Academic English – The Academic Lingua-Franca

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Abstract

Language is not monolithic. The use of language does and should vary in terms of phonology, grammar, lexis, level of formality, etc depending on the context and situation the language is being used. Recent developments by linguists have emphasised the importance of language varieties. Hence, the language usages which may be correct but not appropriate in certain instance. The learner should be taught to discriminate between situations and employ the target language accordingly. Academic English and social English are two separate forms of language. Academic English is more demanding and intricate than social English. An English language learner (ELL) with social English proficiency may not necessarily have the academic English proficiency. Learners who are comfortable and capable in ESL either find it difficult to use the target language in formal setting or resort to 'playground language'. The paper discusses how we need to vary language to suit particular situation, media and human relationships. It advocates due importance to be given to academic language proficiency in ESL classroom and recommends the various approaches/activities that can be implemented to teach the same.

Keywords: Academic English, Social English, English for Academic Purpose, Language Appropriacy, Second Language Learning

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1. **Introduction:**

The language learning process is a complex one. Firstly, language learning cannot happen overnight. In case of second language learning it takes the ESL learner years to acquire proficiency over the target language. Secondly, achieving both linguistic and communicative competence is a major challenge for second language learners. In order to make the language learner proficient user all the modern approaches of second language learning emphasizes on conversation skills. One of the most common fallacies regarding the acquisition of language is that once language learners are able to speak reasonably fluently, their problems in school are likely to be over. According to James Cummins this fluency merely reflects their acquisition of Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS). However, "the ability to speak a second language, especially in conversational settings, does not guarantee that a learner will be able to use the language effectively in academic settings or to acquire Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP)" said Cummins. The reality is, learning social English does not necessarily lead to academic English proficiency which is essential for their academic and professional success. Hence, after learning English for several years ELLs (English Language Learners) are seldom equipped with the target language they will need in formal setting.

2. **Social English VS Academic English**

Academic language is meta-language which every ESL learner needs to master for academic success. Academic language has been defined by using variety of terms: the language of education (Halliday, 1994); the language of school, the language of schooling, the language that reflects schooling (Schleppegrell, 2001); advanced literacy (Colombi & Schleppegrell, 2002); scientific language (Halliday & Martin, 1993); or, more specifically, academic English (Bailey, 2007; Scarcella, 2003).

ESL learners face many problems when using academic English. ELLs (English Language Learners) who speak English well in a social situation, however, are not necessarily prepared for academic tasks in the classroom. According to Halliday (2004) many students who are highly successful in informal context may struggle to communicate at school/college in instances where academic language is required. They face problems when writing essays, reports, paragraphs, applications or paraphrasing. They employ 'playground language' in formal settings. Nevertheless, academic language gets least attention in ESL classrooms. This leads to poor acquisition of academic language by ESL learners. The following are some instances of social English vs academic English which shows difference between two different varieties of English.

Social English	Academic English
What's up!	How do you do?
I am like totally busy.	I am occupied.
Just chill.	Calm down.
Keep mum	Keep Silence
I am sorry.	I apologize.

3. Academic English – A Distant Dream

Academic English Language (AEL) is the language used in the classroom, in coursebooks, and on tests. It is different from everyday spoken language in many respects, including vocabulary and structure. AEL has become accepted as the foundation for completing high school, finishing college, and then moving on to a career.

In words of Norma Mota-Altman, no one is born with the ability to use academic language; it is a second language for everyone. English language learners must be explicitly taught academic language and given consistent practice with it. It has been observed there are different timelines for learning social and academic language. Under ideal conditions, it takes the average second-language learner two years to acquire *Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills* (BICS). On the other hand, *Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency* (CALP), takes 5 to 7 years to develop to a level equal with that of native speakers. The teaching of the Academic Language component, (vocabulary, grammar, syntax, style, etc.) is intricate and requires a thorough understanding of the language demands of the content (Roseberry-McKibbin & Brice, n.d.). Many ELL students are thus in a paradoxical situation. They may exhibit conversational English that appears fluent and adequate for everyday communication. However, they still struggle with academic language proficiency. There are several reasons for poor academic language proficiency.

1. It is difficult to acquire academic language in informal setting. Hence it becomes difficult for ESL learners with minimal or no exposure to academic English outside the classroom to acquire academic English.

2. Little or almost no attention is paid to develop academic language of students. At the school level the students are taught grammar and conversational skills. However, knowledge of grammar rules and

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conversation skills does not ensure that students will be able to communicate academically at the level they are expected. Not all teachers are aware of this phenomenon. It is assumed that if the student has good conversational English, they will be able to easily handle the curriculum content. Unfortunately, this is not always the case.

3. Academic language is difficult to acquire and takes a longer time and more practice to learn.

4. Sometimes students have no awareness regarding acquiring academic English and their motivation level to learn that is low.

5. Inappropriate resources to learn academic English.

` Thus, Mastering Academic Language is a challenge for ESL learners.

4. Let us bridge the Gap – Empower ESL learners with Academic English

Learning starts when learners are actively involved in the process of learning. Academic language is more complex and certainly more difficult to learn. Moreover, a majority of ESL learners focus on conversational English. ESL learners need to put in special energy and efforts to achieve academic language proficiency (ALP). Hence, creating awareness among learners about academic language and its importance in education and professional life will be a good step, to begin with. Many English school teachers do not even know what academic English is, let alone what approaches are effective in teaching it. (Wrong Fillmore & Snow, 2000). Academic English and the problem students have in acquiring it are often ignored. (Ferris, 1995, 1997, 1999, 2002).

To equip the ESL learners with Academic language is a challenging job for teachers. It can be gradually implemented with the following steps.

**a. Conduct a Need Analysis:**

Needs analysis is an important means of conducting research before designing and evaluating lessons/materials/syllabus and it helps draw a profile of students/course in order to determine and prioritize the needs for which students require English (Richards et al, 1992). It helps the instructor to focus on skills/concepts which need to be focussed and are of importance to the learners. The ESL teacher should not make too many assumptions regarding students' proficiency they are using in teaching the content. ESL teachers should work from their analysis of what is required and develop specific lesson components to address those requirements. It helps to tailor-made the language course as per the need of the learners. However, commonly found components in academic English course are - critical and analytical reading, paraphrasing, giving a lecture or presentation, group discussion, pronunciation and intonation The writing process, Reports and theses, building arguments etc.

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b. **Scaffold Language Learning:**

"Scaffolding refers to providing contextual supports for meaning through the use of lucid language, teacher modelling, visuals and graphics, participatory learning and hands-on learning" (Ovando, Collier, & Combs, 2003, p. 345). ESL teacher has to facilitate that support. Later, "as students become more proficient, the scaffold is gradually removed" (Diaz-Rico & Weed, 2002, p. 85). Sheltered instruction and scaffolding are proven and effieicnt techniques to help address language issues. ESL teacher should present the content through non-language specific devices such as physical models, visuals and demonstrations. The teacher should break up the learning content into chunks and provide a structure with each chunk. For instance, scaffold the reading portion of the lesson content by previewing the text and discussing essential vocabulary. Three types of scaffolding have been identified as being especially effective for second language learners.

c. **Pre-teach Academic Vocabulary**

The word 'lemonade' means 'a drink made from lemon juice and water sweetened with sugar.' But most tertiary level students cannot define it. Although these basic words are important to teach English-language learners (ELLs). As a teacher we cannot directly expect students to do so. In order to incorporate academic language into ESL lessons, a good place to start is with Tier 2, high-frequency, general instruction words (such as paraphrase, summarise, predict and justify) that ESL learners require to know for completing an activity, but that are not an ESL lesson's primary learning objective.
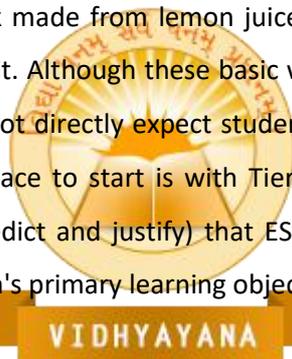
Tier 1 consists of the most basic words. These words hardly need direct instruction and typically do not have multiple meanings. Tier two consists of high-frequency words that occur across a variety of domains. Examples of tier two words are: masterpiece, fortunate, industrious, measure, and benevolent. That is, these words occur often in formal language situations such as adult conversations and literature. Thus, instead of introducing the same tier 1 words like important, easy etc., tier 2 words like cardinal, lucid etc. can be introduced to learners. These words are critical to students' successful processing of academic tasks, and to form a platform for academic language learning.

d. **Focus on Linguistic Competence:**

Linguistic means knowledge of word forms, functions, grammatical elements and discourse patterns used in academic settings (Larry Ferlazzo, 2014). Since academic language is a 'specialised language' - the language used in formal setting, a lot of emphases is laid on accuracy and appropriacy. An academic

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language instructor needs to focus on linguistic competence, i.e. grammar, sentence structure, appropriate vocabulary, accuracy etc.

5. Conclusion:

The teaching of English as a foreign language is complex. It is indeed difficult for ESL learners to acquire proficiency in second language like a native speaker. Academic language mastery is knowing and being able to use all-purpose and content-specific terminology, specialised or complex grammatical structures - all for acquiring new information and skills, interacting about a topic or imparting information to others, Mastering Academic Language is a challenge for all students. Learners who are proficient in the Academic Language for the subject areas they are taught will be much better equipped to learn new knowledge through reading and listening, and to express this knowledge and their understanding through oral discussions, writing and test-taking. Hence, the onus is on the language instructor to equip the language learner with necessary skills and knowledge of the language.

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