

Reconceptualizing the Language of Ideas: ‘A Disciplinary Perspective’

Shreeja Ghanta
Mahindra University

It is a widespread view that ‘academic language’ is the most significant dimension of language. This aspect of language is widely used for academic purposes that contrast with the conversational language spoken outside of the classrooms. The ultimate focus on the linguistic features of academic syllabi overlooks the role everyday forms of conversational language play in academic work and how learners of marginalized backgrounds are capable of using their existing linguistic resources to navigate tasks within the classrooms. The paper intends to shift the focus from academic texts to the language of ideas used to navigate in disciplinary works, such as how the ideas and content can be expressed in various ways, and the linguistic resources learners of unprivileged backgrounds use to engage in the tasks.

Keywords: academic language, language of ideas, disciplinary approach, linguistic resources, conversational language

INTRODUCTION

The language we use is shaped by people’s various cognitive abilities, such as planning, categorization, and sequential processing. The origins and capacities of language are related to its role in social interaction. It is essential to comprehend how language has evolved in the human lineage to examine the effect of interacting constraints such as the structure of thought processes, perceptual and motor biases, cognitive limitations, and socio-pragmatic factors. Although primates are known to be socially interactive, humans have emphasized the importance of this type of interaction in their development. This suggests that language evolved in a highly interactive environment. This interaction suggests that the evolution of language cannot be necessarily understood outside of a social context.

The role of language in society and culture is fundamental. It enables the exchange of knowledge and provides the central means by which people can develop and reproduce their cultural knowledge. Culture is also partly understood as a reflection of what people find interesting and important, reflecting a complex biological relationship between humans and their environment. Language is a system that consists of two levels: the higher levels of communication and joint action. It produces signals in various mediums, such as writing, speech, and sign language. The regularity of these behaviors, called utterance acts, is the basis of language. Language is composed of signals that are formulated into propositions and grammatical constructions. These signals are then used to develop a variety of actions and ideas.

Many educators believe that the language used in schools differs from that used in everyday life. This is because, for most language learners, specialized forms of language are expected before they are ready to engage in mainstream instruction. According to Cummins, the skills of second language students are more challenging than those of academic language proficiency. Scholars and teachers have used his argument in

different contexts. On the other hand, we want to understand why some classrooms are so challenging for second-language students. In addition, we also want to demonstrate that learning English is not as hard as it sounds. Some students may be expected to complete grade-level work without proper support after learning English for a short time. It is also important that English is not only used but also valued.

Various conceptual works designed to guide learning explore the divide between academic and non-academic language. In 2018, Short et al. argued that teachers should differentiate between academic and social language. In the context of academic language, teachers should consider the various features related to the language learners use in speaking and writing. Many distinctions in academic language were argued. For instance, Snow and Uccelli (2009) contrasted the writings of learners from unprivileged socio-economic societies as not meeting the standards of academic language in comparison with adult-written essays on the same topic. Their writings were considered inappropriate because there were conversational expressions. The authors argued that in an adult-written essay, the language features enhanced it to more academic noted for its lexical density, connectives, and endophoric references. Followed by readings, Phillips Galloway and Uccelli (2017) made distinctions between academic and everyday language, stating that speculations help learners read texts across disciplines that meet the criteria of core academic linguistic standards. These skills include language proficiency to comprehend linguistic features in academic texts which are infrequent in conversational language. In addition to these skills, it is essential to comprehend metalinguistic vocabulary and organize context to perceive dense prose. Academic language is bound to diverge from conversational language, leading to cross-disciplinary challenges that learners encounter in perceiving academic texts.

The paper argues that too much thrust on academic and conversational linguistic structure can be misleading. The article attributes the potential risk of reifying and emphasizing academic language as a set of formal linguistic features. The article argues in the shift in focus from the question of “What is academic language?” to “how do learners use language to navigate academic work?”. In doing so, we observe how language differs when expressing ideas versus when various kinds of audiences reflect thinking.

Most students learning English using informal communication can master social language much sooner than they would with formal methods. Although students’ mastery of social language may indicate they can acquire proficiency in academic language, those who learned English in other countries through academic reading and grammar drills are unlikely to have mastered the subject. Academic language is more challenging to learn than social language. Different skills are involved in the development of both academic and social language. For instance, while social language mainly focuses on speaking and listening, academic language requires a lot of writing and reading. Second, academic and social language development is carried out gradually, with varying elements being mastered over time.

There are a few essential conditions that must be present for second language acquisition to occur. The complex neurophysiological function of language is software that runs on the brain’s hardware. This process then influences the neurophysiological processing of input from a new language. The learner’s first language facilitates the acquisition of the first language. In other words, this process significantly influences the neurophysiological processing involved in learning a new language. The normal first language development stage indicates that the neurophysiological processes are well-equipped to handle the additional learning tasks. In addition, teachers should consider students’ experiences in learning primary languages as a strong foundation for new language learning. In addition to the way teachers present information, the kind of input learners receive helps in language acquisition. For instance, if a teacher supports a learner’s understanding of a language by providing other means of input, such as home language summaries, visual aids, and gestures, then the learner can easily access the content. Declaratory requests, reformulations, and metalinguistic signals are some of the most common types of feedback that can be given to the learner. Recreating the learner’s speech, also called elicitation of self-repair, is a productive form of feedback.

According to teachers, active learning involves developing language skills through conversations. This is because students learn how to use language in how they communicate with others. Instead of watching and overhearing speakers, students engage in conversation to establish joint attention and check their understanding. Through conversations, students can test their hypotheses about how language forms work.

They can then receive valuable feedback to improve their understanding or make changes. Language competence is not a skill that's stored in a database or abstract. It's a set of skills useful for sharing knowledge and cooperation. The accumulation of previous language uses help individuals develop their language competence. This is because the more frequent and varied opportunities students have to use language, the more complex and flexible their language abilities become. This is why effective teachers encourage students to interact frequently and provide opportunities for them to use various languages. They also encourage students to use their home languages and develop their language skills through various activities and resources. Some of these include small-group activities and pairs work. They additionally provide language models and frames so that students can learn how to use them effectively. Before interacting with others, students should take the time to formulate their responses and practice them. They should also note down the various language forms in texts. To promote writing fluency, teachers encourage students to think about their ideas and develop quick writing to stimulate their language use.

ACADEMIC LANGUAGE AND LIMITATIONS

In recent years, many educators have raised concerns about the lack of academic language skills among students. Students are more likely to struggle with challenging tasks such as reading books and writing research papers if they have no control over academic language. Early in their academic careers, students must learn about new information sources through content area texts. Unfortunately, many students do not have the necessary academic language skills to access these materials. Many of the time, students are required to carry out assessments that are based on the content's accountability standards. These assessments often use criteria that refer to academic language forms. Although it is important to identify the contexts of use and purposes of academic language, it is also important to have a comprehensive definition of the language. In 2003, Scarcella identified three dimensions of academic language that are needed for students to successfully perform their academic tasks. According to Bailey, being academically proficient means using various complex and general language structures and techniques to interact with others and learn new skills. This level of academic language can also help students develop new knowledge and skills.

Many approaches are used to describe the characteristics of academic languages, such as their acquisition and usage. This language is typically defined in terms of its non-academic counterpart, which is referred to as non-personal, non-explicit, and sometimes even street language. Language proficiency is often associated with the concept of a linguistically deficient student. The BICS/CALP model concept has been the subject of various debates. Its limitations and the need for schools to help language minority students have been highlighted. The BICS/CALP model concept has also been criticized for excluding certain language classes from the curriculum and conflating language proficiency with academic achievement.

Proponents of the concept of schooling as a place where language is a more complex and nuanced argument that the use of language in academic settings is different from that of language used elsewhere. In her book, she argues that decontextualizing language undermines literacy's cultural and cognitive foundations. Instead of focusing on the distinction between academic and other forms of language use, we should consider how students use various linguistic resources to approach their tasks. For instance, in the classroom, students may use various genres and topics of language to discuss their studies. Different approaches are available for exploring the various aspects of language practice and academic work. For English learners, this can be achieved by focusing on the second language's proficiency, rather than on acquiring specific varieties of English. One of the first steps teachers and researchers can take is to describe what students can do with academic content in English. This statement is a starting point for discussions about the curriculum and how it fits into the students' overall academic goals. It also acknowledges that they can still communicate and understand content-area meaning despite their limited ability to produce academic language. Language development aims to enable English learners to engage in content-level discussions and develop their language for academic purposes. A functional approach focuses on the unique uses of language required by specific classroom tasks. This approach usually involves identifying areas of

study where students can use their language most effectively. Different functional approaches are used to develop language. Some examples include the use of frameworks for understanding the various language functions involved in communicative activities and key practices.

Academic language is a domain-specific resource that enables academic writers to communicate with distant audiences. According to Phillips and Uccelli (2017), academic language is vital to providing high-quality instruction and academic literacy. In a paper published in 2017, Uccelli and Galloway highlight the importance of recognizing the numerous ways in which the expansion of academic language resources can support more specific expression and text comprehension. According to the two researchers, their study revealed a worrying tendency among students, who often use diverse kinds of language, to fail to recognize the value of Academic Language's capabilities in facilitating their written and oral communication. They suggest that teachers teach students that Academic Language is superior to other commonly used languages. Snow and Uccelli (2009) acknowledge the exhaustive limitations of the lists of language dimensions which are "conversational" or "academic":

The mere length of the list ... displays the problem with our current conception of academic language: dozens of traits have been identified that contrast with primary or colloquial language and that might function as markers of academic language, but it is unclear that any of them defines the phenomenon. Any of these traits might be present in casual spoken language: Is it their co-occurrence that defines some language as academic? Is it their frequency? How, if at all, do these various traits relate to one another? ... How does the list ... help us with the tasks of assessment or instruction? (Snow and Uccelli 121).

Even though the focus of academic texts is usually on the text itself, students must understand the various features of the text that make it difficult to understand in context. The problem with identifying the structural features of second language learners is that it can be easily manipulated to imply that they must have mastered the academic language to excel in academic work. Learning the meaning of language and how academic content works requires having something to discuss and write about. To learn a language, one must also deeply understand its structures and uses. According to Gee (1998), learning doesn't begin until one fully participates in the experiences that make up the language. The use of sustained content is an effort to provide English Language Learners with the experiences that make up language meaningful. Complex Instruction is a set of instructional strategies that promote equal opportunities for all students. It includes a variety of curricular and instructional techniques that are designed to provide an elevated level of instruction while addressing the needs of a wide variety of students. Researchers studied the effects of Complex Instruction in classrooms with diverse student populations. In such classrooms, students are more likely to learn if they interact with each other and are less likely to drop out if they don't.

Complex instruction classrooms are open to all students, requiring a wide variety of intellectual abilities. Students are expected to solve problems and use various resources, such as video clips, audio and videotape recordings, props, and manipulatives. Aside from reading and writing, they also have various intellectual abilities that allow them to collaborate and communicate effectively. Each task requires the students to complete a series of reports that summarize their learning. These reports help them develop their academic language skills. In developing their academic language, ELLs often benefit from interactions with their mainstream peers. These individuals can provide them with academic resources and support and serve as role models for less proficient learners. Working in groups can be challenging for students, as they may not be used to working together. This can be taught in class by helping students develop effective group-work strategies and assuming various procedural roles in the teacher's office. The second major obstacle to group work is the lack of equal participation among the members. This phenomenon occurs when people are perceived as smart and popular. The problem is that some students become too dominant in the group, leading to other students becoming withdrawn or disruptive.

According to Uccelli and Galloway (2017), the skill to use linguistic knowledge to predict how readers will interpret a given text is related to their reading comprehension. This observation could create a perception that certain people cannot read academic texts. The distinction between academic texts and non-

academic language is very important when analyzing different types of language used in schools. Despite having various levels of language proficiency, non-dominant speakers often use visual representations and gestures to make sense. This is extremely useful for them when they are recognized as intellectual workers. Linguists argue that the language of school makes cognitive arguments more complex and less concise. Yet, despite this, academic language remains widely considered the sole mode of communication for socio-economic groups. In their study, Rosa and Flores argue that language structures and styles in academic settings are not restricted to the language used for formal presentations and reports. Non-lexical elements are often used to make meaning to complex ideas. This is also beneficial for non-dominant students who carry unnoticed language resources.

SHIFT IN FOCUS

The distinction between how students use language and how they perform academic tasks has been emphasized. Not all academic work is done by individual students. This question is also relevant to measuring how students use language in class. In 1984, Wald argues that the use of language in the context of face-to-face interaction is more spontaneous than recorded usage. It is also true that many English learners may struggle in mainstream academic settings despite having acquired certain key features of academic language. The paper highlights that students need not learn all of the English they can learn to succeed in mainstream classrooms. Instead, focusing on the perceived deficiencies of English may distract them from their abilities to effectively engage in academic content. If second language learners are not allowed to participate in mainstream classrooms until their language skills are acquired, then it could lead to the ultimate irony: if we are truly supporting them, then we are preventing them from participating in the activities and experiences that they need to acquire their language. Most of the time, students who are skilled in speaking and writing academic texts often struggle with the language. This paper aims to explain the discrepancy by developing theories based on pragmatic and sociocultural theories. The differences in the opportunities to learn and improve academic language proficiency have important implications for bilingual students. This paper argues that these differences are important for academic language proficiency. For some students, these opportunities are frequent, while for others, they are rarely available. Despite the wide variety of activities students engage in, the skills they typically lack differ from those needed to successfully communicate with peers.

The article suggests alternatives in the shift of focus from academic text across disciplinary content, ideas, and practices (ii) communicative tasks that learners are called to navigate academic work (iii) various linguistic resources that learners bring which essentially do not align with academic language. The disciplinary approach entails learners engaging in tasks that enable them to be learners and thinkers. The articles are designed to center on the “characteristics of academic language” to “how do learners use language to engage in academic tasks”. Buch has explored numerous language dimensions of learners’ work in the classrooms designed to offer linguistically non-dominant learners. He researched the exchanges needed for the learners to engage in groups and entire class structures, and the intricacies associated with the discourses of a small group of learners engaging in presentations.

Some of the works consistently viewed a language’s structure as the language of social practice. Sociolinguists Lier and Walqui (2012), described the limitations in viewing the language as a form rather it ought to be viewed as inseparable from human action connected to all forms of physical, social, and symbolic, and is an “expression of agency, embodied and embedded in the environment”. Language learning is viewed as usage-based instead of grammatical structure and language is an integral part of meaning-making and ceases to be an autonomous system. Similarly, Valdes, Kibler, and Walqui (2014) contrasted cognitive theories of second language acquisition with the “social turn” and its focus as “a communicative repertoire that is apprenticed in social practice”.

LANGUAGE OF IDEAS

According to Bunch the language employed in assigned tasks varied according to the audience and purpose. Bunch viewed language of ideas as “the use of any linguistic resources students bring to bear in the engagement and completion of an academic task, no matter how far from ‘literate’ language it is”, and defines the language of the display as “the evolving oral and written texts students develop, either individually or as a group, to present to particular audiences in academic settings for particular purposes” (Bunch 74). The article casts light on how the language of ideas establishes core academic work despite being viewed as featuring conversational language. The process of the language of display involved synthesizing and explaining the learner’s thinking to an external crowd such as the instructor didn’t serve to propel the academic work. On contrary, the language of ideas featuring its conversational elements was used to engage in academic interpretations. The task of picture description steered learners’ interactive and informal language. Conversational language promotes learner-student interaction and engagement with ideas.

Consequently, the language productively facilitated learners toward academic texts. Bunch argued that both language of ideas and language of display played an essential role in the learners’ academic progress. The concept of the language of ideas and the language of display illuminates the use of language for different target groups. This discourse does not detract learners from engaging formal aspects of a language but rather views it as not the only significant approach.

Though we have come to understand the shift in focus between academic and conversational language play in engaging academic work, the role of discipline is yet to be explored to comprehend the flow of ideas in the language of ideas and the context of the audience addressed in the language of display. While examining learners’ language of ideas and displaying engagement in the task’s ideas seemed to have been overlooked. Language and literacy play a vital role in disciplinary work. It is said that ‘disciplinary practices’ consist of language and literacy practices that are conceptual and analytical. A disciplinary approach is intended for specific relevance keen on learners’ language usage in academic engagements. Literacy in this view becomes “an essential aspect of disciplinary practice, rather than a set of strategies and tools brought into the disciplines to improve reading and writing of academic texts” (Moje 99).

DISCIPLINARY APPROACH

If academic disciplines are to become more focused on the ideas and challenges of students, then language and content specialists should start to look for ways to support them. This framework is a collaborative effort between the disciplinary communities and academic content specialists. It aims to provide a variety of tools and techniques that support students in developing their inquiry arcs. Other tools can help teachers assess the effectiveness of the practices central to a particular discipline. These features can also capture the differences of how arguments are made and evaluated. An excerpt from a student work from De La Paz et al. (2017) shows how students can successfully engage in the core historical practice of connecting sources and time. The excerpt from this book shows how students can make use of the ideas they communicate. It allows us to recognize their abilities without being limited by the language used to describe them. In addition, students should also be aware of the importance of using informal and unconventional language in their studies. This can help them develop a deeper understanding of historical sources.

The first takeaway from this example is that students can still demonstrate high levels of discipline even when using language that doesn’t follow the academic language commonly used in the discipline. The importance of clarifying the distinction between the various aspects of language use is also needed. For instance, Core Academic Language Skills (CALs) were linked to academic success. Reading skills were also identified to help students read and interpret academic texts effectively. Some of these included organizing and tracking ideas, establishing metalinguistic vocabulary, and recognizing academic registers. Disciplinary reading practices involve asking students to read multiple texts. This is in contrast to the single-text models used to describe reading comprehension.

Aside from their shortcomings in reading comprehension, single-text models are also prone to misleading the public about the discipline they are designed to serve. For instance, lists of features of texts are limited to describing the various ways in which students performed well in a given text, and these features do not account for the various ways in which they utilized their background knowledge.

Conducting effective disciplinary practices involves asking students to consider reading across multiple texts. Doing so can help students develop a deeper understanding of the material. Aside from their shortcomings, single-text models can also misrepresent the discipline and engage in inaccurate notions. Also, lists of textual features are often limited to what students already know about each other and the context in which they are reading. What about the ability of students learning English as an additional language to engage in disciplinary practices that they may not be able to do in the dominant language? This question shifts the focus away from the students' talk and toward their understanding of the concepts they are learning. The question is how students are encouraged to engage in the practices and what kinds of support they should receive to build their expertise in these areas. This is not just because of the number of features in their language or the texts they read. This discipline lens serves to celebrate what students can do regarding literacy and language practice, but it also helps identify areas for improvement.

CONCLUSION

The key question for academic and research professionals is not how academic language differs from everyday language but how students can use various resources to engage in core academic practices. This approach differs from a project that aims to teach specific language features to individual students. Instead, it emphasizes the importance of learning and discipline to develop effective academic practices. Some work on academic language has tried to create various ways to address academic practice concerns. For instance, in the works of Phillips, Goldstein, and Marietta (2016), they tried to create a language that is in the larger context of advanced literacy, which includes content and skills related to critical analysis and interpretation.

These larger competencies can help keep the focus on the specific activities that students might engage in to improve their academic performance. They argued for a pragmatics-based approach, which acknowledges that all forms of communication are designed to represent the message. This approach would help identify the various challenges in producing and engaging in academic language. This approach aims to recognize that both the message and the self are represented differently in different ways while working on different types of academic tasks. We also want to make clear that students should not lose sight of the importance of developing a command of certain language structures in academic settings. A targeted and selective focus on the various structures that are relevant to certain academic practices may be helpful for students. We need to listen to students and support them in developing and communicating their ideas to effectively communicate with each other. This is also essential to developing effective ways to recognize and support students' ideas.

REFERENCES

- Biber, D., Conrad, S., Reppen, R., Byrd, P., & Helt, M. (2002). Speaking and writing in the university: A multidimensional comparison. *TESOL Quarterly*, 36(1), 9–48. doi: 10.2307/3588359
- Bunch, G.C. (2014). The language of ideas and the language of display: Reconceptualizing academic language. *Linguistically Diverse Classrooms, International Multilingual Multicultural Research Journal*, 8(1), 70–86.
- Bunch, G.C., Abram, P.L., Lotan, R.A., & Valdés, G. (2001). Beyond sheltered instruction: Rethinking conditions for academic language development. *TESOL Journal*, 10(2/3), 28–33.
- Cummins, J. (2000). *Language, power, and pedagogy: Bilingual children in the crossfire*. Clevedon, England: Multilingual Matters.
- Flores, N., & Rosa, J. (2015). Undoing appropriateness: Raciolinguistic ideologies and language diversity in education. *Harvard Educational Review*, 85(2), 149–171. doi: 10.17763/0017-8055.85.2.149
- Moje, E.B. (2008). Foregrounding the disciplines in secondary literacy teaching and learning: A call for change. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 52(2), 96–107.
- Valdés, G. (1999). Nonnative English speakers: Language bigotry in English mainstream classrooms. *ADFL Bulletin*, 31(1), 43–48.
- Valdés, G. (2000). Bilingualism and language use among Mexican Americans. In S.L. McKay, & S.-L. Wong (Eds.), *New immigrants in the United States* (pp. 99–136). New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Valdés, G. (2001). *Learning and not learning English: Latino students in American schools*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Valdés, G. (2004). Between support and marginalization: The development of academic language in linguistic minority children. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 7(2&3), 102–132.
- Valdés, G., & Geoffrion-Vinci, M. (1998). Chicano Spanish: The problem of the ‘underdeveloped’ code in bilingual repertoires. *Modern Language Journal*, 82(iv), 473–501.
- Valdés, G., Bunch, G.C., Snow, C.E., & Lee, C. (2005). Enhancing the development of students’ language(s). In L. Darling-Hammond, J. Bransford, P. LePage, K. Hammerness, & H. Duffy (Eds.), *Preparing teachers for a changing world: What teachers should learn and be able to do* (pp. 126–168). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Wald, B. (1984). A sociolinguistic perspective on Cummins’ current framework for relating language proficiency to academic achievement. In C. Rivera (Ed.), *Language proficiency and academic achievement* (pp. 55–70). Clevedon, England: Multilingual Matters.
- Wells, G. (1999). *Dialogic inquiry: Toward a sociocultural practice and theory of education*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.