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A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO ACADEMIC LANGUAGE

Dr. Margaret Grigorenko

A Short History

The theoretical concept of “academic language” came from research related to the education of speakers of other languages. Cummins (1981, 1984) made a distinction between “basic interpersonal communicative skills” (BICS) which are the language skills that are needed for casual, face to face communication, and “cognitive/academic language proficiency” (CALP), which refers to the specific literary language that is required in academic settings. Cummins described CALP as being more cognitively demanding than everyday interactions, and decontextualized, requiring students to use language in situations where they have relatively few contextual cues (like the intonation, facial expressions and gestures of BICS). In addition, academic language depends on a “preferred” set of language skills based upon accepted school practices. These skills include such things as discipline-specific vocabulary and phraseology, standardized grammar, discourse structures, and particular pragmatic conventions such as using a formal tone or register in both speaking and writing, using specified structures and procedures for completing work, and demonstrating compliance through certain body postures, facial expressions, tone of voice, ways of setting text on paper, etc.

This theory has been developed within a sociopolitical theory that has sought to identify the multiple reasons that bilingual or minority language students frequently perform poorly in school, and often fail to advance to higher education. It has been advanced by educators who promote diversity and seek to eliminate historical inequities toward certain minority groups within western educational systems. Direct instruction of academic language and related skills give evidence of improved educational outcomes for both language minority students (Chamot & O’Malley, 1994) and for students who are economically disadvantaged and speak non-mainstream American dialects (Grigorenko, 2005).

Based on this evidence, educational policy makers have made “academic language” a current focus. It is an explicit focus of both the new teacher performance assessments for pre-service and in-service teachers (edTPA) and in the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). The goal of putting academic language on educator’s radar screens is to enable all students to develop the language by which they may access mandated school content as well as demonstrate “what they know” on required academic assessments.

Definition

As a starting point, academic language can be defined as the language needed to be successful within a school context. A brief and concise definition of academic language is problematic since the specific language skills necessary for school achievement differ depending on the particular demands of any school, content discipline or educational task. As Cummins explains,

[T]he social practice of schooling entails certain ‘rules of the game’ with respect to how communication and language use is typically organized within that context. In short, in the present context the construct of *academic language proficiency* refers not to any absolute notion of expertise in language but to the degree to which an individual has access to and expertise in understanding and using the specific kind of language that is employed in educational contexts and is

required to complete academic tasks... Thus, in the context of schooling, discussions of greater or lesser degrees of language proficiency or ‘adequacy’ of an individual’s proficiency (CALP) is functional within the context of typical academic tasks and activities. (Cummins, 2000, p. 67)

Discussions of academic language refer to content vocabulary, linguistic registers, mainstream linguistic conventions, textual and literary features among other constructs as components of academic language. All of those elements may be a part of the language abilities that must be mastered to meet academic expectations, but no definitive set of knowledge or skills may be catalogued that identifies the particular language proficiencies that are necessary for any or all academic tasks.

Thus, edTPA defines academic language as, “Oral and written language used for academic purposes. Academic language is the means by which students develop and express content understandings. Academic language represents the language of the discipline that students need to learn and use to participate and engage in meaningful ways in the content area.” (Board of Trustees of the LSJU, 2012)

Components

As stated above, there are various and multiple components of academic language that depend upon the particular context. The following components are identified within the edTPA as critical features. The quoted portions are definitions from the edTPA glossary. The portions that are not quoted are explanations and illustrative examples that I have added:

1. Language functions - “The content and language focus of the learning task represented by the active verbs within the learning outcomes.” Examples of common learning functions are: describing, summarizing, categorizing, explaining, comparing/contrasting, recording.
2. Language forms – The defined system of genres or varieties of language usage that are organized to achieve academic purposes. Characteristically the forms use standardized forms of grammar and syntax (Standard English), use precisely defined vocabulary specific to an academic discipline and are structured according to conventions that are particular to school. Some examples of language forms that are typical of school are oral reports, group discussions, debates, choral singing, poetry, drama, textbooks, essays, research reports.
3. Discourse – “Discourse includes the structures of written and oral language, as well as how students talk, write, and participate in knowledge construction in ways that are appropriate both to their development and to the discipline. Discipline-specific discourse has distinctive features or ways of structuring oral or written language (text structures) that provide useful ways for the content to be communicated.” This is what we may consider to be the “rules of the game,” the preferred ways of speaking or writing that are considered to have the appropriate grammar and level of formality (register) that is expected in school. Though some students may intuitively “absorb” those norms, educators should make the expectations for speaking, writing and participating explicit, and should allow students opportunities to practice not only content, but the “procedural display” (Bloome, Puro & Theodorou, 1989) of the classroom.

4. Language demands - “Specific ways that academic language (vocabulary, functions, discourse, syntax) is used by students to participate in learning tasks through reading, writing, listening and/or speaking to demonstrate their understanding.” This refers to the particular functions, forms and discourses that students must be able to use fluently to accomplish assigned academic tasks and to be able to give evidence for their learning. For example, a simple reading comprehension exercise requires that students are able to listen to and understand the teacher’s directions, decode the text fluently, understand vocabulary, make sense of the content and relate it to prior knowledge. As part of the meaning-making they also must be familiar with the text structures and genre of the text they are reading as well as the participatory structures that they are expected to use to meet the academic requirements (i.e. independent silent reading, reading aloud, paired reading, listening to text). They must be able to interpret the format of the comprehension questions (true-false, multiple choice, short answer) and be able to discern how to appropriately respond, including the format, grammar, register and dialect that is expected. The complete set of necessary language skills encompasses the language demands of the task.

Assessment

In order to effectively teach academic language it is necessary to assess 1) students’ language abilities and 2) the language demands of the academic texts and tasks.

Students’ language abilities and resources may be evaluated either formally or informally. Many teachers use a language survey in which students self-report about their language usage and proficiency (one example is in Aguilar, Fu & Jago, 2007, pp. 123-124). Some informal reading inventories also have assessments of oral and written language (one example is Bader & Pearce, 2009).

Alternatively, teachers may assess student ability by careful observation of students’ oral language features and written language usage. If students use non-standard dialects or have a language other than English as their first language, teachers can study the patterns common to those speakers by accessing information from linguists who have studied the language forms. Linguistic analysis and comparisons to standard English conventions are available for many languages and dialects. It is important to consider the language strengths of students who are not well-versed in standard English, as well as identifying their language needs.

The second area for assessment are the language demands of the classroom - both procedural practices and academic tasks. Various systems for evaluating text difficulty have been developed through readability formulas and leveled reading guidelines which use quantitative measurements to assign levels of text difficulty. Though this is somewhat helpful, readability measures do not take into account other features which need to be assessed when considering the academic language demands. The Common Core State Standards outline the range of features that are considered in assigning what they term “text complexity.” The features are 1) Levels of Meaning or Purpose, 2) Structure, 3) Language Conventionality and Clarity, 4) Knowledge Demands: Life Experiences, 5) Knowledge Demands: Cultural/Literary Knowledge and 6) Knowledge Demands: Content/Discipline Knowledge.

In addition to the demands of texts that are being used, other considerations that should be considered include the level of independence or support that is afforded to complete the tasks,

the language of instruction or directions, the interactional or performance demands of the task, and the textual products (spoken or written) that are expected from the student.

Once an educator is able to evaluate their students' language abilities and needs as well as the language demands of the academic tasks, they are able to plan instruction that incorporates language instruction into the content teaching.

Teaching Academic Language

To effectively teach academic language, educators must utilize the information about students' existing language skills and patterns to expand their linguistic skills in ways that allow them access to the language of instruction and to develop the ability to communicate their learning in ways that count. Based on what students already know, educators need to teach students specific rules, norms, conventions, patterns and features that constitute standardized English. This may include speaking practices like tone of voice, volume and appropriate eye gaze, intonations and gestures. Teachers should make expectations explicit for both verbal performances and written language tasks.

In addition, they need to help students learn the differences between the Standard English required in school and the language varieties that they bring from home. A practice that has been demonstrated to be effective in making connections between home and school language is contrastive analysis (Lado, 1957). By teaching students the grammatical and syntactical features of both their home and school language patterns and communication styles, student can recognize the differences and make informed choices on language use based upon context. Along with this, educators need to recognize the negative stigma that has long been associated with language difference and work to foster positive attitudes toward language variation. Creative and constructive strategies to utilize students' language abilities as resources rather than considering them as deficits creates an atmosphere in which the use of multiple forms of language can be used to enhance content learning across the curriculum.

One of the key strategies for instructing students with regard to academic language is the idea of "fluency." Research suggests that many students are introduced to the content specific language of a discipline, the discourses of the classroom or a particular genre of language use, but are never given enough time and practice to be able to independently and confidently use the language for the range of functions demanded in school

Though the term "academic language" is rarely referred to, the Common Core State Standards have adopted a strong position on the importance of teaching the language of school, and the standards themselves provide learning outcomes that may suggest ways to integrate the teaching of academic language with other academic content.

The CCSS puts a strong emphasis on the development of language and literacy skills across the content areas. In the introduction to the CCSS, it states,

The Standards set requirements not only for English language arts (ELA) but also for literacy in history/social studies, science, and technical subjects. Just as students must learn to read, write, speak, listen, and use language effectively in a variety of content areas, so too must the Standards specify the literacy skills and understandings required for college and career readiness in multiple

disciplines...As a natural outgrowth of meeting the charge to define college and career readiness, the Standards also lay out a vision of what it means to be a literate person in the twenty-first century...In short, students who meet the Standards develop the skills in reading, writing, speaking, and listening that are the foundation for any creative purposeful expression in language.
(<http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy>. Retrieved 2/1/13)

The connection to academic language is elaborated in Appendix A of the English Language Arts Standards. Along with standards for Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening, the CCSS has set standards for Language. The Language strand establishes specific standards in the areas of conventions, knowledge of language, and vocabulary. However, the authors of the Standards make it clear that, “certain elements important to reading, writing, and speaking and listening are included in those strands to help provide a coherent set of expectations for those modes of communication...The inclusion of Language standards in their own strand should not be taken as an indication that skills related to conventions, knowledge of language, and vocabulary are unimportant to reading, writing, speaking and listening; indeed, they are inseparable from such contexts.” (CCSS ELA Standards, Appendix A, p. 28)

With regard to Conventions and Knowledge of Language, the CCSS focus on the teaching and learning of the conventions of Standard English. As they outline strategies for instruction, the authors recognize and dignify varieties of language, emphasizing the need to teach students to recognize and use both standard and non-standard language varieties. The Standards stipulate the development of grammatical knowledge in order that students may develop “a strong command of the grammar and usage of spoken and written standard English to succeed academically and professionally.” (Appendix A, p. 29). At the secondary level, the authors of The Standards also support the learning of grammatical structures of nonstandard dialects to help students both read literature that uses the dialects as well as to be able to purposefully choose from a range of language varieties in writing.

With regard to Vocabulary, the authors relate the standards to concepts of everyday and school language by stating, “

Initially, children readily learn words from oral conversation because such conversations are context rich in ways that aid in vocabulary acquisition: in discussions a small set of words (accompanied by gesture and intonation) is used with great frequency to talk about a narrow range of situations children are exposed to on a day-to-day basis.” (Appendix A, p. 32)

In addition The Standards utilize the conceptualization of three-tiers of words based on the writings of Beck, McKeown and Kucan (2002; 2008). Tier One words are “the words of everyday speech...They are not considered a challenge to the average native speaker” (Appendix A, p. 33). Tier Two words, which in The Standards are referred to as *general academic words* are defined as language that is more likely to appear in texts than in speech. They are not discipline-specific, but “often represent subtle or precise ways to say relatively simple things – *saunter* instead of *walk*, for example.” (Appendix A, p. 33) These words are considered to be highly generalizable because they are found across a wide range of texts. Tier Three words,

which in The Standards are referred to as *domain-specific* words, are defined as words which are specific to a particular field of study, and which are used within domain-specific discourses. These distinctions and the academic skills that are outlined for mastery within The Standards address the concept of academic language proficiency. The authors address the idea that students need not only to learn the meanings of terms, but also the contexts and social practices associated with the language use. “The challenge in reaching what we might call ‘lexical dexterity’ is that, in any given instance, it is not the entire spectrum of a word’s history, meanings, usages, and features that matters but only those aspects that are relevant at that moment.” The Standards then incorporate language learning as integrated with other content learning, having students move from less complex grammatical structures and vocabulary to greater textual and grammatical complexity in secondary grades.

Students need plentiful opportunities to use and respond to the words they learn through playful informal talk, discussion, reading or being read to, and responding to what is read. Students benefit from instruction about the connections and patterns in language. Developing in students an analytical attitude toward the logic and sentence structure of their texts, alongside an awareness of word parts, word origins, and word relationships, provides students with a sense of how language works such that syntax, morphology, and etymology can become useful cues in building meaning as students encounter new words and concepts (Beck, McKeown & Kucan, 2008). (Appendix A, p. 32)

Summary

Using a simple definition, academic language can be defined as the forms and functions of language that are used within the context of school. However, to grasp the breadth of meaning of the concept, it is necessary to unpack the multiple and interrelated ways that language is used in the speaking, listening, reading and writing of school. More than just the words, language involves the social practices that surround the use of words. These social practices hold social weight in allowing students opportunities to access and engage in learning tasks and to show what they know in ways that count. Because language usage permeates the practice of “school,” every educator needs to recognize the range of language practices that are at play within their classrooms and teach the expected language content and practices explicitly and intentionally.

Additional helpful resources (see references):

Baumann & Graves, 2010

Corson, 1997

Nagy & Townsend, 2012

Snow & Ucceli, 2009

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