

Academic language for esl learners

Literature



A basic fact that can be revealed about the English language today is that that it is regarded as a universal language for communication throughout the world.

Whether for colloquial or academic purposes, English has gained the popularity as the basic medium of communication everywhere. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that there are differences when it comes to presenting the English language- especially when using it for academic purposes.

The language for the academic purposes comes with greater clarity and utilizes better uses of words (a thesaurus can be handy). We have academic magazines, journals as well as thousands of research resources that are initially printed in English. Universities worldwide employ only English as the medium of communication for education. The necessity of learning the English language has grown.

The research sources would be easy to understand only if one has a thorough understanding of the English vocabulary and text use that includes the usage of sophisticated words and phrases.

It would be impossible for any person whose language skills are not fluent on an academic level to understand the high-degree content that is used in such literatures. It is therefore essential to understand that the ESL (English-as a second-language) learners be familiar with the academic usage of the English language.

These learners belong to a bilingual background and thus face the difficulty of understanding the academic language. The academic English language, as

stated by the National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition is as follows,

“ The National Center for Research on Cultural Diversity and Second Language Learning defines academic language broadly to include:

semantic and syntactic features such as vocabulary items, sentence structure, transition markers, and cohesive ties; and language functions and tasks that are part of the social studies classroom routine, such as defining terms, explaining historical significance, reading expository text, and preparing research reports” (NCELA, 2006).

On the whole, the academic language proceeds beyond the vocabulary that is utilized in our every-day communications. Academic English language is what we find in textbooks, research articles, journals and other academic sources.

Possessing strong social English communication skills does not represent a strong academic language usage. Using English as an academic language should be developed that includes proficiency in grammar, sentence structures as well as spellings. The written content should be technically correct.

The kind of English proficiency that an ESL learner should learn in order to gain an understanding into the academic aspects on the academic level is the cognitive academic language proficiency (otherwise known as the CALP) that is mainly characterized by the text used in the school or university literatures in subjects such as science, social science and mathematics. Clara Lee Brown states,

“ Due to its decontextualized nature, ESL students struggle to comprehend what they read and to express what they know in writing. CALP English used in context-reduced academic learning demands high cognition on the part of the ESL student. In addition, Cummins reports that it takes 5 to 7 years for ESL students to be proficient in CALP English.

Unlike BICS learning, CALP learning is a long-term undertaking. Collier suggests that it can take up to 10 years for ESL students to reach grade-level CALP English depending on the kind of English instruction they receive. Collier & Thomas report that the ESL students who were taught in pull-out ESL settings took the longest time to reach grade level” (Brown, 2004).

Academic language varies with subjects such as the academic language used in mathematics would be different from the academic language used in social sciences as they have their own technical terms and explanations.

The academic language used in scientific literatures would be different compared to the academic language used in language arts. Excerpts from the academic journals elucidate the comparisons and the following below are excerpts from a science academic paper and a history academic paper.

“ Plasmid profiling of antibiotic resistant *Escherichia coli* isolates revealed that the isolates contained various size R-plasmids. Although some strains exhibited different antibiotic resistance patterns, some of their plasmids had similar migration patterns on agarose gel electrophoresis.

Multiple resistances are conferred by R-plasmids of different sizes. The high prevalence of antibiotic resistance conferring plasmids observed in this study

may be due to the increasing widespread use of antibiotics” (Al-Harthy, 2006). [Science excerpt]

“ Recent scholars, however, have taken a much more open stance against the canonical version of Charles's trial. John Adamson asserts that a preoccupation with Charles's army still at large in Ireland shaped the proceedings at Whitehall in December 1648 and January 1649.

It was the Parliament-men's fear of Charles's ability to command his Irish army that encouraged the army and Parliamentary leaders to try him in late December” (Tubb, 2006). [History excerpt]

The following examples exhibit a tremendous difference and the different subjects make the difference more visible. The scientific academic journal article uses a complex language with terms that are not familiar to any common man.

The same applies to the historical journal article that uses a simple yet a different style to relay its academic concept. The scientific academic journal not only exhibits an advanced form of the language but also represents terms that most of us are not familiar with.

The importance of academic language for ESL learners is absolutely crucial, especially those who are work or are currently to educational and academic fields as these fields require a thorough command over the English language in a more advanced way.

Unlike social language, academic language requires a comprehensive understanding. Therefore, the English Language Learners should be well-

acquainted with the academic language so that their educational or academic goals are easier to obtain.

This especially applies to students who are currently in their high school or universities where the syllabus of different subjects requires them to write academic papers on several topics. Furthermore, the English Language Learners should be able to understand the several components of academic English so that they are familiar.

Developing academic language for ESL or ELL learners is an absolute necessity; viewing the current status of the language into account.

There are several methods and techniques to help the English Language learners to acquaint themselves with the academic language that would help them in their educational and academic motives. The English Language Learners get to learn the language as well as content at the same time if their academic language is given importance.

Teaching the content-area curriculum to students in order to improve the student's academic language is an absolute necessity as they would further be moving on to universities specializing in different fields. We need more than just an ESL syllabus- we need a competent language syllabus that deals with the academic stance of the English language too. As Kenneth Shore states,

“ Students who speak English as a second language (ESL) constitute a significant percentage of the nation's school population: schools currently provide programs for nearly 3 million ESL students, and it is estimated that

this population is growing two and half times faster than that of native English-speaking students.

Many of these newcomers are likely to have difficulties adjusting to their new environment. As teachers, we face multiple challenges: We need to teach the content-area curriculum, while at the same time supporting students' English-language development, and helping them adjust to a new school and a new culture" (Shore, 2001).

Making the students familiar with several different content or subject areas with regards to the academic language can help to a great extent. Furthermore, teaching them content-related areas would help familiarize them to several technical aspects of the content such as content presentation and vocabulary.

Jennifer Malia states that the English Language Learner teachers should incorporate the model writing process stages such as previewing, drafts and editing to help the student develop fluency over the written and communication skills of the academic language (Malia, 2006).

Writing and re-writing (in order to make the drafts compatible to the academic standards) is a good practice for the ESL or ELL learners to have a perfect grasp over the content-related area of the academic language.

It is difficult for ESL or ELL learners to grasp those textbooks concepts that the native English speakers could understand and hence, they face the learning difficulty in this stance.

Therefore, the ELL's or the ESL learners should be taught in a way that the concepts of the academic language (of the subject in use) are easy for them.

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Learning through textbooks is a good start. The needs of the ELL or ESL learners should be taken into account and the kind of response that the teacher expects from the students also matters.

For instance, it would be wise to actually understand what to expect from the ELL or ESL learners after they read the textbook. What concepts we want them to understand and what areas pose a difficulty for them. A thorough evaluation of the student's ability will help the teacher to develop a particular stance that would be helpful in meeting the academic needs of the students.

This is called the scaffolding strategy technique where the teacher first evaluates her expectations, then the students' ability followed by a gradual shift of the learning responsibility to the students (North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, n. d.).

The kind of academic language that should be taught to the ELL or the ESL learners also matters. Teaching the subjects or content that the students are interested to learn can help enhance their academic language skills as they are willing to learn and make a change in this regard due to their interest.

The modeling strategy works well in this stance. As stated by Paul F. Cook, the modeling technique helps the teacher to interact well with her students through regular sessions with the parents as well as discussing the interest of the student as well.

As such, a program entitled Educational Supervision Program was developed in order to help the teachers improve their supervision ability and deal more

effectively with their students on an academic level. Therefore, the entire program aims at developing a better attitude.

The ELL teachers should be aware that the students are not familiar with many concepts of the academic language and should hence, aim at improving their ability by believing in the students capability and interest in the subject followed by knowledge of the preferable outcome of their actions (Cook, 1982).

Alex Regan, the ELL Outlook Editor proposes an interesting framework for teachers to teach academic language to ELL learners in the most appropriate manner.

Regan states that a perfect start for any ELL learner towards academic language is actually through the textbook and within the textbook, the teacher should be able to specify the main ideas and explain the vocabulary to the students.

This should help the student enhance his or her skill initially as he or she start to familiarize themselves with the academic stance of the language which is different from the colloquial or social language. The non-native English speakers face a difficulty adapting to the academic language as they are unable to understand the complex vocabulary of the subject.

This leads to the creation of vague ideas that in turn affect the student's confidence thereby creating a lack of interest in the subject. The ELL teacher should maintain the student's interest by first focusing on the main idea of the text so that the student remains focused (Regan, 2005).