

# Is the reading crisis associated with an academic language crisis?

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## **Educators across the globe are trying to solve the reading crisis. Efforts to improve 4th-grade reading scores seem to intensify every year, but improvements are rarely observed. Could it be that efforts need to target academic language?**

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It is well known that two broad repertoires are needed to achieve skilled reading, and both are related to language. First, the phonological aspects of language are needed for phonological awareness (manipulation of sounds in spoken words) and for letter-sound relations (saying the sound when seeing the letter). Phonological awareness and letter-sound knowledge converge to develop word recognition skills (also called decoding). Methods to teach these skills are well established within the science of reading and most students become fluent and proficient decoders without difficulty.

The second broad repertoire is related to the meaning of language. To be able to comprehend something read, a child must understand the words and sentences of a story or passage, as well as use inferencing and background knowledge to fill in the information that is not in the story or passage. Language that is understood when spoken is easier to understand when it is in written form. In other words, listening comprehension precedes and leads to reading comprehension. Although the science of reading evidence is clear that oral language skills are critical for reading and writing, there is a paucity of guidance on how to teach language in ways that benefit later reading comprehension.

Without more attention on classroom-based oral language instruction, educators will continue to focus their attention on teaching word recognition to the neglect of the meaning aspects of language...and the reading crisis will undoubtedly endure.

### **Academic language is specialized language**

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Emerging research suggests that focusing on a small but potent set of language features can have a powerful impact on reading and writing. Since language is multi-dimensional, educators should focus their attention on the aspects that are going to have the greatest impact and can be leveraged across several academic tasks.

Academic language is specialized in its function and structure. It is used in schools to acquire and express knowledge (function) and relies on complex patterns of words, sentences, and discourses (structure). This sophisticated constellation of language structures is needed for all academic tasks, regardless of modality. As a result of modality

cross-over potential, educators who focus on these critical patterns can leverage learning in one modality (e.g., listening and speaking) for faster learning in another modality (e.g., reading and writing). But, what exactly should be taught?

## **Discourse-, sentence-, and word-level patterns**

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Academic language consists of discourse-, sentence-, and word-level patterns. Because words are contained in sentences, and sentences are contained in discourse, they are naturally integrated in a cognitively and linguistically beneficial way. They should not be taught in isolation. To do so would reduce the synergistic impact their integration can have on learning.

Discourse patterns are the macrostructural organization of a story or a passage of information. They can be brief or lengthy, but it is the pattern of the entire discourse that matters. For example, upper elementary students are often taught the five-paragraph essay. The discourse pattern of essays are: an opening paragraph that introduces the thesis, three paragraphs describing the evidence and support for the thesis, and one paragraph concluding the topic with a call to action. Depending on the type and purpose of information, the structures of the passage or a single paragraph could be the main idea and key detail, cause and effect, problem and solution, compare and contrast, or a sequence. There is a general pattern for narratives, including character, setting, initiating event, emotion, attempts, consequences, resolutions, and ending, with notable cultural variations.

Within the organizational structures of the discourse, paragraphs or stories are made up of sentences. Sentence patterns, or syntax, are the language-specific rules that guide the order and grouping of words in sentences. Complex academic sentences are those with multiple supplementary clauses (e.g., subordinate or relative) attached to a main clause (i.e., main part of the sentence with subject and a verb). Elaboration in the form of adjectives and adverbs and transition words and phrases (e.g., as a result, however) also enhances the complexity and makes the sentences more academic.

Words are necessary parts of sentences. Academic vocabulary words are either general academic words or domain specific. General academic words (e.g., conserve, adjacent, sphere, transportable) are rare in social conversation, but highly useful in academic contexts and can be used in multiple domains or subjects (e.g., science and social studies), whereas domain-specific words are only useful in very narrow contexts (e.g., photosynthesis, citizen, gene, irrigation). Many words have multiple meanings. For example, the word ground can be the solid surface of the earth (noun) or to prevent from flying (verb). Another important word-level pattern requires the teaching of morphology—that is root words, prefixes, and suffixes. The smallest part of words with meaning are called morphemes. The root word port, for instance, means to carry but when the prefix re- (again) is added, it makes the word report, which can be a noun or a verb. And if the suffix -er is added to report, the meaning of the word is changed to a person who carries the news to people again and again. All of these patterns of words are worthy of teaching intentionally.

## Promoting oral academic language

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There is good reason to practice academic language via listening and speaking. For one, academic language learned orally will transfer to reading and writing with minimal effort. It is also easier and more fun for children. Oral academic language activities do not depend on word recognition (for reading) or transcription skills (for writing) so that means they can (and should) begin as early as preschool. As long as the oral discourse (story or information) is condensely packed with complex words, sentences, and discourse patterns, proficiency in oral academic language will result in improved understanding and production of written academic language.

### References

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