Southeast CC e-Bulletin Focus: Teaching Academic English to Ensure the Success of English Language Learners

By Maggie Rivas, Program Associate

Introduction
Successful educators of English Language Learners (ELLs) recognize that demonstrating language proficiency depends greatly on contextual factors. It is critical for classroom teachers to recognize that ELLs bring a broad variety of abilities and skills, both educational and personal experiences, as well as distinct talents. When teachers fail to look beyond their students' linguistic difficulties, they often fail to distinguish them as competent individuals.

Before teachers can determine the competency of ELL students in order to plan for instruction, they need to know the students' levels of language proficiency. There are a variety of labels for language proficiency across the country and school districts. For example, the Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) stages of language proficiency are designated as shown in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1: TESOL Levels of English Proficiency</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Level I: Starting</td>
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<td>Level II: Emerging</td>
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<tr>
<td>Level III: Developing</td>
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<td>Level IV: Expanding</td>
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<td>Level V: Bridging</td>
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(Continued on page 2.)
Each stage or level focuses on the characteristics of language performance by the student. The following conversation demonstrates how the TESOL stages can be used for teacher planning.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vignette</th>
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<tr>
<td>Ms. Clark: Where were you yesterday, Jesse?</td>
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<td>Jesse: Home cus I had to take Lupe to the emergency hospital cus, she fall and hit her head and blood was coming out and she was crying loud. My mama went to work already, so I call my cousin to take me to the hospital with my sister.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ms. Clark: What about you, María Elida?</td>
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<tr>
<td>María Elida: I sick. (She points to her teeth.) Sick teeth.</td>
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</table>

In the vignette, Jesse demonstrates some fluency with the English language, whereas María Elida shows limited English proficiency. Jesse's level of proficiency is Developing Level III, so he will be able to analyze and classify information if Ms. Clark presents the information in small chunks and provides visual support. However, María Elida demonstrates that she is able to communicate basic concepts with limited understanding of syntax.

Ensuring the academic success of ELLs, such as Jesse and María Elida, has never been more critical. With the passage of the NCLB legislation in 2001, every American public school is assessed on the performance of all students, including ELLs. ELLs' academic success is greatly contingent upon achieving academic English language proficiency. Therefore, it is essential for teachers to begin providing rich and meaningful content lessons. As part of this effort, teachers need to plan each lesson with both content and language objectives for engaging ELLs in thinking about and using the English language. (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2004). These language objectives not only will serve as a reminder for teachers but also will raise student awareness of the importance of developing academic English skills.

**What is Academic English?**

For many years, ELL teachers focused their efforts on increasing each student’s conversational vocabulary. However, if ELL students are to reach their full potential, they also must master academic English, the language common to the content that is taught. Thus, it is vital for teachers to be aware of the differences between conversational fluency and academic language proficiency. According to Cummins (2000), there is a clear distinction between academic language and social language. As demonstrated in the above vignette, both students had some knowledge of social language. Social language is basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS); it is context-reduced and cognitively undemanding. In Jesse's case, he is at a different level of English proficiency and is able to explain and use more language than María Elida. Both students were able to answer the question but at different levels of language proficiency.

Learning academic English language is probably one of the most predictable ways of achieving success not only in school but also socioeconomically. Academic English language requires knowledge and abilities in the content areas as well as communicating in many social and academic settings. Therefore, ELLs must develop advanced levels of proficiency in listening, speaking, reading, and writing structure and its academic rules. This type of language proficiency usually takes 2 to 3 years. While, cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) is demanding, it is the language of the classroom, of the disciplines, higher order thinking skills, and textbooks. Since academic language is more challenging, it can take 5 to 7 years to acquire proficiency to a point that will allow ELLs to benefit from academic instruction in English. (Cummins, 2000).

Scarcella (2003) notes in her proposed framework the significance of linguistic, cognitive, and sociocultural/psychological dimensions as critical for students in learning academic English. For example, Table 2 (see page 3) illustrates the 5 linguistic components: phonological, lexical, grammatical, sociolinguistic, and discourse, as well as their features. In addition, the cognitive dimension of academic English, at a minimum, consists of components such as knowledge, higher order thinking, cognitive and metalinguistic strategies. The student's social and cultural norms, such as values, attitudes, beliefs, and social practices, also influence the sociocultural/psychological dimension. (Continued on page 4.)
Table 2: A Description of the Linguistic Components of Academic English and Their Associated Features Used in Everyday Situations and in Academic Situations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Linguistic Components of Ordinary English</th>
<th>Linguistic Components of Academic English</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1. The Phonological Component</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>knowledge of everyday English sounds and the ways sounds are combined, stress and intonation, graphemes, and spelling</td>
<td>knowledge of the phonological features of academic English, including stress, intonation, and sound patterns.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Examples: <em>ship</em> versus <em>sheep</em> /ɪʃ/ - /ʃ/</td>
<td>Examples: <em>demography</em>, <em>demographic</em>, <em>cadence</em>, <em>generic</em>, <em>casualty</em>, and <em>celerity</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>sheet</em> versus <em>cheat</em> /ʃ/ - /ʃ/</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Example: <em>find out</em></td>
<td>Example: <em>investigate</em></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>2. The Lexical Component</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>knowledge of the forms and meanings of words occurring in everyday situations; knowledge of the ways words are formed with prefixes, roots, suffixes, the parts of speech of words, and the grammatical constraints governing words</td>
<td>knowledge of the forms and meanings of words that are used across academic disciplines (as well as in everyday situations outside of academic settings); knowledge of the ways academic words are formed with prefixes, roots, and suffixes, the parts of speech of academic words, and the grammatical constraints governing academic words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Example: <em>find out</em></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>3. The Grammatical Component</strong></td>
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<td>knowledge of morphemes entailing semantic, syntactic, relational, phonological, and distributional properties; knowledge of syntax; knowledge of simple rules of punctuation</td>
<td>knowledge that enables ELs to make sense out of and use the grammatical features (morphological and syntactic) associated with argumentative composition, procedural description, analysis, definition, procedural description, and analysis; knowledge of the grammatical co-occurrence restrictions governing words; knowledge of grammatical metaphor; knowledge of more complex rules of punctuation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>4. The Sociolinguistic Component</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>knowledge that enables ELs to understand the extent to which sentences are produced and understood appropriately; knowledge of frequently occurring functions and genres</td>
<td>knowledge of an increased number of language functions. The functions include the general ones of ordinary English such as apologizing, complaining, and making requests as well as ones that are common to all academic fields; knowledge of an increased number of genres, including expository and argumentative text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>5. The Discourse Component</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>knowledge of the basic discourse devices used, for instance, to introduce topics and keep the talk going and for beginning and ending informal types of writing, such as letters and lists</td>
<td>knowledge of the discourse features used in specific academic genres including such devices as transitions and other organizational signals that, in reading, aid in gaining perspectives on what is read, in seeing relationships, and in following logical lines of thought; in writing, these discourse features help ELs develop their theses and provide smooth transitions between ideas</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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What Does it Look Like?

First and foremost, academic English language consists of the language functions needed for school success. (Cummins 1992 & 1994). As ELLs advance through school, the academic demands and linguistic contexts become more difficult. Gottlieb (2004) reports that language complexity includes using academic or technical vocabulary, comprehending varying lengths of utterances and passages, responding to varying language patterns and functions, and relying on paralinguistic cues and visual support to construct meaning. When students demonstrate a high degree of academic language, they are able to use English in complex cognitive thinking and problem-solving skills to understand and communicate the new and abstract concepts taught in the content areas.

For example, academic English language in teaching mathematics includes specialized vocabulary and content related phrases, procedures, learning activities, and complex thinking processes. Take the word number and other content related words, such as digit, numeral, amount, place value, and quantity. The student might know number, but these other terms also must be learned if the student is to have success in mathematics. In these situations, the math teacher needs to encourage students to talk about math vocabulary and their understanding of problems. Vocabulary instruction should occur in context, that is, as an intrinsic part of classroom lessons in mathematics.

For as Molina (2006) found in his research, teachers commonly taught mathematics without considering the implications of 1) total isolation of mathematics between language arts 2) that learning vocabulary is part of learning the content, 3) the difficulty in learning the English language itself, 4) that mathematical terms are rarely used outside of the mathematics classroom, 5) the abstract nature of many mathematical terms, and 6) the ambiguity and confusion students often experience when they don’t have the needed academic vocabulary. In fact, according to Culyer (1988), research indicates that math is the most difficult content area material to read, since there tends to be more concepts per word, per sentence, and per paragraph than in any other area. Mere definitions are often not enough. Students need to think about and discuss vocabulary and the concepts that the terms represent to internalize them. This explains why ELL students have difficulties in mathematics—it is simply difficulty with the academic English of mathematics.

The Role of Teacher-Student Interactions

Cummins and Schecter’s Framework for Academic Language Learning (2003) draws attention to the importance of teacher-student interactions as the most direct cause of student success or failure in school.

The framework starts with the idea that educators view the learning process through two lenses, one being cognitive engagement and the other being the identity empowerment of the students. The teacher-student interaction capitalizes on cognitive engagement of the student by focusing on meaningful and comprehensible input in the target language. Cognitive engagement reflects the students’ depth of prior knowledge in making connections, justifying positions, in searching for solutions to problems and issues, and in exploring possible options. At this point, the student has to have a depth of understanding of the concepts and vocabulary. Such development of understanding will occur when the teacher takes a course of action in which students are able to make connections by using their prior knowledge and experiences to understand textual context and instruction.

For example, if the function of academic language is to seek information, the student’s task would be to observe, explore, and inquire to obtain information. The teacher’s instruction would focus on ensuring that the student would be able to use questions such as who, what, when, where, and how to gather information. Teachers must ensure that positive experiences related to the student’s identity are part of their instruction by providing ample opportunities for students to focus on language and its meaning, use, and functions. Furthermore, positive social interaction can help students view the school and classroom as comfortable and friendly places where they will feel safe using their new language skills and may provide basic motivation for communicating in English.

What Can Teachers Do?

Every teacher needs to have a role in teaching academic English regardless of whether ELL students are enrolled in the class. Fillmore and Snow (2002) advocate that schools provide opportunities for all teachers to engage in professional development through activities that focus on developing and strengthening academic English language. Schools also have found success by participating in professional learning communities to enhance their own learning about academic English.

Teachers can enhance academic achievement by creating language-rich classrooms, by using graphic organizers, and by building vocabulary through the use of cognates to make cognitive connections to the student’s native language. Teachers also should recognize the diversity represented in
the classroom by incorporating multicultural literature into
the curriculum and by inviting parents and family members
to share facets of their cultures with the class. ELLs need to
develop an understanding of and appreciation for others,
considering the diversity of society.

What Can School Leaders Do?
School leaders need to recognize the role that academic
English language has in the areas of curriculum, instruction,
and assessment for school accountability purposes. One
way to do this is through organized study groups to
study academic English or other embedded professional
development strategies.

What Can School Districts Do?
School districts can recognize that their schools are challenged
to meet the academic and linguistic needs of ELLs. They can
ensure that all students have access to equally challenging
curriculum and that expectations for achievement are held
to the same high level as they are in content areas. School
districts also can provide ample opportunities to address the
needs of ELLs by offering professional development in the area
of academic English language. In addition, they can support
the implementation of instructional strategies that address
the language needs of ELLs. Such strategies are a necessary
foundation to guide language instruction for K—12 students.

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SECC Regional Forum Provides
Leadership Tools for NCLB
By Chris Times, Communications Associate

Ask an experienced manager to define the keys to a successful
project, and he’ll probably say: a good plan, a qualified
team, and the right tools. The staff at the Southeastern
Comprehensive Center (SECC) couldn’t agree more. They
work closely with the states in their region to build capacity
to implement NCLB by providing the technical assistance,
professional development, resources, and tools required to get
the job done.

During its second annual regional forum, SECC placed the
spotlight on “Leadership Tools for NCLB.” The forum took
place October 23–25, 2007, in Atlanta, Georgia. More than
120 leaders from the state education departments of
Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, and South Carolina
participated in presentations, interactive activities, working
sessions, and networking opportunities.

The forum was designed
to help state educational
leaders address NCLB
implementation challenges
and planning strategies.
Participants selected from
four strands, which consisted
of leadership skills for state
level staff, strategic leadership, issues in teacher quality, and
middle/high school reform.

(Continued on page 6.)
Feedback from the event was overwhelmingly positive (see comments from attendees on right), with many participants planning to share information with coworkers and colleagues.

Debra Meibaum, Mississippi Liaison for the SECC, served as chairperson for the event. Reflecting on the experience, she says, “The forum had a wonderful representation from all five of our states. Throughout the entire 2.5 days, our participants consistently demonstrated their enthusiasm for learning and their desire for networking with their colleagues from the other states.”

For additional information on leadership tools or other NCLB issues, contact your state liaison. To view the agenda and resource materials from the forum, visit the SECC Web site at: http://secc.sedl.org/forum/07/files/index.html.

### State Highlights and Events

**Alabama**

**Meeting the Social, Academic, and Language Needs of ELLs**
*Provided By Gayle De Jong, EdD, AL State Department of Education*

One of the challenges faced in education in the Southeast today is the growing population of English Language Learners (ELLs). The Alabama Department of Education (ADE) and systems throughout the state are meeting the challenge with a focus on professional development and parent involvement activities.

Using the results of an ELL Needs Assessment, Alabama developed a plan for statewide professional development that included superintendents, school administrators, ELL specialists, and classroom teachers. The state sponsored 3 different 1-day programs to provide individuals in leadership positions with an overview of federal law and effective ELL instructional programs and strategies.

Eight school districts throughout the state were selected to participate in a Professional Development Academy for secondary schools based on a commitment to build capacity in their own systems. These dedicated educators meet for 2-day sessions to refine their instructional skills and develop strategies for local professional development. An additional academy is planned for elementary school teams.

State sponsored professional development activities include “Writing For ELLs,” an exciting online course for working with ELLs hosted by Alabama Public Television, spring training for all Alabama Reading Initiative (ARI) and Alabama Math, Science and Technology Initiative (AMSTI) coaches in academic language and English language proficiency standards, workshops in Mathematics for ELLs, and working with Special Education ELLs at the summer MEGA Conference.

(Continued on page 7.)

**Forum Comments from Participants**

“The sessions were informative and beneficial. The closing session was fabulous and hit close to home.”

“Presenter/keynote speakers were excellent and very open to questions and clarification.”

“The workshop in high school reform and the closing workshop were outstanding.”

“Information gathered will help the department better prepare schools on focusing for obtaining higher student achievement.”

“I will use much of what I have gained in preparing new principals.”

“The discussion and information on the workplace readiness – very pertinent to today’s learner.”

“I work with adolescent literacy, and the sessions I attended will help me as we expand initiatives.”

“Overall, a very well organized, informative conference.”
Alabama also has some noteworthy ELL parental involvement activities, which include:

- Parent involvement specialists hold monthly meetings for parents that focus on learning activities and informational meetings with topics in both Spanish and English
- Teachers conduct English lessons for ELL families and other community members
- Adult ESL classes provide parenting lessons on topics ranging from helping children with homework to car seat safety.

All of the above activities lead to parents furthering their education and developing their English while participating in their children's education and gaining a better understanding of the expectations of the school system.

Georgia

**ELL Activities and Resources**  
*Provided By Deborah Houston, GA State Department of Education*

Each year, the Georgia Department of Education (GDE) evaluates comprehension and communication for English language learners in its school systems with its ACCESS for ELLs assessment tool. ACCESS for ELLs is used to determine the English language proficiency levels and progress in the domains of speaking, listening, reading, and writing. On November 13–16, 2007, the GDE held a pre-administration workshop for facilitators, administrators, and other staff. The ACCESS testing window for ELLs is from January 22–March 3, 2008. Georgia's ACCESS for ELLs meets the NCLB mandate requiring states to evaluate ELL students in K–12 on their progress in learning to speak English. Detailed information on the assessment tool is available on the GDE Web site.

In addition to information on standards, instruction, and assessment testing, the GDE's Web site contains activities for ESOL students, guides for encouraging diversity in the classroom, and other resource and educational materials.

To provide greater access to information for ELL educators, students, and ESOL colleagues, the GDE published its first issue of The ESOL Exchange newsletter in June 2007. The newsletter features information on ESOL courses, activities, and events. It also features ESOL and limited English proficient (LEP) students and their success stories. In the June issue of the newsletter, 8th-grade ESOL students at a middle school in the Cobb County School District were recognized for achieving 75% on the New Georgia Middle Grade Writing Assessment Test.

Louisiana

**ELL Standards, Assessments, and Tools**  
*Provided By Janet Mora, LA State Department of Education*

The Louisiana Department of Education (LDE), in collaboration with other participating states in the English Language Learners' (ELLs) State Collaborative and Assessment and Student Standards for English (SCASS), is working on several projects. One of these projects is the development of a screening instrument that is similar in format to the English Language Development Assessment (ELDA) that measures both social and academic English language skills. Districts will be able to utilize this screening instrument to identify students who are in need of ELL services and better target each student's specific social and academic language needs.

Another major project is an online tool that could be used to help guide selection of accommodations for ELLs to facilitate their acquisition of academic language. Additionally, the LDE is working on the development of a guide to assist with meeting NCLB requirements, particularly the establishment of appropriate Annual Measurable Achievement Objectives (AMAOs), alignment of English language assessments and ELL standards, as well as linkage between English language assessments and performance on content assessments. The LDE recognizes that all these areas are essential for driving the instruction and assessment of academic language that ELLs must acquire.

The U.S. Department of Education is planning a visit to the LDE on February 11–15, 2008, to monitor the state's implementation of Title III and NCLB. This visit will include a visit to 3 Title III subgrantees.

Mississippi

**Technical Assistance for English Language Proficiency Standards**  
*By Maggie Rivas, Program Associate*

Title III of NCLB requires states to establish English language proficiency (ELP) standards that are aligned to ELP assessments and linked to the state's academic standards. To lend support to the Mississippi Department of Education's (MDE's) Innovative Support Title III staff, the Southeast Comprehensive Center continues to provide technical assistance in revising (Continued on page 8.)
Mississippi’s ELP standards for English language learners (ELLS) (committee working session shown in photo). This work started with the SECC facilitating a 2-day meeting with MDE’s Title II staff and ELL Committee of Practitioners in May 2007 and continued through October 2007. At the end of October, a draft of the document was submitted to Dr. Gary Cook, an outside consultant, for review and comments. MDE and SECC staff met with Dr. Cook to discuss comments and feedback that were incorporated into the revisions. MDE’s ELP Standards have been developed in accordance with the TESOL ESL Standards for Pre-K–12 Students and the work of other national standards. The MDE’s ELP Standards specify the language competencies ESL students in elementary and secondary schools need to become fully proficient in English, have equal access to appropriate instruction in challenging content academic subjects, and in due course, to not only be successful in school but also be prepared for life.

MDE’s ELL Committee of Practitioners ensured that the following components are addressed in the revised standards:

- Development and attainment of English language proficiency by ELLs
- Application of the domains of listening, speaking, reading, writing, and comprehension
- Linkage to the academic content achievement standards in English Language Arts, Science, and Mathematics.

MDE’s ELL Committee of Practitioners revised the ELP standards for the various target audiences in Mississippi, such as local school districts, administrators, curriculum specialists, and teachers in K–12 schools. These audiences will use the standards to develop effective and equitable education that is inclusive of English language learners.

South Carolina

Academic English for ELLs
By Sandy Lindsay, State Liaison

As the number of ELLs in South Carolina (SC) continues to increase, it has become clear that all school staff have a role to play in making sure our students acquire academic English quickly. In recognition of this necessity, a focus of the Title III coordinator has been to provide mainstream teachers of ELLs with appropriate staff development that helps them understand how to effectively teach these students academic content objectives. While SC has long used ITV and streaming video of English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) programming for this purpose, we decided to do more direct staff development for mainstream teachers at the beginning of this school year with plans to continue this effort in future years.

The first “live” professional development opportunity for mainstream teachers sponsored by the SC Department of Education (SCDE) was offered in September 2007 for about 200 teachers and was provided by Jane D. Hill of Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL), co-author of the book “Classroom Instruction that Works with English Language Learners.” Jane’s training, which focused on about 100 teachers a day for 2 days, was very involved and modeled great instructional strategies that teachers could begin to apply as soon as they returned to their schools. In one powerful exercise, she demonstrated how ELLs at even the earliest stages of English language acquisition could access content at all levels of Bloom's taxonomy while demonstrating grade level content knowledge. The feedback from this training was enthusiastic, and due to the response, the SCDE will plan more of this hands-on staff development for many more mainstream teachers soon.