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Academic Language in Teaching and Learning Introduction to the Special Issue

Author(s): Mary J. Schleppegrell

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# ACADEMIC LANGUAGE IN TEACHING AND LEARNING

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## *Introduction to the Special Issue*

### ABSTRACT

Success in school calls for using language in new ways to accomplish increasingly challenging discursive tasks across grade levels and school subjects. As children develop new knowledge, they also need support in using language in new ways. This introduction to the special issue offers insights into the challenges and affordances of developing academic language and suggests implications for pedagogy, teacher education, and further research.

Mary J. Schleppegrell

UNIVERSITY OF  
MICHIGAN

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**T**HE notion of *academic language* is currently informing research focused on identifying ways that teachers can more effectively support children in learning (e.g., Anstrom et al., 2010; Bailey, 2007; Cummins & Man, 2007; Schleppegrell, 2001, 2004; Snow & Uccelli, 2009; Spycher, 2009; Zwiers, 2007). Researchers are also calling for more attention in teacher education to preparing teachers to support academic language development (e.g., Lucas, Villegas, & Freedson-Gonzalez, 2008). Anstrom et al., in a comprehensive review of research on *academic English* (AE), noted that this construct has been defined and operationalized in different ways for different purposes, but in its broadest sense it refers to “the language used in school to help students acquire and use knowledge” (2010, p. iv).

As the articles presented in this special issue demonstrate, the notion of academic language has important relevance for teachers and students from the earliest years. A focus on academic language foregrounds the linguistic demands of teaching and learning, recognizing that schooling is accomplished in great part through spoken and written language. Understanding and responding to the challenges of academic

language offers potentially powerful new ways of successfully engaging all children in learning.

This issue presents research that highlights some key issues in academic language development, demonstrating that this development begins in early childhood and involves increasing flexibility in drawing on language for different purposes in different contexts. Academic language is functional for getting things done at school, varying as it is used in different subject areas and for different purposes, but requiring that children use language in new ways to learn and to display knowledge about what they have learned in ways that will be valued. All children need opportunities to develop awareness about academic language and to practice engaging in activities in which academic language is used.

The notion of academic language developed out of research in the 1970s and 1980s that focused attention on the challenges of the language children engage with at school and how the language expectations at school differ from the language of the home and community for many children. Heath's (1983) ethnographic research, for example, illustrated how children are socialized in different ways in their use of language because of differences in the ways language is valued and used in their communities. This positions children to respond in different ways to the literacy tasks of schooling, and it also means that some children's ways of responding to such tasks mesh more effortlessly with the ways of their teachers than do those of other children. Snow's (1983) analysis of children's interactions with their caregivers described some distinctive ways that middle-class families prepare preschoolers to understand and produce what she called "literate" features of oral discourse; for example, by telling or reading stories in which the author is impersonal, the setting is distanced, reference may have to be understood from the writer's or speaker's point of view, and relatively complex language is used. Snow suggested that the process of education consists largely of training in this "decontextualized" language use.

Cummins (e.g., 1981, 1984), drawing on research with bilingual children, described different kinds of language proficiency, focusing on assessment issues and arguing that assessment of students' language proficiency should involve more than tests of spoken interaction. He used a distinction between interpersonal language and academic language to suggest that such assessments would include tasks requiring students to use language that can be understood without reference to the context in which it is produced—rather than contexts of face-to-face interaction—as well as tasks that call on students to focus their attention on language itself. Both Cummins and Snow pointed to particular features such as more complex sentences and more precise and elaborate vocabulary as characteristic of academic language.

At the same time, functional linguists were developing frameworks for describing language in its social context in specific and elaborated ways. In particular, a meaning-based grammar grounded in Michael Halliday's theory of systemic functional linguistics (SFL) (Halliday, 1978, 1985) became available, providing a framework researchers could use to look systematically at relationships between form and meaning in the language used in different social contexts, using the notion of *register variation*. Register variation refers to the ways the language forms we choose vary according to the context of use. From an SFL perspective, we can analyze differences in register related to what is going on (the "content"), who the interlocutors are and the relationships they enact, and the way language participates in the context (as spoken or written, in a shared context or not, etc.). So, for example, in this made-up

“shopping” encounter, we recognize how the language is functional for getting things done:

**Customer:** Do you have this in a larger size?

**Clerk:** No, everything we have is on the shelf.

**Customer:** OK, thanks.

In this face-to-face encounter, the item in question doesn't need to be named, so we don't know what *this* is. The politeness expectations do not require that the customer and clerk greet each other before the customer asks the question. The pronoun *you* is used by the customer, even though it is not the clerk who has the merchandise, and the clerk uses the pronoun *we* to mean *in the store*, different from the *we* that would mean *you and I*. All of these aspects of the discourse are related to the context here, where the two parties are engaging in a face-to-face institutional encounter in which both share knowledge about how language would typically be used to make the encounter successful. This does not mean that they might not have said something different or taken the conversation in a different direction; it is just an example of how our lives are enacted in activities for which there are shared expectations for how we will interact with each other using language.

School is no exception. At school as well, language is functional for getting things done, and children are expected to learn to present information and interact with their teacher and peers in particular ways. *Academic language* refers to the new set of registers that many children encounter for the first time on arrival at school; a set of registers through which they will be expected to learn and participate as they move through the grades. But much research has established that children do not all come to school prepared in the same ways to engage in these new contexts and registers. The registers of schooling have historical and social origins in ways of using language associated with social class positioning in our culture. This means that parents who themselves already control these registers often socialize their children into “schooled” ways of using language even before they begin preschool or kindergarten. For example, teachers often want children to answer questions with full sentences or to answer questions about information that appears obvious and already known (e.g., what am I holding here?).

Most children recognize, even at an early age, that we use language in different ways to do different things. They speak in different ways to their parents than they speak to their peers, and they have learned to talk in particular ways in public contexts as they observe and participate in institutional encounters such as shopping or going to the doctor. From a linguistic perspective, this ability to be appropriate in language use in different contexts indicates that children command a range of registers even when they first come to school, regardless of what their home language is. However, children control different registers, depending on their home experiences, and the registers they control are not always the ones that are valued in school.

For example, more than a generation ago, research on sharing time in kindergarten established that sharing time is a genre of presentation with its own discursive expectations (its own register features) that children may realize in divergent ways, often leading to frustration on the part of both teacher and child when the child's way of presenting what is to be shared does not mesh with the teacher's (Christie, 1985; Michaels, 1981). This research showed that some children come to school already able

to treat their audience as if they are not present, being explicit even about shared knowledge and using lexical rather than pronoun reference. Other children, not already practiced in this style of sharing, were criticized by the teacher for being unprepared. Other classroom activities also have expectations for how language will be used to achieve them that are not always shared by all participants. This is a complex problem, because teachers are often not aware of their implicit expectations for the ways children will use language in a particular context; they may judge a child as disorganized or unable to engage in a task effectively when instead the issue is a difference in what the child and teacher recognize the task to be or in how the child and teacher expect the task to be accomplished through language.

For many teachers, language is so transparent in its meanings that it is challenging to talk about explicitly and make expectations for language use clear to children. For the same reason, it is sometimes challenging for teachers to “hear” meanings presented in language that are different from what might be expected. For example, a child might begin to tell a story about something she has experienced that the teacher cannot connect with the topic under discussion. This may be a distraction, but on the other hand, it might be that the child is not accustomed to explicitly making the purpose of telling a story clear at the outset. There might be several explanations for responses that are answered in unexpected ways. Perhaps the child has the right information but organizes and presents it in ways that are not valued by the teacher, as in the sharing-time example. Perhaps the child is using an informal register when a formal one might be expected, and the teacher is distracted by the word choice or grammatical construction. Or perhaps the child is adding something new and unexpected that might take a moment to grasp. Each of these scenarios has the potential to lead to miscommunication, so the teacher who is aware of potential differences in the ways children use language to interact and to present information is better positioned to respond in ways that are helpful. Teachers can focus on meaning and engage in conversation that clarifies what the child intends to contribute as well as model alternative ways of using language for purposes of learning. Such practices can support the development of academic language.

Differences in expectations for academic language use also emerge as teachers and children move from one disciplinary context to another, as each subject area has its own expected activities and ways of using language to accomplish them. For example, the language students need to engage in discussion about a story they have read is different from the language they will use in working together to do a science experiment. Writing a book report in language arts calls for different ways of using language than writing a report of a science experiment. In both oral and written academic tasks, language resources are used in different ways for these different purposes. The teacher who understands the ways language shifts as children move from one context to another can provide specific guidance to children on academic language use, preparing them in valuable ways to engage successfully in activities across content areas.

Children vary greatly in their experiences with language outside of school, making it especially important that academic language registers become a focus of attention in the classroom. The increasing number of language-minority children in today’s classrooms has stimulated much research on academic language, but language-minority students are themselves a diverse group. In the U.S. context, some of these students are English language learners (ELLs), still in the process of learning the

language across registers and modalities, while others are fluent speakers of English from communities where English does not serve as the language of familial or community communication, and where for various reasons the range of registers they are able to develop does not include those that are expected at school.

English language learners also vary in the extent to which they have had the opportunity to engage in a range of registers in their home languages. For example, older children who immigrate to the United States, having learned literacy and engaged in academic language use in their home country's educational contexts, may be well positioned to learn academic English because the notion of "schooled" ways of speaking and writing will already be familiar. On the other hand, ELLs who have few opportunities to engage in activities that draw on English academic registers outside of school may need substantial support to develop these registers.

Not all language-minority students need support in learning English, but many will need support in learning academic language (as will many native speakers of English who do not have opportunities outside of school to engage in these registers). But language-minority students are not the only ones who can benefit from a focus on academic language. Many native speakers of English do not have experience with the registers expected in schooling and can be apprenticed into use of those registers through explicit attention to language that is informed by knowledge about academic registers.

In summary, academic language is a set of registers through which schooling activities are accomplished. As they learn the knowledge needed to engage in the activities, children also need support in using language effectively to accomplish the purposes of these activities across grades and subject areas. The research presented in this special issue offers new insights into the challenges and affordances of developing academic language and suggests implications for pedagogy, teacher education, and further research.

## **This Issue**

This issue presents research on academic language from a range of contexts, using a diverse set of research approaches. One theme that is highlighted in these articles is the important role of task or genre on the language children produce. The articles confirm that children need social experience doing different kinds of things with language in order to develop the range of registers and genres they are expected to comprehend and produce and that are the basis for evaluation of their learning. The findings from the articles presented in this issue illustrate the importance of recognizing the affordances of different kinds of tasks and activities and enabling children to engage in a variety of ways with the knowledge they are developing.

Another theme of these articles is the role of schooling in supporting language-minority children's academic language development. While, as noted above, academic language development is an issue for all children, researchers' interest in academic language is often related to interest in closing the achievement gap between mainstream and language-minority students. As researchers and teachers engage with the changing demographics of K–12 education in countries around the world where children from diverse linguistic backgrounds now learn together, and where linguistic diversity has made the role of language in education more visible, research on academic language has been stimulated.

Several of the articles in this issue draw on the theory and/or tools of SFL to explore the linguistic choices children make as they engage with varied topics, interlocutors, and modes of communication. The SFL tools enable researchers to describe the features of language that are typical of different discursive activities in the classroom (Christie, 2002; Schleppegrell, 2001, 2004). Using notions of *genre* (focused on the social purposes of the activity) and *register* (focused on the lexical and grammatical choices children make in doing those activities), researchers are able to provide detailed analyses of differences in language use in different genres, across developmental levels, and among children with different social positioning. These analyses help us understand what is valued in language use at school and can inform the development of ways of supporting children by building on the language they already use and adding new ways of using language for schooling purposes.

The first article in the issue, by Scheele, Leseman, Mayo, and Elbers (2012), underscores the genre-specific nature of the development of academic language. Their report on a study of home language comprehension and production by 58 3-year-old Dutch preschool children finds that experience at home in personal narrative, impersonal narrative, and instruction genres predicts the children's emergent skill in drawing on features of academic language. Their work draws on SFL register theory and constructs to offer a rich view of academic language, showing the interrelatedness of lexical, grammatical, and textual aspects of language use. The article illustrates how young children make different kinds of language choices in their oral language in meeting the demands of different tasks, and the results support the notion that academic language development begins in the home, through interaction in task-specific ways, for some children. The authors find that children as young as 3 years are producing emergent academic register features in retelling narratives, using cohesiveness strategies to structure the narratives, taking an authoritative stance in the retelling by using the declarative mood, producing utterances with a relatively high information density, and showing awareness of the need to establish a shared frame of reference with the audience by using lexical reference and not relying on context for shared meaning. These features of academic registers will be highly relevant as these children subsequently engage with language at school.

The second article, by Brisk (2012), illustrates that children's written texts offer important data for recognizing the challenges students face in presenting diverse voices as they do different things with language. It also suggests how instruction can support students in understanding the purposes and language features of school-based genres. Brisk closely analyzed the varied ways 13 bilingual children in grades 3–5 use first-, second-, and third-person reference in five genres written over a school year. Based on the notion that a genre is a purposeful, goal-directed activity, SFL researchers have described the typical expectations for how a genre unfolds and identified language features that enable the unfolding. Brisk drew on this research and reports on what the choice of grammatical person shows about how young writers understand the purposes of the genres they engage in and how they connect with their audiences in a context where they are not explicitly taught about the linguistic expectations for the genres. The article suggests that with greater awareness of these genre expectations, teachers can better support young children in writing genres other than the narratives that are so frequently assigned in the early grades. Brisk argues that elementary writing instruction needs to incorporate a wider range

of genres and enable students to draw on language features that are appropriate for writing in the varied ways that different genres call for.

The third article, by Crosson, Matsumura, Correnti, and Arlotta-Guerrero (2012), also focuses on the role of task and genre in studying academic language use. They find that more cognitively demanding writing tasks elicit greater use of academic language features from bilingual children writing in Spanish in grades 4 and 5. Further reinforcing the points made by Scheele et al. and Brisk, this focus on writing in the mother tongue offers a unique perspective on academic language development, showing that it calls for attention to academic register resources in both languages. Their findings suggest that students may have few opportunities to engage in challenging writing tasks in their first language, restricting their development of academic registers in that language. Especially troubling is their report that half of the students in their study had a very narrow vocabulary range in Spanish: 89% of the words the children used were among the top 500 most frequently used in Spanish. Without attention to the development of language for a variety of challenging tasks and contexts, bilingual children cannot realize their full potential and develop the range of registers that can enable them to participate in academic and professional opportunities for use of their mother tongues.

Taken as a whole, these three articles illustrate how, from a research perspective, exploring the role of task in supporting academic language use is a valuable contribution to our understanding of how to support children's learning. Both in their oral and written language, children need opportunities to engage in a range of tasks and genres that enable them to develop a wide range of linguistic resources, including those implicated in academic register use.

The final two articles in the issue focus on vocabulary development as a key component of academic registers. Different registers involve both lexical and grammatical choices, and a focus on vocabulary also points to the different choices that are typically foregrounded in different contexts of language use. Drawing on register theory and focusing on the lexical aspects, Townsend, Filippini, Collins, and Biancarosa (2012) showed that the notion of "vocabulary in general" is not sufficient for understanding students' academic language development needs. They studied the variance in academic achievement explained by academic word knowledge for diverse middle-school students in four disciplines and reported that students have differential knowledge of "academic" vocabulary as distinct from vocabulary knowledge in general, further supporting the notion of register differences in the ways we use language. The authors argue that this academic vocabulary gap indicates that language-minority and low-socioeconomic-status (SES) middle school students may struggle with academic subjects because they do not have the language resources needed to keep up with instruction in the disciplines. Townsend et al. suggest that focusing on academic vocabulary can be a "way in" to discussions about academic language with teachers. Highlighting the vocabulary gap between low-SES and standard-SES students, their work also supports the point that it is not only language-minority learners who need academic language development support.

The final article in the issue, by Kieffer and Lesaux (2012), studies the effects of instruction on the morphological awareness of grade 6 language-minority students compared with native speakers. Morphological awareness refers to students' understanding of the meanings and functions of the smaller units from which complex words are formed (i.e., base words, prefixes, and suffixes). Their study is distinctive



in focusing separately on *relational* and *syntactic* knowledge about words. Children with relational knowledge recognize that one word shares meaning elements with another (e.g., that *farmer* comes from *farm*). Children with syntactic knowledge recognize that a prefix or suffix can change word class, and they are able to use the derived word in a sentence (e.g., they recognize that *This is a democracy country* is incorrect). In this study, teachers implemented an 18-week academic language intervention to help students understand how complex words are formed from meaningful smaller units, and they engaged students in contextualized use of the new vocabulary. The authors found that all students benefited from the intervention, and the language-minority students demonstrated greater gains than their peers on development of syntactic knowledge. This suggests that instruction in morphological development can contribute to students' academic language development, as these word-formation processes are highly relevant for writing and speaking in academic registers. This study also offers a means of situating vocabulary and grammar instruction in relationship to each other, recognizing the importance of teaching vocabulary in contexts of use. Children do not encounter language as words in isolation; instead, they encounter language as discourse as they engage in purposeful activities both outside and inside school.

These two studies of vocabulary offer further support for the notion that academic language is different from the everyday language that most children control well, and that explicit attention to supporting children in the kinds of learning experiences that enable them to expand their vocabulary in the context of meaningful work across subject areas is vital. Taken as a whole, the articles point educators and researchers to a focus on task, register, and word knowledge as key aspects in supporting academic language development.

## Conclusion

A focus on academic language reveals the role of language in schooling and suggests that every teacher is a language teacher. As children progress through the years of schooling, at each new level and in each new subject area they encounter expectations for how language should be used to accomplish the activities they engage in. Every subject is taught and learned through language, and teachers, without good knowledge about how language makes meaning in the subjects they teach, cannot provide all children in their classrooms with robust opportunities to learn.

In addition, a focus on academic registers highlights the need to recognize and respect the language resources students bring from their homes and communities, as the language of everyday life that they already control is the foundation from which additional language resources can be developed. Teachers need to understand and connect with the language resources children already have in order to help them develop new resources for meaning-making. This means being sensitive to differences in language use, being open to culturally different ways of using language that may be unexpected but appropriate, and being prepared to support all children in helping them develop new academic language registers. Respecting the language students bring to school also positions the teacher to be open to the ways students from diverse backgrounds will contribute to shaping school-based tasks in particular ways that enrich our understanding of academic language and its ways of making meaning.

Teaching students academic registers is an equity issue, as some children gain access to these registers outside of school through family and community activities, while other students need support in the classroom if they are to learn to engage in using language in ways that enable them to demonstrate their knowledge. If we recognize that language is used in particular ways because of what it is accomplishing in particular contexts, then a focus on academic registers can offer teachers an additional way of helping children understand how to engage in the tasks expected of them in school through a focus on the language that is functional for the purposes of schooling. The increase in language-minority children in our schools is making this concern more prominent and more important, and the articles in this special issue are focused to a great extent on the ways language-minority students learn and use academic language.

This issue of *ESJ* offers new insights into the contexts in which academic language develops, the importance of academic language for school success, and some ways that academic language development can be supported. It contributes to our understanding of the registers of schooling and children's access to opportunities to develop those registers, and the articles suggest new possibilities for further research on this important topic.

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