Meeting the linguistic needs of multilingual writers

"With a considerable emphasis placed on academic writing and literacy internationally, adolescent writers are expected to develop advanced skills to analyze, interpret, and produce complex texts."

1 Making the case

Only 1% of English learners in 8th and 12th grades perform at or above the proficient level in writing.

Academic writing is a complex task that requires an in-depth understanding of genre conventions and linguistic principles.

Being able to access and apply discourse and language knowledge is key to writing proficiently.

Adolescent multilingual writers are still developing linguistic competence for writing.

2 Academic writing

The nature of academic writing (Olson et al, 2015)

- Focused and well-informed topic Logical progression of ideas
- Textual coherence
- Formal tone
- Precision and economy of expression
- Variety in sentence structure
- Adherence to the expectations of specific types of writing

Syntactic features: Subordination clauses to achieve a hierarchical order of ideas and efficiency

Lexical features

- Specific and technical
- Nominalization
- Three categories of academic vocabulary: general words, technical words, and nontechnical academic words (Scarcella, 2003)

3 Pedagogical implications

A multifaceted, contextualized, needs-based approach to language development curriculum should be in place.

Awareness to use appropriate sentence structures and words is also crucial.

What to teach? -- Systematically assess students' linguistic needs and language objectives to determine what features to focus on.

How to teach? -- Set teaching goals that not only teach language forms, but also functions of language features, consideration of audience expectations, and genre conventions.

Explicitly teach language: Engage students in close and critical reading of academic texts. Help them notice, analyze, and grasp structural and functional linguistic choices.

Strategy instruction: Promoting self-directed learning can prepare students with the skills needed to become critical thinkers, problem solvers and develop a habit to critically view and revise their own writing.

Techniques: color-coding different sentence structures, highlight conjunctions, connectives and transition markers; followed by inviting students to mark their own draft.

Explicitly model (e.g., think aloud) planning, production, and revising processes and how to make academic linguistic choices.

Guided writing practice

Engage learners in extensive and consistent practice in writing in a variety of academic genres.

Scaffold students to express complicated ideas. One technique is to provide sentence frames.

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