

# **Beyond language: Academic communication and student success**

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Available online 16 February 2014.

This paper argue that an explicit focus on teaching the nature of academic language and how it works to create meaning in complex texts is a crucial component of effective instruction for students who are at risk of underachievement. However, it is just one among several crucial components. Equally important are the promotion of literacy engagement and identity affirmation. Despite extensive empirical evidence supporting the impact of these variables, they have been largely ignored in educational policies and instructional practices.

## **Introduction**

This paper builds on the discussion of academic language in other contributions to this issue by highlighting the empirical evidence regarding effective instruction for three groups of students who are at risk of underachievement: English learners, students from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds, and students from socially marginalized communities. These three dimensions of potential educational disadvantage overlap with each other but are also conceptually distinct. The overlap derives from the fact that many students fall simultaneously into all three categories but this is not always the case. For example, a student in the United States from a Romanian background with professional parents would fall into the “immigrant background” category but not the other two categories. In common with the authors of other papers in this issue, I argue for the importance of teaching academic language explicitly across the curriculum but caution that other evidence-based dimensions of effective pedagogy need to be simultaneously in place if academic language teaching is to be successful. Equally important dimensions of effective instruction are (a) ensuring that students experience ample access to print and are enabled to engage actively with literacy, (b) effective scaffolding of students’ language comprehension and production, (c) connecting

instruction and curriculum to students' lives and mobilizing their background knowledge, and (d) creating instructional contexts of identity affirmation and empowerment.

There is considerable consensus among researchers and educators about the role of extending students' knowledge of academic language, scaffolding meaning, and activating their background knowledge. However, the roles of literacy engagement and identity affirmation have been largely ignored in recent debates on closing the achievement gap between social groups defined on the basis of language, income, and racialized status. In the United States context, if the mandate of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) to focus instruction intensively on the development of academic language proficiency is implemented in isolation from other components of effective instruction, the goal of improving academic outcomes is unlikely to be realized. I first highlight some of the points regarding the teaching of academic language made by the authors of the other articles in this issue. In particular, I draw attention to aspects of the pedagogy they document that are vulnerable to being ignored in the context of the current insistence on high-stakes testing in the United States. Among the instructional features documented in these articles are the role of English learners' home language (L1) in the development of academic language proficiency (Gebhard, Chen, & Britton, 2014) and also the importance of integrating the teaching of academic language into a broader academic communication framework that emphasizes both critical literacy and the multiple modalities through which meaning is constructed and communicated (Haneda, 2014). I then discuss what we know about causes of underachievement among different social groups (low-SES, immigrant-background English learners, and students from marginalized communities that have experienced sustained discrimination in the wider society). Obviously, instruction is more likely to be effective if it responds specifically to these causal factors than if it ignores them. Finally, I articulate an evidence-based framework that attempts to respond to the causes of underachievement and I specify how the explicit teaching of academic language is integrated into this framework. The core argument is that students will gain expertise in understanding and using academic language when instruction engages them in the co-construction of knowledge and

provides opportunities for them to use academic language for intellectually powerful purposes.

## **Section snippets**

### **The context of academic language instruction in the United States**

The advent of the CCSS in the United States has focused the attention of policy-makers and educators on the centrality of academic language for students' overall educational growth. The CCSS emphasize that teaching academic language should be a central focus of *all* teachers across the curriculum and the language demands of different subject areas should be explicitly addressed by content teachers in addition to language arts and English-as-a-second-language (ESL) teachers. They recommend a

### **Causes of underachievement and appropriate educational responses**

Raising the achievement levels of underachieving students through more effective teaching of academic language is a major goal of the CCSS. However, in order for schools to attain this goal, instruction must address the full range of causal factors that contribute to underachievement. These causal factors go far beyond simply ineffective teaching of academic language.

In the international literature on patterns of academic achievement (e.g., DeVillar et al., 2013, OECD, 2010a) three groups are

### **Putting academic language instruction in its place**

Where does academic language teaching fit within a broader context of addressing the causes of student underachievement? In Table 1, several instructional responses were specified that address factors that potentially contribute to underachievement among low-SES, immigrant-background, and marginalized group students. These include maximizing literacy

engagement, teaching academic language explicitly across the curriculum, scaffolding students' comprehension and production of language across the

## Project FRESA

This cross-age project was initiated in 1999 by third-grade teacher Amanda Irma Pérez and fifth-grade teacher Michelle Singer in Mar Vista Elementary School in Oxnard, California. The school is surrounded by strawberry fields and a large majority of students (45 out of 50) had family members who worked picking strawberries. The two classes met on a weekly basis to pursue the project. Students initially brainstormed about what they knew and would like to know about strawberries. The students

## Conclusion

The new emphasis on teaching academic language across the curriculum embodied in the CCSS is likely to exert minimal impact on student achievement if it is implemented only within a transmission orientation to pedagogy where teachers focus on one-way transmission of content specified within the curriculum. As project FRESA illustrates, student engagement is likely to increase dramatically when instruction enables them to co-construct knowledge with their teachers and to develop the critical

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