WE ARE ALL ESOL STUDENTS: ACADEMIC ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

Keri Withington
Pellissippi State Community College
klwithington@pstcc.edu

Abstract

It has often been assumed that all college students are able to understand the language that they hear in academic settings. However, academic English is a foreign language register to many students, particularly first generation students from low income backgrounds. To increase student confidence, success, and ownership of learning, educators can approach academic English as a foreign language and incorporate ESOL techniques into the classroom experience.

Keywords: language registers, academic English, language expectations, ESOL pedagogy, academic English immersion

We are all ESOL students: Academic English as a foreign language

At most colleges, a clear distinction is drawn between English classes (ENGL) and English classes for non-native speakers (ESOL). In fact, ESOL is often not even a part of the English departments, and it is rare for English instructors to also teach ESOL. It is fairly obvious that students who do not speak English fluently need specialized instructions, and much research is available on ESOL pedagogy. . There is a long tradition of studying language acquisition. In the 1990s, many researchers began really incorporating socioeconomic and ethnographic concerns into account. Auerbach's 1996 guidebook asserts the importance of real-life applications for academically gained knowledge, and promotes collaborative relationships between the community and educators. Although Hammond's work is centered in Australia, her conflation of ESOL processes and literacy acquisition is widely applicable. In the 2000s, through the work of Richardson and others, it became more widely acknowledged that vernacular, such as Afro-American vernacular, could benefit

from incorporation into academic settings. More recent research has also made strides in understanding the importance of metacognition in language acquisition (Suls).For those interested in further studying ESOL pedagogy, London South Bank University's *Literature Review on Acquisition and Development of Literacy in a Second Language* is a useful resource that provides concise explanations and further sources. The *TESOL Quarterly* is also a vital resource. Despite the volume of research on teaching English as a foreign language, it has often been neglected that academic English is, in fact, a foreign language for many, if not all, first-time college students.

It is widely accepted that different registers exist within every language. The term *register* was first definitively used in 1956 by Thomas Bertram Reid (Gonzalez 455). Other linguists, notably Halliday, Quirk, and Joos, soon adopted the phrase. They explained that a number of factors, such as age and education level, influence the way that we speak. Most people also adapt their speech to particular settings and circumstances. Most people speak differently to their spouse or partner than to their boss, for example. The way that people use registers of language and interlocute between registers is examined within a socioeconomic context in Payne's work. As explained in her work, the most common register of language is the casual. This form of language is used in every day conversation, and can be characterized by the use of slang and an inattention to grammar. Casual English is constantly evolving and displays strong regional variations. This is a rich variety of language that allows for great variety of expression. Included within the wider sphere of the casual register are technology speak, such as students commonly use in social media and text messaging; the intimate register used with immediate family members and lovers; parenting language, which is adapted to speaking to very young children. The casual register is the native language of most students.

While the casual register is the most commonly spoken in every-day life, the formal language is most commonly encountered in print, academic, and professional settings. The formal register is characterized by attention to grammar and syntax, as well as a wider and more formal vocabulary. The formal register includes academic English, as used in academic settings—both within and out of the classroom—and

consultative language, as used in professional settings. Formal English is sometimes referred to as the language of negotiation. The most extreme form of formal register is frozen language. Formal, traditional uses of language that rely on the performative power of repetition fall into the frozen register. Examples of frozen register include religious ceremonies, legal documents, and even syllabi. English sounds very different depending on the speaker/writer and the context.

The usage of different registers of English is closely aligned with socioeconomics. The casual register is considered to be the language of poverty, whereas the formal register is considered to be the language of the middle and upper classes ("Bridges Out of Poverty"). This is the result of a variety of complicated factors, including tradition, limited educational access and different professional opportunities. The insightful training program *Bridges Out of Poverty* spends time exploring the use of different language registers by different economic groups. The use of language is markedly different among members of America's different social classes (Compassion Coalition). The *Bridges Out of Poverty* course emphasizes that people living in poverty live in "the tyranny of the moment". Forced to constantly address immediate needs, such as adequate food and safe housing, they are unable to effectively look towards the future. As a result, their primary focus is on the present, and language centers on meeting immediate needs and entertainment. Often, it is reduced to the language of survival. This focus on immediate, concrete needs communicated in the casual register often precludes the full development of more formal language registers.

The difference in acquisition of language starts early in life, and only becomes more pronounced as children progress through school and career. Research shows, for example, that the average four-year-old from a family in poverty has been exposed to approximately 13 million words (Hart). The same age child from a middle class family has been exposed to at least double that amount. The language divide starts before children can even speak, and so these kids have never been exposed to the same language as schools generally expect. In fact, many researchers argue that reduced language processing abilities are the most pervasive

problem associated with children raised in poverty (Perkins). The chronic stress on impoverished families and the resulting lack of mental stimulation for children in those households can actually cause observable, biological changes to their brain chemistry and function. The family's income seems to directly correlate with the language abilities of children: "for every gain of $5,000 in annual income, vocabulary scores were raised" (Perkins). The vocabularies of young children are markedly larger when they come from financially stable households rather than impoverished or financially insecure households, and they are better able to understand a range of language sage (*Bridges Out of Poverty*). This diminished language ability associated with poverty perpetuates the cycle of poverty as it can lead to lower academic achievement and diminished employment options.

When discussing the enormous impact of economics on language development, it is important to understand how large of a group this actually impacts. According to data from 2013 from Kids Count, 27% of children in Tennessee live in poverty. Over one in four children in the state fall under the federal criteria for poverty. For a family of four, the federal poverty threshold is $23, 834. In reality, it is virtually impossible for a family to survive on that income, much less thrive. At least 17% of Tennesseans are considered food insecure, with the rate even higher among families than singles ("Tennessee"). While 27% of Tennessee's children live in poverty, another 29% live in low income households. These households earn more than households in poverty, but are also eligible for less assistance programs and benefits. Less than half of the children in Tennessee live in households with sufficient incomes.

Several factors correlate with trends in economic divisions and stability. The strongest correlation seems to be between the education level of the parents and the family's income. When considering families in which the parents have not completed high school or earned a G.E.D., approximately 82% of the children live in poverty (Douglas-Hall). When the parents are uneducated, their families are likely to live in poverty and remain there. Even just earning a high school diploma or G.E.D. yields drastic results. In families in which the parents have high school

diplomas or equivalency certificates, but not further education, 57% of the families live in poverty. While this still means that over half are in poverty, it is a dramatic decline from the families without a high school education. When the parents have attained some college education, the poverty rate sinks even lower: 24% (Douglas-Hall). The higher the level of education among the parents, the lower the levels of poverty and food insecurity. Increased income is usually linked with more stable living conditions, healthier diets, increased exercise, better medical care, and lower familial stress. All of this is quantifiable in the language acquisition; children from economically stable households have larger vocabularies, more complicated syntax, and increased phonological awareness. What is equally important to note, however, is the way that language is actually used by people in different economic classes.

As previously mentioned, the casual register is considered to be the language of poverty. Generally, this is what people of a certain socioeconomic background speak. It is important to note that while they are aware that more formal registers exist, most people living in poverty have never learned to speak in a formal register. Many first generation college students wonder why it is necessary for them to learn a more formal way of communicating. Sadly, it is even common for students to be shamed by their families and communities for developing a more formal language register. However, a command of academic English is important outside of the classroom, as well as in academic and professional settings. Since formal English is used in contracts, and—as established by *Bridges Out of Poverty*—people living in poverty usually only master common, less formal language registers, low-income citizens are particularly vulnerable to companies and individuals that target financially vulnerable groups. Without the ability to understand formal and frozen English, for example, many people in poverty are unable to understand the fine print on agreements and the details of contracts, and so end up making bad financial decisions because they are unable to fully understand the choice that they are making. This lack of a formal register also means that most people in poverty are uncomfortable in formal settings, notably including school and college. Because students do not fully understand the language as it is being used, they feel as if they

do not belong. This creates a climate of failure. Students who feel out of place are more prone to self-doubt and self-sabotaging behavior, such as dropping out of their classes.

For example, a Pellissippi State Community College student stated in 2014, "I was excited to start college because I want a better life for my family. Then I went to the first day of classes. They might as well have been speaking Chinese. I just wanted to give up. How the hell was I going to pass if I didn't even get the first day?" This student came from a background of poverty and did not have positive previous experiences with education. However, he had also realized the importance of an education, and he had chosen to return to school in order to pursue a better career. In the first few days, though, he was overwhelmed not by the expectations, work-load, or routine, but by the language being used in Pellissippi's classes and offices. On the first day of class, for example, he had never heard the word *syllabus* before his first teacher began summarizing that class's syllabus. Within that document, he encountered many other phrases, such as *inclement weather*, that he was unfamiliar with. In addition to the vocabulary, the syntax was different than the speech patterns that he was more familiar with. This student very nearly gave up after the first week. This particular student is representative of a large group in Tennessee considering that over half of incoming freshmen come from low-income backgrounds. The lack of language skills, as well as a lack of familiarity with college, contributes to the low success rates of first-time college students. At Tennessee State University, only 11% of low-income, first generation students graduate within six years (Riggs). Other regional institutions have better success rates (54% at University of Tennessee-Knoxville), but they all have room for improvement.

In discussing these topics, it is the general trends that are being noted and analyzed. These are not meant as judgments of groups or individuals, and there will always be exceptions to these trends. As the economic climate in the country shifts, the dynamics of class are also evolving. America, like most countries, has long been considered to have three classes: upper, middle, and lower. Now, though, new

classes must be recognized. In particular, there now exists a class that is more socially aligned with the middle class but economically similar to lower: the so-called working poor. In general, this phrase is used to describe educated professionals who come from middle class backgrounds and who have careers but are unable to gain financial stability. Many educators, especially adjunct instructors, fall into this category. Their usage of language has not been widely studied yet, but is distinct from people in generational poverty.

If the defining linguistic characteristic of a person from poverty is a rich casual register, then the most important trait of someone from a middle class background is the ability to navigate between registers. The middle class is seen as occupying a sort of social middle ground. Many middle class families speak common register together and have rich vernacular varieties for informal social settings. Many teenagers work blue-collar types of jobs, but they generally gain educations and, later, white-collar employment. They are able to interact with all classes in a way that others on both ends of the social structure are not. *Bridges Out of Poverty* explains that unspoken rules govern social expectations and behavior, and that the middle class is best prepared for a wide range of these social rules. As a general rule, children in the middle class now learn to use a variety of casual registers: the language of the playground, technology related conventions, and the intimate register of families. They also learn more formal English because their parents are adept at formal English. The simplest example of this dual ability is seen in discipline with many children. If a little boy hears his name being called, "Robbie," he recognizes the casual tone and lack of immediacy. If his parents are calling, he is not likely to be in trouble. If a little boy hears his full name being called, "Robert Scott," as an example, he knows immediately that he is in trouble. The more formal version of his name is associated with higher expectations and following consequences. The middle class is, generally speaking, able to navigate the different registers of language, often without even realizing it. People will instinctually speak differently to their boss than to their friends, and that is different still from their

children. Yet even with this background, it is often uncomfortable for students from middle class backgrounds to begin writing essays in formal English.

If, as just established, students are uncomfortable inside of the school or college building, already feel like an outsider, and lack support to receive education, then encountering formal English that they don't understand adds another frustration and barrier to success. It is presenting another obstacle to overcome and potential reason to just give up. If educators expect students to speak formal English from the first day of the semester, they are setting many of their students up for failure. This certainly does not mean that academic English should be discarded from academic settings, or that educators should lower their standards. Instead, it suggests a need for a different approach to language usage and student interaction that helps students to understand the expectations and instructions so that they are language empowered rather than overwhelmed.

In all of my English classes at Pellissippi State Community College, students complete an entrance writing sample during the first week of class. I give the students a step-by-step list of instructions to follow that includes formatting guidelines, the subject, and other requirements. When I receive that assignment, I am not primarily examining the quality of their writing. I am assessing their ability to read, understand, and follow the instructions. Many students are working hard and put enormous amounts of time and effort into their homework. However, they continue to fail or earn disappointing grades because they do not have the language capability to correctly understand the instructions (which are almost always written in formal, academic English, sometimes even in frozen language). The language of the instruction becomes a barrier that students need support to overcome. If I started listening to tapes in Korean with nothing but language, I would never learn Korean. The sounds would become more familiar to me, but I would have no way to start assigning meaning to them without some other help. Similarly, our students need an extra help for academic English to become meaningful.

One approach that has transformed the learning atmosphere within my classes is to bring this issue of language to the attention of my students. Early in the

semester, we discuss the way that they talk and the situations in which they speak differently. Classes also spend time discussing the differences between speaking and writing, often studying corresponding texts and videos (like Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech) as examples. I emphasize how effectively they are able to use the English language, and praise their mastery of casual/conversational language. Academic English is then introduced as a foreign language that they need to learn to speak. To emphasize this, I often hand out papers for students to try reading. I usually include the same passage in a variety of languages, including foreign languages that students are unlikely to know (such as Thai) and that some students may speak (such as Spanish). Included with the foreign languages is a passage in very formal, dense, academic English. It is almost as difficult for students to read, but it is no longer embarrassing because it is within the context of foreign languages, and so is something that they can learn. Many students automatically assume that they are stupid if they make a mistake with foreign language. Instead, we can build their confidence by emphasizing that academic English is essentially a foreign language to all of us, and so they are making progress towards learning a new language. With this in mind, rather than berating their failings with academic English, we can celebrate their successes as they begin using it in their assignments. This does not mean that I lower my standards for assignments, but that I approach the way that I explain and comment on them differently.

To help them to learn academic English, we need to model it. This requires the instructor to be adept at navigating multiple language registers within the classroom. Simply modeling formal English on its own is not enough; as all instructors know, confused and bored students often just stop paying attention. It requires fluidly moving from one register to another to explain the same concepts. This can be done by explaining something in the formal register, and then showing a video with examples in the casual register. This could mean explaining terms and asking students to rewrite key concepts or instructions in their own words. One approach that I have used is offering two sets of instructions for the same assignment. For some important assignments or course documents, I will give them

an assignment sheet that is written in formal, academic English. I realize that, after reading and rereading that sheet, many of my students still will not fully understand the instructions. Many of those same students are afraid to admit that they don't understand. So I also give them another set of instructions. The second set is usually a video. This set is less formal. I record myself chatting with them about the important points from the assignment sheet. In the video, I refer to the written instructions, but I speak in the casual register. This way, students have access to the same information in both the casual and formal register. Giving the same information in more than one register is a way to increase understanding of the foreign register.

Another tool is to start with the basics and approach them in new ways. Doing stacks of grammar worksheets, for example, is unlikely to make a significant difference in a student's speech. It needs to seem fun and relevant. Using ESOL techniques helps to make language instruction more effective. Having taught ESOL, I use many of the same grammar lessons in my English classes for native speakers, and still find them effective.

The most effective method of language acquisition is immersion. This is true of foreign languages, and it is also true of academic English. For students to gain mastery of academic English, they need to be exposed to as much of it as possible. Just hearing their instructors speak formally is not enough to enact rapid change in language usage. One way of stimulating immersion is to host mixed level classes. These require more work from the instructor and are more difficult to schedule. However, they do have many benefits. The higher level students are able, as peers, to model more formal language than their classmates. The higher level students benefit from this because the most effective way for a student to learn is to explain a concept to others. The lower level students also benefit because they are able to hear more formal language than they speak from both the instructor and their peers. I knew from experience teaching multi-level classes that it could have benefits, but I went through my class records to try to decide how beneficial it actually was. I only took data from transitional studies classes which would have the

least language prepared students. When I looked at integrated classes (with more than one class level meeting together during the same time in the same room), the success rate, when defining success as the number of students who pass the class on the first attempt, was approximately 77%. Traditional, single level classes had a success rate of 52%. The success rate was statistically significantly higher for both the lower and higher level students.

While multi-level classes have benefits for the students, individual instructors may not be able to initiate them at an institutional level. Individual instructors can, however, simulate immersion in other ways. One way of further exposing students to academic English is to assign audiobooks--or other audio assignments—that are in academic or formal English. When used with introductory level college English students, it is most effective to emphasize the listening experience and the language over the content of the book or other listening material. Students can even be assigned into book clubs, which further increases chances of success by fostering learning communities and relationships. Self-evaluation assignments and discussion groups can be used to help students to recognize their own language acquisition process. The first semester that I incorporated a mandatory audiobook assignment into my curriculum for transitional studies English classes, I considered it a pilot program. At the end of the semester, I gave students an evaluation of the project and explained that I would use their feedback to help me to decide whether to continue using the assignment or not. The completed them anonymously. Out of four classes, only one person said not to keep the assignment, and one said they "weren't sure." Everyone else recommended keeping the assignment. One student wrote, "it is a cool way…to prepare students to focus on lectures better." Another student added, "it helps your comprehension…it also really helps your speaking. Personally, for me, it has had a dramatic effect on what I catch in my papers. I now see more errors in my papers and have the skill and knowledge to fix them." These are typical of the feedback that I received. These listening assignments can be used to practice current concepts, and could be incorporated into many classes, not just English. Any class that

includes reading assignments could also incorporate listening assignments. The issues of language may apply most obviously in English classes, but can prove an equal hindrance or advantage in virtually all college classes.

For college students, and especially first generation college students, there are many potential obstacles to success. Probably the most frequently overlooked obstacle is the formal, academic English that students encounter in their academic career that they may not have had any previous significant experience trying to speak or understand. Rather than expecting students to have already mastered academic English, which is an increasingly unrealistic expectation, educators can empower students by bringing language registers to their attention and helping them to acquire another language register, just as ESOL students gain another language.

References

Auerbach, Elsa. *Adult ESL.Literacy From the Community to the Community: a Guidebook to Participatory Literacy Training.* Mahweh: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1996. Print.

Compassion Coalition. *Bridges Out of Poverty*. Pellissippi State Community College. Knoxville, TN. 20 March 2015 and 27 March 2015. Training Workshops.

"Children in Poverty (100 Percent Poverty)." *Kids Count Date Center.* The Annie E. Casey Foundation. 2015. Web. 30 March 2015.

Douglas-Hall, Ayana and Michelle Chau. "Parents' Low Education Leads to Low Income, Despite Full-Time Employment." *National Center for Children in Poverty*. Columbia University: Mailman School of Public Health Department of Health Policy & Management. Nov. 2007. Web. 31 July 2015.

Gonzalez, Josue, ed. *Encylopedia of Bilingual Education*. Los Angeles: Sage, 2008. Print.

Hammond, Jenneifer. "The pedagogical relations between adult ESL and adult literacy." NCELTR. Sydney: Macquarie University and Laguage of Literacy Centre, University of Technology, 1992. Print.

Hart, Betty and Todd Risley. *Meaningful Differences in the Everyday Experiences of Young American Children*. Baltimore: Paul H Brookes Publishing, 1995. Print.

Payne, Ruby, Philip DeVol, and Terie Dreussi Smith. *Bridges out of Poverty: Strategies for Professionals and Communities.* 5 ed. Highlands, TX: aha! Process, 2006. Print.

Payne, Ruby. *A Framework for Understanding Poverty: A Cognitive Approach.* Highlands, TX: aha! Process, 2013. Print.

Perking, Suzanne, Eric Finegood, and James Swain. "Poverty and Language Development: Roles of Parenting and Stress." *Innovations in Clinical Neuroscience.* US National Library of Medicine. 2013 Apr; 10(4); 10-19. Web. 30 July 2015.

Richardson, Elaine . *African-American Literacies.* London: Routledge, 2002. Print.

Riggs, Liz. "First-Generation College-Goers: Unprepared and Behind." *The Atlantic*. 31 Dec. 2014. Web. 20 July 2015.

Suls, Jerry and Ladd Wheller, eds. *Handbook of Social Comparison: Theory and Research.* New York: Kluwer/Plenum, 2000. Print.

"Tennessee." *Talk Poverty.* Center for American Progress. 2015. Web. 30 March 2015.

Tranza, Efisia and Helen Sunderland. *Literature Review on Acquisition and Development of Literacy in a Second Language.* National Adult Literacy Agency. March 2009. Web. 15 July 2015.