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Defining and Teaching Academic Language: Developments in K-12 ESL

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Abstract

The concept of academic language (also referred to as academic English) has developed substantially in the 30 years since Cummins introduced the distinction between basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) and cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP). Cummins' (1979, 1981, 2000a) work explains why English language learners (ELs) may acquire basic conversational fluency in English quickly but require substantially longer to acquire academic language. The BICS/CALP framework has also influenced pedagogy, particularly by promoting highly contextualized teaching of academic content. More recent work drawing on linguistic approaches, including corpus linguistics and Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), provides insights into the specific features of language used in school settings. Pedagogical approaches emphasizing explicit language instruction and plentiful opportunities for oral and written language practice show promise for assuring that ELs can develop academic language proficiency. Given the need to address the academic achievement of the growing population of ELs, it is important for teachers to expand their concept of academic language instruction to include these approaches.

Introduction

Over 30 years ago, English learners faced a problem: they were underachieving in school and disproportionately identified as having special needs. Jim Cummins (1979, 1981) analyzed these issues and coined the terms Basic Interpersonal Conversation Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP), proposing that immigrant students gained fluency in BICS quickly, but that their slower and uncertain mastery of CALP led to lower academic achievement. As we enter the second decade of the 21st century, we feel the impact of the BICS/CALP framework, yet the problem of underachievement persists. Research in the last decade points to persisting low achievement and high drop-out rates for English learners (ELs), although factors such as educational programs can lead to higher success (Genesee et al. 2005).

Despite the three decades of awareness of a distinct academic register, an extensive review of research in academic English (AE) (Anstrom et al. 2010 1) concludes that "policies focused on academic language are in their infancy; implementation of these policies is difficult to assess given the lack of clarity on AE and how ELLs best learn" and they call for "a deeper and more thorough conceptualization of AE" in order to develop standards, assessments, and instructional approaches.

The need for clarity on academic language (AL) is taking on more urgency as the pressure for accountability in education grows. Academic language is receiving more attention in teacher preparation[1] and in K-12 ESL Standards[2]. While there may be consensus on the importance of academic language for school achievement and the necessity for teaching it, we lack a broad consensus about what AL consists of and how best to teach it.

The BICS/CALP construct has spread awareness of the challenge, but more recent work that could inform educational policies and practice is less widely known.

This paper examines the AL construct and pedagogical applications from Cummins to more recent frameworks. In this exploration I will consider how the BICS/CALP duality framed AL and how recent theorists have refined the concept. Turning to applications, I review the influence of Cummins' framework on instructional approaches and the contribution of other linguistic and pedagogical approaches. Finally, I propose that a more nuanced approach to AL can guide educational models and decisions.

1. BICS/CALP: Early Concepts of Academic Language

The concept of academic language as it relates to English as a second language (ESL) is generally traced back to Cummins' (1979) formulation of the contrast between BICS and CALP. Cummins was not engaged in describing the features of academic language per se, but rather in explaining the question of why seemingly fluent English learners were not performing well in school. He posited that language proficiency is not a uniform construct[3], but that learners acquire social language relatively quickly, while it takes several years to acquire academic language. In support, he pointed to the fact that children acquire the basic structures of their first language by the time they enter school, yet they must continue to develop academic language to meet the demands of school over the next 12 years and beyond. The BICS/CALP distinction served to explain data on immigrant learners in North America as well as Finnish immigrants in Sweden (Cummins 2000a), and to this day, teachers find that it rings true to their experiences with fluent yet low-performing English learners. Cummins defines academic language in terms of what people *do* with language rather than how they use specific linguistic features, as he explains ''In short, the essential aspect of academic language proficiency is the ability to make complex meanings explicit in either oral or written modalities by means of *language itself* rather than by means of contextual or paralinguistic cues (e.g. gestures, intonation, etc.)''(Cummins 2000a 69, his emphasis).

Cummins (1981) elaborated on the BICS/CALP concept by developing a framework consisting of two intersecting continua related to context and cognitive demand. On the horizontal level, context is developed as a continuum from context-embedded language; usually associated with face-to-face interaction in which facial expression, gestures, and negotiation of meaning provide context; to context-reduced language, typically written language where writers and readers communicate without the benefit of those physical elements of context. On the vertical level, the continuum extends from cognitively undemanding language to cognitively demanding language, typically seen as going from conversation on informal social topics to oral and written communication on the more abstract topics of academic subjects. These intersecting continua then form four quadrants that categorize language use in and out of school: quadrant A contains tasks that are high context/low in cognitive demand, B has tasks that are high context/high in cognitive demand, C consists of high context/low cognitive demand tasks, and D combines low context with high cognitive demand. (figure 1) This framework explains the inherent flaw in expecting students who can use language fluently in quadrant A, as in talking with friends about their interests, to automatically be able to perform well in quadrant D, as in taking standardized tests in school. In addition, it points the way to a general framework for instruction, as Cummins (2000a) recommends that teachers should lead students from quadrant A (social, conversational language tasks) to quadrant D (highly academic language tasks) by way of quadrant B (academic tasks that are challenging but highly

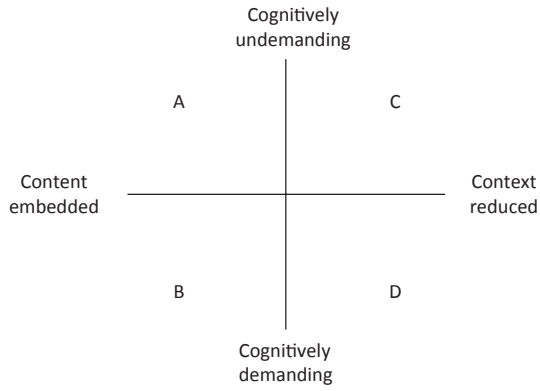

Fig 1. Cummins' (2000a:68) 4 quadrant framework.

scaffolded through context). In other words, it emphasizes the need for instruction that maintains a high cognitive level of academic content while supporting learning through high context, which Cummins describes as including the use of visuals, plentiful face-to-face interaction, and the building or activation of background knowledge. The learner's background knowledge is included because context is internal as well as external, making it easier to understand communication on familiar topics (Cummins n.d.).

Cummins' BICS/CALP duality and the four quadrants framework has the advantage of parsimony, but has been critiqued as oversimplified (e.g. Scarcella 2003). The complexity of language use in academic settings cannot be captured in this four-way division. In analyzing real-life interactions, one often finds a mixture of degrees of context and cognitive demands, leading Goldenberg and Coleman (2010 64–66) to outline a ''hybrid area'' that contains features of both conversational and academic language. For example, speakers in academic contexts sometimes use cues such as gestures or visuals, while social conversation can be cognitively complex, as in presenting an argument or describing something insightful. Background knowledge plays a large role in the cognitive challenge. Cummins (2000a) recognizes that the internal nature of background knowledge makes it difficult to precisely map tasks into the quadrants, as teachers need to factor in their students' background knowledge in considering the need for context. Still, he views the framework as a tool for teachers to use in thinking about task difficulty and sequencing. In response to critiques, Cummins (2008) claims that the framework was not intended to provide a comprehensive theory for the development of academic tasks. Instead, his purpose was to address the questions about language proficiency as a unitary construct and about reasonable expectations for the length of time required for immigrant students to achieve academic success. Indeed, the BICS/CALP distinction explains research findings such as low correlations between measures of reading scores and oral language proficiency, and conversely higher correlations between reading scores and language proficiency as measured with a greater focus on content and abstract language that relate to academics (Goldenberg and Coleman 2010).

Where does this framework lead us in thinking about the nature of academic language and how best to teach it? In a broad sense, we can agree that academic language generally is associated with complex and abstract ideas, or high cognitive demands, and often has reduced external context such as in reading academic textbooks. The framework has been extremely useful in explaining to teachers why superficially fluent language learners may still lack language skills to achieve in school and has dominated the presentation of ESL

issues to teachers, as evidenced by its frequent citation in education textbooks (e.g. Horwitz 2008; Herrera and Murry 2005; Mihai 2010; Reiss 2005).

Yet these concepts alone do not give us a deep understanding of how academic language works or exactly what it is that we should teach. Cummins has written little about the specific linguistic features of academic language, other than referring to Corson's (1997) work on academic vocabulary and Biber's (1986) study of register differences in a large corpus of spoken and written texts. Without an anchor to specific functions and features of the language used in CALP, it is limited in guiding teachers as to what specifically needs to be taught in order to help students develop the advanced language skills needed for school success.

2. Developments in the Academic Language Construct

In the last decade, the focus has shifted away from the duality of BICS/CALP to a focus on the construct of AL itself, thus retreating from some of the problematic issues in framing BICS and CALP as opposites. These problems include the recognition that social language is not inherently simple (Bailey 2007) and that social and academic language may differ not so much in the degree of context but are simply functional for different contexts of use, as schooling constructs its own discourse contexts (Schleppegrell 2001, 2004). Furthermore, framing ''basic interpersonal conversational skills'' as opposite of academic language ignores the extensive social interaction in the school setting as well as other social contexts where AL is used. Conversation itself can be the conduit for highly academic thinking, as demonstrated by Zwiers and Crawford (2011). While it is difficult to precisely define the opposite of academic language, the term ''everyday language'' (e.g. Gibbons 2009; Snow and Ucelli 2009) avoids some of the problems of the BICS label.

As we focus in on the academic language concept, we see complexity beyond the continua of context and cognitive challenge. Anstrom et al. (2010 4–5) point out that academic English varies across content areas, modalities, and grade levels in school. Typically, definitions of AL refer to the context of use, as in saying that academic language is the language of school, or the type of register used in books and academic assignments and tests, and is necessary for academic achievement. Yet as Irujo (2009) points out, it is simply circular reasoning to define AL as the language of school because we use it in school. To specify what we are trying to teach, it helps to examine its linguistic features.

2.1. ACADEMIC VOCABULARY

The linguistic feature that stands out immediately is the vocabulary of academic language, often described as comparatively large, precise, and formal (e.g. Freeman and Freeman 2008; Snow and Ucelli 2009). The technical vocabulary of academic subjects, such as *pollination*, *equation*, or *constitution* readily comes to mind, but studies point to a broader view. Corson (1997) identifies a pattern of distribution whereby English words derived from Graeco-Latin origins tend to be associated with academic contexts, while words with Anglo-Saxon origins tend to be used more in everyday contexts. These patterns go beyond the subject-specific words to include general purpose academic words such as *comprehend* or *signify*. Coxhead (2000) employed corpus analysis to develop the Academic Word List (AWL), consisting of words that are used across subject areas in academic and similar contexts. While the utility of a general vocabulary has been questioned by Hyland and Tse (2007) and the application of the AWL to primary and secondary education is limited by the fact that it was drawn from post-secondary sources, this corpus analysis

demonstrates that academic language contains a general vocabulary that is distinct from everyday language *and* goes beyond the technical subject area terms.

Some authors divide academic vocabulary into different categories. For example, Scarcella (2003) uses three categories: general words used in both academic and non-academic settings, such as *already*; technical words specific to disciplines, such as *fulcrum*; and non-technical words used across academic fields, such as *assert*. These categories mirror the three tiers outlined by Beck et al. (2002), where Tier 1 has words that are non-academic, Tier 2 contains general academic words, and Tier 3 consists of technical, content-specific words. Dutro and Moran (2003) omit the category of everyday words to focus on the two kinds of academic vocabulary, using the metaphor of bricks (the content specific words) being held together in text by mortar words (the general academic words). Whichever terms are used, it is clear that the AL register includes a large number of non subject-specific words, which reinforces the idea of AL being a register that is broader than each subject-specific language variety.

2.2. OTHER LINGUISTIC FEATURES OF ACADEMIC LANGUAGE

While vocabulary is more readily associated with AL, a number of other linguistic features have been identified. Scarcella's (2003) conceptual framework for AL draws on the linguistic approach of detailing AL features at different levels, from the basic level of phonology to lexical, grammatical, sociolinguistic, and discourse levels. (See Scarcella's explanation on Doing What Works). Dutro and Moran (2003) expand the CALP concept to consist of functions (e.g. explain, infer, analyze), forms (e.g. text structure, grammar, and vocabulary), and fluency (e.g. automaticity and appropriateness). (figure 2) Snow and Ucelli (2009 122) frame the AL challenges of choosing specific vocabulary and grammatical features within the broader context of representing the message as well as positioning

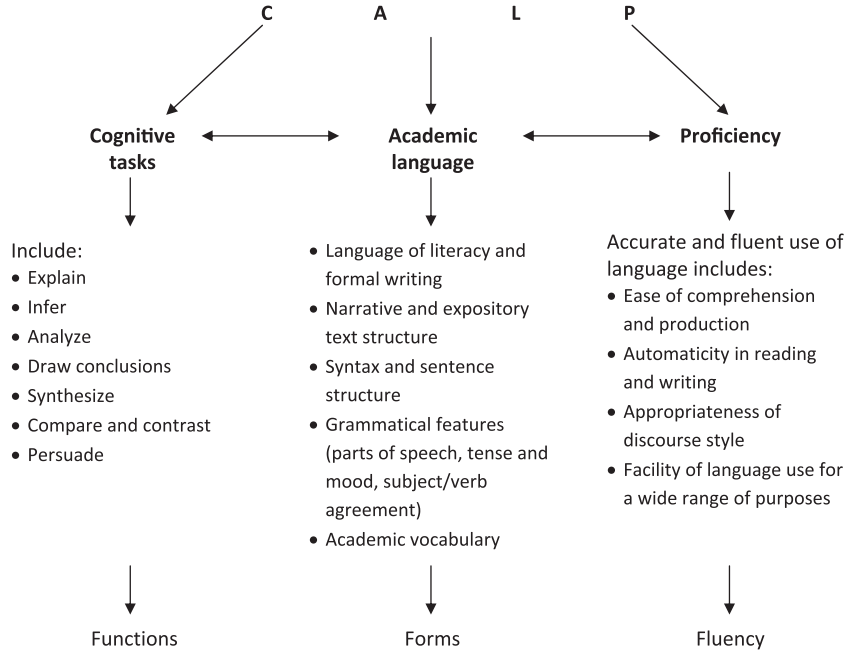

Fig 2. Dutro and Moran's (2003) conceptual model from CALP to functions, forms, and fluency.

the self and the audience. They cite the need to attend to ways of organizing discourse as well as selecting the genre and presenting one's self in ways that are expected in academic contexts, as in displaying knowledge and using a detached, precise, and authoritative style (See also Zwiers 2008). The common theme across these models is that academic language is a register that is used to perform distinct academic language functions, draws on lexical and syntactic resources that are less common in everyday language, is realized in a variety of text structures and genres in different disciplines, and conveys messages about interpersonal aspects of academic interaction.

These qualities of precision, detachment and authority may be related to what Cummins labeled as being context-reduced, but they reflect a particular type of context. To understand how language becomes precise, detached or dense, it is useful to draw on the systemic functional linguistic (SFL) theory developed by Halliday (1994). SFL theory insists that grammatical features of a register are not arbitrary choices but are motivated by the context demands, which can be described in terms of field (subject matter or topic), tenor (interpersonal roles and relationships), and mode (the type of text, ranging from ''most spoken'' to ''most written''). Each of these factors influences the choices of linguistic features. (figure 3) Schleppegrell (2001 438) lists the following linguistic features of the register of school: lexical choices that are specific, dense, and technical; elaborate noun phrases using modifiers, relative clauses, and prepositional phrases; subjects that are expressed lexically rather than as pronouns; sentences marked syntactically rather than with intonation; mainly declarative sentences; embedded clauses; specific conjunctions; and a hierarchical text organization. These specific linguistic features create the qualities of precision, detachment, and density that fit the context of academic tasks.

The linguistic features of nominalization and long noun phrases illustrate how some of these forms add to precision and density. Nominalization takes an action which is normally expressed through a whole clause with a subject and an action verb (e.g. *destroy*)

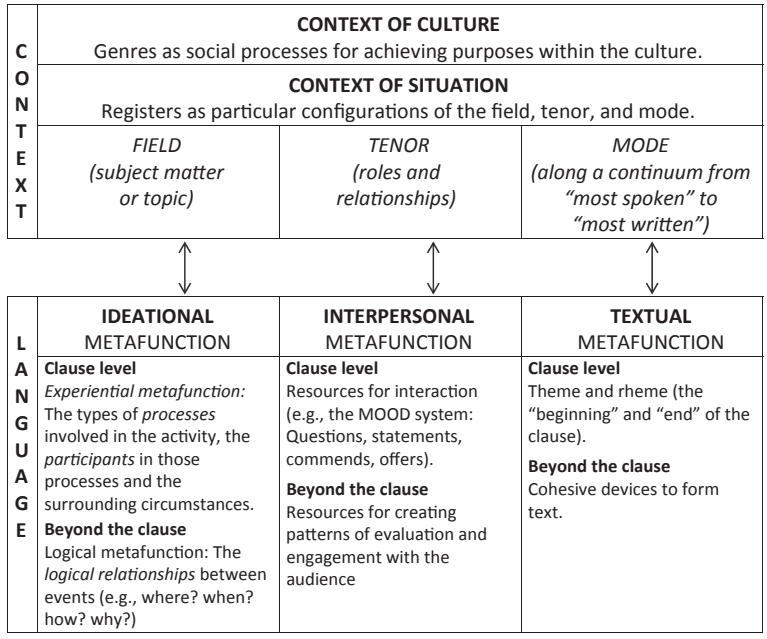

Fig 3. SFL framework for register (Christie and Derewianka 2008:7).

and transforms the construct into a single noun that conveys the action as an abstract concept without stating the agent (e.g. *destruction*). This linguistic process allows for the expression of abstract ideas in a smaller number of words than might otherwise be required, thus creating lexical density. It also allows users to focus on abstract ideas rather than on people and events (Gibbons 2009) or to condense what has already been written to create a chain of reasoning and further develop a piece of writing (Fang et al. 2006). Long noun phrases are formed through the use of modifying words added before or after the noun, such as adjectives, adverbs, -ed/ing participles, prepositional phrases, and relative clauses, as in the noun phrase "a natural, non-living solid with a definite chemical structure" or "a pattern that forms small crystals" (Fang, Schleppegrell and Cox 259). These are powerful linguistic resources for expressing abstract ideas, but the resulting density means that readers of academic texts need to process a lot of information per clause, thus contributing to the cognitive challenge of academic language.

2.3. VARIATION WITHIN ACADEMIC LANGUAGE

Beyond the general view of academic language as a register, many characteristics of particular genres and subject-specific registers have been identified. Genres of school include recounts, narratives, procedures, reports, accounts, explanations, and exposition (Gibbons 2009; Schleppegrell 2004). These genres, or ways of organizing information for various academic purposes, may be interwoven into particular school tasks such as sharing information in a show-and-tell format or writing a research paper. Subject areas use differing genres, and also have characteristics that flow from the functions that are emphasized in the specific discipline. For example, (Martin 1991; 1993) found that science textbooks tended to provide explanations, using the functions define, classify, and exemplify, whereas history texts provide exposition, using nominalization to create abstractions rather than new taxonomies.

In a quantitative study of academic subject registers in 5th grade textbooks, Butler et al. (2004) enumerated distinct features of the academic language in science, social studies and mathematics. They found description to be a common organizing pattern across the three subjects, but there were differences such as that mathematics textbooks also made heavy use of the scenario genre in word problems. Explanation and sequencing were found in science and social studies, though not in mathematics, and the science texts used a more straightforward expository style while the social studies texts used a more narrative style. In their quantitative linguistic analysis, they found similarities across subjects on the use of complex and simple sentences, but there were differences in the distribution of the passive voice, with little use of it mathematics, some in social studies, and most in science.

Overall, studies of particular content areas reveal sub-registers of academic language that vary in purposes and in the distribution of particular types of grammatical forms, vocabulary, and text structures. For example, Louwerse et al. (2008) found particularly frequent use of conditional sentences in physics, although conditionals are also widely used in other subjects as well as in less academic contexts, including personal letters. Other studies of subject areas show associations with certain features of language, while still drawing on some common linguistic features. (See e.g. Christie 2002 and Davison 2005 for language arts; Irujo 2007; Moschkovich 2002 and Schleppegrell 2007 for mathematics; Achugar and Schleppegrell 2005; Bunch 2009 and Short 1997 for social studies, and Lemke 1990; Merino & Scarcella 2005 and Snow 2008 on science). Other studies of particular subject areas have examined the teaching of academic language, which is the topic we turn to next.

3. Teaching Academic Language to English Learners

3.1. HOW LONG DOES IT TAKE TO LEARN AL?

Coming back to the original problem that led Cummins to posit the existence of a separate academic language proficiency, we still need to address questions about the length of time required for acquisition of AL and optimal approaches of supporting AL development. Research over the years suggests that academic language takes from 4–7 or 5–7 years to develop (see e.g. Collier 1987, 1989; Collier & Thomas 1989; Cummins 1981; Herrera and Murry 2005; Hakuta et al. 2000). This delay in itself raises issues for assuring access to academic content during the years before students acquire this proficiency. Even more worrisome is the phenomenon of long term ELs, or students who may start primary school as ELs and still be considered intermediate level or below after seven or more years in English medium schools (Calderon & Minaya-Rowe 2011; Olsen 2010).

Yet such long delays are not an inevitable result of AL complexity. Roessingh et al. (2005) found that variables such as age on arrival and L1 proficiency level contribute to the time it takes to acquire AL, but quality ESL programming, administrative support, teacher expertise, and collaborative working relationships play important roles. Indeed, the 5–7 year time frame may actually serve as an excuse for some to withhold rigorous instruction from ELs (Calderon & Minaya-Rowe 2011 141) or to take a laissez-faire attitude that exposing ELs to AL in the classroom is sufficient. Yet Goldenberg and Coleman (2010 71–72) argue:

> A language-rich school environment is certainly desirable but we suspect not enough to accelerate English language development adequately. Instead, educators probably must be more directive, structuring explicit language learning opportunities to develop vocabulary, syntax, and other aspects of how the English language functions, combined with ample opportunities (at school and home) for practice and meaningful use of the language.

Another factor that has not received adequate attention is the differing needs of ELs as they move from beginning to intermediate and advanced levels of proficiency (Aguirre-Munoz et al. 2008), and it seems likely that one factor leading to long-term ELs is a lack of focused AL instruction to move students beyond intermediate level. Clearly, we need to identify more promising pedagogy than what many ELs are currently receiving.

3.2. TEACHING APPROACHES FOCUSED ON QUADRANT B

Drawing on Cummins' concept of quadrant B, some approaches to teaching ELs focus on providing instruction pairing high cognitive challenge with high contextual support through the use of visuals, face-to-face interaction, and the activation of background knowledge. The use of general strategies for scaffolding academic content, such as graphic organizers, comprehensible input, background knowledge, and cognitive and metacognitive strategies has been described as ways of teaching AL (e.g. Bowers et al. 2010). Similarly, the widely used Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol approach (SIOP) (Echevarria and Graves 1998; Echeverria et al. 2008) emphasizes the goal of making academic content comprehensible through contextualization, as in building background knowledge, using hands-on activities, increasing interaction, and providing practice. Inherent in this approach is an assumption that content instruction that targets academic language tasks and functions will support AL development.

In addition to providing contextualized support with academic content, SIOP also promotes the teaching of academic language by requiring teachers to develop and display language objectives along with content objectives. However, the language objectives in SIOP models remain largely at the general level of academic language tasks and functions (i.e. read, predict, discuss) while not consistently addressing specific linguistic features[4]. When SIOP language objectives do address specific linguistic features, it is often through targeting content-specific vocabulary or discourse connectors they cite as signal words, such as *also, however*, or *on the other hand*.[5] While this vocabulary may be useful, language functions are often expressed through less overt lexical choices than the typical signal words or connectors (Achugar and Schleppegrell 2005) and some language functions are not easily expressed in single words or phrases (Kidd 1996). A broader and deeper understanding of AL features could enhance language objectives.

3.3. EXPLICIT TEACHING OF ACADEMIC LANGUAGE

A reliance on the Quadrant B, or sheltered content, approach may overemphasize the scaffolding of academic content while neglecting the development of AL proficiency. Zwiers (2007) observed classrooms in which the overuse of context such as visuals seemed to actually suppress the development of academic language, as students could answer non-verbally rather than by using academic language. Zwiers (2007, 2008) warns against linguistic enabling, as in allowing students to respond with non-academic language, not providing needed feedback, or directing only fact-based questions to English learners rather than challenging them to use higher order thinking skills. Similarly, Kinsella (1997) points out that excessive scaffolding to make academic content comprehensible has led to a counterproductive development of passivity in English learners.

A more explicit approach to academic language instruction would correct this overdependence on scaffolding as the route to academic language development. Cummins (2000a, 2000b) himself added to his quadrant framework by calling for instruction with a focus on meaning, language, and use, including more conscious development of critical language awareness. Bunch et al. (2001) include an explicit focus on academic language development as a condition for effective learning in sheltered content classrooms, and various recommendations for teacher preparation call for explicit attention to AL forms and genres (e.g. Aguirre-Munoz et al. 2008; Bunch 2010).

What would this more explicit focus on AL look like? A number of authors have elaborated on specific approaches to targeting AL beyond the general level of scaffolding and using AL functions. In the area of developing academic vocabulary, deliberate planning for repeated exposure to and practice of general academic words can lead to effective instruction (See Snow on Word Generation – Developing Academic Language). Empirical data (Carlo et al. 2005) support a sustained program of direct vocabulary instruction and strategy instruction. Although teachers often focus solely on salient content-specific vocabulary, optimal instruction should target high use academic words that transcend subject areas (Feldman and Kinsella 2005).

Moving vocabulary instruction beyond the sporadic teaching of obvious content-specific terms to a more deliberate focus on the larger category of general academic terms is an important part of explicit AL instruction. However, there is also a need to move beyond vocabulary to address other linguistic forms. In a case study of a high school sheltered science class, Bruna et al. (2007) found that a teacher's narrow focus on vocabulary as her concept of teaching academic language limited her language teaching to dis-

crete lexical items and omitted instruction on the semantic relationships that are expressed through grammar. They warn:

> Vocabulary-based approaches to academic language instruction, therefore, albeit against best intentions, are likely to continue to withhold from EL students the very linguistic input and output they need in order to acquire the language of science. In narrowing the range of attention that teachers of ELs place on the linguistic demands of science, vocabulary-based approaches may also substantively compromise cognitive development. (Bruna et al. 2007 51)

Focused AL instruction thus needs to embrace not only vocabulary but the use of all features of AL in oral and written discourse, with attention to the cognitive purposes of these features. Zwiers (2008) recommends that teachers cultivate academic language acquisition through explicit modeling, as in drawing attention to AL through teacher think alouds, and through developing habits of communication such as using provocative statements to elicit discussions, repeating and rephrasing student responses, having students paraphrase their own thoughts, using comments to enrich classroom talk, and building metalinguistic awareness through discussions about thinking and language.

Drawing on the SFL approach, Fang et al. (2006) propose explicit teaching of how academic language works through unpacking, displaying, and discussing language structures and the functions they serve. Fang (2008) provides examples of what this might include, such as exercises that involve students in deconstructing and expanding noun phrases, doing sentence completions that require nominalization, transforming sentences, and identifying relations among clauses. Derewianka (1990) provides descriptions of academic genres and illustrates ways to explicitly teach them in elementary school. Applying the SFL theory to analyze history texts, teachers have learned to guide students to understand the ways that linguistic options such as text organization, choice of verbs, and connecting words lead to the construction of meaning (Schleppegrell et al. 2004; Schleppegrell and de Oliveira 2006).

Explicit instruction on language and genre features can take place in meaningful contexts and in ways that guide students from their everyday registers to academic registers through a teaching-learning cycle (Derewianka 1990; Feez 2002; Gibbons 2009; Rothery 1996, figure 4). In this cycle, the teacher starts by helping students build knowledge of the topic, then models the genre and engages students in deconstructing texts, engages students in jointly constructing text, and finally releases students to independent writing. Studies of

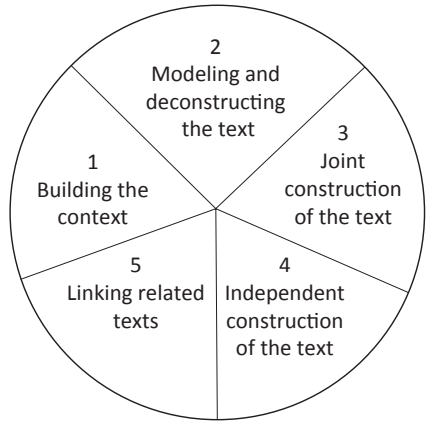

Fig 4. The teaching-learning cycle (Feez 2002:65, from Feez and Joyce 1998).

science classes using this type of explicit modeling and attention to features of the relevant genre and linguistic forms have shown positive results in student writing (Gibbons 2003; Huang 2004; Huang and Morgan 2003; Wright 2008). Other studies show promising results in using SFL and a cyclical approach in teaching writing in language arts classes (Aguirre-Munoz et al. 2008; Brisk and Zisselsberger 2011; Gebhard et al. 2011).

While reading and writing are most commonly associated with academic language, oral language development is vital both in laying the foundation for literacy and in meeting the spoken language demands of the classroom and similar contexts. Kinsella (See lectures on http://pubs.cde.ca.gov/tcsii/video/Kinsella4Pt1.asx) demonstrates strategies to engage students in rigorous and accountable academic discussions. Similarly, Verplaetse (2008) recommends that teachers deliberately engage ELs in interaction, through strategies such as modeling expressions for beginners, responding to comments by listening rather than evaluating, and increasing student-student interaction.

Zwiers (2008) and Zwiers and Crawford (2009, 2011) promote the teaching of academic conversation as a way to build academic language and literacy skills, as well as critical thinking skills and content understandings. In particular, they advocate teaching students to use five core skills of academic conversation: elaboration and clarification, supporting ideas with examples, building on a partner's idea, paraphrasing, and synthesizing conversational points. Throughout their approach to instruction, there is a focus on linking academic language and higher order thinking.

4. Conclusion

Questions remain about the best practices to follow in teaching AL. For example, some scholars recommend front-loading, by giving lessons on the necessary academic language at the beginning of a lesson and then proceeding to the related content (e.g. Calderon and Minaya-Rowe 2011; Dutro and Moran 2003; Irujo 2009), while others recommend teaching AL after meaning has been established, or with familiar content (e.g. Gibbons 2009; Snow and Ucelli 2009). Research could offer guidelines, though it is possible that the order of presentation is less important than simply giving AL explicit attention in meaningful contexts. Gee (2008 68) notes "Indeed, it is important for teachers to call learners' attention explicitly to aspects of academic language and to the genres in which these are used, both in the midst of practices such as active inquiry and outside of them."

Given our current knowledge about the complexity of both oral and written academic language, it is time for educators to move beyond oversimplified binary distinctions to a deeper understanding of the features of AL in order to clarify the target for instruction. The BICS/CALP distinction was not intended as a comprehensive theory of language proficiency or as a tool to generate academic tasks (Cummins 2008), so a pedagogy for AL development needs to encompass broader perspectives. We also need to replace an over-reliance on sheltered content with more effective pedagogy. The long period of time required for AL to develop should be taken as a challenge rather than as an excuse for low EL achievement. Educators need to focus intensely on finding ways to help ELs and other struggling students beat the 4–7 year (or longer) barrier to developing the academic language proficiency crucial to school success.

While more research is needed to meet this challenge, we already have considerable evidence of promising approaches, such as building rich academic conversations and habits of communication that foster AL, developing greater awareness of AL features (especially drawing on SFL analyses) among both teachers and students, and scaffolding

students to notice and use language features explicitly while engaged with academic content in a teaching-learning cycle. Results of some professional development projects using these types of approaches show student gains (Gebhard 2010). It would be helpful to have research to see if the development of AL proficiency can be accelerated through these approaches. To provide that evidence as well as address the pressing challenges of educating English learners, deeper understandings of AL and promising pedagogical approaches should be more widely disseminated and put into practice.

Short Biography

Susan Ranney is a Senior Lecturer in the Program in Second Languages and Cultures Education at the University of Minnesota. Her longstanding interest in pedagogical grammar and language-content integration have led to her work in academic language development, which includes offering a graduate course on the topic, providing workshops for school districts, and conducting collaborative action research projects with teachers. She is also engaged in efforts to improve the preparation of content area teachers for working with English learners. Her perspective on content based instruction has been informed by teaching ESL through social studies content at the high school level as well as through ongoing collaborative projects. She has published articles and book chapters on her research on language-content integration and teachers' knowledge about language. She holds a Ph.D. in Curriculum and Instruction from the University of Minnesota.

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Notes

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[1] The Teacher Performance Assessment, developed in California, includes a prominent role for academic language instruction on rubrics for assessing teacher candidates' performance on videotaped instruction. See Teacher Performance Assessment Consortium | Teacher Performance Assessment Consortium (TPAC) This assessment instrument is currently being adopted by 21 states. AACTE RSS Feeds

[2] See Standards developed by TESOLPreK–12 English Language Proficiency Standards Framework and by WIDA WIDA: English Language Proficiency (ELP) Standards.

[3] Cummins (2000a 59) contrasts this with a unitary view of language proficiency held by John Oller (1979 cited in Cummins 2000a).

[4] For example, note the functions of reading and predicting but the lack of specified language to carry out the functions in this sample language objective: ''In partners, SWBAT read a narrative story and make predictions in writing about a character's motives and consequent actions'' . (Vogt et al. 2010 110)

[5] See for example this objective: ''SWBAT orally compare and contrast characters using academic vocabulary from the Compare/Contrast Signal words chart by writing sentences and displaying them in a pocket chart.'' (Vogt et al. 2010 112–113.).

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