be confusing to English language learners.



## Linguistic concepts and academic language (cont.)

- vocabulary



**Example:** anthropology

### Teaching technique

1. Repeat word 3 times
2. Show student a sentence using the target word from their textbook
3. Talk about how it is used
4. Make up new sentences using the word
5. Have students practice using the word with partners
6. Remember that some students need more practice than others to use language accurately



## Linguistic concepts and academic language (cont.)

- Other areas of academic language include:
  1. Grammatical components:
    - parts of speech
    - prepositions
    - sentence agreement
    - verb tenses
    - modals

*Note: This list was adapted from [Dr. Scarcella's interview](#) for the Doing What Works website*



## Linguistic concepts and academic language (cont.)

### 2. Sociolinguistic components:

- how to use different genres with different audiences, such as explanation, summarization, persuasion, or argument

### 3. Discourse components

- how to appropriately start, continue, and end discourse, as in a conversation or an essay

*Note: This list was adapted from [Dr. Scarcella's interview](#) for the Doing What Works website*



## Choosing what to teach in academic language instruction

- When teaching reading and choosing passages, teachers should identify words that students will have difficulty understanding and will determine student's ability to comprehend text
- These words may be an academic word (such as “stimulate”), a grammatical structure (“either...or”), a preposition (“between”), an adverb (hardly), or a conjunction (“and”)



## Academic language and word usage

- When teaching new vocabulary, it's important to be very specific on word forms and usage



**Example:** Teach English language learners (ELLs) the difference between “stimulate” and “stimulation,” and how the different forms are used



## Academic language and word usage (cont.)

- When teaching native speakers, a definition for a new word is often sufficient
- ELLs need more than the definition of a new word. They need to use the word and produce accurate language with the word
- When students talk about text, they also need to understand the definitions of related words, and how to use them







## Activity: Beyond definitions

1. Give students a word bank. Discuss the words in the bank and how they are used in the text. Talk about how you would use the words.
2. Provide students with the definitions and model sentences for all of the words.
3. In pairs, have students discuss usage of the words, and how the words are being used in the model sentences. What would be appropriate or inappropriate uses of these words?





## Activity: Close reading

1. Read a short passage aloud to students so they hear the melody of the language.
2. Explain the passage to students.
3. Ask students to read the passage, focusing on a few specific features of academic language, such as synonyms, word families, or pronouns



**Example:** Have students underline all pronouns and then circle the nouns to which they refer.



## Fixed expressions in academic language

- Fixed expressions (also called collocations) are another important area of academic language, such as:
  - peanut butter and jelly (not jelly and peanut butter)
  - salt and pepper (not pepper and salt)
  - Mr. and Mrs. (not Mrs. and Mr.)
- Using these kinds of expressions correctly is an important step in learning and using a second language well





## Activity: Summarization

1. Read a short passage aloud to students.
2. Have students read the short passage to themselves and then summarize verbally to a friend.
3. Give students the opportunity to repeat the exercise with several partners.

Through this exercise, students begin to acquire the author's language, and will get more and more fluent with the language each round.





## Activity: Summarization

1. Choose a topic that older students will find interesting, such as poverty or another “equity issue” related to a passage in your textbook.
2. Explicitly explain the language objective at the beginning of class: “Today we’re going to work on academic vocabulary in this passage about poverty, and we’re going to talk about ways to eliminate poverty.”





## Activity: Summarization (cont.)

3. Ask the students to summarize the text and provide them with vocabulary words, ideas about ways to end poverty, and complete sentences and structures to get them going.
4. Have students work in pairs, practicing using these structures, and expressing their own beliefs. These conversations may serve as basis for a presentation to the class.



## Tips for working with older students

- Students perform to the expectations we set. If they know we expect them to think critically about issues and use academic language, they will.
- In order to increase confidence, allow students some time to practice in a safe environment before getting in front of their classmates.



## Tips for working with younger students

- Keep the material cognitively and linguistically appropriate
- Remember that some features of language can be taught explicitly to young students



**Example:** “Two plus two equals (with an ‘s’) four.” Talk about the ‘z’ sound of a bumble bee, and get students moving around.





## Tips for working with younger students (cont.)

- With younger students, use:
  - songs
  - jazz chants
  - language games
  - choral repetition
  - Total Physical Response strategies (TPR)
  - direct instruction



## Does academic language need its own block of time?

- **Grades K through 3:** academic language needs separate instruction, but it also needs to support the core curriculum
- **Grades 4 and up:** academic language needs more explicit instruction. Every day should include vocabulary, content, writing, and reading comprehension instruction, as well as direct scaffolding of oral language



## How much time should teachers spend on academic language instruction?

- For younger students, the time varies
  - If students don't have instructional gaps in their language skills, 45 minutes a day is sufficient
  - If they have big gaps in their basic knowledge, they will need more time each day
- Older students need more time
  - Students need more than an hour of daily English language instruction that includes a component of academic language



## Tips for academic language and writing

- Every time you give a writing assignment, give students models to follow – multiple models are better



**Example:** “In this essay, I expect a thesis statement. This is where it goes, and this is what it does. Here is an example.”

- Give students supports, such as:
  - vocabulary
  - grammatical structures
  - tips for organizing essays



## Academic writing in the content areas

- Content area teachers can also provide examples of academic writing, and then a chance to practice with content-based writing assignments:



### Examples:

- lab reports in biology class
- persuasive essays in social studies class
- word problems in algebra class



## Importance of feedback

- It's important that academic language instruction include feedback for both oral and written expression
- The objective of constructive feedback is not punishment or criticism. Instead, it allows students to learn from their mistakes.



**Example:** A student who uses “first of all” as a single word will not learn that it is an expression of three words if she is never corrected.



## Importance of feedback (cont.)

- It's helpful if the whole school uses the same system of proofreading and editing, so that students don't have to learn new symbols as they go from one grade and teacher to the next.
- An editing system may include:
  - underlining or highlighting words
  - writing in the margin
  - using proofreading symbols



## Importance of feedback (cont.)

- The other advantage of using a school-wide system is that students know exactly what kind of feedback their teachers are going to give them. They know when the teacher's going to give them this feedback. They don't consider it punitive because they don't expect it.





## Curriculum and content objectives

- When learning new content, ELLs also need to learn the lesson's language objectives in order to understand the content
- Every time a teacher chooses a new text to help the students acquire the content standards, students will be exposed to new language objectives in addition to new content
- When students receive reading, writing, or oral assignments, they will need to learn different language objectives based on the kind of assignment and what it requires



## Who is responsible for teaching academic language for younger students?

- The primary instructor has the responsibility for laying the foundation of academic language instruction by teaching a strong language proficiency in:
  - phonology
  - spelling
  - grammar
  - Vocabulary
- Teachers in elementary school can also work closely with ESL instructors and reading specialists in order to support language instruction



## Who is responsible for teaching academic language for older students?

- The English language development / ELL instructor is going to be responsible for teaching academic language used when reading, writing, speaking, and listening
- Content teachers have a role in supporting language development as well, but not for primary academic language instruction



## What is the role of the content teachers?

- The content teacher's responsibilities **do not** include:
  - becoming a reading specialist
  - becoming an ESL teacher
- The content teacher's responsibilities **do** include:
  - teaching reading comprehension by using graphic organizers and teaching note-taking skills
  - scaffolding discussions in content-area classes by teaching related vocabulary, using academic words, and using the text
  - teaching any kind of writing associated with the content area



## What is the role of the content teachers? (cont.)



**Example:** A chemistry teacher might teach students the language used to describe a chemistry experiment



## Vocabulary in content instruction

- The best place to teach specific content vocabulary at the high school level is in the content class, rather than the ESL class
- Content vocabulary can be reinforced in the ESL class, but teaching a vocabulary word within its context will be more effective



## Vocabulary in content instruction (cont.)

### **Example:** “photosynthesis”

- Instruction of this content word will be more effective in a science context than an ESL context as students learn related content, participate in relevant activities and have access to visual or hands-on representations



## Academic language and newcomers

- Students who arrive late in our system need more instruction than we have previously estimated
- Newcomers need a lot of extra inclusion. Some scheduling options include:
  - intensive 3- or 4-hour language blocks
  - tutoring before and after school
  - summer school
  - attending school for an extra year





## Long-term ELLs and academic language

- Long-term ELLs, or students who have been in the United States for a longer period of time, are the largest growing population that we have in the U.S.
- These students may have very proficient social language, but they need lots of instruction and practice to develop academic language so that they can fulfill their potential



## Long-term ELLs and academic language (cont.)

- ELL teachers can help long-term ELLs develop their language skills by using:
  - dictation exercises
  - oral sentence completion activities
  - written cloze passages
  - summarization
  - intensive feedback on writing assignments



## Resources: learner dictionaries

- One way to help ELLs in 4<sup>th</sup> grade and above use academic language independently is through learner dictionaries, offered by many publishers
- Learner dictionaries offer:
  - a definition
  - grammatical information
  - the word used in a sentence
  - variations of the word
  - expressions using the word
  - common errors in usage



## Independent use of academic language

- Students need to learn skills that will allow them to:
  - use academic language independently
  - self-edit
  - recognize strengths and weaknesses, such as subject/verb agreement or word forms and related parts of speech



## Administrators and academic language

- Administrators can support academic language instruction by:
  - investigating the very best curricular programs for teaching academic language
  - implementing a coherent program for English language development (ELD)
  - observing academic language instruction
  - ensuring that teachers are prepared to teach academic language
  - giving teachers the opportunity to access high-quality professional development



## Teacher collaboration

- Teachers can collaborate on academic language instruction by setting aside lesson planning time in which they come together to talk about the curriculum for English language development.
- Collaboration should be happening with:
  - ESL and ELD coaches
  - reaching specialists and coaches
  - administration
  - any other specialists in the schools



## Online resources

- Colorín Colorado:
  - [Writing a Winning Essay](#)
- AdLit.org (Adolescent Literacy):
  - [ELL Resources](#)
- University of California:
  - [Linguistic Minority Research Institute](#)



## Online resources (cont.)

- University of California:
  - [ESL Program](#)
- Doing What Works:
  - [Academic Language](#)
- National Council of Teachers of English:
  - [Teaching Secondary ELL Students](#)





## Myths and misconceptions

- **Myth:** It takes students 7-12 years to acquire academic language.
- **Truth:** The amount of time it takes students to master academic language directly depends on:
  - exposure to academic language
  - amount of practice in using academic language
  - extent of academic language instruction and feedback



## Myths and misconceptions (cont.)

- **Myth:** We can teach academic language in an ESL or an ELD class and then students don't need anything afterwards.
- **Truth:** Students need sustained, effective academic language instruction throughout the upper grades and even in college in order to master correct usage and expression.



## Myths and misconceptions (cont.)

- **Myth:** Academic language is easy to assess
- **Truth:** It's actually very poorly defined for assessment purposes. Research is just beginning to develop that will help us identify the features of academic language that are accessible at the various proficiency levels. When we get test scores back on proficiency, we've only got a slice of what students do academically.



## Final thoughts

- Academic language is highly teachable
- ELLs are a hard-working group of students who can and have achieved great heights academically
- One of the most effective and important ways to support their future success is by teaching them academic language



***Thank you for watching this webcast!***

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[www.ColorinColorado.org](http://www.ColorinColorado.org).



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