English Language Learners and Academic Language

Mid-Continent Comprehensive Center (MC3)
Regional ELL/CCSS Task Force
Rosie García-Belina, Ed.D.

1

Language Variations

- The language the student brings to the school represents the language and thinking of family, home culture, and community.

- During school years, the student constructs other levels of general and specialized language identified as academic language, which includes variations to communicate with teachers and the specific language used in each subject.

Students' Use of Language

- Native English speakers are socialized from a very young age to use many of the language patterns found in school. As a result, these students know "what, when, and how to say and write things well" in school settings.

- On the other hand, many bright and capable English language learners (ELLs) struggle in school because they lack the abilities to use language in ways that are expected in academic settings.

Students' Use of Language

- Many language conventions and expressions used in formal English are unknown to ELLs because the exposure to books, movies, TV shows and/or conversations is different and closely related to their culture.

- Teachers are immersed in school language, and they may unconsciously include different idiomatic expressions in their instructional discourse that are unfamiliar to non-native English speakers.

Academic Language

- Academic language differs greatly from informal language and should be taught directly.

- A primary goal of academic language is to understand and describe complex concepts and texts .

- Students need to use the appropriate language and grammar conventions to explain both orally and in written form how and what they comprehend, including abstract concepts as they apply high order thinking skills.

Some Differences Between Informal and Academic Language

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

Start Early and Persevere

- Young children are good language learners and are eager to learn new words and participate in conversation.

- Teachers of young students can build a foundation for future academic language skills.

- Keep the material cognitively and linguistically appropriate.

- Remember some features of language can be taught explicitly to young students.

Start Early and Persevere

- **Fourth grade through 8th grade** - Instruction should transition in order to teach students more sophisticated academic language skills, including vocabulary and grammatical structures.

- **Ninth 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.

Nurturing Acquisition of Academic Language

- For many students, academic language is like a new language.

- ELLs need to learn new words, new concepts, new meanings for known words and new grammar patterns that are valued in school.

- Modeling of academic language is paramount, but it is not enough.

Nurturing Acquisition of Academic Language

- Fostering academic language growth requires hard work and patience.

- Intense interaction is needed with all students, especially with ELLs.

- It is necessary to consider ELLs are at different levels of language proficiency. Some strategies may work with some students, while those strategies might not help others.

Nurturing Acquisition of Academic Language

- Acquiring a language encompasses the simultaneous development of the two receptive skills—listening and reading; and the two productive skills—writing and speaking.

- Listening and reading can bypass much of the grammar by focusing on meaning.

- Writing and speaking entail developing grammar and syntax control to produce the message to a particular audience properly.

Teaching by Modeling

- Everyday teachers' interaction with ALL students using academic vocabulary

- Use of sentence starters to initiate academic discussions

- Think-alouds to model powerfully the language used by experts in a discipline

- Using different examples to clarify content while modeling the process of supporting one's opinions with evidence

Teaching by Scaffolding

- Providing high levels of language support at the early stages of language proficiency and diminishing it as the student improves

- Guiding students step-by-step to connect thinking, content, and language to students' lives

- Using metaphors to establish connections through similarities to abstract concepts

Connecting with Background Knowledge

- Increasing the level of connection and the depth and breadth of background knowledge with the complex concept/text is a useful approach.

- Schools might be the first exposure to specific topics for students who have limited or no background knowledge about some areas.

Additional Approaches

- Movement to make academic communication more animated and help students form images in their minds of the abstract concepts being taught

- Challenging students to use more academic ways of expression, and not feeling satisfied with limited content understanding when using non-academic language

Bottom Line

- Encourage students to use academic language at all times.

- Regardless of their age and/or level of English proficiency, expose ELLs to complex literature and informational texts.

- Practice, practice, practice, then PRACTICE again!

Activity #1

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

1. Give students two 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.

Repeat this exercise with numerous passages until students are able to recognize the differences between social and academic language.

Activity #2

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 following:

- "The topic of my presentation is…"

- "First, I will provide some background information"

- "In conclusion…"

- "Are there any questions?"

Additional Resources

Anderson, L. W., & Krathwohl, D. R. (Eds.). (2001). *A taxonomy for learning, teaching and assessing: A revision of Bloom's Taxonomy of educational objectives*: Complete edition, New York : Longman.

Bandura, A. (1997). *Self-efficacy: The exercise of control*. New York: W.H. Freeman.

Beck, I., McKeown, M. & Kucan, L (2002). *Bringing words to life: Robust vocabulary instruction*. New York: The Gilford Press.

Blase, J. and Kirby, P.C. (1991). *Bringing out the best in teachers: What effective principals do*. Newbury Park, CA: Corwin.

Caine, R.N., & Caine, G. (1991). *Making connections: Teaching and the human brain*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Calderón, M. & L. Minaya-Rowe (2004). *Expediting Comprehension to English Language Learners (ExC-ELL) Teachers Manual*. Center for Data-Driven Reform in Education, Johns Hopkins University.

Calderón, M., August, D., R. Slavin, A. Cheung, D. Durán & N. Madden (2005). *Bringing words to life in classrooms with English language learners*. In Hiebert, A & M. Kamil (eds.) Research and development on vocabulary. Nahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Additional Resources

Echevarria, J., Vogt, M. E., & Short, D. J. (2000). *Making content comprehensible for English language learners: The SIOP model. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon.*

Hiebert, A & M. Kamil (eds.) (2005) *Research and development on vocabulary.* Nahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Irujo, S., & Ragan, A. (2007). *Academic Language Notebooks: The Language of Math.* Haverhill, MA: Course Crafters Publishing, and Logan, IA: Perfection Learning.

Marzano, R. J., & Pickering, D. J. (2005). *Building academic vocabulary: Teacher's manual. Alexandria, VA:* Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.Snow, M., Met, M., & Genesee, F. (1989). A conceptual framework for the integration of language and content in second/foreign language instruction. *TESOL Quarterly, 23,* 201-217.

Wong Fillmore, L. (n.d.) *The role of language in academic development.* Santa Rosa, CA: Sonoma County Office of Education. Downloaded 9/6/10 from: http://www.sonoma.k12.ca.us/aiming_high/docs/AH_language.pdf.

For additional information, please contact

MC3 REGIONAL ELL/CCSS TASK FORCE
c/o the University of Oklahoma

Rosie García Belina, Ed.D., Coordinator

405.200.2242

rbelina@ou.edu