

All Students are Academic Language Learners

Academic Language Must be Taught, not Caught

There is no single definition of academic language. It has been conceptualized as book language acquired through reading, high utility words to be explicitly taught, words of schooling, and content terms and concepts ([Shanahan, 2015](#)). Researchers and practitioners agree, however, that academic language can be a roadblock to text comprehension for students who can't leverage its meanings.

English Language Learners (ELL) and students with learning disabilities are likely to stumble over academic terms. But so are those children who, while not officially classified as ELL, are not exposed to academic language at home. [Hart and Risley](#) (2003) have famously described families' language and use as differing across income groups; vocabularies of children from "professional" families are more than double those from low-income or welfare families, with the lexicons of children of "working class" families falling somewhere in between. For many if not most children, academic language learning must occur at school. Academic English should be "taught, not caught."

How to Teach Academic Language

Without a unified definition of academic language, how should teachers approach its instruction? Literacy How's Professional Learning Series *Vocabulary: Knowledge to Practice* offers a [word selection tool](#) that integrates word utility with instructional methods and [activities](#) to teach whichever words are selected.



Word Selection Grid

	Content (Brick) Words			Utility (Mortar) Words
	Multiple Meaning (Polysemy)	Morphological Elements	Word networks	Academic vocabulary (Examples provided)
Tier 1	bat ¹ (animal, action, sport equipment)	bat/bats ²	bat, mammal, habitat, sonar ³	and, in, on it, they write, think, look, sort
Tier 2	season (time of year, flavoring for food) ⁴	seasons, seasoning, seasoned, season ⁵	season, climate, weather, environment, temperature, geography	because, then, it, them locate, understand, describe
Tier 3	bat, as part of common phrases or idioms (e.g., bat your eyes, go to bat for someone) blue (a color, a feeling of dejection) and as part of a common phrase or idiom (e.g., out of the blue, meaning suddenly)	seasonal (-al), batty (-y), unlock (un-), reread (re-), bluest (-est) ⁶ evaporate, -s, -ed, -ion for evaporates, evaporated, and evaporation	evaporation, liquid, gas, atmosphere, moisture	however, therefore its, their analyze, imagine, prove

¹Words selected in Tier 1 for their multiple meanings include simple words that children might know but not their multiple meanings.

²Tier 1 can focus on the inflectional ending that signals singular and plural (i.e., -s, -es)

³Biemiller's Words Worth Teaching can inform the selection of words for networking value and utility.

⁴Words selected in Tier 2 for multiple meanings include words that children might know but not consider their multiple meanings.

⁵Tier 2 can focus on inflectional endings that signal tense (-ed), number (i.e., -s, -es), and possession (i.e., 's, s')

⁶Tier 3 can focus on common prefixes (See page 83) and suffixes (See page 84).

The rows of the grid organize words according to tiers, or their level of utility. Three columns provide the instructional dimensions representing evidence-based and teachable dimensions—multiple meanings, morphological elements, and networkable meanings in content areas. The last column focuses on the group of words that holds our language together (i.e., “mortar”) to make it comprehensible. As Dutro & Moran explain (2003), “mortar” words connect ideas (e.g., **because**, **but**, **however**), show the relationship between words (e.g., **on**, **under**, **between**), make it possible to refer to nouns (e.g., **it**, **they**), and are the utility words used across the content areas to direct instruction and learning (e.g., **describe**, **analyze**, **compare**). Together these words focus on an aspect of vocabulary development needed for academic learning, hence we refer to them as academic vocabulary.

Word Networks and Word Dialogs are two types of activities that can be used to develop academic language. The sample lessons provided here are for students in Stage 1 of Chall's Stages of Reading Development. A Formal Frame or Academic Phrase is another high leverage activity that begins as a sentence starter, but adds critical grammatical and

lexical clarification and support, enabling students to produce a competent verbal or written response in an appropriate register. As you begin practicing Formal Frames make sure you choose topics that everyone can talk about so that the cognitive demand is on practicing the phrase *not* grappling with the content of the topic.



www.literacyhow.com



203-239-7323



Send us an Email

Our Mission is to EMPOWER TEACHERS to ensure that every child learns to read by third grade.

100 Broadway 2nd Floor | North Haven, CT 06473 US



[Subscribe](#) to our email list