Developing Academic Language in Elementary-Age English Language Learners

by Jo Ann Miles and Debra Calluzzo

Developing academic language (AL) and discourse is a cornerstone of the Common Core Learning Standards (CCLS) and vital to preparing students for school success. Instructing English language learners (ELLs) in abstract, sophisticated AL, however, can be a daunting task for English as a new language (ENL) educators, as word choice for the ELL is often the literal, most familiar form. To have a keen understanding of AL and use it masterfully in academic discourse, one must be able to identify the language of debate, state facts, and pose arguments in a confident way. This article offers activities to assist ELLs in developing AL and academic discourse.

AL is much more than understanding and using Tier II and III vocabulary. A precursor to developing competence in using AL is the ability to understand and systematically practice the dynamics of good conversation: speech rate and tone, voice projection and facial expression, and eye/face contact between speaker and receiver that results in oral fluency. Native speakers take these dialogue dynamics for granted, whereas ELLs need explicit instruction (Dove & Honigsfeld, 2013).

Engaging Activities to Build AL

The need to create opportunities for student-to-student academic dialogues is essential in developing AL (Dodge & Honigsfeld, 2014). AL can be introduced within a *social* classroom setting, where students feel comfortable to analyze and practice using it in academic conversation.

In a class set up to facilitate such a setting, the students, seated in a circle, first practiced reading comprehension questions (*Why is a turtle a carnivore?*), their answers taken from an informational text. The students were instructed to think about the components of good conversation as they called to a friend in the classroom and stated the question, with the classmate responding. The challenge became posing and answering the statements without looking at the written model. Although the students had several practice readings, they experienced difficulty in both asking and answering the question with fluency and ease. Furthermore, the components of good conversation were lost as the students averted their eyes and used stilted language, punctuated with stops and starts. As ELLs, they required a deeper understanding of the language and explicit grammar instruction to complete the task. The language deteriorated in several ways: misuse of the interrogative (e.g., "why" for "what"), verb tense ("A turtle *eat* meat"), word omissions ("Turtle is carnivore") and syntax ("A carnivore is a turtle . . ."). These language errors offered an opportunity for mini grammar lessons that assisted the students in correctly stating the questions and answers.

The next task allowed the students to examine the difference between the language of classroom instruction and that of social interaction. Cummins (1984) has documented that social language is more readily acquired than AL. The ENL teacher posed these questions: "How is the

academic language of the classroom different from the social language that you use on the playground? How do you feel and what does the language sound like when you ask a friend to play versus how you feel and sound when you use academic language?" The students expressed feelings of nervousness and lack of confidence in being able to both state and answer questions in AL; they had been taken out of their comfort zone and their affective filter diminished when required to use the language of instruction (Krashen, 1994). In order to allow the students to speak with ease and command, they were asked to imagine they were on the playground asking a friend to play. Holding a jump rope or ball, a student called out to a friend, "Edwin, do you want to play soccer with me?" The students were asked to compare how they felt, their level of confidence, speech rate, tone, and use of eye and face contact using the two different styles of language. They noted that when using social language, their tone was carefree and engaging, allowing them to speak in a natural, fluent way. Furthermore, eye and face contact was maintained and their speech rate was faster and free of the hesitancy of their academic speech. Using the playground analogy to foster the style of social language, the students practiced AL.

The final exercise required the students to memorize and state sentences while employing the elements of good conversation. Likening the oral language activity to a rehearsal of public speaking skills on a stage with an imagined audience helped them to recognize the importance of tone, rate, and voice projection, as well as eye-to-eye contact to achieve natural academic discourse.

Using Signal Words to Develop Academic Discourse

Signal words and phrases play a significant role in developing academic discourse. When Miles engaged in a conversation with her six-year-old grandson, she noted that his language was peppered with AL, as well as introductory signal words and expressions that marked academic discourse. Pointing to her hand, she asked if he knew that these were the finger bones. He responded with "*actually* these are phalanges!" This statement was followed by "*interestingly,* the bones of your feet are also called phalanges!" A variety of signal words filled their academic conversation: "as a matter of fact," "did you know that," "similarly," "amazingly so," "let me explain it to you," "I am considering." These signal words and phrases enabled him to participate in academic discourse and think in the world of reason, debate, and explanation. From this exchange, it was clear to Miles that she needed to create instructional opportunities for her ELLs to embrace AL and words that stimulate academic discourse.

Signal words were introduced in a simple lesson based on the structured daily routine of the calendar. The teacher modeled, "*Did you know that* today is Monday because yesterday was Sunday?" This was followed by "*It stands to reason that* if today is Monday, tomorrow will be Tuesday"; "I *am considering* building a snowman on Saturday because the forecast calls for snow." Eventually these academic expressions were applied to more linguistically challenging content areas—a lesson on oceanography, for example, featured dialogue such as: "*Did you know that baleen* whales have *rostrums* instead of beaks?"

To further develop academic oral language, lists of signal words and phrases were written on the board. A science topic the students were familiar with was chosen and they were asked to participate in a discussion, with each student selecting a trigger word to state a fact. The first student began by stating: "*Did you know that* Pluto is a planet?" Another student responded with "*Actually*, Pluto is a dwarf planet." A third student followed with "*Similarly*, Ceres is a dwarf planet."

The following excerpt is from a teacher-created story about health, focusing on the use of words and phrases that develop academic discourse. It provides a model for natural academic debate between the story's characters—whose names are actually the students' inserted into the text—personalizing the story, heightening the interest level, and motivating them to learn scientific facts that can be stated in an academic way.

> Bryanna stated, "*Did you know that you need at least eight hours of sleep a night to stay healthy?*"
>
> Leo responded, "*Equally as important as sleep is getting daily exercise.*"

To enrich vocabulary and facilitate academic speech, synonyms for the word "said" as well as a list of academic starter words were introduced (see the Appendix).

This reading activity expanded into an oral exercise in which the students demonstrated their command of AL, scientific facts, and words and phrases that are the forerunners of academic debate. Presenting a language model in the written form prepares ELLs for oral academic discourse.

Conclusion

Building AL as well as the climate for academic debate is a process. By making meaningful and relevant connections and being mindful of a student's affective filter, the groundwork is laid to provide instruction in using the language of academic discourse.

References

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Appendix: Academic Language for a Health Discussion

Synonyms for the Word "Said"

There are many ways of using the word "said." Here is a list of synonyms that mean the same thing as the word "said." They can be used in an academic conversation.

1. stated - explained - informed - noted - advised - pointed out

2. interjected - included - added - chimed in - continued - volunteered

3. recalled - remembered

4. answered - replied - responded - agreed

5. asked - questioned - inquired

Academic Language Sentence Starters

1. Interestingly
2. Did you know that
3. Obviously
4. Actually
5. Furthermore
6. Importantly
7. Equally as important
8. More importantly
9. For example
10. The reason why