As described in “Understanding Academic Language and its Connection to School Success” (Friedberg, Mitchell, & Brooke, 2016), academic language is critical for reading comprehension and overall academic success. Often referred to as “the language of school”, academic language encompasses the words and phrases that characterize the texts, discussions, and assessments that students encounter in educational settings. This language includes sophisticated vocabulary used in complex phrases and sentences that helps students express and unlock meaning.

### Common Features of Academic Language

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Academic vocabulary knowledge, including understanding of word parts (morphology) and word relationships, helps students learn new vocabulary and deduce the meaning of unfamiliar words. Academic vocabulary can refer to:</th>
<th>Knowledge of syntactic elements that constitute academic language helps students make inferences about ideas in text, clarifies what they have already read, and provides clues about what they will read next. Syntactic elements of academic language include:</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Word with multiple parts (prefixes, suffixes, and roots) such as “cooperatively” or “refinement”</td>
<td>• Connective or signal words and phrases, such as “as a result” or “however”</td>
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<td>• High-frequency words that may be abstract or have multiple meanings, such as “reservation” or “precipitate”</td>
<td>• The connection between pronouns and their referents (“Juan and Alexa tied for first place. They celebrated with the team.”)</td>
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<td>• Words with precise definitions used in specific contexts or disciplines, such as “amoeba” or “equator”</td>
<td>• Subject-verb agreement (“The musicians, as well as the conductor, are ready to begin.”)</td>
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</table>
As students progress through school, the challenges of using and comprehending academic language increase, particularly for struggling readers and English Language Learners. What does this mean for educators? By focusing on academic language skills in instruction, educators can make a considerable impact on students' reading comprehension and educational achievement. Use the following strategies for practical, meaningful ways to teach these important skills across the curriculum.

**Academic Language Instruction in the Early Elementary Grades**

For early elementary students who are learning to read, academic language skills can be taught through language instruction. Start with supporting students in developing a strong foundation in age-appropriate oral language skills, and then guide them towards using more complex academic language and applying their oral language skills when reading. Encourage your young students' innate enthusiasm for learning by teaching vocabulary and syntactic skills with the following strategies:

- **Foster a language-rich classroom.**
  Discuss classroom activities, and encourage students to add detail to their spoken language. Promote opportunities for students to learn and use new vocabulary when following directions, describing, answering questions, and participating in conversations. For example, use new words when assigning classroom roles (e.g., “Who would like to distribute supplies?”) and asking students to respond to stories (e.g., “Make a prediction about the consequences of their choice.”).

- **Teach and apply word relationships, categories, and essential vocabulary to broaden students’ word knowledge.**
  Select words that are important for understanding across the curriculum, including spatial, quantitative, temporal, and qualitative words (e.g., *behind; enough; next; radiant*). Progress towards synonyms and antonyms and increasingly complex, abstract vocabulary that may be present in multiple subjects (e.g., multiple-meaning words; figurative language; words for explaining and analyzing).

- **Emphasize associations between words.**
  Focus on analogies and shades of meaning (e.g., *warm → hot → scalding*). This helps
students understand that words can be similar in meaning while used in different contexts.

- **Provide explicit instruction in content-area words.**
  Most students will require direct instruction in vocabulary that is discipline-specific (e.g., *nocturnal; conservation*). Structure lessons around having students hear, say, read, and write new words.

- **Model sophisticated language use.**
  Use more advanced terms for familiar concepts (e.g., *vehicle; evaporate*), as well as words and phrases that connect, contrast, and emphasize ideas (e.g., *even though; since*).

- **Associate meanings of new words with pictures.**
  Students can use pictures to deduce the meaning of unfamiliar words and recognize similarities and differences between concepts.

- **Teach word-learning strategies for acquiring new vocabulary.**
  These strategies include using sentence-level context clues and word analysis skills. Identify and then analyze common prefixes, roots, and suffixes for meaning and support students in applying this knowledge when reading. Students get excited about learning new vocabulary when they have tools to discover relationships between words!

- **Model the use of active comprehension strategies.**
  Demonstrate self-monitoring of comprehension when encountering complex language and ideas in texts read aloud, such as summarizing what was read using words from the text to support understanding and recall of details.

- **Encourage students to paraphrase what they have heard and read using previously learned words and phrases.**
  For example, ask students to use the words “before”, “after”, and “next” to paraphrase a text that describes an event sequence or how something is made. By using targeted language along with their own words, students can monitor their own comprehension.
Academic Language Instruction in the Upper Elementary and Secondary Grades

As students transition from learning to read to reading to learn, comprehension demands increase. To achieve successful reading comprehension across the curriculum, older students need instruction in more sophisticated academic language skills. Learning high-utility definitions, word relationships, and the structure of words with Latin and Greek origins is particularly meaningful. Educators can help older students build their vocabularies, learn ways to deduce the meaning of unfamiliar words, and think critically about what they have read with the following strategies:

- **Teach students about the morphological structure of words (prefixes, suffixes, and root words) and how words are joined together.**
  By transitioning students’ thinking from “I don’t know the meaning of this word” to “What parts of this word do I recognize?” through the knowledge of the structure of words, students build upon their vocabulary knowledge and learn word parts that can help them read and understand unfamiliar words.

- **Provide semantic maps when teaching vocabulary.**
  Semantic maps are graphic organizers or “webs” that connect new words to related words and concepts. Students can use these tools to visually and verbally connect new academic vocabulary to their experiences and prior knowledge.

- **Before students read class selections, preview and pre-teach vocabulary that will be important for their comprehension of the text.**
  Also consider which words might be useful across subject areas (e.g., high-frequency, abstract, or multiple-meaning words). Use visuals to help connect meaning to new words and concepts. Then, model the use of these words as they are encountered during reading.

- **After introducing new words, give students opportunities to independently apply their knowledge.**
  Choose engaging, brief informational texts that contain previously taught academic vocabulary, or embed targeted words within the text. After reading and discussing the
vocabulary, have students construct sentences aloud or in writing using the targeted words.

- **Enhance lessons and conversations using academic language with pictures, video, and other multimedia.**
  This strategy is particularly facilitative for English Language Learners and students with language comprehension needs. Visual aids help students with language weaknesses connect definition and function to concepts, as well as to their current background knowledge.

In addition to developing vocabulary knowledge, older students need direct instruction in syntactic elements that organize words, phrases, and concepts into sentences and paragraphs. With opportunities to read, write, say, and hear diverse sentence structures, students can learn how to make connections and inferences about words, parts of speech, and ideas within and across sentences in academic texts. To teach syntactic knowledge, educators can:

- **Coach students through the meaning of sentences that require careful interpretation when discussing texts.**
  Encourage students to paraphrase and explain what they have read, particularly when sentences combine or contrast ideas. Support students in clarifying or expanding on their interpretations.

- **Teach the meaning of connective words and phrases.**
  Focusing on connective (or "signal") words and phrases in text can help students interpret relationships between multiple concepts in text. Students can practice using connective words to combine sentences in their own writing. (e.g., *Vitamin D is essential for the human body. Many people are deficient in this vital nutrient.* → *Even though Vitamin D is essential for the human body, many people are deficient in this vital nutrient.*)

- **Read and discuss different types of texts, and identify the kinds of words and phrases that characterize them.**
  Work with students to compile a reference list of connective words contained in each type (e.g., comparative texts = *similarly, as well as*; contrastive texts = *whereas*;
although). Discuss why a comparative text contains different connective words than a contrastive text. Encourage students to use their reference sheets during discussion and writing.

- **Provide students with sentence frames that chunk sentences into meaningful phrases or parts of speech.**

  Using sentence frames can demonstrate to students how changes in word choice and order affect meaning, subject-verb agreement, and pronoun usage. Sentence starters (e.g., *Despite the frigid weather, residents of Siberia________*), modeled phrases, and word and concept mapping also facilitate for students who need additional scaffolding to apply and internalize new words and phrases during discussions and in writing.

- **Call attention to the differences between conversational language and the language of school.**

  Support students in rephrasing conversational language into academic language using connectives and more complex sentence structures. Have students practice rewriting their own or others' writing into more sophisticated versions using previously learned vocabulary and syntactic forms (e.g., *I didn’t like the dinner, but dessert was delicious.* → *While the main course was underwhelming, the dessert was rich and satisfying.*)

References: