

ACADEMIC LANGUAGE LEARNING

A conversation with Emily Phillips Galloway

To understand the complex reading materials assigned in the middle and upper grades, students must learn the subtleties of academic language.

By **Rafael Heller**

KAPPAN: According to your bio, your work “explores relationships between academic language development and reading skill in adolescents.” What led you to conduct research in this area?

EMILY PHILLIPS GALLOWAY: Earlier in my career, I was a middle grades’ reading specialist, which meant that I spent a lot of time trying to help students who could decode text but struggled to comprehend what they read. At the time, the reading research put a lot of emphasis on teaching vocabulary as a way to boost comprehension, but it seemed to me that this wasn’t enough. My students were acquiring words and background knowledge, but their progress was very specific to the topic we were working on at the moment, and it wasn’t transferring to the rest of their reading. So I wanted to figure out how to provide more explicit instruction in the *other* aspects of academic reading and writing that kids need to learn in the middle grades.

It’s not that I want to dismiss the importance of vocabulary, which is essentially a proxy for what a reader knows about the world. If children don’t know the words or concepts they see in a book, they’ll struggle to make meaning from it. But it turns out that students need more than that. For the last 20 years or so, middle-level teachers have implemented a lot of interventions focusing on vocabulary building, but they haven’t seen much improvement in students’ comprehension of complex texts. The question that I and other researchers have been asking is: What are the other things students need to know about academic language to make sense of the kinds of texts that they begin to encounter around 4th grade?

KAPPAN: What, exactly, do you mean by “academic language,” and how similar or different is it from the kinds of language children develop at home and in other settings?

GALLOWAY: In one sense, academic language is like any other kind of discourse we learn as we grow up. At home with our family, we talk one way, then we shift to local language varieties with friends, use another way of talking at the doctor’s office, talk in another way at school, and on and on. And as I see it, none of these forms of language is inherently better or worse than the others. They’re all valuable resources. We just draw upon different ones in different parts of our lives.

That’s how I describe academic language, too: It’s one of the many language resources we can develop as we grow up. However, it’s particularly useful in middle and high school, when we begin reading, writing, and talking about complex material. And it can be challenging to learn, since it uses relatively intricate sentences, a lot of abstract terminology, specific structures that guide readers through complex arguments, specific ways of expressing precise ideas, and so on.

KAPPAN: But you’re not talking about disciplinary literacy, right? By academic language, you don’t mean the specialized kinds of language people use in math, science, history, and other subject areas?

GALLOWAY: Academic language, when defined broadly, includes this disciplinary language as well as language used in academic communication across content areas. However, in my own work, when I say *academic language*, I mean certain ways of communicating that are found in every subject area. For several years, I’ve worked with a team (including Paola Uccelli at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and Alejandra Meneses, a colleague from Chile) to identify features that show up in all kinds of texts assigned in middle and high school. And we’ve found that students need to know certain things about how those

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texts use language. We call these “core academic language skills,” since they’re foundational to reading comprehension in the upper grades and beyond. When students get to specialized subjects like AP history or chemistry, they’ll also need to learn some discipline-specific ways of using language. But the core skills matter to all kinds of text comprehension, and they’re important to teach, although they get much less attention in curriculum and in textbooks.

So far, we’ve identified seven features of academic language that are critical to reading comprehension in the 4th through 8th grades. For example, one has to do with keeping track of people and themes while reading complex sentences and paragraphs. Let’s say you come across the sentence, “The king was regarded as a tyrant by some, but he was loved by others.” To follow this, you have to know that *king*, *tyrant*, and *he* all refer to the same individual, and you have to keep track of these references as you keep going. This turns out to be very challenging for a lot of students.

Another core academic language skill has to do with understanding the author’s — or narrator’s — viewpoint or “stance.” For example, to understand the nuances of what the person is saying, you have to know whether they’re totally sure of themselves or have some doubts. If I say to you, “Most of the evidence suggests . . .,” then I’m signaling to you that there’s strong agreement on this point. But if I say, “The field is not so certain . . .,” then I’m signaling that I have doubts about this, and you should treat this point with caution. A lot of students struggle with recognizing these sorts of subtle differences in viewpoint.

In addition to *understanding the writer’s viewpoint* and *keeping track of people and ideas in texts*, the other five core skills have to do with *making logical connections*, *unpacking complex words*, *understanding complex sentences*, *organizing analytic texts*, and *using metalinguistic vocabulary* (i.e., language for talking about thinking and learning). I won’t go into detail on all of them here — but the point is that even if a student can decode text fluently, and even if they have a great vocabulary, they can easily get tripped up by these common features of academic texts.

When we assess these core academic language skills, we find that they’re incredibly predictive of kids’ progress in reading comprehension over time, much more so than assessments of vocabulary and even socioeconomic factors. If students are able to take the writer’s viewpoint into account, keep track of who and what are being referred to, and so on, then they’ll continue to perform well on reading comprehension tasks. It makes no difference what race they are, whether they’re native English speakers, or whether they’re eligible for free and reduced-price meals. And this suggests to us that explicit and effective instruction in these core ways of using academic language

would go a long way toward reducing achievement gaps in reading.

KAPPAN: Do these skills transfer to reading other kinds of complex texts outside of school? For example, do you need these skills to comprehend newspaper articles, too?

GALLOWAY: We’ve found that these features are prevalent across all sorts of texts aimed at adult readers. To comprehend an article in the *New York Times*, for example, you’ll have to understand when the text is referring to people and ideas that were introduced in previous paragraphs. You’ll have to make sense of the very different viewpoints taken by reporters on the front page and in the op-ed section. You’ll have to untangle a lot of long and complicated sentences, follow logical connections that link sentences, and so forth. And it’s not just when you read a newspaper like the *Times* — these features show up, to varying degrees, in *People* magazine, articles in the MSN news feed, and on and on.



EMILY PHILLIPS

GALLOWAY is an assistant professor at Vanderbilt University’s Peabody School of Education. She holds an Ed.D. from the Harvard Graduate School of Education, as well as an M.S.Ed. and a B.A. from the University of Pennsylvania. Before beginning her doctoral

studies, she was a Michael Pressley Memorial Fellow at the Benchmark School in Media, PA, where she taught struggling readers in grades 6, 7, and 8 and served as a reading specialist.

Currently, Phillips Galloway’s research, which includes quantitative and qualitative studies, explores the relationships between academic language development and reading skill in adolescents with a particular focus on English learners. Her work has been featured in journals such as *Reading Research Quarterly*, *Applied Psycholinguistics*, and *Reading and Writing*. With a commitment to advancing research-practice partnerships, she has also worked with teachers, school leaders, and administrators in two of the largest urban districts in the United States. The lessons learned from this work are featured in a recent book titled *Advanced Literacy Instruction in Linguistically Diverse Settings: A Guide for School Leaders* (Guilford Press, 2016), co-authored with Nonie Lesaux and Sky Marietta.

KAPPAN: If you want students to develop these skills, what has to happen in the classroom? What does this actually mean for literacy instruction in the middle grades?

GALLOWAY: To learn any form of language — whether it's youth culture language on Twitter or a local dialect or a professional discourse — you have to have a reason to *use* it, engaging in meaningful ways with people in the given community. That's no less true for academic language. So, as classroom instructors, we need to create conditions in which students feel compelled to use academic language for authentic purposes, whether it's to make an argument or share an idea or write a newspaper article or complete a project. And we need to provide opportunities for them to be collaborative, to use their new language to interact with their peers, both in print and through oral communication.

We recently conducted a study of 33 middle grades classrooms, to see what factors predicted students' academic language learning over the course of the school year. Unsurprisingly, we found that students' language skills at the start of the academic year predicted how much progress they made by the end. But we also found that a significant amount of students' progress could be predicted by their *peers'* academic language skills — that is, students learned a lot of academic language by interacting with classmates who had strong skills. To me, that's a powerful argument for heterogeneous groupings, where kids have opportunities to collaborate in making meaning from the text. In the process, some kids will practice the academic language they've already learned, and others will have a chance to hear it and try it out for themselves. In addition, we found that the presence of teacher scaffolding for students' academic language use during class discussions led to gains in academic language.

KAPPAN: You've argued also that students need plenty of opportunities to think and talk explicitly about academic language, right?

GALLOWAY: “Metalinguistic awareness”— or the ability to talk about the language we're learning — is the secret sauce in middle grades classrooms. One of the things we know about language learning is that it depends on pattern recognition. You notice a particular feature of a language, and then you notice it again and again, until you become aware of the pattern. We do this all the time. For instance, if you move from Boston to Tennessee, like I did, you start

to notice people saying *y'all* in everyday conversation, but you're not sure when you're supposed to say it. Then, after you've heard it a few dozen times, you realize, “Oh, I get it. People use *y'all* to address each other when they want to convey a certain kind of friendliness...” It also has the benefit of being a great gender-inclusive pronoun, so I have now adopted it into my own language repertoire.

In most classrooms, you don't see teachers and students talking very often about language, or the linguistic patterns

they notice. But it's much easier to strengthen your academic language if you do have the words to talk about it. For instance, I recently observed an incredibly powerful conversation in a classroom where middle graders were studying contemporary issues in the news. The teacher had given them a bunch of articles about Brexit, representing different sides of the debate. But instead of just saying, “This author thinks X, and that one thinks Y,”

the students were talking about specific “stance markers,” or phrases that the authors used to signal their particular viewpoint. That's a really helpful thing to do. When a student starts writing an argumentative essay, for example, the teacher can point to a spot in their introduction and show them that their stance marker is too weak, and the student will know exactly what that means and why it's important to strengthen it. The more students talk about academic language, the more visible it becomes, and the easier it is for them to recognize those language features, understand them, and learn how to use them in their own talk and writing.

KAPPAN: Is it especially challenging for non-native English speakers to learn these core academic language skills? How does this work translate to bilingual classrooms or schools that serve a lot of English learners?

GALLOWAY: There's no reason to think that students have to become totally fluent in conversational English as a prerequisite for learning academic language. For example, consider students in other countries who study English as an additional language. It's pretty common for those students to acquire academic English before they're ready to hang out and chat in English in social settings. Plenty of internationally educated, multilingual students come to the United States for graduate school and do well in their academic work even though their conversational English may still be developing.

In the U.S., we often spend too much time worrying about English learners' command of everyday spoken English, and

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in the meantime, we hold off on giving them opportunities to engage with complex, grade-level texts. That leads to two big problems: Students are not getting exposure to the academic language that they need, and they are being deprived of academic content. If you're 13 years old, say, you're developmentally ready to grapple with complex material. There's no reason to wait until you've reached 100% fluency in English to start learning about rich ideas, and the language often follows as we teach these concepts.

So the challenge for educators is to figure out how to balance the teaching of conversational English with the teaching of genuine academic language and content. Often, that means giving English learners shorter segments of rich and compelling text and letting them dig into the material over a longer period of time, while also reserving some time for them to practice conversational English, learn vocabulary, and so on. It's important to help them improve their everyday language skills, but that shouldn't mean putting off their academic learning.

KAPPAN: In addition to your research and teaching, you've been doing a lot of consulting with schools and districts to help them improve reading and writing instruction in the middle grades. Tell us a bit about that work.

GALLOWAY: One of my own mentors, Paola Uccelli, has always pointed out that educators, who often are very skilled language users themselves, tend to think of language as just a transparent medium for instruction. Most middle grades teachers aren't in the habit of looking at the differing kinds of language we use at school, at home, on the playground, in textbooks, and so on. So, much of this work involves helping them become more aware of academic language and helping them understand how that language creates barriers for many of their students by blocking them from participating in the classroom community and accessing content.

I think this work is most useful when teachers get a chance to sit down together to analyze their own instructional materials and try to identify the specific challenges those texts are likely to pose for middle graders. I'll ask them: If you want your students to be able to make sense of those texts, what will you have to teach them? Of course, in a single meeting, it's impossible to discuss everything that might be challenging about a given reading assignment, so I try to get teams of teachers to focus in on one or two things at a time. I'll ask, what are the specific skills students will need to comprehend this text? Then, we often choose one skill to teach in an upcoming lesson using this text. We repeat this work over many cycles, and, over time, we all become more "tuned in" to language.

KAPPAN: What are the big questions about academic language development that you hope to see answered in the coming years?

GALLOWAY: At this point, we know that several academic language skills are critical to adolescents' reading comprehension, writing, and conversation in school settings. But we're still figuring out how to teach these things effectively and in ways that are equitable and that support diverse learners.

One of the main tensions in the field, right now, is this: If we believe that all language resources are inherently valuable, then what place should we provide in the classroom for the full range of language resources kids bring with them to school, from their regional dialects, cultural language practices, texting lingo, and so on? Historically, schools have tried to keep those other languages out, even disciplining students who try to speak in ways that don't sound school-like. But what would it mean to decide that those language resources can support what goes on in the classroom? If we're going to help students become fluent in academic ways of reading and writing, then why not also help them use the skills they've developed in other forms of language?

For example, in our professional development work with teachers, my colleagues and I have been focusing more on writing instruction. Increasingly, it's becoming clear to us that skilled writers don't confine themselves to just a single academic register (or tone). Rather, they blend registers together, pulling in different kinds of language for rhetorical effect. Think of President [Barack] Obama's speeches, for example. Sometimes he sounds like he's giving a university lecture, but then he'll suddenly shift into language that sounds more like a sermon. And he does this seamlessly, drawing from multiple language resources and making them his own.

If we want our students to become truly skilled writers, then isn't it important to help them develop this sort of rhetorical flexibility, so they can bring all sorts of language resources into their texts?

Of course, this isn't a new idea. There have always been writers who mix genres, and there have always been writing teachers who encourage students to borrow from different registers and change their style as they go, for rhetorical effect. But this is very different from how most middle grades educators have tended to think about writing instruction (or how they were taught to be writers!), which has always been very rule-bound and formal. So the big question for me is what will happen when we ask teachers to consider bringing kids' full range of language resources into the classroom? What happens if we suggest that teaching core academic language skills doesn't have to mean shutting out other ways of talking and writing?

