



“Words that hold us up:” Teacher talk and academic language in five upper elementary classrooms

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Available online 28 May 2011

Keywords:

Teacher talk
Academic language
English language learners
Language minority students
Sociolinguistics
Cultural capital
Elementary school

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the oral academic language used by English as a second language prepared teachers during content area instruction in five upper elementary classrooms in the United States. Using ethnographic and sociolinguistic perspectives the authors examine the oral, academic language exposure students received from their teachers during mathematics, social studies, and language arts instruction in mainstream classrooms.

Findings suggest that English language learners in these classrooms (1) had limited opportunities to hear the specialized language of the content areas, and (2) encountered a variety of *opaque* terms (e.g., homophones, idiomatic expressions), which can potentially hinder understanding. These findings have important implications for: understanding the subtle and overt aspects of the language of school, increasing our understanding of teacher talk during content area instruction, and preparing educators to teach the unique linguistic demands of each academic content area.

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1. Introduction

In a U.S., 4th grade, mainstream classroom, Ms. Kennedy is discussing with her students ways of inferring the meaning of unfamiliar words. After encouraging students to brainstorm with their neighboring peers for strategies, several students raise their hands to share their ideas. Arthur shares the following:

144	Arthur	How about comprehension
145	T	WAYS TO SOLVE PROBLEMS {writing on chart paper}
146	Arthur	Monitoring our comprehension
147	T	YOU KNOW, AND WHEN WE MONITOR COMPREHENSION
148		WE'RE THINKING ABOUT WORDS THAT HOLD US UP

When Arthur offers “monitoring our comprehension” (line 146) as a way to draw inferences from the text, Ms. Kennedy attempts to clarify the meaning of this academic language phrase using the idiomatic expression “words that hold us up” (line 148). While the use of this everyday language phrase might be easily understood by native English speakers as words that obstruct the reader in comprehending the text, it might also have the opposite effect on the eight English language learners (ELLs) present. Unfortunately, the activity shifted and the opportunity to elaborate on or question Arthur's and Ms. Kennedy's comments vanished.

Academic language is one of the key factors affecting the “achievement gap” between high- and low-performing groups of students in U.S. schools (Wong Fillmore, 2004). Many students perform poorly because they cannot handle the unique linguistic demands of each academic content area (e.g., science, mathematics). This is especially visible in U.S. upper-elementary

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and secondary classrooms where students are expected to learn and demonstrate new ways of knowing, thinking, and communicating.

Recent studies comparing the differential performance of native English speakers and ELLs conclude that fluency in English plays an important role in school performance, given that ELLs are outperformed by their native speaker counterparts (Abedi & Lord, 2001; August & Hakuta, 1997; MacSwan & Rolstad, 2003). As a whole, these studies reveal how the language demands encountered by ELLs in mainstream classrooms hinder their opportunities to learn content material and demonstrate subject matter knowledge, skills, and habits of mind.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the nature of teachers' oral academic language during content area instruction in mainstream classrooms with ELLs. Three reasons support this focus. First, teachers' oral language is central to the teaching and learning processes. In most U.S., K-12 classrooms, teachers talk for a considerable part of each lesson. In fact, it has been estimated that teachers talk for approximately two thirds of teacher directed lessons (Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975). Second, Gee (1990) reminds us of the advantages held by students raised in middle- and upper-class homes where the language of school is spoken. For these students the comprehension and communication of school language are supported by a wide range of linguistic, cognitive, and cultural patterns acquired at home. Consequently, these students more easily acquire the linguistic conventions and thinking processes necessary to succeed in school. In contrast, for most ELLs who speak another language at home, school can be the main stage where they encounter the specialized language of the content areas via their teachers who model how this language can be used. If students are to achieve academic competence, they "must have opportunities to develop academic discourse" (Gutierrez, 1995, p. 21). Finally, for students the discourse of their teachers does not only contain utterances to be understood but they are also signs of authority and status to be accepted, imitated, and reproduced (Bourdieu, 1991). It follows that if schools require students to use certain linguistic skills in order to demonstrate knowledge in the content areas, teachers need to be deliberate and systematic in modeling and teaching the kind of academic discourses needed to achieve academic success. Failure to do so equates to what Macedo (1994) calls a "pedagogy of entrapment," that is, requiring of students what teachers do not explicitly teach.

This article draws on data collected in five mainstream, upper elementary classrooms in the Pacific Northwest of the United States. Using ethnographic and sociolinguistic perspectives, the study analyzed the oral, academic language exposure students received from their teachers during mathematics, social studies, and language arts instruction. The experienced teachers in this study had advanced specialization in English as a second language (ESL) and had at least 5 ELLs with varying English language proficiency levels in their classrooms. Each classroom was observed and video-recorded during one week for an average of 12 h of content area instruction.

To frame our discussion, two different yet complementary theoretical perspectives are presented: current conceptualizations of academic language, particularly in reference to ELLs in the context of elementary and secondary U.S. classrooms, and Bourdieu's conceptualization of language and power. The paper then discusses the methodological underpinnings of the study, including a description of the context and participants as well as the principled approach used in the microanalysis of the data. This combination of theoretical lenses coupled with sociolinguistic and ethnographic methodologies enables us to examine language use and social context simultaneously. The results section is structured around selected interactions focusing on the presence or absence of oral academic language used by the teachers during mathematics, social studies, and language arts instruction.

2. Conceptual framework

2.1. Research on academic language in U.S., K-12 classrooms

While there has been an abundance of research in the area of English for academic purposes at the university level, only recently have researchers explored the nature and implications of academic language in K-12 settings (e.g., Gottlieb, Katz, & Ernst-Slavit, 2009; Bartolomé, 1998; Bruna & Gomez, 2009; Schleppegrell, 2004; Valdés, 2004; Zwiers, 2008) and particularly in reference to English language learners (e.g., Bailey, 2007; Bunch, 2009; Chamot & O'Malley, 1994; Cummins, 2000; Scarcella, 2003; TESOL, 2006). Within this body of work, the construct of academic language has been defined differently by various authors. In most cases, academic language has been conceptualized in contrast to the everyday, casual language used by students in informal settings such as in the home or neighborhood or at recess. Scarcella (2003), for example, describes academic language as requiring "a much greater mastery of a range of linguistic features than ordinary English" (pp. 27–28). A well-known distinction among practitioners, although recently criticized by diverse scholars (see below), can be found in the work of Cummins (1984), who theorized a distinction between basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) and cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP). While Cummins' BICS and CALP framework has been useful in educational settings by putting forward a construct that brings attention to the development of academic English, it has been challenged for its conceptualization of CALP as decontextualized language (see for example, Bartolomé, 1998; Gee, 1990) and for promoting deficit thinking by focusing on the low cognitive/academic skills of students (e.g., Edelsky, 2006; Edelsky et al., 1983; MacSwan & Rolstad, 2003).

Other approaches, derived from linguistic and functional perspectives, describe academic language in terms of its utility in today's standards-driven classrooms. The 2006 TESOL PreK-12 English Language Proficiency Standards define academic language as needed "to acquire a new or deeper understanding of content related to the core curriculum areas and to communicate that understanding to others" (TESOL, 2006, p. 18). Research in this area focuses on the lexical, grammatical,

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