# Exploring early career teachers' beliefs and instructional practices about academic language for English learner students

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***Abstract***
*This study explored U.S. early career teachers' beliefs about academic language and their relationships to reported instructional practices with English learner (EL) students. Of particular interest was whether limitations of EL students' mastery of academic language is a significant factor impacting their school-learning, since these students consistently underperform academically compared with native English-speaking peers. Academic language — the specialized vocabulary, syntax, and discourse required for school success — is a key factor in student achievement. Two research questions were addressed: (1) What beliefs do early career teachers hold about academic language, and (2) what do they report about implementing academic language-related instruction for EL students. Seven early career teachers participated in semi-structured interviews and completed a background questionnaire. Data were analyzed thematically using NVivo 14 (Lumivero, 2023). Findings revealed teachers' beliefs about academic language were varied, fragmented, with a general awareness of the importance but limited conceptual clarity. Teachers strongly believed academic language should be intentionally taught but reported underprepared to do so. Reported instructional practices were emergent, intuitive, and inconsistent, emphasizing vocabulary instruction with a lack of comprehensive academic language instruction. The findings suggest the need for systemic investment in teacher preparation and sustained professional learning supporting EL students' academic language development.*

***Keywords****: academic language, English learner students, teachers' beliefs, instructional practices*

## Introduction

This study explored early career teachers' beliefs about academic language and their role in reported instructional practices for EL students (English learner students). EL students are those for whom English is not their first or preferred language and who are learning English at the same time they are attempting to master the academic requirements of U.S. schooling. The focus on academic language is central, as a large body of research has clearly established that mastery of academic content depends upon, indeed is mediated by, the language of instruction employed in classrooms (Bailey & Wilkinson, 2022).

Teachers' beliefs determine to a significant extent how they conduct their classrooms (both instructional practices as well as curricular decisions, e.g., Adams et al., 2023; Anders & Evans, 2019; Haukås, 2016; Skott, 2015; Rizzuto, 2017). Teachers' beliefs play a pivotal role in shaping their specific instructional decisions and classroom practices, such as how, when, and where to integrate academic language, particularly for those working with linguistically diverse students, EL students (Borg, 2003; Fives & Buehl, 2012). Research suggests that while some educators believe in the value of supporting EL students, they often hold misconceptions about language development such as assuming oral fluency equates to academic language proficiency (de Jong & Harper, 2005). Furthermore, ample research findings suggest the acceptability for teachers to conduct educational practices for EL students with a less

rigorous curriculum, incorporating a diminishing demand for academic language utilization (e.g. Torff & Murphy, 2020).

**Background and literature review**

The focus of this study was teachers' beliefs about academic language and the relationship to their reported instructional practices with EL students.

*Academic language*

Academic language refers to the specialized vocabulary, grammar, and discourse structures required for success in school-based tasks, particularly in reading, writing, and disciplinary learning (Zwiers, 2008; Schleppegrell, 2004). This conceptualization extends beyond social or conversational language and is deeply embedded in the practices of school disciplines such as science, history, and mathematics (Nagy & Townsend, 2012; Bailey & Wilkinson, 2022). For EL students in particular, academic language serves as a critical gatekeeper to educational achievement and access to content knowledge (Cummins, 2000; Scarcella, 2003; García & Ozturk, 2019). Research has shown consistently that students' ability to comprehend and use academic language is a strong predictor of their success on standardized assessments and classroom performance (Snow & Uccelli, 2009; Uccelli et al., 2015).

Our view of academic language fully aligns with Nagy and Townsend's, (2012, p. 92) as "the specialized language, both oral and written, of academic settings that facilitates communication and thinking about disciplinary content." Without full mastery of academic language, students are most likely to experience increased difficulties in fully engaging in and constructing their own understandings of disciplinary knowledge. Nagy and Townsend (2012) emphasize both oral and written language. That is, academic language encompasses how students speak in classroom discussions as well as reading and writing. Academic language is different from the social, informal conversational language used with friends and family. Academic language is what students encounter in textbooks and from interacting with teachers, exceeding the vocabulary and typical grammatical framing in those settings. Academic language can be considered as a set of tools for doing academic work. Consequently, learning academic language is not limited to learning new and different words, but learning to accomplish new actions with language and acquiring new tools for these purposes. The lexical-syntactic interface is central: The set of new and different words must be learned and used with the language structures within which they appear.

Academic language is not a neutral construct as it is deeply tied to power, access, and identity in schools (Paris & Alim, 2017). Sociocultural theories of language learning emphasize that students construct meaning through interaction and that language practices are shaped by cultural and community contexts (Vygotsky, 1978; Gutiérrez, 2008). From this perspective, academic language instruction must be not only rigorous but also responsive and inclusive of students' home cultures and literacies. Teachers' beliefs about what constitutes "appropriate" or "correct" language can either support or hinder EL, multilingual learners. When teachers value and build on students' linguistic repertoires, including translanguaging practices, they are more likely to foster equitable access to content and participation (Garcia & Wei, 2014). Conversely, deficit-based views that frame EL students' language differences as problems can limit their opportunities to demonstrate understanding and growth.

Despite the significance of academic language in student academic achievement, focused instruction is often underemphasized in both curriculum materials and teacher preparation programs (Bailey & Heritage, 2008; García & Ozturk, 2019). Teachers may recognize the importance of supporting EL students, but they often lack explicit preparation on how to scaffold academic language across disciplines (Bunch, 2013; Fang & Schleppegrell, 2010). The complexity of academic language, including its abstract vocabulary, nominalizations, and complex syntax, requires deliberate and sustained instructional strategies that many educators feel unprepared to implement (Schleppegrell, 2004).

Teacher beliefs

The central focus of this study is whether and to what extent teacher beliefs about academic language impact their instructional practices, particularly with their EL students. Teachers' beliefs play a pivotal role in shaping instructional decisions and classroom practices, particularly when working with linguistically diverse students (Borg, 2003; Fives & Buehl, 2012). Beliefs about language, learning, and student capacity influence whether and how teachers engage with academic language instruction (Buehl & Beck, 2015). A central contribution to our understanding of this work is offered by Buehl and Beck's (2015) model of the articulation of the internal and external factors that can serve to either support or hinder the translation of teacher beliefs into instructional practices. Their model emphasizes both internal and external mediators of beliefs to practices. In the case of this study, the internal factors focus on how teachers' knowledge about language and EL students, as well as their experiences with both (including with various curricular materials), impacts how teachers act on their beliefs in their instructional practices.

The corpus of extant research on this topic suggests that many educators believe in the value of supporting EL students but often hold misconceptions about language development, such as assuming oral fluency equates to academic proficiency (de Jong & Harper, 2005). Ample research has documented those beliefs can negatively impact optimal instruction and maximized learning opportunities for linguistically diverse students. In the case of EL students, Murphy & Torff (2019) investigated to what extent teachers underestimated EL students' capacity to do rigorous academic work. Torff and colleagues conducted an extended examination of teachers' beliefs about academic rigor in teaching EL students and how these beliefs might contribute to the achievement gap in comparison with English-speaking students. In a series of published papers, taken together, they argued that teachers held beliefs that implied/stated EL students would benefit from less rigorous classroom work (Torff, 2005; Torff, 2011; Torff & Murphy, 2020; Murphy & Torff, 2023). These findings suggest the acceptability for teachers to conduct educational practices for EL students with a less rigorous curriculum, incorporating a diminishing demand for academic language utilization.

Early career teachers, in particular, have stated high levels of commitment to equity and inclusion, but often struggle to translate these beliefs into effective practice due to limited preparation (Lucas & Villegas, 2011; Valdés et al., 2014). Furthermore, their understandings of academic language may be intuitive rather than research-informed, potentially resulting in vague or generalized instructional approaches. For example, Bunch (2013) found that even well-intentioned teachers frequently conflated academic language with vocabulary lists or simply "sounding smart," rather than seeing it as a social and disciplinary construct embedded in meaning-making. The transition from belief to practice is mediated by teachers' preparation and their sense of efficacy in supporting EL students. Studies on teacher self-efficacy underscore that educators' confidence in their ability to implement effective instruction influences both the rigor and consistency of their practice (Rizzuto, 2017; Delcourt, et al., 2024).

**Research questions**

Consequently, two research questions were addressed by this study:

1) What beliefs do early career teachers hold regarding the role of academic language in their K-12 classrooms?
2) What do early career teachers report regarding the implementation of academic language instruction and support for EL students' acquiring mastery?

**Methodology**

Overview

A semi-structured interview protocol and background questionnaire were employed to explore how seven early career teachers defined academic language, perceived its importance, and described their instructional practices for academic language, with a particular interest in EL students and the language

challenges faced. Additional information was collected on participants' educational backgrounds, as well as reports of professional development and collaborative collegial activities regarding academic language and EL students.

Participants

The target participant population for this study was early career teachers, defined as individuals with zero to five years of teaching experience, who were enrolled in a teacher certification or graduate-level program focused on education. One requirement was that participants were teaching in a literacy or language-focused area or working with linguistically diverse student populations, such as English as a New Language (ENL) or language arts. Participants were recruited through a letter of invitation to students enrolled in a graduate teacher education program at a major, Northeastern, U.S. research university. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of [Syracuse University (Approval Number 24-363). Participants' confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the study.

The seven participants were employed as classroom teachers in central New York public school districts, and they represented a cross-section of U.S. early career educators working within linguistically diverse educational contexts. Their shared institutional background, combined with variation in certification pathways, placements, and student populations, provided a robust basis for understanding the complexities of academic language instruction in the early stages of a teaching career. The participants were within their first three years of teaching and represented a range of grade levels (K-12) and subject areas, including English Language Arts (ELA), Literacy, and Special Education. All participants had direct experience working with EL students in inclusive classroom settings. The participants included all self-identified female educators, with six identifying as White and one as Hispanic/Latino. The majority were in the 18-24 age range, except for two participants who fell in the 24-34 age range. Their teaching experiences spanned urban, suburban, and mixed community settings. The linguistic backgrounds of their students varied widely, including Arabic, Somali, Spanish, Ukrainian, Russian, Swahili, and French.

Data collection

The semi-structured interview protocol, with 13 questions with follow-up probes, was designed to elicit in-depth reflections on participants' beliefs, practices, and experiences related to Academic Language instruction. Interview questions were organized around three thematic domains: (1) Academic language (e.g., understanding, instructional strategies, student needs); (2) professional preparation and beliefs (e.g., coursework, readiness, challenges); (3) collaboration and support (e.g., training, mentorship, co-teaching experiences). The use of these domains allowed for consistent exploration across participants while preserving flexibility for open-ended responses and emergent themes.

Data analysis

Interviews were conducted via Zoom, recorded with participants' consent, transcribed verbatim, and reviewed for accuracy. Transcripts were imported into NVivo 14 (Lumivero, 2023, https://lumivero.com/products/nvivo/2023) for the coding and analysis process (after Qureshi & Ünlü, 2020). Coding was conducted following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis framework and was supported with the use of NVivo 14 (Lumivero, 2023) software. After transcription, all interview transcripts were read and re-read to ensure familiarity with the data. During the initial phase, observations and analytic notes were recorded through memos within NVivo 14. These memos represented an attempt to capture early impressions, recurring language, and noteworthy patterns that informed subsequent analysis. This phase aimed to gain a holistic understanding of participants' experiences while allowing space for unanticipated patterns or anomalies to surface. Listening to the audio recordings again also

assisted with the capture of vocal nuances, pauses, and emphasis, which added context to the transcribed text and informed memoing. To ensure the reliability of the data coding, an external coder, an individual who did not participate in the original coding, was identified and selected; that individual was provided with the definitions and examples of coding and the coding of a data set with which to compare the coding of the data set by the first author. The text of one interview was selected at random for a total of nine pages, representing approximately 15 percent of the entire interview sample that participants produced. The first author and the external coder separately checked the selected sample for agreement, using the NVivo 14 program. The measure of the percentage of agreement between the first author and the external coder exceeded 80% agreement. Miles et al. (2014) reference the percentage of inter-coder agreement for qualitative data as a sound indicator of the reliability of the coding process. Eighty percent is considered an acceptable level of agreement in social sciences (Creswell, 2014).

**Findings**

Overview

Thematic analysis of the semi-structured interview data of seven early career teachers yielded nine salient themes reflecting the perspectives and lived experiences of these participants, as they navigated the complexities of academic language instruction in linguistically diverse classrooms.

*Understanding of Academic Language, Beliefs About the Importance of Academic Language, Instructional Practices for Academic Language, Student Challenges in Mastery of Academic Language, Teacher Challenges in Academic Language Instruction, Teacher Preparation for Instruction in Academic Language Instruction, Assessment and Academic Language; Cultural Competence and Inclusion, and Collaboration and Support Systems.* These themes illuminated the cognitive, pedagogical, and systemic challenges teachers encountered and the strategies they employed to support EL students. The analysis foregrounds the tensions between teachers' conceptual understanding, beliefs, and the realities of classroom practice.

**Table 1**: Summary of key themes

*(1) Teachers' general understanding of academic language*

- Varied and fragmented understanding of academic language
- Limited conceptual clarity of academic language
- General awareness of the importance of academic language for students' school success, but also functionality
- Academic language was often equated solely with vocabulary knowledge

*(2) Teachers' beliefs about academic language in the classroom*

- Mastery of academic language was seen as foundational for school success in the U.S.
- Academic language as the "gatekeeper" was seen as especially challenging for EL students, whose home language/heritage language/preferred language is not the language of instruction
- Academic language must be "intentionally taught' with specific, and effective pedagogical practices based on peer-reviewed research findings.
- Academic language was not seen solely as a linguistic (namely language structural) phenomenon; but also, how language is used in classrooms (pragmatics) to define and include members of that learning community (social and cultural phenomena as well)
- Prior to their employment as full-time teachers in K-12 schools, participants experienced a lack of sufficient preparation to both understand and teach academic language.

- All participants believed that this under-preparedness---a deficit in their education---impacted their ability to provide optimal instruction in academic language for all students, especially EL students.
- Standardized testing was seen as improperly functioning as an assessment of students' mastery of the academic language of the disciplines, and not deep conceptual understandings of these disciplines. Thus, participants regarded EL students as "penalized" by taking standardized assessments that were not, essentially, a valid measure of "what they knew."

*(3) Teachers' reported instructional practices for academic language*

- Participants reported using a range of instructional approaches with the aim of scaffolding academic language learning for all students, including sentence stems, visual aids, word walls, modelling, think-alouds, and structured peer interactions.
- Participants reported that their implementation of these strategies was described as emergent, intuitive, and/or inconsistent, rather than grounded in a coherent pedagogical framework and research based.
- The lack of explicit, systematic instruction in academic language suggests that teachers rely heavily on experiential knowledge rather than research-based approaches.

Detailed qualitative findings

(1a) General understanding of academic language

One of the central themes to emerge across participants' interviews was the varied and often fragmented understanding of what constitutes academic language. While all participants were able to describe classroom interactions and language-related challenges faced by their EL, multilingual learners, few demonstrated a cohesive or theoretically grounded definition of academic language at the outset of the interview. Their responses revealed a general awareness of the concept's importance, but their interpretation reflected inconsistencies in scope, terminology, and application.

Participants consistently reported that the term academic language was either underemphasized or absent in their teacher preparation coursework. Several noted that they had not encountered the term formally until graduate school, and even then, the instruction lacked depth or was framed narrowly within literacy methods.

*"I didn't really hear about Academic Language until grad school, and even then, it was more about vocabulary than, like, sentence structure or discourse."* (Participant 7)

*"In undergrad, we learned about teaching reading and writing, but no one really said what Academic Language is."* (Participant 2)

The absence of explicit, conceptual instruction seemed to impact participants' ability to name or define the features of academic language (e.g., syntactic complexity, genre structures, or linguistic registers), though they were able to describe classroom practices that implicitly targeted such skills.

(1b) General vocabulary and content knowledge

Several participants initially equated academic language with content-specific vocabulary or technical terms, rather than recognizing it as a broader set of linguistic competencies that enable students to engage in school-based discourse across disciplines. This narrow view limited their ability to see academic language as embedded not only in subject areas, but also in instructions, assessments, and classroom routines.

*"I think of Academic Language as the words they need to know for the science test...things like 'hypothesis' or 'conclusion,'"* (Participant 5)

This definition, while not incorrect, reflects a limited understanding of the layered nature of academic language, which includes not only discipline-specific vocabulary but also functional language for reasoning, comparing, analysing, and arguing.

(1c) Emergent and evolving understandings

Despite initial uncertainty, participants often articulated more nuanced understandings as the interview progressed. Through reflective dialogue, many began to connect their experiences with EL students to the idea of language demands embedded in content tasks. For example, Participant 3 initially described academic language as "school words" but later added, *"I guess it's also how students put their ideas together, not just the words, but how they explain things in a formal way."* These evolving definitions suggest that while explicit knowledge of academic language terminology may be limited, early career teachers are developing an intuitive understanding based on their experiences with student challenges. The interview appeared to facilitate the articulation of a deeper conceptual awareness that they had verbalized earlier in the data collection process.

This conceptual ambiguity has important implications for practice. Several participants expressed uncertainty about whether they were "doing it right" when supporting EL students, including a need for clearer frameworks and language scaffolds in their preparation. One participant explained:

"*I know I do things to help my students talk and write better in class, but I wouldn't know how to label it or if it counts as teaching Academic Language."* (Participant 1)

The uncertainty may contribute to missed opportunities for intentional, targeted instruction that supports EL students in acquiring the complex linguistic tools needed for academic success.

(2a) Beliefs about the importance of academic language

Across interviews, participants expressed strong beliefs about the critical role of academic language in student success. Although most acknowledged gaps in their formal training, they consistently emphasized that academic language is foundational, not optional, for EL students to participate meaningfully in classroom activities, access grade-level content, and demonstrate learning on assessments. Their responses reflected a deeply held recognition of linguistic equity as a central concern, even when their conceptual vocabulary was limited.

(2b) Academic language as a gatekeeper

Despite variability in definitional clarity, participants unanimously identified academic language as essential to EL students' academic success. Participants framed academic language as a foundational tool for accessing content, participating in classroom discourse, and performing on high-stakes assessments. Their responses suggested an intuitive understanding of the role of language in mediating learning and achievement. Participant 5 described academic language as a "gatekeeper", stating:

*"Without Academic Language, they can't even understand the instruction on the test. It's not about what they know – it's about what they can read and write."* (Participant 5)

Similarly, Participant 2 linked language proficiency to classroom participation:

*"They're quiet not because they don't know the answer, but because they don't have the right words to say it the way school wants."* (Participant 2)

These findings align with sociocultural theories that position language as a primary tool for learning. Teachers' beliefs reflect an emerging awareness of linguistic equity and the structural barriers faced by EL students, even if their reported instructional responses to these beliefs apparently were not comprehensive. Participants consistently expressed concern that EL students are often misjudged or underestimated due to linguistic hurdles rather than a lack of content understanding.

*"If students don't know how to speak or write in academic ways, they kind of disappear in the classroom. They know things, but they can't show it."* (Participant 3)

*"It really makes the difference between passing and failing – especially for EL students."* (Participant 6).
Several participants articulated a belief that academic language is not only linguistic but also cultural and social. They viewed its mastery as tied to students' ability to perform classroom roles and meet implicit behavioural and discourse expectations.
*"It's not just knowing big words, it's knowing how to be a student, like how to talk in a way that sounds smart or respectful or whatever the teacher wants."* (Participant 4)
These responses suggest that participants understood academic language as a socially situated practice, one that affects how students are perceived, how they participate, and how they are assessed within school contexts.

(2c) Beliefs in the need for intentional instruction

Participants shared the belief that academic language development requires explicit teaching and cannot be assumed to develop incidentally. This belief extended beyond EL students to include other linguistically diverse students. However, participants emphasized that the consequences for EL students were most immediate and pronounced.
*"They're expected to just know how to explain their thinking or write a paragraph the right way, but no one teaches them the sentence frames or how to say it."* (Participant 5)
*"I think we assume students will get it if we give them enough vocabulary, but really they need to be shown how to use that vocabulary in academic ways."* (Participant 2)

(3a) Instructional practices and efficacy

Participants described a range of instructional approaches intended to scaffold academic language development. These included sentence stems, visual aids, word walls, modelling, think-alouds, and structured peer interactions. However, the participants' reported implementation of these strategies was often described as emergent, intuitive, or inconsistent, rather than grounded in a coherent pedagogical framework.
*"I use sentence starters like 'I agree because…' to help them speak up. It gives them a way into the conversation."* (Participant 6)
Participant 4 emphasized multimodal scaffolds:
*"I use pictures, videos, anything that helps. Sometimes I'll act it out. Especially with newcomers, visuals are key."* (Participant 4)
While such practices reflect a general awareness of the linguistic demands placed on EL students, the lack of explicit, systematic instruction in academic language suggests that teachers rely heavily on experiential knowledge rather than research-based approaches.

(3b) Student challenges: instruction

Participants identified significant challenges faced by EL students in acquiring and using academic language. These challenges extended beyond a limited vocabulary to include comprehension of syntactic structures, test-taking language, and culturally unfamiliar content. Participants reported that many EL students experienced affective barriers such as anxiety, fear of public error, and low confidence, and these factors impacted the efficacy of their instruction.
Participant 1 explained:
*"They'll say 'I don't know' even when they do—they just don't know how to say it. I can see they're thinking, but they're stuck."* (Participant 1)
This observation resonates with Cummins' (2000) distinction between Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP), where students may appear fluent in social contexts while lacking the academic language required for success at school-based tasks. The

participants also noted that linguistic challenges often masked students' cognitive competence, leading to inaccurate assessments of ability.

(3c) Teacher challenges: instruction

A prominent theme throughout the data set was the pervasive sense of unpreparedness and pedagogical uncertainty. Participants reported that their teacher preparation programs provided limited coursework or field experience focused on academic language instruction or linguistically responsive teaching. As a result, they frequently described feeling overwhelmed, isolated, or forced to "figure it out" on their own, how best to provide instruction for their EL students.

*"I felt like I was just guessing. There wasn't a lot of guidance on what to do for EL students."* (Participant 7)

In addition to gaps in preparation, structural barriers such as limited planning time, lack of curriculum adaptations, and inadequate collaboration with specialists further compounded instructional challenges. This theme suggests that early career teachers may be operating with a high degree of instructional improvisation, despite a strong commitment to student success.

(3d) Assessment and academic language: linked to instruction

Participants expressed widespread concern that standardized assessments—and even classroom-based tests—disproportionately penalized EL students due to their reliance on complex academic language. The participants described situations in which students understood the content but were unable to demonstrate their knowledge due to linguistic inaccessibility. It was not clear to these participants how to address via their instructional processes.

*"One of my students understood everything we did in science—she could talk to me about it—but when it came to the test, she failed. The language just shut her down."* (Participant 5)

While some participants attempted to modify classroom assessments, many felt constrained by school policies or lacked the tools to make meaningful accommodations. This finding illustrates how assessment practices can serve as gatekeepers for academic advancement, reinforcing the need for more linguistically responsive assessment design.

(3e) Cultural competence and inclusion: instruction

Although all participants expressed a desire to create inclusive environments, their approaches to cultural responsiveness varied widely. Some made intentional efforts to integrate students' languages, cultural backgrounds, and lived experiences into instruction, while others acknowledged a lack of confidence or strategies for doing so.

*"I let them speak their language when they work together. I want them to feel like their identity matters in this space."* (Participant 4)

Conversely, Participant 6 reflected:

*"I know I could do more. The curriculum doesn't always reflect who they are, and I'm not sure how to fix that."* (Participant 6)

These responses suggest that while these early career teachers may possess a disposition toward inclusion, they required more targeted support to enact culturally sustaining pedagogies. The findings may suggest constraints, such as standardized curricula, that may limit teachers' capacity for culturally responsive adaptation.

(3f) Teacher preparation

Closely related to instructional and cultural challenges was the theme of teacher preparation. Most participants reported minimal coursework or practical training related to academic language or multilingual learners in their certification programs that would enable them to offer optimal instruction.

Those who had enrolled in graduate-level literacy or ENL coursework expressed slightly more confidence but still emphasized the disconnection between theory and classroom application.

*"We learned about BICS and CALP and the importance of language, but I didn't get to see how it looks in a real classroom."* (Participant 1)

This gap between conceptual understanding and practice echoes broader critiques in the research literature about the inadequacy of teacher preparation programs in equipping candidates to teach in multilingual contexts. The responses suggest that early career teachers often enter the profession without a clear instructional guidance for language development.

(3g) Collaboration and support systems for optimal instruction

Participants emphasized the importance of collaboration in navigating the complexities of instruction for EL students. The participants who had access to mentors, ENL (English as a New Language) co-teachers, or instructional coaches reported greater confidence and efficacy with their instruction of EL students. Others, however, described limited collaboration opportunities and inconsistent feedback from support personnel.

*"My coach helped me break down the standards and figure out how to teach vocabulary. That made a huge difference."* (Participant 3)

Participant 6 offered a contrasting view:

*"I barely talk to the ENL teacher. We're on different schedules, and I'm not sure what support they're giving the kids."* (Participant 6)

These findings indicate that while collaborative structures can enhance instructional capacity, their implementation remains uneven across school contexts. In the absence of formal support, these early career teachers relied on digital resources, peer networks, and informal trial-and-error approaches.

Unexpected findings

While the primary goal of the present study was to examine early career teachers' beliefs and reported instructional practices about academic language for EL students, several unexpected findings emerged during the data collection and interview process. One of the most unanticipated patterns was the emotional intensity with which many participants approached the subject of academic language. Rather than offering solely technical or instructional descriptions, participants frequently expressed feelings of guilt, inadequacy, and frustration when reflecting on their preparedness to support their EL, multilingual learners. These affective responses were not elicited through direct questioning but arose spontaneously, suggesting that academic language instruction is not only a cognitive or pedagogical challenge but also an emotional and ethical concern for early career teachers. In particular, participants often spoke of a goal to do more for their EL students, accompanied by a sense that they lack the training, tools, or instructional support to do so effectively. This emotional vulnerability highlighted how the challenges of academic language instruction intersect with professional identity formation and teacher self-efficacy in the early stages of teaching.

An additional unanticipated insight emerged around the conceptual clarity of academic language. Several participants initially struggled to define academic language in precise terms. It became evident during the interviews that several had not previously reflected on the construct in any formal way. Often, they associated academic language with vocabulary lists or writing conventions. As the interviews progressed, participants were encouraged to articulate examples and explain how they thought EL students' needs and understandings changed over time. For some, the interview itself became a reflective exercise, prompting new insights about the relationship between language and learning. One participant remarked that the conversation helped for the realization of how much instruction assumed language proficiency that students did not yet possess. This emergent conceptualization suggests that interviews

may serve not only as a method of data collection but also as a formative space for professional learning, particularly for educators still in the process of developing their pedagogical language awareness.

**Discussion**

This study reveals these seven early career teachers understood the importance of academic language and expressed a strong commitment to supporting EL students. However, they faced systemic challenges in translating their commitment into their instructional practice. Inadequate preparation, lack of explicit instructional models, and limited collaboration time apparently hindered the consistent implementation of academic language instruction. The participants' reliance on vocabulary-focused strategies reflects a gap in preparation around syntax and discourse. Participants demonstrated evolving understandings of academic language, often initiating with surface-level definitions and expanding toward a more functional view as interviews progressed. While few had formal training focused specifically on academic language, all identified it as essential to EL students' success, describing it as a "gatekeeper" to assessments, participation, and achievement. This aligns with prior research that highlighted gaps in teacher preparation on disciplinary language (Zwiers, 2008; Fang & Schleppegrell, 2010). Despite strong beliefs in the importance of supporting EL students, most participants reported feeling unprepared to do so effectively. Across both bachelor's and master's certification pathways, teachers noted limited exposure to strategies for academic language development or linguistically responsive instruction. Most of the participants described systemic constraints, such as rigid pacing calendars, standardized testing, and curriculum limitations, that made it difficult to apply their beliefs in practice. Access to collaboration also varied. Some participants benefited from co-teaching models and interdisciplinary planning with ENL specialists, while others lacked structured support. These findings underscore the importance of embedding academic language pedagogy within teacher preparation programs and ensuring that early career teachers receive sustained professional learning and mentoring within their school contexts. These insights highlight the ongoing need for systemic support to bridge the gap between beliefs and instructional practice in serving multilingual learners.

**Conclusion**

This study examined early career teachers' beliefs and their reported instructional practices regarding academic language in relation to EL students. The findings suggest that participants recognized academic language as foundational to students' academic success and viewed it as essential for meaningful participation in classroom discourse, content learning, and assessment performance. At the same time, participants' conceptualizations of academic language were frequently fragmented, inconsistent, and primarily associated with vocabulary acquisition rather than with the broader linguistic, syntactic, discourse, and sociocultural dimensions that characterize disciplinary language use in academic settings. These findings indicate that although early career teachers acknowledge the importance of academic language, many lack a sufficiently developed theoretical and pedagogical understanding of how language functions as a medium for disciplinary thinking and knowledge construction.

The findings further reveal a significant disconnect between teachers' beliefs and their reported instructional preparedness. Participants consistently expressed strong commitments to supporting EL students and emphasized the necessity of intentionally teaching academic language. However, they also described relying largely on intuitive, emergent, and experience-based instructional strategies rather than systematically implemented, research-informed pedagogical approaches. Participants frequently attributed this reliance to insufficient preparation within teacher education programs, limited opportunities for sustained professional learning, and systemic constraints embedded within school contexts, including standardized assessment pressures, restrictive curricular pacing, and inadequate collaborative support structures. Consequently, instructional practices related to academic language

often appeared inconsistent and underdeveloped, even though the participants' demonstrated a commitment to equitable instruction.

Broader implications emerging from this study highlight the relationship between academic language and issues of educational equity, access, and inclusion. Participants recognized that academic language functions as a gatekeeping mechanism within U.S. schools, shaping EL students' opportunities for rigorous academic participation and influencing how their abilities are perceived and assessed. Teachers frequently acknowledged that EL students' linguistic challenges were often misinterpreted as limitations in academic ability, restricting opportunities to demonstrate conceptual understanding and engage fully in disciplinary learning. These findings reinforce sociocultural perspectives that position language as central to participation, identity formation, and academic achievement, while highlighting the need for more coherent and practice-centred preparation in linguistically responsive pedagogy and academic language instruction.

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