What You Say Matters: Exploring Teacher Talk in Linguistically Diverse Classrooms

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Walk past any classroom, in any school, and you will hear teacher talk. Teachers talk as they help students focus on the tasks for the day, as they guide students through lessons, and as they facilitate discussions. Teachers talk to explain, direct, question, and prompt. But who is benefiting from this teacher talk, and who is not? Is it possible that the sheer amount of teacher talk or the particular grammar or words that teachers use might be a factor in student achievement?

For many years, educational researchers have emphasized the importance of the classroom language environment in building young children’s vocabulary. However, the role of teachers’ linguistic input has not been fully explored in secondary settings. Perla B. Gámez and Nonie K. Lesaux sought to extend previous research to older students as they explored whether students of teachers who used more academic language during their classroom talk showed increases in their vocabulary and reading comprehension (“Early-Adolescents,” “Relation”). To do this, they recorded and transcribed sixth-grade ELA teachers’ classroom talk and analyzed their use of academic language. Across 14 economically and linguistically diverse schools, Gámez and Lesaux examined two specific aspects of academic language: usage of words and clauses.

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This column highlights compelling findings for English teachers who are working to meet the literacy needs of their linguistically diverse students—both Emergent Bilinguals (formerly referred to as “English language learners”) and students who speak English as their first language (L1s).

Academic Language

Academic language varies from everyday language use in several distinct ways such as which words and syntactic structures are used (Schleppegrell). Academic language is characterized by a higher proportion of nouns, morphologically complex words, and words that are not typically used outside of academic contexts. These features result in language that is more information dense and more abstract than everyday language (Nagy and Townsend).

Research confirms that language and vocabulary knowledge play a critical role in reading comprehension (Biemiller; Nagy and Scott). In particular, as students progress into secondary settings, the texts they encounter contain greater proportions of academic language (Nagy and Anderson). Accordingly, instruction that boosts students’ facility with academic language is essential to academic success (Scarcella; Snow).

Words

One reason that academic language poses challenges is that it is composed of words that are less likely to be used in everyday conversation. For example, rare words such as metonymy and archipelago are related...
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to specific disciplinary knowledge in literature and geology. William E. Nagy and Dianna Townsend also point out that academic language uses lower-frequency synonyms such as dine instead of eat and exist instead of be (93). Additionally, academic words such as analysis and derived are used across content areas (Coxhead 231–32). To gauge teachers’ use of these words in these studies, high frequency words were eliminated from the teachers’ transcripts. Then, the number of rare words each teacher used was calculated.

Sentence Structure

Academic language contains clauses that differ from everyday conversation (Schleppegrell). To examine use of syntax aligned with academic language, the number of multiple clauses teachers used—subordinate and dependent clauses—was calculated.

When the proportion of talk that contained rare words and clausal utterances was calculated, some teachers used more than twice as much academic language as other teachers.

What Gámez and Lesaux Learned

Teacher Talk Varies

The studies documented that teachers can differ greatly from one another in how much they talk in the classroom. Teachers also differed in their use of academic language. Specifically, when the proportion of talk that contained rare words and clausal utterances was calculated, some teachers used more than twice as much academic language as other teachers.

Interestingly, teachers’ use of academic language did not differ based on free and reduced-price lunch rates or the percentage of Emergent Bilingual students in the classroom. Additionally, teachers’ talk did not change significantly over the school year. Thus, Gámez and Lesaux suggest that instead of characteristics of the students driving the amount and type of teacher talk, perhaps teachers just have a “personal style of speaking” that they bring to the classroom (“Relation” 1327). This premise is supported by the finding that both academic and rare words were more common in teacher’s spontaneous speech than in their speech related to direct instruction.

Teachers’ Talk and Vocabulary Growth

Just hearing a teacher talk more did not result in students learning more vocabulary. However, there was a significant positive relationship between teachers’ use of more rare words and students’ academic vocabulary growth. All students, Emergent Bilinguals (EBs) and L1s, showed this pattern of growth. A different pattern emerged in relation to teachers’ use of clauses. Only L1s and EBs with higher English language proficiency levels showed statistically significant benefits from teacher talk that contained higher levels of multiple clauses. Although speech with more clauses did not negatively affect EBs with lower proficiency, it did not help them either. So while teacher talk alone might positively affect some students, these results indicate that other EBs who have lower levels of English proficiency might need additional linguistic instruction and support to further their academic vocabulary knowledge.

Teachers’ Talk and Reading Comprehension

Similar to the positive results described above, after controlling for income level and students’ previous reading comprehension level, teachers’ use of rare and academic words was significantly related to increases in students’ reading comprehension scores on two measures. This was equally true for L1s and EBs. The authors point out this finding indicates that teachers’ use of academic language in the classroom might currently be an underused resource that can support students’ reading comprehension.

What Does This Mean for Teachers?

Overall, the findings discussed above show that teacher talk matters. Specifically, what teachers say and how they say it has potential for supporting and advancing vocabulary and reading comprehension skills of learners, both L1s and EBs. Given these findings, we encourage teachers to consider the language environments in their classrooms in the following ways:

(1) Investigate: Find out more about academic language. The more you know about the characteristics of academic language, the better prepared you are to model
and teach it. Resources are listed in the sidebar. (2) **Reflect**: Given the great variation in teacher talk recorded in these studies, examine your personal style of speaking. An easy way to do this is to record yourself using your cell phone and just listen. Think about the vocabulary and syntax you use. Do you see opportunities to model aspects of academic language that can advance students’ learning?

### Resources

- **Colorín Colorado Academic Language Resource Page**  
  [www.colorincolorado.org/academic-language](http://www.colorincolorado.org/academic-language)

- **Academic Word List (Coxhead)**  
  [www.victoria.ac.nz/lals/resources/academicwordlist/](http://www.victoria.ac.nz/lals/resources/academicwordlist/)

- **Voices from the Middle**, vol. 20, no. 4, May 2013  
  Theme: Teaching the Language of School and Academics  
  [www.ncte.org/journals/vm/issues/v20-4](http://www.ncte.org/journals/vm/issues/v20-4)

### Works Cited


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