



# Academic discourse practices in action: Invoking discursive norms in mathematics and language lessons



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## ABSTRACT

Previous empirical research has mainly focused on the analysis of lexical and grammatical features of academic language and has *inferred* underlying language norms. The present study, in contrast, addresses the normative aspect of academic language as a topic of reconstructive research and investigates “norms-in-interaction”. Based on a corpus of videotaped language and mathematics lessons in grade five, the analysis illuminates how teachers and students display their orientation to discursive norms in actual instances of classroom interaction. Inspired by conversation analysis and genre-oriented approaches, the study reconstructs the sequential contexts and the interactive procedures of invoking norms. Varying procedures are described that differ in their degree of explicitness. Findings indicate that the ability both to interpret the often subtle displays of orientation to norms and to contextualize switches to the metalevel of communication is essential for mastering academic discourse.

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## 1. Introduction

This paper aims to contribute to research on academic discourse in educational settings by examining how “academic language norms” (Snow & Uccelli, 2009, 124) are actually made relevant and oriented to in interaction. Previous research on academic language has enriched our knowledge of the lexical, syntactical and discursive features that distinguish talk in academic contexts from talk in rather informal settings. The initial approach was to analyze academic texts and tasks in order to identify typical linguistic structures (e.g. Bailey, 2007; Chamot & O'Malley, 1994; Gogolin, 2009; Schleppegrell, 2004). Underlying academic language norms have then been inferred on the basis of these findings. This approach necessarily tended to abstract from the language users themselves and from the ways in which they convey and interpret normative expectations with regard to academic language. Thus, studies on how academic language norms are invoked in actual classroom discourse are still surprisingly scarce.

The issue of how interlocutors make academic language norms the object of talk becomes particularly important when dealing with *oral* classroom discourse. Participants in classroom discourse are engaged in accomplishing certain communicative and interactive tasks: teachers ask students to demonstrate their knowledge by explaining what a quantity word is; or they expect them to justify a certain mathematical solution and to argumentatively rule out other options. All these activities are accomplished not only by using certain syntactical constructions and academic vocabulary but within *situated* communicative practices such as explaining and arguing. The paper therefore builds on the notion of *academic discourse*

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*practices* (cf. Heller & Morek, 2015). In contrast to written language norms, normative expectations with regard to such oral practices – for instance, how they should be realized and what particular purpose they serve in the context of classroom talk as opposed to peer and family interaction (cf. Morek, 2015) – are generally not codified. This raises the question if and how normative expectations with regard to language use manifest in actual instances of classroom discourse and how students come to understand such expectations.

This question is significant on at least two accounts. First, with regard to academic language research, it is generally assumed that academic language poses challenges to particular students (e.g. Schleppegrell, 2004, 5; Snow & Uccelli, 2009). Yet it is by no means clear what these challenges exactly consist of. There is evidence that they are related to the (un)availability of linguistic resources required for participating in academic discourse (e.g. Scarcella, 2003; Townsend, Fillipini, Collins, & Biancarosa, 2012). Difficulties in recognizing when and which normative expectations with regard to language are made relevant may, however, also play a role for how students make use of and actively assemble resources when participating in classroom discourse. We need to understand more deeply how norms are dealt with in interaction in order to figure out the particular challenges that academic discourse may entail.

Second, sequential analyses of talk-in-interaction demonstrate that in everyday talk norms are usually not made explicit but rather taken for granted (see section 2). It may be doubted, however, whether this observation also holds for interactions in educational contexts which involve participants in specific goal orientations linked to the institution-relevant identities (Heritage & Clayman, 2010, 34) of expert and novice. For instance, when expert and novice identities are at stake (e.g. in parent-child interactions), other-correction is not as distinctly dispreferred as it is in other settings and may serve as a vehicle for socialization (Schegloff, Jefferson, & Sacks, 1977). Thus, it seems worthwhile to examine if and in what ways academic language norms are actually appealed to in naturally occurring classroom discourse.

The aim of the paper is, therefore, to address academic language norms as a topic of empirical research *sui generis*. It investigates “norms-in-action” (Housley & Fitzgerald, 2009, 346; Kern et al., 2015), i.e. processes of invoking and actualizing norms as an inherent part of classroom discourse. In doing so, the paper focuses on academic language on the discourse level and focuses on explanations and argumentations, since these represent particularly important genres of classroom discourse. Inspired by conversation analysis, the paper microanalytically reconstructs how teachers and students display their orientation to norms (Bilmes, 1986; Deppermann & Helmer, 2013), i.o.w., how they exhibit their behavior or assess that of others as (not) being produced according to a norm, thus making normative expectations observable and accountable (Garfinkel, 1967).

In the following section (section 2) I discuss the notion of norms from an ethnomethodological point of view and take a first look at an extract from classroom discourse in which teachers and students express expectations with regard to what constitutes a proper explanation. Since the present study focuses on globally organized discourse activities such as explanations and argumentations, section 3 introduces the concept of discourse units and outlines a preliminary notion of discursive norms. Data – videorecordings of German language and mathematics lessons in grade five – are introduced in section 4. Section 5 focuses on how norm invocations unfold in classroom interaction. It first maps the sequential positions in which discursive norms are typically made relevant (section 5), i.e. it examines when in the course of an explanation or argumentation participants observably display their orientation to norms. This analytical step sheds light on the question of whether communication about discursive norms is temporarily prioritized and becomes the main topic of talk or whether it is rather done *en passant*. Second, I reconstruct three interactive procedures of invoking norms: marking the violation of a norm, approaching a norm-congruent discursive practice *ex negativo*, and performing a positive model (section 6). The analysis shows that these procedures can be differentiated according to their degree of explicitness. Section 7 discusses the study’s consequences for students’ acquisition of academic discourse practices. The findings on the procedures with which norms are invoked contribute to our knowledge of how students are socialized into discursive practices of classroom talk (Duff, 2010). Furthermore, they point to students’ skills needed for interpreting and understanding normative expectations. Thus, the approach also yields insights that can ultimately help to explain why some students succeed while others struggle in mastering academic discourse.

## 2. Norms-in-interaction

In the present section, I discuss the notion of norms from an ethnomethodological perspective (Garfinkel, 1967) and take a first look at an instance in which a teacher displays her expectations with regard to certain ways of explaining. From an ethnomethodological perspective, norms belong to the “socially-sanctioned-facts-of-life-in-society-that-any-bona-fide-member-of-the-society-knows” (ibid., 76) and are part of what Garfinkel calls “common sense knowledge”. These ‘facts’ are taken for granted and thus usually remain implicit. In general, interlocutors do not explicate (and are often not able to do so when asked) the social and normative reasons underlying their interaction since these belong to the “common ground”, to the “seen but unnoticed features of common discourse whereby actual utterances are recognized as events of common, reasonable, understandable, plain talk.” (ibid., 41) Thus, in everyday conversations, norms are rarely explicitly dealt with.

In contrast, in interactions between experts and novices, common knowledge is often not assumed from the outset. Rather, as our data demonstrate, teachers frequently produce metacommunicative and evaluative comments on discursive practices and convey that specific expectations have been violated. Excerpt (1) illustrates such a case (for a more detailed analysis of this sequence see section 5). It is part of larger episode that stems from a German lesson about features

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