Learning the Language of the Classroom: Academic English for Nonnative Speakers

by Kathleen Flynn & Kirsten Miller

The number of English language learners (ELLs) in U.S. schools and districts is skyrocketing. According to the National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition (NCELA, n.d.a), the percentage of ELLs in U.S. public schools between 1995 and 2005 rose almost 61%, although overall student population growth was 2.6%. Twenty-three states saw triple digit growth in that same time period; 11 of those states saw increases of more than 200% (NCELA, n.d.a).

These rapidly rising numbers caught many states by surprise, particularly those in the Southeast and the Midwest. Nebraska, for example, until recently served a fairly homogenous White student population. But due in large part to a growing meatpacking industry that employs many Latino workers, the number of ELLs grew from approximately 4,000 to more than 16,000 in a 10-year period. ELLs now constitute almost 6% of the state’s student population. North Carolina has seen even more dramatic growth, jumping from approximately 15,000 ELLs in 1995 to more than 70,000 in 2005. This growth is largely because of an increased demand for farmworkers as the state’s main agricultural product has shifted from tobacco to other crops.

Although states may have been surprised, schools and districts have been overwhelmed. Not all schools and districts employ English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers, and even in those that do, the sheer number of ELLs often means that the students are no longer solely the responsibility of the ESL teaching team.

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Just the Facts

- Principals—particularly principals of middle level and high schools—must become more familiar with the research on language acquisition for ELL students.
- Almost half of English language learners are secondary-level students.
- Academic English takes at least five years to seven years to develop, and it can take even longer for students who were not literate in their primary language when they started in a U.S. school. (Collier & Thomas, 1989).
- One common thread within the research on ELL instruction is that it is imperative to offer direct instruction in academic English across content areas.
teacher. Instead, they have been placed in mainstream classrooms with teachers who are unprepared to teach linguistically diverse students.

Data from the 2003–04 Schools and Staffing Survey conducted by the U.S. Department of Education (2006) indicated that of the 44% of teachers who taught ELLs, only 14.1% had eight or more hours of training in such instruction in the preceding three years. Therefore, it is not surprising that principals report that their schools and teachers need assistance in learning how to teach ELLs in a mainstream setting.

The research has made it increasingly clear that effective instruction for ELLs cannot begin until teachers are aware of how a second language is acquired. Without that knowledge, teachers will not be able to appropriately modify instruction and assessment for their ELLs. They will expect too much or too little language output, and the result will be frustration for both the teacher and the student.

Schools and districts must ensure that mainstream teachers receive professional development that focuses on language acquisition and offers specific strategies for these teachers to use with their ELL students. As a starting point, principals—particularly principals of middle level and high schools—must become more familiar with the research on language acquisition for ELL students.

**Secondary-Level English Language Learners**

Almost half of English language learners are secondary-level students. They are a diverse group who speak different native languages; vary in the extent of the formal schooling they have received, either in the United States or in their native countries; have been in the United States for different amounts of time; and have different socioeconomic statuses. A total of 44% are foreign-born, as opposed to 24% of elementary students, making it more likely that they are newcomers to the U.S. public school system (NCELA, n.d.b).

As Lucas (2000) points out, secondary-level ELLs face unique challenges because of the greater cognitive and linguistic demands of middle and high school. Not only must students be able to comprehend more advanced content; they must also demonstrate their comprehension on tests that demand advanced English skills. This leaves far less time to catch up to their English-dominant peers than ELLs who started at the elementary level. Lucas (2000) offers a number of recommendations that can help secondary level principals ease the transition of English language learners in middle level and high school, including cultivating relationships with students and their families; learning about students’ native cultures; and building collaborative relationships with other agencies that serve the students’ communities. These are especially important for students at the secondary level, who, as Lucas points out, are going through sociocultural and institutional transitions on top of the normal transitions of adolescence.

**The Language Acquisition Process**

A primary academic concern is how students can best acquire academic English—the language of the classroom. Educators often want to know how long it will take for a nonnative speaker to perform as well as a native speaker in school. In her study of secondary teacher attitudes toward ELLs, Reeves (2006) found that most secondary school teachers believed that students should be able to acquire English within two years. However, that is a common misconception that confuses conversational ability with full fluency.

To understand the difference, it is helpful to consider English language acquisition as an iceberg, as Cummins (1984) does. The tip of the iceberg—the
small part that is visible above water—is conversational English, sometimes called basic interpersonal communicative skills. This is the language of normal everyday speech, the ability to understand and speak informally with friends and teachers. This conversational ability, which is not demanding intellectually, is the language that non-English speaking children develop after about two years of living in an English-speaking country.

The large hidden portion of the iceberg represents academic English—the language used in classrooms—with terms such as photosynthesis, complex compound sentences, and isosceles triangles. Students must master academic English to understand textbooks, write papers and reports, solve mathematical word problems, and take tests. Academic English takes at least five to seven years to develop, and it can take even longer for students who were not literate in their primary language when they started in a U.S. school (Collier & Thomas, 1989).

Teachers can easily think that a student who has mastered conversational English is fluent. Such students understand the teacher’s questions, converse with their classmates in English, and translate for their parents. Their coursework and exams, however, may not demonstrate fluency. As Hill and Flynn (2006) note, frustrated parents and teachers, faced with this contradiction, often conclude that such students have learning disabilities, are poorly motivated, or are just plain lazy.

There are several research-based strategies for helping ELLs acquire academic English needed for success in school. They focus on reading and mathematics instruction, the key content areas under NCLB. However, the research underlying those strategies, although certainly valuable, varies in terms of rigor and is not “gold standard,” i.e., randomized controlled trials that have evaluated the effectiveness of the strategies. Instead, most sources are guides in which the authors have reviewed the existing research literature and have then translated that research into practical guidance. There is widespread agreement in the academic community that a comprehensive research study regarding best practices for teaching ELL students needs to be done.

**Strategies For Teaching Content Area Material**

**Developing Academic English Through Content-Based Instruction**

One common thread within the research on ELL instruction is that it is imperative to offer direct instruction in academic English across the content areas. “The integration of language and content should relate language learning, content learning, and the development of thinking, and should aim to find systematic connections among them” (Mohan as cited in Meltzer & Hamann, 2005). This is particularly true at the secondary level, where mastering content area material relies so heavily on the acquisition and comprehension of academic terminology. Francis, Rivera, Lesaux, Kieffer, and Rivera (2006a) note that for ELLs

*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. (p. 5, emphasis added)

Such mastery will not occur in the absence of content-based instruction, i.e., instruction that embeds literacy instruction across the content areas and emphasizes both content and language objectives in grade-level curriculum in every course. This means that vocabulary instruction cannot be left solely to the ESL or English language arts teacher; under a content-based approach, all teachers must take responsibility for helping their ELL students achieve academic proficiency, which includes developing academic English.

Language learning cannot occur if a teacher focuses only on content, and content knowledge cannot grow if we focus solely on English language acquisition. “Vocabulary is as unique to a content area as fingerprints are to a human being. A content
area is distinguishable by its language, particularly the special and technical terms that label the concepts undergirding the subject matter” (Vacca & Vacca as cited in Meltzer & Hamann, 2005). Teachers must therefore combine content and language objectives in each class. In short, setting language objectives involves looking at two concepts: language functions, or the purpose of language, and language structures or the phrasing, key words, or grammatical usage required to participate actively in the lesson (Hill & Flynn, 2006). Language forms and vocabulary develop more naturally as students study areas of interest, and language structure and form are better learned in authentic contexts (Brinton, Snow, & Wesche, 1989). In other words, “students learn new terminology and word meanings best when they encounter them during purposeful activities and investigations” (Jarrett, 1999).

Building Academic English Across the Content Areas

The U.S. Department of Education (Gersten et al., 2007) recently issued a practice guide on effective literacy and language instruction for elementary level ELLs. This guide offers recommendations for instruction based on a review of the available research, and rates each recommendation according to the quality of the underlying research. Although aimed at the elementary level, many of the Department’s recommendations are equally applicable to secondary ELLs. Two key recommendations are:

- Provide high quality vocabulary instruction throughout the day, teach essential content words in depth, and use instructional time to address the meanings of common words, phrases, and expressions not yet learned. This recommendation is based on three studies conducted specifically with ELLs; thus, the authors rate the level of evidence supporting these strategies as “high.” Based on their review, Gersten et al. note that professional development in effective vocabulary instruction for ELLs is often necessary, and they recommend in-class coaching and teacher study groups as promising methods for improving teachers’ skills in this area.

- Ensure that the development of formal or academic English is a key instructional goal for English learners. There is little empirical research on this topic, leading Gersten et al. (2007) to rate the level of evidence supporting this strategy as “low.” However, the authors note that the “strong consensus of expert opinion is that English learners require considerable explicit and deliberate instruction to learn the features of the type of formal English used in the schools and in academic discourse” (p. 17). As with basic vocabulary instruction, teachers will likely need training in how to best teach academic English. In addition, there may be attitudinal hurdles; for example, teachers may believe that academic English is too hard for ELLs to master. English language learners, however, can begin to learn academic English before they have even fully mastered conversational English.

Other recommendations include screening for reading problems and monitoring progress, providing intensive small-group reading interventions, and scheduling regular peer-assisted learning opportunities.

Francis, Rivera, Lesaux, Kieffer, & Rivera (2006b) of the Comprehensive Center on Instruction also recently reviewed current research on teaching English language learners and developed a set of recommendations for both reading and mathematics instruction based on that research. Of their six recommendations regarding reading, two specifically address academic language:
K–12 classrooms must increase opportunities for ELLs to develop sophisticated vocabulary knowledge. Estimates indicate that only 5–10% of classroom instructional time is spent on vocabulary instruction and that even this small amount of time is limited in scope. By the time students get to middle and high school, vocabulary instruction is rare, even though it is at these levels of schooling that academic language becomes more difficult for ELLs as well as their native-speaking peers (Francis et al., 2006b). For vocabulary instruction to be effective with ELLs, it must be “frequent, intensive, systematic, and complex” (p. 21). However, this does not mean that all such instruction must be direct vocabulary instruction. Teachers should also teach word-learning strategies. One strategy, which would apply to students who speak Latin-based languages, would be the use of cognates, i.e., words that are similar in sound and meaning in English and the ELL’s native language (consider, e.g., estimate in English, and estimar in Spanish).

In all K–12 classrooms, ELLs need opportunities to engage in structured, academic talk. Reading aloud and shared readings, each followed by structured discussion, are examples of using oral language to promote the development of academic English. Cooperative learning strategies, such as peer-led discussions, are also valuable to ELLs: “a key variable in the language acquisition of ELLs is the amount of opportunity to practice language with peers who have slightly more developed language and/or are native English speakers” (Francis et al., 2006b, p. 28).

Other recommendations include early, explicit, and intensive instruction in phonological awareness and phonics to build decoding skills; strategies
and knowledge to comprehend and analyze challenging narrative and expository texts; instruction and intervention to promote reading fluency with a focus on vocabulary and increased exposure to print; structured and purposeful independent reading, and a good reader-teacher match.

Meltzer and Hamann (2005) of the Education Alliance at Brown University, agree that vocabulary instruction currently plays a limited role in middle level and high-school classrooms and that the typical “assign, define, and test” approach that is most commonly used is not effective:

Effective vocabulary instruction requires learning environments in which students constantly use relevant vocabulary in their reading, writing, and speaking, both actively building word knowledge and deepening their understandings of the relationships among key terms (Allen, 1999; Blachowicz & Fisher, 2000; Curtis, 2002; McKeown, Beck, Omanson, & Pople, 1985). (p. 56)

Recommendations for Building Academic English in Mathematics Instruction

Although all of the recommendations in the previous section apply to teaching mathematics, we have separated this content area out from others because of its particular relevance under NCLB and, perhaps even more important, because of its unique linguistic nature. Math is frequently considered a content area with few linguistic demands; after all, math is a “universal language,” isn’t it? In reality, however, “academic language is as central to mathematics as it is to other academic areas” (Francis et al., 2006b, p. 36), and “language facilitates mathematical thinking” (Jarrett, 1999, p. 4). Despite this connection between mathematics and language, Francis et al. (2006b) point out that direct instruction of key mathematical terms gets short shrift in most math classrooms. As a result, many ELLs struggle significantly with mathematics, particularly with the word problems that can be the heart of instruction and assessment in upper grades.

What are the language demands of mathematics? First, there are words and phrases specific to math, such as Pythagorean theorem, obtuse angle, sine, and cosine. Students—ELLS as well as native English speakers—need “significant instructional support” to be able to understand such phrases and use them correctly (Francis et al., 2006b, p. 37). Perhaps even more difficult for ELLs, however, are multiple meaning words—words that mean one thing in everyday conversational English but have a specific meaning within mathematics—words such as difference, equal, table, odd, even, root, point. As in other content areas, effective vocabulary instruction in mathematics must be “frequent, intensive, systematic, and complex” (Francis et al., 2006b, p. 21).

In mathematics, vocabulary instruction works best when it is part of core instruction. There are a variety of devices and procedures that can be used to supplement classroom instruction and make vocabulary more meaningful for English language learners, including manipulatives and other real objects and pictures, photos, and drawings (Hill & Flynn, 2006; Jarrett, 1999). In math particularly, charts and graphs can make the meaning of abstract information clearer to English language learners (Fathman et al. as cited in Jarrett, 1999).

Conclusion

Developing ELLs’ academic English skills is obviously only one part of providing effective instruction for this group of students. Differentiating instruction, using formative assessments systematically and effectively, knowing the stages of language acquisition, involving parents and the community—are all keys to effective instruction. However, to ignore adolescent ELLs’ need to acquire academic vocabulary in every content area will not only hurt their performance on NCLB-required tests; it will also do them a grave disservice as they move past secondary schooling. Meltzer and Hamann (2005) note that ELLs do not perform as well as other student populations in terms of secondary school completion rates, participation in advanced classes, and postsecondary pursuits and success.
Given today’s growing need for workers who think and read critically, express themselves persuasively, and solve complex problems, ELLs who have basic skills “but lack sufficient complexity and sophistication in their oral and written academic language” will fail to meet today’s standards for the workplace or postsecondary education (Francis et al., 2006b, p. 5).

References


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