THE IMPORTANCE OF ACADEMIC LANGUAGE in Achieving Content Area Mastery

By 2015, second generation children of immigrants are expected to be 30 percent of the school-aged population.

Given current immigration trends and birth rates, as much as 93 percent of the growth of the working-age population between now and 2050 will be accounted for by immigrants (43 percent) or their U.S.-born children (50 percent) according to a population projection by the Pew Research Center.

These two trends speak clearly to one of the most significant challenges facing schools throughout the U.S. today. At the center of that challenge is the ever-increasing need for educators to focus on language, and more specifically, the specialized language found both in content areas and the Academic Language used in teaching that content.

In a nutshell, Academic Language is the language typically found in textbooks, used daily in our classrooms, and presented on tests we regularly give. It is the language that students must master in order to succeed in any content area. It is comprised of discipline-specific vocabulary, grammar and punctuation, and applications of rhetorical conventions and devices that are commonly used in a content area.

Mastering Academic Language is a challenge for all students. Any student in your classroom may struggle with tasks that require proficiency with Academic Language, such as reading, writing, speaking and listening. Research clearly shows that it is especially challenging for students with limited exposure to that language outside of school. For these children, under-developed Academic Language skills are largely responsible for poor reading comprehension, a keystone in mastering any content.

More specifically, Academic Language is believed to be one of the most important factors in the academic success of English Language learners (ELLs), and it has been shown to be a major contributor to achievement gaps between ELLs and English-proficient students.

We know that ELLs generally acquire social language in about two years' time. However, Academic Language acquisition can typically take five to seven years. Because of this, ELLs translate between English and their home language, as well as between social and academic languages. This is a tremendous amount of language processing.

The Common Core State Standards place significant Academic Language demands on students as a whole, and is even more daunting for ELLs. These language demands include: reasoning abstractly and quantitatively; constructing viable arguments and critiquing reasoning of others; constructing explanations and designing solutions; engaging in argument from evidence; and asking questions and defining problems.

As a result, the Common Core Standards require effective teaching of both Academic Language skills as well as the specific subject area content.

The teaching of the Academic Language component, (vocabulary, grammar, syntax, style, etc.) is complex and requires a deep understanding of the language demands of the content. For example, challenging language demands in math include: symbolic notation; visual displays, such as charts and graphs; technical vocabulary; and grammatical features such as complex noun phrases.

One of the truly insightful questions we need to ask when students are under performing is: are they failing to master the specific content in the subject area, or are they failing language comprehension? Another way to look at this, say for math, is to ask a question such as: are my students failing to demonstrate the ability to create an equation (for example), or are they unable to create an equation because they don't comprehend what's being asked of them? The reality is that they may well know how to do the math, but not have mastered the language we use to teach math.

That is, semantic aspects of language can lie at the root of many difficulties our students are encountering. For example, here is typical language we might use in a math class; Four times a number is 12 more than two times the number. Find the number.

In order to create the correct equation, the student must know the technical language of math: that the word "times" indicates multiplication, the word "is" means "equals" or the = sign, and that "more than" indicates addition, or the + sign.

But they must also know what the Academic Language "Find the number" means. It means create an equation and solve it. All in all, there is a lot of language to comprehend in order to get to a correct answer.

There are a number of words we use in our math classes that pose challenges for ELLs. These include Academic Language words that express various kinds of quantitative relationships, and common language words that provide logical links in sentences that we typically find in math word problems.

These issues are prevalent throughout the curriculum. For example, before taking earth science, few students may already know some of the technical words used in that subject. The limited language proficient students often will not know these technical words and may not know much of the Academic Language used to teach earth science concepts. They may not be familiar with words like evaluate, theory, hypothesis, assumption, cycle, etc. While we might assume that our students comprehend this academic vocabulary, as it is not typically used in the students' everyday spoken English, they therefore may not have a clue as to its meaning. Again the question, is the student failing earth science, or language skills?

So, what can be done in our classrooms to better address these challenges? First, analyze the text, tasks, and tests associated with a lesson in order to identify the language demands that are either overtly expected or tacitly implied. Focus on the receptive language skills (e.g., listening, reading) and/or productive language skills (e.g., speaking, writing) needed by the student to complete a lesson successfully.

Second, add a goal of developing your students' Academic Language in your lesson plan. Each lesson should have specific goals for both the language and content components. Don't make too many assumptions with respect to your students' mastery of the Academic Language you are using in teaching the content. Work from your analysis of what is required and develop specific lesson components to address those requirements.

Consider high-frequency vocabulary, which is primarily comprised of social language. This would include terms used in everyday situations such as when students are speaking with their friends in the lunchroom or on the playground.

Next, consider general vocabulary for the content area, comprised mostly of Academic Language. This would include terms used in doing school work but not directly associated with the specific content area, such as decreased by, therefore, as a result, for instance, etc.

Next, consider specialized vocabulary for the content area. This is comprised of Academic Language and includes terms broadly associated with a subject area. In mathematics for example, terms may include: number, angle, equation, average, etc.

Lastly, consider technical vocabulary. These would include terms associated with a specific content topic. Again using math, terms may include: natural numbers, complementary angles, median, etc.

Sheltered instruction and scaffolding are proven and powerful techniques to help you address language issues. Present your content through non-language specific devices such as physical models, visuals and demonstrations. Break up the content into chunks and provide a structure with each chunk. For example, scaffold the reading portion of the lesson content by previewing the text and discussing key vocabulary. You could do this for each section of the textual content you are covering in that lesson.

Conclusion

"Academic language proficiency is knowing and being able to use general and content-specific vocabulary, specialized or complex grammatical structures — all for the purpose of acquiring new knowledge and skills, interacting about a topic, or imparting information to others," (Bailey, 2007).

Students who are proficient in the Academic Language for the subject areas you teach will be much better equipped to acquire new knowledge through reading and listening, and to express this knowledge and their ideas through oral discussions, writing and test taking.

Michael Willis, M.S., a former Assistant Professor of Math and Computer Science, having taught at Montgomery College, the University of Southern California, the University of Denver, and the University of Colorado, Boulder, is one of the founders of Digital Directions International, Inc., the developer and publisher of HELP Math. To learn more, visit www.helpprogram.net.