

# Aiming High

A COUNTYWIDE COMMITMENT TO CLOSE  
THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP FOR ENGLISH LEARNERS

## Aspirando a lo Mejor

# RESOURCE

## Academic Language

*What is it that differentiates students  
who make it from those who do not?*

*This list is long, but very prominent  
among the factors is mastery of  
academic language.*

—Lily Wong Fillmore, Ph.D.

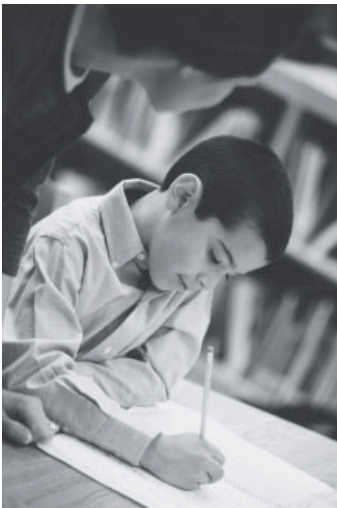


*All Sonoma County schools are to be  
commended for their commitment to  
the improvement of the academic lives  
of English Learners. The Sonoma  
County Office of Education is pleased  
to join with you in aiming for high  
achievement for these students.*

—Carl Wong, Ed.D.  
Superintendent of Schools



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## *About this publication*

This publication is one of four “briefs” that SCOE will be distributing over the next several months to support you in providing more effective instruction for the English Learners in your classrooms. Each publication will include a four-page summary of one of the excellent presentations made at the *Closing the Achievement Gap for EL Students* administrator conference that was held at SCOE in April 2004. Our goal in distributing these briefs is to provide access to information and resources that will help all of us, as a county, close the achievement gap for English Learners.

As you may know, 27 Sonoma County districts have formally agreed to concentrate efforts on raising English Learner achievement over the next four years through the Aiming High initiative. But whether you’re in an Aiming High district or not, *all* local educators face the challenge of improving instruction for EL students. Today, almost 20 percent of the students in Sonoma County schools are not fluent in English, which means that *every* teacher must have ways to reach out to English Learners and help them be successful in our schools. Some of us see this as a moral imperative, while others are motivated by the clear link between EL achievement and schoolwide accountability. Whatever your view, I can tell you that raising English Learner achievement is a critical aspect of school improvement efforts today.

This first brief is on **The Role of Language in Academic Development** from a keynote speech by Lily Wong Fillmore, Ph.D. This topic is extremely important to any gap-closing effort—and it’s something that’s relevant to teachers at all grade levels. In schools where teachers have promoted student learning of academic language, it has moved the whole school forward and enabled English Learners to reach higher levels of achievement.

Please note that this is not a “how to” guide for academic language development, but rather something to spark your interest in this important and complex topic. We’ve also compiled some print and Web resources if you want to learn more about this issue, and we’ve listed the training and curriculum support resources available at SCOE to assist you with implementation.

I hope you find this publication useful! I look forward to sending you three more briefs before the end of the school year.

Sincerely,

Don Russell, Ed.D.  
Assistant Superintendent  
Sonoma County Office of Education



## *The Role of Language in Academic Development*

*Excerpts from a presentation by Lily Wong Fillmore, Ph.D.*

*Jerome A. Hutto Professor in Education, University of California, Berkeley*

Educators are under a lot of pressure these days. There is a necessity to make sure that all students are making progress in school. We have to meet the state content standards, demonstrate progress in test scores, pay attention to the Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), and find ways to avoid the dreaded consequences of poor performance. The question of how to close the gap in achievement has never been more critical than it is right now.

What is it that differentiates students who make it from those who do not? The list is long, but very prominent among the factors is mastery of academic language. What I will be speaking about today is what is meant by academic language and why it is such a necessary part of language development for ALL kids if they are going to survive academically. I will also discuss the kinds of help that schools must provide students who aren't already proficient in English if they expect them to do their part in helping the school make its AYP.

In California we have 1.6 million students who are clearly limited in English proficiency. But it's not only the English Language Learners who have problems with language. There are at least half again as many who speak English only or who speak English along with another language for whom language is a barrier in school.

If we look at the 2003 California Standards test scores for all students, we see how students are doing in school. (See figure below.)

In the eleventh grade, only 32% of all students in California are at the advanced or proficient level; and only 3% of the students we call English Learners in California are proficient or advanced. Only 19% of African-American children—and these are English-speaking students—are at the advanced level. Think about the prospects for these students on the California High School Exit Examination. I have been analyzing the language and academic demands of high school exit exams across the country, and California is among the lowest. So there are some real issues here.

At the second grade, the English Language Learners perform well enough, considering that they don't know the language they are reading. But by fourth grade, the differences are evident, and from that point on, the test scores for the English Learners and the African-American students who do not have a mastery of academic language go downhill. What are some reasons for this dive in the test scores after fourth grade?

Up to the fourth grade, the text materials—by that I mean any kind of reading materials—are greatly simplified. The assumption is that up to the fourth grade, students are still learning how to read and can't handle anything more complex. But text simplification also means that the language used is not the language of academic discourse. So most children perform well enough on these tests up to that point because the tests focus primarily on basic skills.

But after fourth grade, textbooks and other print materials begin to carry an informational payload. Students have to be able to read and interpret them well enough to get information from them. The assumption here is that students now know how to read and don't need simplification, so the text material becomes a source of learning. To learn in school and become an educated person, students must learn to deal with the language in written text. Otherwise they can have only those experiences that are face-to-face with other people. Books are closed to them. The language used in written text after fourth grade is typical academic prose, and it gets more difficult as you go up the grades.

**2003 CALIFORNIA STANDARDS TEST SCORES**

| Level                   |                  | Gr 2 | Gr 4 | Gr 7 | Gr 9 | Gr 11 |
|-------------------------|------------------|------|------|------|------|-------|
| Adv & Proficient        | All students     | 36%  | 36%  | 36%  | 38%  | 32%   |
|                         | ELL              | 19%  | 15%  | 5%   | 6%   | 3%    |
|                         | African-American | 28%  | 27%  | 20%  | 23%  | 19%   |
| Basic                   | All students     | 32%  | 33%  | 31%  | 31%  | 29%   |
|                         | ELL              | 34%  | 30%  | 29%  | 29%  | 23%   |
|                         | African-American | 34%  | 34%  | 34%  | 34%  | 28%   |
| Below & Way Below Basic | All students     | 32%  | 32%  | 31%  | 31%  | 39%   |
|                         | ELL              | 48%  | 64%  | 65%  | 65%  | 73%   |
|                         | African-American | 38%  | 46%  | 44%  | 44%  | 54%   |

## *What is Academic English?*

Academic English is extended, reasoned discourse. It is not short responses or just one sentence after another. It is logical, connected discourse that is much more precise in reference than ordinary spoken language. In ordinary spoken language, we can be imprecise and the context might help with the meaning. Or the person you are addressing can say, “What do you mean by that?” Or you can see by the looks on their faces that you are not communicating and you have to be more precise.

Academic English uses grammatical devices that allow speakers and writers to pack as much information as necessary for interpretation into coherent and logical sequences. It is important to include just the right amount of information so people can figure out what you mean, but not too much so they get confused. It must be logical and coherent because usually academic discourse is not one-on-one.

Consider the writers of a fourth-grade science textbook. They have an idea of what fourth graders have had in the past, so they can assume some background knowledge. But they can't be sure that everyone has that background knowledge, so they have to pack some information in just in case there are some students who won't know what they are referring to. They include this information, and therefore sentences get more complex because they contain both background information and foreground material—the main message. By high school, the language is quite complex, and some high school teachers say they just put the textbook aside and do lectures or demonstrations. But this is a disservice to students. They need to be able to study this text, to learn to read and decipher it—and they will need help doing that.

At any grade level, it is problematic to think that if children don't understand the language or don't read well yet, they've got to have massively simplified text. Sometimes simplified text is actually harder to understand because there is not enough information to be able to make sense out of what is being said. Simplification is not always kind to readers. If you want people to understand what you are presenting, you have to include the appropriate information.

There are signposts in academic language, which, if you understand how to use them, can guide you through a well-formed text. Unlike spoken language, meaning in academic text is more dependent on the words and linguistic structures used in the text.

Academic vocabulary tends to be either Latin or Greek in origin. English, of course, has words from many different sources, but words with Latin or Greek roots are less likely to be as familiar as the words used in everyday social discourse. So it is helpful for students to know how to deal

## EXAMPLE

An 8<sup>th</sup> grade item on the NAEP test shows a rectangle that is twice as long as it is wide, and asks, What is the ratio of the width of the rectangle to its perimeter? It doesn't seem difficult, but only 11% of American 8<sup>th</sup> graders got it right as opposed to 56% of 8<sup>th</sup> graders in Singapore.

What was hard about it? The language looks easy enough and there are no numbers to mess with! There are some technical terms: perimeter and rectangle. There could be a problem with the words long and wide. We assume the students know the word ratio and what it means by the 8<sup>th</sup> grade. The student needs to interpret the descriptor perimeter as meaning twice width and length from the dimensional words wide and long. The next step is to recognize what's called for, and this is the difficult part. Math learning is not just about technical terms; it is understanding that ordinary terms are used to refer to relationships. The student needs to recognize that what's called for is the proportional relationship of width to perimeter. That seems to confuse the students because they are not always conscious of what the language is saying.

with Greek and Latin roots.

Real literacy of any sort requires a consciousness of language. No one can be literate without having a keen sense of how language works.

*Using language without being conscious of how words convey meanings and affect relationships is not communication.* Reading without being aware of what words communicate—either singly or collectively—is not real reading. Therefore, the skill that students need to acquire for academic development is to become conscious of how language is used in texts. This, by the way, is the language that is used on tests as well.

How can we help students acquire this skill of language awareness? Students do not usually pay much attention to the language that is used in texts. They are reading, but they are not really thinking about the words and what they mean. They are not paying attention to how things are said—at least not on their own. If they understand the text, or think they do, they think about the meaning and they let it go at that. If they don't understand, they are likely just to skip



over it. And that's where the problem lies.

That is why it is so important for someone to draw their attention to it. Someone has to get them to think about how language works—and not just in terms of words, but phrases, sentences, rhetorical devices, discourse structures, and the like. Someone needs to draw them into instructional conversations about language itself.

The CAHSEE is not an especially difficult examination, but the overall pass rate for the English Language Arts part is only 66%. For English Language Learners it is only 33%, and for students from low-income families, it's 51%. In math, it's a 43% pass overall, and 22% for English Language Learners, and 31% for low-income students. You have to pass both parts of it, so you can figure out how many students are not going to be graduating from high school.

In order to pass this test, students need to be prepared to deal with the language demands of high-stakes tests, and that process does not begin in high school. It begins in kindergarten and continues through elementary school, through middle school, and into high school. It requires an attention to language at all these levels, and the language that is worked on has to go across the curriculum.

## *Language Enrichment is a Key Factor*

What does it mean to “know English”? Linguistic knowledge includes grammatical, lexical, semantic and pragmatic knowledge, which allows speakers of a given language like English to communicate with other members of that speech community. It is often said in teacher training courses that by the time children enter school at age five, they will have mastered the language of the home. This is not true. Five-year-olds have a long way to go in language development, and the most important kinds of language development take place in school.

When children come to school speaking English, they have the English that is learned early in life, the English of basic face-to-face communication. Some children come with more than that if they come from talk-rich homes, or have been read to a lot. They may also be familiar with academic English or academic Spanish or academic Chinese or academic Hmong. The Hmong people are refugees from Southeast Asia, and because they come from a preliterate society, they were expected to be less likely to become literate in English. But that turned out not to be the case because they have one of the richest oral traditions you can imagine. Parents and grandparents tell elaborate stories to children each night so the children will know about the history of their people. Hmong mothers teach their children spontaneous poetry generation. They do this because one of the ways that you win yourself a partner is not by how you look, but rather

by the beauty of your soul as expressed in poetry. So mothers give their children an image or a metaphor and the child responds with a piece of spontaneous poetry. No formal literacy but such a rich oral tradition!

Reading stories to children is important. The linguistic structures, the vocabulary, the grammatical devices that distinguish academic English are most reliably found in written texts. Children who are already familiar with such usages have a running start on learning at school.

Children who have not had much exposure to written texts or who have not been read to much at home or been around people who make rich use of oral narratives and stories will need such experiences in school to learn such language. That is to say, if children come without this kind of experience, remediation compensation is not what they need. What they need is language enrichment, which gives them the same chance that other children have.

## *Instructional Support Is Needed for Academic English*

For all kids, school is where academic English is learned, and it is learned through literacy. English Learners need to learn the new language from scratch. They begin with the basics, which are readily available to them through social interactions with speakers of other languages. I have spent years studying the process by which children who don't speak English learn the language. I have looked at what they've learned from peers and what they've learned from teachers, and I can tell you that what they have learned from peers is just the basics. Only teachers can give them what they really need, which is the more complex forms of academic register.

Literacy takes time, but it's important to note that time alone, that is, simply being exposed to English at school, does not ensure academic English learning. Some people say it takes students five to seven years to master English. Actually, it's more like eight to ten years. Should it be taking that long? Absolutely not! It depends on the specific help that students are given. The eight to ten years is the result of benign neglect. Children cannot learn the language they need for academic development on their own. All students need instructional support, but especially English Learners. English Learners who have been exposed to academic language in their first language find it easier to acquire such language in English as long as they have help. This accounts for the fact that children who have been partly educated in Mexico or Hong Kong or Korea or Singapore usually do better than English Learners who are born in this country and have only been to schools here. In most of these other countries, no one expects that the children will learn anything on their own. There is massive teaching of language.

## *The Teacher's Role in Academic Language Development*

There are many ways that teachers can help students develop the academic language they need:

- *Teach academic language in the context of content instruction.* One naturally teaches English in the course of teaching math, science, social studies, and literature.
- *Find opportunities to work on the kinds of construction that figure in logical reasoning.* For example, use conditional sentences such as, “If x is true, then y must be true,” or conditional comparative constructions such as “If Yao is taller than Harry, and Harry is taller than Mini-Me, then Yao must be taller than Mini-Me!”
- *Find opportunities to teach the meanings and uses of terms that express relationships in time, space, quantity, direction, order, size, age and so on.* This has to be an essential part of the school’s curriculum whether or not the standards say so because ultimately the test includes these terms.
- *Study the use of prepositions such as: above, over, from, to, near, until, toward, beside and so on.* Relationships are expressed by prepositions, but this is almost never taught in math.
- *Study adjectives and adverbial forms such as hardly, scarcely, rarely, next, last, older, younger, most, many, less, longer, least, higher and so on.* These words modify the meanings of sentences and need to be worked on.
- *Work on words that express logical relationships such as: if, because, therefore, however, unless, same, alike, different from, opposite of, whether, since, unless, almost, probably, exactly, not quite, always, never, and so on.* These are critical to understanding academic text because these words are used to link ideas.
- *Work with other classroom teachers to promote the learning of content-relevant language for a variety of subjects.* Look at the language used in math, social studies, and science.

By themselves and together, teachers can do many things to promote student learning of academic language, but they also need support from administrators. Both site and district administrators have to work closely with teachers in making thoughtful curriculum and instruction decisions in

support of academic language learning. They also need to support teachers as they incorporate these strategies into the classroom.

Teachers may need professional development to learn about language and the ways to teach it. Administrators need to provide the space and time for teachers to learn and work together. Finally, both teachers and administrators need to be prepared to educate policymakers on what language skills students need for academic development and success.

### INQUIRY QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. Why does the achievement gap widen between 2<sup>nd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> grade for all students regardless of primary language? Is this true for your school or district? Look at the student achievement data for students from 2<sup>nd</sup> through 8<sup>th</sup> grade and make your own chart of student performance.
2. What are some of the characteristics of academic English? Identify instances of academic English in the problems/texts/materials you are using in the classroom.
3. Lily Wong Fillmore says it is a mistake to set aside the textbook in order to focus on lectures and demonstrations. How does the use of textbooks translate into creating a student-centered learning environment?
4. Lily Wong Fillmore suggests that the rich oral tradition of Hmong students helps them become literate in English. Why is that? What oral traditions in our culture can help students acquire literacy?
5. Select an academic content standard you work with and identify the academic language required for student mastery of that standard. What strategy would you use to teach the academic language in that standard?

# Want to learn more about academic language development?

## PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES

### ***Administrator English Language Learner Conference***

This well-attended annual conference features guest speakers and breakout sessions, including many that highlight the role of academic language instruction in EL programs. Among this year's presenters are Dr. Kate Kinsella on Academic Language in the Upper Grades, Susana Dutro on Systematic English Language Development, and the Bay Area School Reform Collaborative on Gap-Closing Elementary Schools.

Date: Tuesday, April 12, 2005

Cost: \$90 per person; \$250 for 3-person teams

Register online at [www.scoe.org/training](http://www.scoe.org/training) or call (707) 522-3151

### ***Coaches Network for Academic Language***

The new Coaches Network for Academic Language is expected to be up-and-running by April. It is being developed *by* teachers and *for* teachers who are emphasizing academic language development in their classrooms. Using a coaching model, teachers will support one another as they work to improve instructional practices for EL students.

Cost: To be announced

Call (707) 522-3305 for information

### ***Guided Language Acquisition Design (GLAD)***

GLAD is an integrated, balanced literacy approach that promotes academic achievement, language acquisition, and cross-cultural sensitivity in K-8 classrooms. Tied to English language development standards, the program helps teachers deliver grade-level academic content to EL students more effectively. The program has earned national and state recognition and was named a model program.

Dates: February 16-17, 2005

Cost: \$225

Register online at [www.scoe.org/training](http://www.scoe.org/training) or call (707) 522-3151

### ***Site-Based Support: Academic Language Development Across the Content Areas***

Sites establishing a schoolwide commitment to academic language development may be interested in obtaining support and training for their entire staff. ELL Services director Jane Escobedo provides site-specific support on a fee-for-service basis. She is also available to train administrators in "what to look for in the English Learner classroom."

Call (707) 522-3305 for information

## BOOKS

***Accelerating Academic English: A Focus on the English Learner***, by Robin C. Scarcella (University of California, Irvine, 2003)

***Bringing Words to Life: Robust Vocabulary Instruction***, by Isabel L. Beck, Margaret G. McKeown, and Linda Kucan (Guilford Press, 2002)

***Building Background Knowledge for Academic Achievement: Research on What Works in Schools***, by Robert J. Marzano (ASCD, Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2004)

***Scaffolding Language, Scaffolding Learning: Teaching Second Language Learners in the Mainstream Classroom***, by Pauline Gibbons (Heinemann, 2002)

***Vocabulary Instruction: Research to Practice***, edited by James F. Baumann, Edward J. Kame'enui (Guilford Press, 2003)

## WEBSITES

[www.crede.ucsc.edu](http://www.crede.ucsc.edu)  
Center for Research on Education, Diversity & Excellence

[www.lmri.ucsb.edu](http://www.lmri.ucsb.edu)  
Linguistic Minority Research Institute

[www.ncela.gwu.edu](http://www.ncela.gwu.edu)  
National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition

[www.siopinstitute.net](http://www.siopinstitute.net)  
Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP)

# What is Aiming High?

In the fall of last year, a coalition of Sonoma County districts and partner agencies agreed to join forces for the explicit purpose of working together to *accelerate* the achievement of English Learners. They named their effort Aiming High and describe it as a countywide commitment to close the achievement gap for English Learners. Specifically, the goal of Aiming High is to raise EL performance so that the achievement gap between English speakers and English Learners is reduced by 50 percent over the next four years.

Twenty-seven of the county's 40 school districts are participating in Aiming High, along with a number of partner agencies. The Sonoma County Association of School Administrators (SCBASA) and Sonoma County Office of Education (SCOE) are providing leadership for this effort.

Each participating district board passed a resolution to formally support Aiming High. An Aiming High Toolkit was developed by SCOE to provide targeted resources to the over 100 school sites that are part of Aiming High. New professional development opportunities have emphasized strategies for closing the achievement gap and experts in effective ELL instruction have delivered teacher and administrator trainings in Sonoma County.

At the start of the 2004-05 academic year, baseline achievement data for each Aiming High school and district was compiled into easy-to-read charts that identify the achievement gap (at grades 2, 4, 6, and 8) and the Aiming High goal for each site. Progress reports will be produced annually through 2006-07.

If your district isn't yet participating in Aiming High, it's not too late to take part in this important countywide initiative. For more information, contact assistant superintendent Don Russell, (707) 524-2786 or [drussell@scoe.org](mailto:drussell@scoe.org).

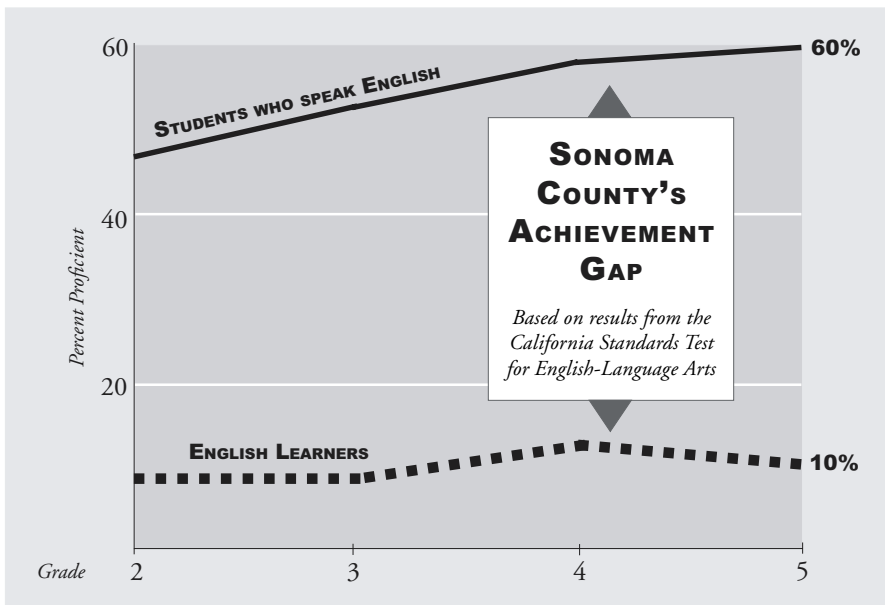


## AIMING HIGH DISTRICTS

|                  |               |
|------------------|---------------|
| Alexander Valley | Mark West     |
| Bellevue         | Oak Grove     |
| Bennett Valley   | Old Adobe     |
| Cinnabar         | Petaluma      |
| Cloverdale       | Elementary    |
| Dunham           | Petaluma High |
| Forestville      | Roseland      |
| Fort Ross        | Sebastopol    |
| Geyserville      | Twin Hills    |
| Gravenstein      | Two Rock      |
| Guerneville      | Waugh         |
| Harmony          | Wilmar        |
| Healdsburg       | Windsor       |
| Kenwood          | Wright        |

## AIMING HIGH PARTNERS

- First 5 Sonoma County
- La Voz Bilingual Newspaper
- Migrant Education
- PTA, 14th District
- Regional System of District and School Support
- Santa Rosa Chamber of Commerce
- Sonoma County Association of School Administrators (SCASA)
- Sonoma County Office of Education
- Sonoma State University
- Volunteer Center of Sonoma County



This chart shows the annual progress of students who were in second grade in Spring 2001. Now in fifth grade, 60% of the students who speak English are proficient in Language Arts, but only 10% of the English Learners have reached proficiency. Aiming High's goal is to accelerate the achievement of English Learners, so that the gap in achievement is reduced by 50% four years from now.