Developing Academic Language in the Middle Grades

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Abstract

Academic language is a significant component of learning that can promote or interrupt student learning, motivation, and achievement at the middle grades level where language complexity increases. Classrooms in the United States are culturally and linguistically diverse. Students bring an array of dialects from culturally-situated discourse communities that differ greatly from the academic language used within the school context. For the most part, promoting academic language has been part of the language arts discipline, as every student learns to understand some form of academic language. In language arts, language development is considered a critical point of access for learning; however, this approach must be expanded to all disciplines.

Broad research confirms language provides access to more complex concepts and cognition and supports academic success. Educators from all disciplines must employ strategies that teach students effective code-switching and academic language. This paper provides a survey of research and best practices to enhance academic language in middle level students and increase academic success.

Introduction

Cognitive psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1962) contended that without specific language to adequately represent and understand new concepts and express ideas, limitations in knowledge were certain. Vygotsky made clear that language and cognition cannot be separated; one is dependent on the other. Therefore, language skills are at the heart of an individual's academic development. In schools, academic language is the norm; however, it is somewhat different from the everyday colloquial spoken language found in most students' homes. According to Jeff Zwyers (2005), academic English or language is a set of words and phrases that describe content or discipline specific knowledge and procedures. Academic language is a tool that gives people the means to express complex thinking processes and abstract concepts and gives people the capacity to clearly convey intricate thoughts and concepts in spoken and written discourse; academic language is the language used to conceptualize and convey complex broad thoughts within an academic realm.

For adolescents, academic language is used in classrooms, lectures, books, research articles, instructional videos, and websites, as well as on both formal and informal assessments to convey basic and higher-level concepts. Further, limited knowledge of academic language can be a substantial barrier to learning as language becomes increasingly more complex at each grade level. For middle level students, preparation and understanding of how to interpret and use academic language is vital for students to have success in learning key concepts that will prepare them for high-stakes standardized tests, high school and college course-work, and various work or career environments.

As students advance through the various levels of the education process, the use of academic language becomes more complex, extensive, and greatly required, yet according to McTigue and Liew (2011), 74 percent of eight grade students in the United States read at only a basic level. Further, academic language, effective communication, and use of advanced language plays a dynamic role in an individual's success within higher education and in the branching of language into workplace discourse communities (Galloway, 2014). Gilstein (2013) describes a discourse community, also known as a speech community, as, "a group of people who share certain characteristic and interests, sharing language practices for communication and the group's goals" (para. 1).

The need for attainment of academic language increases over time as academics and career overlap. Successful acquisition of academic language can play a significant role in educational attainment and career outcomes, and therefore, should be considered essential for all students. For educators, this means that in addition to teaching discipline content, teachers should also simultaneously support middle school students in in the development of academic English proficiency within the discipline's discourse community.

Galloway (2014) supports the need for purposeful development of academic language at the middle grades, as students must learn, "words, phrases and ways of structuring text commonly found in academic texts, speech, and writing" (para. 4). Academic language is the vehicle that drives discourse and reflective consideration of multifaceted ideas and phenomenon required by the middles level curricula. Galloway also notes that in contrast to conversational English, academic language and texts are longer with more abstract concepts typically derived from Latin. Further, Galloway (2014) states that academic texts have, "more nouns, adjectives, and prepositional phrases; words and phrases that connect ideas within sentences; and more information in each sentence. Therefore, students will struggle to learn from what they have read if they do not understand the academic language of the text" (para. 4).

In order to further understand the need for teaching academic language, it is important to understand that language is acquired through an individual's environment, and therefore, a single classroom will have many different colloquial forms and discourse communities. Colloquial forms are culturally significant and valuable and also closely associated with identity; however, many middle school students who fluently speak a form of the English language have trouble comprehending higher level academic language used within informational texts and lack the ability to produce academic language when speaking and writing in various discourse communities. The barriers for many middle school students, both English Language Learners (ELL), a growing segment of the secondary population, and monolingual English speakers are largely due to lack of exposure to academic language.

Educators can bridge the gap between different discourse communities for students within a formal education setting; to do this, educators must understand the challenges of academic language within the respective content area and actively assist students as they develop the ability to code-switch between academic and social or conversational languages. This paper provides a survey of the research and best practices that enhance the use of academic language throughout various discourse communities to support students at the middle school level and increase academic success and career readiness.

Literature Review:

Academic language includes various dimensions of knowledge, and also emphasizes the context in which learning take place (Uribe, 2008). During k-12 schooling, to appropriately teach and meet the various needs of students, educators should be aware of all the dimensions of knowledge associated with academic language, so students acquire skills the necessary skills. According to Diego Uribe's (2008) research report entitled, *Characteristics of Academic English in the ESL Classroom*, Uribe concluded that three dimensions of knowledge are utilized in academic English.

Of the three academic language dimensions, the linguistic dimension of knowledge is the first used to navigate academic English. Features in this realm are used in everyday situations as well as in academic settings. The linguistic dimension contains phonological, lexical, grammatical, sociolinguistics, and discourse components. The phonological features of academic English include: stress, intonation, and sound patterns; for example, the pronunciation of sheet versus cheat within the appropriate context. The lexical area forms word meanings that are used across various academic disciplines as well as in everyday settings; for example, the use of the word, investigate, versus using, look into. The lexical component is critical, because developing a deeper understanding of words that express more abstract or complex concepts is vital for access to meaning and learning when reading.

The grammatical component adheres to more specific rules of grammar conventions utilizing appropriate tense, number, punctuation, and capitalization within the appropriate context. For example: The boy ran all the way home, in contrast to, the boy runned all the way home (Uribe, 2008). The grammatical component can also present obstacles for students writing in academic language, because language forms over time naturally, and various dialect forms do not always adhere to standard conventions. Therefore, this is another area for consideration when developing academic language within a discourse community.

The sociolinguistic realm involves an increase in the number of language functions. Sociolinguistic functions include culturally relevant ordinary English expressions, such as apologizing, complaining, and making requests, as well as those that are common to all academic fields. For example, in more formal settings, using more formal salutations, such as, "how are you Sir," versus saying, "what´s up?"

Discourse features are used in specific academic genres. These devices are used as transitions or other organizational signals that in reading aid in gaining perspective on what is read, in seeing relationships, and in following logical lines of thought. For example, using words that indicate transition, such as, nevertheless versus, but (Uribe, 2008).

The second dimension of knowledge needed to negotiate and use academic English is cognition. Cognition plays a vital role in academic English that includes knowledge, higher order thinking, and cognitive and metalinguistic strategies. The knowledge component focuses primarily on facts. The ability for an individual to understand the knowledge, ideas, concepts, definitions, and stories they can draw upon to make sense of text and explain or express ideas based on personal experience or schemata. For example, the ability to know the type of moon versus the rotation of the moon (Uribe, 2008).

Higher order thinking skills are also important for processing and cognition. This is the ability to interpret, analyze, evaluate, synthesize, and cite information from readings at an advanced level. For example, the ability to shift conversations from casual to more professional, as in formal presentations. Metalinguistic awareness is an advanced cognitive function that improves linguistic performance and is useful in editing and revising, because it requires the individual to think and compare how they use language versus how Standard English conventions are used, and then being able to apply standard usage conventions in formal situations. Further, this is the movement or shift from casual letter-writing, texting, or e-mailing to writing formal cover letters for a job, proposals, or papers in college (Uribe, 2008).

The third dimension associated with academic language is the sociocultural and psychological dimension of knowledge, which according to Uribe (2008), focuses on social and cultural norms, beliefs, and values. As an individual grows and develops, these two areas also grow and transform into a larger context so that academic English can also develop. Cognitive schema is not fixed and is constantly evolving affecting the linguistic, cognitive, and social dimensions of knowledge. Although not all of these components can be taught, understanding the function and connections of each dimension is useful to educators in terms of providing valuable developmental understandings in this process that can assist in support students. Also important to understand are the backgrounds and developmental contexts of middle school students as well as the many content area discourse communities these students are required to inhabit. Educators must be able to support gaps in students' language and help students develop adept code-switching skills.

Code-switching as a concept was identified in 1977 by Carol Myers-Scotton and William Ury. The researchers defined code-switching as, "the use of two or more linguistic varieties in the same conversation or interaction" (Coffey, 2013, para. 1). During this time-frame, parents at an elementary school in Michigan sued the Ann Arbor School District citing a lack of equal education opportunities for their children (Coffey, 2013). The primary purpose of the law suit was inadequate teaching of academic English to their children. Parents won the case which, "established the legitimacy of African American Language within a legal framework" and mandated teachers in Ann Arbor school district to use students' primary language to teach students how to read, code-switch, and use academic English (Coffey, 2013, para. 1). Later, in 1996, a major law suit in California generated the Oakland Ebonics Resolution, which recognized African American Language (AAL) and African American Vernacular English, or AAVE as the language of African American children.

AAL and AAVE as well as other vernacular dialects have been viewed negatively by some educators. Viewing students' diverse dialects as incorrect or an invalid form of the English language follows a deficit model approach, or views the language from the perspective that something needs fixing or from the assumption that something is deficit or wrong. A deficit approach to teaching children with variations in language assumes there is something inherently wrong with the primary language, or that it is broken and needs correcting. The problem with this approach is that language is deeply personal and is closely associated with identity and culture (Bergman, Watrous-Rodriguiez, and Chalkley, 2008).

Operating from a deficit model is also known as a correctionist approach and assumes that academic language is the only formal system of language.

From this approach, any deviation in language from the standard form should be overcome or eliminated. According to Rebecca Wheeler (2005), teachers who feel this way may do so because many of the students who perform poorly on standardized test are students who have had minimal exposure to academic language. Coffey suggests that students do poorly on such tests not because of the content, but because:

> they experience great difficulties understanding the language of the test questions. Children often speak in vernacular English and do not realize the differences between the patterns of how they speak and those of "Standard (academic) English." Teaching through a traditional language arts lens treats African American and other language minority students as being in the deficit paradigm. Students using vernacular language are not making errors, but instead are speaking or writing correctly following the language patterns of their community. (2013, p. 1)

From the correctionist approach, all considerations for the culturally diverse aspects of the classroom are diminished, and this approach tends to be exclusionary of students who are not fluent in academic English.

However, over time the alternative, contrastivist approach has been applied. This approach maintains that language comes in many diverse varieties and recognizes that students' home or primary language is not any more deficit in structure than academic and school language (Coffey, 2013). When this approach has been applied effectively, children learn to code-switch between the home language and the academic language used at school. Students learn to use academic language at the appropriate time and place with the appropriate audience, and for accurate communicative purposes (Coffey, 2013).

According to classroom research conducted by Wheeler and Swords (2001) teaching using the contrastive response to language utilizes vernacular patterns found in written language samples. The researchers suggest that educators acquire written student samples and use these examples to contrast language differences between Standard English and the many diverse dialects found in the classroom. In addition, use a graphic organizer to chart language differences and hold discussions that highlight the differences in speech among different people and in different settings. Ask students to role-play the speech patterns of different people in the community and discuss the unique qualities found in the different forms of language. Teachers can create a conducive environment by modelling how to correct their own written work and show students the various ways they speak in different environments. Students should know that everyone codeswitches in various situations and see examples of diverse dialectical language in culturally rich literature.

Greene and Walker (2004) suggest that teachers can create a more inclusive environment by engaging students in activities that encourage leadership and collaboration skills among students, by teaching active code-switching skills, and through demonstrating respect and value for linguistically diverse dialects. In addition, educators should include families and other professionals to enhance classroom learning and communicate clear goals, so that students understand the various contexts in which codeswitching takes place, as well as demonstrate respect, value, and an understanding of the historical significance of students' language. Teachers should also convey an understanding of the historical development of AAL and AAVE and develop culturally responsive assignments, such as having students prepare and deliver a speech by a community leader written and spoken in the vernacular language of the individual.

Codeswitching should be student-centered; however, teachers can model how to interpret academic language found on standardized tests and in texts. When educators value and respect students' language and then contrast home language and formal language so students can see similarities and differences, students can build and successfully develop academic language. A contrastivist approach increases linguistic metacognitive skills, use of academic language, respect for diversity, leadership, social, and communication skills, as well as technology and critical thinking skills (Wheeler and Swords, 2001).

Analysis and Interpretation

Staggering numbers and statistics continue to show how the lack of academic language currently affects many adolescents, and some of these statistics are based on socio-economic status, race, culture, and intellectual ability. Research conducted by Short and Fitzsimmons, (2007) showed that:

Nationally, over 6 million American students in grades 6 through 12 are at risk of failure because they read and comprehend below—often considerably below—the basic levels needed for success in high school, postsecondary education, and the workforce. Only 30% of all secondary students read proficiently. For students of color, the situation is even worse. Eighty-nine percent of Hispanic and 86% of African-American middle and high school students read below grade level (NCES, 2005). Almost 50% of students of color do not graduate from high school with a regular diploma in four years of instruction (p. 5).

Such statistics are alarming, and much of the literacy crisis is due to students' lack of academic language. The level to which students can access academic English plays a major role in literacy rates, especially for those classified as English Language Learners. In all areas of the country one can see the expanding enrollment of middle school students whose primary language is not English. The general lack of understanding the English language, coupled with minimal exposure and knowledge of academic language imposes an even bigger issue for students learning a second language which can causes these students to have greater struggles with: reading, writing, and oral discourse (Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007). In addition, ESL students are typically beyond the age where basic literacy instruction is provided for students in classes with secondary teachers who are not trained to teach basic literacy skills to adolescents.

Growing up in the new digital age where there are multiple and various discourse communities that students must inhabit, many middle grades students find it difficult to utilize academic English within the classroom setting. However, and as research demonstrates, in order for academic success and achievement, or success within a content area or a discourse community, which may be a content discipline, but could also be higher education or the professional workplace, one first has to understand every discourse community has some sort of language of the discipline or field; for examples: alliteration in language arts, axiom in math, class struggle in socials studies, and atoms in science (Wheeler, 2005). All of these different concepts are associated with discipline-specific language and are utilized throughout these various academic communities typically in ways that are unique to the given community. Academic discourse is discipline specific and unique, and student do not enter the classroom knowing this language; it has to be taught, developed, and acquired over time. Therefore, educators must be proficient in the discourse community of the discipline(s) they teach and also understand the crucial need to help students develop skills associated with the content as well as the academic discourse skills relevant to the discipline to provide student with real access to the knowledge therein. Fully developed discourse skills and discipline knowledge will help students adeptly code-switch between discourse communities and find broader academic and professional success.

Proficiency in academic English is vital, because it enables students to become greater communicators in this 21st century global society that relies heavily on a strong foundation of academic vocabulary, conventions, and structure. Adept negotiation of academic language in written and spoken contexts has become the foundation for successfully completing high school, college, and moving into a career. Many students, especially those among the middle grades population, are now taking new Common Core assessments that emphasize proficiency in academic English. Therefore, this topic is relevant in today's classroom and society. Educators can approach teaching academic English that focuses not on home language as a deficit, but instead, contrasts home language and formal language so students can see and build academic language. The goal of this paper is to promote the development of academic language proficiency as well as provide effective research-based strategies to remove barriers that inhibit effective academic communication among diverse middle grade student populations across various academic discourse communities.

Language and interaction with and among peers are great motivators for middle grade students. Using effective collaborative group strategies opens the door for better communication in diverse environments that promote academic English. Working in collaborative groups where students are taught to respect all language and learn a formal means of communication allows students to take ownership of their work and language development and demonstrate leadership. In addition, collaborative groups provide opportunities for students to work and interact with peers and develop sound social skills and respect for diverse thoughts and individuals. Activities such as the think-pair-share exemplifies this approach and allows students to read diverse or rigorous academic text independently, translate it into social language or codeswitch from the formal to conversational language, and then pair up with another student in class to share (Finley, 2014). This activity can also be switched so students translate social texts into academic or scholarly texts. Such activities allow students to practice and understand how to codeswitch and paraphrase academic texts into a language of comfort (Finley, 2014).

Encouraging students to read diverse text allows students exposure to a wide range of genres and vocabulary which are a vital to learning academic language (Finley, 2014).

Technology has become a vital part of today's society and is considered a 21st century skill. Computer assisted instruction can also serve as a supplemental teaching tool that helps students gain academic language competency as well as link parents and communities. Instead of reading primary content textbooks or passages, computer-based reading can be used to increase the interest level of students through more abundant digitally available, high-interest informational texts. Pairing students to read digital texts provides a space for immediate feedback on performance and the ability to read texts students may not otherwise be able to read (Ybarra & Green, n.d.). Computer software and games also provide fun opportunities for students to practice and improve academic vocabulary and literacy skills. Technology can also be used to improve parental involvement and increase academic language in the home. Teachers can send home information, various reading texts, websites, and book projects so parents can be active participants in their child's education.

In conclusion, incorporating charts within lessons can be used to highlight and demonstrate differences between academic languages among various academic discourse communities as well as within a student's home language. Moving from a corrective approach to a contrastive approach of academic language acquisition shows the diversity of language (Coffey, 2013). One of the many positive aspects of the contrastive approach recognizes and demonstrates that students' home language is not deficient. Educators can teach students to understand the grammatical differences between both variations of academic and home language, while simultaneously providing a rationale as to why it is appropriate to code-switch depending on the audience and communicative purposes (Coffey, 2013). Teaching these concepts demonstrates that the educator is not only knowledgeable, but also has respect for diversity and individual worth. In addition, incorporating the use of technology as a tool for instruction can help facilitate and improve academic language development through increased exposure to complex vocabulary, reading, and writing. Educators across disciplines have the responsibility of maintaining an effective classroom environment that promotes the academic language and skills that are critical for students' success in the classroom and later in life (Ybarra & Green, n.d.).

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