

ACADEMIC LANGUAGE FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS AND STRUGGLING READERS BY Y. FREEMAN AND D. FREEMAN, AND BUILDING ACADEMIC LANGUAGE BY J. ZWIERS

Freeman, Y. & Freeman, D. (2009). *Academic language for English language learners and struggling readers: How to help students succeed across content areas*. Portsmouth NH: Heinemann. List price: \$28.75

Zwiers, J. (2008). *Building academic language: Essential practices for content classrooms, grades 5-12*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass. List price: \$24.95

**Reviewed by
Susan Ranney**

At the MinneTESOL conference in November 2009, there was a lot of buzz about "academic English" and in particular about a new book by Jeff Zwiers on teaching academic English. The concept of academic English is familiar to most ESL teachers through the work of Jim Cummins and his BICS/CALP distinction, yet the notion of academic English remains largely unanalyzed and instruction often relies more on intuition than research. That situation may soon change as more resources are becoming available to help teachers analyze and teach academic English.

Two of the recent books on this topic are *Building Academic Language: Essential Practices for Content Classrooms* by Jeff Zwiers, and *Academic Language for English Language Learners and Struggling Readers: How to Help Students Succeed Across Content Areas* by Yvonne Freeman and David Freeman. Given the shared goals of these two books, it is perhaps surprising that they are more complementary than overlapping in their content.

Academic Language for English Language Learners and Struggling Readers approaches the topic from the point of view of ESL research. As in much of the Freemans' work, the purpose of the book is to distill scholarly research and make it accessible to practicing teachers. They review a broad range of research, from Cummins' work to the research and theories of John Ogbu, David Brown, M.A.K. Halliday, James Gee, Robin Scarcella, Mary Schleppegrell, and many others. They start in chapter 1 by identifying types of learners who need academic language instruction, and include the familiar categories of long term English learners and limited formal schooling students, but they add the non-ESL category of Standard English learners, who have English as a native language but do not speak the Standard English required in school. Then in chapter 2, they review Cummins' work and the differences between academic and conversational language. Chapter 3 goes into a detailed description of academic registers and cultural influences on discourse. The next three chapters get to the practical issues of how to guide students to read academic textbooks, write for academic purposes, and learn academic vocabulary. The final chapter goes back to the broad, school-wide challenges of supporting ELLs for academic success through the integration of language and content instruction, while also giving a detailed description of a unit developed by an ESL teacher on the novel *The Circuit* that addressed the students' need for identity, engagement, and motivation. Throughout the book, the authors bring in examples of individual students to illustrate the challenges, present summaries of relevant research, and suggest practical applications to teaching.

Zwiers' book *Building Academic Language: Essential Practices for Content Classrooms* covers some of the same topics, but comes at them from more of a classroom practice perspective.

He cites many of the same researchers as Freeman & Freeman, but gives just a brief overview of research. As he notes in the introduction, the book derives much of the content from his own classroom research and teaching as well as his ongoing work with content teachers in the U.S. as well as Africa, Latin America, and Eastern Europe. The book goes into great detail on specific activities and practices that teachers can follow in their classrooms, with many tables showing specific types of academic language and descriptions of activities that teachers can use to develop their students' academic language proficiency. Overall, reading his book is like listening to a gifted teacher share stories and tips for teaching.

The book starts with a chapter that focuses on the types of students who need help with academic language and encourages teachers to honor what they bring to the classroom and learn more about their interests. Chapter two describes features of academic language and links it to the higher order thinking required in schools. In chapter three, he describes processes of language acquisition and suggests ways to scaffold academic language development. This chapter contains a useful discussion of the balance between over-scaffolding and under-supporting students as they struggle with academic language. Chapter four addresses the variations in the language used in various content areas. Then both chapters five and six deal with oral academic language - in promoting development through whole class lectures and discussions, and in small group activities. Chapters seven and eight address academic reading and writing. Finally, in chapter nine, he guides teachers to design assessment with academic language in mind, and to link assessment closely with instruction. The last chapter is a short summary of the book and call to action. The book also includes four appendices: recommended resources, frequently used academic terms, suggestions for before, during, and after mini-lectures, and an example of how to borrow from academic content standards to design academic language instruction.

With these books and others that are coming out, the knowledge base in the area of academic English is expanding greatly and teachers can find much useful guidance in how to apply what we know to actual classroom teaching. Both of these books would be useful for teacher book clubs or personal reading for professional growth. They are very readable and contain end of chapter exercises that give useful extensions to apply in exploring the applications of concepts. Given the importance of this area, I would recommend that teachers read both books as well as exploring other books, articles, and internet resources on academic language. We simply cannot continue to explain to people outside the ESL field that academic language (CALP) takes 5-7 years to develop; we need to be on the forefront in helping ELLs develop those language skills quickly and effectively. As Zwiers says in the last page of his book, "Each hour in class is one more hour that builds up the language, thinking, content, and character of each student. Let's make the most of each minute."

REVIEWER

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