



Adolescents' metalinguistic reflections on the academic register in speech and writing



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ABSTRACT

Whereas mastering academic language (AL) contributes to school success, difficulty in school might be partially traced back to the gap between teachers' linguistic expectations and the communicative norms to which students orient. Teachers, as experienced AL users, may implicitly hold linguistic expectations for speaking and writing in the classrooms, making AL learning a 'hidden curriculum.' AL learning might be more effective if both teachers and students were able to understand, and possibly communicate, their linguistic expectations more explicitly; however, little research has explored how adolescents talk about and reflect on the language used for learning at school and, so, we have little knowledge of whether students are developing the language resources that support these pedagogical conversations (or 'academic metalanguage'). Based on written and oral reflections of 4th–8th grade students from the Northeastern United States on how registers differ by context, the present study provides an initial entry point into students' resources to refer metalinguistically to features of the academic register and examines students' metalanguage as a window into their beliefs and attitudes about academic language learning.

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Introduction

Though research on language acquisition has traditionally focused language on language learning in young children, language development continues throughout adolescence and beyond (Berman & Ravid, 2009). Think, for example, of the continuous expansion of language resources throughout schooling, where new learning almost always involves acquiring new language. This language of school—often called *academic language* (AL)—is a set of co-occurring lexical, syntactic, and discursive features particularly useful for precisely and concisely communicating abstract content and ideas like those taught in classrooms (Biber & Conrad, 2009). Skill to understand and to produce AL, which peppers textbooks and classroom discussions, is unsurprisingly linked with successful participation in all domains of academic inquiry (Becker-Mrotzek, Schramm, Thürmann, & Vollmer, 2013; Redder, this issue).

Becoming a skilled academic language user is no simple task. A student learning academic language simultaneously expands her repertoire of school-relevant language forms (*academic language resources*) and maps these forms to particular social contexts (*metalinguistic awareness of the academic register*), which enables her to recognize when AL is useful for communicating thoughts or completing certain tasks in the classroom (Ravid, 2004; Snow & Uccelli, 2009). Whereas

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children seem to be aware of the fact that speakers use different language forms to address different audiences from early on (Andersen, 1990; Blum-Kulka & Snow, 2004; Flavell, Botkin, Fry, Wright, & Jarvis, 1968; Halmari & Smith, 1994; Tsuji & Doherty, 2014), as the social contexts that adolescents navigate expand, being aware of the correspondence between specific constellations of forms and their respective social contexts poses new challenges.

This challenge is further compounded because language exists along a continuum with no clear separations between 'academic' and 'colloquial' registers and, so, is not particularly amenable to explicit instruction (Snow & Uccelli, 2009); instead, tacit knowledge of how registers differ is acquired 'on the job' through repeated participation in academic exchanges and by reading texts. As a result, AL learning often constitutes a 'hidden curriculum' (Giroux, 2001; Schleppegrell, 2004). Teachers, who have had many more opportunities to acquire academic language than their adolescent students, often have implicit expectations of what language best supports the communication of certain curricular content. In contrast, students, as relative novices with much shorter histories of academic language and literacy socialization, are developing both academic language knowledge as well as an awareness of how linguistic choices influence the meaning being communicated (Heath, 2012).

Given this asymmetry, researchers have articulated the value of developing a common instructional language to talk about academic language—known as 'academic metalanguage.' The expectation is that a shared academic metalanguage will make linguistic expectations explicit as well as make visible for students *how and why* AL differs—at the lexical, morpho-syntactic, and discourse levels—from conversational language (Schleppegrell, 2013). In fact, numerous educational interventions, often with bilingual learners, have sought to teach terms for labeling language as a means to make school-relevant language features explicit to students (Borg, 1998; Brisk & Zisselsberger, 2010; French, 2010; Moore & Schleppegrell, 2014; Rafieyan, Sharafi-Nejad, & Lin, 2014; Schleppegrell, 2013). These pedagogical approaches often adopt metalinguistic terms from systemic functional linguistics (SFL) to label features of AL, which are unfamiliar to adolescents. In contrast, language-focused instruction could begin from and build upon the metalanguage generated by students themselves. Such an approach would acknowledge learners' linguistic agency and build upon their emerging understandings and resources in navigating the linguistic contexts of school (Aukerman, 2007; Swain, 1998, 2000). Even in the absence of explicit instruction, we would expect that students might be developing some metalanguage through their everyday experiences reading textbooks and from exposure to teachers as fluent users of AL.

In the pair of qualitative studies presented here, we seek evidence for this hypothesis in students' explicit oral and written reflections on academic language and its use. Interpreted as indicators of metalinguistic awareness of academic registers, students' comments give insight into their abilities to identify and refer to differences in linguistic features, social contexts of use, communicative purposes and functions of more academic vs. more colloquial registers (Ag & Jørgensen, 2012; Ellis, 1994). To create the conditions for metalinguistic reflection in both studies, pre-adolescents' and adolescents' reflected on the situational appropriateness of two written texts of the same length on the same topic—one manipulated to contain a higher proportion of oral language features and one that contained predominately features of the written academic register. In study one, we examine students' written reflections for references to lexical (vocabulary), morpho-syntactic or discourse features, which offers insights into the aspects of academic language that learners in grades six, seven, and eight attend to when working independently. In the second study, drawing on prior research with second language learners that suggests that language awareness can be enhanced during teacher-mediated language-focused dialogs (Swain, 2000), we engaged our primarily monolingual population in group discussions focused on the two texts. The change in mode afforded us insights into the interactional process itself, both in terms of the challenges that middle graders are confronted during metalinguistic activities and into how they make use of discursive supports from peers and adults in these discussions. In this study, we also examine students' metalanguage as a window into their beliefs and attitudes about academic language learning. As students acquire academic language, they are also acquiring an awareness of the social meaning of this language or of the implicit or explicit assumptions held by students and teachers about the academic register, its key features, and its usage (Brown, 2011; Delpit, 1988; Gal, 1988; López, 2012; Milroy, 2001; Norton, 2014). These collective beliefs and assumptions about academic language are often echoed in instructional materials and participatory structures within classrooms, and are inextricably linked with economic and political histories that legitimize certain ways of communicating in the classroom and position learners as more or less-adept users of AL (Bloome, Carter, Christian, Otto, & Stuart-Faris, 2005; Godley, Carpenter & Werner, 2007; Gutiérrez, 1995). We argue that this inquiry into how middle graders understand the experience of learning AL is a vital pre-requisite to the design of classroom instruction that offers meaningful learning opportunities for all students, especially linguistically-diverse learners (Faltis, 2013).

Theoretical framework

Reflecting on the academic register using language—as we ask students to do in this study—is a complex task given that the language of school simultaneously functions as a tool for communicating school content within classrooms *and* for communicating social meaning, in other words, a social semiotic (Heller, 2015).

The academic register: a pragmatics-based perspective

Conceptualized through a pragmatics-based or 'functional' framework (Snow & Uccelli, 2009), academic language offers a solution to schooling's communicative challenges. Although teachers most often make-up the actual audience for students'

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