

# The Third Language of Academic English

*Five key mental habits help English language learners acquire the language of school.*

Jeff Zwiers

**A**cademic language is the linguistic glue that holds the tasks, texts, and tests of school together. If students can't use this glue well, their academic work is likely to fall apart. I define *academic language* as the set of words and phrases that (1) describe content-area knowledge and procedures, (2) express complex thinking processes and abstract concepts, and (3) create cohesion and clarity in written and oral discourse.

For English language learners, academic English is like a third language, their second language being the social English of the hallways, community, and media. And whereas students are exposed to social English in various settings, academic language acquisition is generally limited to the classroom. This third language is full of new words, figurative expressions, grammar structures, verb tenses, and communication strategies. Many English language learners, even those with well-developed social language, struggle to master the complex language of school.

## Learning Habits

Teachers need to help English language learners develop a set of automatic strategies—what I call learning habits—that they can use to acquire academic language in any setting. The five learning habits discussed here can help students recognize and understand

academic language in a variety of classroom contexts. I developed the list by drawing on research from language acquisition theory, academic language development, and constructivist learning methods.

To help students cultivate these

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habits, educators must first reflect on their own academic language proficiency. Because we are immersed in an ocean of academic language daily, it's hard to notice the habits we automatically engage in to comprehend such language. For example, you are probably not struggling to read this article, which is saturated with academic language. The ocean analogy and the word *saturated* are examples of the kind of academic language that we take

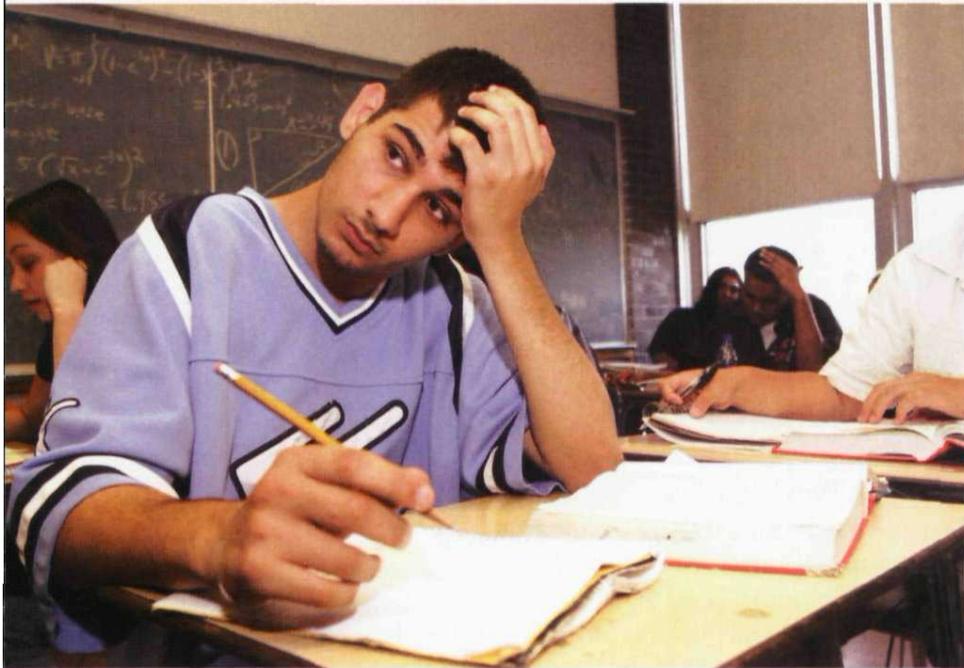
for granted—and so is the phrase *take for granted*. When we become aware of our own habits and strategies, we can model them and make them available to our students.

## Use Context to Interpret Meaning

I teach students to use context to help figure out an unfamiliar word or expression. Context is a combination of the meaning of surrounding words, any accompanying visuals, and the overall meaning of a passage. I encourage students to “scope out the neighborhood where the word lives,” and show how this “neighborhood” provides clues to meaning. When listening to spoken academic language, students can guess the meaning of unfamiliar words by paying attention to the speaker's purpose, intonation, and facial expressions, as well as to key words the speaker emphasizes or repeats.

Such guesses will remain stored in the brain, sometimes unconsciously, until the student sees or hears the word again. As a student encounters the target word or expression in more contexts, the student's brain continues to sculpt the word's meaning and store it in memory. Most of us learned the majority of words we know from seeing them in context—often not just one or two times, but hundreds of times or more.

I model for students how I go



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through this process in my own reading. For example, I might think aloud,

When I find a word I don't know, I look at the words around it. I take out the unknown word and try replacing it with words I do know that would make sense. This sentence says, "His *desultory* ways led him to the four corners of the globe." When I remove the unknown word *desultory*, I get, "His *something* ways led him to the four corners of the globe." I guess that *desultory* means *wandering, traveling, or curious*. Now I write these possible meanings on a sticky note and stick it to that page of the book. The next time I see the word *desultory*, in this text or another book, I will see if my current meanings fit.

I have students try this process with an appropriate text. If they run into numerous unknown words, I suggest they concentrate on words the author repeats, which are probably important. Students discuss and refine their guesses with partners, then check their guesses against the dictionary meaning. A key aspect of this habit is learning to make

the concrete-abstract connection, to quickly change the concrete meaning of a term into an abstract meaning that fits the context. For example, when educators read the expression "to scaffold learning," they do not envision literal scaffolds at construction sites; they think of temporary teaching supports.

### Recognize Words That Describe Thinking Skills

One of the principal roles of academic language is to describe such complex, higher-order thinking processes as comparing, analyzing, evaluating, synthesizing, and persuading (Chamot & O'Malley, 1994). As teachers, we must notice the concepts and thinking processes associated with the content we are teaching and identify the academic language that describes these thinking skills (Zwiers, 2004).

For example, if you ask students to compare the foreign policies of two presidents, pause to discuss the meaning of the term *compare*. Highlight some of the terms commonly used to signal the process of comparing: *like-*

*wise, on the other hand, similarly.* Train students to analyze the academic language in texts, which in turn helps them figure out the author's thinking, purpose, and text structure.

One way to help students recognize academic language is to create an "Academic Language Bank" (Cunningham, 1995). Work with students to pick out key academic terms and expressions from texts—not specialized, "big" vocabulary items like *photosynthesis*, but such terms as *rather, therefore, doesn't hold water, justify, and support*. Write terms and their definitions on pieces of green paper and tape them on the wall. The bank can be an ever-evolving reference tool to help students understand, value, and use academic language.

### Read Challenging but Understandable Materials

Reading is a powerful way to push students beyond social language into academic language (Gibbons, 2002). Reading texts helps students see the *organizational structure of sentences* and paragraphs in both narrative and expository form. In contrast to listening, reading allows students to revisit confusing parts and fix up comprehension glitches. Reading gives students time to see and process many new words and expressions that are not commonly used in conversation.

So how do we build the habit of reading in English when getting English language learners to read in their first language is often hard enough? One

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**Educators must set up learning environments  
in which students feel safe to take risks with their  
evolving academic language.**

such as

- What do you think about the current president?
- What is your favorite class/film/book? Why?
- Why do we study history? Science? Literature? Math?

One way to help students conquer their fear of talking to native speakers is to model successful conversations. I have a friend come into class and—with students gathered around watching us—hold a conversation with me, talking slightly more slowly and clearly than normal. I often choose a controversial topic to model ways to disagree respectfully. Students listen and take notes on specific words they hear, nonverbal communication strategies they notice, and questions they have about conversational practice.

**Owning the Language**

Many English language learners need to learn English at accelerated rates to perform on grade level. Fluency in social language is not enough to help close the achievement gaps that are often created by a lack of academic language. We must train our students to hear, harness, and own the academic language that they need for success. **EL**

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