

# Reading and verbal skills are not enough

Study finds English language learners also need academic English for their success

By **Carla Thomas McClure**

**E**nglish language learners (ELLs) who have good word-reading and verbal skills in English — including many ELLs who no longer qualify for language support services — are not necessarily prepared for academic success, according to a report from the Center on Instruction. Especially as the focus shifts from learning to read to reading to learn, ELLs can benefit from explicit instruction in academic English across all content areas, including mathematics.

## What is academic English?

Proficiency in academic language includes the mastery of specialized vocabulary, content-specific concepts, and complex sentence structures; it also encompasses the ability to write, read, and understand such language. Such proficiency is “arguably the single most important determinant” of individual students’ mastery of academic content, concluded the Center after examining research on ELLs.

## What prompted the Center on Instruction to focus on academic English?

In its review of research on instructional issues affecting ELLs, the Center found that most ELLs can be taught to read words accurately, but they don’t always comprehend what they are reading. The reasons for such difficulties are not entirely clear. As students move into the upper elementary grades, and reading instruction drops



away, however, students must apply reading skills to acquire concepts, ideas, and facts in content areas. At this point, poor reading comprehension can prevent ELLs from meeting higher-level demands, such as analyzing text or writing about what they have read.

## Do native English speakers also struggle with academic language?

Yes. In fact, the Center reports that “native English speakers from all ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds benefit from explicit instruction to develop academic language.”

## What can teachers do to help students acquire academic English?

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Targeted, classwide instruction can supplement the skills of English speakers and help prevent difficulties for ELLs. One-on-one or small-group instruction can be used to address difficulties that are shared by only a few students.

The Center on Instruction recommends vocabulary instruction that is frequent, intensive, systematic, and complex. It should include words that are important to understanding the text but not commonly used in conversation (e.g., determine, whereas, and factor). Especially problematic for ELLs are words with multiple meanings. For example, odd, root, and field take on special meanings in the context of mathematics. Multiple exposures to academic and content-specific words across domains (reading, writing, speaking, and listening) can reinforce vocabulary learning. To gain deep understanding, students need 12 to 14 exposures to each targeted word.

ELLs also need to learn strategies for comprehending and analyzing challenging narrative and expository texts.

The Center on Instruction recommends explicitly teaching students to make predictions before they read, to monitor their own understanding as they read, to reflect on the strategies they use to increase text comprehension, and to summarize what they have read. Repeated reading is cited as an intervention that has been used successfully with ELLs. Students practice orally reading a text passage to a supportive partner (usually an adult) until the passage can be read expressively, with very few errors. The partner provides corrective feedback and may ask the student to summarize the passage, discuss it, or answer questions.

ELLs also need opportunities to engage in structured academic talk and can benefit from purposeful independent readings that are matched to the reader's ability level (the student should be able to read and understand 90% of the text).

**Is academic language important for mathematics proficiency?**

Yes. According to the Center on Instruction, “a common misconception about mathematics is that it is a ‘universal language,’ one that is synonymous with numbers and symbols.” However, teachers use academic language to teach mathe-

**TO SUPPORT AND PROMOTE READING DEVELOPMENT FOR ELLS:**

1. Provide early, explicit, and intensive instruction in phonological awareness and phonics.
2. Increase opportunities for ELLs to develop sophisticated vocabulary knowledge.
3. Teach strategies and knowledge needed to comprehend and analyze challenging narrative and expository texts.
4. Focus on vocabulary and increased exposure to print.
5. Provide significant opportunities for ELLs to engage in structured academic talk.
6. When assigning independent reading, make sure there is a good reader-text match and make assignments structured and purposeful.

tics. Understanding word problems well enough to solve them can also challenge ELLs.

**Reference**

**Francis, D.J., Rivera, M., Lesaux, N., Keiffer, M., & Rivera, H. (2006).** *Practical guidelines for the education of English language learners: Research-based recommendations for instruction and academic interventions.* Portsmouth, NH: Center on Instruction. [www.centeroninstruction.org/files/ELL1-Interventions.pdf](http://www.centeroninstruction.org/files/ELL1-Interventions.pdf)

Note: The Center on Instruction ([www.centeroninstruction.org](http://www.centeroninstruction.org)) is part of the federally funded Comprehensive Center network. The Center provides research-based information on K-12 instruction in reading, math, science, special education, and English language learners. ♦