Developing Academic Language Through the Content Areas
Deborah J. Short, Academic Language Research & Training

Objectives

Content
• Identify examples of academic literacy
• Explain guidelines for working with complex text

Language
• Discuss and present techniques to emphasize academic vocabulary, promote academic discussions, and strengthen reading and writing skills

Academic Language: Examples of Challenging Terms, Syntax, & Discourse

Vocabulary
1. New technical terms (e.g., biome, perimeter, metaphor)
2. General academic terms (e.g., result, conclusion, characteristics, identify, analyze)
3. Multiple meaning words (e.g., root, resolution, power)
4. Nominalizations (i.e., verbs transformed into nouns) (e.g., evaporate > evaporation)
5. Complex noun phrases (e.g., least common denominator, frequency distribution)
6. Synonyms (e.g., add, increase, increase by, plus, more, and)
7. Symbols (e.g., +, =, %, H)
8. Idioms (e.g., rule of thumb, gut feeling, keep an eye on, start from scratch)
Functions

- Ask/answer questions
- Give information
- Define
- Provide examples and counterexamples
- Analyze
- Synthesize
- Build on others’ ideas
- Describe
- Elaborate
- Predict/hypothesize
- Explain
- Sequence
- Clarify
- Retell
- Cite evidence
- Summarize
- Paraphrase
- Conclude
- Negotiate meaning
- Agree or disagree
- Support opinions
- Persuade
- Listen attentively and record information
- Distinguish fact from opinion
- Explain cause and effect
- Compare
- Justify
- Evaluate ideas and information
- Advise
- Generalize

Syntax

1. **Comparatives** (e.g., greater than, six times as much, as many as)
2. **Preposition usage** (e.g., divided by, divided into)
3. **Articles and modifier usage** (e.g., One factor is more influential than another in plant growth.)
4. **Passive voice** (e.g., The ballots were distributed in November.)
5. **Word problems and Testing language** (e.g., Which type of relationship exists when…; Which process is represented by…, Determine the figurative language used…)
6. **Logical connectors** (e.g., if …, then ___; given that …)
7. **Similar language, different function** (e.g., I have 2 ounces. I add an additional 2. How many do I have? How many more do I have?)
8. **Embedded clauses** (e.g., relative clauses – A temperate rainforest which has more than one season differs from a tropical rainforest.)
9. **Multiple ways of expressing terms orally** (e.g., NaCl can be “sodium chloride,” “salt,” and “a compound of sodium and chloride atoms”).

Text Discourse

1. **Reading process**: Left to right (sentences), right to left (an integer number line), top to bottom (tables), diagonally (graphs), and holistically (diagrams and images).
2. **Text structures and styles**: Varied structures, sometimes embedded (e.g., cause-effect embedded in sequential structure). Dense textbooks—abstract and technical terms with precise meanings for topic but different meanings in other contexts; long noun phrases, synonyms, conjunctions and other logical connectors; and reported speech.
3. **Background knowledge**: Student schema may not fit text assumptions. ELs may lack knowledge, have conflicting experiences, or be unable to infer due to incomplete schema.
4. **Tone**: Varied across disciplines; may be formal, authoritative, cautious or detached in tone.
5. **Point of View**: Maybe be first, second or third person in literature, first or third person in primary sources. Third person may also be omniscient.
Guidelines to Develop Academic Vocabulary

- Select words carefully (content-specific, general academic, and word parts).
- Teach words with visual supports, student-friendly examples, personal and bilingual connections.
- Provide extensive practice with each key word.
- Teach word learning strategies.

Sample Vocabulary Techniques

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word Generation</th>
<th>A root or affix is provided, and students brainstorm words that include that root. The class analyzes the meaning of brainstormed words to figure out what the root means. The teacher may give hints or explain it. Then students apply the meaning to other words listed.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shades of Meaning</td>
<td>Students focus on word choice. They arrange synonyms by intensity (content-happy-gleeful-delighted; walk-jog-run-dash).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocabulary Flip Charts or Foldables</td>
<td>Flip charts can be made in many ways. For one, fold a paper in half (hamburger fold). The front half is then cut into a number of flaps (e.g., 3), with the cut going up to the fold. On the outside front, a key word may be placed on each flap. When it is lifted, a definition may be written on the top half and a picture may be on the bottom half.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Guidelines to Develop Academic Oral Language

- Discuss topics of high interest – essential questions
- Ask good questions; teach students how to ask questions
- Use sentence starters/language frames to scaffold and practice key terms and turn-taking
- Provide language models and multiple opportunities to practice
- Talk less

Sample Oral Language Techniques

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Academic Language Frames</th>
<th>Teach and post language frames for language functions. Ex. Cause-effect: ___ happened because …; ___ is caused by …. Compare: One similarity / difference is …; Both are ___, but ___ is …. Analyze: The map/chart shows that …. ; ___ is important because …</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conga Line (variation of Inside-Out Circle)</td>
<td>1. Students write or draw something unique on an index card (e.g., favorite character in a story). 2. Divide students into two groups. Group 1 stands in a line (by shoulder); Group 2 in a parallel line, facing a partner in Group 1. 3. Group 1 shares information from the index card with a partner from Group 2. Partner comments. Group 2 then shares information with same partner from Group 1. Partner comments. 4. After a few minutes, have Group 2 take one step to the left so each person faces a new partner from Group 1. The last person in Group 2’s line moves to other end of same line. Repeat sharing of ideas on index cards.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sentence Strips</td>
<td>Steps in a process or math problem solution, or order of events, or a summary can be placed on individual sentence strips. Individual students are given a strip and asked to put themselves in order. Once arranged, they read their strips aloud and explain their order. Additional strips can be added in, such as those with sequence words (e.g., first, second, next, finally), and the students retell using the new terms as well.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Guidelines to Promote Academic Reading

- Build background and vocabulary to support access to text
- Pair fiction and non-fiction to capitalize on content, vocabulary, and EQs
- Scaffold the reading process; teach reading comprehension strategies
- Link classroom interaction with reading and writing texts
- Ask text-dependent questions and teach students to support responses with text evidence

Sample Reading Techniques

| Information Gap activities | These activities, which include jigsaws, problem-solving, and simulations, are set up so each student (in a class, or in a group) has one or two pieces of information needed for the task, but not all the necessary info. Students read and work together, sharing info while practicing their language, negotiating and critical thinking skills. |
| Getting the GIST | While viewing a video, listening to a lecture, or reading a text, students record 10 terms or phrases that capture the main ideas. Students then use the words/phrases to write a summary paragraph at the end of the video or lecture. Or they can use the ideas to orally retell the information. When listing the 10 ideas, students should know they do not need to write complete sentences. |
| SQP2RS (Squeepers) | S Survey: Scan text for 1-2 minutes. Q Question: Generate Qs: What questions will the text answer? P Predict: Make 1-3 predictions: What will we learn about? R Read: Read text, look for answers, confirm predictions R Respond: Respond to questions, generate more, re-read S Summarize: Summarize text in a few sentences |

Guidelines to Promote Academic Writing

- Model writing (model texts, think-alouds)
- Use interactive writing for younger learners and beginners.
- Use writing scaffolds, such as paragraph frames, clozes, and sentence starters.
- Use grammar mini-lessons and incorporate grammar in editing stage
- Have students collaborate for prewriting and editing.

Sample Writing Techniques

| Character Diaries | Students take the role of a scientist making a discovery, a food item moving through the digestive system, or a character in a story and write several entries in a diary as that person/thing, including key events. Other requirements could be use descriptive language, use past tense or if-then clauses, or use key language frames. |
| Writing Headlines | Students or small groups write a headline to summarize a story or article, or to describe the results of an experiment. Students practice summarizing skills and, as they get more proficient, descriptive language skills. Advanced students may provide most of the language, but beginners can copy the final product, perhaps in a fancy “script.” Focus on word choice to create compelling headlines. |
| Questionnaires and Interviews | Student groups design questionnaires and interview respondents. Interviews may be conducted in students’ first language. Groups analyze data and prepare a written report and/or oral presentation. |