



## Chapter 3 – The Role of Language and Language Learning (pages 43–49)

### from **Scaffolding the Academic Success of Adolescent English Language Learners: A Pedagogy of Promise**

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## CHAPTER

# 3



# THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE AND LANGUAGE LEARNING

All teachers who have English language learners in their classroom are language teachers, regardless of their main job to teach language arts, social studies, math, or science. In addition to teaching their subject matter, these teachers need to provide challenging, well supported, and effective disciplinary language instruction. However, for teachers who use a content-based approach or teach mainstream subjects, integrating a focus on language is one of the hardest things to do. These skills do not come automatically with the job of being a subject matter teacher or even an ESL teacher. They require sustained thinking, reflection, and development; the issues involved are complex and multifaceted. In this chapter, we consider the difficulties and possibilities of focusing on language within a subject matter classroom.

## Language Development

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Why do students who are otherwise fluent in English often struggle with subject matter language?

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Well over two decades ago, Jim Cummins (1984) drew attention to problems with how instruction for immigrant students was determined. These students were routinely tested for their English language proficiency by means of quick tests of oral comprehension and the production of everyday conversational language. If they seemed to do all right on these tests, they were placed in regular classrooms and deemed to be ready for mainstream instruction. When these students subsequently struggled in their subject matter classes, their failure was blamed on lack of academic abilities, motivation, or home support, and they were often placed in special education classes. Not surprisingly, dropout rates were very high among these students.

Arguably, the situation is not all that different now. Learners, teachers, and policymakers alike generally seem to think that “knowing English” is “knowing English,” regardless of the situation in which the language is used. The huge gap between conversational English and the requirements of academic language use is not often appreciated. It’s all just English, right?

Yet, a bit of reflection will show that, even as native speakers, we are not always equally skilled in using our own language in different contexts and for different purposes. We may be quite comfortable cracking jokes and telling stories around the dinner table, explaining why candidate X is preferable to candidate Y, and so on; but we might be less comfortable describing to a doctor why we don’t feel well or to a car mechanic what exactly those noises are that come out of the engine when we start the car on a cold morning. Alternatively, we might be able to write beautiful poems, yet be unable to participate in small talk at a reception.



Likewise, students who are English language learners have different levels of general abilities and different kinds of interests and skills, all of which are reflected in complex ways in their use of English. These students are not products of one single cookie cutter, and their scores on standardized tests do not tell us who they are and what they might be capable of knowing or doing.

In the sections below, we will examine the differences between conversational language and its more challenging partner — academic language — and, in particular, look at the important notion of *genre*.

### **Conversational Language**

Linguists often claim that by the age of five or so, children have basically mastered the syntax of their native language (Chomsky, 1986; Pinker, 1994). Indeed, children around that age sometimes come up with remarkably complex, grammatically correct utterances. They can also be quite inventive in applying patterns of use that sound plausible, yet do not happen to be part of the language. A child who has climbed into a tree might say, "Can you lower me down?" She might also ask, if she wants to reach the cookies on the top shelf in the kitchen, "Can you higher me up?" In a class of high school English learners, an enthusiastic teacher explaining the word *apathetic* pointed out that the prefix *a-* often means the absence of something, in this case, "without energy" or "without emotion." To elaborate, the teacher gave the paired examples of *political* — *apolitical*, *moral* — *amoral*. In response, one smart student joked, "Teacher, so you are *pathetic*?"

Acknowledging that children and English language learners are capable of coming up with gems of language, there also are many constructions that we would not expect of them. For example, the following extract from a text many students encounter, Richard Wright's *Black Boy*, while easily comprehended, would not likely be part of most adolescents' linguistic

repertoire, regardless of their status as native English speaker or English language learner:

I flayed with tears in my eyes, teeth clenched, stark fear making me throw every ounce of my strength behind each blow. I hit again and again, dropping the money and the grocery list. The boys scattered, yelling, nursing their heads, staring at me in utter disbelief. (p. 18)

The differences between everyday conversational language use and literate, academic (or otherwise specialized) uses of language are often associated with whether the language is used in speech or writing, though things are not quite as simple as that (see, for example, the section on genre below). Jim Cummins (1984) initially proposed a distinction between what he labeled Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). That formulation has often been criticized as too simplistic and dichotomous, and Cummins has since elaborated it into a model that distinguishes between the degree of cognitive complexity and the amount of contextual information available (e.g., 1996, p. 57).

Australian researcher Pauline Gibbons identifies such differences in terms of “playground language” and “classroom language”:

This playground language includes the language which enables children to make friends, join in games and take part in a variety of day-to-day activities that develop and maintain social contacts. It usually occurs in face-to-face contact, and is thus highly dependent on the physical and visual context, and on gesture and body language. Fluency with this kind of language is an important part of language development; without it a child is isolated from the normal social life of the playground.

But playground language is very different from the language that teachers use in the classroom, and from the language that we expect children to learn to use. The language of the playground is not the language associated with learning in mathematics, or social studies, or science. The playground situation does not normally offer children the

opportunity to use such language as: *if we increase the angle by 5 degrees, we could cut the circumference into equal parts*. Nor does it normally require the language associated with the higher order thinking skills, such as hypothesizing, evaluating, inferring, generalizing, predicting or classifying. Yet these are the language functions that are related to learning and the development of cognition; they occur in all areas of the curriculum, and without them a child's potential in academic areas cannot be realized.

(Gibbons, 1991, p. 3, as cited in Cummins, 1996, pp. 56–57)

English language learners may be able to carry on conversations with ease and, perhaps, sound remarkably fluent and native-like. Yet, when it comes to using academic language in reading or writing tasks, they may experience tremendous problems.

### **Academic Language**

As illustrated in the following teacher-student interaction in a class studying brain function (see, also, chapter 5), English language learners who feel comfortable with conversational English may protest against having to practice complex terminology:

Student 2: But I know English.

Teacher: Yes, but *psychological* English.

This brief exchange between an English language learner and the teacher (Crescenzi and Walqui, 2008) encapsulates the challenge that academic language raises for teachers, as well as for many students (not only English language learners). Teachers of English language learners — and the learners — often find that they need to focus on the language itself in order to get something right, whether in formulating a question, finding a word for an object, writing a description, or any other of the multitude of ways in which language is used in lessons. For example, in the lesson on brain function,

students must navigate complex academic terminology, including unfamiliar psychological terms (e.g., *amygdala*, *frontal lobe*, *parietal lobe*). Later, when describing a brain injury, they must learn to say things like “penetrated his skull,” when they might prefer to say, “went through his head.” The following classroom interchange is an example of such linguistic negotiation.

Student 12: (*Reading a proposed answer to group members*) “A tamping rod may have penetrated Phineas Gage’s skull.”

Student 13: Did you all put that he got that little thing through his head, right?

Student 12: Yeah.

Student 13: Awesome.

Student 4: The rod. The rod may have penetrated

Student 13: Do you have to use a big word like that? I’m just gonna put “went through.”

Student 2: (*Teasing*) Oh, put “p” then a dot.

(Crescenzi and Walqui, 2008)

The students in this group encounter the differences between everyday language and academically precise expression. Student 13 resists the “big word” *penetrated*, proposing that “went through” would do just as well. Student 2, in a slightly sarcastic tone, advises Student 13 to compromise, and just write “p.” Even English language learners who are quite proficient in everyday language can find that the unfamiliar universe of academic language makes achieving subject matter proficiency a long and hard struggle, one they may especially resist if it causes identity conflicts. In the above example, Student 13 appears reluctant to “play the academic game.” As teachers, by paying very close attention to students’ interactions during group tasks, we can learn much about how to help them become the practiced users of academic language that they need to be.



A lot of academic language is common across different disciplines. For example, the word *penetrate* that some students had difficulty with in the brain injury lesson is used in different subjects (physics, history, literature, and so on). However, even though the word is the same, its meaning and patterns of use may be quite different. In history, spies may penetrate enemy positions; in literature, a particular turn of phrase may be a penetrating insight; and in science, a chemical may penetrate a rock. Students need to understand how meaning may shift for a single word as its context shifts.

### **Conversational and Academic Language: A Continuum**

Because conversational and academic language use can be seen as opposite ends of a continuum, from informal to formal, and from highly contextualized to highly academic, a key question, and one that drives the work of QTEL, is *How can we use the conversational skills of English language learners to help them build the academic skills that they will increasingly need to be successful in school?*

In recent years, researchers such as Pauline Gibbons and Mary Schleppegrell have focused intently on this question. An important insight of their research is that in order to learn academic registers, that is, the “style” of language that is common in academic fields, learners have to talk about the language they are using. Once they become more aware of the language choices they make, which is to say, become more metalinguistic, everyday language can then form a bridge toward the increasingly complex academic language they need to master. The teacher, through carefully designed activities and scaffolding, leads the students step by step toward using more complex vocabulary and expressions. As in the extract from the brain injury discussion on the preceding page, the student locution “he got that little thing through his head” becomes “a tamping rod penetrated his skull.” Later in that same class, when a student describes a brain-injured person who “hears stuff,” the teacher