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What Is Academic Language?

Language is the fundamental resource or tool with which teachers and children work together in schools.

—Frances Christie, 2005, p. 2

For the last couple of decades the language education community has been grappling with defining the construct of academic language and situating it within an assets-based model to ensure the academic success of linguistically and culturally diverse students. Along come the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in 2010, and poof, academic language assumes a front and center position in curriculum design and enactment, impacting every teacher, every day. This chapter summarizes the thinking on academic language use and its application to schooling. It examines the roles of academic language, its dimensions and underlying theories, and the developmental nature of language learning. It concludes with a call for educators to recognize the paradigm shift we are currently witnessing and to seize the opportunity to promote social justice for students everywhere.

THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE IN SCHOOLING AND BEYOND

Language is perhaps the most powerful tool available to teachers, since language is pervasive in every aspect of the teaching and learning process. Whether it is a nod signifying agreement, a command such as “Eyes on me!”

or an explanation such as, “This is one way to simplify an equation,” language is always a resource for making and communicating meaning.

Language serves many purposes in schools. In addition to being a place for social networking and for socializing students into ways of “doing school,” school is one context for learning. In school, students use language to make sense of the world that surrounds them, and, in the process, they are (1) learning language, (2) learning through language, and (3) learning about language (Halliday, 1993).

One unique characteristic of humans is that we never stop *learning language*. From birth to age 7, children learn an enormous amount of language. Although this amount declines as students reach age 17 or 18, we continue to learn and enhance the language we need as we navigate through new stages and contexts in life.

Language is at the center of the learning process; humans *learn through language*. Language is a way of seeing, understanding, and communicating about the world. Learning in schools and classrooms is largely accomplished through language. In school, “We could virtually say that ‘language is the curriculum’” (Derewianka, 1990, p. 3).

Beginning with the early stages of language learning, children formulate—consciously or unconsciously—their own rules about how language works. Later, children add new rules and amend old ones so that their sentences and usages resemble the language used by adults and those that surround them. As children learn the language of the home, they learn several different language styles, which vary according to the setting, the speakers, and the goal of communication. These styles are also called *registers*.

Different Registers

The concept of register is typically concerned with variations in language conditioned by uses rather than users and involves consideration of the situation or context of use, the purpose, subject-matter and content of the message, and the relationship between the participants. (Romaine, 1994, p. 20)

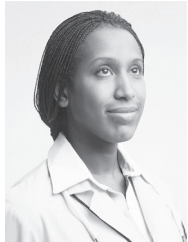
In the study of language, a register is a variety of a language used for a specific purpose and audience in a particular social setting. Registers are simply a particular kind of language being produced within the context of a social situation. Below are three ways of saying the same thing, depending on the relationship between speakers and the circumstance:

I would be very appreciative if you would make less noise.

Please be quiet.

Shut up!

Throughout the day a person may use several different registers. For example, let’s listen in as Nicole, a 37-year-old nurse, uses several registers.

 <p>Nicole (nurse, 37 years old)</p>	Message	To Whom	Context
	“That’s the optimum, and clinically that’s what’s advisable.”	patient	work
	“What’s up, Anne? I haven’t seen you in years.”	friend	grocery store
	“Way to go, Rudy, you nailed that one.”	son	basketball practice
	“let me know where u r when you have a min. thx, luv u”	teenage daughter	text message
	“I never had the opportunity to meet your father, but I know you talked highly of him, and I know your loss is great. Our condolences to you and your family.”	neighbor	written message on a card

In school contexts, teachers and students also use a variety of registers. Many researchers and educators have made a distinction between everyday and academic language (Cummins, 1986). Social language is associated with everyday, casual interactions; it’s the language we use to order an ice cream, talk with a neighbor, or chat with family members. In schools, this is the language students use in the playground, cafeteria, or in the hallway. However, social language is also very much used in classroom dialog, as illustrated in the following examples:

Consider this . . .

What are some of the ways you typically use language during the day? How might you document differences in academic language use according to the context and with whom you are interacting? What suggestions might you make to increase the rigor of academic language use within classrooms?

“Turn to your elbow partner and figure out the answer.” (Grade 2 teacher to students)

“Hold your horses; we are not there yet!” (history teacher to high school students).

“Dunno how to save my work.” (Grade 4 student to teacher)

“That’s a cool shirt, Dylan. Did you see the game?” (principal to middle school student).

“Dude, you need to get caught up with your group.” (Grade 5 teacher to student).

Everyday language is very much a part of classrooms and schools; however, with its colloquial and idiomatic expressions, it can be considered in the academic range for those students who have not previously been exposed to it. At the other end of the academic language spectrum is the more formal, specialized register associated with disciplinary material. With today’s emphasis on academic registers, many educators immediately think about vocabulary as the distinguishing feature. Although vocabulary is a very important dimension of academic language, as will become evident in the next sections, it is only one aspect.

THE NATURE OF ACADEMIC LANGUAGE

What’s hard about learning in academic content areas is that each area is tied to academic specialist varieties of language (and other special symbol systems) that are complex, technical, and initially alienating to many learners. (Gee, 2004, p. 3)

Although in recent years academic language has been at the center of many educational efforts, educators and researchers have conceptualized academic language in different ways. Several recent studies point to teachers’ understandings of academic language as challenging content-area vocabulary, or “hard words” (e.g., Ernst-Slavit & Mason, 2011; Homza, 2011; Lee, 2011; Wong Fillmore, 2011). However, academic language is a complex concept. “The difference in purpose, audience, and context results in clear differences in terms of language use in the selection of words, formality, sentence construction, and discourse patterns” (Gottlieb & Ernst-Slavit, 2013, p. 2).

In this section, we will provide a working definition of academic language, explain its importance in fostering academic thinking, describe the main roles of academic language, and explain three dimensions or components that characterize academic language.

In general terms, academic language refers to the language used in school to acquire new or deeper understanding of the content and communicate that understanding to others (Bailey & Heritage, 2008; Gottlieb & Ernst-Slavit, 2013; Gottlieb, Katz, & Ernst-Slavit, 2009; Schleppegrell, 2004). Because academic language conveys the kind of abstract, technical, and

complex ideas and phenomena of the disciplines, it allows users to think and act, for example, as scientists, historians, and mathematicians. Thus, academic language promotes and affords a kind of thinking different from everyday language. As put by William Nagy and Dianna Townsend (2012), “Learning academic language is not learning new words to do the same thing that one could have done with other words; it is learning to do new things with language and acquiring new tools for these purposes” (p. 93).

Viewing academic language not as an end in itself but as a means to foster academic thinking can be very helpful in moving away from a focus on teaching academic language when it is not contextualized in meaningful academic activities. Along these lines, Zwiers (2008) contends that academic language serves three interrelated and broad roles: to describe complexity, higher order thinking, and abstraction. Each purpose is briefly summarized in Figure 1.1.

Throughout this chapter and book series, we discuss academic language as including more than vocabulary or phrases pertinent to the topic at hand. As can be deduced from the above discussion, academic language necessitates more than knowledge of single words to describe complex concepts, thinking processes, and abstract ideas and relationships. The academic language needed for students to access disciplinary content and textbooks and successfully participate in activities and assessments involves knowledge and ability to use specific linguistic features associated with academic disciplines. These features include discourse features,

Figure 1.1 Roles of Academic Language

To Describe Complexity	Academic language enables us to describe complex concepts in clear and concise ways (e.g., explaining the concept of the black hole, the causes of the French Revolution, or the Fibonacci sequence).
To Describe Higher Order Thinking	Academic language enables us to describe complex thinking processes that are used to comprehend, solve problems, and express ideas (e.g., application and problem solving in math, analyzing data in science, constructing an argument in English language arts).
To Describe Abstraction	Academic language enables us to describe ideas or relationships that cannot be easily acted out, pointed to, or illustrated with images (e.g., democracy, altruism, values and beliefs, relationships among objects or numbers, adaptation).

Source: Adapted from Zwiers, 2008, pp. 23–27

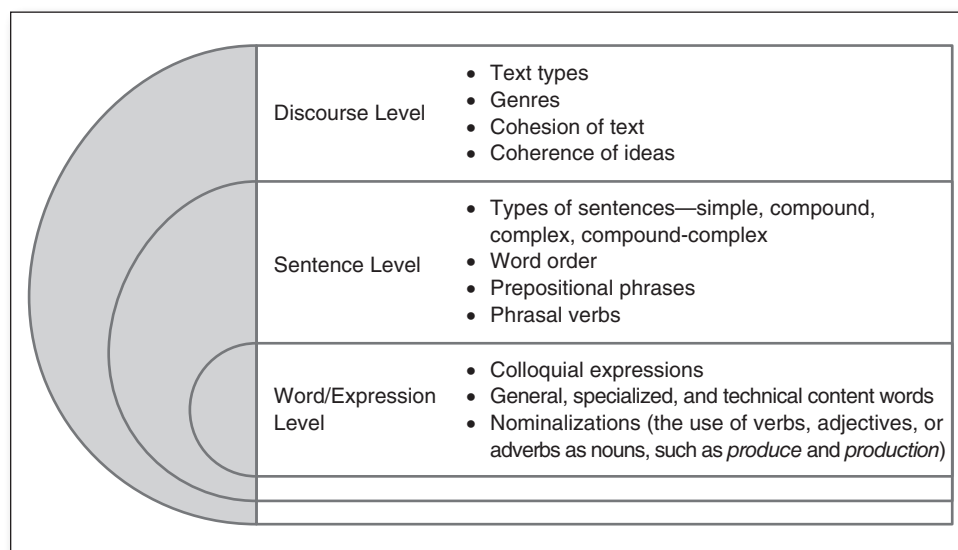
grammatical constructions, and vocabulary across different language domains (listening, speaking, reading, writing) and content areas (language arts, mathematics, science, history, among others).

When thinking about academic language use in classrooms, teachers generally start from the bottom level (with words and expressions) and then fold vocabulary into different configurations or syntactic structures that, in turn, combine to create unique genres. However, it might be easier for teachers and students to envision how discourse is the overarching dimension or umbrella that helps shapes the types of applicable sentence structures that, in turn, dictate the most appropriate words and expressions. Figure 1.2 shows the hierarchical nature of the dimensions of academic language along with some examples.

EVOLVING PERSPECTIVES OF ACADEMIC LANGUAGE

The construct of academic language developed from research in the mid 1970s to the 1980s. Since then, academic language—also called *academic English*, *scientific language*, *the language of school*—has been defined differently by authors and disciplinary perspectives. This next section provides a brief summary of the different frameworks used in the last decades to approach the construct of academic language. (For reviews of the literature,

Figure 1.2 Dimensions of Academic Language



Source: Adapted from Gottlieb & Ernst-Slavit, 2013

please see Anstrom et al., 2010, and Snow & Uccelli, 2009). To facilitate the discussion, this review is organized around five main orientations:

- Academic language versus social language (e.g., Cummins, 1986; Scarcella, 2008)
- Systemic linguistic perspectives (e.g., Gibbons, 2002, 2009; Halliday, 1978; Halliday & Martin, 1993; Schleppegrell, 2004)
- Language skills perspectives (e.g., Bailey & Heritage, 2008; Scarcella, 2008)
- Sociocultural perspectives (e.g., Gee, 2004, 2005; Heath, 1983)
- Language as social action (e.g., García & Leiva, 2013; García & Sylvan, 2011; van Lier, 2007, 2012; van Lier & Walqui, 2012)

Consider this . . .

When you think about the dimensions of academic language, do you see them as a cone, from the top down, or as a triangle, from the bottom up? Which visual would be most helpful to explain this concept to your students or other colleagues? Why?

Academic Language Versus Social Language Perspectives

In the early 1980s, Jim Cummins, drawing on research with bilingual children, described different kinds of language proficiency, focusing on assessment issues and arguing that assessment of students' language proficiency should involve more than tests of spoken interaction. This pivotal work makes a clear distinction between *basic interpersonal communication skills* (BICS) and *cognitive academic language proficiency* (CALP). In essence, BICS is the casual, everyday language that students use when they are talking to friends and neighbors, during recess, or at the lunchroom (e.g., "Give me that book." "Let's sit by the window." "See ya' later."). BICS, according to Cummins, rely more on contextual cues for transmitting meaning (e.g., body language, facial expressions, gestures, objects). CALP, on the other hand, is more complex and abstract and relies less on contextual cues for meaning. (For example, "Functions are used to solve equations for variables and to show a relationship between the variables." "The process is called photosynthesis." "Meriwether Lewis was born at a time of conflict and just before a major revolution.")

While the BICS and CALP distinction has brought to the forefront the importance of academic language for all students, but particularly for English language learners (ELLs), it has been criticized for its conceptualization of CALP as decontextualized language (see, e.g., Bartolomé, 1998; Gee, 1990) and for promoting deficit thinking by focusing on the low cognitive/academic skills of students (see, e.g., Edelsky, 2006; Edelsky et al., 1983; MacSwan & Rolstad, 2003). This distinction may not suffice to

explain the complexities of the language needed to succeed in school, as students are exposed to and interact with multiple literacies (e.g., visual, digital, print) every day. Different kinds of proficiency are needed, including social language. Bailey (2007) has warned us not to believe that “there is something inherent in social language that makes it less sophisticated or less cognitively demanding than language used in an academic context” (p. 9). In fact, social language is much needed to construct meaning in the classroom, but for ELLs who may not be acclimated to school, it’s part of the language they must learn!

Systemic Functional Linguistic Perspectives

About four decades ago, Michael Halliday (e.g., 1978) developed an approach to understand how meaning is constructed depending on the different purposes and language choices. Systemic functional linguistics provides a framework to look systematically at the relationships between form and meaning in the language used in various social contexts. More specifically, for scholars espousing a systemic functional linguistic approach, the linguistic system is made up of three strata: meaning (semantics), sound (phonology), and wording or lexicogrammar (syntax, morphology, and lexis).

Researchers have argued that teachers need to be able to conduct linguistic analyses of their curriculum in order to identify potential challenges for students, particularly ELLs (Achugar, Schleppegrell, & Oteíza, 2007; de Oliveira, 2013; Fang & Schleppegrell, 2008; Gibbons, 2009; Schleppegrell, 2001), and functional linguistics provides a framework for conducting such analyses. Language functions are the goals a speaker is trying to accomplish through the use of specific language structures and vocabulary, in other words, the purpose for communicating. In the classroom setting language functions can be equated with the question: What are we asking students to do with language? Examples of the many language functions are describing, listing, and summarizing. (See Chapter 3 for additional examples of language functions found in content and language standards.) Researchers contend that identifying the language functions underlying grade-level content is an important consideration for classroom teachers (Gibbons, 2009; Schleppegrell, 2004). By focusing on the meaning-making role that language plays in content-area learning, this perspective provides “a metalanguage for analyzing language that highlights issues of overall organization and voice and goes beyond structural categories such as noun and verb to show the meanings that follow from different language choices” (Schleppegrell, 2007, p. 123).

The work of Pauline Gibbons (1998, 2003, 2009) is of particular importance for classroom teachers. Influenced by the work of Halliday and Vygotsky (see, for example, Halliday, 1978; Vygotsky, 1978, 1987), Gibbons (2003, 2009) illustrates how language development for learning can be supported, for example, in the context of teaching a science unit on magnetism. Later in this chapter, we point to the different registers used in a science unit, where we observe the different types of language needed to interact in this classroom (see Fig. 1.6). Beginning with language that is more conversational, students eventually move to learn the science concepts and produce the language that is more academic and needed in required oral and written reports.

Language Skills Perspectives

Several approaches focus on the “academic language demands” students must meet to participate in school tasks and activities, specified by educators’ grade-level expectations, and required by different standards. The emphasis here is on the language needed to acquire new and deeper understanding of the content areas and communicate that understanding to others (TESOL, 2006; WIDA, 2012). Work in this area has focused on the grammatical and lexical features of written and oral language used in school settings in conjunction with the language functions (e.g., summarizing, explaining) required in most classrooms. For example, important work by Robin Scarcella (2008) discusses the types of cognitive knowledge, skills, and strategies students need to acquire to succeed in the content areas. In her work, mostly with college students, Scarcella highlights the foundational knowledge of English, that is, the basic skills needed to communicate inside and outside of school, such as knowing how to read and write using appropriate verb tenses, as a precursor for academic language. In addition, she emphasizes the importance of learning academic vocabulary (e.g., *argument*, *empirical*) and language features (e.g., using passive voice, stating a thesis) across content areas as a way of ensuring understanding of and success in content specific classes.

The work of Alison Bailey and Margaret Heritage (2008) provides initial ways of cataloguing the language all students, including ELLs, need to succeed in school. These researchers distinguish *school navigational language* (SNL) and *curriculum content language* (CCL), where SNL is the language used to communicate with teachers and others in the school (e.g., “Get your red pens out.” “Do we have to write a summary?”), and CCL is the language used in teaching and learning content (e.g., “The plot revolved around two main characters.” “This time we are using an expanded algorithm.”). In sum, work in this area describes academic language in terms of its utility in today’s standards-driven classrooms.

Sociocultural Perspectives

Sociocultural perspectives view language learning as a social practice, consider students as active participants in the construction of knowledge, and take into account a variety of social and cultural factors involved in the teaching and learning process. From this perspective, there is much more to learning a language than its structural aspects. In classrooms, students need to learn when they can ask a question about a classroom presentation, under what circumstances can they copy information from a text, or when can they speak without raising their hands. Within this stance, language learning is seen as a social practice, where talk and interaction are central to human development and learning.

Sociocultural approaches highlight the role that many factors inside and outside of school play in the acquisition of academic language. In her groundbreaking ethnographic study, Shirley Brice Heath (1983) studied child language and teacher preparation in two working-class communities in North Carolina: Roadville and Trackton. Her findings revealed that the language socialization processes, including home literacy practices, played a pivotal role in students' success at school. In her analysis, Heath explained why some teachers and students had difficulties understanding one another and why typical school questions were not answered. Her work brought forth the fact that certain language socializations were more compatible with school environments than others.

Along these lines, Jim Gee's work (e.g., 1990, 2004, 2005) points to the advantages held by students raised in middle- and upper-class homes, where the language of school might be spoken at home. For these students, a wide range of linguistic, cognitive, and cultural patterns acquired at home support many of the features of school language. Consequently, students from more privileged groups more easily acquire the thinking processes and linguistic conventions necessary to succeed in school. In contrast, for most ELLs who speak another language at home, school might be the only place where they encounter the specialized language of the content areas, via their teachers who model how this kind of English is used (Ernst-Slavit & Mason, 2011). This discussion is elaborated on in the final section of this chapter, Academic Language and Social Justice.

Language as Social Action Perspectives

A relatively recent perspective views language as action. In general terms, action-based learning involves the acquisition of knowledge through activities that involve the concept or skill to be learned. In the field of language learning, this presumes that language must be scaffolded by social activity in terms of actions, interactions, and manipulations

(van Lier, 1996). Within this context, the learner's agency and identity need to be located at the center of the teaching and learning process, and learners are seen not only as future competent users of the language to be learned but also as autonomous learners.

In school contexts, an action-based perspective can be understood as somewhat connected to other approaches, such as content-based, project-based, task-based, exploratory, and experiential teaching and learning approaches (van Lier, 2007). A common trait in all these approaches is the emphasis on the learner as an active participant, as someone with agency. Through an action-based perspective, ELLs engage in meaningful activities (e.g., research, projects, presentations) that pique their interest and foster language development through processes that involve perceiving, interacting, planning, researching, discussing, and coconstructing diverse academic products (van Lier & Walqui 2012). In these situations, language development takes place not only because of the meaningful ways in which students are interacting with each other, the teacher, and the materials, but also because activities are carefully planned and language is systematically scaffolded by the teacher.

In sum, an action-based teaching and learning approach places the agency of the learner at the center of the pedagogical process. Language is not seen as a set of rules or list of words but as a type of human action. In addition, language learning is not only a cognitive process but involves the mind, body, emotions, and all the senses. Viewing language learning within an action-based perspective places the forms and functions of language in the backdrop while foregrounding the role that language plays in doing things.

Consider this . . .

Which theoretical orientation(s) of academic language resonates with your thinking? What evidence do you have from teaching to match to your selected theoretical base? Why do you think it is necessary to ground your instruction and assessment in theory?

ACADEMIC LANGUAGE LEARNING AS A DEVELOPMENTAL PROCESS

Academic language is developmental in nature, with increased complexity and sophistication in language use from grade to grade that includes specific linguistic aspects that can be the same or vary across content areas (Anstrom et al., 2010). Lev Vygotsky (1987) saw the fundamental difference between the language a child masters by the age of six, and the many long and hard years of study needed to master academic language

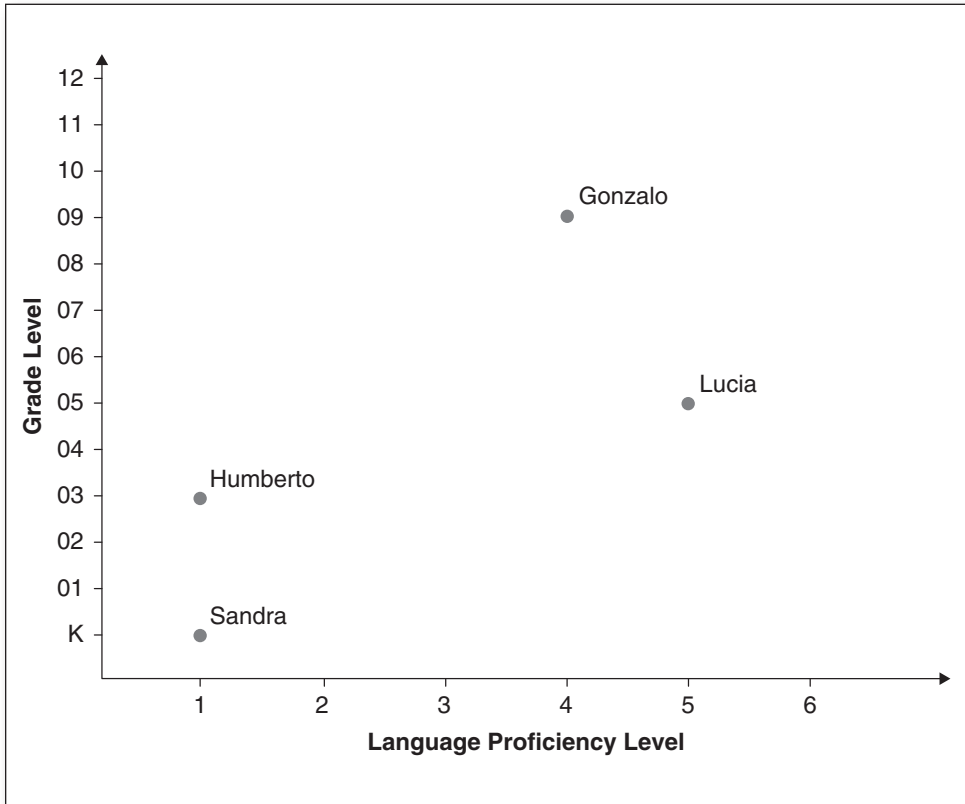
and concepts that students face, right up to and beyond the writing of a high school senior project, a grant proposal, a master's thesis, or a doctoral dissertation.

Important to this discussion is the changing nature of academic language throughout the school years. What is considered academic language for children in the early grades becomes part of the everyday language repertoire of high school students. Think about how students in preschool and kindergarten may need explicit instruction to understand the linguistic and conceptual differences among the terms *more*, *less*, and *same*. Yet, these same terms are used on a regular basis by older students both in and out of school.

Another way to view how linguistic complexity increases throughout the school years is by examining the academic language used in textbooks. A cursory look at a Grade 3 and Grade 10 textbook in any content area will make clear the increase in language demands. With the implementation of the CCSS and the Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS), the level of linguistic complexity in the textbooks is bound to increase, as students are required to read complex texts. In fact, writers of the standards consider that students' ability to comprehend the kinds of texts they will encounter in college and the workplace is perhaps the most critical factor in preparing for postsecondary life. However research discussed in the standards found that, while complexity of texts in entry-level college courses and workplaces held steadily for the most part, the linguistic complexity of texts used in high school declined over recent decades (CCSSI, 2010a, 2010b).

We view academic language as developmental for all students, increasing vertically from grade to grade, year to year. For ELLs, academic language has an additional developmental dimension, that of increasing horizontally from one language proficiency level to the next. Note in Figure 1.3 how grades K through 12 are displayed on the vertical axis, and language proficiency levels 1 to 6 on the horizontal one (Gottlieb & Ernst-Slavit, 2103). Now, let's try to imagine the amount of academic language needed by the four children from an immigrant Honduran family. The two older children came five years ago with their father, while the two younger ones came with the grandma less than a year ago. Gonzalo just started high school and is roughly in Level 4 of English language proficiency (ELP). His sister, Lucia, in fifth grade, is approaching the language proficiency of her English proficient peers and can be considered Level 5. The two younger children are both ELP Level 1, although Humberto in Grade 3 seems to struggle in school more than his little sister, Sandra, in kindergarten. What conclusions can you draw in terms of the academic language in English needed by these four children to be successful in school?

Figure 1.3 The Developmental Nature of Academic Language for ELLs



Source: Adapted from Gottlieb & Ernst-Slavit, 2013, p. 4

Considerations for Students With Disabilities

The developmental trajectory for students with disabilities may not be the same as that of their peers; the same principle applies to ELLs with disabilities. However, having a disability does not preclude this group of students from being exposed to age-appropriate academic language and having academic experiences that enable them to perform at their highest level of conceptual and language

Consider this . . .

Think about siblings who speak a language other than English at your school. Are they at the same level of English language proficiency? Who appears to learn English faster? Why might this happen?

expectations. Disabilities also do not necessarily impede this group of students from being able to use language for academic purposes in both their home language and in English. The mere growth of academic language associated with each grade level and language proficiency level for ELLs is not enough to explain its complexity. Also to be taken into account is the building of different types of awareness associated with language within classrooms (Gottlieb & Ernst-Slavit, 2014, p. 9).

ORAL AND WRITTEN LANGUAGES

Most will agree that there are differences between oral and written languages. The language used in a nonfiction book will, in most cases, be vastly different from the language used by two friends chatting in a coffee shop. On some occasions, for example, during a class lecture, a legal consultation, an interaction with a police officer after a collision, or in a text message, there might be some resemblance between oral and written language. Examples of differences between oral and written language occur in texting, tweeting, and other forms of short message services (SMS) normally transmitted through mobile phone connections. However, on most other occasions, when we hear people speaking the way we write or folks writing the way we speak, it may sound strange, funny, unnatural, and even inappropriate. Why? Because generally there are many differences between the ways we speak and the ways we write. For example,

- Spoken language can be more communicative than written language due to extra cues such as body language, tone, volume, and timbre.
- Spoken language often relies on immediate interactions with people.
- Spoken language tends to be full of repetitions, incomplete sentences, corrections, and interruptions, except for formal speeches or scripted presentations.

On the other hand,

- Written language is generally more formal than oral language.
- Written language tends to be more precise than oral language.
- Written language can be more complex and sophisticated than oral language.
- Written language follows certain patterns of organization, explicitness, and logic.
- Written language is usually permanent.
- Written language uses punctuation, headings, layout, colors, and other graphical effects not available in spoken language.

Important to highlight is that neither form of communication is better than the other. The two forms are different and, like different registers, serve different purposes. While some of the above statements do not apply when using text messaging, tweets, or other types of instant communication, the truth is that there are specific suggestions for speakers and writers. Making students aware of the differences between speakers and writers will help them improve both their conversational and writing skills.

What do the differences between written and oral language mean for speakers (during conversations or informal presentations) and writers? Figure 1.4 is a chart that might be useful to students when discussing differences between the language used by speakers and that used by writers.

Figure 1.4 What Speakers and Writers Do

<i>Speakers . . .</i>	<i>Writers . . .</i>
make eye contact with audience.	do not often have readers present.
refer or point to objects in their immediate context.	cannot assume that readers share their immediate context.
can expect encouragement and support from listeners.	have to construct and sustain their own line of thinking.
use all sorts of body language, intonation, stress, and tone to construct meaning.	use punctuation, headings, layout, colors, and other graphical effects to help make their meaning clear.
repeat, restate, and rephrase when they assess that their meaning is not clear.	take time to edit and revise their work to enhance their message.

Source: Adapted from <http://englishonline.tki.org.nz/English-Online/Exploring-language/Speaking-and-Writing>

Oral Language as a Vehicle for Promoting Academic Language Development

Until recently, students' oral language development in the classroom has largely been neglected due to the prevalence of teacher talk (Rothenberg & Fisher, 2007). The coverage of Listening/Speaking in the Common Core State Standards for English language arts (CCSS for ELA) has helped stimulate student collaboration and

Consider this . . .

Model examples of oral and written language around the same topic for your students. Then pose the questions: "How is oral and written language alike?" "How is oral and written language different?" Have students work in partners or small groups using a graphic organizer, such as a T-chart or Venn diagram, to identify and compare the features of oral and written language.

interaction through conversation. For example, across grades K–2, CCSS for ELA, Speaking and Listening, Comprehension and Collaboration #1 states that students “participate in collaborative conversations with diverse partners about grade [level] topics and texts with peers and adults in small and larger groups” (CCSSI, 2010a, p. 23). By grades 3–8, students are expected to “engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners” (pp. 24, 49). In high school, the same standard extends to having students “initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade [level] topics, texts, and issues” (p. 50).

While the language domains of listening and speaking have always been integral to English language proficiency/development standards and curricula for ELLs, there are now enhanced opportunities for ELLs to have proficient English models (their own peers) with whom to practice their additional language in intentional ways. As a result, dialog and conversation within content area instruction have become venues for elaborating and practicing academic language. To ensure growth in students’ oral language development, teachers must plan and orchestrate student–student interaction with clear roles, language targets, and built-in formative assessment strategies to monitor progress on an ongoing basis (Saunders & Goldenberg, 2010).

Consider this . . .

What strategies might you use to ensure that students have time to engage in pointed conversations that involve higher order thinking across all content classes? What is the academic language with which students have to be familiar to meaningfully interact with each other around content topics and issues? How might oral language practice reinforce the students’ literacy development?

A language-rich environment that surrounds students with oral and written discourse can be a stimulus for ongoing student exchange and engagement in academic conversations and writing for a variety of purposes (Zwiers, 2008). As learning occurs through social interaction, teachers must organize instruction to facilitate purposeful, academic oral discourse between and among students. As oral language is foundational to literacy development, purposeful talk leads students to develop and deepen their understanding of concepts and ideas that are reinforced through print. Thus, student interac-

tion in authentic contexts should revolve around and be embedded in standards, instructional tasks, and classroom assessment (Fisher, Frey, & Rothenberg, 2008).

Academic conversations are a necessary aspect of schooling. In fact Jeff Zwiers and Marie Crawford (2011) have five distinct categories that justify cultivating and sustaining conversations among students: (1) language and literacy development, (2) cognitive engagement, (3) content learning, (4) social and cultural benefits, and (5) psychological reasons. Figure 1.5 takes the classification scheme of Zwiers and Crawford (2011, pp. 12–25) and places it into a chart.

Figure 1.5 Reasons for Promoting Academic Conversations in School

<i>1. Reinforce Language and Literacy Development</i>	<i>2. Enhance Cognitive Engagement</i>	<i>3. Promote Content Learning</i>	<i>4. Recognize Social and Cultural Benefits</i>	<i>5. Tap Psychological Needs</i>
Conversation: Builds academic language, literacy skills, oral language, and communication skills	Conversation: Builds critical thinking skills Promotes different perspectives and empathy Fosters creativity Fosters skills for negotiating meaning and focusing on a topic	Conversation: Builds content understanding Cultivates connections Helps students coconstruct understandings Helps teachers and students assess learning	Conversation: Builds relationships Builds academic ambience Makes lessons more culturally relevant Fosters equity	Conversation: Develops inner dialog and self-talk Fosters engagement and motivation Builds confidence Fosters choice, ownership, and control over thinking Builds academic identity Fosters self-discovery Builds student voice and empowerment

Oral Language as a Bridge to Literacy

Historically, spoken language has been the precursor of written language. People were speaking for thousands of years before writing was invented; some languages remain only oral. Children use oral language before they learn to read and write. In fact, most folks learn to speak

Consider this . . .

Which of the reasons for promoting conversations between and among students resonates with you? Give a classroom example of the reasons you select. Make an inventory of activities around conversations for building academic language to reinforce students' language and literacy development.

without formal instruction but need assistance when it comes to learning how to read and write.

As discussed in other volumes in this series (Gottlieb & Ernst-Slavit, 2014),¹ oral language is a bridge to literacy, whether in the students' home language or English. According to the Center for Research on Education, Diversity & Excellence (CREDE) and the National Literacy Panel, English oral language proficiency contributes to English literacy development (Goldenberg & Coleman, 2010). In

addition, research has substantiated that students who are proficient in both their home language and English tend to outperform their monolingual peers. For Hawaiian students in the Kamehameha Project, oral language development through "talk story" practices, a culturally responsive teaching strategy, improved their literacy when this strategy was integrated into reading instruction (Au, 1998).

What do these findings mean to teachers? It is quite clear that teachers must intentionally build in instructional time for pair and small group work so that students can collaborate, interact with each other, and engage in academic conversations in English and their home languages. This thinking is in concert with the Speaking/Listening standards of the CCSS for ELA; here students are expected to "participate in collaborative conversations with diverse partners about grade-level topics and texts with peers and adults in small and larger groups" (CCSSI, 2010a, p. 23).

Speaking, in particular, in vibrant, topic-focused discussions leads to and strengthens literacy comprehension in ELL classrooms (Snow, Uccelli, & White, 2013).² Academic conversations not only fortify oral language and communication skills; these language exchanges tend to build vocabulary, academic language, and literacy, all the while fostering critical thinking and content understanding (Zwiers & Crawford, 2011). As reading expository text tends to be more challenging for ELLs than reading narrative text (Vásquez, Hansen, & Smith, 2010), it is important that students discuss their work with each other to clarify, reinforce, and expand their comprehension of text.

Use of targeted oral language can provide scaffolds for students to enter into academic reading more successfully. Read-alouds, for example, can help build background knowledge about the discourse, spur student interest in the topic, and assist students in acquiring academic language.

Additionally, this strategy helps students (1) develop academic listening comprehension, (2) have multiple exposures to academic words and expressions, (3) cope with complex grammatical constructions within natural contexts, and (4) more readily tackle grade-level text and concepts (Zwiers, 2008). While focused oral language use enhances students’ literacy development, there are many areas that challenge language learning, especially when that language is English.

In schools, students need to learn how to use oral language that is more precise, fosters critical thinking, and facilitates understanding of the content areas. What follows is an example from an Australian science classroom where the teacher and her 9- and 10-year-old students are studying magnetism (Gibbons, 2009). One of the teacher’s goals for her students, to learn the language of science, becomes apparent when she uses comments such as, “Let’s start using our scientific language” and “We are trying to talk like scientists.” In this classroom, the teacher interacted with her students in ways that scaffolded their contributions and prepared them for both academic conversations and written texts. Her interchange with them is shown in Figure 1.6.

Figure 1.6 Moving From Oral to Written Language: One Example From a Science Lesson in an Elementary Classroom

<i>Language Mode</i>	<i>Text</i>	<i>Context</i>
Oral	“Look, it’s making them move. Those didn’t stick.”	Students talking in a small group as they were experimenting with a magnet.
	“We found out the pins stuck on the magnet.”	Student telling the teacher what she had learned from the experiment.
Written	“Our experiment showed that magnets attract some metals.”	Students’ written report about the experiment.
	“Magnetic attraction occurs only between ferrous metals.”	An entry in a child’s encyclopedia about magnets.

Source: Adapted from Gibbons, 2009, p. 49

The example above demonstrates what Gibbons (2003) calls the “mode continuum,” which starts from oral language where the speaker and audience share contextual knowledge, and moves to oral language where the audience may not share additional contextual cues (e.g., body language),

and goes on to written language. The language needed in these different situations increases in complexity and precision as students move from everyday language to academic language and from oral to written modes as they navigate through the different grade levels.

MULTILITERACIES AND MULTIMODALITIES AS SOURCES OF ACADEMIC LANGUAGE

With the new millennium on the horizon, the New London Group of ten prominent international educators authored a profound article emphasizing the increasing cultural and linguistic diversity around the globe and its impact on the changing social environment facing students and teachers.

With this premise as a backdrop, multiliteracies have emerged as a way to address and make sense of the communicative complexities of the world. Within a relatively short time span, multiliteracies, learning, and teaching have come to be viewed as completely interconnected social processes within the educational milieu. Pedagogically, multiliteracies have taken on a two-pronged approach, recognizing expansion in (1) the number and the integration of different modes of meaning making; that is, where the textual relates to the visual, the audio, the spatial across mass media, multimedia, and electronic hypermedia; and (2) heterogeneity, yet at the same time, the interconnectedness of our global society (New London Group, 1996).

Consider this . . .

What does the term *multiliteracies* mean to you as a teacher, teacher educator, or teacher leader? How has the concept of multiliteracies influenced your thinking about how all students make meaning from the world around them? Is this construct in concert with or different from your personal knowledge base about literacy development?

Len Unsworth (2001) poses a conceptual framework that embraces multiliteracies in school. In it, he suggests three stages: (1) framing perspectives that introduce the changing perspectives of school-based literacy, (2) facilitating knowledge on the role of academic language as a resource for literacy development, and (3) formulating classroom practices where multiliteracies are integrated into content area teaching. The challenge of multiliteracies for teachers is to expand traditional language and print bases of literacy to provide real-life appli-

cations for students to express their understanding and learning using multiple modalities.

Today multiliteracies are a means of sense making beyond the printed page, especially for the digital natives sitting in our classrooms who tend to seek information electronically. *Digital literacy* involves the creative use

of different forms of technology to support the learning and imagination of students. *Visual literacy* is a way for students to express complex concepts through images without heavy reliance on print. *Oral literacy* has its own genres, encompassing rich storytelling and information sharing. Figure 1.7 lists some of the means students can use to show their conceptual understanding through multiliteracies.

Figure 1.7 Examples of Different Types of Multiliteracies Addressed in School

<i>Print-Based Literacy</i>	<i>Digital Literacy</i>	<i>Visual Literacy</i>	<i>Oral Literacy</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Books • Manuals • Magazines • Newspapers • Brochures • Outlines 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Computer games • Podcasts • Video streaming (e.g., webinars) • Blogs • Social media 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PowerPoints • Photographs • Videos • YouTube clips • Murals • Wordles • Graphics • Sketch noting or visual note taking 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Readers theater • Choral reading • Book reads • Process drama • Read-alouds • Storytelling • Lyrics/songs

Source: Adapted from Gottlieb & Ernst-Slavit, 2014, p. 5

There are new and creative ways of displaying literacy that do not follow the typical horizontal or vertical patterns of print on a page. Think about a typical screen displaying a website for an organization, with its flashing banner and rotating messages. In fact, there may be boxes of varying sizes on this electronic display with illustrated inserts or advertisements. Its contents are generally presented as tabs that serve as a table of contents and open to reveal multiple layers of information. Another form of communication is presented in Figure 1.8, a visual impression of a text that has been made from a Wordle (www.wordle.net), a word cloud from a source text that gives greater prominence to the more frequent words. This word cloud provides an additional medium for students to represent academic language at the word level.

To become effective participants in emerging multiliteracies, students and teachers have to understand the different configurations that result from the interaction among available resources. Put another way, students and teachers alike need to be able to use language in conjunction with images and digital expressions to construct different kinds of meanings. The knowledge of linguistic, visual, and digital meaning-making systems involves metalanguage—language for describing language, images, and meaning-making intermodal interactions (Unsworth, 2001).

Figure 1.8 An Example of Visual Literacy in the Form of a Wordle

Source: nicholaspelafas, 2011

Students have a growing repertoire of literacy sources and a multiplicity of communication channels to access meaning within sociocultural contexts. English language learners, in particular, benefit from having multiple avenues for gaining and demonstrating deep understanding of language and content. Having multiple venues for literacy development allows students to become more motivated and participatory in the process.

RAISING AWARENESS OF ACADEMIC LANGUAGE³



Academic language is more involved than terms, conventions, and genres. The teaching and learning of academic language involves more than learning a variety of linguistic components. It encompasses knowledge about “ways of being in the world, ways of acting, thinking, interacting, valuing, believing, speaking, and sometimes writing and reading, connected to particular identities and social roles” (Gee, 1992, p. 73). Put another way, language needs to be understood in relation to the speakers, the purpose of the communication, the audience, and the context for use.

This situated nature of language is integral to content area learning. Moschkovich (2002) proposes a situated-sociocultural view to describe the language ELLs need to successfully navigate instructional activities in the mathematics classroom. That is, language is one of the several resources students need and use to participate in mathematics thinking and learning.

Students also draw on social cues (e.g., gestures) and material resources (e.g., artifacts) as well as the use of their home languages to access and construct meaning as they engage in learning.

Language operates within a sociocultural context, not in isolation. In school, the classroom environment often serves as the sociocultural context for learning academic language. Although the distinct backgrounds, experiences, and views of the students need to be taken into consideration, the classroom becomes the mediator for accruing individual knowledge that leads to shared meaning. Thus, by listening to and coming to understand other perspectives, students become a community of learners with its own cultural practices and social norms. In the examples of content area classrooms described in this volume, we come to see distinct communities of practice with established social and cultural ways of being (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

There is also a growing awareness on the part of teachers and students of the various processes involved in language learning. Besides the sociocultural dimension that permeates the classroom, students are becoming more conscious of how they learn, and teachers are becoming more responsive in how they teach. Figure 1.9 offers teachers ideas of how to tap students' linguistic, cognitive, and sociocultural awareness within the classroom context.

Having established that classrooms are very specialized environments for content and language learning, we now hone in on the relevance of academic language for diverse learners.

Teacher language awareness (TLA) is an area of increasing interest to those involved in preparing teachers to work with linguistically and culturally diverse students. However, over the past several decades, as global migration has made classrooms increasingly heterogeneous, all teachers, regardless of their content area or grade-level expertise, are becoming de facto language teachers. The language awareness movement is rooted in the United Kingdom, where it began in the early 1980s. In its most basic form, "language awareness refers to the development . . . of an enhanced consciousness of and sensitivity to the forms and functions of language" (Carter, 2003, p. 64, as cited in Andrews, 2007). In other words, an understanding of the language used by teachers in the classroom and the ability to analyze it will contribute directly to teaching effectiveness. A general language mindfulness involves at least the following:

- A. Awareness of some of the properties of language, its creativity and playfulness, its double meanings.
- B. Awareness of the embedding of language within culture. Learning to read the language is learning about the cultural properties of the language. Idioms and metaphors, in particular, reveal a lot about the culture.

Figure 1.9 Building Awareness of Academic Language in the Classroom

<i>Type of Awareness</i>	<i>Classroom Examples</i>
Metalinguistic Awareness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognizing and identifying cognates in multiple languages • Comparing the similarities and differences of forms and structures • Transferring information and literacy across languages
Sociocultural Awareness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Using language and culture as resources • Considering and incorporating the students' cultural norms and traditions • Being aware of the situation or context for language learning
Metacognitive Awareness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reflecting on how students learn language • Talking and writing about language learning • Discussing with learners about how they do things in the classroom, such as their comprehension strategies

Source: Gottlieb & Ernst-Slavit, 2013, p. 5

- C. Awareness of the forms of the language we use. We need to recognize that the relations between the forms and meanings of a language are sometimes arbitrary, but that language is a system with patterns and exceptions.
- D. Awareness of the close relationship between language and ideology. It involves “seeing through language,” in other words. (Carter, 1994, as cited in Andrews, 2007)

Consider this . . .

For additional information, see *Teacher Language Awareness* (2007) by Stephen Andrews or the *Language Awareness* journal. Several variations have evolved under the language awareness umbrella: *teacher language awareness* (TLA), *critical language awareness* (CLA; for a partial review, see Svalberg, 2007); and *critical language study* (CLS).

ACADEMIC LANGUAGE AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

In a study focusing on the classroom talk used by elementary teachers working in mainstream classrooms, Ernst-Slavit and Mason (2011) found that ELLs had limited opportunities to hear and use different academic discourses. In fact, teacher talk during content area instruction heavily relied on everyday language and was filled with contractions, colloquialisms,

indefinite referents, homophones, heteronyms, and idiomatic expressions, all of which have the potential to cloud understanding.

Learning the language of the content areas—with its conciseness, use of high-density information words, and precision of expression—is difficult for all students. Schools might be the only setting where they hear that “metamorphic rocks that have their grains arranged in parallel bands or layers are classified as foliated,” or that “Melville’s crew in the Pequod predicted America’s demographic diversity federated along one keel.” For many students, their teachers might be the most significant single source of oral academic discourse (Bartolomé, 1998; Ernst-Slavit & Mason, 2011).

Academic language has become increasingly important in K–12 settings; this increase has been fueled, in part, by the implementation of college and career readiness standards, in particular, the CCSS and NGSS. If schools are going to require students to use certain linguistic repertoires to demonstrate conceptual understanding, educators will have to systematically model the kind of academic registers needed to achieve academic success. “Those academic and professional uses of language require conformity to elaborate, explicit, and often quite mysterious sets of rules” (Gottlieb & Ernst-Slavit, 2014, p. 8). Not teaching those rules to our students is equivalent to what Macedo (1994) calls a “pedagogy of entrapment,” when schools require students to use the different academic registers that they do not teach. Simply put, all educators must be aware of the importance of teaching academic discourses to all students, but particularly to those students for whom English is a second, third, or fourth language and for students from underrepresented backgrounds who may not be surrounded by the types of thought and academic registers valued in schools.

Implementation of the new generation of content (college and career readiness) standards and language development standards can be seen as an opportunity for advancement for all students and a renewal of equity in the classroom. Belief in academic success for all students, coupled with appropriate, scaffolded, and stimulating instruction and assessment, will lead to the creation of a generation of students prepared for exciting and challenging postsecondary experiences.

FOR FURTHER THINKING . . .

During the last three decades, the construct of academic language has been central in the work of researchers and practitioners searching to advance educational opportunities for students for whom English is an additional language. Only recently, due in part to the introduction of new

content standards including the CCSS and the NGSS, has the focus on language learning become central to the educational success of all students. As a result, all teachers have become language teachers, regardless of their content area.

With an emphasis on developing verbal and analytical skills, the new standards are propelling educators to acknowledge the importance of preparing all students to use language in sophisticated and academic ways as they participate in meaningful academic practices. This emphasis on language learning places proficient English speakers and ELLs on equal footing, as all students will need to learn academic language as they become ready for college and careers.

The following questions are intended to spark discussion among teachers and teacher leaders as they deal with academic language use on a daily basis.

1. Make a list of all the activities you do in your classroom that involve the use of academic language. What proportion of your list involves written texts? What proportion is devoted to oral language?
2. What strategies do you use in your classroom or school to foster academic language learning for all your students? What additional steps can you take to keep enhancing the acquisition of academic language for students?
3. Do you remember learning a second language in high school? What were some practices used by your teachers that helped you learn or that hindered your learning of the new language? For example, was there an overemphasis on teaching vocabulary and grammatical structures in isolation?
4. Look at a couple of pages in your grade-level content area textbook. Aside from new or difficult academic vocabulary, what are the grammatical structures that might be challenging for students to understand or produce?

NOTES

1. Text in this paragraph and the following one was previously published in Gottlieb & Ernst-Slavit, 2014, pp. 12–13.

2. Text in this paragraph and the following one was previous published in Gottlieb & Ernst-Slavit, 2014, p. 14.

3. The next five paragraphs and Figure 1.9 were previously published in Gottlieb & Ernst-Slavit, 2013.