

# Teaching Academic English to English Language Learners

*\*This infographic is based on literature review examining what is known about the nature of academic English in K-12 schools. The article aims to review how the concept is defined, how the concept are realized in instruction, and implications for professional learning.*

## 1 What is Academic English?

\*Academic English (AE) is the language used in school context to help students acquire and apply knowledge.

## Academic English vs. Social Language

AE uses more precise and abstract vocabulary.

AE is an additional register, a language of school that is foundational to academic access and success.

Social language relies heavily on contextual cues to make meaning, while AE is more independent of context (Cummins, 1980; 1981).



*However, we should be cautious against believing there is something inherent with AE that is more sophisticated than social language (Bailey, 2007).*

## 2 One framework conceptualize AE as three types: (Scarcella, 2008)

- Basics of English language -- requires explicit instruction
- Essential academic language: academic language that is common across disciplines
- School navigational language: the language students used to communicate in the school setting

## 3 Vocabulary

Three tiers of academic vocabulary:

- 1 First tier:** nonacademic, conversational vocabulary
- 2 Second tier:** general academic words (e.g., however, illustrate)
- 3 Third tier:** content-specific, technical vocabulary (e.g., rectangle)

### Common grammatical features of academic language

- A series of clauses
- Use of subordinating conjunctions
- Long noun phrases with pre- and post-modifiers
- Nominalization: use of a verb/ adjective as a noun or noun phrase (e.g., fragmentation)

## 4 Discourse

Teachers should explicitly analyze discourse features and rhetorical devices common to the content area (Fillmore & Snow, 2000).

Differences and commonalities of discourse features can be found across content areas:

- Science
- Math
- History/ social studies

## 5 Instruction in academic vocabulary

- Pay attention to multiple meanings within and across content areas.
- Explicitly teaching word morphology and word origin can make vocabulary learning more efficient.
- Don't neglect instruction on general academic vocabulary (Tier 2 words). These words are crucial for students to access knowledge.
- Individualize vocabulary learning.
- Immerse students in a language-rich environment.
- Provide repeated exposure.
- Encourage students to make connections between new words and known words.
- Note that academic vocabulary is only one part of academic language.

## Implications for teacher professional learning

- Knowledge of linguistic features and discourse structures of the content area and understand how the features relate to academic tasks.
- Ability to analyze academic language features in the content area.
- Sufficient linguistic knowledge to select appropriate materials for students' proficiency levels.
- Additional linguistics courses should be part of the teacher preparation curriculum. (Fillmore & Snow, 2000)
- Invite language specialists to help teachers integrate language instruction into daily instruction.

Reference: DiCerbo, P. A., Anstrom, K. A., Baker, L. L., & Rivera, C. (2014). A review of the literature on teaching academic English to English language learners. *Review of Educational Research, 84*(3), 446-482.

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