

Academic Language across Disciplines

Mahmuda Yasmin Shaila

Assistant Professor of English, University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh, Dhaka



Building Academic Language: Meeting COMMON CORE Standards across Disciplines, Grades 5-12

Jeff Zwiers

San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2014 (2nd ed.). 336 pp.

ISBN-13: 978-1118744857, ISBN-10: 11187

Building Academic Language: Meeting COMMON CORE Standards across Disciplines, Grades 5-12 by Jeff Zwiers is a much needed addition in the field of teaching and learning. In this text, the author reveals the importance of academic language and portrays the ways through which teachers in the classroom can help students build academic language skills in all disciplines. Though the text focuses on Common Core State Standards, the discussions on academic language and the ways to build competency in it are highly relevant for students and teachers studying and teaching in different settings. This review explores the possibilities of using the text as a tool to minimize the gap that exists between mainstream and nonmainstream students who bring with them very little academic language from schools and suffer all through their academic life.

Zwiers (2014), in the preface to his book, states how important it is to become equipped with academic language, the language that describes “abstract concepts, complex ideas and critical thinking” (ix). In every phase of academic life, especially when students move from primary to secondary and higher level, at every step of academic life, success depends on the ability to use academic language. The Common Core State Standards (2010) expects students to argue, synthesize, evaluate evidence, analyze complex texts and engage in academic discussions. Zwiers in the second edition of his book shows that the teachers, though aware of these expectations, find it very difficult to create classrooms where all these expectations are fulfilled.

One reason is that these classes consist of students who do not have any opportunity to experience and immerse themselves in academic thought or talk outside of the classroom. These students perform poorly in the classroom and in tests because they are not familiar with the academic language in different content areas and cannot use them properly to achieve success. Zwiens, from his rich experience of teaching in different levels from elementary to tertiary, has announced that students in every level – elementary, middle school, high school, and even in university courses – struggle with the “language of academic reading, writing and discussion” (10). However, these students are brilliant and creative. Zwiens portrays how they are marginalized and left behind because these students do not have social capital – rich interaction pattern or cultural capital that enriches one through travel, reading, and educated parents. Most importantly, they are deprived of knowledge and linguistic capital that are developed from rich conversation with parents and siblings, quality and quantity of language they are exposed to, and books at home. Mainstream students who are rich in all these can read, write, and speak according to the expectations of the teachers and the standards. This allows them to excel in the academic arena.

To explain the scenario, Zwiens brings in Bourdieu (1986). Just as money and property are unequally distributed in society, so are the less visible words, skills, and knowledge that give people advantage (Bourdieu, 1986). Those students who do not receive a fair amount of words, skills, and knowledge suffer all through their academic life. These students work hard and still fail to produce the desired result only because of their lack of expertise in academic language. They, unlike their mainstream peers coming from affluent, educated families, cannot read, write and discuss ideas using academic language and, as a result, suffer academically, socially, and emotionally.

To overcome the situation, to minimize the gap between mainstream and diverse students, Zwiens emphasizes on teaching academic language in the classroom. He points out that as students’ do not pick up academic language as easily as they pick up other types of social language (Scarcella, 2003), it has to be taught with care in the classroom. Many educators also highlight the need for teachers to directly teach students how to use academic language in school settings (Bartolome, 1998; Delpit, 1995; Scarcella, 2003). As the teachers venture to teach academic language, they need knowledge, skills, and strategies. Most importantly, the teachers must have respect for these diverse students which Zwiens believes would naturally develop as soon as the teachers explore the struggling students and invest time and energy to find out more about their interests, cultures, and beliefs.

Zwiens, in the first few chapters, clarifies the concept of academic and school language. He uses the metaphor of Rico and Weed (2002), to whom academic language is a tool box, a set of thinking skills and language abilities to decode and encode complex concepts. The definition that Zwiens provides helps us to get rid of the common concept that academic language is just a list of words. Rather “it is the set of words, grammar and discourse strategies used to describe complex ideas, higher order thinking processes, and abstract concepts” (22). Zwiens also portrays how academic language is used to describe complexity, higher order thinking,

and abstraction. To carry out all these functions, the features that academic language uses, like figurative expressions, dependent clauses, passive voice, and nominalization are also discussed.

The need for teaching academic language in schools becomes evident throughout the book. Zwiers, along with creating the awareness to teach students academic language, focuses on the poor preparation the teachers have in teaching academic language in the classroom. Many students, as Cummins (1979) reports, enter into the mainstream classes as schools think they are academically proficient because they are fluent in social and everyday use of English. However, these students perform poorly not only because they lack academic language preparation but also that their teachers lack preparation to teach this language. The scenario has not changed much and it is still very true for many diverse students (Scarcella, 2003). Keeping that scenario in mind, Zwiers designs chapter three which talks about how to build academic language in the class. The most important aspect of this chapter is that it shows how teachers from different disciplines, by incorporating content terms and general academic terms, can explain content and help students build up academic language. It becomes clear that it is not only the responsibility of the language teacher to help the diverse students. Teachers from all disciplines need to intervene. The chapter is a wonderful resource for teachers as it shows, through examples, how to help students build connections, how to think, and express using appropriate language. Strategies like co-shaping conversation, rephrasing student responses, paraphrasing, conducting meta-discussions, and focusing on deeper levels of talk are all ways to build academic conversation.

Zwiers also discusses how important it is to do scaffolding while teaching academic language. However, this scaffolding (which also appears in feedback sessions) in teaching academic language suffers as teachers accept papers and presentations which are not academic in nature. Applebee (1984) reports that underperforming writers are given more personal, less academic assignments. Zwiers (2005) observes that less proficient speakers are given far less thoughtful feedback. While providing feedback to the struggling learners and speakers, teachers focus much more on mechanics. For proficient speakers, teachers provide positive comments, probing questions, and elaborate feedback. All these information clearly show the problem areas in teaching and assessment, and both future and practicing teachers need to be aware of these pitfalls.

Zwiers has already established the idea that all teachers are language teachers and all have a role in teaching academic language. Chapter 4 of the book shows how to build academic language in four school disciplines: science, language, math, and history. The tables that contain academic expressions for interpreting and argumentation in language arts and academic expressions for identifying cause and effects in language arts are highly useful for language teachers. Similar guidance is provided for science, math, and history teachers.

Leaving the content area, Zwiers starts exploring specific skills and in chapter 5, focuses on classroom discussion. The Common Core standards focus on listening and speaking standards. Listening is a skill which is rarely taught in the classroom. According to Lundsteen (1979),

listening is the process through which spoken language is converted to meaning in the mind. It requires thinking too. The students need to pay attention, organize what they think, and collect information into levels of importance, and diverse learners struggle here a lot, especially with interpreting intonation and nonverbal signals. Dictation discussion and note taking comes as an effective solution. This book repeatedly brings out the point that rich classroom discussion is vital to build thinking and academic language skills. Many teacher preparation programs fail to teach the ways to facilitate discussion in the classroom. The teachers who fail to learn the skill to conduct discussion in the class can take much help from conversation circles, radio talks, interview grids, prediction cafés, simulations, and structured academic controversy.

Chapter 6 revolves again around the discussion in the classroom. However, Zwiers here tries to help those diverse students who remain quiet and participate less during this whole class discussion. To help them, Zwiers immediately shifts to small group discussions as, when properly supported, these smaller scale discussions can be very effective to build thinking, academic language, and content understanding in all students (Cohen, 1994). The alarming part is that even in small groups, students work together to learn facts and do assignments. Zwiers regrets that it is rare to see activities that require students “to process the experience with other students, share opinions, disagree with each other, construct a meaning, and solve complex problems together” (153). To improve the situation, teachers need to train students how to work in groups, what language to use during the group work and how to report the findings and solutions. This training of how to interact with others in an academic way is especially important in grades 5 through 12 when students are expected to engage in meaningful discussions about a wider range of topics and concepts based on complex texts across disciplines (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, 2010).

Zwiers in chapter 7 concentrates on reading skills. The author demonstrates here how to develop both the language of academic reading and the reading of academic language. Though Common Core State Standards put emphasis on building all students’ abilities to comprehend grade-level complex texts (Engage NY, 2013), comprehension strategies like synthesizing, inferring, analyzing, summarizing, and figuring out words are not taught effectively in the classrooms. Teachers still focus more on learning content. To come out of this trend, the “Academic Discussion Role” can play an important role. When the students assume the roles of main idea sculptor, predictor, word detective, inferer, problem finder, prior knowledge connector, synthesizer, comparer, classifier, questioner, opinion generator, and summarizer, both the teachers and the students understand clearly that while reading a text, each person must do all these tasks simultaneously. Zwiers also draws teachers’ attention to using textbooks as a great resource for teaching academic language. However, here too the teacher needs to guide students to navigate and notice academic language embedded in it.

Chapter 8 carries a lot of value. Here Zwiers brings in academic writing and it seems quite clear that many ideas discussed in earlier chapters reappear here to support the building of academic writing skills. As students move from primary to secondary and higher levels at school, they need to write expository papers that require arguments, reasoning, clarity, organization, and technical terms with varied sentence patterns. However, most students draw on oral, informal

language when they write and it is difficult to move them away from this practice. Zwiers says that the students need to see models and teachers have to train them how to analyze and incorporate these models in their writing. Most importantly, students need the opportunity to read and discuss before they write. The culminating chapters incorporate academic language in the lesson plan and assessment. The tests appear as a way not only to assess language but the way to teach language too.

Building Academic Language: Meeting COMMON CORE Standards across Disciplines, Grades 5-12 by Jeff Zwiers is an important addition in the field of language teaching. It is essential for pre-service as well as for practicing teachers from all disciplines, as the text provides ways to enhance academic language, a tool students must acquire to achieve academic success. This book is a road map for those teachers who feel alienated and search for ways to make changes in the lives of their students who appear in school with very little resources. The administrators, educators, and the policymakers can consult this text too as it aims to minimize the achievement gap between the mainstream and nonmainstream students.

Though Zwiers writes in the context of the USA, the struggle to master academic language exists in schools around the world. There too, especially in EFL classrooms, students discover that they lack academic capital to compete in the classroom and during tests. This book thus can have a universal appeal. Another area where this book can contribute much is in the parenting programs. Parents need to know how the home environment has an effect on their children. After reading this book, they will think twice before putting all the blame on the poor children for their academic failure.

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