Practical Guidelines for the Education of English Language Learners


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Academic Language as Key to Academic Success
Mastery of academic language is arguably the single most important determinant of academic success for individual students. While other factors—such as motivation, persistence, and quantitative skills—play important roles in the learning process, it is not possible to overstate the role that language plays in determining students’ success with academic content. Unfortunately, ELLs often lack the academic language necessary for success in school. This lack of proficiency in academic language affects ELLs’ ability to comprehend and analyze complex texts, limits their ability to write and express themselves effectively, and can hinder their acquisition of content in all academic areas, including mathematics. Many ELLs have well-developed conversational skills yet lack the specialized language of academic discourse central to school success. The distinction between conversational and academic language may be seen in this example:

When a student walks up to a newspaper stand and purchases a newspaper, he utilizes his conversational language skills to converse with the clerk and make the purchase. In contrast, other skills altogether are used to read and understand the front-page article, as well as to discuss the pros and cons of the proposed policy change that the article describes. The student might use still other skills to compare the writer’s opinion to his own, and to the opinion of the store clerk. The oral and written language required to be able to engage in the latter “conversation” will involve more advanced and specialized vocabulary, more complex sentence structures, and more complex discourse structures than that required for the former.

Many skills and factors are wrapped up in the notion of academic language.
Vocabulary knowledge (including the multiple meanings of many English words), the ability to handle increasing word complexity and length over time, and understanding complex sentence structures and the corresponding syntax of the English language are all aspects of academic language. Other aspects relate to text itself, including the organization of expository paragraphs, the function of transitions such as therefore and in contrast, and a wide range of vocabulary that appears far more often in text than in oral conversation.

A particular aspect of academic language and source of ELLs’ difficulties focused on in this report is academic vocabulary—the words necessary to read and talk about—and learn—content-area knowledge. Academic vocabulary is central to text and plays an especially prominent role in the upper elementary, middle, and high school years as students read to learn about concepts, ideas, and facts in content-area classrooms such as math, science, and social studies. In doing so, ELLs encounter many words that are not part of everyday classroom conversation. Words such as analyze, therefore, and sustain are more likely to be encountered while reading than in conversation, and they are often key to comprehension and learning.

The need for well-developed academic language skills runs well beyond high school graduation. Many learners—especially learners from minority backgrounds—who graduate from high school and enroll in post-secondary education often need additional support and remediation to succeed in their post-secondary classrooms. This highlights the importance of academic English as it relates to oral language, reading skills, and writing. Supporting the development of academic English skills requires a systematic and concerted effort on the part of educators who serve adolescent newcomers. In this light, this document provides evidence-based recommendations for policymakers, administrators, and teachers in middle and high schools who seek to make informed decisions about effectively serving adolescent newcomers.

CONCLUSIONS
Meeting the complex and diverse needs of adolescent newcomers is far from simple. There are several instructional and organizational elements that must be in place to serve these learners effectively. To meet the challenges posed by texts in middle and high school, newcomers require:

• content-based literacy instruction
• an instructional emphasis on developing academic language
• explicit comprehension instruction
• instruction in writing for academic purposes

There are many ways in which these instructional elements can be combined in the service of adolescent newcomers. However, to maximize their potential as instructional approaches, these elements must be combined with:

• high-quality ongoing classroom assessment
• appropriate intervention with word-reading difficulties
To support the implementation of these six instructional approaches, there are five organizational elements that must simultaneously be in place:

• systems for assessment and placement
• heterogeneous student grouping
• extended time for learning
• coordinated efforts
• targeted resources

Each of these organizational and instructional elements can enhance the opportunities to learn that schools provide to newcomers. Enabling our nation’s newcomers to reach the highest standards of achievement demands the concerted and best efforts of our educators and educational researchers.