

Academic Language of the English-Language Arts

Introduction

If we were to survey the general population, we would most likely find that English-language arts teachers are some of the most: (1) prodigious readers; (2) preeminent writers; and (3) articulate speakers with sophisticated vocabularies. For example, have you ever driven your friends crazy at a cocktail party when you corrected their grammar, answered questions in complete, elaborated sentences, used synonyms to paraphrase what someone has just said, or, most annoying of all, gave the etymology and derivation for a word a friend just used? If so, you are indeed part of a very special group of educators, those



who love the English language, treasure great literature, and recognize the turn of a good phrase, whether delivered orally or in writing.

However . . . how did you feel when you purchased your most recent BlackBerry/fancy cell phone/digital camera/new computer . . . and you had to figure out how to turn it on? It's amazing how highly educated, literate people, including educators, can turn into mush when trying to navigate today's technology. As an example, perhaps you have run across words and phrases in a product's manual such as:

- *glog* (hmm . . . like a blog?)
- *e-cycle center* (a store where you can buy e-cycles?)
- *dynamic smart cooling* (something to aid menopausal women?)
- *chiller* (an especially cold smoothie?)
- *in-row cooling* (like an ice cube tray?)
- *drexting* (texting while wearing a dress?)
- *conficker* (we don't even want to try . . .)
- *influencer* (we've got it . . . the suffix "er" means "one who . . .")

While *one who influences* is a good guess here, the actual technological definition for *influencer* is: *In the blogosphere, an influencer is a person who blogs about a specific subject and is highly recognized online as an expert. An influencer differs from an a-list blogger in that they are often able to sway another's opinions and thoughts on the subject matter.*

Okay, but what's an *a-list blogger*? And, were you able to resist the temptation to correct the definition to read, "An influencer differs from an a-list blogger in that he or she is . . .?" Further, if one of your students used the word *influencer* in an essay, how quickly would you circle it in red and jot, "No such word . . .?"

We have all had experiences where, as knowledgeable, well-read, educated people, we became lost when we listened to or read about a new and unfamiliar topic. We're often tripped up by the terminology, phrases, and concepts that are unique to the subject matter. When this happens, we most likely become frustrated and disinterested, and we may tune out and give up. Every day, many English learners sit in classrooms where both the topic and the related words and concepts are totally unfamiliar to them. Other ELs may have familiarity with the topic, perhaps even some expertise, but because they don't know the English words, terminology, and phrases—that is, the content-specific academic language—they are also unable to understand what is being taught.

What Is Academic Language?

As an elementary reading/language arts teacher or secondary English teacher, you may be wondering how it is possible to separate "academic language" from all the other types of language within our content area. This is similar to the dilemma frequently expressed by language arts teachers that it's especially challenging to write language objectives because as language arts teachers, all we "do" is language! However, within our particular content area, academic language plays a critically important role, and for English learners (as well as struggling readers and writers), academic language can provide serious challenges. In this chapter, we will define academic language (also referred to as "academic English"), discuss why academic language is challenging for ELs, and offer suggestions

for how to effectively teach academic language. We also include an overview of academic language specifically for teachers of English-language arts (ELA).

Although definitions in the research literature differ somewhat, there is general agreement that academic language is both generic and content specific. That is, although many academic words are used across all content areas (such as *demonstrate, estimate, analyze, summarize, categorize*), others pertain to specific subject areas (*idioms, characterization, symbolism* for Language Arts; *angle, ratio, dispersion* for Math). It is important to remember that academic language is more than specific content vocabulary words related to particular topics. Rather, academic language represents the entire range of language used in academic settings, including elementary and secondary schools.

When you reflect on the previous examples for Language Arts and Mathematics, you can see that academic language differs considerably from the social, conversational language that is used on the playground, at home, or at cocktail parties (see Figure 1). Social or conversational language is generally more concrete than abstract, and it is usually supported by contextual clues, such as gestures, facial expressions, and body language (Cummins, 1979; 2000; Echevarria & Graves, 2007). To further clarify academic language, the following definitions are offered by several educational researchers:

- Academic language is “the language that is used by teachers and students for the purpose of acquiring new knowledge and skills . . . imparting new information, describing abstract ideas, and developing students’ conceptual understandings” (Chamot & O’Malley, 1994, p. 40).
- Academic language refers to “word knowledge that makes it possible for students to engage with, produce, and talk about texts that are valued in school” (Flynt & Brozo, 2008, p. 500).
- “Academic English is the language of the classroom, of academic disciplines (science, history, literary analysis), of texts and literature, and of extended, reasoned discourse. It is more abstract and decontextualized than conversational English” (Gersten, Baker, Shanahan, Linan-Thompson, Collins, & Scarcella, 2007, p. 16).
- Academic English “refers to more abstract, complex, and challenging language that will eventually permit you to participate successfully in mainstream classroom instruction. Academic English involves such things as relating an event or a series of events to someone who was not present, being able to make comparisons between alternatives and justify a choice, knowing different forms and inflections of words and their appropriate use, and possessing and using content-specific vocabulary and modes of expression in different academic disciplines such as mathematics and social studies” (Goldenberg, 2008, p. 9).
- “Academic language is the set of words, grammar, and organizational strategies used to describe complex ideas, higher-order thinking processes, and abstract concepts” (Zwiers, 2008, p. 20).

Some educators suggest that the distinction between conversational and academic language is somewhat arbitrary and that it is the *situation, community, or context* that is either predominantly social or academic (Aukerman, 2007; Bailey, 2007). For purposes of this book, we maintain that academic language is essential for success in school (the *context*), and that it is more challenging to learn than conversational English, especially for students who are acquiring English as a second or additional language. Although

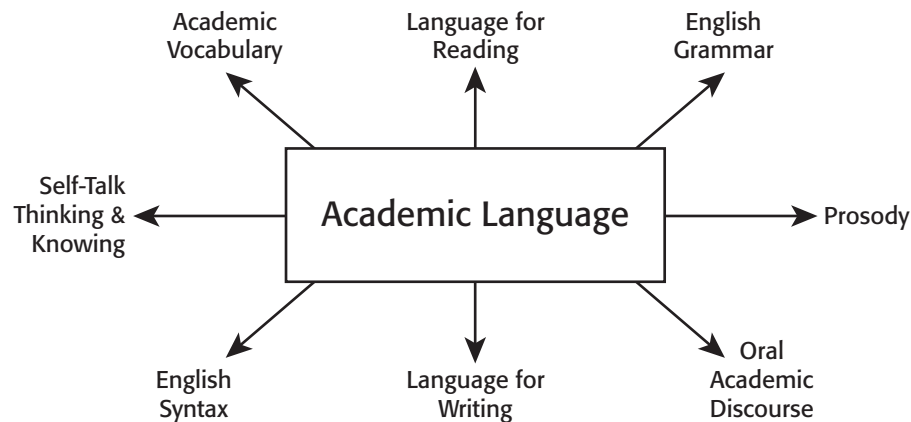


FIGURE 1. *The Spectrum of Academic Language*

knowing conversational language assists students in learning academic language, we must teach English learners (and other students, including native speakers) the “vocabulary, more complex sentence structures, and rhetorical forms not typically encountered in nonacademic settings” (Goldenberg, 2008, p. 13).

How Does Academic Language Fit into the SIOP® Model?

As you know, the SIOP® Model has a dual purpose: to systematically and consistently teach both content and language in every lesson. Once again, sometimes English-language arts teachers feel that “This is what we always do, so why do we need a demarcation between content and language?” The simple answer to this question is that although content and language objectives help focus the teacher throughout a lesson, these objectives also (perhaps even more importantly) focus students on what they are supposed to know and be able to do during and after each lesson as related to *both* content knowledge and language development.

English learners especially need to understand that they should be concentrating not only on acquiring content (such as learning the difference between a simile and a metaphor) but also on learning how to correctly use figurative language in written and spoken English. You might be thinking, “Well, of course! That’s what teaching English, reading, writing, grammar, and spelling is all about!” And, to a degree, you’re right. But because we also have specific content in our field (such as teaching roots, base words, prefixes, affixes, and figurative language), we must provide opportunities for English learners (and other students) to develop their English proficiency by using and producing language through reading, writing, listening, and speaking. And, that’s what the SIOP® Model is all about.

A critical aspect of academic language is academic vocabulary. Within the SIOP® Model, we refer to academic vocabulary as having three elements (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2008, p. 59). These include:

1. **Content Words.** These are key vocabulary words, terms, and concepts associated with a particular topic. Key vocabulary can come from literature and expository texts (such as *character, setting, rising action, conflict, denouement, falling action, resolution, cause and effect, main idea, supporting details, generalization*); from writing analysis (such as *imagery, sentence structure, writing process, thesis statement,*

conclusion, sentence fragment); from grammar (such as *action verbs, noun clauses, subjects, predicates, homonyms, antonyms, imperative, declarative, interrogative*); as well as from other components of the curriculum. Obviously, you will need to introduce and teach key content vocabulary when teaching poetry, biography, plays, and other genres related to both reading and writing.

2. **Process/Function Words.** These are the words and phrases that have to do with functional language use, such as *how to request information, justify opinions, state a conclusion, uncover an author’s message, “state in your own words,” identify multiple perspectives, summarize, persuade, question, interpret*, and so forth. Tasks that students are to accomplish during a lesson also fit into this category, and for English learners, their meanings may need to be taught explicitly. Examples include *list, explain, paraphrase, debate, identify, create, write a five-paragraph essay, define, share with a partner*, and so forth.
3. **Words and Word Parts That Teach English Structure.** These are words and word parts that enable students to learn new vocabulary, primarily based on English morphology. Although instruction in this category generally falls under the responsibility of English-language arts teachers, we also encourage teachers of other content areas to be aware of the academic language of their own disciplines. While you teach past tense (such as adding an *-ed* to regular verbs) as part of your ELA curriculum, a history teacher might reinforce past tense by pointing out that when we talk or write about historical events, we use the past tense of English. Similarly, as part of an ELA curriculum, you are responsible for teaching about English morphology (base words, roots, prefixes, suffixes). However, science teachers use many words with these morphemes as part of their key vocabulary (such as *arthropod, ecosystem, anaerobic respiration*). If English learners (and other students) have an opportunity to read, write, and orally produce words with complex parts during their English/language arts class as well as their history and science classes, English development is doubly reinforced. And, if this reinforcement occurs every school day, one can assume that English learners’ mastery of English will be accelerated, as happens with repeated practice in any new learning situation. For a usable and informative list of English word roots that provide the clue to more than 100,000 English words, refer to pages 60–61 of *Making Content Comprehensible for English Learners: The SIOP® Model* (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2008). This is a must-have list for both elementary and secondary teachers in ALL curricular areas.

Picture a stool with three legs. If one of the legs is broken, the stool will not be able to fulfill its function, which is to hold a person who sits on it. From our experience, English learners must have instruction in and practice with all three “legs” of academic vocabulary (content words, process/function words, and words/word parts that teach English structure) if they’re going to develop the academic language they need to be successful students.

Of course, academic English also involves reading and writing. As you most likely know, the National Reading Panel (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000) defined the components of reading as phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and reading comprehension. Research suggests that high-quality instruction in these five components generally works for English learners as well, although additional focus on oral language development and background building are called for to enhance comprehension (August & Shanahan, 2006; Goldenberg, 2008).

Although English learners are able to attain well-taught word-level skills such as decoding, word recognition, and spelling that are equal to those of their Native-English speaking peers, the same is not typically the case with text-level skills such as reading comprehension and writing. The reason for the disparity between word-level and text-level skills among English learners is oral English proficiency. Well-developed oral proficiency in English, which includes English vocabulary and syntactic knowledge plus listening comprehension skills, is associated with English reading and writing proficiency. Therefore, it is insufficient to teach English learners the components of reading alone; teachers must incorporate extensive oral language development opportunities into literacy instruction. Further, English learners benefit from having more opportunities to practice reading, check comprehension, and consolidate text knowledge through summarization. They also need instruction on the features of different text genres, especially those found in subject area classes—such as textbook chapters, online articles, laboratory directions, math word problems, and primary source materials. Because reading is the foundation for learning in school, it is critical that teachers use research-based practices to provide English learners with high-quality instruction that will lead to the development of strong reading skills.

Academic writing is an area that is affected significantly by limited English proficiency. Whereas oral skills can be developed as students engage in meaningful activities, skills in writing must be explicitly taught. The writing process (involving planning, drafting, editing, and revising written work) allows students to express ideas at their level of proficiency with teacher (or peer) guidance and explicit corrective feedback. However, for English learners, it is critical that a lot of meaningful discussion take place prior to asking students to write because such dialogue leads to writing and provides students with the English words they will use. Writing is also facilitated by such things as teacher modeling, posting of writing samples, providing sentence frames, and even having students occasionally copy words or text until they gain more independent proficiency (Graham & Perin, 2007). This kind of constant exposure to words and sentence patterning allows ELs to become familiar with the conventions of how words and sentences are put together in the language (Garcia & Beltran, 2003).

English learners should be encouraged to write in English early, especially if they have literacy skills in their native language, and they should be provided frequent opportunities to express their ideas in writing. Errors in writing are to be expected and should be viewed as part of the natural process of acquisition. Providing scaffolded writing tools, such as partially completed graphic organizers for pre-writing and sentence frames for organizing key points and supporting details, will help ELs write in the content classroom.

How Is Academic Language Manifested in Classroom Discourse?

Our teachers come to class,
And they talk and they talk,
Til their faces are like peaches,
We don't;
We just sit like cornstalks.

(Cazden, 1976, p. 74)

These poignant words come from a Navajo child who describes a classroom as she sees it. Teachers like to talk. Just observe any classroom and you'll find that the teacher does the vast majority of the talking. That might be expected because the teacher, after all, is the most expert English-language arts person in the classroom. However, for students to develop proficiency in language, interpret what they read, express themselves orally and in writing, participate during whole-group and small-group instruction, and explain and defend their viewpoints and answers, they need opportunities to learn and use academic language. To promote more student engagement in classroom discourse, the Interaction component is included in SIOP® Model. The features of the Interaction component include:

- Frequent opportunities for interaction with and discussion between teachers and students and among students, which encourage elaborated responses about lesson concepts
- Grouping configurations that support language and content objectives of the lesson
- Sufficient wait time for student responses consistently provided
- Ample opportunities for students to clarify key concepts in L1 (native language) as needed

These features promote balanced turn-taking both between teachers and students and among students, providing multiple opportunities for students to use academic English. Notice how each feature of Interaction encourages student talk. This is in considerable contrast to the discourse patterns typically found in both elementary and secondary classrooms. Most instructional patterns involve the teacher asking a question, a student responding, the teacher evaluating the response (IRE: Initiation/Response/Evaluation), or providing feedback (IRF: Initiation/Response/Feedback), followed by another teacher-asked question (Cazden, 1986; 2001; Mehan, 1979; Watson & Young, 1986). A typical interaction between a teacher and her students following the reading of a short story is illustrated in the following example:

T: Who is the main character in the short story we just read?

S1: The boy.

T: Yes, you're right. But what's the boy's name? Who can tell us?

S2: Billy.

T: That's right. Billy is the main character. Very good. Now, what is the setting of the story? Remember that the setting is where and when the story takes place.

S3: A farm in summer.

T: Great! Now, what do you think is the problem in this story?

And so it goes, often for a good portion of the lesson. Notice that the teacher asked questions that had one correct answer with no reasoning or higher level thinking required, the teacher controlled the interchange, and the teacher evaluated student responses. Also note that the only person in the interchange to actually orally produce academic language (*main character, setting, problem*) was the teacher. The students didn't need to use more than one or two words in response to the teacher's questions in order to participate appropriately. Only three students were involved, while the others sat quietly.

The IRE/IRF pattern is quite typical and it has been found to be one of the least effective interactional patterns for the classroom (Cazden, 1986; 2001; Mehan, 1979; Watson & Young, 1986). More similar to an interrogation than to a discussion, this type of teacher-student interaction stifles academic language development and does not encourage higher level thinking because most of the questions have a straightforward, known answer. Further, we have observed from kindergarten through high school that most students become conditioned to wait for someone else to answer. Often it is the teacher who ultimately answers his or her own question, especially when no students volunteer.

In classrooms where the IRF (Initiation, Response, Feedback) pattern dominates, the teacher's feedback may actually inhibit learning because she changes students' responses by adding to or deleting from their statements, or completely changes a student's intent and meaning. Because the teacher is searching for a preconceived answer and often "fishes" until it is found, the cognitive work of the lesson is often carried out by the teacher rather than the students. In these classrooms, students are seldom given the opportunity to elaborate on their answers; rather, the teacher does the analyzing, synthesizing, generalizing, and elaborating.

Changing ineffective classroom discourse patterns by creating authentic opportunities for students to develop academic language is critically important because as one acquires language, new concepts are also developed. Think about the previous example of trying to understand technology terms. Each new vocabulary word you read and understand (e.g., *influencer*) is attached to a concept that in turn expands your ability to think about technology resources. As your own system of word-meaning grows in complexity, you are more capable of understanding the associated concepts and generating the self-directed speech of verbal thinking: "Now that I know what twittering is, I can give it a try." Without an understanding of the words and the concepts they represent, you would be incapable of thinking about (self-directed speech) or discussing (talking with another) your newest electronic gadget.

Why Do English Learners Have Difficulty with Academic Language?

Developing academic language has proven to be quite challenging for English learners. In fact, in a study that followed EL students' academic progress in U.S. schools, researchers found that the ELs actually regressed over time (Suarez-Oroczo, Suarez-Oroczo & Todorova, 2008). There are myriad influences that affect overall student learning, and academic language learning in particular. Some factors, such as poverty and transiency, are outside of the school's sphere of influence, but let's focus on some of the influences that are in our control, namely what happens instructionally for these students that facilitates or impedes their learning.

Many classrooms are devoid of the kinds of supports that assist students in their quest to learn new material in a new language. Since proficiency in English is the best predictor of academic success, it seems reasonable that teachers of English learners should spend a significant amount of time teaching the vocabulary required to understand the lesson's topic. However, in a study that observed 23 ethnically diverse classrooms, researchers found that in the core academic subject areas only 1.4% of instructional time was spent developing vocabulary knowledge (Scott, Jamison-Noel, & Asselin, 2003).

The lack of opportunity to develop oral language skills hinders students' progress in all subject areas. Passive learning—sitting quietly while listening to a teacher talk—does not encourage engagement. In order to acquire academic language, students need lessons that are meaningful and engaging and that provide ample opportunity to practice using language orally. Successful group work requires intentional planning and giving students instructions about how to work with others effectively; teacher expectations need to be made clear. Grouping students in teams for discussion, using partners for specific tasks, and other planned configurations increase student engagement and oral language development.

Another related influence on language development is access to the language and the subject matter. Think about a situation in which you hear another language spoken. It could be the salon where you get a manicure or your favorite fast food place. Just because you regularly hear another language, are you learning it? Typically, not. Likewise, many English learners sit in class and hear what amounts to “English noise.” It doesn't make sense to them and thus, they are not learning either academic language or the content being taught. Without the kinds of practices that are promoted by the SIOP® Model, much of what happens during the school day is lost on English learners.

Finally, some teachers have low expectations for EL students (Lee, 2005). They are not motivated to get to know the students, their cultures, or their families. Poor performance is not only accepted, but expected. Rather than adjusting instruction so that it is meaningful to these students, these teachers attribute lack of achievement to students' cultural background, limited English proficiency and, sadly, ability.

How Can We Effectively Teach Academic Language in English-Language Arts?

In a recent synthesis of existing research on teaching English language and literacy to ELs in the elementary grades, the authors make five recommendations, one of which is to “Ensure that the development of formal or academic English is a key instructional goal for English learners, beginning in the primary grades” (Gersten, Baker, Shanahan, Linan-Thompson, Collins, & Scarcella, 2007, pp. 26–27). Although few empirical studies have been conducted on the effects of academic language instruction, the central theme of the panel of researchers conducting the synthesis was the importance of intensive, interactive language practice that focuses on developing academic language. This recommendation was made based upon considerable expert opinion, with the caveat that additional research is still needed.

Because you are already familiar with the SIOP® Model, you know that effective instruction for English learners includes focused attention on and systematic implementation of the SIOP® Model's eight components and 30 features. Therefore, you should use the SIOP® protocol to guide lesson design when selecting activities and approaches for teaching academic language in the English-language arts.

Jeff Zwiers (2008, p. 41) notes that “academic language doesn't grow on trees.” Rather, explicit vocabulary instruction through a variety of approaches and activities provides English learners with multiple chances to learn, practice, and apply academic language (Stahl & Nagy, 2006). Teachers must provide comprehensible input (Krashen, 1985) as well as structured opportunities for students to produce academic language in

their content classes. This will enable English learners to negotiate meaning through confirming and disconfirming their understanding while they work and interact with others.

In addition to explicit vocabulary instruction, we need to provide a variety of scaffolds, including context. Writing a list of new terms on the board or pointing out sentences that are bolded in the textbook only helps if students know what they mean. To create a context for learning academic English, teachers must preteach terms and sentence patterns (e.g., interrogative and declarative), and explain them in ways that students can understand and relate to, followed by showing how the terms and sentence patterns are used in the textbook. Scaffolding involves providing enough support to students so that they are gradually able to be successful independently. Another way of scaffolding academic English is to have word walls or posters displayed that show academic language (such as literary terms with definitions) or processes (such as a strategy poster for decoding unknown words). Certainly, older learners can work in groups to create these posters with mnemonics, including cartoons or other illustrations. As English learners refer to and use these posted academic language words and phrases, they will internalize the terms and begin to use them independently.

In the lesson plans and units that appear in Chapters 3–7, you will see a variety of instructional techniques and activities for teaching, practicing, and using academic language in the English-language arts classroom. As you read the lesson plans, note the box on the lesson plan that is labeled “academic vocabulary.” Reflect on why particular activities were selected for the respective content and language objectives. Additional resources for selecting effective activities that develop academic language and content knowledge include: Buehl’s *Classroom Strategies for Interactive Learning* (2009); Vogt and Echeverria’s *99 Ideas and Activities for Teaching English Learners with the SIOP® Model* (2008); and Reiss’s *102 Content Strategies for English Language Learners* (2008). Secondary teachers will also find the following books to be helpful: Zwiers’s *Building Academic Language: Essential Practices for Content Classrooms (Grades 5-12)* (2008), and *Developing Academic Thinking Skills in Grades 6–12: A Handbook of Multiple Intelligence Activities* (2004).

The Role of Discussion and Conversation in Developing Academic Language

As mentioned previously, researchers who have investigated the relationship between language and learning suggest that there should be more balance in student talk and teacher talk in order to promote meaningful language learning opportunities for English learners (Cazden, 2001; Echevarria, 1995; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988; Walqui, 2006). In order to achieve a better balance, teachers need to carefully analyze their own classroom interaction patterns, the way they formulate questions, how they provide students with academic feedback, and the opportunities they provide for students to engage in meaningful talk.

Not surprisingly, teacher questioning usually drives the type and quality of classroom discussions. The IRE or IRF pattern discussed previously is characterized by questions to which the teacher already knows the answer and results in the teacher unintentionally expecting students to “guess what I’m thinking” (Echevarria & Silver, 1995). In fact, researchers have found that explicit, “right there” questions are used about 50% of the

time in classrooms (Zwiers, 2008). In contrast, open-ended questions that do not have quick “right” or “wrong” answers promote greater levels of thinking and expression.

Something as simple as having students turn to a partner and answer a question first, before reporting to the whole class, is an effective conversational technique, especially when the teacher circulates to monitor student responses. Speaking to a peer may be less threatening; in addition, this method actively engages every student. Effect SIOP® teachers facilitate discussion by following up with open-ended questions and probes that stimulate divergent thinking and language development.

Rather than responding to student answers with “Very good!”, teachers who value conversation and discussion encourage elaborated responses with comments like, “Can you tell us more about that?” or “What made you think of that?” or “Did anyone else have that idea?” or “Please explain how you figured that out.”

Zwiers (2008, pp. 62–63) has classified the types of comments you can make to enrich classroom talk. By using comments like those that follow (adapted from Zwiers), you can create a better balance between the amount of student talk and teacher talk. Further, classroom interactions are less likely to result in an IRE or IRF pattern. Try using some of these comments and see what happens to the interaction patterns in your own classroom!

To Prompt More Thinking

- You are on to something important. Keep going.
- You are on the right track. Tell us more.
- There is no right answer, so what would be your best answer?
- What did you notice about . . .

To Fortify or Justify a Response

- That’s a good probable answer . . . How did you get to that answer?
- Why is what you said so important?
- What is your opinion (impression) of . . . Why?

To See Other Points of View

- That’s a great start. Keep thinking and I’ll get back to you.
- If you were in that person’s shoes, what would you have done?
- Would you have done (or said) it like that? Why or why not?

To Consider Ethical Ramifications

- Should she have . . . ?
- Some people think that . . . is [wrong, right, and so on]. What do you think? Why?
- How can we apply this to real life?

To Consider Consequences

- Should she have . . . ?
- What if he had not done that?
- Some people think that . . . is [wrong, right, and so on]. What do you think? Why?
- How can we apply this to real life?

A conversational approach is particularly well suited to English learners who, after only a few years in school, frequently find themselves significantly behind their peers in most academic areas, usually because of low reading levels in English and underdeveloped language skills. Students benefit from a conversational approach in many ways because conversation provides:

- A context for learning in which language is expressed naturally through meaningful discussion
- Practice using oral language, which is a foundation for literacy skill development
- A means for students to express their thinking, and to clarify and fine-tune their ideas
- Time to process information and hear what others are thinking about
- An opportunity for teachers to model academic language, use content vocabulary appropriately, and, through think-alouds, model thinking processes
- Opportunities for students to participate as equal contributors to the discussion, which provides them with repetition of both linguistic terms and thinking processes and results in their eventual acquisition and internalization for future use

A rich discussion, or conversational approach, has advantages for teachers as well, including the following:

- Through discussion, a teacher can more naturally activate students' background knowledge and assess their prior learning.
- When working in small groups with each student participating in a discussion, teachers are better able to gauge student understanding of the lesson's concepts, tasks, and terminology, as well as discern areas of weakness.
- When teachers and students interact together, a supportive environment is fostered, which builds teacher-student rapport.

When contemplating the advantages of a more conversational approach to teaching, think about your own learning. It probably takes multiple exposures to new terms, concepts, and information before they become yours to use independently. If you talk with others about the concepts and information you are learning, you're more likely to remember them. English learners require even more repetition and redundancy to improve their language skills. As they have repeated opportunities to improve their oral language proficiency, ELs are more likely to use English, and more frequent use results in increased proficiency (Saunders & Goldenberg, 2009). Discussion and interaction push learners to think quickly, respond, construct sentences, put their thoughts into words, and ask for clarification through classroom dialogue. Discussion also allows students to see how other people think and use language to describe their thinking (Zwiers, 2008).

Productive discussion can take place in whole class settings, but it is more likely that small groups will facilitate the kind of high-quality interaction that benefits English learners. Working to express ideas and answers to questions in a new language can be intimidating for students of all ages. Small group work allows them to try out their ideas in a low-stress setting and to gauge how similar their ideas are to those of their peers. Working with partners, triads, or in a small group also provides a chance to process and articulate new information with less pressure than a whole class setting may create.

Earlier in this chapter, you read an interaction between a teacher and her students in which the IRE (Initiation/Response/Evaluation) pattern prevailed. In contrast, read the following transcript from a tenth grade literature discussion, and reflect on the differences in the two classroom interaction patterns (Vogt, 1996, pp. 182–183):

SARA: In the book *The Count of Monte Cristo*, what caused Eugenie to flee?

JUAN: She was going to marry Benedetto . . . is that wrong? I'm wondering . . .

TRAN: It's not right . . . she wanted to run away from her parents, I think.

TEACHER: Look at Sokea because she has the answer to this, I think. Sokea seems to think there's a little bit more to this.

SOKEA: Yeah . . .

ALEX: Wait, I know! Benedetto was convicted as a criminal, so you know the cops were going to arrest him so he was shamed. In other words, Eugenie's family was shamed 'cause they were supposed to, uh, marry the count . . . so that's why she ran away . . .

TEACHER: Are you satisfied with that?

SOKEA: Yeah, that's kinda like what I was thinking . . .

SARA: Yeah, okay, good, but I'm still wondering why Madame Danglars and Duprey met in secret at the hotel . . .

TEACHER: Interesting thought. They had been meeting in secret for a long time . . .

ALEX: Okay, they're meeting and she brought Duprey a letter that Monsieur Danglars left her and he told her that he was leaving town . . .

CARLA: Yes, but I also think . . . (the conversation continues . . .)

Now, your students may not sound exactly like these students or speak English as fluently. However, this is a regular tenth grade classroom with diverse students, including English learners. Note how the teacher facilitates this discussion with very few words—just probes and careful listening. Sharing conversational control with students involves some risk-taking on the part of the teacher and practice on the part of students who may prefer to answer questions with monosyllabic words. Simply telling students to “discuss” will likely have poor results. We need to teach students how to engage in meaningful conversation and discussion and provide the support they need to be successful. Rather than sitting as “quiet cornstalks,” students, including English learners, can learn to express themselves, support their viewpoints, advocate their positions, and defend their beliefs. When this occurs, we establish a classroom environment in which conversational control is shared among teachers and students alike.

What Is the Academic Language of English-Language Arts?

There are myriad terms that are used in academic settings. Some of these are used commonly across content areas and others are content-specific. The metaphor of bricks and mortar is helpful here as we think of some words representing bricks, such as English-language arts content-specific words such as *imagery*, *symbolism*, *narrative*, and *nonfiction*.

The mortar refers to general academic words such as, *describe, represent, and approximate* (Dutro & Moran, 2003). Understanding both types of terms is often the key to accessing content for English learners. For example, although most students need explicit instruction in the terms related to literary analysis, English learners (and struggling readers) also require that general academic words be included in their vocabulary instruction.

As you plan for lessons that teach and provide practice in both English-language arts content words and more general academic language, take a look at your teacher’s guides from your reading series and/or literature anthologies. Note the highlighted vocabulary. Also, identify other terms and phrases that are included in the student texts, but are not necessarily highlighted for teaching. This latter group of words may be precisely the academic vocabulary that is unfamiliar to your English learners (and struggling readers).

Other resources include the “1,000 Most Frequent Words in Middle-Grades and High School Texts” and “Word Zones™ for 5586 Most Frequent Words,” which were collected by Hiebert (2005) and may be found online at www.textproject.org. For those of you who are high school teachers, you might also want to take a look at the Coxhead Academic Word List (Coxhead, 2000).

In addition to your teacher’s edition and other word lists, use your state English-language arts content standards, and, if they exist, your state English language development standards for ELs to help you select academic language for writing and teaching accompanying language objectives. Let’s take a look at several ELA content standards taken from the *English-Language Arts Content Standards for California Public Schools (K–12)* (1998). The words that are English-language arts content-specific are **bolded** and general academic words are underlined.

Examples from Standards for Grades K–2

- Match oral words to printed words.
- Identify and describe the elements of **plot, setting, and character(s) in a story**, as well as the **story’s beginning, middle and ending**.
- Distinguish between **complete and incomplete sentences**.

Examples from Standards for Grades 3–5

- Ask questions and support answers by connecting prior knowledge with **literal information** found in, and **inferred** from, the text.
- Identify and use **past, present, and future verb tenses** properly in writing and speaking.
- **Make and confirm predictions** about text by using prior knowledge and ideas presented in the text itself, including **illustrations, titles, topic sentences, important words, and foreshadowing clues**.

Examples for Standards for Grades 6–8

- Determine the adequacy and appropriateness of the **evidence for an author’s conclusions**.
- Support all statements and claims with **anecdotes, descriptions, facts and statistics, and specific examples**.
- Analyze the relevance of the **setting (e.g, place, time, customs)** to the **mood, tone, and meaning** of the text.

Examples for Standards for Grades 9–12

- Critique the logic of **functional documents** by examining the **sequence** of information and **procedures** in anticipation of possible **reader misunderstandings**.
- Describe with **sensory details** the **sights, sounds, and smells of a scene** and the specific actions, movements, gestures, and feelings of the characters.
- Discern the meaning of **analogies** encountered, analyzing specific comparisons as well as **relationships** and **inferences**.

As you can see, many of the underlined words may be used in other content areas as well, but students need to be explicitly taught their meaning. Some of these words are common, but have a specialized meaning in the English-language arts. And, as mentioned previously, for those of us who teach ELA, it's sometimes difficult to separate “academic language” from “content language” (and you might even wish to argue some of our examples above in terms of which is which!). For students who speak a Latin-based language such as Spanish, cognates may help in teaching some words. For example, *predict* in English is *predecir* in Spanish; *justify* in English is *justificar* in Spanish; *communication* in English is *comunicacion* in Spanish.

What is important is that academic language is taught so that English learners and struggling readers can be successful throughout the school day. In the English-language arts, academic language enables students to read, write, and speak like writers, literary critics, and knowledgeable and informed readers.

In Appendix B you will find a comprehensive list of ELA and academic words and phrases across several domains in the grade-level clusters used throughout this book (K–2, 3–5, 6–8, 9–12). The words and phrases were culled from the California State Content Standards for the English-Language Arts. Your state's standards and domains will differ a bit, but we hope this extensive list will assist you in your lesson and unit planning, and in the writing of your content and language objectives.

Concluding Thoughts

Proficiency in English is the best predictor of academic success, and understanding academic language is an important part of overall English proficiency. In this chapter we have discussed what academic language is, why it is important, and how it can be developed. In ELA, teachers need to explicitly teach both content area terms and general academic terms as well as provide opportunities for students to develop academic language, so that English learners can fully participate in lessons, meet content standards for the English-language arts, and increase their academic language proficiency. An important way to provide opportunities for students to learn and practice academic language is through classroom conversations and structured discussions. When you teach students how to participate in classroom conversations, you not only improve their English skills but also prepare them to understand the type of language used by historians, scientists, mathematicians, authors, literary critics, and other scholars. You will give them the tools they need to practice language skills that will enable them to back up claims with evidence, be more detailed in their observations, use persuasive language compellingly in arguments, and compare events or points of view.