

# Rethinking Academic Language in Second Language Instruction

**Kellie Rolstad**  
Arizona State University

## 1. Introduction

Most people - laymen, practitioners and researchers alike - seem to share a fundamental assumption about the effects of education on language proficiency: that in school we learn a superior version of our language, a version which affords greater opportunities for those of us who master it, a language form which increases our cognitive development. In other words, studying standard English in the U.S. not only helps prepare students for higher education and greater access to high status jobs, it enables students to think more clearly, to better analyze, synthesize, evaluate, use logic, and so forth. The basis for this belief undoubtedly lies in the fact that only standard English is widely used in literacy in the U.S., where literacy is inextricably linked to academic development. Without standard English literacy, children are very much at a disadvantage in the U.S., not only socially and politically, but, according to this argument, also intellectually, because cognitive development can be fully realized only through the development of the school dialect. This argument has been elaborated by psychologists and other experts in the U.S. and elsewhere for decades, and studies have been conducted to provide evidence to support it.

Hart and Risley (1995), psychologists who specialize in language development in early childhood, conducted a longitudinal study that showed that, prior to kindergarten, poor children are already so far behind in language development that there is no way they can ever catch up. Bereiter and Engelmann (1966), psychologists who have focused on ethnic influences on language development, reported that many African American children have such limited language development that they can make no statements of any kind whatsoever. Cummins, an educational psychologist who is a world-renowned expert in bilingual education, argues that conversational language and academic language are vastly different, and actually follow different developmental patterns (Cummins, 2000). He argues that the reason children fare better when their bilingualism and biliteracy is fostered in school is that they receive the early cognitive advantages that the study of academic language bestows on them.

These researchers are known to care deeply about improving the lives of linguistically-disadvantaged children; their findings are powerful, persuasive, and the implications of their findings seem clear. The early childhood experts demonstrate the need for educators to reach out to children long before kindergarten to begin their education in standard English, while working at the same time to educate their hopelessly ill-prepared parents in an effort to minimize the damage that the parents' lack of literacy and underdeveloped speech inflict on their children. Bilingual educators are urged to teach academic language to English learners, academic English at least, if not also academic Spanish or other academic first language, in order to allow the children to attain cognitive maturity. Should the child be unfortunate enough to speak a language which has no academic form, it is recommended that teachers show respect for the child's first language but focus on academic English, so that the children will have at least some opportunity for cognitive development.

These underlying beliefs regarding the benefits of academic language are deeply ingrained in our society. However, they are based on myths that were long ago dispelled by linguists, notably by William Labov during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Unfortunately, the fields of education and psychology have continued to accept and promulgate such myths about language, unaffected by advances in linguistic research. A thorough re-examination of the role of education in language development is, unarguably, long overdue.

Perhaps the most difficult changes to effect are those that relate to our fundamental beliefs and habits of mind, those that are based on what seems to be "common knowledge." Beliefs about language fall solidly into this category, reinforced by centuries of an approach to language study which has been largely of an esthetic nature. Traditional school dogma regarding "correct grammar" which

applies only to standard English and which is based on misapplications of grammatical rules from non-English languages, is held to be true, and no further inquiry is considered necessary or desirable. But researchers must continually seek to look beyond dogma, to recognize biases and become aware of how biases affect our ability to understand complex issues. In order to strip away our biases as much as possible, we need to pose our questions carefully and critically. What do we know about our language and about children who do or do not speak standard English? What is the source of our information?

What is academic language? *Is there even such a thing?* If so, what makes it distinct? Does learning it make you *smarter*? Does academic language improve a person's ability to analyze, evaluate, and so forth, or is it possible to think competently without academic language?

How does literacy figure in? How should we teach academic language to native speakers? Is that different from how we should teach it to second language learners? If there is no such thing as academic language, why do poor children and English learners have trouble in school? Do they suffer from some linguistic or cognitive deficit? None of these questions has been adequately addressed by educators, who often seem to be blind to their own deficit views of language and content to maintain their conventional views, without delving below the surface of their understanding.

## 2. Middle-class bias and deficit views of language

James Gee (1986) and Terry Wiley (1996) have criticized the notion that there is a 'cognitive great divide' between literate and nonliterate people, that the acquisition of literacy has powerful, positive effects on cognitive development. The prevalent, mainstream argument regarding the cognitive effects of academic language acquisition is in essence a sub-component of the great divide argument regarding literacy, and clearly a deficit view. By contrast, linguists hold that any natural language is capable of expressing whatever its speakers seek to express, whether that entails borrowing words or coining new ones to fit new concepts. Any language can be a suitable vehicle for thought and learning, and any normal child who speaks a language already has all that is needed in order to achieve full cognitive development.

What is the source of our society's beliefs regarding children who are non-middle-class and/or speakers of nonstandard English? Many psychologists have studied children and their knowledge of language in an attempt to determine why children who are not middle-class standard-English speakers tend to do less well in school. Unaided by an understanding of linguistic theory, they yet claim to know much about language, and quickly move to operationalizing their concepts of language proficiency. Hart and Risley (1995), for example, are two psychologists who were working to develop teaching procedures to remediate the language of poor children, when they observed the following:

Undertaking to remediate, improve, or add to present skill levels assumes the existence of some "difference," "delay," or "deficit" relative to a norm. But when we listened to the [children of poverty] talk during free play, *they seemed fully competent to us, well able* to explain and elaborate the topics typical in preschool interactions. We became increasingly uncertain about which language skills we should be undertaking to improve. We decided we needed to know, not from our textbooks, but from advantaged children, what skilled spontaneous at age 4 is in terms of grammar and content (Hart & Risley, 1995:8) (*italics added*).

Interestingly, regardless of the fact that the children appeared to be "fully competent" and "well able" to use their language, the researchers clung to their deficit view. They proceeded to collect language data from dozens of families over several years, trying to show in precisely what ways the language development of poor children is underdeveloped, and why it is likely to remain so permanently. It is hard to miss the glaring bias of their *premise*, the obvious deficit view held by these researchers. Rather than asking, "Is there something different about the way these children's language is developing? If there is a difference, is it a developmental *problem?*," they ask, "What is wrong with the language of these other people's children, and what has caused it?"

After collecting substantial amounts of longitudinal data on the children's linguistic interactions, Hart and Risley failed to find any linguistically interesting difference between the language of children of poverty and the language of professors' children. However, clinging to their premise, and being

charged with fixing the children, they had to find something to fix. They determined that there was a difference in vocabulary size, that the children of professors knew more words. Unfortunately, the researchers did not count words that were “not listed in the dictionary ... used to check and standardize spelling;” so, by definition, the vocabulary size of speakers of nonstandard English would have been automatically deflated. The researchers did not realize that an accurate linguistic inventory would include any vocabulary used by the children which exist in the dialect of the children’s speech community.

The researchers were also clearly shocked by the cultural differences they encountered. They found that children of poverty heard more commands than professors’ children heard (at least in the presence of the researchers), and report approvingly of “the *politeness* of a parent who said, ‘why don’t you pick the toys up for me?’ (Hart & Risley, 1995, p. 57) (italics added), as if middle-class politeness and pragmatics are universally valued. In some cultures, this “politeness” would be considered inappropriate; the indirectness of the request could as well be considered a weak, ineffective attempt to teach approved behaviors.

The researchers witnessed other instances of cultural transmission and observed that “[p]arents who said, ‘move’ and ‘shut up,’ had children who did the same...,” while parents who gave long explanations “had children who also explained at length” (Hart & Risley, 1995, p. 58). That these cultural differences are judged subjectively by middle-class researchers and that language differences are evaluated tautologically (“high quality language” is defined as the language used by people who use “high quality language,” as MacSwan (2000) has observed) are nowhere acknowledged in Hart and Risley’s account. Yet it is precisely this definition that drives the research reported in the book, and remains its underlying purpose: to define language “quality” and the middle-class interactional style that fosters these researchers’ conception of high quality language.

Hart and Risley do not use the term “academic language” presumably because it would be so obviously difficult and patently silly to distinguish academic language from conversational language in 2-year-olds. But make no mistake, academic language is precisely what they seek to differentiate among these children. The final, widely heralded conclusion of this study is that disadvantaged children are so far behind the children of professors in vocabulary size and “richness” by age 4 that they will never succeed, regardless of any conceivable intervention which may be attempted, in approaching the *academic* achievements of professors’ children. We must keep in mind that Hart and Risley studied only children who speak English. What hope, then, could an English learning child ever have, if native speakers of English whose parents are not professors are doomed to academic inferiority on the basis of their low levels of academic language proficiency?

Back in 1970, linguist William Labov exposed the flaws in such culturally-biased research, showing the absurdity of claims by Bereiter and Engelmann that the African American children they tested could “without exaggeration...make no statements of any kind” and could not ask questions. In response to the researchers’ question, “where is the squirrel?” subjects tended to answer “in the tree” which Bereiter and Engelmann characterized as illogical and badly formed (Labov, 1966: 230). Despite the efforts and influence of Labov and other educational linguists, the deficit tradition lives on, as seen in Hart and Risley’s (1995) widely-cited work.

The deficit tradition has survived and thrived in bilingual education as well, where many researchers persist in believing that children whose first language is not English face academic doom and, if treated incorrectly, are in danger of developing no language at all, becoming “semilingual” (Hansegård, 1968; Cummins, 1976; Skutnabb-Kangas & Toukoma, 1977). Cummins insists that the differences between CALP (academic language) and BICS (everyday language) are so extreme that these two forms of language “are conceptually distinct and follow different developmental patterns” (2000:62). Bilingual education researchers and teacher educators seize uncritically on such distinctions, producing statements such as the following.

While children who are second language learners appear to converse with ease, their ability to think, read, and write in an academic realm may be quite limited; this is especially true if the child is from a *semi-lingual population that has no native language CALP* on which to build his English academic skills (Meskill, Mossop & Bates, 2002) (italics added).

The leap that is made here from the (supposed) danger of an individual failing to develop either first or second 'academic' language (semilingualism) to the existence of entire semilingual populations is staggering. It is not clear whether the authors mean to suggest that a child may be from a community which just happens not to have academic language proficiency, or whether that lack inheres to the language of that community.

Such prescriptivist views are current and pervasive. Numerous examples can be cited of educated people arguing that this or that language variety, a dialect spoken natively by a community or population, is linguistically deficient and therefore inadequate to permit normal development, arguments typically espoused by speakers of that variety as well as by outsiders. Of Native American dialects of English, Dick Littlebear argues that "you find these kids floating between two nonstandard languages, a population growing up without a linguistic home. The kids haven't had the basis to develop reasoning skills."<sup>1</sup> The linguistically naïve notion that words associated with school settings are somehow more complex, inherently more difficult to learn than other words, or that learning academic language leads to a child's ability to think adequately is questionable, at best.

Researchers and teacher educators routinely insist that, while children may be proficient in 'playground language,' only 'classroom language' will enable them to develop 'higher order thinking skills.' Pauline Gibbons argues that

playground language is very different from the language that teachers use in the classroom, and from the language that we expect children to learn to use.... The playground situation does not normally... require the language associated with the higher order thinking skills, such as hypothesizing, evaluating, inferring, generalizing, predicting or classifying (Gibbons, 1991:3).

If this is so, it would be quite surprising, and not normal, to hear a child on the playground evaluate, generalize and predict, exclaiming, for instance, "Wow, good kick! If we can get her on our team, we'll win for sure!" Yet, such an exclamation should strike us as neither surprising nor abnormal. Gibbons' claim is an empirical one, as are any claims for the distinct nature of academic language. Unfortunately, it seems that without the tools of linguistic analysis, researchers are unable to provide real evidence that academic language enhances thinking skills, and, worse, are quite incapable of recognizing their failure to do so.

Certainly, there are many compelling arguments for using native language instruction and for promoting bilingualism and biliteracy, but such flawed notions, supposedly linguistically-based, as those discussed above should play no role in them. If there is such a thing as academic language, it must be considered a linguistic register on a par with any other register, no more complex, no more inherently difficult to learn, than any other register. It makes little sense to claim that children pick up "conversational language" quickly and easily, but need years to acquire academic language. What is the evidence that conversational language is picked up quickly and easily? What is conversational language, if such a thing exists? Are we all equally skilled conversationalists? Doesn't the existence of books on the art of conversation suggest that even conversation may involve far more than the acquisition of some "basic" vocabulary and syntax? It is likely that much of the difficulty facing even advanced second language students in schools is that they are unable to socialize successfully with English speaking students, even having achieved what teachers may consider to be "conversational ability." Peers can be very hard on children considered to be outsiders, linguistic or otherwise, and a child's ability to converse successfully may take many years to develop sufficiently for the child to become accepted by his or her peers.

Research suggests that only one component of language is acquired with greater success by young children than by teenagers or adults, and that is phonology. Pre-adolescent children learning a second language typically develop a native or near-native accent. Is native-like accent to constitute our definition of conversational language? We might decide that accent is insufficient, and attempt to specify vocabulary items to be included in the features of conversational language. Non-linguists suggest that "everyday words" are those that should characterize our definition. Unfortunately, this is another tautology; 'everyday words' are those that we use in 'conversational language;'

---

<sup>1</sup> James Crawford, personal interview with Dick Littlebear (1986), cited in Crawford, 1999.

'conversational language' consists of words we use every day. If there is linguistic reality to be captured by these terms, proponents of the distinction have yet to capture it.

What is academic language? Wong Fillmore and Snow (2002) refer to researchers' attempts to distinguish academic from "general Standard English skills." If we consider academic language to be a register, no more, then is conversational language a register? Or does it belong to some domain of "general English" proficiency? As Wong Fillmore and Snow (2002, p. 27) point out,

Although there is a lot of discussion about the need for all children to develop the English language skills required for academic learning and development, few people can identify exactly what those skills consist of or distinguish them from general Standard English skills. To the extent that this matter is examined at all, observers have usually pointed to differences between written and spoken language. However, academic English entails a broad range of language proficiencies. We must ask what linguistic proficiencies are required for subject-matter learning. Is academic language proficiency just a matter of vocabulary learning...?

Along the same vein, Russell Campbell (1984) referred to "learning and using a foreign language for authentic academic purposes" rather than to learning academic language, and this distinction is implicit in the field of teaching and learning English for Specific Purposes (ESP), which has a scholarly journal of the same name.

But I am especially interested in this claim: "We must ask what linguistic proficiencies are required for subject-matter learning." I would argue that instead of trying to explain the challenge to English learners as one of moving beyond their quickly acquired conversational English to develop a new and higher, "more purely linguistic, decontextualized" form of English, we should think of their challenge as learning all the English they can to take on whatever tasks are necessary to them. Whether conversational language is a register (as yet undefined) that is likely to require just as many years to learn as an "academic" register, or whether it consists of basic, underlying, general language skills, it is surely the case that each different subject matter requires a different "academic register."

The register used to study computers, for example, is comprised of such features as unique jargon (motherboard), specialized meanings of words which may appear familiar from other contexts (mouse), perhaps higher frequency of particular syntactic structures (passive voice), and so forth. The register used to study geometry also includes unique jargon (rhomboid), specialized meanings (plane) and higher frequency of particular syntactic structures (the sum of which), and so forth. What linguistic proficiencies are required for learning about computers and geometry? It seems that what is required is the ability to learn new words, and some new uses of words. The fact that one may come across more frequent use of a given syntactic structure hardly renders one register more difficult to learn than any other, since the same structures are likely to be found in every register, including so-called playground language.

As a child growing up near the beach in California, I routinely used words that I have since learned are unfamiliar to people from other regions. My friends and I talked about the berm (the angle along the beach where the sand begins to drop down toward the sea) and mochre (rhymes with ochre, and means "beyond enormous") waves. We used particular syntactic structures with higher frequency, structures such as "I was like all...." to preface an oral and/or gestural and/or intonational performance (not at all, as nonlinguists proclaim, as some sort of weak, illiterate substitute for "I said...."). These beach register examples, like those described above to typify academic register, include unique jargon - "mochre" and specialized meanings - "berm." (I have since learned that "berm" is also used by landscape architects to refer to man-made mounds of earth.)

Why should the linguistic features of my beach register suffer the prescriptivist attacks that they do? There is no linguistic basis for arguing that my beach dialect is in any way less developed than any other register, or that my proficiency in it should preclude me from either attaining full cognitive development or from learning any other register I might care to learn. Neither is there any basis for claiming that the person who has mastered the concepts and register of computers is cognitively superior to the person who has mastered the concepts and registers of boatbuilding, fashion design, or any other complex undertaking that is not held to be of an academic nature.

Students need to learn all the registers of the subjects they study in school, each with its peculiar vocabulary and whatever other linguistic features that inhere. At the same time, they most also learn

those registers that are necessary for their social success in school as well as in other areas of their lives. Social, communicative competence requires the acquisition of myriad registers, or Discourses, ways of talking to other students, inside and outside of class, and ways of talking to teachers, each of whom may have his or her own preferences for interaction.

### 3. Second Language Instructional Competence

On this view, to be successful in learning subject matter through a second language, a student needs the amount and type of linguistic proficiency that is required for that student to engage the subject matter at hand. In other words, it matters less what a student scores on some global test of English proficiency than whether that student is able to understand the language of instruction sufficiently well at that moment, in that context, to participate in that lesson and learn from it. Once the student knows enough of the second language to be able to participate at that moment, in that context, the student can be said to have second language instructional competence (SLIC) in that subject area (MacSwan & Rolstad, 2003).

But how is the teacher or administrator to know when and in what subject area a given student has attained second language instructional competence? No existing standardized test is sophisticated enough to distinguish when, say, a third-grade immigrant student has SLIC in math, but perhaps not in social science. Imagine a student who was schooled in Mexico, where she was very good at math, who can easily participate in most math lessons in English. She can be said to have SLIC in math, although she may need support whenever word problems are involved. This same student may not have SLIC in social science – except for when her class begins a unit on Mexico. Depending on the nature of the lessons and on the second language instructional ability of the teacher, this student may, for these lessons, have sufficient SLIC to participate fully. Imagine her delight at being able not only to participate, but perhaps to contribute her own ideas to the class. She may or may not have SLIC in social science when the class begins the next unit, say, on Japan.

From this perspective, second language instructional competence is not a specialized form of academic language that the student masters and can then generalize for use in studying “academic” topics. SLIC is situational, perhaps even quixotic, and only a teacher who understands the apparent paradox of a student seeming to take two steps forward, then one step back, can recognize by working closely with that student where she has SLIC and where she does not, and hence where she can participate with minimal support and where she needs substantial, perhaps native-language, support. With her understanding of second language development and knowledge of that student, the teacher can continue effectively to support the student’s learning, and alleviate the student’s likely frustration at alternately succeeding and failing in her efforts to engage a variety of subject areas in a language she does not fully understand.

It is my hope in exploring this alternative perspective to developing second language proficiency that expanded inquiry in educational linguistics can be stimulated, and that researchers from a variety of disciplines can be inspired to seek out explanations that are linguistically informed. Before we can identify “academic language” we need to understand the nature of language, how it works and how it is used in “everyday” contexts, whatever those are, and to understand what might be “academic” about the way language is used in educational settings. To do so, researchers and educators need to become informed about linguistic theory, and about educational linguistics in particular. If we fail to ground our investigations in linguistics, we run the risk of making foolish errors, of uncritically accepting commonsense views of what language is, how it works, and how we are best to go about teaching it.

Over three decades ago, Labov (1966:260) argued,

There is no reason to believe that any nonstandard vernacular is in itself an obstacle to learning.... As linguists we are unanimous in condemning this view as bad observation, bad theory, and bad practice.... That educational psychology should be strongly influenced by a theory so false to the facts of language is unfortunate; but that children should be the victims of this ignorance is intolerable.

It is somewhat discouraging to realize that so little has changed, and that research is probably being conducted without benefit of linguistic counsel at this point in time. On the other hand, real change

takes time. As Max Planck pointed out, “A new scientific truth does not triumph by convincing its opponents and making them see the light, but rather because its opponents eventually die, and a new generation grows up that is familiar with it.” We need to make every attempt to make linguistic theory familiar to the new generations, and as educators and educational researchers, we are in an excellent position to do so.

## References

- Bereiter, C., & Engelmann, S. (1966). *Teaching disadvantaged children in the pre-school*. Englewood Cliffs, NY: Prentice-Hall.
- Campbell, R. N. (1984) The immersion approach to foreign language teaching. In *Studies on immersion education: A collection for United States educators*, pp. 114-143. Sacramento, Calif.: California State Department of Education.
- Crawford, J. (1999) *Bilingual education: History, politics, theory and practice*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition. Los Angeles, Calif.: Bilingual Education Services.
- Cummins, J. (2000). Putting language proficiency in its place. In Cenoz, J. and U. Jessner (eds.), *English in Europe: The acquisition of a third language*, pp. 54-83. Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters, Ltd.
- Gee, J. G. (1986). Orality and literacy: From the savage mind to ways with words. *TESOL Quarterly*, 20, 719-746
- Gibbons, P. (1991) *Learning to learn in a second language*. Newtown, Australia: Primary English Teaching Association.
- Hansegård, N.E. (1968). *Tvåspråkighet eller halvspråkighet?* [Bilingualism or semilingualism?] Stockholm: Aldus series 253.
- Hart, B. & Risley, T.R. (1995). *Meaningful differences in the everyday experience of young American children*. Baltimore, Maryland: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co.
- MacSwan, J. (2000) The Threshold Hypothesis, semilingualism, and other contributions to a deficit view of linguistic minorities. *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences*, 20(1), 3-45.
- MacSwan, J. & Rolstad, K. (2003). Linguistic diversity, schooling, and social class: Rethinking our conception of language proficiency in language minority education. In Paulston, C.B. and G.R. Tucker (eds.), *Sociolinguistics: The essential readings*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Meskill, C., Mossop, J., & Bates, R. (2002). Electronic Text and English as a Second Language Environments. <http://www.albany.edu/lap/Papers/E-Text.htm>. Thursday, November 28, 2002. (see same authors: Electronic texts and learners of English as a second language. Paper presented at AERA, San Diego, CA, April 13-17, 1998.)
- Skutnabb-Kangas, T., and Toukomaa, P. (1976). *Teaching migrant children's mother tongue and learning the language of the host country in the context of the socio-cultural situation of the migrant family*. Helsinki: The Finnish National Commission for UNESCO.
- Wiley, T. G. (1996). *Literacy and language diversity in the United States*. McHenry, IL: Center for Applied Linguistics and Delta Systems, Co.
- Wong Fillmore, L. and Snow, C.E. (2002). *What teachers need to know about language*. McHenry, IL: Center for Applied Linguistics and Delta Systems, Co.

# **ISB4: Proceedings of the 4th International Symposium on Bilingualism**

edited by James Cohen, Kara T. McAlister,  
Kellie Rolstad, and Jeff MacSwan

**Cascadilla Press   Somerville, MA   2005**

## **Copyright information**

ISB4: Proceedings of the 4th International Symposium on Bilingualism  
© 2005 Cascadilla Press, Somerville, MA. All rights reserved

ISBN 978-1-57473-210-8 CD-ROM  
ISBN 978-1-57473-107-1 library binding (5-volume set)

A copyright notice for each paper is located at the bottom of the first page of the paper.  
Reprints for course packs can be authorized by Cascadilla Press.

## **Ordering information**

To order a copy of the proceedings, contact:

Cascadilla Press  
P.O. Box 440355  
Somerville, MA 02144, USA

phone: 1-617-776-2370  
fax: 1-617-776-2271  
sales@cascadilla.com  
www.cascadilla.com

## **Web access and citation information**

This paper is available from [www.cascadilla.com/isb4.html](http://www.cascadilla.com/isb4.html) and is identical  
to the version published by Cascadilla Press on CD-ROM and in library binding.