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Introduction

Why should we care about academic language?

Framing the special issue

This special issue, entitled "Academic language and English learners: Theory and practice," focuses on the topic of academic language and the teaching of academic language to school-age English learners (ELs), who are in the process of learning the language of instruction while studying school subjects in "mainstream" grade-level classes. There are a number of reasons why this topic matters in language-related studies in education. Because of globalization and other socioeconomic factors, schools across the globe have an increasingly diverse student population (Blommaert, 2010), and "inner circle" (Kachru, 1990) English-speaking countries, such as the United Kingdom, the United States, and Australia, are no exception to this global demographic trend (Gándara & Hopkins, 2010). In the context of the United States, compared with earlier waves of immigration from Europe, today's immigrants tend to be people of color, limited education, and low socio-economic backgrounds and to settle in urban centers with limited human and material resources (Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, & Todorova, 2008). Unfortunately, the achievement gap between English-speaking "mainstream" students and ELs has increasingly widened in recent years (Gándara, 2013; NCES, 2013). One of the factors frequently associated with this gap is the lack of mastery of academic language on the part of many ELs, which is critical for them to access the curriculum content of school subjects. Hence, educational researchers have pointed to the importance of helping all students, particularly ELs, to develop academic language through systematic instruction (e.g., Snow, 2008; Snow & Uccelli, 2009). In this respect, it should be emphasized that the attribution of deficit to ELs or any other student group that is struggling with academic language is not only ideologically suspect but also detrimental to the goal of achieving equity of educational access for all students (Ladson-Billings, 2013). Effective teaching of academic language, or any other content, must be aimed at the intersection between the resources students bring to school such as their linguistic, cultural, and lived experiences, the content to be taught, theoretical or empirical models for equitable educational practices, and the particulars of the sociocultural and sociopolitical milieu in which classrooms are situated. Thus, treating academic language as consisting of discrete skills for ELs to acquire through interventional programs of decontextualized instruction falls short of the aim of empowering these students. As Cummins argues in this issue and elsewhere (Cummins, 2001, 2009, 2011), it is necessary to situate the teaching of academic language in an educational framework of "transformative pedagogy" that not only values students' resources and identities but also promotes their overall literacy development (see Cummins, in this issue).

The terms, ELs and academic language, need to be unpacked before proceeding to introduce this issue. In the policy documents of the past 40 years in the United States, English-as-additional-language students have been categorized mainly on the basis of their scores on standardized English proficiency assessments and referred to as "limited English proficient" (LEP) – a term that highlights what they lack. More recently, however, educators have begun to favor terms, such as English language learner (ELL) or English learner (EL), in order to see these students in a more positive light, focusing on them as active "learners" rather than as persons with inherent "limited" competence. However, these terms are also not without problems, since all speakers of English, including those for whom it is their only language, can be considered to be life-long learners of English. Adopting a proactive stance toward the resources of these immigrant students, García (2009) and García and Kleifgen (2010) have coined the term "emergent bilinguals" as many ELs fall into this category. While concurring with the ideological stance associated with the term "emergent bilinguals," in this issue, contributors use either EL or ELL as these terms are the ones now most frequently used in the literature.

Defining academic language is a challenge because this construct has been approached and operationalized differently across disciplines, and theoretical and research approaches to its study have also been equally varied (Valdés, 2004). However, in educational communities, common characterizations include "the language of schooling" (Schleppegrell, 2004),

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"the types of language proficiencies that are necessary for learners to perform in academic contexts," and the "specialized vocabulary, grammar, language functions, and discourse structures" used in each of the curriculum content areas (WIDA, 2013). Definitions of this type appear to derive from the distinction that Cummins (1979, 1984) made between academic and conversational or social language when, several decades ago, when he pointed to the detrimental effect of conflating the two in evaluating students' academic performance, which he believed to be responsible for the over-representation of ELs in special education. Since then, Cummins's binary distinction has been critiqued on a number of grounds and a variety of alternatives have been proposed. One such, put forward by systemic functional linguists, operationalizes academic language in terms of the linguistic features that are characteristic of the registers and genres employed in the different academic disciplines (e.g., Christie & Derewianka, 2008; Christie & Martin, 2007; Coffin, 2006; Rose & Martin, 2012). More recently, some scholars have suggested a practice-oriented view of academic language, seeing it as part of the academic literacy practices (e.g., Enright, 2010; Gutiérrez, 2008) or communicative repertories that students need to develop in order to engage in disciplinary specific practices (e.g., Lee, Quinn, & Valdés, 2013; Valdés, 2013). In short, in the fields of literacy education, applied linguistics, and TESOL, multiple perspectives on academic language now co-exist (for a comprehensive review of the relevant literature, see Anstrom et al., 2010; Bunch, 2013). While the contributors to this issue do not all take the same perspective on academic language, what they have in common is an orientation toward an expanded definition of academic language as part of the broad communicative repertoires that students need to develop in order to achieve success in school and beyond.

Teaching academic language to additional-language students, that is to say, language minority students studying school subjects in the majority language, is an issue that is applicable to educational contexts beyond countries in which the medium of instruction is English (e.g., Somali students learning school subjects in public schools in Italy, Spain, or Finland). The contributors to this issue all acknowledge the need for some type of explicit teaching of academic language and propose varied yet overlapping alternative approaches or perspectives. Furthermore, they agree that academic language is foundational for ELs' future participation in the more formal contexts of civic society, which will require them to comprehend and contribute to a variety of public discourses in oral and written forms. Thus, the development of academic language matters greatly not only in the context of schooling but also in the world beyond.

Contributions to the issue

The complexity involved in teaching ELs academic language poses a challenge to those who wish to examine this topic. Part of the complexity stems from the fact that both terms, EL and academic language, mask a great deal of internal variation. ELs include both newcomers and long-term ELs, and they are also diverse in terms of such factors as their ethno-linguistic backgrounds, life trajectories, levels of first-language literacy, and initial schooling. ELs may be bi/multilinguals or monolinguals and may be placed in different educational contexts (e.g., English-medium instruction, bilingual education). Further, as noted earlier, the construct of academic language is still being contested. Thus, it is not the aim of this special issue to address the whole range of pertinent issues related to this topic, but rather to provide a forum in which to critically examine the notion of academic language as well as to explore some concrete classroom examples of strategic ways of teaching ELs in instructional contexts in which English is the medium of instruction. While acknowledging the importance of developing academic language bilingually, it is beyond the scope of this particular issue.

The contributions by Moore and Schleppegrell as well as Gebhard, Chen, and Britton describe their professional development work with US public elementary school teachers and report ways in which they used the systemic functional linguistics (SFL) framework to engage young ELs and non-EL students with the learning of academic language. While the former focuses on the classroom practices in three mainstream classes that included both EL and non-ELs, the latter focuses on one intact ESL classroom. Haneda's conceptual paper puts forward the notion of "academic communication," expanding on the definition of academic language to include a variety of other semiotic resources that can be used in support of learning a school subject. Following the three core articles, two renowned scholars who have done extensive work in this area, Constant Leung in the United Kingdom and Jim Cummins in Canada, present extended review essays on this topic, using the three articles as a springboard. In what follows, I briefly present an overview of each contribution.

Moore and Schleppegrell report on a longitudinal, design-based investigation with elementary school teachers in a high poverty Mid-western urban school district that serves a large number of Arabic-speaking bilingual ELs. Drawing on the data from three mainstream classrooms (grades 3–5) with a large number of ELs, they illustrate how a carefully selected set of SFL 'metalanguage' terms (e.g., process types) can be used in conjunction with literacy 'metalanguage' (e.g., figurative language) to achieve curricular goals for English language arts in elementary grades – in this case, analyses and evaluations of characters and interpretations of narrative texts. The findings show that, under the guidance of their teachers, the young students were able to 'talk about text,' analyzing and evaluating characters' actions and feelings, relating them to their own experiences, and interpreting the text in dialog with one another and, in doing so, also engaged in the learning of academic language. The authors point to the importance of explicitly connecting SFL concepts to literacy metalanguage "in the service of teaching skills central to the subject."

Gebhard, Chen, and Britton show ways in which one elementary school ESL teacher used SFL and genre-based pedagogy to design and enact academic literacy instruction with Spanish–English bilingual EL students. They describe three curricular units, which focused on three genres (historical, biographical, and scientific explanations); in each unit instruction utilized SFL metalanguage at the levels of register (e.g., process types, participants) and genre (e.g., genre moves such as 'orientation,'

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