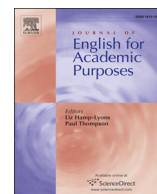




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## Tracking movement toward academic language in multilingual classrooms



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### A B S T R A C T

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Learning history depends heavily on language and cultural references that students supposedly already know. Understanding how young people from multilingual backgrounds develop language in content area classrooms can help us better assist students to achieve higher levels of literacy needed to understand discipline-specific knowledge. Using the conceptual framework and analytic tools of Systemic Functional Linguistics (Halliday, 1994) we analyze the changes in lexico-grammatical and discourse-semantic choices in learners' responses to two primary source history texts as indexes of academic language development. The data comes from a larger study that explored the integration of text analysis to history lessons focusing on primary sources and documenting the impact of the intervention on students' disciplinary literacy development. In this paper, we focus on the configuration of linguistic indices that serve to track academic language development. The analysis shows changes in students' linguistic choices that realize ways of reasoning and arguing typical of history. The findings show that it is important to document academic language development in qualitative ways that capture the complexity of development considering constellations of linguistic features and how they function to serve discipline-specific ways of making meaning.

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### 1. Introduction

Learning history depends heavily on language and cultural references that students supposedly already know to build more academic understandings of society, citizenship, and change. Understanding how young people from multilingual backgrounds develop language in content area classrooms can help us better assist teachers and students to achieve higher levels of literacy needed to understand discipline-specific knowledge. The transition from learning to read to reading to learn in adolescence incorporates challenges that have to do with the discipline-specific ways of reasoning, constructing arguments, and evaluating knowledge. These ways of knowing are realized through particular ways of using language that are not those typically encountered in every day situations.

Using the conceptual framework and analytic tools of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) we analyze the changes in lexico-grammatical and discourse-semantic choices of multilingual learners production of academic discourse in history. This type of analysis can help us identify specific configurations of language resources functional in constructing disciplinary content. This type of functional analysis, that identifies and tracks changes in the linguistic choices that encode discipline-specific ways of reasoning can help in assessment and instruction. The implications of this study are important for supporting academic literacy development of the growing number of linguistically and culturally diverse learners in U.S. high schools.

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## 2. Academic language in the disciplines and language minorities

The linguistic minority population has increased significantly in the past few years. These students tend to lag behind in academic achievement and grade level content norms. There is an achievement gap in schools between Hispanics, African Americans, and White students (Adger, Christian, & Taylor, 1999). Students of different language, racial and economic groups tend to be the ones that suffer the consequences of differential opportunity environments.<sup>1</sup>

According to Batalova, Fix, and Murray (2006), between 1996 and 2006 the nation's K-12 English Language Learner (ELL) population rose by over 60 percent while the size of the overall student population essentially did not change. Of these students, 56% (in 2005) were also poor or low income. The drop out rate for these students was also higher than that of their peers. On the other hand, scholarship on dialect diversity in U.S. classrooms has shown that vernacular and stigmatized dialect speakers are also underperforming in academic measures. These students seem to be particularly affected by language ideologies that attribute less value to their ways of speaking and do not integrate them into the curriculum (Godley, Sweetland, Wheeler, Minnici, & Carpenter, 2006).

Cultural, linguistic and economic differences provide learners with different language experiences that result in differentiated linguistic resources. Thus, at school these learners are confronted with different cultural practices, literacy experiences and knowledge from those of their primary socialization. Developing academic language associated with different disciplines constitutes a secondary socialization that is part of secondary level schooling.

The multilingual linguistic characteristics of many U.S. public schools present both a need and an opportunity to explore the role of academic language development in learning. Academic language development is an umbrella term used to refer to the particular ways in which language is used in school contexts (e.g. Hyland, 2002; Schleppegrell, 2004). But at the secondary school level, students begin to encounter an academic language that displays some variation from one subject-matter to the next. This type of language variation, according to area of knowledge and professional practice, is referred to as disciplinary literacy (e.g. Hyland, 2004; Lee, 2004; Moje et al., 2004). Disciplinary literacy is a recontextualization of professional practice that provides access to specialized knowledge and ways of producing it.

In our work, we focus on this specialized academic language in subject-matter history courses: disciplinary literacy in history. For those who come from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds than the mainstream students in U.S. schools, learning disciplinary literacy poses fundamental challenges. Some of the students already have knowledge of content that may transfer to the new language, while others do not have experience with academic contexts in their home language. These multilingual classrooms include minority language learners who are also being socialized into standard American English varieties and second language learners who are developing English as another language in their repertoire. All of these learners with very different linguistic backgrounds run into many of the same problems when faced with disciplinary literacy. They all have a quasi-foreign relationship to the language they are trying to write and read (Green, 2002; Shaughnessy, 1977; Siegel, 2010). For them, the development of disciplinary literacy entails learning a new way of making meanings, which together with the expansion of their linguistic repertoire incorporates a new way of using the resources to understand a field of knowledge (i.e. history).

In this paper, we report on part of a larger project that investigated the role of language in history classes to better understand how the development of language awareness can support the development of a disciplinary gaze (Martin, Maton, & Matruggio, 2010). By disciplinary gaze we refer to the values and ways of understanding that are unique to the discipline. We operationalize disciplinary literacy as the representation and orientation choices that characterize meaning making practices within the field. In this paper, we explore the development of linguistic resources that index ways in which learners of disciplinary literacy in history construct logical relations and an academic voice. First, we present how logico-semantic relations and interdependency relations function to construct sense and subjectivity between clauses in a text (Thibault, 1991, p. 58). The exploration of these logical structures can contribute to tracking the semantic construction of historical reasoning. Secondly, we explore the construction of a disciplinary voice.

We approach the development of disciplinary literacy through a functional linguistics perspective (Schleppegrell, Achugar, & Oteiza, 2004; Christie & Derewianka, 2008; Coffin, 2006; Fang & Schleppegrell, 2010; Martin, 2002; Martin et al., 2010; Schleppegrell & de Oliveira, 2006). This means we look at how language functions in texts and how historical meanings are constructed through linguistic choices. We focus on the meaning making process as a socio-cultural practice through which students are socialized into content, language and activities. The linguistic resources used to construct historical understanding and the meaning making practices used to engage with texts represent evidence of language development as a form of participatory appropriation (Rogoff, 1995).

Our focus in this part of the project<sup>2</sup> was to document the linguistic resources that learners deployed when trying to make sense of disciplinary content texts. In particular, we looked at the ways in which learners recontextualized historical knowledge

<sup>1</sup> According to California's 2009 Base Annual Performance Index (API), race and class are linked to educational opportunity and systemic inequity is pervasive in California schools. Low income students and students of color are concentrated in the lowest-achieving schools.

<sup>2</sup> This design experiment explored three questions: one dealing with how students' understanding of history and disciplinary literacy developed through their involvement in the intervention; the second dealt with the main features that characterized the disciplinary literacy lessons developed and finally we investigated how the teacher's understanding of the role of language in the discipline changed throughout the experience. The focus of the intervention was on reading comprehension of primary source documents and the development of critical language awareness based on research and integrating them to the regular curriculum. The impact of this intervention on students' learning was assessed through a reading comprehension task designed by the researchers which required students to produce written responses that are analyzed here as evidence of their appropriation of academic discourse.

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