

Academic Language in the Secondary Classroom

Practice with the vocabulary used in each discipline builds fluency in academic language.

By Douglas Fisher and Nancy Frey

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Watch the Video!

Watch a teacher model how to use academic language at:
www.principals.org/pl0211fisher.

Academic language has become a hot topic in secondary education. Teachers and administrators recognize that students must be able to understand and use the languages of academic disciplines to explain, debate, and persuade. It is simply not sufficient for only one person—the teacher—to be adept at using academic language. Yet listening to academic English will not ensure that students become proficient users of the language.

Acquisition of any language, including academic English, requires that users speak, listen, read, and write using the vocabulary of the discipline. This is especially true for English language learners. Or as Dutro and Moran (2003) note, students need to learn English, not just learn *in* English. Learning English requires that students are apprenticed into language use through exposure to academic vocabulary and language frames and that they are then given opportunities to use the language of the lesson during productive group work.

The Demands of Academic Language

Even native English speakers are still novices at using academic language proficiently, in part because they are still mastering the disciplines of history, science, mathematics, and the arts. Each has its own nomenclature and communication style. In addition, the language registers, or linguistic features of classroom discourse, are specialized (Joos, 1967). People generally shift through several registers every day:

- Consultative: two-way speech that people use to discuss ideas in such situations as schools and workplaces
 - Casual: two-way speech among friends, marked by fragments, interruptions, and inside humor
 - Intimate: speech reserved for close friends and family, such as a mother cooing to her baby.
- The consultative register is the language of the classroom. Students read, write, speak, and listen using a language style that can be challenging to nearly all of them. Think of the discourse demands of a science classroom. Students discuss a concept that is abstract and likely to be far removed physically and temporally from the room they sit in. The verb tense may be past, present, or future, and the sentences are long and complex. Meaning is derived from written texts as well as spoken ones. And there is a high expectation that the speaker be accurate grammatically as well as in content (Scarcella & Rumberger, 2000).
- Instruction, then, must provide students with ample opportunity to interact in ways that require them to use academic language. Of course, simply giving more-difficult assignments won't do the trick. The quality indicators for academic language instruction include exposure to academic language as well as opportunities to practice the language with others, including peers. Students must witness how their teacher (an expert in using academic language) models its use and exposes his or her thinking. (See our November 2010 column for discussion about modeling and thinking aloud.) Students need instruction on how to use vocabulary in context. And to use academic language, they
- Fixed or frozen: recited speech, such as the Pledge of Allegiance
 - Formal: one-way speech, such as in a sermon or lecture

require lots of interaction that includes supports to foster and extend their proficiency.

Vocabulary and Language Structure

Vocabulary gets lots of attention in content classrooms and for good reason. Notably, it is a strong indicator of verbal ability (Sternberg, 1987) and reading comprehension (Baker, Simmons, & Kame'enui, 1998). But vocabulary should not be thought of as a list of isolated terms, but rather as the accurate use of these terms in sentences and paragraphs. Therefore, student practice with vocabulary should occur within the context of the language itself. Correct grammar is necessary to accurately express ideas, and the practice of generative sentences (Fisher, Frey, & Rothenberg, 2008) allows students to simultaneously consider vocabulary and syntax.

A World History teacher at our school spends a few minutes each day using this instructional routine to foster academic language use that is both grammatically and semantically correct. For example, during a unit on the era leading up to World War I, he asked students to write a sentence in their notebook that was at least eight words long and featured *pogroms* in the fourth position, then asked volunteers to read what they had written:

- Russian czarists used *pogroms* to frighten Jewish activists
- Some people escaped *pogroms* by immigrating to other countries, such as the United States
- It's easy for *pogroms* to turn into genocides.

As each student shared his or her original sentence, the class discussed the content. If needed, the teacher reviewed grammar. Every few days, he

invites students to look back at their history notebooks to select a generative sentence. Students use one of their previous sentences as a topic sentence for a summary they write as a ticket out the door. This allows the teacher to assess students' learning progress and determine which students need additional instruction.

Language Frames to Support Discourse

Another method for developing academic language in speaking and writing is through the use of language frames (Graff & Birkenstein, 2006). These are sentences, and even strings of sentences, that encourage students to explain, defend, and persuade using formal language. Students insert their original ideas into sentences that are partially constructed.

For example, an English teacher at our school uses language frames to develop her students' ability to write essays. They used this language frame to construct text: *I agree that _____, a point that needs emphasizing because so many people believe that _____.* One student wrote, "I agree that happiness can be bought, a point that needs emphasizing because so many people believe that it is internal. Doesn't the ease of transportation make you happy? What about the iPod you listen to?"

Of course, students don't immediately begin writing using such sophisticated language frames. They need many opportunities to use language frames in their discussions and in short writing tasks. Early in the year, the teacher introduces frames as a means by which students can explain themselves more clearly. When she noticed that they had difficulty supporting their opinions with evidence from the books they were reading



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independently, she designed some language frames that focused on that. For instance, they were introduced to such structures as:

- The evidence shows that _____
- I believe this because _____
- Ultimately, what I believe is _____
- I reached this conclusion because _____
- I would even add that _____.

She begins the lesson by setting the purpose: “Today we’re going to use sentence frames that will help us write using academic language and use evidence to support our statements.” After introducing the frames to her students, she models her own thinking about how she identified her aha moment while reading a mystery novel. She tells them that she wants to use a sentence frame to capture her own thinking about a moment of revelation about one of the characters. She models how she incorporates it into her literacy letter. Next, she and the class read an informational article about bullying and its consequences. She chose the article because it was full of startling statistics. After reading the article, students work collaboratively to discuss and write about their own aha moments. They negotiate how they could craft their summaries using the frames. Over time, the teacher hopes to build students’ habit of using academic language in their speaking and writing. A video of this teacher’s lesson on language frames accompanies this article and can be viewed at www.principals.org/pl0211fisher.

Conclusion

Adolescents are often unfamiliar with how the language of the classroom

differs from the other informal registers they commonly use. The academic vocabulary and structures make it especially difficult, but students must learn how they work in concert to illuminate ideas. Indicators of quality instruction in academic language include teacher modeling of how it is applied; oral and written practice as students interact with one another and the content; and language supports, such as sentence frames, to develop a disciplined approach to explaining and persuading. **PL**

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