

# Video Transcript

## Academic Language and its Connection to CCDD

Paola Ucceli: Academic language is different from everyday language. And 20 years ago, the work of (00:22 inaudible) raised awareness about the distinction between face-to-face everyday conversation where we are pointing, using intonation, gestures, many simple words and academic language or the language of school. And that work started the context of students learning a second language but gradually, we have understood its relevance for a wider population of students who are struggling with reading and writing. So we know that many students in our schools are struggling with these abilities, these advanced literacy abilities. The interesting thing is that we know many of those students actually need help with decoding, many of those students are 3 or 4 grades below in their abilities to decode the words on the page.

But we also know that for a large proportion of kids, decoding and encoding, writing and reading aloud words is not the main problem. They can actually read the words or they can spell the words but they cannot understand what they can actually read aloud. So research has pointed to language proficiency as a key area for improving the students' literacy skills. But of course, many of these students, you can see on the cafeteria, you can see on the playground and they are indistinguishable from other kids; the language sounds perfectly fluent. And so that's very confusing for teachers because we are seeing fluent speakers on the playground, on the cafeteria and yet, they are struggling in the classroom.

And what happens is the language that we use in the classroom in text, in writing, in communicating content is very different than the language that we use to play and to interact with friends. The problem has been that the skills involved in that type of language have not been precisely defined. So we know it's different, we know there is something different, we know kids are struggling because of that but what are truly the skills that are relevant to understand and be skillful in academic language have not been precisely defined by the research.

So if you ask around in education circles nowadays what is academic language, usually the response is academic vocabulary, right. And we have heard a lot about academic vocabulary and we have done lots of research on the importance of teaching explicit vocabulary words, explicit academic words. However, we also hear from teachers, you know I taught all the academic words to my students and yet they could not understand the text. So what is missing there? Our work in this project is trying to specify what academic language is beyond academic vocabulary. In a sense, we know that people who have large and rich vocabulary repertoire also use those words in complex sentences, with connecting ideas in a particular way, organizing their ideas in discourse in specific ways. So we know that vocabulary or we argue that vocabulary is a proxy for a full constellation of language skills and that we need to pay attention not only to vocabulary but to all these additional pieces that are part of advanced language skills. And this is work trying to identify what are those pieces.



What happens in language research is that research has mostly focused on the early years. So we have abundant research studies on early language development but we have very little on other lesson language development. So we have little research on other lesson language development but we have enough research to show that language development does not stop at age 5. And of course there are certain pieces like the sounds of your language or the core grammatical structures that are set by age 5, but there are plenty of additional language skills that students need to master to succeed academically in schools.

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One domain that we are calling information packing, academic language, you have to pack a lot of information. That's one of the expectations. Instead of saying things linearly and through lots of words and sentences, you are trying to pack. It's more dense than everyday language.

Jayne Ogata: So it condenses sort of concepts together, is that what we are thinking?

Paola Ucceli: Exactly. You use instead of saying the water evaporates, then you use evaporation that is referring to this full sentence through complex words and also through complex syntax, right. Instead of saying an animal that has four legs, now you are going to say a four legged animal, right. So it's really that condensation of information that we are identifying as one domain. Our second domain is what we were seeing in the text, linking ideas through explicit connectors. Many students do not know some of these connectors, right, like consequently or in contrast, and those are providing explicit guides for the reader to understand the content. And this additional piece that we have the example of just matching pronouns with the reference. Well the tyrant is referring to the king and kids have to do all those connections in text, which is also very challenging.

Jayne Ogata: And very common.

Paola Ucceli: And very common, exactly. It's part of academic language that you would refer to the same person or theme through various sentences, pronouns and--

Jayne Ogata: Descriptors.

Paola Ucceli: Exactly, exactly. Another domain we have identified is this core structure. For a reader to understand the text, it's very helpful if you can anticipate how the text is organized. In narratives, we start with a setting, we go through a sequence of events and then we have the resolution. Well many academic texts do not follow that structure. And in trying to understand how a persuasive essay is constructed, it would be very helpful for kids to understand well there is a thesis, there is an argument, a counter-argument, a rebuttal maybe and a conclusion. So that idea of how texts are organized, like having a map in access to text, is very helpful and we are considering that also.

Jayne Ogata: Both knowing what the components are but then knowing how they flow and fit together and how they might be presented, if you are a reader versus I

guess when you are writing, that's also showing that you understand that organization and you know how to organize your ideas.

Paola Ucceli: And I think that's a great question because we are truly thinking about academic language as this core set of skills that you use both in reading and in writing. You can deploy them in both modalities. Another domain that we are considering is awareness of the academic language as a register. In a sense, there are some expectations. Mary (08:16 inaudible) work states it nicely. She says, teachers in school have many expectations about the language kids are supposed to read and produce yet those expectations are never made explicit. But why? In part, we are not aware of them; we don't have a language to talk about those expectations. So we know when we see a good piece of writing or a piece of writing that is not skilled yet, identifying particularly the language pieces is not that straightforward.

So trying to make those expectations explicit is important and you can be unconsciously aware in a sense of those expectations, things for example like being precise. I mean you are expected to be very precise when you write or read and understand. So it's these additional ideas, linking ideas in a precise and clear manner, packing a lot of information in a few words, organizing the text in a certain manner are all expectations. And part of language development is learning a larger set of forms and functions that you can use more flexibly in different context. So being aware that the language of school requires certain forms will allow kids to switch.

Jayne Ogata: Like code switching.

Paola Ucceli: Exactly, exactly. And that's what we think academic language should be thought as expanding your languages, as expanding your options and your resources for expression, not replacing your home language or your ways of communicating. Truly the message here is that language is highly dependent on context and there are particular contexts that call for particular repertoires of forms and you don't need to understand how to switch the language according to context. There are two additional domains that we consider academic stance. When you are talking to someone, you can say oh let me tell you, this was so great let me tell you, right, the oral language, and kids do a lot of that in the writing. In academic writing or reading, stance is expressed very differently, right. It's more of a detached, sometimes impersonal voice like through passive voice or through very cautious statements. It might be true that, right. So, kids need to understand that way of making sense of ideas and explaining that. And finally, I think what teachers are very aware of Lexical Preciseness, using precise vocabulary to express ideas.

Source: Strategic Education Research Partnership (SERP)  
<http://ccdd.serpmedia.org/research-academic-language.php>