

# Importance in Mastery of Academic Language to Academic Student Success



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## **Importance in mastery of academic language to academic student success.**

Data Recognition Corporation recognizes the importance of evidence-based interventions and instruction to support Academic English Learners on their pathway to academic and career success, as exemplified in the Career and College Readiness Standards and state-level learning standards. To help their students succeed, educators require diagnostic information about the strengths and weaknesses of each student's skills in social and academic language.

This information provides the foundation to help teachers make advancements in their students' academic English language skills. This is important because students who are not appropriately exposed to academic English will have more difficulty benefitting from classroom instruction.

### **What is Academic English?**

In their literature review on Academic English, Andstrom, et al. (2010), noted that Academic English is "an evolving construct not agreed upon in the literature". This observation is followed by their statement that "whatever one's perspective on Academic English, there is consensus that students must be able to understand and use language in a variety of situations to be successful in school".

Following the same line of thought, DRC identified two general target language use (TLU) sub-domains. The first is School Life, which is similar to School Navigational Language (SNL) in Bailey & Heritage (2008). Examples of language use tasks include casual conversation with peers about teachers and courses, and following generic classroom instructions.

Content Learning is the second sub-domain, which is similar to Curriculum Content Language (CCL) in Bailey & Heritage (2008). Content Learning includes language knowledge and skills essential for all content areas, which is similar to Essential Academic Language (EAL) in Scarcella (2008). Content Learning also includes language knowledge and skills particular to each grade and each content area. It should be noted that required language knowledge and skills may also vary with teachers' idiosyncratic pedagogical practice.

Students are often engaged in language-use tasks that occur at a variety of academic settings. DRC suggests that these tasks be defined and described in five dimensions.

#### ***These dimensions are:***

- 1.** Context (e.g., one-on-one vs. teacher-led instruction)
- 2.** Amount and type of linguistic demand (e.g., oral vocabulary vs. extended writing)
- 3.** Types of language function (e.g., to describe vs. to summarize)
- 4.** Level of cognitive complexity as a result of the combined effect of 1, 2, and 3
- 5.** Expectations or criteria for judging student performance on the task

These dimensions serve as a foundation for DRC's development of an assessment for Academic English. It allows a comprehensive analysis of the language demand from actual learning contexts. It also allows meaningful inference of, and alignment to, language demand from content learning standards, such as the Career and College Readiness Standards.

### **Who are Academic English Learners (AELs)?**

As Scarcella (2003) pointed out, academic situations "expose learners to a range of linguistic features that learners do not normally encounter in their day-to-day interactions". In this sense, Academic English requires acquisition by all students, regardless of their home language. The rate and success of

acquisition may be affected by several factors, including not only students' general English proficiency but also their exposure to academic language at home and school.

Academic situations may become increasingly complicated as students progress in their studies. As a result, even students who are already proficient in general English may see the need for continuing their acquisition of Academic English.

To close achievement gaps, it is critical for educators to obtain an accurate picture of their students' needs. Given the demand for acquisition of Academic English, we suggest that educators adopt a broader definition of Academic English Learners to ensure these learners are identified and receive the support they need to acquire Academic English. Typically, these learners may be observed from both Limited English Proficient students, and speakers of English who have lacked exposure to Academic English, e.g., Standard English Learners.

**Relevant types of language proficiency scores could include the following:**

1. Domain scores: Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing
2. Composite scores: Overall, Comprehension, Production, Oral, and Literacy
3. Scores for each language domain used at a variety of academic settings:
  - a. Social, Intercultural and Instructional Communication
  - b. Communication related to Learning in English Language Arts, Social Studies, and History
  - c. Communication related to Learning in Mathematics, Science, and Technical Subjects

**Support All Your Learners in Their Acquisition of Academic English**

A key to supporting all your learners in their acquisition of Academic English is to understand and track their language proficiency to succeed in academic settings across all four language domains: Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing, and their communication performance within each domain at different settings, for example,

- Social, Intercultural, Instructional
- Language Arts, Social Studies, and History
- Mathematics, Science, and Technical Subjects

Measuring each of the four domains and performance across settings allows providing diagnostic information about the strengths and weaknesses of each student and student group, and will inform teachers, districts, and school systems in their strategic planning of instructions. That information provides effective and appropriate scaffolding to students from all backgrounds, who may be struggling academically due to limitations with language proficiency.

If you or your institution would like to learn more about Academic English, contact DRC.

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**References**

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