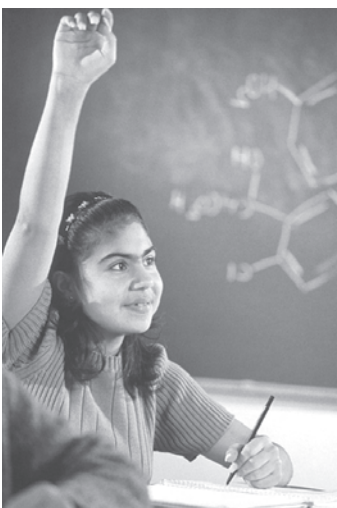
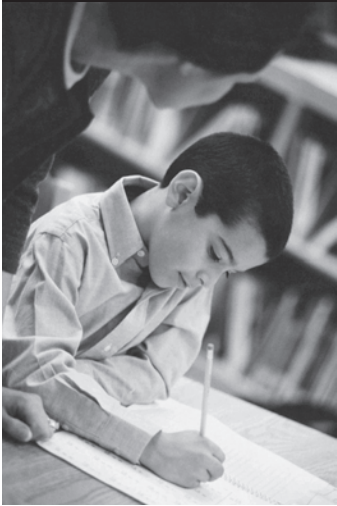


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Deconstructing Language for English Learners

*Based on a presentation by
Vanessa Girard and Pam Spycher*

Vanessa Girard is the director of instructional support for Elk Grove Unified School District. She created and was the director of WestEd's English Learners and the Language Arts (ELLA) teacher professional development program. Pam Spycher is a senior research associate in the Comprehensive School Assistance Program at WestEd and the current director of ELLA.

Building a home is a useful metaphor for understanding how to approach instruction for students who are learning English. When designing a house, architects begin by looking at the location, evaluating the amenities the site brings, and determining what modifications will be needed to successfully build there. They also consider the overall design of the house and the specialized needs of the family that will live in the home. How many bedrooms are needed? Should the kitchen be large or small?

When working with English Learners, teachers should also start by considering the unique qualities of “the location”—that is, what the students bring to school. What is their educational background in their native language? How much time have they spent learning English in their home country? What are their academic strengths? Only with knowledge about what

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This publication is based on a presentation made at the 2006 ELL Administrator Conference hosted by the Sonoma County Office of Education (SCOE). As part of its Aiming High initiative, SCOE is providing this resource to teachers in Sonoma County.

each English Learner brings to school can teachers determine what needs to be done to bring them to parity with their English-speaking peers.

When planning instruction for English Learners, teachers should be aware that students need to learn more than just new words. English Learners must learn how the English language is constructed. Teaching students about

language construction enables them to use the specialized features of the language and gives them a strong foundation in English.

At the 15th annual ELL Administrator Conference held in April 2006, Vanessa Girard and Pam

Spycher presented detailed information about how to “construct language” for English Learners. They provided a range of ideas for how teachers can build academic language skills throughout the day to expedite student understanding across content areas.

“If students don’t know the academic language that affords them access to content, we do them a disservice,” says Girard. “They really cannot learn the content. All students deserve the access and advantages that academic language affords.”

What is academic language?

The kind of language we use is specific to the situation in which we are participating. The three specialized languages that English Learners use are:

- Their primary language.
- The social English of the hallways, playgrounds, neighborhoods, movies, and television shows.
- The academic English that is used in the classroom, which is filled with new words, figurative expressions, multiple verb tenses, complex grammar structures, and various communication strategies.

Academic English is very different from the language that’s used at home with family and friends. While both require linguistic competence in the four skill areas—reading, writing, speaking, and listening—academic language demands more extensive use of reading and writing, precise grammar and vocabulary, and higher order skills

Everyday language	Academic language
There was a guy...	The main character is a young man...
Going to Alcatraz was great.	Visiting Alcatraz was an interesting and informative experience.
Then we looked at the stuff with the microscope.	Next, we placed the slide under the microscope.
The telephone was invented in 1876. It changed the way people talked to one other.	The invention of the telephone in 1876 radically changed American communication.

such as comparing/contrasting and predicting. These language demands are often specific to the subject matter students are studying.

Of course, what’s especially challenging for English Learners is that they must gain academic language proficiency at the same time that they’re studying core content areas. This, in essence, doubles their work and complicates their path toward language proficiency.

To be considered fully proficient in academic English, students must be able to use language that is authoritatively presented, informationally dense, and highly structured (*Schleppegrell, 2004*). They must use precisely chosen words and formal sentence structures appropriate to the content area being studied. Their language must also be keyed to the academic task they are engaged in—comparing and contrasting two characters, analyzing what’s being asked in a math problem, explaining cause and effect in history, or hypothesizing on the outcome of a science experiment.

In order to attain academic language proficiency, students must gain competency with both receptive language (reading and listening) and expressive

language (writing and speaking). Vanessa Girard and Pam Spycher recommend that teachers help students analyze how writers and speakers use language to achieve a purpose. By constructing and deconstructing language at the word, clause, and whole-text levels, students can build language skills specific to the function or task they are being asked to perform.

“Deconstructing language helps students construct academic language. It promotes increasing levels of fluency for all,” says Girard.

Working at the word level to develop word consciousness

Developing word consciousness is one way to get started learning academic language. Word consciousness refers to the knowledge and attitudes necessary for students to learn, appreciate, and effectively use words.

We all know people who love to use unusual words in everyday interactions, enjoy playing Scrabble, or excel at word puzzles. Those people understand how words work, how they are put together, and how to find meaning by looking at parts and relationships. They have strongly developed word consciousness.

California’s English Language Development (ELD) standards call for students to apply knowledge of word parts—which is another way of saying they must have word consciousness. This means that students must be able to recognize and use common English morphemes and word relationships such as roots and affixes to derive the meaning of known and unknown words.

At the word level, vocabulary study will lead students to greater familiarity with varied and precise language. By adding construction and deconstruction techniques to the language-learning regimen, teachers can help students advance their word consciousness skills.

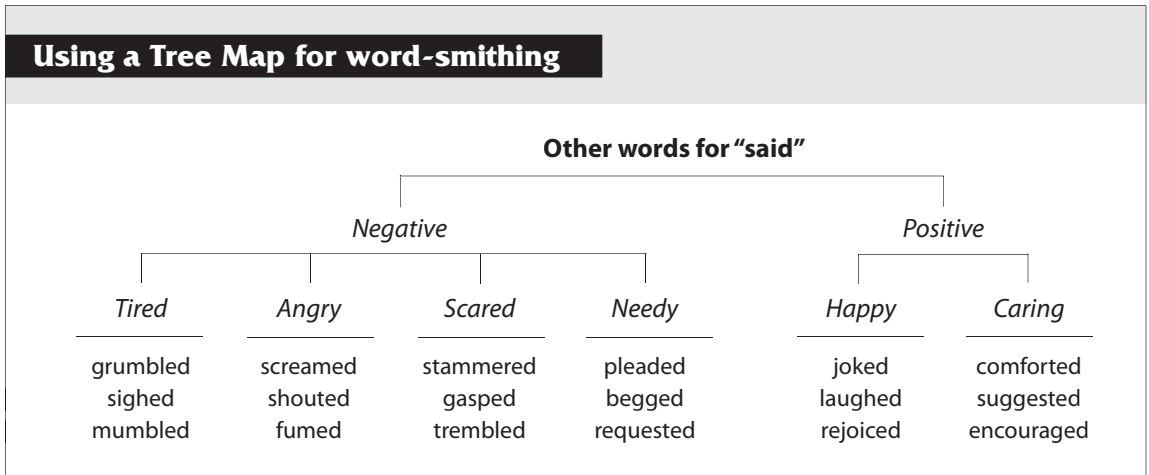
Here are five techniques that focus

on word-level construction and deconstruction. These techniques set the stage for students to think about the word choices they have and how the choices they make can increase the precision of what they say and write. This is key to successful participation in academic settings.

Word-smithing. Vanessa Girard suggests the use of word-smithing as one strategy for teaching students how to select words. The procedures in word-smithing are just as the name implies—changing words to improve the precision and specificity of a sentence. In word-smithing, teachers ask students to transform a sentence or short piece of text by replacing generalized, vague words with more precise ones. For example:

In a second-grade classroom, the teacher notices that students are overusing the words *mad* and *sad*. Using an overhead projector to show a piece of student work, she highlights the word *sad* and says, “This word is not very specific. I think *frustrated* might be a better word. People are frustrated when they’ve tried and tried, but haven’t been

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successful. Can you see why I think *frustrated* is a better word? Let's use it instead." The teacher then revises the sentence using the new word.

Word-smithing helps students become familiar with and understand the context for increasingly sophisticated and meticulous language through an activity that can be both fun and challenging. Working in pairs or teams, students can compare their word-smithed sentences to see how vocabulary and grammar can clarify meaning.

Exploring word forms. Teachers can also increase word consciousness by helping students create and identify groups of words that are related. This can be done by looking at—and talking about—how the addition of affixes and inflections effect the meaning of words. For example, students might look at a group of words like this: *define, defined, defining, definition, definitions, redefine, redefined, redefines, redefining, undefined.*

This is a good activity for pairs of students who are at the intermediate or advanced level of English proficiency. It effectively focuses students on word relationships and builds greater understanding of how English works. When students learn the meaning and function of affixes and inflections, they have knowledge that will help them decipher new and unfamiliar words.

Grouping words. Another way to develop word consciousness is to have students create lists of words that relate to a specific topic—for example, types of habitats or things associated with the Bill of Rights.

<i>Types of habitats</i>	<i>Things associated with the Bill of Rights</i>
Desert	Constitution
Mountain	Amendments
Lake	Rights
Grassland	Freedom

When students group associated words, they have multiple opportunities to build connections across words and to expand their “word repertoire” within a content area. This seemingly simple technique can go a long way toward strengthening word knowledge among English Learners.

Playing the Say It! game. The Say It! game is adapted from *Building Academic Vocabulary* by Robert Marzano and Debra Pickering. It involves students in

Purposes of academic language

- **Present ideas and display knowledge**

- Explain and interpret events
- Clarify, explain processes, build theories

- **Document findings**

- Record, interpret, judge
- Present conclusions objectively

- **Structure text in expected ways**

- Focus explanations and interpretation
- Build information and procedure

defining target terms in their own words and getting teammates to recognize the terms from their definitions. In the Say It! game, one student is the giver and the other students are the guessers. Using categories of words—for example, types of habitats or things that are round—the giver describes each word in the category one-by-one without naming the category or using rhyming words. The other students try to guess each word and the category that links the words together. This is an excellent activity for students who complete their work early. Students can also work on creating category cards to be used in future Say It! games.

Presenting teacher think-alouds. In this activity, teachers explain how they choose words by verbalizing their thought process. For example, beginning with the sentence, “His mother was angry,” a teacher might say the following while making changes to the sentence on the board or overhead projector in front of the class.

I want to be more specific about his mother by answering the question, “Whose mother are we talking about?” So, I am going to replace the word *his* with *Jack's* because this explains whose mother it is. I'm going to use the possessive form—Jack with an apostrophe s—because I want to show that the mother mentioned “belongs” to Jack. Then, I want to describe exactly how angry the mother was. Was she a little bit angry, or a lot? I'm going to add the word *extremely* because she was very, very angry. I've changed my sentence to read, *Jack's mother was extremely angry.*

Working at the clause level to build understanding of complex sentences

When teachers encourage students to look at how academically dense sentences are constructed, they are helping them understand that the same idea can be communicated in different ways. Using sentence frames, deconstructing complex sentences, and combining sentences are strategies that can help students analyze how sentences are put together and how expert writers and speakers use complex sentence structures to convey meaning in an unambiguous manner.

Lifting sentences from text. Teachers can use text from content lessons to show students how sentences work, thereby integrating academic language learning with content instruction. Girard and Spycher suggest using a sentence-lifting technique to teach students about sentence structure. To focus attention on a particular sentence structure that students need to practice, teachers “lift” an example from a core text. As they deconstruct the model sentence, teachers can explain the sentence’s meaning and construction.

The box below shows two samples of sentence lifting designed to foster student understanding of dependent and relative clauses. The deconstruction of these sentences shows students the separate ideas embedded in the sentences and how those ideas are interrelated. From the deconstruction, they can see that the complex sentences allow a writer to convey more meaning with fewer words.

Once students learn to deconstruct complex

sentences, they need to practice the reverse process— sentence construction. At the beginning level, students should practice combining sentences with conjunctions like *and* and *but*. Students at the intermediate level and above should be learning to use independent and dependent clauses.

Changing verbs to nouns. Another device that promotes student understanding of complex sentence structure is nominalization, or transforming the verbs novice speakers use to nouns that are more frequently found in academic dialogue and texts. Turning verbs into nouns is typical of academic language because it supports discussion of general concepts. Here are two examples of how changing verbs to nouns alters the academic feel of sentences.

■ **Original:** Scientists *developed* plants that responded to fertilizer and farmers were able to *produce* more.

Revised: The *development* of plants responsive to fertilizer led to increased *production*.

Students must be able to use language that is authoritatively presented, informationally dense, and highly structured.

Lifted sentence	Deconstruction of the lifted sentence
Moose, who was quietly grazing in the swamp, noticed her friends running by.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Moose was quietly grazing. 2. Moose noticed her friends. 3. Her friends were running by.
Grandma India and Mother Lois followed the story closely; but when we discussed it over dinner, the talk about white people doing bad things to us kept me from telling them I had signed the list to go to Central High. —from <i>Melba’s Choice</i> in High Point, Level C	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Grandma India and Mother Lois followed the story closely. 2. We talked at dinner. 3. Grandma and Mother said white people were doing bad things to us (black people). 4. I didn’t tell them. 5. I had signed the list to attend Central High.

- **Original:** The insurgents *attacked* the police station with guns and then *released* the prisoners.

Revised: The *attack* of the armed insurgents caused the *release* of the prisoners.

Providing sentence frames. Sentence frames are another technique for teaching students to understand and use a particular type of text. For example, in Scott Foresman’s *California Science* text for grade 2, students learn about the effects of force on objects and conduct an experiment using magnets. The following sentence frames guide students in developing the academic language needed to report on cause and effect.

- If ____ is ____, then ____.
- One possible outcome of ____ might be ____.
- Because ____ is ____, the result will be ____.

Sentence frames can be used with students at various levels of English proficiency. Basic frames can help students at the beginning levels, while academic frames can support advanced learners.

When using frames, it’s important for teachers to explicitly tell students what’s important about the frame—for example, that the *if/then* statement indicates cause and effect—so that students can generalize those aspects of academic language to other tasks they are asked to perform.

Working at the text level to teach the features of content-specific language

The academic genres that students encounter in school include both narrative and expository texts

and range from summaries and short stories to procedures, explanations, and arguments. Within these varied text genres, the language used is often specific to the content area being studied. For example, mathematics texts utilize language to describe procedures and often include comparatives, while history texts frequently employ sequence and cause-and-effect structures.

Explicit teaching of the features specific to subject-area texts is essential to the development of academic language. Subject-area texts or genres can be distinguished by a number of characteristics, as illustrated below.

<i>Subject Area</i>	<i>Characteristics</i>
Language Arts	Action verbs to report events, noun phrases with adjectives and prepositions
History-Social Science	Past-tense verbs, structures to compare and contrast, conjunctions to show cause and effect
Mathematics	Action verbs to describe processes, comparatives, conjunctions to sequence
Science	Verbs to describe relationships and express possibilities, conjunctions to show time sequences

Using graphic organizers. Graphic organizers can help students recognize how sentences are built around an academic function or task. For example, in history,

A graphic organizer used to sequence historical events



This sequencing graphic includes signal words (above the boxes) and past-tense action verbs (in the boxes).

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teachers can focus on the time sequence and words that signal chronological order to help students understand what the text is saying. By using a sequencing graphic or Flow Map, students can explore the academic purpose of the text and organize their thoughts. For

example, after reading this text from Prentice Hall's *Medieval and Early Modern Times* for grade 7, students identified the sequence of events in Muhammad's life using the graphic organizer illustrated on page 6.

Muhammad was orphaned at an early age and raised by his uncle. At 25, he married a wealthy, widowed merchant named Khadija.... One night in 610, according to Islamic beliefs, Muhammad had a vision or revelation.... In 630, Muhammad returned to Mecca as a conqueror. Muhammad died two years later.

Specific content areas have distinctive linguistic and syntactic characteristics, such as usage of specific types of verbs. In the history text above, all the verbs are past tense and describe actions or states of being. With explicit instruction, students can learn that, when they are writing a historical sequence, verbs should focus on past actions and signal words should specify time order. In future lessons, teachers can guide their students in using varied signal words and past-tense verbs.

By explicitly teaching the linguistic characteristics of particular text types, teachers can lead students to a deeper understanding of how different texts are constructed. This, in turn, increases their facility in creating their own written and spoken academic responses.

Exploring the features of text. Text features—table of contents, bold print, illustrations, captions, and headings—can serve as signposts for students struggling with complicated written materials in science, history, mathematics, and language arts. When teachers take the time to explicitly teach students how these features are used across the content areas, students learn to use the “cues” these features provide to identify what's important and where to focus their attention.

Joanna Cuellar, an English Learner support teacher at Sam V. Curtis Elementary School in San Bernardino County, created a three-part lesson that helped third-grade students identify text features of expository writing. She began by presenting the idea that expository text has features, just like a person's face has features. Showing students a drawing of a blank face, Cuellar added eyes, a nose, and a mouth, explaining that these parts of a face help us understand what a person is saying.

Using two large posters with narrative taken from a science book—one formatted as it appeared in the book and the other showing typed text without formatting—Cuellar and her students talked about the difference between the two text samples. The class worked together to identify, discuss, and label the various text features. Students then practiced finding the text features in other documents, working with a partner and using sticky notes to label their findings.

Later, the students were given an Expository/Non-Fiction Book Checklist. Working in groups of four, they used the checklist to evaluate a series of books and identify what features might be added to make the books more understandable. Suggestions included adding an illustration to show the growth cycle of an ant and including a glossary with page numbers.

In summary

Just teaching English vocabulary is not enough to equip students with the tools they'll need to succeed in our K-12 system. We must build their academic language skills by teaching strategies, building relationships, and guiding their analysis of how language is “built.”

Through a strong focus on deconstructing language at the word, clause, and text levels, teachers can help students construct academic language that is increasingly

precise and specific. When teachers use content-area text to clarify the structures and relationships created by language, students are empowered to build deeper understandings of how language creates meaning in the subjects they are studying.

Teachers should always build on what students know about both the content and language of the subjects they are studying. From this starting point, they can provide appropriate, effective, and explicit instruction about the specialized characteristics of language—and they can lend support to students who are learning the words and structures of academic English. ♦

Resources

- Pauline Gibbons, *Scaffolding Language, Scaffolding Learning*, 2002
- Robin Scarcella, *Accelerating Academic English: A Focus on the English Learner*, 2003
- Mary J. Schleppegrell, *Grammar for Writing: Academic Language and the ELD Standards*, 2003
- Mary J. Schleppegrell, *The Language of Schooling: A Functional Linguistics Perspective*, 2004

Developing academic language at Sonoma Valley Unified

Educational consultant Tonya Ward Singer has been working with fourth- and fifth-grade teachers in the Sonoma Valley Unified School District to develop more effective academic language lessons for use during English Language Development (ELD) time.

Using expository text from *Time for Kids: Exploring Non-Fiction Reading in the Content Areas*, the teachers have designed a series of lessons on different academic language functions—for example, compare/contrast, sequencing, and fact vs. opinion. They begin each lesson by introducing students to the topic, then guide them to:

- Identify key words in the text;
- Use visual tools to extract information from the text and organize their responses;
- Write sentences from their own experiences using key words; and
- Write academic sentences using the key words.

During one lesson that used a written piece about school uniforms, teachers developed response frames to support students at various levels of English proficiency. Beginning and early intermediate students focused on the use of qualitative words and adjectives (best, worst, huge, pretty, etc.). Students at higher levels of proficiency concentrated on the use of verbs like improve, strengthen, and decrease. All students participated in pair and small-group activities designed to support their comprehension of the topic and allow them to hear target language from a variety of input sources—including their fellow students. After the group activities, the students wrote short response pieces that further honed their academic language skills.

Teachers from the Sonoma Valley elementary schools come together after teaching each unit to review student work and identify instructional priorities for the next unit. These teachers will join in Tonya Ward Singer's presentation at this year's ELL Administrator Conference on March 21, 2007 at the Sonoma County Office of Education. You can register for this conference online at www.scoe.org/training. ♦

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