Characteristics of Academic English in The ESL Classroom

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This article examines the characteristics and differences of academic and conversational English in the second language classroom. While academic English is the language used by the educated and needed to succeed financially in society, conversational English refers to the common and familiar language that is used in everyday, ordinary situations. Academic language includes cognitive, linguistic, and social/psychological components. Some aspects of those components can be taught; others are less useful, while still others may be counterproductive to teach.

Introduction

What do successful learners have in common? Are there different varieties of English? If so, what are the differences between them? Scholars tend to distinguish between academic and conversational English. Academic English refers to the language used by the educated and is needed to function at the university level and beyond. Conversational English is the language used in everyday, ordinary situations. Unfortunately, second language learners often fall into the conversational English usage category. Many of them have been schooled for several years in the United States , yet they still display striking deficiencies in reading and writing in academic contexts. The situation is very frustrating because there is clear evidence that some educators are still unaware of what academic English is and the situational obstacles related to it (Wong Filmore & Snow, 2000; Ferris, 2002; Ferris & Hedgecock, 1998).

If students want to achieve socio-economic success, it is imperative that they are able to perform at the appropriate academic level. And performing at this level can be a continuing struggle, since academic English entails "multiple complex features of English required for long-term success in public schools, completion of higher education, and employment with opportunity for professional advancement and financial rewards" (Rumberger & Scarcella, 2001, p. 1).

While today's efforts are directed to teaching the basics, second language learners frequently fall behind when it comes to educational excellence. Scripted programs have become the norm and have replaced teachers' creativity and initiative. The need to emphasize approaches that target the instruction of academic English is more important than ever. Cummins (1981b) postulated the existence of two different types of English, the academic or Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) and the conversational or Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS). Although this dichotomy has been controversial since the beginning, there is agreement among scholars about what academic English is and the characteristics that conform it. According to Scarcella (2003, p.1), academic English is "needed to challenge the tenets of those in power who use it … without knowledge of academic English, individuals may be excluded form participation in educated society and prevented from transforming it".

Characteristics of Academic English

Academic language not only includes several dimensions of knowledge, but it also emphasizes the context where learning takes place. Educators need to be aware of all these dynamics in order to teach effectively English language learners the necessary skills to succeed in life and become productive members of society. Those dimensions are:

The Linguistic Dimension

The linguistic component includes the following areas: phonological, lexical, grammatical, sociolinguistics, and discourse.

Table 1. Description of the linguistic components of academic English and their features used in everyday situations and in academic situations

Linguistic Components of Conversational English	Linguistic Components of Academic English
1. The Phonological Component	
Knowledge of everyday English sounds and the ways sounds are combined, stress and intonation, graphemes, and spelling	Knowledge of the phonological features (including spelling: *research, although*) of academic English, including stress, intonation, and sound patterns
Examples: ship versus sheep /I/ - /i/ sheet versus cheat /sh/ - /ch/	Examples: demógraphy, demográphic, cádence, genéric, casualty, and celerity
2. The Lexical Component	
Knowledge of the forms and meanings of words occurring in everyday situations; *knowledge* of the ways words are formed with prefixes, roots, suffixes, the parts of the speech of words, and the grammatical constraints governing words	Knowledge of the forms and meanings of words that are used across academic disciplines (*assert, hypothesis*) as well as in everyday settings; Knowledge of the ways academic words are formed with prefixes, roots, and suffixes, the parts of speech of academic words, and the grammatical constraints governing academic words

Examples: find out
          look for
	Examples: investigate, research
	          seek

3. The Grammatical Component	
Knowledge of morphemes entailing semantic, syntactic, relational, phonological, and distributional properties; knowledge of syntax; *knowledge* of simple rules of punctuation	Knowledge that enables EL´s to make sense out of and use the grammatical features (morphological and syntactic) associated with argumentative composition, procedural description, analysis, definition, procedural description, and analysis; Knowledge of the grammatical co-occurrence restrictions governing words; Knowledge of grammatical metaphor; Knowledge of more complex rules of punctuation

Example: he was runned by a car
          knifes, mines
          if I was you
	Example: he was run by a car
	           knives, mine
	           if I were you

4. The Sociolinguistic Component	
Knowledge that enables EL´s to understand the extent to which sentences are produced and understood appropriately; *knowledge* of frequently occurring functions and genres	Knowledge of an increased number of language functions. The functions include the general ones of ordinary English such as apologizing, complaining, and making requests as well as ones that are common to all academic fields; knowledge of an increased number of genres, including expository and argumentative text
Example: what´s up? (to a professor)	Example: how are you doing, sir?
5. The Discourse Component	

Knowledge of the basic discourse devices used, for instance, to introduce topics and keep the talk going and for beginning and ending informal types of writing, such letters and lists	Knowledge of the discourse features used in specific academic genres including such devices as transitions and other organizational signals that, in reading, aid in gaining perspective on what is read, in seeing relationships, and in following logical lines of thought; in writing, these discourse features help EL´s develop their theses and provide smooth transitions between ideas

Example: but
     it was
	Example: nevertheless
	     once upon a time

Source: Scarcella (2003)

The Cognitive Dimension

Cognition is also an important part of academic English. It includes knowledge, higher order thinking (critical literacy), cognitive, and metalinguistic strategies.

Table 2. Description of the cognitive components of academic English and their features used in everyday situations and in academic situations

Cognitive Components of Conversational English	Cognitive Components of Academic English
1. The Knowledge Component	
Knowledge of the facts	Knowledge of the ideas, concepts, definitions and stories that they can draw upon to make sense of text and explain themselves based upon personal experience and internal knowledge structures (*schemata*)
Example: types of moons	Example: rotation of the moon, gravity
2. The Higher Order Thinking Component	
Knowledge of the higher order thinking (interpreting, analyzing, evaluating, synthesizing, citations in reading) at the basic level	Knowledge of the higher order thinking (interpreting, analyzing, evaluating, synthesizing, citations in reading) at the advanced level

Example: recognizing a chart
    identifying a source
    incoherent essays
	Example: interpreting a chart
	    determining the credibility of a source
	    support thesis statements, remain focused

3. The Strategic Component	
Knowledge of the basic strategies that enhance the effectiveness of communication or compensate for breakdowns in communication due to limiting factors in actual communication or to insufficient competence	Knowledge of the advanced strategies (*organize study, monitor errors, assess progress)* that enhance the effectiveness of communication or compensate for breakdowns in communication due to limiting factors in actual communication or to insufficient competence

Example: informal letter writing
    conversations
	Example: formal presentations
	    official memoranda

4. The Metalinguistic Awareness Component	
Knowledge of the basic functions which allow improve linguistic performance and is particularly useful in editing and revising	Knowledge of the advanced functions which allow improve linguistic performance and is particularly useful in editing and revising
Example: casual letters to friends e-mails informal invitations to parties	Example: cover letters for a job applying online for a grant invitations to companies

It is important to point out that the development of academic English is not sequential, nor does it follow a predetermined pattern. It can happen during the early stages of child development or at the very end. It can occur at the same time as conversational English or it can develop on its own.

Although some components of the two dimensions may overlap, there are evident differences between them. And some features of the components are more important than others. Let's consider the following figure taken from Scarcella (2003), where different fonts indicate degrees of importance of the component for the tasks:

Figure 1. Linguistic and cognitive features entailed in writing an expository essay and in participating in everyday conversations

Writing an Expository Essay		Participating in Everyday Conversations	
PROFICIENCY	Higher order thinking Metalinguistic abilities Phonological features Grammatical features Vocabulary features Background knowledge Discourse features Strategies Sociolinguistic features	Higher order thinking Metalinguistic abilities Phonological features Grammatical features Vocabulary features Background knowledge Discourse features Strategies Sociolinguistic features	PROFICIENCY

The Sociocultural/Psychological Dimension

Social and cultural norms, beliefs, values, attitudes, motivations, interests, behaviors, practices, and habits are involved in this dimension. They grow, take shape, and change in the larger social context where academic English happens. Table 3 shows the sociocultural/psychological dimensions of academic English:

Table 3. The sociocultural/psychological dimensions of academic English

Attribute	Example
Norms	Research is conducted in specific ways
Values	Empirical research is valued; anecdotal information is questioned
Beliefs	A researcher´s work is respected if it informs or tests theory, advances knowledge in significant ways, and influences practice. A researcher´s work is reputable if it cited in peer-reviewed, scholarly journals

Attitudes/Motivations/Interests	Alternatives perspectives must be considered; asking pointed questions is necessary
Behaviors/Practices/Habits	Researchers review the literature to establish what is known about a problem and how other researchers have studied the problem to avoid mistakes

Source: Scarcella (2003)

Conclusion

Knowledge is not static. It is a changing reality that involves linguistic, cognitive and social dimensions. The conversational and academic dichotomy is not uncontroversial or easily attainable. However, most scholars agree on several components that help differentiate them. Some of those components can be taught and are useful to learn, and some others are limited only to conscious language learning and deliberate memorization (Krashen & Brown, 2007). It was my intention here to describe the basic features of academic language in the light of the debate of effectiveness of programs for minority language students. Ultimately, I hope it can help educators at all levels to incorporate this knowledge into the classroom and better serve the interests of second language learners.

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