

▪ TAB ONE

A F o c u s e d A p p r o a c h Explicit Language for Content Instruction



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RATIONALE

Secondary education is a complex endeavor: fast-paced schedules, specialized courses, rigorous content, high-stakes assessment, and varying instructional methods place a high demand on any student. Yet for our long-term English learners, who must tackle the coursework while simultaneously acquiring the English language, the demands intensify significantly.

Acknowledging this, and recognizing that it is our responsibility to provide our English learners with instruction that supports them in meeting this demand, we developed *A Focused Approach to Constructing Meaning*.

Students come to us as the products of a myriad of environments that include home, culture, language, and prior schooling. How they respond to the teaching you provide will depend, in part, on these prior experiences and how you mediate critical instructional gaps in language and content.

Two guiding questions have been the driving force behind the development of *A Focused Approach to Constructing Meaning*:

1. Why are English language learners continuing to perform consistently below their native-English speaking peers?
2. What model can we propose that infuses explicit language instruction into the teaching of grade level content standards?

The content of *A Focused Approach to Constructing Meaning* seeks to optimize language and content learning for long-term English learners by examining more closely these recurring themes:

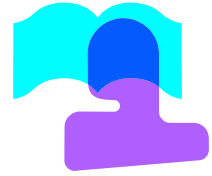
- ◆ Knowing our students
- ◆ Identifying discipline-specific language
- ◆ Connecting listening, speaking, reading and writing
- ◆ Building receptive and expressive academic language

One Teacher's Stated Goal

To equip students with the language they need to express the sophistication of their thinking for academic and real life purposes.

THE CHALLENGE

English learners face a daunting task. They must gain a multi-faceted knowledge of the English language as they learn grade level subject matter content. They must do all this while competing with native-English speaking peers who are rapidly increasing their knowledge of the English language and applying that knowledge to the content standards.



How quickly and efficiently an English learner progresses in acquiring and learning a second language depends on a number of factors, including: his or her level of language and literacy development in the primary language, time in U.S. schools, type of instructional program, age, individual experiences and, most importantly, *quality of instruction*.

Experience tells us that a student's receptive and expressive language abilities are often at different levels. For example, a student's ability to understand oral explanations and answer specific questions may far exceed his or her ability to fully express her understanding of content. Many students are able to express their thinking more clearly when speaking than when writing. English learners who have studied English previously may be more competent reading and writing English than speaking or understanding spoken English. Many long-term English learners have been exposed to everyday language and have developed oral English proficiency, but may be limited in formal oral and written English.

Students glean a great deal of English knowledge from daily experiences in the natural process of language learning. However, it is important to note that while an English learner may have internalized certain complex verb forms, he or she may consistently misuse others and lack knowledge of abstract or precise vocabulary.

Without consistent, explicit instruction and regular practice, secondary English learners may not internalize the forms of academic language and may instead continue to rely on a partial command of the rules and structures of academic English.

Students learning English as a second language must learn every word and sentence combination native English speakers have spent thousands of hours internalizing during their early childhoods. This must be done in a condensed time frame, and often only during the hours a student is in school. Additionally, they must learn the language being taught in every subject area. This includes the conceptual and concrete language taught not only in the current year, but also the foundational vocabulary taught in each previous year. Consider what it takes to learn abstract concepts like "plot," ideas like "democracy," and techniques like "estimating" in a second language.

English also happens to be rich in idioms and figurative language. English learners must learn both the literal and idiomatic meanings of hundreds of sayings and expressions English speakers use on a daily basis. The challenges are enormous when learning terms like "off the record" or "tongue-in-cheek."

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SETTING THE CONTEXT

It is well understood that a student's academic success depends on learning to read well. Learning to read well depends on rich language knowledge - which presents unique challenges for English learners and others who have not acquired academic English.

English learners with several years of schooling in the United States have acquired a great deal of English through experiences in school and community. They have learned the social/conversational language skills to appear fluent in English, but they often score low on academic tests and tasks requiring academic language proficiency. It is important to note that a lack of adequate progress in reading is not necessarily a sign that students have a language or reading disability, but often is the result of insufficient explicit instruction in the vocabulary and language forms of academic English.



Why do so many long-term English learners struggle with academic language proficiency?

One reason may be that explicit instruction in how English works is rarely provided beyond the intermediate level. The gap between the language students need to thrive in everyday settings and the language required to succeed academically may not have been identified and advanced English language instruction may not be provided.

Academic language proficiency is a separate skill from everyday speech and writing- it is the language of texts, of academic discussion, and professional writing. Without it, students will not achieve long-term success in school and beyond. Formal, academic English is used to problem-solve, weigh evidence, and think critically. It is required to negotiate the dense-print paperwork associated with adult independence, such as: banking, health care, and property rental. Yet, once many students reach the Intermediate and Advanced levels of ELD, they no longer receive formal language instruction. When EL students transition into core content courses, increased emphasis on subject matter knowledge allows little time for language instruction. This shift often leaves the Intermediate English learner orally fluent, but with critical gaps in language knowledge and vocabulary.

Accessing prior knowledge and assuring student motivation and interaction is critical assure student learning- but it is not enough. Academic English *must* be continuously developed and explicitly taught across all subject areas.

Staying Focused on Language Demands

Adolescent English Learners require specific guidance with regard to language learning, including kinds and uses of texts.

- Mary Schleppegrell

WHAT GOOD READERS DO

Defined simply, reading is a motivated act that combines decoding and comprehension. But reading is a deceptively complex task. It requires the development and synthesis of many skills, as illustrated in the graphic below.

Framework for Reading Assessment & Instruction, John Shefelbine

Motivation										
Decoding					Comprehension					
Word Recognition Strategies			Fluency		Academic Language			Comprehension Strategies		
Concepts about Print	Phonemic Awareness	Phonics	Sight Words	Automaticity	Background Knowledge	Vocabulary	Syntax	Text Structure	Comprehension Monitoring	(Re)organizing Text

The majority of second language students come to content area classrooms with basic **word recognition strategies** and a certain level of **reading fluency**. (For those students who do not, a reading intervention class may be necessary.)

However, **motivation**, **knowledge of academic language**, and **comprehension strategies** are also essential to successful reading. Academic English requires a general knowledge of words used differently across subject areas and specialized knowledge of topic-related concepts in a particular subject area. Consider the background knowledge and vocabulary required to understand the context for the following words: braise, mince, sauté, fold, blanche. Then consider the knowledge of text structure needed to read a recipe for artichoke bisque versus Pablo Neruda’s *Ode to the Artichoke*.

Reading proficiency requires the reader to not only automatically and accurately recognize a vast number of words and contexts, but also to comprehend what is being read.

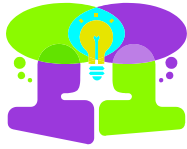
Good readers:

- Determine what each word means within the context of the particular phrase, sentence and passage.
- Call upon a broader knowledge of the language and text structures for that content-area.
- Actively monitor their own comprehension as they read. They must understand the details of what the author has written- from the literal level to thought-intensive, analytic, and interpretive levels.
- Mentally (re)organize text by making connections with previous knowledge and arriving at new associations, ideas, and relationships while reading.

Adolescent English learners need to learn and practice the language, skills, and strategies employed by accomplished readers. They do not have the luxury of listening to and absorbing the forms and structures of academic English over an extended period of time. To accelerate transitioning English learners, teachers of all disciplines must make “visible” the otherwise “invisible” skills of comprehending content-specific text. In an English class, this may mean demonstrating and modeling how the same punctuation mark is read

differently in prose and verse. In a science class, this may mean teaching students how to explain the solution to a problem by sequencing a series of discrete steps.

Knowing what good reading “looks like” moves the act of comprehension from that of abstract concept into the realm of observable action. Providing them with concrete comprehension strategies (*Effective Practices for Developing Reading Comprehension, Duke & Pearson, 2002*) will help English learners establish tangible, behavioral goals.



Utilizing Our Expertise (Think, Pair, Share)

Directions: Working with a partner, complete the right side of the T-Chart below:

Good readers are active readers, who:	Practices that support students in using effective strategies include:
<p>Have clear goals in mind for their reading. They constantly evaluate whether the text, and their reading of it, is meeting their goals.</p>	
<p>Typically look over the text before they read, noting such things as the structure of the text and text sections that might be most relevant to their reading goals.</p>	
<p>Make predictions about what is to come.</p>	
<p>Read selectively, continually make decisions about their reading—what to read carefully, what to read quickly, what not to read, what to re-read, and so on.</p>	
<p>Construct, revise, and question the meanings as they read.</p>	
<p>Try to determine the meaning of unfamiliar words and concepts in the text, and deal with inconsistencies or gaps as needed.</p>	
<p>Draw upon, compare, and integrate their prior knowledge with material in the text.</p>	
<p>Read different kinds of text differently.</p>	



Developing a Shared Understanding

Directions: Read the following excerpts. What common recommendations or ideas do they share?

Academic English is the language that specific disciplines and academic areas of focus use to impart new information, describe concepts, and explain abstract ideas. It includes key vocabulary, but goes beyond vocabulary to include the ways in which language is used within each academic discipline – how things are organized, and discussed, read and written about. It includes the terms, meta-linguistic skills, and discourse patterns a student needs in order to comprehend the text, to write, and to speak appropriately. Academic English also provides the thinking skills that enable students to analyze, compare, contrast, and justify, describe, classify, debate, synthesize, and evaluate information within that discipline.

Academic English is not picked up through normal social interaction. It needs to be intentionally and systematically developed through direct teaching, through active reading in the academic area, and through modeling.

Laurie Olsen, *Secondary School Leadership for EL Success*

Academic English is a variety or register of English used in professional books and characterized by the specific linguistic features associated with academic disciplines. The term “register” refers to a constellation of linguistic features that are used in particular situational contexts (Halliday & Hasan, 1989; Martin, 1990). Academic English tasks include reading abstracts, taking notes on key ideas from lectures, and writing critiques, summaries, annotated bibliographies, reports, case studies, research projects, and expository essays. Academic English is a wide range of genres (Savaille-Troike, 1994; Swales, 1990). Examples of academic genres include lab reports and journal articles. Academic English includes many diverse sub-registers associated with different disciplines such as science, economics, and mathematics (John, 1997). It is not possible to “do” science, “do” economics, or “do” mathematics with only ordinary language (Halliday & Martin, 1993; Lemke, 1990). One must “do” discipline-specific work with academic and discipline-specific language.

Robin Scarcella,
Accelerating Academic English: A Focus on English Learners

Academic English is a cognitively demanding and relatively decontextualized register (Cummins, 1984). It relies on a broad knowledge of words, concepts, language structures, and interpretation strategies. Skills related to mastery of academic English include summarizing, analyzing, extracting and interpreting meaning, evaluating evidence, composing, and editing. Acquiring academic English is a challenge for English language learners, and native speakers. Few children arrive at school competent in this register. For the most part, academic English is learned over the course of schooling through frequent engagement in classroom talk, reading textbooks, and writing. Teachers need to recognize that all students need support to acquire the structures and vocabulary associated with academic English, and they need to know how to provide it.

Lily Wong Fillmore and Catherine Snow,
What Teachers Need to Know About Language