

# Defining Academic Language



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**NCELA Web Conference**



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# Attendee Polling Question 1

Do you represent a State Education Agency (SEA), Local Education Agency (LEA), Institution of Higher Education (IHE), or other?

Please enter your response (SEA, LEA, IHE, other) so we get an idea of who is with us today. Results will be displayed momentarily.

# A Letter from a University Student Requesting Exemption from UCI's ESL Requirement

Dear Mrs. Robbin

I really not need humanity 20 writing class because since time I come to United State all my friend speak language. Until now everyone understand me and I dont' need study language. I don 't know Vietnam language. I speak only English. I have no communication problem with my friend in dorm. My English teacher in high school key person to teach me. My teacher explain to me that how important the book was for the student and persuaded me read many book. I get A in English through out high school and I never take ESL. I gree that some student need class but you has not made a correct decision put me in English class. Please do not makes me lose the face. I have confident in English.



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# Letter from the Same University Student After Instruction

Hi Robin, I am apologize for having to send you this information at the last minute. I still need a letter. This letter should discuss my qualifications, skills and accomplishments. It should be written on letterhead and addressed “To Whom It May Concern” and submitted with a Recommendation Form (which I will give to you tomorrow). Please write a letter that addresses my academic achievement, seriousness of purpose, personal maturity, and whether or not I possess the skills necessary to adapt to a new environment. Also, please address my ability to think analytically, my aptitude, my overall maturity and my independence. Thank you so much Robin for doing this for me. I truly appreciate it. Let me know if you have any last minutes questions.



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# Teaching academic English learners presents unique challenges. . .

And multiple opportunities



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No time to go into details...  
In the time I have, I will comment on...

- What academic English is
- Myths concerning it





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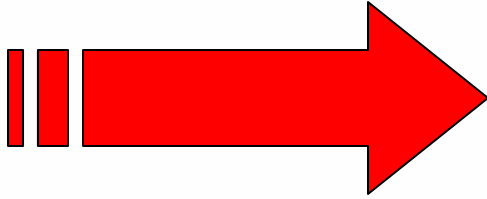
# Academic English: What is it?

The language of school

**An *essential* component of  
educating *all* students**



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# Academic English

- Is associated with academic success and student empowerment
- Brings credibility to those who have attained it





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# Academic English

✓ *Mastery of academic English is arguably the single most important determinant of academic success for individual students.*

Francis et al., Book 2, 2006, pg. 5



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Lily Wong Fillmore and Catherine Snow  
(2000) ***What Teachers Need to Know  
about Language***

ERIC Clearinghouse on Languages and  
Linguistics

<http://www.cal.org/ericcll/teachers/teachers.pdf>



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# Among other things, learners need to be able to:

Summarize texts, using linguistic cues to interpret and infer the writer's intentions and messages.

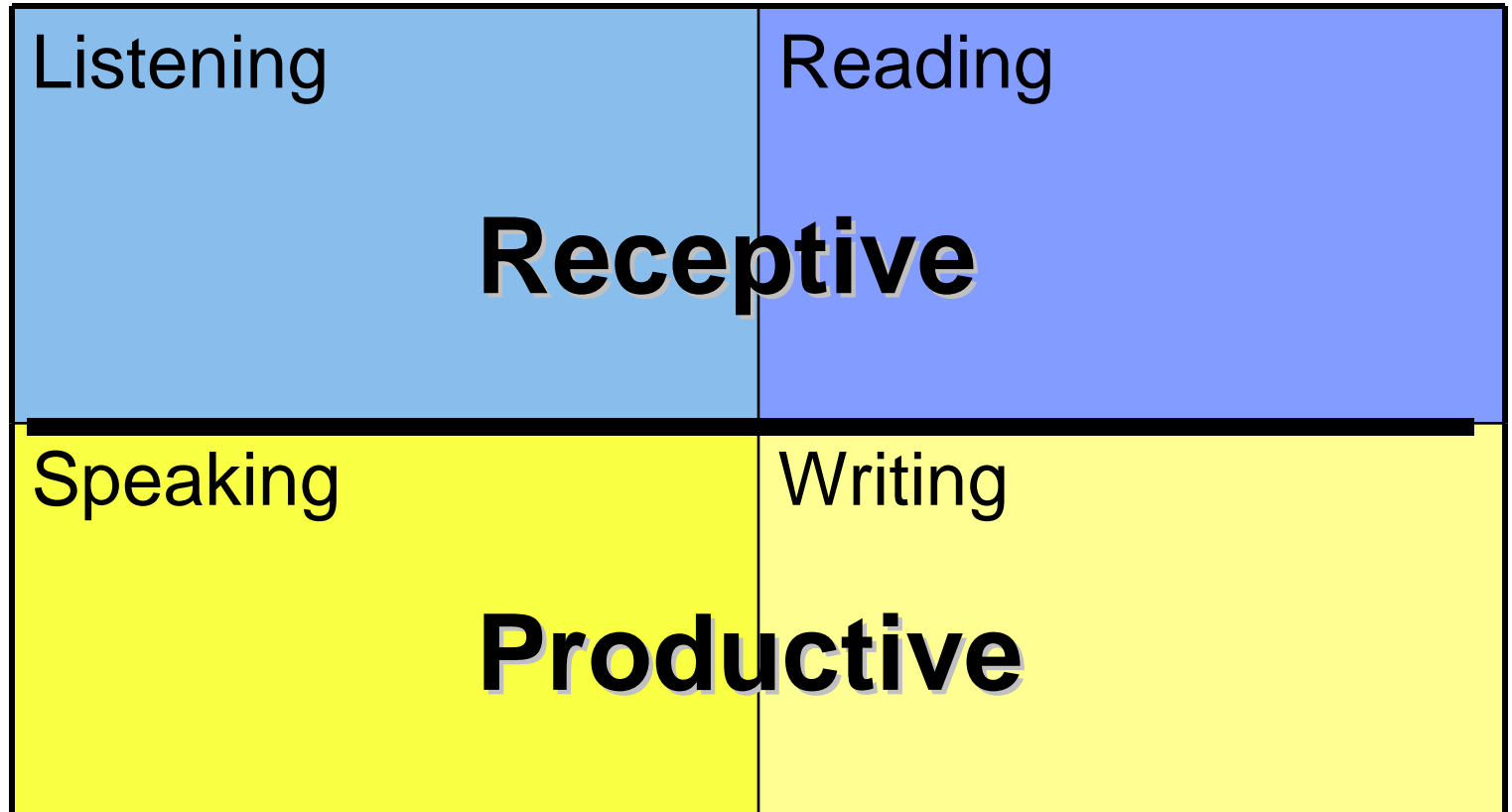
Extract meaning from texts and relate it to other ideas and information.

Evaluate evidence and arguments presented in texts and critique the logic of arguments made in them.



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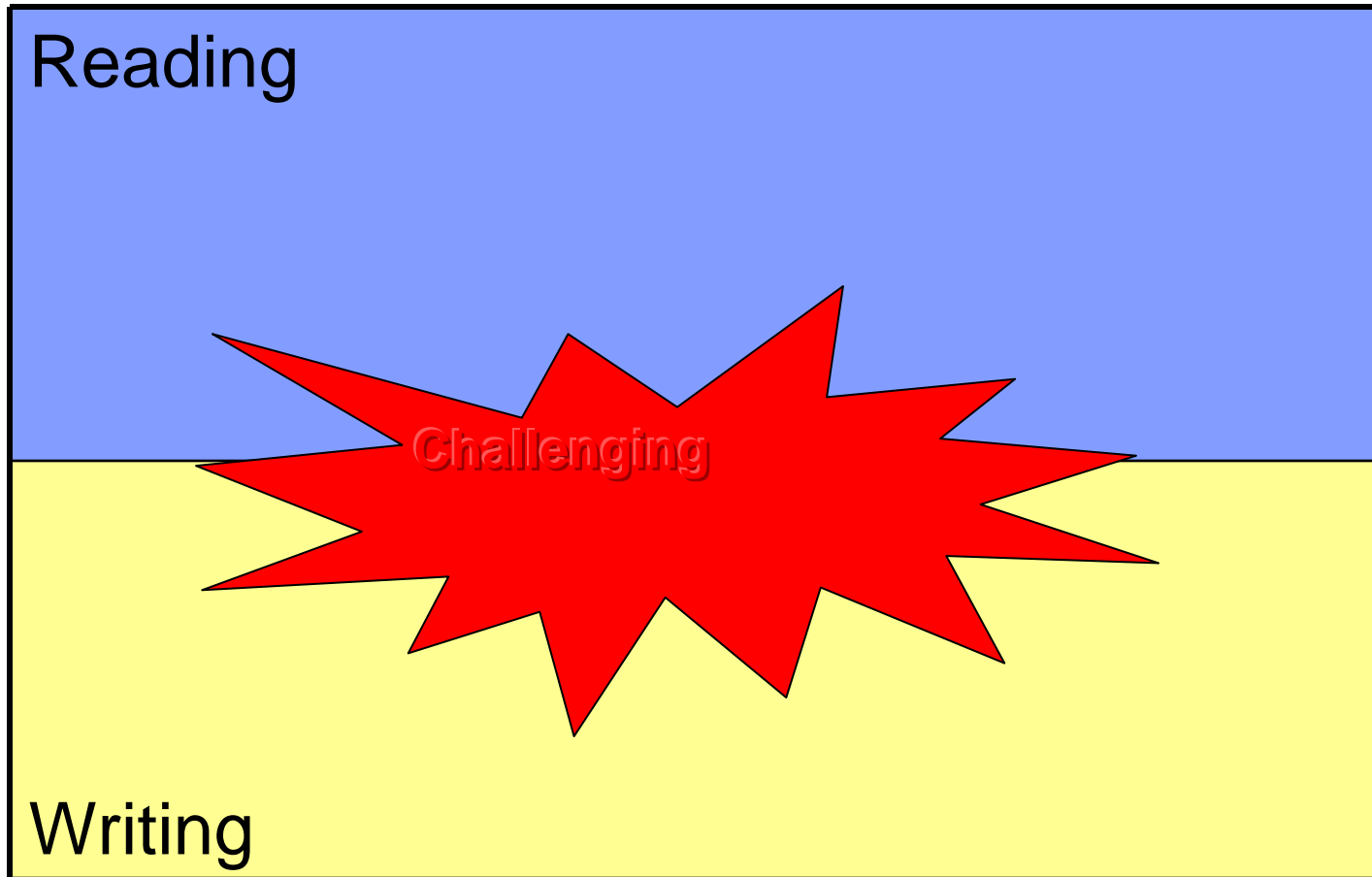
# Four Skills Areas





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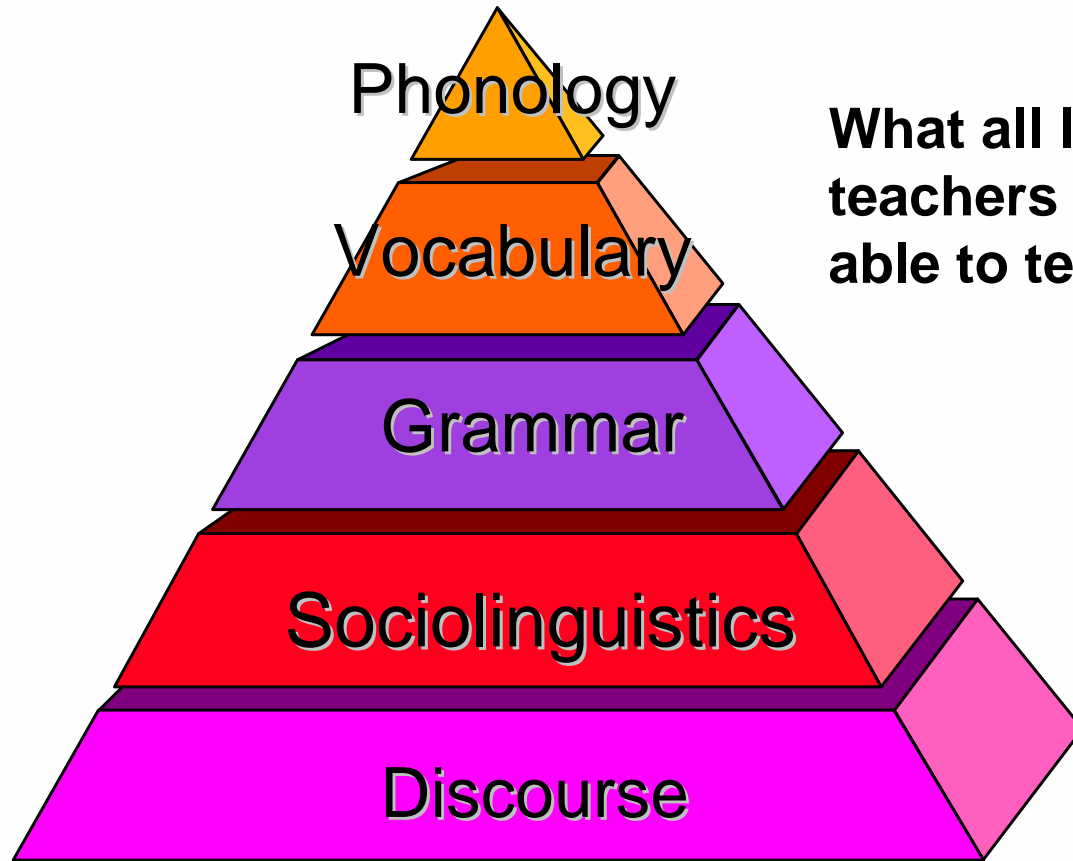
# The Most Challenging Skills





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# Linguistic Components of Academic Language



**What all language  
teachers must be  
able to teach.**

# The Phonology Component: Word Stress - A particular challenge

## **Science**

ecology - ecolOgical

biology - biolOgical

technology - technolOgical

morphology - morpholOgical

## **Math**

geometry - geomEtrical

## **Social Studies-History**

history- histOrical

anthropology - anthropolOgical

etymology - etymolOgical

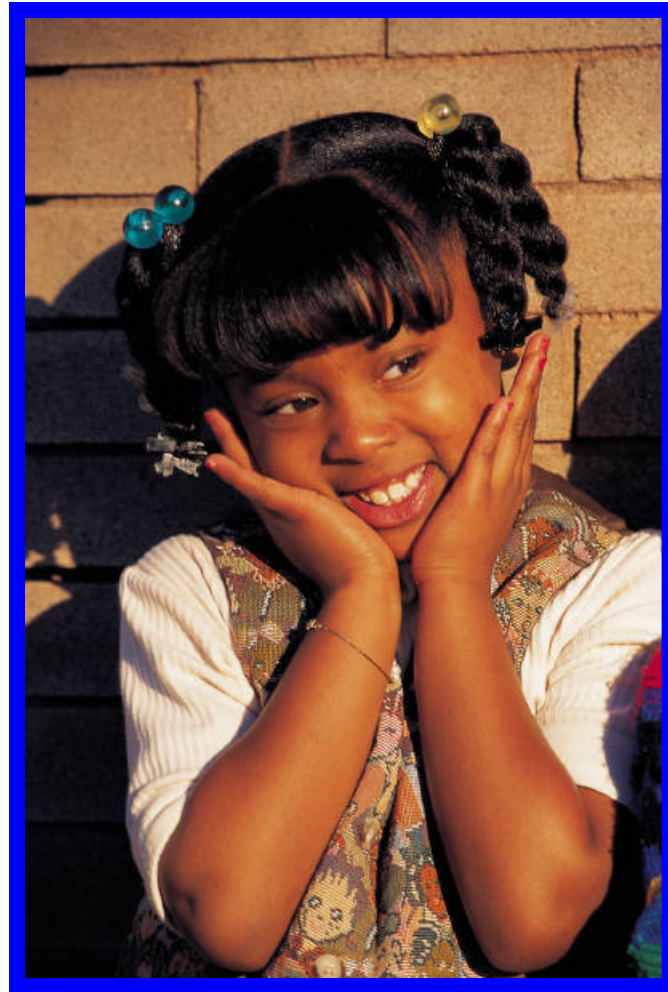


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# The Vocabulary Component







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# Words that Characterize Academic Language





# Basic, Everyday Words

- Everyday words that express relationships in time, space, quantity, direction, order, size, and age  
*hardly, scarcely, rarely, next, last, most, many, less, longer, older, younger, least, and higher.*
- Everyday words that link sentences and that express logical relationships such as: *if, because, unless, same, alike, different from, opposite of, whether, since, unless, almost, probably, exactly, not quite, always, and never.*

Source: Wong-Fillmore. L. 2004. [http://www.scoe.org/aiming\\_high/docs/AH\\_language.pdf](http://www.scoe.org/aiming_high/docs/AH_language.pdf)



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# Academic Words

**Everyday Word**

**Academic Word**

**Live**

**Survive**



# How is the use of **survive** different from the use of **live**?

My husband went to Catholic school. He says the nuns were lucky to survive.

- The nuns who taught him *lived*.
- The nuns **survived**.
- They are **survivors**.
- Their **survival** is remarkable.



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# Content-Specific Words

- Photosynthesis
  - Estimation
  - Westward Expansion
  - Industrialism
- These types of words are best introduced and taught in content instruction, though they can be **reviewed and practiced** throughout the day -- e.g., in ELD ELA, and reading instruction.



# Vocabulary Use In Specific Subjects Mathematics

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Type of Words	Examples
1. Content words pertaining to mathematics	additive, monomial, denominator
2. Everyday vocabulary that has special meanings in mathematics	square, power, odd, even, equal
3. Synonyms	add, plus, combine, sum
4. Homophones	sum/some, whole/hole
5. Near Homonyms	fourths/fours
6. Difficult (semi-fixed) Collocations/Expressions	If ... then, If and only if... , given that, . . .
7. Prepositions	divided into vs.divided by

(adapted from Mestre, J. 1988, p. 25)



# Collocations

## Fixed Expressions

## Word Phrases

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- Pairs or groups of words that co-occur with very high frequency
- Groups of words that often go together

For example:

*as discussed above*

*in contrast*

*in comparison with*



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# Noun + Preposition Combinations

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- Approval of
- Awareness of
- Belief in
- Concern for
- Grasp of
- Hatred of
- Hope for





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# Adjective + Preposition Combinations

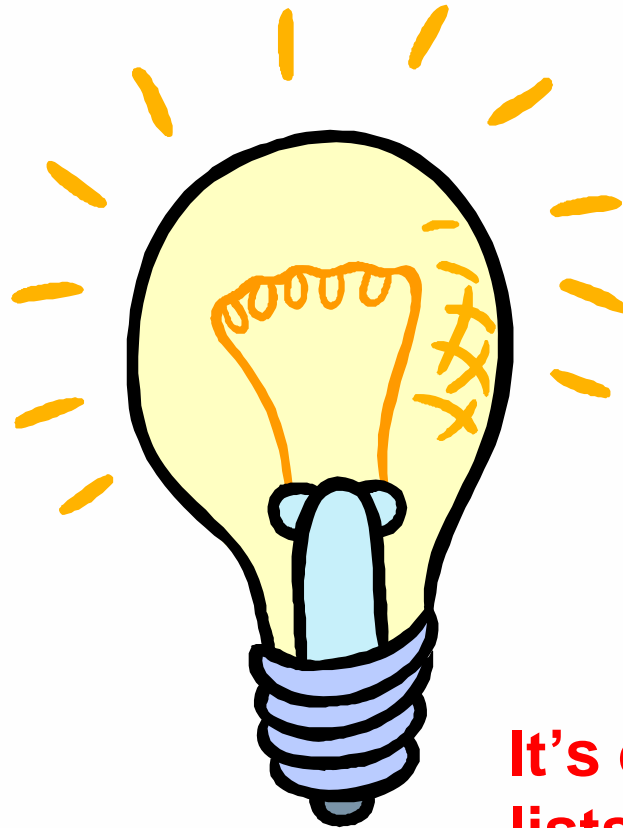
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- Capable of
- Doubtful of
- Familiar with
- Fearful of
- Frustrated by
- Interested in
- Pleased with
- Tired of



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# Academic language is not just vocabulary!



**It's especially not word  
lists!**



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# A large part of academic language: The Grammar component

- Knowledge that enables students to make sense and use grammatical features



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# Grammar

Passive Structures	<i>Five books were purchased by John.</i>
Conditional Clauses	<i>Assuming X is true, then Y</i>
Comparative Constructions	<i>If Thuy is taller than Harry, and Harry is taller than Miguel, then Thuy must be taller than Miguel.</i>



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# Questions?

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# Challenges For English Learners

Verb Tense	<i>I study language for three years.</i>
Modal Auxiliaries	<i>It might rains tomorrow.</i>
Gerunds and Infinitives	<i>She asked him help her.</i>



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# Sociolinguistics

The ability to vary language  
appropriately according to the  
addressee



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# Sociolinguistics

Knowledge of an increasingly large number of genres



# Sociolinguistics: Genres

A **genre** is a type of writing.  
Some call genres functions.



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# Genres or Types of Writing

## Math

**Source: Jacqui D'warte**

Graphs

Tables

**Proofs**

**Procedures/explanations**

Problems

Proposals

Journals

Notes/observations

## Science

**Lab Reports - Procedures/explanations**

Journals

Science Fiction

**Field notes**

Graphs

Explanations

Research

Arguments

Persuasive essays

Descriptions

**Written debates**

Letters

Editorials

**Research papers**

Data



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# Genres or Types of Writing

Source: Jacqui D'warte

## History/Social Science

**Historical descriptions** (factual, narrative)

Biographies

Posters

**Research papers**

Discussions of authors intentions and perspectives  
(critical reviews)

Formulas

Timelines

Written debates

**Persuasive essays**

Compare and contrast essays

**Arguments**

Scenarios

**Interviews**



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# Discourse

Knowledge of the ways in which language  
(oral or written) is organized

# Discourse refers to the linguistic features that make organization salient.

- I. Introduction
  - A. Grab attention
  - B. State the thesis
- II. Body
  - A. Build the points
  - B. Develop ideas
  - C. Support main claim
- III. Conclusion
  - A. Reemphasize main idea

I. II. III.

Organization



# Discourse Features



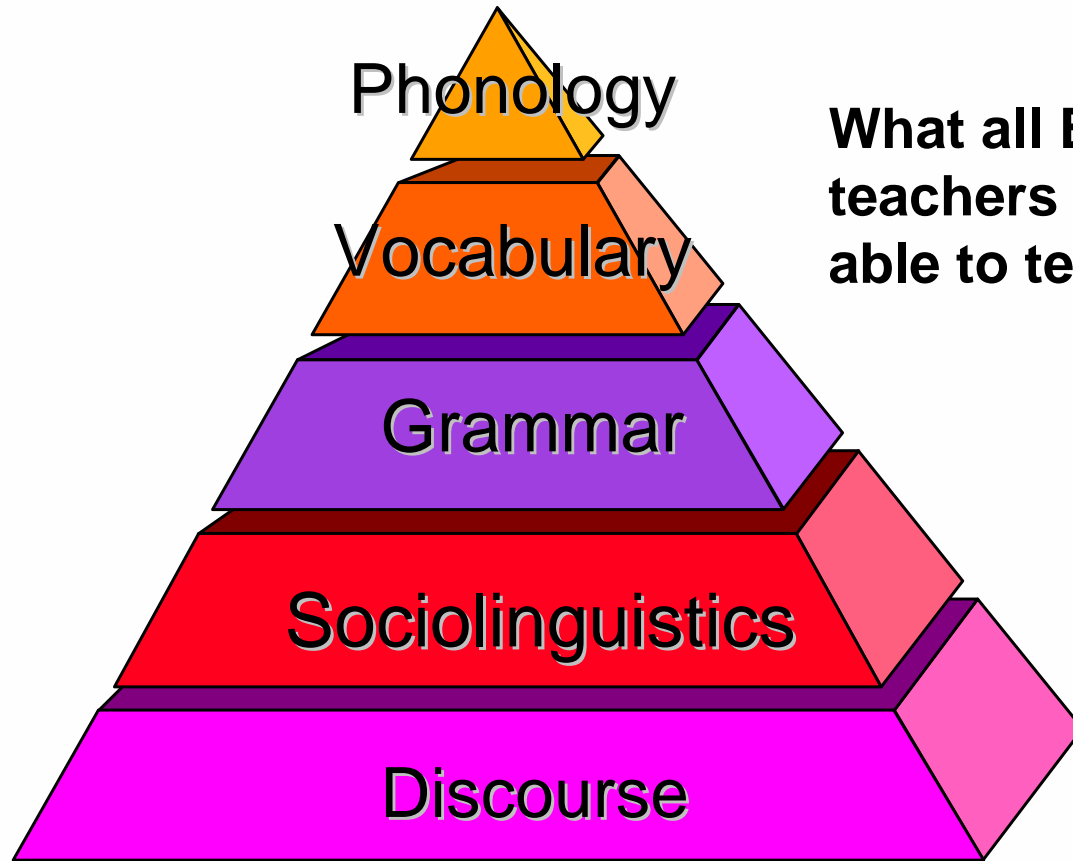
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Introductory statements	<i>This paper examines X.</i>
Transitional sentences	<i>Before discussing X, it will be useful to define Y.</i>
Linguistic ways to build on ideas (e.g., organizing words)	<i>This in turn leads to...; Another reason is that. . .</i>
Transition words that help to organize text	<i>In sum, In concluding</i>



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# Linguistic Components



**What all ELA/ELD  
teachers must be  
able to teach.**

**Why ELD standards will never be sufficient**



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# Cognitive Aspects

- Knowledge of the world
- Content-specific knowledge
- Higher order thinking
- Study skills/Learning strategies
- Metalinguistic knowledge



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# Socio-Cultural Aspects

- Cultural and social values associated with using language in specific ways in academic contexts



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**What all  
teachers  
of English learners  
must be able  
to do:**



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- |   | Helpful                             | Necessary                           |
|---|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| • Include language objectives                             | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| • Provide clear student-friendly explanations of language | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| • Model language use                                      | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| • Provide sufficient review and practice                  | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| • Provide formative assessment                            | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |



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And teachers  
must also be  
able to provide  
differentiated  
instruction!



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**One size does not fit all.**

# All English learners are not the same.

- Struggling readers
- Learners with disrupted formal educations
- Newcomers
- Learners who seem to plateau in their language development and who never acquire academic English



# What are the challenges?

- English learners and others are often misplaced!
- We underestimated the amount of support teachers and students need.
- Many of the current curricular materials have weaknesses (flimsy workbooks, not enough scaffolding, and on and on).



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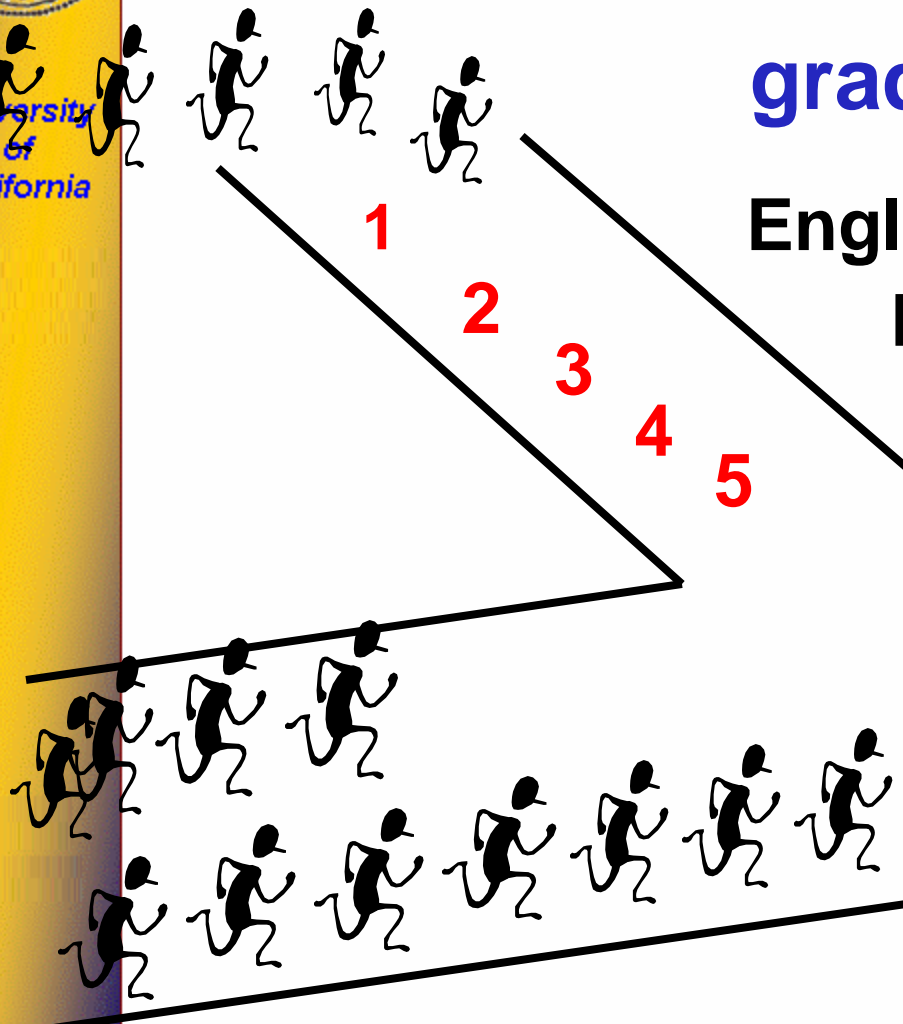


There is a lot of academic language to teach, especially in the upper grades!

English Learners

1  
2  
3  
4  
5

E L A





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**The good news: Teachers  
can work together to  
provide English learners  
with a coherent  
curriculum addressing  
state standards!**



# The critics argue:

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Using a common, coherent curriculum is just another instructional bandwagon...

...There's no scientific evidence to support it...

It won't work, because it leads to "one size fits all" instruction. . . .

It limits teachers' freedom. . . .

...too many scripted tasks. . . .

It stops teachers from using their professional judgment...

It prevents students from developing English!



# The evidence suggests:

---

When teachers lack expertise in teaching language. . .

they need a common curriculum.

When students need instructional routines. . .

they need a common curriculum.

When students frequently move from one school to the next . . .

they need a common curriculum.

When teachers lack proficiency in the language they teach. . .

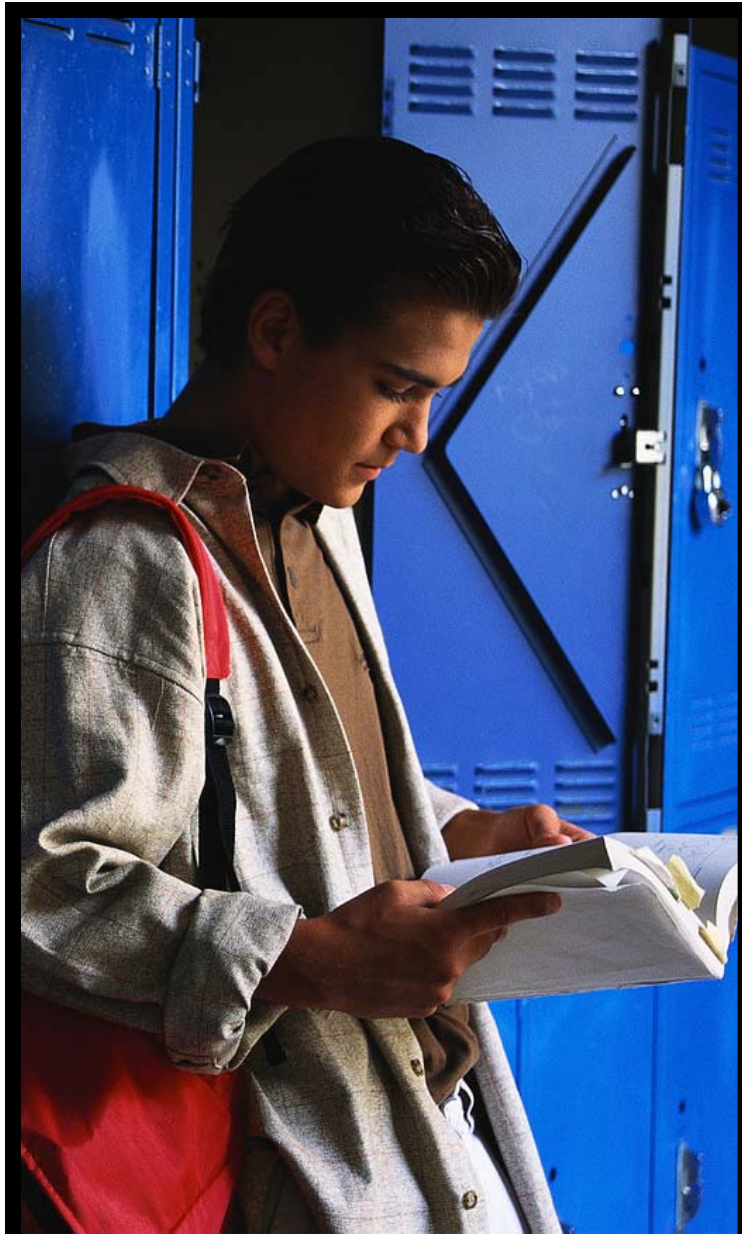
they need a common curriculum!



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# Robin Scarcella argues:

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When teachers need to teach something so difficult and so extraordinarily complex as academic language. . .

. . . English learners deserve a strong common curriculum.

**The goal of teaching is not entertainment; it's education.**



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# Attendee Polling Question 2

When do teachers need to teach students the foundations of academic English?

- In ESL class
- In English Language Arts class
- In all classes, every day



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# When do teachers need to teach students the foundation of academic language?

Each day! In all classes.



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Timing is critical if you want students to do well on important tests and succeed academically.







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# Why do students fail to acquire academic language?

- Absence of exposure to books and to people who use academic language
- Absence of opportunities to use the language
- Absence of motivation to develop and use academic language
- Absence of solid instruction including sufficient and supportive feedback



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# Questions?

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## MYTH

“English learners can learn academic language on their own.”

English learners require instructional support to learn academic language. This instructional support is best delivered in blocks of time devoted to its instruction and integrated throughout the school day.



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## MYTH

“Learning academic language is effortless and requires little work on the part of English learners.”

Don't be fooled by so-called experts who tell teachers that English learners can learn academic language quickly without much effort.



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## MYTH

“Motivation is unimportant in teaching English learners academic language.”

Students, like all others, are motivated by success. Teachers need to motivate their English learners to succeed and to keep up their efforts to learn academic language over time.



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## MYTH

**“Linguistic details are unimportant.”**

When it comes to academic language, all the English proficiency in the world is worthless if it can't be used rapidly, efficiently and accurately. Linguistic details matter. Good learners pay attention to linguistic details when reading, writing, speaking and listening. Bad ones, even those who fancy themselves as highly proficient in English, do not bother with the details or understand their importance.



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## MYTH

“Experts who know little about language can give teachers quick ways to teach academic language.”

Don't be buffaloed. Those who provide teacher professional development require a high level of knowledge of English and expertise teaching it to English learners.



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## MYTH

**“Grammatical correctness is unimportant.”**

Paradoxically, some teacher professional development groups think that grammar is not important and can be taught as quickly to English learners as it is to English learners' monolingual English-speaking peers.





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## MYTH

**“English learners only fail content assessments because they cannot assess the language on the assessments.”**

Many groups of English learners (e.g., those with advanced – and sometimes even intermediate English proficiency) do not do well on content tests because they did not receive adequate content instruction. Had they received this instruction in content courses they may have had the opportunity to acquire the academic language associated with it.



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## MYTH

**“Instructional strategies that are not tied to teaching specific language objectives count for next to nothing.”**

Strategies that do not teach specific aspects of academic language are pretty meaningless. They may possess pizzazz and may be fun and easy for teachers to use, but do they help learners develop academic language?



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## MYTH

**“The best place to teach English learners academic language is in ESL/ELD programs.”**

- English learners will have difficulty learning academic language if they are not exposed to the core curriculum.



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## MYTH

“There is no magic bullet for teaching all aspects of academic language.”

Don't chase the latest instructional fads. Stick to research-based practices. Your learners, the aspect of language you are instructing, and the situational context dictates the instructional approach required.



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# Conclusions

- To gain academic language, students need increased instruction in this variety of language.
- English learners who have a strong foundation in the basics of language and are aware of language use are best prepared to develop academic language.

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**With academic English,  
dreams can come true.**





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**[http://www.alliance.brown.edu/pubs/adlit/adell\\_litdv2.pdf](http://www.alliance.brown.edu/pubs/adlit/adell_litdv2.pdf)**

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**<http://www.all4ed.org/publications/DoubleWork/index.html>**



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# References

*Doing What Works* is a web site developed by the U.S. Department of Education. It summarizes findings vetted by IES and provides instructional implementation ideas and examples to assist teachers in the field. Currently the pilot site dealing with language Learners is ready at [http://65.103.99.76/dww\\_new/index.html](http://65.103.99.76/dww_new/index.html). You will find much of the research supporting this presentation cited on this web site.



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• ***Links to sites to share with high school students:***

- <http://e3.uci.edu/programs/esl/links.html> - This site maintained by the UCI Humanities ESL Program provides links to grammar exercises and explanations and other language resources.
- <http://e3.uci.edu/programs/esl/symbols.html> - The UCI Correction Symbols are explained here and links are provided to explanations and exercises developed by the UCI Humanities ESL Program.



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# A few questions, if time

- At what age do children need to learn academic language? Age five?
- If academic language is poorly defined, why are tests assessing it?
- Do we need to teach social language before we teach academic language?
- If children know academic language in their first language will they have an easier time learning academic language in their second?