

THE CHALLENGE OF LEARNING ACADEMIC ENGLISH

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What is academic English?

Children with normal language development come to school at age four or five fluent in their home language. We spend another 12 years attempting to expand this linguistic competence into the sphere of literacy. In the early grades, instruction focuses on teaching students how to decode written text. Effective early reading instruction develops students' awareness of how the sounds of the language map on to written symbols and also encourages them to apply these skills in reading and writing extensively. These early years of schooling are crucial in helping students forge an affective connection to reading and writing.

The acquisition of fluent decoding skills in the primary grades, however, is only the first step to becoming a strong reader. As students progress through the grades, they are required to read increasingly complex texts both in language arts and in the content areas of the curriculum (Science, Math, Social Studies).



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Academic language becomes increasingly complex after the primary grades.

The complexity of academic language reflects:

- **The difficulty of the concepts that students are required to understand;**
- **The vocabulary load in content texts that include many low frequency and technical words that we almost never use in typical conversation; many of these words come from Latin and Greek sources (e.g., predict, photosynthesis, sequence, revolution, etc.);**
- **Increasingly sophisticated grammatical constructions (e.g., passive voice) that again are almost never used in everyday conversational contexts.**

Students are not only required to read this language, but also to use it in an accurate and coherent way in their own writing.

We find academic language predominantly in books. Students who read extensively both inside and outside the school, therefore, have far greater opportunities to acquire academic language than those whose reading is limited.

Why is conversational English faster to acquire than academic English?

We can function well in most familiar everyday situations with a relatively small vocabulary of high frequency words. Linguists estimate that knowledge of about 2,000 words is enough to get by in most conversational situations. There are many clues to meaning in face-to-face conversation—eye contact, gestures, facial expressions, intonation, etc. So we don't need to know as much of the language to understand the meaning or make ourselves understood. By contrast, the language used in schools and more formal situations lacks these face-to-face supports and entails many more low frequency words and difficult grammatical constructions.

What specific challenges do struggling readers face in catching up academically?

The learning difficulties faced by struggling readers can derive from a variety of sources regardless of whether their home language is English or a language other than English. Some students experience difficulties in acquiring decoding skills and fall behind from an early stage; other students acquire reasonably fluent decoding skills but experience difficulties around Grades 3 or 4 when the conceptual and linguistic load of the curriculum becomes significantly more intense than in early grades. Intervention for struggling readers should address the specific difficulties they are experiencing.

If the problems lie in decoding, then provide support focused on helping students acquire the sound symbol relationships that characterize English written text. If the problems lie in the area of reading comprehension, focus on building up vocabulary knowledge and encouraging students to read extensively and talk about the books they have read. In both cases, we should strive for a balanced approach – build up students’ awareness of how written language works while simultaneously encouraging students to engage actively with reading and writing.

What instructional strategies are effective in enabling EL students and struggling readers to develop academic language?

Sustained growth in reading and writing skills is strongly related to students’ level of literacy engagement. Reading researcher John Guthrie (2004) summarized this research by noting that students “whose family background was characterized by low income and low education, but who were highly engaged readers, substantially outscored students who came from backgrounds with higher education and higher income, but who themselves were less engaged readers. Based on a massive sample, this finding suggests the stunning conclusion that engaged reading can overcome traditional barriers to reading achievement, including gender, parental education, and income.” (p. 5)

We can promote literacy engagement among EL students and struggling readers by using “scaffolds” or supports to make the input more comprehensible (e.g., through graphic organizers, demonstrations, etc.). It is also important to scaffold students’ use of language, particularly their written language. Newcomer students, for example, can be encouraged to write initially in their first language (L1) and then work from L1 to English possibly with the help of classmates.

Effective instruction for EL students and struggling readers will also activate students' prior knowledge and build background knowledge as needed. Learning can be defined as the integration of new knowledge or skills with the knowledge or skills we already possess. It is crucial, therefore, to activate EL students' preexisting knowledge so that they can relate new information to what they already know.

Identity affirmation is also crucial for literacy engagement. Students who feel their culture and identity validated in the classroom are much more likely to engage with literacy than those who perceive their culture and identity ignored or devalued. Writing for authentic purposes and for real audiences, together with creative project work that will be published (e.g., on a school web site), are excellent ways of reinforcing students' academic and cultural identities.

Finally, literacy engagement among EL students requires that teachers across the curriculum explain how language works and stimulate students' curiosity about language. Students who gain a sense of control over language will want to use it for powerful purposes.

Reference

Guthrie, J. T. (2004). Teaching for literacy engagement. *Journal of Literacy Research*, 36, 1-30.