The Third Language of Academic English

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

Jeff Zwiers

Academic 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 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 once or two times, but hundreds of times or more.

I model for students how I go...
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-
way is to read aloud to students as they follow along, stopping at times to model your thinking out loud, to go over new words, or to talk about what is happening in a passage. Have students come up with questions, make predictions, develop summaries, and talk or write about the text in small groups. The Directed Reading-Thinking Activity (Stauffer, 1975) and Guided Reading (Fountas & Pinnell, 2000) are popular strategies for modeling and scaffolding the thinking that is needed to comprehend as one reads. Literature Circles (Short & Burke, 1991) and Reciprocal Teaching (Palinscar & Brown, 1984) are effective models for student-led discussions about readings.

To stimulate reading, bring in materials besides books—magazines, newspapers, song lyrics, letters, short stories, and so on—focused on topics that appeal to kids. Emphasize the importance of reading for meaning, and remind students that they don’t need to know every word to get a passage’s meaning.

I have students fill out a chart for texts they read in school, answering the following questions: What was the author’s purpose in writing this piece? Is the piece fiction or nonfiction? What academic thinking skills did I use as I read this? What did I learn from reading this? What do I still want to know, and what new words and terms did I encounter? These charts encourage academic responses and help cultivate discussion.

**Take Risks in the New Language**

Educators must set up learning environments in which students feel safe to take risks with their evolving academic language. Speaking challenges an English language learner to communicate a complex message to real listeners (Lightbrown, 2003). To speak in a group, a student must actively think about and organize the message quickly and clearly so that listeners will understand. Whether or not the message comes out grammatically correct, this thinking strengthens the student’s academic language processing. Rivers (1994) highlights the need for language learners to construct their own meanings and negotiate meaning with other speakers. If students remain silent, never communicating their thoughts, they will not hear direct responses to their comments. Direct responses from other speakers represent what Krashen (1982) calls comprehensible input—language that students hear or read that is understandable enough for their brains to acquire and process.

For example, in a discussion in a science class on pollution, an English language learner might hesitate to give her opinion, waiting until she can formulate a grammatically perfect sentence. If that student remains silent, she remains passive and tends to tune out. If she speaks up, even with an imperfectly constructed message, she learns actively from genuine conversation. Other students’ responses will connect directly to what she said.

Another advantage of taking risks with academic language is that the teacher can model the student’s message back to her with correct grammar. If a student says, “I think that we don’t need more factories because pollution,” the teacher could respond, “Interesting. You think that we don’t need factories because of their pollution. Does anyone disagree?” This answer validates the student’s response, models the correct way to say it, and keeps the conversation focused on meaning.

**Converse with Native Speakers About Academic Topics**

This can be the most challenging habit of all for English language learners to develop because conversing with native speakers of English can be scary. Few English language learners get enough experience conversing in English about school topics. Yet such conversation is vital. English language learners may have done exercises, answered questions, created brochures, or even given oral presentations, but few have had in-depth conversations about a topic with a native speaker of English.

I encourage my students to see every native speaker as a temporary teacher and every conversation as a chance to learn something new. I actually assign English-learning students to have a conversation, however brief, with a native English speaker and to record on a notecard how the talk went. I suggest that they approach the native speaker and say, “I need to practice speaking English for a few minutes. Can you help me?” They are armed with a list of possible questions or conversation topics with an academic flavor to them,
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.

References


Copyright © 2004 Jeff Zwiers.

Jeff Zwiers is an Adjunct Instructor in the Teacher Education Department at the University of San Francisco; jzwiers@usfca.edu.

First Choice for Education Solutions

- Spanish Resources for Early Literacy, including Manipulative Kits
- Sheltered Instruction in High School Content Areas - Resources and Professional Development
- Science Children’s Book Series
- Primary Reading Instruction Manuals for Educators (PRIME)
- Many Additional Products Available

Products and services can be customized to meet your state standards.

www.esc4.net
Call (713) 462-7708

Prices Catalog Order Forms

Go To www.esc4.net/resources

ASSOCIATION FOR SUPERVISION AND CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT 63