



Middle School Academic Talk: The Key to Ensuring Access for All

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In any classroom, whether a kindergarten class in Colorado or a high school science class in New Hampshire, English language learners (ELLs) need to meet two sets of standards: content standards and English language proficiency (ELP) standards.

Typically, classroom teachers are masters at addressing content standards, but they may not be as masterful at attending to ELP standards. There are key differences between academic content standards and ELP standards—in audience, focus, representation, and progressions (see Table 1). The second element in the table, Focus, emphasizes one of the key differences between the two sets

of standards: The ELP standards are focused on acquiring social and academic language, with a stronger focus on acquiring academic language.

For most teachers, particularly middle and high school teachers of subjects other than language arts, language is invisible. Although they know they teach with language, they don't think of themselves as teachers of language. They may identify key vocabulary but aren't accustomed to identifying the academic language that accompanies their content. This may be because there is much more to academic language than vocabulary, a point often overlooked in teaching in the content areas. Purposeful attention to academic language, in conjunction

with multiple opportunities for students to engage in productive, accountable talk, is important for ELLs and others who need language development.

A myriad of reasons may contribute to inattention to purposeful teaching of academic language—a lack of professional development around instructional practices that align academic language to content, for example, or the strong emphasis on reading and writing, particularly through standardized assessments. The good news for instructional leaders is that we can address academic language in the content areas through purposeful, intentional leadership designed to increase academic talk in middle school classrooms.

Table 1. Comparison of Academic Content Standards and English Language Proficiency Standards

Element	Academic Content Standards	English Language Proficiency Standards
Audience	Designed for all students	Designed for ELLs
Focus	Focused on knowledge and skills to achieve academically	Focused on acquiring social and academic language proficiency
Representation	Represented by three content areas: language arts, math, science	Represented by four language domains: listening, speaking, reading, writing
Progressions	Labeled by achievement levels (e.g., basic, proficient, advanced)	Labeled according to levels of language proficiency (e.g., beginning, developing, transitioning)

Adapted from Gottlieb, M. (2006). *Assessing English language learners*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press

Before delving more deeply into how instructional leaders can introduce strategies for increasing academic conversations, we need to clearly define and understand the three dimensions of academic language. In addition to the disciplinary content (e.g., characters, photosynthesis, parabola), process (e.g., analysis, justification, computation), and vocabulary, other dimensions of academic language include the syntax and discourse of content.

In the case of academic language, *syntax* refers to the grammar associated with subject matter. For example, passive voice is common in science classrooms and textbooks, but is not how students talk in their day-to-day lives. Passive voice can be challenging for ELLs. Most of the time, students and those around them use active voice while speaking; passive voice, on the other hand, may appear primarily in textbooks, and students may struggle with it given its unfamiliarity. ELLs, then, need syntactically sensitive teachers who can help them negotiate complex texts that include passive voice constructions.

Academic vs. Conversational Discourse	
Conversational	Academic
They're the same.	Both items are similar because _____.
They ran and then they jumped and then fell.	Initially, they were sprinting. Not long after, they leaped and ultimately collapsed.

Discourse, the third element of academic language, refers to the structures put in place in classrooms so ELLs can hear good models of English and have the opportunity to use the English they are learning. Academic discourse includes the sentences used to express content ideas—as opposed to social conversation—and is characterized by longer, more complex sentences using higher-level vocabulary (see “Academic vs. Conversational Discourse” sidebar).

When teachers are discourse coaches, they help their students to “sound like a book” (Hill & Flynn, 2006), as if they were authors, mathematicians, and scientists.

O'Hara, Zwiers, and Pritchard (2014) recommend that we visualize the three dimensions of academic language as an iceberg. This is a good metaphor because it reminds us that vocabulary is just the tip of the iceberg, and there is so much more below the waterline. The

iceberg shows how the depth and complexity increase as one moves from looking at words to looking at how messages are put together for particular audiences.

Zwiers, O'Hara, and Pritchard (2014) have summarized the dimensions of academic language in the table below, which shows us the depth of academic language.

The message dimension in the chart above represents discourse and providing students with multiple opportunities to interact with one another. When students are talking, we want them to use targeted academic language rather than the conversational language they would use with their friends. The sentence dimension denotes the grammar that teachers should attend to with ELLs, particularly when reading complex text. And, finally, the word/phrase dimension signifies the vocabulary element of content learning. To address the vocabulary facet, teachers need to help students talk

Table 2. Dimensions, Features, and Skills of Academic Language

Dimensions	Features	Skills
Message	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Clarity and coherence Register for participants and purpose Density of ideas and their relationships Message organization and structure (visuals, paragraphs) Organization of sentences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create a logical flow of—and connections between—ideas, knowing how ideas develop and need to develop Match language with the purpose of the message (clear, complete, focused, logical, and appropriate to the discipline) Create, clarify, fortify, and negotiate ideas
Sentence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sentence structure (compound/complex) and length (longer) Transitions and connectives Complex verb tenses and passive voice Pronouns and references 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Craft sentences to be clear Use a variety of sentence types to clarify a message and condense information Combine ideas, phrases, and clauses
Word/Phrase	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cross-disciplinary terms Figurative expressions and multiple meanings Content vocabulary Affixes, roots, and transformations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Choose and use the best words and phrases to communicate Figure out the meaning of new words and terms Use and clarify new words to build ideas or create products

From Zwiers, O'Hara, & Pritchard (2014). *Common Core Standards in diverse classrooms: Essential practices for developing academic language and disciplinary literacy*.

Strategy Spotlight—Signal Words

Again, it's not enough to simply teach the vocabulary of a content area. Using signal words can support students in using academic language and producing more complex sentences. For example, in comparing ancient civilizations in sixth-grade social studies, after teacher modeling of transition words, students might be expected to talk in pairs, using transition words such as "based on," "similarly," and "compared with." A teacher could expect to hear students say, "Based on types of food production, the ancient Romans and Mayans were similar because they both grew corn." After the oral practice, teachers could then anticipate seeing similar transition words in students' writing.

Strategy Spotlight—Mix/Freeze/Pair

It's not enough to learn disciplinary vocabulary; students must hear and use the words in meaningful contexts. One way to foster this is by using a structure for academic talk called a Mix-Freeze-Pair (Kagan, 1992), which is a tool for discussion and a way to get students talking with other students.

Step 1: Teacher calls "Mix!" Students move around the classroom without talking.

Step 2: Teacher calls "Freeze!" Students stop in their tracks.

Step 3: Teacher calls "Pair!" Students turn to the closest partner and answer the teacher's prompt.

In middle school science, the teacher may ask, "How does precipitation affect your life?" After talking with three others, using the word "precipitation," students may be asked to return to their desks and engage in a writing assignment to answer the question. The written product will be much richer when students have had a chance to talk before writing.

Classroom Snapshot—Talk Before You Write

The idea that rich, oral academic language is the precursor to improved writing may also be true for struggling writers who are native English speakers. One of the authors was observing in a high school classroom when students were asked to write to the prompt, "What is poetry?" The responses were brief: "It rhymes." "It doesn't always rhyme." "It has stanzas." Written replies would have been longer if students were able to talk with three others before formulating a response.

(message dimension) about words in meaningful contexts generating longer and more complex sentences (sentence dimension).

Students come to school with varying degrees of exposure to academic language. Wong-Fillmore (2013) points out that there are no native speakers of academic language; Gottlieb and Ernst-Slavit (2014) further support this notion, suggesting that everyone is a language learner because all students must learn the language of the classroom.

To emphasize that all students need explicit instruction in academic English, McREL International has coined the acronym ALL, which identifies all students as Academic Language Learners (ALL).

To support ALLs in using the language associated with schooling and helping them to engage in academic discourse, instructional leaders need to encourage specific structures that will allow multiple

opportunities for students to talk with each other, hear good models of English, and learn the English that has been targeted to support the content. The goal of these opportunities is not talking for talking's sake—the goal is accountable, productive talk, so that students will sound like authors, scientists, and historians. In order to facilitate the infusion of academic conversation into middle school classrooms, instructional leaders will need to lead the charge toward moving the classroom from being a culture of "sit and get" to one characterized by academic conversations.

If talk is encouraged as a way to develop academic language, then ELLs are "on equal footing" with proficient English speakers (Gottlieb & Ernst-Slavit, 2014, p. 26). Because everyone has to learn academic language, academic conversations benefit ALL students.

Strategy Spotlight—Sentence Starters for Reciprocal Teaching Roles

SUMMARIZER

- The most important person/place/thing is _____.
- The most important idea about the person/place/thing is _____.
- The author wants to highlight _____.
- Does anyone want to add to my summary?

QUESTIONER

- Why _____?
- How _____?
- Explain _____.
- What is the problem with _____?
- What would happen if _____?
- Would anyone else like to ask a question?

CLARIFIER

- Here is an idea I would like to clarify: _____.
- _____ means _____.
- Is there anything else to clarify?
- Are there any words we need help with?

One effective means for permeating classrooms with academic talk is to use reciprocal teaching (Palanscar & Brown, 1984), because it engages students in four behaviors of good readers: summarizing, questioning, clarifying, and predicting.

Here's how reciprocal teaching works in an effective way for ELLs: Students are seated in groups of four. Each student is assigned one of the four reading behaviors, which become "roles," on a table tent that has the role written on one side and sentence starters on the other side.

After reading a portion of text and before executing their roles, all students meet in expert groups according to their roles and decide upon a summary that they will share, questions they will ask about the text, what needs to be clarified about the text, or predictions about the next portion of text.

For instance, for a predictor, the sentence starters might be as follows

(see sidebar for sentence starters for other reciprocal teaching roles):

Predictor

- I think _____ will happen next because _____.
- I predict the author will tell us _____.
- I predict the next part will be about _____.
- What do you predict?

(For more evidence of the efficacy of reciprocal teaching for improving adolescent literacy, please visit the What Works Clearinghouse, U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences, at http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/reports/adolescent_literacy/rec_teach/index.asp.)

Instructional leaders can provide the message that ELLs need more talk time before engaging in the writing process. As Williams, Stathis, and Gotsch explain, if you can't say it, you can't write it. "Research suggests that more talking—oral language development—is the prerequisite to developing strong writing skills" (2009, p. 22). In other words, rich, oral academic language is the precursor to expecting high quality written work (August & Shanahan, 2006). When we provide more time for academic talk we must in turn provide a corresponding amount of time to transfer those new skills to writing, which is assessed and carries a fair amount of weight in terms of school accountability measures.

This change in teacher practices, allowing for more talk before writing, can lead to a change in student achievement. The literature is awash with studies and reports (e.g., Coleman & Goldenberg, 2012; O'Hara, Zwiers, and Pritchard, 2014; Willner, 2014) supporting the need for academic talk in classrooms.

Reshaping classrooms to include more productive, accountable academic conversations to improve reading and writing will demand focus and thought leadership from instructional leaders. By supporting teachers across the content areas to use structures for academic talk including reciprocal teaching, these leaders can help teachers understand the benefits and experience the results.

Key action steps for supporting teachers in their teaching of complex academic language and its connection to content standards include:

- Coteaching alongside content teachers and augmenting with opportunities for extended academic talk related to literacy.
- Modeling for teachers how to integrate academic talk into daily work. Modeling can include examples and nonexamples of what this can look and sound like.
- Providing focused professional development so teachers will have structures that provide opportunities for students to interact with one another using listening and speaking as a means to understand what they have read and what they are going to write.
- Substituting or providing a substitute for teachers to watch other teachers successfully integrate academic talk into subject matter instruction.

While infusing classrooms with supportive structures for academic talk will benefit ELLs as they grapple with both academic and English language proficiency standards, it will also benefit ALL. **PL**

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