

ACADEMIC LANGUAGE

THE CCSS: A CALL FOR INCREASED INSTRUCTIONAL RIGOR LEADS TO A GREATER EMPHASIS ON ACADEMIC LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION

Recently, the Common Core State Standards (CCSS, 2010) call for students to be engaged in increasingly more rigorous academic inquiry—often by engaging with multiple, authentic (and more complex) texts on a single topic—has once again made reading comprehension instruction a central concern for all educators of adolescents. Adolescent readers require many kinds of knowledge and skills in order to comprehend these complex texts (for instance, background knowledge and the skill to apply reading strategies). However, the ability to understand the language of academic texts, also called ‘**academic language (AL)**,’ is fundamental. While we may view the increased emphasis on teaching complex texts and the AL these texts contain as simply a consequence of a broader shift towards teaching more complex content and ideas to our students, there is no denying that this shift has placed AL at the center of the pedagogical conversation about how to best prepare adolescents to be successful readers.

All secondary educators regardless of the learners they teach, are facing the daunting task of teaching AL to their adolescent students so that they might learn from the texts that they read. However, for teachers of English Language Learners (ELLs) the challenges of AL instruction are particularly salient given that their students face the challenge of both acquiring knowledge of the abstract and complex content that dominates the middle grade curricula while also acquiring the academic English through which this content is often expressed (Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007). In this period of rapid instructional change, educators are often left with many questions:

- **What is academic language?**
- **What is the importance of teaching academic language?**
- **How should I approach the teaching of academic language?**

While these questions lack simple answers, the field of literacy research has begun to provide some initial insights that might support educators in crafting linguistically-responsive instruction.

WHAT IS ACADEMIC LANGUAGE?

Defined by Nagy and Townsend (2012) as the, ‘specialized language, both oral and written, of academic settings that facilitates communication and thinking about disciplinary content (p.92),’ academic language is a functional tool that allows for discussion and reflection on the types of complex ideas and phenomenon that comprise the middle grade curricula. Problematically, there is no clear set of words, phrases, or text features that can be labeled as ‘academic’ (Snow & Uccelli, 2009; Snow, 2010). Instead, we find that in contrast to conversational English, academic texts contain a higher proportion of **longer, abstract words** often derived from Latin; more nouns, adjectives and **prepositional phrases**; **verbs or adjectives used as nouns** (to destroy →destruction); **words and phrases that connect ideas within sentences**; **variation in the terms used to refer to the same person or idea**; and more information in each sentence (Biber, 2006; Snow & Uccelli, 2009) (See text box below). These features of academic text all occur simultaneously; therefore, the challenge faced by adolescent readers, and especially by ELLs, is great. In fact, recent research with learners in grades 4-8 suggests that students’ knowledge of these features and of academic vocabulary together predict much of the variation in their reading comprehension performances (Uccelli et al., 2014). This suggests that while secondary educators may focus on the teaching high-utility vocabulary found across the texts selected as part of a unit, AL instruction must also support students to systematically attend to these other features of text.

Academic Language

Academic Language refers to the words, phrases and ways of structuring texts commonly found in academic texts, speech and writing. This language is used by academic writers because it is useful for conveying information precisely and concisely. Academic writers are communicating with an audience that is not present, and so clear and accurate communication is particularly valued.

The reason for teaching academic language is simple: Students will struggle to learn from what they have read if they have not understood the language of the text.

WHAT IS ACADEMIC LANGUAGE? AN EXAMPLE

The **accelerating** pace of technological **progress** means that our **intelligent creations** will soon eclipse us—**and** that **their creations** will eventually **eclipse them**. Sometime early **in this century** the intelligence of **machines** will exceed that of humans. **Within a quarter of a century, machines** will exhibit the full range of human intellect, emotions and skills, ranging from musical and other creative aptitudes to physical movement. **They** will claim to have feelings **and, unlike** today’s virtual personalities, will be very **convincing** when **they** tell us so. By around 2020 a \$1,000 **computer** will at least match the **processing** power of the human brain. **By 2029** the **software for intelligence** will have been largely mastered, **and** the average personal **computer** will be equivalent to 1,000 brains.

Excerpt from: Kurzweil, Ray. “The Coming Merger of Mind and Machine.” *Scientific American Special Edition* January 2008.

WHAT IS THE IMPORTANCE OF TEACHING ACADEMIC LANGUAGE?

Often our students are conversationally fluent in English and may even be engaging conversation partners when discussion events in the schoolyard or yesterday’s school play. Surprisingly, these same students may struggle to understand the language of texts and to produce AL when speaking or writing (Cummins, 2000). This difficulty with academic language arises, in part, because many learners—both ELLs and monolingual English speakers—have simply had very few opportunities to be exposed to and to use AL (Lesaux & Kieffer, 2010). These students, often struggling readers, have limited access to school texts, which contain much more academic language than spoken English (Corson, 1997). This is especially the case for students classified as Long Term English Language Learners (LTELLs), who represent a large (and growing) segment of the secondary school population in New York City (Menken, Kleyne & Chae, 2012). One reason for teaching academic language, therefore, is to provide authentic opportunities for students to gain experience speaking, writing, listening and reading the language used in academic communities. As the body of research grows which suggests that the ability to understand and to use academic language is linked with both reading comprehension skill and general academic achievement (Bailey & Heritage, 2008; Hakuta, Butler, & Witt, 2000; Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007; Uccelli et al., 2014), educators should increasingly conceptualize academic language teaching as a lever for providing students with the tools they need to access higher education and career opportunities—and as a mechanism for promoting educational equity (Zwiers, 2008).

A FRAME FOR APPROACHING THE TEACHING OF ACADEMIC LANGUAGE

As demonstrated on the previous page, academic language does not refer solely to the complex vocabulary found in texts. However, for most of us beginning to teach academic language in earnest, the teaching of academic vocabulary within texts and linked to the other words that are necessary to grasp the word's meaning offers a starting place (Nagy & Townsend, 2012). In the past, we often selected a few rare words from a single text or from an academic word list and would teach the definitions of these words and, when time allowed, have students write their own sentences using the taught vocabulary. Today, we recognize that we are not teaching vocabulary simply to help students to get through a single text (Lesaux & Kieffer, 2010). Instead, we are teaching AL vocabulary to provide students with knowledge of the language forms that they will need to access the texts they will encounter in the future and to convey their learning (Townsend, Filippini, Collins & Biancarosa, 2012). Of course, this has important ramifications for how we select words to teach and craft this instruction. Luckily, we have a strong research-base to draw from given that approaches that have long been known to support monolingual students have recently been demonstrated to support ELLs (Lesaux et al., 2010; Snow et al., 2009; Townsend & Collins, 2009).

SELECT WORDS TO TEACH THAT APPEAR MULTIPLE TIMES IN CURRICULAR MATERIALS AND ARE ESSENTIAL FOR COMMUNICATING THE KEY LEARNINGS FROM THE UNIT.

Words selected to teach should be predominately of two types: 1) Discipline-specific AL words that are used in a single content area and often have specialized meanings; 2) and 'general-use' AL that appears in all academic texts across disciplines (e.g., structure, procedure, option, identify) (Beck, McKeown & Kucan, 2002; Coxhead, 2000; Hiebert & Lubliner, 2008; Townsend et al., 2012). While we likely teach discipline-specific academic words as part of our regular instruction, the words in the latter category appear frequently in texts and demand explicit teaching (Coxhead, 2000). In fact, knowledge of these 'general-use' academic words appears to support reading comprehension in all disciplines, especially for ELLs (Institute of Educational Sciences, 2007; Townsend et al., 2012).

To truly 'know' a word—so that it can be used accurately when writing and speaking—requires that students have been exposed to the word multiple times and had the opportunity to repeatedly practice using it (Blachowicz & Fisher, 2000). By selecting a small number of words to teach that appear frequently in the texts students will read and which are easily used by students when discussing and writing about the content focus, educators can foster the conditions that support word learning. Simply put learning the definition of a word, without having mastered how the word might be used in different contexts or disciplines, is insufficient (Hancioglu, Neufield, & Eldridge, 2008; Hyland & Tse, 2007).

TEACH ACADEMIC WORDS WITHIN THE CONTEXTS IN WHICH THEY ARE USED AS A BRIDGE TO TEACHING ADDITIONAL ACADEMIC LANGUAGE FEATURES—AND WORLD KNOWLEDGE.

When we teach academic vocabulary comprehensively, we are teaching vocabulary embedded in the authentic contexts in which these words are used—namely, complex texts. This implies that we are also supporting students to examine the complex sentences in which the target words are embedded as well as the other AL features used by the writer. Because general-use academic language words appear in predictable formulations in texts ('identify the problem' is a common construction, for example), students should be supported to recognize and adopt these common patterns, which exposes students to a host of additional words. Because knowledge of vocabulary and other academic language features develops simultaneously as students interact with text, knowledge of a single AL vocabulary words 'is just the tip of the iceberg' (Stahl & Nagy, 2006, p.10). However, as students acquire knowledge of AL words through rich exposure to text, they are not only learning additional academic language features; they are also gaining knowledge of the concepts and ideas these words represent (Stahl, 2005).

FOSTER MASTERY OF ACADEMIC WORDS AND PROMOTE 'WORD CONSCIOUSNESS' THROUGH ENGAGEMENT WITH AUTHENTIC TASKS (DISCUSSIONS, WRITING) AND ENGAGING TEXTS

Ample research suggests that students are motivated to acquire new language when presented with texts that are engaging and tasks that make them want to use the target language to communicate with peers (Lesaux et al., 2010; Snow et al., 2009). Through activities that stimulate an interest in words as tools for expressing opinions, knowledge and wonderings, students can be supported in developing a disposition towards examining word parts and how words are used in academic contexts—dubbed 'word consciousness' by Scott and Nagy (2004).

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES TO CONTINUE LEARNING:

- Fang, Z., & Schleppegrell, M. J. (2008). *Reading in secondary content areas: A language-based pedagogy*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Kieffer, M., & Lesaux, N. (2007). Breaking down words to build meaning: Morphology, vocabulary, and reading comprehension in the urban classroom. *Reading Teacher*, 61, 134–144.

- Snow, C., Lawrence, J., & White, C. (2009). Generating knowledge of academic language among urban middle school students. *Journal of Research on Educational Effectiveness*, 2, 325–344.
- Townsend, D. (2009). Building academic vocabulary in after school settings: Games for growth with middle school English learners. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 53, 242–251.
- Zwiers, J. (2008). *Building academic language: Essential practices for content classrooms*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

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