# From academic language to academic communication: Building on English learners' resources

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## ABSTRACT

In the first part of the article, I briefly survey the major theoretical frameworks proposed and empirical approaches adopted in recent research on academic language. While mastery of academic language is certainly important for academic success, this construct does not fully encompass the range of modalities through which students participate in the learning of school subjects. Adopting a sociocultural perspective on learning, I propose that academic communication better captures the multi-modal dynamics of learning and teaching as it occurs in classrooms. Working together in joint activities, such as problem solving, developing ideas, and communicating understanding, involves material action, artifacts, speech and writing, and other semiotic tools such as graphs, diagrams, and images. While English learners benefit from extra linguistic scaffolding, it is particularly important for them to engage in activities that draw on non-linguistic forms of communication to complement the meanings made by language.

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## 1. Introduction

Among factors affecting success of school-aged students, the development and mastery of academic language (AL) is considered to be critical (Francis, Rivera, Lesaux, Kieffer, & Rivera, 2006). All students must face this task, but it can be particularly challenging for English learners (ELs), who are simultaneously learning the language of instruction as wells as the vocabulary and content of the different school subjects. Although AL concerns all school-aged students, it has been discussed and researched primarily in relation to the education of second-language students in the fields of TESOL, bilingual education, and applied linguistics, leading Snow and Uccelli (2009) to call for more research on this topic in the field of language and literacy education for all students. Yet despite a growing interest in and recognition of the importance of this construct, AL lacks an agreed-upon definition, since it has been defined and operationalized in different ways for different purposes (Anstrom et al., 2010).

Clearly, any discussion of AL and of the related issues of teaching and assessing must begin with a consideration of how AL is conceptualized and characterized. For this reason, I will briefly survey the major theoretical frameworks proposed and empirical approaches adopted in recent research on AL. However, the aim of the present article is to argue for the importance of going beyond the current discussion of AL, approaching it from a sociocultural perspective on learning that takes EL's diverse resources and their empowerment into consideration in a more holistic manner. On this basis, I then propose that the multi-modal dynamics of learning and teaching as it occurs in classrooms is better captured in terms of 'academic communication'. I shall then present a set of pedagogical principals based on this sociocultural perspective on

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learning, illustrating how they may be put into practice with two examples from elementary classrooms, which included a proportion of ELs.[1]

## 2. Academic language and academic communication

### 2.1. Academic language: what is it?

Although a variety of different conceptualizations have been proposed to define AL at different linguistic levels, from lexis to discourse organization, and from various theoretical perspectives, from cognitive to sociocultural (Bailey & Huang, 2011), here I selectively describe several major approaches, the majority of which address ways to assist in the teaching of AL (for a comprehensive review of research on AL, see Anstrom et al., 2010).

As early as the 1980s, Cummins (1979) alerted the education community to the importance of distinguishing between cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) and basic interpersonal communicative skills (BICS), and his work has been particularly influential in K-12 TESOL and bilingual education in the United States (Valdés, 2004). In brief, BICS, also referred to as conversational (social) language, consists of the language skills that are needed in day-to-day social interaction, and it is considered to develop in a few years. CALP, on the other hand, refers to the linguistic ability to manipulate and interpret language in the kinds of cognitively demanding, contextually reduced texts that are associated with schooling (Cummins, 1984); mastery is said to take ELs five to seven years, depending on their previous educational and literacy experiences.

As Cummins (2008) stated, the distinction was intended "to draw educators' attention to the timelines and challenges that second language learners encounter as they attempt to catch up to their peers in academic aspects of the school language" (p. 71). Arguing against the one-dimensional view of language proficiency prevalent at the time, for example Oller's (1979) notion of global language proficiency, Cummins (1980, 1984) warned educators of the peril of conflating BICS with CALP in educational assessment, which, he argued, might be responsible for the large number of ELs being misplaced in special education.

However, his proposed distinction soon met with a variety of criticisms, ranging from the charge that it privileged school-based language over other varieties to the objection that it uncritically posited a linear developmental progression from BICS to CALP or offered an impoverished view of everyday communication, which, in practice, often requires considerable negotiatory skill (e.g., Bailey, 2007; MacSwan, 2000; Martin-Jones & Romaine, 1987). Nevertheless, despite such criticisms, the distinction has continued to inform work on AL. For instance, Scarcella (2003) employed this dichotomy on the grounds that AL is indeed cognitively demanding and must be learned without contextual cues; furthermore, it requires greater mastery of an extensive range of linguistic features than colloquial English. However, Cummins (2000) himself later moved away from his original formulation, describing the goal for AL as "access to and command of the oral and written academic registers of schooling" (p. 67).

One of the more recent developments in the literature of AL is a practice-based or bottom-up approach to academic English that has been adopted by a group of researchers at CRESST (National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Testing at the University of California, Los Angeles) (e.g., Bailey, 2007; Bailey & Huang, 2011). This work is oriented toward language testing with the goal of articulating the level of competence in AL that all school-aged students in the Unites States must achieve in order to function well in content-area classes. CRESST researchers have examined language use in mainstream upper-elementary grades from multiple perspectives, including textbooks, content standards (e.g., those of the science curriculum), teacher expectations, and classroom teacher-talk (e.g., Bailey, 2007; Bailey, Butler, & Sato, 2007). Bailey and Heritage (2008) break down AL into School Navigational Language (SNL) and Curriculum Content Language (CCL). SNL refers to the language through which students communicate with peers and teachers, including teacher instruction and CCL to "the language used in the process of teaching and learning content materials" (p. 15). These authors contrast social language, SNL, and CCL according to the purposes for which these language varieties are used, their degree of formality, the contexts of their use, the predominant modalities they utilize, teacher expectations for language abilities across these varieties, and grade level expectations (e.g., those set by standards, instructional materials, administrators) (pp. 15–17). This approach is helpful to practitioners in that it provides grade-level indicators for language performance that can be used for instructional and assessment purposes.

Along with this new development, Cummins's proposal of CALP has been further pursued by educational researchers who have investigated what they consider to be its essential features, such as its use of academic vocabulary and its different grammatical and discourse structures; of these, the most intensively studied has been academic vocabulary (Anstrom

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[1] A caveat is in order here. I do not claim that this article has provided a comprehensive answer to all the issues related to ELs' development of academic communication. First, my focus is on ELs who are already relatively fluent in conversational English. For beginning English-proficient ELs it is clear that more intensive second-language focused instruction is needed than was discussed here. As well, newly arrived adolescent ELs with little or interrupted schooling will also require much more intense linguistic and cultural scaffolding than was assumed here. Another important issue that is not discussed is the promotion of dual language development among ELs. The two examples to be presented are in English-medium instructional settings, and they show how committed teachers, who may not be fluent in their ELs' first languages, can successfully engage them in learning. However, this should not be interpreted as exclusive support for monolingual pedagogy. There are settings in which bilingual programs are the most appropriate choice, whereas there are others in which English-medium instruction is the only feasible choice (e.g., with ELs from diverse L1 backgrounds). For the promotion of bi/multilingual development, I refer readers to the writing of scholars such as Jim Cummins, Ofelia García, and Kenji Hakuta.