An Innovative Gateway to Teaching Academic Language to ESL Students: Got Words?

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Don’t we all ask our students to use academic language?
What is academic language? Can you define it?
AL is part of the language we are the native speakers of

AL means rich vocabulary

AL should be acquired by college students

AL is not teachable; students acquire it by themselves
❖ AL is a second language for everyone
❖ AL means advanced vocabulary, advanced structures, advanced thinking processes/skills
❖ AL is not to be acquired at college level but much earlier
❖ AL is both teachable and learnable
Definitions

- **Scarcella (2003)**
  “a variety or register of English used in professional books and characterized by the linguistic features associated with academic disciplines”

- **Chamot & O’Malley (1994)**
  “the language that is used by teachers and students for the purpose of acquiring new knowledge and skills . . . imparting new information, describing abstract ideas, and developing students’ conceptual understanding”

- **Halliday (1993)**
  “there is no single academic language, just as there is no single British English, but rather a number of varieties that share certain core features; academic or scientific languages are not arbitrary sets of conventions but rather grammatical resources that make scientific thought possible”
“Academic language, unlike the categories of written, formal, and expository language, has no clear opposite.

We start, then, from the assumption that language can be more or less academic – that is, furnished with fewer or more of the traits that are typical of academic language.”

(Snow & Uccelli, 2008)
Examples:
More or Less Academic
What do you think the function of school is?

What’s the purpose of school you tell me? Well first of all, school is to get your education.

So we can learn what the teachers learn so we can be ready for the 8th grade. Because if we don’t get education you can’t be what you want to be when you grow up.

Secondly to get us ready so we can make it to the 8th grade ready and prepared they don’t want to send to the 8th grade because they like us or the just feel sorry for us. No! that’s not the reason they want to prepare make sure we understand the work. When we grow up we also want to get a good job because we are the future leaders of the world. That’s we need to work with the function of the school so you show us the world should be.

(All examples from Snow & Uccelli, 2008)
What do you think the function of school is?

First, school functions to provide an education, so students can learn what the teachers know and be prepared to continue their education at higher levels. Teachers will not promote students who have not learned the material, so understanding the work is very important. Without an education, attaining one’s career goals is very difficult.

Second, getting a good job is dependent on going to school. Today’s students are the future leaders of the world. School could help them understand how the world should be.
What do you think the function of school is?

Why do we go to school? One prime goal of education is to transmit knowledge. Another is to enhance students’ capacities to earn a good living. Some would argue that schools should orient students towards a set of shared values, in order to facilitate the maintenance of a democratic state. Others contend that schools should help students develop an understanding of the perspectives of others, to promote social harmony. Still others think schools should teach students to challenge authority, reject received opinion, and think for themselves. Of course, if we accept this last version of what schools should do, then we will have to expect that the curriculum will be massively adjusted and classroom activities radically altered. Whereas thinking for themselves is something educators value, students do not always have the license to do so in the classroom.
Traits of Academic Language
Linguistic Skills of AL

1. **Stance:** impersonal, detached, and authoritative
2. **Information Load:** concise and dense
3. **Organization:** autonomous text and stepwise logical argumentation
4. **Lexical Choice:** diversity, formality, precision, and abstract and technical concepts
5. **Grammar:** compact with subordination, nominalization, and passive voice

(Snow & Uccelli, 2008)
How to Infuse Your Teaching
Step 1: Reduce Informality
Language Features Contributing to Informality

1. 2nd person pronouns (*you, your, yours*)
2. Contractions (*don’t, he’d, she’s*)
3. 2- or more word verbs (*talk about, go up, come up with, find out*)
4. 2- or more word negatives (*Not many of the…, did not show any*)
5. *There is/are* at the beginning of sentences (*There is little evidence…*)
6. Unattended *this/these* (*This can help…*)
Word Choice Contributing to Informality

Too general or vague words:

- Nouns: thing(s), stuff, people, kid(s)
- Verbs: get, put, make, look, let, say
- Adjectives: big, good, bad, nice, done
- Adverbs: very/really/so, sort of, like, lots /a lot of
Step 2: Build Academic Language
1. Stance: Impersonal, Detached, & Authoritative

Teaching Tips

• Impersonal/Detached:
  • No second person, few uses of I or we
  • Abstract nouns as agents

• Authoritative: no hedging

• Typical lesson sequence: explanation, modeling, practice, feedback

• Students practice with their own texts
1. Stance: Impersonal, Detached, & Authoritative

Shifting Registers

Academic to Social

Students translate academic text into their social register

Social to Academic

Students translate social text into the academic register

Video surfaced this week of Mariah Carey getting wheeled around Caesars Palace to her show at the Colosseum. People chalked it up to diva antics, but our sources say Mariah was a victim of what she calls "shoeicide" -- wearing shoes that are super fabulous, but murder on her feet. (TMZ.com)
A video circulated depicting Mariah Carey being transported in a wheeled device to her show in Caesars Palace’s Colosseum. The polis attributed it to the celebrity’s capricious affect, but TMZ’s reported explanation was that her selection of aesthetically designed, high-heeled footwear, thoroughly inappropriate for functionality, was the complicating factor.
2. Information Load: Concision & Density

Activities to Practice Concision & Density

- Students summarize a longer text, their own or one given to them.

- Using their own text, students rewrite it in 100 words, 50 words, 10 words, etc.

- Students return to their texts and reduce clauses to phrases.

  For example:

  Women who are elected to Congress are in the minority.
2. Information Load: Concision & Density

Targeting Wordiness Activity

1. Have students highlight or propose "cuts" that are not essential to the meaning of the sentence. Things to consider cutting:
   - Extra words such as weak qualifiers (i.e. "quite" or "very") and/or empty phrases
     Ex. The long dress was very pink.
   - Negative phrasing and/or unnecessary "to be" verbs
     Ex. He was not very lazy, making him a hard worker-->He was a hard worker.

2. Have students read each paragraph aloud to make sure all sentences still support the topic sentence.
3. Organization: Autonomous Text

What’s the Prompt? Activity

1. Students work in pairs or small groups.
2. The instructor gives each member of the group a different writing prompt.
3. Individually, the students write an introduction to a paper based on their prompt.
4. Students trade introductions.
5. After reading a peer’s introduction, students attempt to recreate the original prompt.
6. Comparisons are made to see if autonomous texts have been produced.
3. Organization: Autonomous Text

What’s the Prompt? Teaching Tips

- Precede the activity with
  - Models of well- and poorly written/not autonomous texts
  - Explanation of how the author’s choices determine autonomy
  - Discussion of how to create an autonomous text by duplicating the prompt’s idea, not its words

- Follow the activity with
  - Each group justifying an example of an autonomous text
  - Incorporation into the class culture
4. Lexical Choice: Lexical Diversity

Low-Frequency Academic Words

1. Explain the role of lexical diversity in academic language.
2. Challenge students to bring in found examples of new words.
3. Record these words and their definitions in an accessible location.
4. Discuss and record associated word forms.
5. Use them in the classroom and in student writing.
4. Lexical Choice: Formality

Fixed Expressions (aka Collocations)

• Create a class database of student-found collocations
• Raise awareness that these are often discipline based
• Online Resources
  • Pearson’s 2,469 Academic Collocations
  • 50 Useful Academic Collocations
  • TEFLtastic
  • IELTS Collocation Quizzes
5. Grammar

Grammar structures should be **compact** with:

- Nominalization
- Subordination
- Passive voice
5. Grammar: Nominalization

Nominalization: when you turn a verb or an adjective into a noun, you nominalize it.

USEFUL NOMINALIZATIONS:

1. The nominalization may be a subject that refers to a previous sentence.
   They decided to lay off 100 employees. ➔ This decision came as a surprise to most employees.

2. The nominalization names what would be the object of its verb.
   I do not understand either what she means or what he intends. ➔ I do not understand either her meaning or his intention.

3. A succinct nominalization can replace the fact that.
   The fact that I denied what he accused me of impressed the jury. ➔ My denial of his accusations impressed the jury.

4. Some nominalizations name ideas we can express only in nominalizations.
   abortion, taxation, amendment, election, revolution, freedom, death, love, hope, life
5. Grammar: Nominalization (Cont.)

Nominalizing Sentences
1. Give students verbs and adjectives and ask them to find the nouns

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Verbs/Adjectives</th>
<th>Nouns</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>expand</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>disagree</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>intend</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>careless</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>applicable</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5. Grammar: Nominalization (Cont.)

2. Ask students to create sentences with some of these nouns:
   
   Expand
   Did you see the new expansion of the library building?

3. Give them sentences and ask them to rewrite them by turning verbs and/or adjectives into nouns:

   This sentence illustrates the problem with fused sentences.
   This sentence provides an illustration of the problem with fused sentences.
5. Grammar: Subordination

Subordination Activities

• Present a passage from a textbook and discuss:
  • What kinds of subordinate clauses are used?
  • How do coordination and subordination interact?

• Options for practice:
  • Students turn pairs of simple sentences into complex sentences.
  • Students revise their texts using subordination. They can underline or highlight the new subordinate clauses.
5. Grammar: Classroom Activity

Identifying Academic Grammar

Students are given an academic passage and asked to find examples of nominalization, subordination, and passive voice constructions.

The author provides an illustration of what she considers to be unreflective and inaccurate perceptions of the role language plays in knowledge creation in order to demonstrate how valid work was done by experts in this field. Knowledge is not seen as a set of facts to be discovered but rather as a way of participating effectively in a community.
Instructor Use of AL

- Raising awareness of AL in the first weeks
- Incorporating AL into the class culture
- Addressing students through oral communication
- Providing written feedback and in class correspondence
References


Online Resources

Source for most frequent and relevant academic words, with form variations and appropriate additions: https://pearsonpte.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/AcademicCollocationList_2018.pdf

Source for 50 common phrases and appropriate contexts for them: https://www.italki.com/article/444/transform-your-academic-english-skills-with-these-50-collocations?hl=en-us

Wordpress blog featuring teaching tips and classroom materials: https://tefltastic.wordpress.com/

Source for list of academic words and their word families: https://www.ieltsbuddy.com/ielts-vocabulary.html