Meaningful Discipline-Specific Language Instruction for Middle School Students for Whom English Is an Additional Language

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The main purpose of this chapter is to convey the many ways middle school students can make content-area concepts comprehensible to students for whom English is an additional language, by intentionally including opportunities for language and literacy development to scaffold content knowledge. At the secondary level, English language learners are likely to be in mainstream content-area classes. This trend, in addition to the advent of the Common Core State Standards that emphasize discipline-specific literacy and exposure to complex texts for all students, calls for instruction that scaffolds the academic language demands of the content being taught. The following are the points on which we expanded throughout the chapter:

- We posit a rationale for using the term students for whom English is an additional language.
- We explain the heterogeneity among secondary students for whom English is an additional language in the United States.
- We convey the importance and advantages of bringing language to the forefront of content instruction (connection to the Common Core State Standards).
We present several strategies across the four language domains (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) that are likely to enhance students’ learning across content areas, with examples of strategies in each of the four main academic subject areas (language arts, mathematics, natural and social sciences).

We provide instructional vignettes that illustrate the incorporation of language development while working to develop students’ content-area concepts.

Last, we summarize, raise some concerns, and highlight a few issues for future reflection.

**WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES A TERM MAKE?: A RATIONALE FOR USING ENGLISH AS AN ADDITIONAL LANGUAGE**

Although English language learners (ELLs) is the term most commonly used in the United States to describe students who are not native English speakers and who are in the process of developing English competencies, throughout this chapter we will adopt the term students for whom English is an additional language (EAL), which is more commonly used by scholars in the European Union (EU). EAL expresses a more holistic profile of such students, for it acknowledges that students who are learning English as a new language are developing linguistic competencies in addition to the linguistic competencies they already use in another or other languages or dialects (Rubinstein-Ávila & Johnson, 2008). Thus EAL acknowledges what learners know—not only the competencies they are in the process of developing, as was explained in the first author’s coauthored chapter in the first edition of this volume. We hope that more school districts and teachers recognize that secondary ELLs are already competent users of one or more languages or dialects and acknowledge that their existing linguistic repertoires function as resources for developing competencies in English.

Bilingualism and multilingualism are viewed as social, cultural, and economic resources across most of the globe. In fact, it is important to keep in mind that most children around the world grow up in bilingual or multilingual environments (Grosjean, 2010). Just as some children in India, especially in the southern part of the country, may be speakers of Tamil, Urdu, and Hindi before arriving to the United States, indigenous children in rural Mexico or Central America may already be bilingual in their indigenous home language in addition to Spanish, before they develop English proficiency (Rubinstein-Avila & Johnson, 2008). Therefore, in this chapter we continue to underscore that secondary students who are in the process of developing English competencies are likely to be proficient users
of at least one other language (regardless of their prior formal education levels).

HETEROGENEITY AMONG EAL SECONDARY STUDENTS

Most teachers are well aware that EALs not only come in all shapes and sizes, but that they are different in many other ways. Spanish-speaking students (referred to commonly as Hispanics or Latino/Latinas) are the largest language minority group across U.S. schools. We want to remind readers that Spanish is spoken in over 23 countries worldwide; thus Latinos/Latinas are a highly heterogeneous student population who are likely to use different varieties of Spanish. Also, speakers of the same language do not necessarily share common values, religious beliefs, political ideologies and/or immigration histories. Although officially most Latin Americans are Roman Catholics, these students may have been socialized in a variety of religious beliefs and cultural practices. It is important to keep in mind, for example, that although students from the Dominican Republic and Mexico share Spanish as a common language, they do not share the same history or ancestry, and they are unlikely to share cultural practices or immigration status and experiences (Rubinstein-Ávila & Johnson, 2008). Moreover, EAL students vary in family socioeconomic status (SES), or class, which is likely to influence the educational experiences (formal and informal) to which they have been exposed (Rubinstein-Ávila, 2003).

Also, not all secondary EALs are immigrants. Many have been born on U.S. soil but may have lived transnational lives between the United States and their parents’ countries of origin. It is important to note that although Puerto Rican students are not “immigrants” per se, they may face many of the language and adaptation challenges other immigrant students face. In fact, in some schools refugee students, from many parts of the globe (e.g., Sudan, Somalia Iraq, Syria), whose families have been granted political asylum as a result of our government’s far-reaching diplomatic and military involvement, may outnumber immigrant students.

Consequently, the range of prior educational experiences among secondary EALs may be vast—from refugee camps, rural areas, multi-grade, one-room schools taught by a teacher who has only completed the eighth grade, to exclusive, state-of-the-art, private bilingual (or multilingual) schools, where teachers may hold graduate degrees. Another common assumption to avoid is the assessment of EALs’ parental education by the current jobs they hold. Parents who may have been certified teachers, nurses, or even lawyers and doctors, in their countries of origin may be employed in the service sector in the United States because of language barriers and a lack of reciprocity of professional certification (Rubinstein-Ávila & Johnson, 2008).
The degree to which EALs have attained English proficiency ranges on a continuum from emergent to advanced. This range in competencies also necessitates a range of scaffolding to build on individual needs and strengths. The instructional scaffolds required for an emergent EAL to experience academic success across subjects will be different from the scaffolds needed for students who have already developed some of the more complex English language competencies. Furthermore, in addition to students’ levels of English language competencies, content-area teachers’ expectations need to take into account factors such as students’ prior formal schooling experiences and the academic and linguistic supports available at individual schools.

Although many students classified as ELLs can actively engage with content-area texts and participate in academic classroom discussions, some may be at the emergent stages of proficiency, and may need a (bilingual) partner and intensive language support in order to benefit fully from classroom instruction. Regardless of where they are, students need to be both supported and challenged in order to continue to grow as language and content learners. Moreover, they need to be provided ample opportunities (and modes) to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding of content-area concepts.

In addition to knowing who one’s students are and understanding their academic strengths and needs, scholars such as Gándara and Contreras (2009) and Moschkovich (2012), remind us that viewing all languages as resources for learning, and focusing on students’ academic achievement—as opposed to a narrow emphasis on English language proficiency—are two of the most important characteristics of high-quality instruction for this population.

Discipline-specific language (DSL) includes both the oral and written aspects of language that are required for secondary students to...
communicate concepts, information, and ideas particular to a discipline, be it mathematics, science, or social studies. Although the CCSS is a fait accompli, it does not provide pedagogical suggestions. Rather, they affirm that their use in the creation of state English language proficiency (ELP) standards will have “significant implications” (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010, p. 3) for instruction, primarily across secondary classrooms.

The CCSS highlight a new role for secondary teachers. As pointed out in the Common Core ELPD Booklet, up until now, the language development of EALs was the purveyor of the ESL (English as a second language) teachers. However, with the implementation of CCSS, all content-area teachers will be expected to utilize strategies in their discipline-specific classes to render the content knowledge they teach comprehensible for EALs. This puts discipline-specific language development through content knowledge at the forefront of instruction.

Discipline-specific teachers will need to be able to recognize, and make explicit to their students, the language and literacy practices that are embedded in their discipline. ESL teachers will be expected to “cultivate a deeper knowledge of the discipline-specific language and literacy practices that ELLs need in order to perform the activities germane to those disciplines” (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010, p. 4).

ADVANTAGES TO BRINGING LANGUAGE TO THE FOREFRONT OF INSTRUCTION

Emphasizing the structures of language and texts can facilitate the literacy and language development and access to complex content knowledge for EALs and, at the same time, all other students. In altering instructional routines just slightly to include explicit discussions about and practice with language, teachers can promote second language acquisition and academic literacy. Many of the content-area literacy practices that benefit the literacy development of native English speakers are also beneficial to EALs (August & Shanahan, 2010).

Integrating explicit instruction regarding text structures, word study, and comprehension strategies facilitates understanding of content while developing language and literacy skills. With the advent of the CCSS and their emphasis on disciplinary literacy, it is essential that teachers expose all students to complex texts with sufficient scaffolding to make those texts comprehensible. Highlighting vocabulary, language patterns, and text structures, in addition to incorporating reading strategies and opportunities to discuss texts and concepts, is the type of scaffolding that can result in academic success for ELLs.
THE IMPACT OF THE CCSS ON INSTRUCTION FOR EALS

Because the CCSS emphasize language practices and stress the importance of exposing all students to complex texts, in essence all single-subject, content-area teachers will be expected to know how to convey and develop content knowledge by engaging students in language practices such as saying, doing, listening, and being that facilitate the conveyance of ideas and information. We are reminded by Moschkovich (2012) that teachers who have had proven success with students from nondominant communities (including EALs/bilinguals) are highly committed to student–home communication, believe in their students’ academic potential, and reject deficit-oriented models of their students. Such teachers are likely to hold high expectations and often are agentive about modifying instruction to meet their students’ specific linguistic and academic needs.

These demands on secondary teachers are great; nevertheless, so are the many demands on EAL students. They are expected to closely read complex text, construct oral and written arguments, elaborate on ideas collaboratively, and determine key points of oral discourse or written text. All secondary students are expected to analyze both primary and secondary sources related to a topic and to incorporate that analysis into argumentative and explanatory texts, according to CCSS. This level of discipline-specific literacy is challenging for most students, and even more so for EALs.

There are many strategies that educators can utilize to help bring language to the forefront of instruction in ways that build on, without sacrificing, the learning of content. In fact, including language practices in the content areas is likely to enhance all secondary students’ learning because it provides opportunities to use the language of the discipline in multiple ways. As students receive a wider range of academic language use in their classrooms, their engagement with the content will likely be deeper and more meaningful.

In summary, all secondary teachers, not only ESL teachers, will be expected to place language at the forefront of content instruction, which means explicitly underscoring the structures of language and using strategies that promote the close and careful reading of texts. This includes the scaffolding of high-quality content-area conversations (Fisher, Frey, & Rothenberg, 2008) and incorporating opportunities for students to process their learning through oral presentations and writing.

Another example of instructional strategies that promote language in the content areas is the deconstruction of “juicy sentences” (Wong-Fillmore & Fillmore, 2012), to deepen EALs’ understanding of linguistic structures, which they are likely to encounter in their academic texts. This strategy involves emphasizing a single sentence, or focal sentences, and analyzing them both for linguistic and conceptual reasons during instruction. The authors state that the “juicy sentence” should be worthy of extended
analysis. The sentence ought to be “so complex it begs for explication, is grammatically interesting, and is focused on an important point in the passage” (p. 6). Also drawing students’ attention to the parallel structures, first and final sentences of paragraphs, the strategic uses of the dashes, and facilitating students’ understanding of authors’ arguments appear multiple times in the CCSS.

It may not seem prudent, or even seem counterintuitive, for content-area teachers to spend so much time carefully studying a single sentence or a paragraph (not at the expense of context, of course); however, being able to deconstruct and label such linguistic patterns and structures provide EALs the necessary scaffolds to access complex academic texts. Furthermore, it provides EALs the opportunity to engage with the same texts as their English-proficient peers. Thus in this sense, less (coverage) is more. Helping EALs to deconstruct small portions of challenging texts can be more linguistically and academically beneficial than having them read longer texts that have been simplified for use with EALs. Linguistic minority students need to be exposed to a range of complex texts, and need to acquire the tools to comprehend those complex texts.

**THE CLOSE READING OF CONTENT-AREA TEXTS THROUGH TEXT ANNOTATION**

Similarly, the use of text annotations can facilitate EALs’ text comprehension and bring language to the forefront of instruction. Close reading can be defined as an examination of the deep structures of a text through repeated readings (Fisher & Frey, 2012), and text annotations are a way for students to track their own thinking while reading. When used in conjunction, close reading and text annotations can help EAL students comprehend complex content-area texts. One way to join the two strategies is for the teacher to read a passage from a text to the students while they follow along and then explain to students the aspects of the text they should focus on and annotate (model) during independent reading. For example, a science teacher might have students circle the words that indicate the steps in a process, such as photosynthesis, and then have them jot down questions they have as they read or connections they make in the margins. Finally, the teacher has students work through the text again with a partner and compare their respective annotations and make collaborative meaning of the text.

In this type of instruction, students have the opportunity to read the same text three times, each with a distinctive purpose. The first oral reading by the teacher can help students make the spelling/pronunciation connections of academic vocabulary and get a sense of the content concepts. Through verbal emphasis, teachers can also indicate which words and phrases warrant attention during students’ independent annotations.
The second reading, with the inclusion of the annotating process, directs students to specific aspects of the text and provides information to teachers regarding students’ comprehension. As in the previous example, if students are to circle words and phrases that show the steps in the process of photosynthesis, teachers can easily see whether students have marked key concepts as they are circulating around the room. This provides teachers an opportunity to walk around the classroom and work with particular students who are having difficulty (not only EALs). The final reading of the text with a partner provides students, especially EALs, the opportunity to discuss the text and clarify concepts with a peer. We elaborate on this strategy further in the next section.

THE IMPORTANCE OF STUDENTS’ ORAL LANGUAGE

Several studies have shown that the majority of talk in classrooms is done by the teacher, not the students—particularly in classrooms with low-achieving students and language-minority students (Guan Eng Ho, 2005; Lingard, Hayes, & Mills, 2003). Instead, EALs need multiple and varied opportunities to engage in classroom conversations in which they produce the language of schooling and express their learning. Learning cannot be a passive endeavor for EALs; they cannot simply be recipients of written and spoken information. They need to be the speakers and the writers so they can process content concepts, improve their academic language fluency, and practice what they learn. One way to do this is through “content-area conversations” (Fisher et al., 2008). Content-area conversations are types of classroom talk that emphasize the use of academic language. When thoughtfully incorporated and appropriately scaffolded, classroom talk simultaneously fosters the active engagement of students, promotes language development, and facilitates the comprehension of content concepts.

The key to successful classroom talk is in the planning and the scaffolding. Teachers need to determine points in a lesson or unit of study that warrant the inclusion of focused student talk. Teachers also need to decide on the academic words and phrases that students should use to practice academic talk and how she/he will scaffold the conversation so that students are mandated to use those target words and phrases. The following scenario based on a sixth-grade mathematics lesson exemplifies each of these steps.

In a series of lessons focused on order of operations, the teacher has provided enough direct instruction and guided practice using the acronym PEMDAS (parentheses, exponents, multiply, divide, add, subtract) to help students remember the steps to following in solving multistep equations. The goal is to provide students an opportunity to engage in independent practice and to explain their application of PEMDAS. An instructional
strategy that can be integrated to content conversations to achieve this goal is consensus boards (Fisher et al., 2008; Harste, Short & Burke, 1996). This strategy involves dividing students into groups of four and giving them a large piece of butcher paper to place on the table in front of them. Students divide the paper (i.e., their consensus board) into four sections with an additional section in the center. Each student claims one of the four sections. The teacher provides the prompt, in this case a math problem that includes several of the operations in PEMDAS. The teacher allows students several minutes to work on the problem in their portion of the consensus board. This is an individual's time to think and should be free of conversation. Students may use their notes or other aids to help them solve the problem, and can use words, symbols, or a list of steps to notate their process in their individual squares.

In order to scaffold the conversation to ensure that students are practicing and applying academic language, the teacher should have the target words and phrases easily visible in the front of the room or on papers for the group to consult as they converse. Target words for this example could include: parentheses, exponent, product, solution. Target phrases could be written as sentence stems such as, “The first step to solve this problem is to __________ because __________.” As the students explain their individual processes, the teacher should be circulating and giving students feedback on their application of PEMDAS as well as their use of academic language. After all students have shared, the group’s goal is to reach consensus regarding the prompt or, in this case, how to solve the problem.

This type of lesson brings language to the forefront of instruction by mandating and scaffolding the use of academic language by students. Not only does the inclusion of content-area conversations promote language acquisition, but these conversations provide a time for students to process and practice content-area concepts. Furthermore, the inclusion of listening and speaking standards for all students in the CCSS provides educators an opportunity to explore how classroom talk can benefit all students, not just their EALs.

However, just as extended classroom talk and discipline-specific discourse practices need to be scaffolded, so do reading and writing need to be extended beyond the single word/sentence response. For example, we advocate that secondary teachers provide students with a topic sentence for a paragraph in their subject, and have them rely on their notes or other resources to write four or five supporting detail sentences. For longer writing assignments, such as an essay or research report, rather than assuming that students already know how to structure such an assignment, we suggest that teachers make the content of each section (or even each paragraph) explicit for the students. This is essential because different disciplines organize and present information in different ways (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008). For example, writing a lab report in biology
Students for Whom English Is an Additional Language has a distinctly different structure than a persuasive essay in history class. Being explicit about expectations regarding written assignments promotes student success—especially for those developing academic proficiencies in English—because it demystifies the process and provides a clear expectation of the product.

**AN EIGHTH-GRADE SOCIAL STUDIES INSTRUCTIONAL SCENARIO**

The scenario below exemplifies a mainstream content area classrooms instruction that scaffolds the language and literacy development that are particularly beneficial for EALs. We present readers a skeleton of four closely related lessons within a larger unit of study. This topic of the social studies unit is the American Revolution. The class is composed of 28 students, of whom nine are EALs. Five of the EALs are have been tested at the advanced English proficiency, and four tested at the low–intermediate proficiency level (their native languages are Spanish, Mandarin, and Arabic). All nine EALs receive specialized ESL (English as a second language) instruction for 2 hours a day, but are in mainstream content-area classes for the remainder of the day.

The four successive mini-lessons we present here focus on the theme of “Taxation without Representation” using four events: (1) the Stamp Act, (2) the Townshend Acts, (3) the Boston Massacre, and (4) the Boston Tea Party. Five key vocabulary terms that are part of each lesson: *patriot*, *resistance*, *protest*, *tax*, and *impose*. Through a series of instructional activities, including direct instruction, small-group work, and individual assessment, this scenario demonstrates how a social studies teacher can integrate language and literacy instruction and scaffold that integration for the various degrees of English proficiencies among the students. Note that each lesson contains both content and language objectives, describes the series of activities, provides examples of some of the materials and structures, and includes a discussion of the rationale for and intended goal of each activity.

**Lesson 1: Direct Instruction**

*Content Objective*

Students will be able to make connections among four historical events leading up to the American Revolution.

*Language Objectives*

Students will be able to:
• Complete Cloze (fill in the blanks) notes.
• Using at least two of the key vocabulary terms, describe two ways in which the historical events (from the content objective) are connected.

Activities

Asking students to share whether they, or their parents, have ever participated in a protest, or whether they remember any recent protests in the news is likely to generate some interest and establish broad background knowledge/experience on the topic. Students can be expected to take notes of a lecture-style lesson, with an accompanying PowerPoint presentation (which would incorporate key facts about each of the events, in addition to visuals and brief video clips). The five key vocabulary terms (patriot, resistance, protest, tax, and impose) are also defined in the presentation and integrated into it meaningfully and as often as they are applicable. For example, a slide titled “The Boston Massacre” contains the following facts:

- Occurred on March 5, 1770.
- A group of Boston patriots was protesting the Townshend Acts.
- British soldiers killed five colonial protestors.
- Resulted in the removal of troops from Boston.

Notice the use of bold to highlight key terms as well as the limited amount of information. The goal for the presentation is an initial familiarity with the key terms and events, not a comprehensive understanding of events and relationships. However, to supplement the basics, the slide could then be followed with a visual or a short video clip. Websites such as www.history.com and www.pbs.com are stable and provide images of primary source documents as well as a wide variety of video clips. These nonlinguistic inputs help students develop initial understandings of content-area concepts. The use of visuals and video is particularly beneficial on the first day of instruction.

Although there are several ways of taking notes, Cloze notes are helpful to EALs and easy for teachers to prepare from their digital presentation. For example, the above “Boston Massacre” slide could be copied and pasted into a Word document, and then the teacher can simply replace some of the key words with blank lines:

- Occurred on __________ 5, 1770.
- A group of Boston patriots was protesting the __________.
- British soldiers __________ five colonial protestors.
- Resulted in the __________ of troops from __________.
This form of notes allows EALs to pay attention to what the teacher is saying and still record accurate content information. It is often difficult for EALs to attend to a teacher’s lecture and take notes simultaneously because of the high levels of language such an act entail. Reducing the linguistic demand while still providing access to academic language allows EALs to develop both content-area concepts and academic language.

Lesson 2: Expert Groups

Content Objective

Students will be able to describe in detail one event that led to the American Revolution.

Language Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Read a text to identify important causes and effects of their focal event.
- Add two key details to the previous day’s notes.
- Create a simple visual of the event that also incorporates two key vocabulary words.

Activities

The “expert group” component of the jigsaw structure allows teachers to differentiate independent reading tasks. Therefore, prior to the lesson the teacher should select and/or adapt three brief texts related to each event. The published social studies textbook as well as websites like the two mentioned in the previous section are excellent sources for texts. Using different sources provides ready-made differentiation because they tend to include varying degrees of detail. For example, one source could provide a brief summary, whereas another would have an extended description. Because this reading task will primarily be an independent one, EALs with lower levels of English proficiency should be provided with a shorter, simpler text.

At the onset of instruction, the teacher places students into heterogeneous groups of three, mixing EALs among the mainstream students. Each group gets a set of readings related to one of the four events. In order to guide their reading, students receive the following prompt: “Determine the Who, Why, and So What of your focal event. Identify specific places in the text that support your answer.” This prompt gives students a purpose for reading and expands on the basic information presented in the previous
lesson. It also provides a way for the teacher to monitor student comprehension as they circulate while students are reading.

After individual group members finish reading their text, the group has a brief discussion of their individual readings focused on the Who, Why, and So What of the event. Then they determine the two best pieces of information to add to the previous days’ presentation about their event. Their final step is to develop a simple visual that depicts their event and relates at least two key terms. Each group member makes his or her own version of the visual to help describe the event to a new group in the next lesson. Students may also write words or phrases on the back of the visual to help them remember what to say. This scaffold is particularly useful to EALs and other students who are uncomfortable sharing in group situations.

**Lesson 3: Mixed Groups**

*Content Objective*

Students will be able to make connections among four historical events leading up to the American Revolution.

*Language Objectives*

Students will be able to:

- Clearly describe their focal event including at least two key vocabulary terms.
- Complete a graphic organizer connecting the four key events.

*Activities*

The teacher places students into groups of four, with one representative from each event per group. Students are given about 5 minutes to present the information about their event using their visual to guide them. Listening students should add new information to their notes from the first day’s lesson. While students are working, the teacher circulates to monitor use of academic language and ask questions of group members to check for comprehension.

When all members have presented, groups complete a graphic organizer to compare and contrast the four events; a modified Venn diagram or a semantic feature analysis chart would work well in this situation. After completing the organizer, groups need to write several sentences explaining the connections among the four focal events.

Although there is a lot of language use and production in this lesson,
the group structure helps EALs of varying English proficiencies access the content. Students listen to the content, add a few pieces of information to their notes, and work collaboratively to compare/contrast the four events. The multiple modes of input and the group structure facilitate comprehension and participation among EALs.

**Lesson 4: Assessment**

**Content Objective**

Students will demonstrate their understanding of four events leading up to the American Revolution.

**Language Objectives**

Students will be able to:

- Construct a comparison/contrast paragraph of at least two focal events.
- Incorporate at least three vocabulary terms into their paragraph.

**Activities**

A brief assessment of students’ understanding related to the four events leading up to the American Revolution is warranted after 3 days of instruction. Straightforward multiple-choice questions that are based on students’ notes are appropriate for EALs of all proficiency levels. The main difference in assessment for EALs is the teacher’s expectation regarding paragraph development. The content of paragraphs should be correct, but EALs might write less and have sentence construction errors. The goal is to assess their understanding of content and provide another opportunity for them to practice and apply the academic language embedded in the content area.

**CONCLUSION**

This chapter attempted to underscore that although secondary EALs are developing English language proficiency, they are likely to already be proficient in one or more languages or dialects. Also, after explaining the range of these students heterogeneity, the chapter outlined several instructional strategies and activities to help secondary teachers put language at the forefront of content instruction, to ensure the successful academic achievement of students for whom English is an additional language.
DISCUSSION AND ACTIVITIES

1. Who are the EAL students across your classes? What do you know about their prior formal education experience?

2. Which one of the strategies provided in this chapter could be implemented in your content area?

3. Review the texts (including, of course, visual texts) your students will be exposed to, and try to compose one or two language objectives to make the linguistic demands of the text explicit both to you and your students.

REFERENCES


