Academic Language for English Language Learners

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 academically
  - be at a higher risk of dropping out of school

Academic language in action:

Two writing samples from 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.):

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.

Social language vs. 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

Note: Read more about the difference between social and academic language at Colorín Colorado.

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Do students need to master social language first?

- 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 vs. academic language

When comparing social and academic language, students should look for the following differences:

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

Note: This chart may not appear on printouts of the outline format.

Activity Idea:
Recognizing social v. academic language

- Passage comparison is an effective way to teach students how to recognize the differences between social and academic language

    1. Give students 2 passages – one using informal language, and one using academic English

    2. Ask students to compare the passages step-by-step in groups or with a partner

    3. Have groups write a list of differences between the kinds of languages used, and discuss their findings

    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. Have students practice these expressions in pairs before doing an oral presentation

Helping students prepare for presentations with a partner will:

increase their confidence

– give them more opportunities to practice using their academic language

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Using academic language in a student's native language

- As with reading skills, if students have acquired academic 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 3rd grade

  – Students need to learn age-appropriate vocabulary and language that will give them a strong foundation for academic language in the future

- 4th grade through 8th 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 4th grade.

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

- 9th grade through 12th 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

Linguistic concepts and academic language (cont.)

- Academic language also includes:
  - vocabulary
- Points to remember:
  - Vocabulary knowledge plays an important role in a student's ability to understand the language used in academic assessments
  - Ongoing, systematic instruction is needed to help students expand their academic vocabulary
  - Students need to know how to use a word as well as its definition

Linguistic concepts and academic language (cont.)

✅ **Example**: **Teaching vocabulary**

anthropology

<u>Vocabulary teaching technique</u>

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

Note: To learn about other concepts included in academic language, review <u>Dr. Scarcella's interview</u> for the Doing What Works website.

Choosing what to teach in academic language instruction

- Teachers should teach language that will help students access the text or content:
  - When teaching reading comprehension, teachers should identify language that students will have difficulty understanding and will undermine student's ability to comprehend text
- This language may include:
  - an academic vocabulary word (such as "stimulate")
  - a preposition ("between")
  - an adverb ("hardly")
  - a conjunction ("and")
  - a grammatical structure ("either…or")

Academic language and word usage

- Explicit, specific instruction of word use is necessary for English language learners (ELLs)

   Example: Word Form and Use

   Teach English language learners (ELLs) the difference between "stimulate" and "stimulation," and how the different forms are used

- When teaching native speakers, a definition for a new word is often sufficient

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Academic language and word usage (cont.)

- The definition alone is not sufficient for ELLs
- ELLs need to:
  - understand text and definitions
  - use the word correctly
  - produce accurate language with the word
  - understand the definitions of related words
  - discuss the text using target words correctly

Activity: Close reading

- Close reading gives students a chance to "slow down"
    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 pronouns

Example: **Close Reading**

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 a second language well

  - Collocations serve as a "marker" of being able to speak like a native speaker

What does close reading accomplish?

- Close reading allows students to examine and dissect other features of the text such as:

  – pronominal reference (use of pronouns)

  – synonyms

  – word families

- Talking about the text allows students to incorporate the author's language into their speech

Activity: Summarization

- To get students using academic language, try 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

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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:

  – scaffold instruction to help them acquire the language

  – allow students adequate time to practice in a safe environment before getting in front of their classmates

Long-term academic language (what's better?)

- ELL teachers can help long-term ELLs develop their language skills by using:
  - dictation exercises
  - oral sentence completion activities
  - written cloze passages
  - summarization and retelling of passages
  - frequent writing practice with intensive feedback

Resources: Learner dictionaries

- One way to help in 4th 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 (such as "discriminate against")
  - common errors in usage

Independent use of academic language

- Students need to learn skills that will allow them to:
  - self-edit
  - continue independent language development in the mainstream classroom
  - recognize strengths and weaknesses, such as subject/verb agreement or word forms and related parts of speech

Myths and misconceptions

- **Myth:** It takes students a certain number of years (i.e., 7 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:** Academic language is easy to assess
- **Truth:** Academic language is 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 assessable at the various proficiency levels
  – When we get test scores back on proficiency, we've only got a slice of what students can do academically

Final thoughts

Points to remember:

– 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