

Academic English for All

The Essential Role of Academic Language in Preparing All ELs for College and Career



Jose Ortiz Mateo, Ph.D.

Senior Fellow, International Center for Leadership in Education

Norma Godina-Silva, Ed.D.

Senior Consultant, International Center for Leadership in Education



**International Center for
Leadership in Education**

RIGOROUS LEARNING FOR ALL STUDENTS

Academic English for All

The Essential Role of Academic Language in Preparing All ELs for College and Career

Academic English is the foundation to an English language learner’s successful and self-sustainable future; without it, the odds of an EL student excelling to college and winning the high-skill, high-paying careers of the twenty-first century greatly diminish. When we use the term “academic English,” it’s essential to keep in mind that its use isn’t merely to help students excel in an academic setting. Rather, it’s about helping ELs grasp the language that is the same language they will need in college and careers.

If we don’t prepare our students for high-skill jobs, by default we will relegate them to low-skill, low-paying jobs. Consider our country’s changing economic circumstances: the share of low-skill and high-skill jobs is growing as mid-skilled jobs continue to get wiped out by technology (Daggett, 2015). Since the 1970s, economic inequality has been expanding and is at its highest rate since 1928 (DeSilver, 2015). Those with less education will fall further behind, while those with more education will continue to spring that much more forward (Pew Research Center, 2014a).

When economic disparity is viewed through the EL lens, certain borders of the divide come into focus. EL students are the fastest growing subset of the public school population; by 2025, it is expected that nearly 25 percent of public school students will be an EL (NEA, 2008). Two-thirds of EL students come from low-income families and 75 percent are Spanish speaking (NEA, 2008). Most disconcerting is that ELs perform well below their peers and have an “excessively high dropout” rate (NEA, 2008). Estimates show that ELs are between two (Maxwell, 2013) and four (McKeon, 2005) times more likely than their native English speaking peers to drop out of school.

The achievement gap that ELs face in school will only become more evident as they attempt to establish careers. The achievement gap becomes the opportunity gap becomes the economic gap. Pew Research looked at how educational attainment is affecting economic outcomes for Millennials, the most college-educated generation the U.S. has ever seen (Pew Research, 2014b). The poverty rate of Millennials with a four-year college degree is 5.8 percent. For Millennials with a two-year degree, it’s 14.7 percent, more or less in line with the national average (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013). For Millennials with just a high school degree, a staggering 21.8 percent live in poverty, which is a full 7.3 percentage points above the national average. By contrast, when Baby Boomers with just a high school degree were the same age as Millennials are now, only 7 percent lived in poverty. The ever-expanding economic divide and consequent cycle of poverty will only be broken if we bridge the opportunity gap.

How do we stop the economic divide from getting further entrenched, particularly along the lines of the English language? By preparing every last EL student for high-skilled jobs.

We achieve this by first doing whatever we can to ensure ALL ELs learn academic English—the English they will need in college, interviews and careers. For us, this means raising expectations for ELs and, importantly, for teachers as well so that they are equipped to help ELs meet heightened expectations. Research shows that an optimistic belief in one’s abilities coupled with challenging, yet achievable goals will raise one’s abilities (Derrer-Rendall & Wesson, 2011). In other words, ELs—and their teachers—will rise to the expectations we set for them. Setting clear goals and always communicating to students—

and teachers—that we believe they *can and will* achieve them must be the bedrock of teaching academic English.

EL teachers must become content teachers rooted in the Rigor/Relevance Framework® (Daggett, 2014), which serves as a means to raise expectations for teachers. To accomplish this, a growth mindset must become a foundational component of a district and school’s culture. Similar to inspiring optimistic belief in our ELs’ ability to excel, we must let our EL teachers know we believe they are fully capable of obtaining the skills necessary to teach English through content aligned to rigorous and relevant standards. Districts and schools must also systemically provide the structural and professional development supports to help them get there.

And get there they must, as content-driven EL instruction is about more than raising expectations for teachers. Relative to just language instruction, content-based learning inherently promotes higher-order, analytical thinking. Content-based instruction’s power rests in the fact that it not only helps students learn the language of a subject area, but it also helps students learn to communicate *about* the subject by constructing meaning (Garcia, 2002). What we have to keep in mind with our ELs is that it’s not enough simply to teach them English as a second language; we have to teach them how to apply analytical thought and achieve comprehension while using the English language. In other words, true academic English means acquiring academic vocabulary *plus* the ability to communicate clearly in abstract terms. Without adopting this content-based definition of academic English, our ELs will not be able to keep pace with their peers or today’s higher academic standards, and thus we will fail on our promise to help them excel in school and careers.

To that end, teachers should not shy away from regularly reinforcing with ELs that grasping academic English is about more than just school achievement. It’s about their futures. If everyone—from district and school administrators to teachers, ELs, their families and the community—understands that learning academic English is part of a larger goal for ELs to create self-sustaining, successful lives, a partnership is formed. And through a sense of partnership, everyone feels responsible to his or her role and each other, which motivates progress and creates accountability.

From there, effective EL instruction is a matter of ensuring that all teaching decisions stem from proven strategies built to meet the objective that ALL ELs learn academic English. From our decades as EL practitioners and strategists in optimizing learning for ELs, we’ve found that through a content-based structure rooted in rigor and relevance, three core strategies must guide the tactical best practices and tools teachers use in the ELL classroom.

Academic English Instructional Strategy 1: Make Learning Relevant Through *Affective* Instruction

That learning must be relevant to be effective and memorable is true for all students. That many EL students are in new cultural or school settings, or even if they are American-born but needing to bridge a cultural language divide, means that relevance takes on an additional layer of significance—and complexity. For the native English student, relevance is about building relationships to learn what matters to each learner, and then personalizing instruction with those references wherever possible. It’s also about tying lessons to a real-world or career-related application whenever feasible. For the EL student, the same is true, but relevance is also about cultural inclusion, sensitivity and awareness.

EL teachers have the additional responsibility of gaining insights into a variety of cultures and pasts and facilitating cultural understanding across the classroom. Pulling this off requires sensitivity and empathy—tools that teachers can cultivate and hone with proper school support and professional learning. EL teachers must form a practice of recognizing when certain words or references are cultural in nature, and then pause to ensure that they are defined and explained so that no EL student gets lost in a session due to missing a cultural reference or nuance.

Best practices and tools teachers can apply for relevant affective instruction include: K-W-L charts to determine what each student knows, relates to, doesn't know or relate to, and what each needs to learn; utilization of universal themes; differentiation based on language proficiency; low-anxiety learning environments; real-world connections aligned to the Rigor/Relevance Framework (Daggett, 2014); classroom experiences that value students' differences and honor students' cultural uniqueness; and bridging skills to a broad range of careers, including high-skill careers.

Academic English Instructional Strategy 2: Make Learning Rigorous Through *Cognitive* Instruction

It's a point that bears repeating: ELs have an excessively high dropout rate. We simply cannot let our ELs drop out in droves and then watch as they lose opportunities to those with more education. To close the opportunity gap, which we know becomes the economic gap, we must raise expectations for ALL ELs. And then we must constantly reinforce the belief that we know each EL can and will excel—in a rigorous school setting and beyond.

Elevating the rigor of EL instruction is not merely a lofty ideal; it's actually a matter of practical significance and necessity. According to Stephen Krashen, a second language is acquired when a learner listens to "input," i.e., words and conversation, that is more sophisticated than his or her current level of proficiency in communicating and thinking in that language (Garcia, 2002). In other words, without elevating rigor, ELs *won't* see significant proficiency and comprehension gains. For all students, rigor is a game-changing learning strategy. For ELs, it's simply not an option.

ELs need support systems to scaffold their understanding and "bump them up" to the next level of proficiency in language *and* thinking. Best practices and tools teachers can apply for rigorous cognitive instruction include: guided instruction; explicit instruction; teacher modeling; visuals; graphic organizers; use of technology, such as short videos, Today's Meet, etc.; varying level of questions; use of content and language objectives in order for students to have a clear understanding of expectations and as a way of measuring their progress; and ongoing informative assessments.

Academic English Instructional Strategy 3: Reinforce learning daily through *linguistic* instruction

As ELs gain in language proficiency and facility, their gains will only stick if practiced daily. In the Atkinson-Shiffrin model of human memory, data only transfers from short-term to long-term memory if that data is repeated frequently and in a way that is meaningful to a person. Without daily reinforcement, students are more likely to fail to retain knowledge over the long term, and the teacher's and students' efforts can prove for naught.

Key to a teacher's ability to differentiate instruction and align it with language proficiency standards is first understanding each student's level of English proficiency in all four language domains: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Teachers can then personalize and advance daily linguistic instruction accordingly, as well as spot when intervention is needed.

The best practices and tools teachers can apply for relevant linguistic instruction include: strategic and purposeful grouping; cooperative/collaborative learning protocols, e.g., turn and talk, talking chips, put your heads together, etc.; repeated practice opportunities (fluency); extended discussions; vocabulary development; learner engagement opportunities; phonemic awareness; and sentence stems and sentence starters.

Important to note is that it is under the strategic linguistic umbrella that teachers must reinforce the proper and contextual usage of social and academic English whenever necessary. For true academic English to be acquired, we must take care not to confuse a student's fluency in social English as a fluency in academic English (Haynes, 2013), as it is the latter that will help students excel in school and careers. Teachers must make a habit of recognizing and acknowledging the difference between the two.

When a student uses social English in an activity where academic English is appropriate, it's vital that teachers don't make students feel a failure has occurred. Instead, the teacher should reiterate that each has value and purpose in appropriate settings. For example, the point can be made that social language is integral in forming bonds and connecting with peers. Teachers can then model how the student statement in question can be restated in academic language.

Critical to implementing a major initiative is tracking its effectiveness. Any program, strategy, or best practices is only as good as its ability to achieve the objective at hand. When implementing your EL best practices under each of the three foundational strategies— affective, cognitive and linguistic—make sure each is trackable. Questions to keep in mind as you determine how to apply these strategies and which best practices make the most sense for your students:

- What metrics need to be tracked?
- What are the data points that can be extracted from this strategy or learning tool?
- Are these data points relevant to the metrics we need to measure?

Just as critical as devising powerful learning tools and best practices is knowing when to discard those that data reveal not to be meeting objectives. Leaders must leave room for welcoming failures in this urgent and most crucial quest to ensure that ALL ELs acquire academic English. Failures are inevitable when attempting to find innovative solutions to a very large challenge.

In serving ELs, we have to remember we aren't merely trying to move them to the next grade. We're helping them establish productive, self-sufficient lives in the country they call home. And we are also aiming to break the cycle of poverty and close the ever-expanding economic divide in the country we all call home.

It's time we think bigger about academic English taught in schools. It's the language that will not only help students excel in school, but also in life. In thinking too small about the use of English learned in schools, we think too small about the futures and potentials of ELs, and we also think too small about our ability to impact ALL ELs in the classroom and beyond.

REFERENCES

Daggett, W. R. (2015). *Rigor, relevance, and relationships in action: Innovative leadership and best practices for rapid school improvement*. Rexford, NY: International Center for Leadership in Education.

Daggett, W. R. (2014). *Rigor/Relevance Framework®: A guide to focusing resources to increase student performance*. Retrieved from http://www.leadered.com/pdf/Rigor_Relevance_Framework_2014.pdf

Derrer-Rendall, N. M. & Wesson, C. J. (2011). Self-beliefs and student goal achievement. *Psychology Teaching Review*, 17(1), 3-12.

DeSilver, D. (2013, December 5). "U.S. income inequality, on rise for decades, is now highest since 1928." Retrieved from <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2013/12/05/u-s-income-inequality-on-rise-for-decades-is-now-highest-since-1928/>

Garcia, G. G. (2002). *English learners: Reaching the highest level of English literacy*. Newark, NJ: International Reading Association.

Haynes, J. (2013). *Getting started with English language learners: How educators can meet the challenge*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

MaxwEL, L. A. (2013, March 14). Stemming the tide of English-learner dropouts. [Weblog post]. *Education Week: Learning the language*. Retrieved from http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/learning-the-language/2013/03/stemming_the_tide_of_english-l.html

McKeon, D. (2005). "Research talking points on English language learners." Retrieved from <http://www.nea.org/home/13598.htm>

Pew Research Center. (2014a, March 7). "Millennials in adulthood." Retrieved from <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2014/03/07/millennials-in-adulthood/>

Pew Research Center. (2014b, February 11). "The rising cost of not going to college." Retrieved from <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2014/02/11/the-rising-cost-of-not-going-to-college/>

United States Census Bureau. (2014, September) "National income and poverty estimates for calendar year 2013." Retrieved from <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/poverty/about/overview/index.html>

National Education Association (NEA) (2008). *English language learners face unique challenges*. Center for Great Public Schools: Washington, DC.