Academic English – An Overview for Teachers
(Link to Blog: **Academic English Framework: A Teacher-friendly Version**)

About the Paper

This is an awesome paper by Robin Scarcella, where she collects the research and ideas around what constitutes academic English to build an argument that this variety of English can and should be taught in schools. Her argument is that children won't just acquire academic English automatically by being in school, and that despite the complexity and quantity of language needed in order to be proficient in it, learners need to have this variety of English if they are to succeed in life. Therefore ignoring and not teaching it isn't an option.

If you are planning on doing research into classroom language use, the original paper would be a great starting point, providing lots of food for thought for classroom methodologies, whatever subject you teach. The article is long but lucid, with a very good bibliography.

If you don't want to read the whole article, below are some of the big ideas covered. Hopefully some will resonate and you'll be able to bring them into your daily practice.

The Paper

Scarcella starts by sharing an email sent by an undergrad student to his professor.

Here's a fragment:

How do you do? My name is xx. I am a student in UCI currently on the freshman level. I am going to be atend Biology 5C next year, but during the summer, I would like to continue my study on the subject. … As I have understand that you are currently conducting a research on the subject of plasma, and I would like to know more about it, that is, if I am not costing any inconvenience. Thank you very much, and have a good day.

You may have been presented with something similar by one or more of your students! Where do you begin?!

Clearly this student is struggling with spelling and grammar, but we can see that he also doesn't really understand the conventions of a formal email whose purpose is to persuade the professor to accept him into the team. From this, we see that academic English isn't just about getting the grammar right, but is much more convoluted and layered, involving social elements as well as the strictly linguistic.

It is often perceived that only non-native speakers of English struggle with academic English, but that isn't the case; any student in an environment with little or no contact with academic language is likely to struggle in acquiring it. But being able to use academic English is essential for future success, since gaps can leave students vulnerable to prejudices which link linguistic ability to cognitive ability.

According to Scarcella, academic English can be broken down into teachable components. Teachers need to explicitly know about, use and discuss these components with their students if they are to be of help to them, so that as students progress through school, they are exposed to more and different aspects of academic language, encountered across the various subject areas.

Scarcella highlights three dimensions of academic literacy: linguistic, cognitive and social/psychological.

The Three Dimensions:

Linguistic Dimension

This is critical! Learners have to be proficient in a multitude of language components.

The linguistic dimension involves:

Phonological component:

- Understanding how the sounds of English work (that 'str' is okay but 'tsr' isn't; that 'plethora' has stress on the first syllable, not the second)
- How words are pronounced and how they link to spelling (why psychology doesn't start with a 'p' sound)

Lexical component:

- Academic vocabulary – some words mean different things according to the subject and some are used in a particular way within a subject ('product' in Maths is different to 'product' in business)
- How words and parts of words are used: nouns, verbs etc, morphology – eg using clues around prefixes and suffixes to get meaning ('tri' means 'three', 'pre' means 'before')
- Fixed expressions. English has lots of them and they have to be learnt (eg 'react to' compared to 'react with', 'in fashion', not 'in the fashion')

Grammatical component:

- The grammatical systems of English are horrendously complex and yet to succeed academically students have to be able to use English grammar competently.
- In spoken English learners can get away with getting grammar wrong, but not in written language
- So language needs to be discussed as part of and across the curriculum. What verb tenses are used when writing a Geography essay? How to pluralise scientific words (bacterium/bacteria) etc

Sociolinguistic component:

- Learners need to know the differences between the language they use whilst chatting with friends and the language they are expected to use when discussing work in school.
- They need choices for presenting information to others; eg when to repeat for effect or how to disagree politely.

Discourse component:

- Understanding of how texts are built – what is and is not expected in a text, and whereabouts
    o You won't find many flowery metaphors in science texts but you might find abbreviated names of chemicals)
    o Appropriate openings and closings, and discourse markers to organise ideas (Dear Sir; in addition; as a result of..)

Cognitive Dimension

Academic English isn't just about communication; it's about thought. As well as being able to decode and produce texts, students need to be able to engage with them: thinking, inferring, synthesising information from them, and using them to build on knowledge they already have.

Again, Scarcella breaks the cognitive dimension down into components:

Knowledge component

- Knowledge comes before anything else. You can't understand a text if you have absolutely no knowledge about its content. If you already know a little about a subject, you can use your knowledge to plug gaps and so learn more from what you are reading or hearing.
- With good academic English, students can read effectively over time, and so build up their knowledge step by step.
- However not all students have good academic English, so teachers need to make sure students have the basic knowledge and vocabulary they will need to engage before asking them to learn new content.

Higher order thinking component

- Involves interpreting and synthesising in terms of taking information in and producing texts, and also critical evaluation of texts: what makes information reliable or not; how to present information in a way which will be understood and be convincing?
- Without proficiency in academic English and higher order thinking skills, students are likely to struggle.

Strategic component

- This is about enhancing communication or repairing it when it breaks down. Learners need strategies and behaviours which will help them achieve this, such as highlighting, annotating, brainstorming, asking questions, answering questions, using context to infer meaning, checking spelling and grammar etc. These strategies should be explicitly taught so that they become part of a student's tool kit.

Metalinguistic component

- Learners need to think about their use of language, identifying such as what content to include in a text, and which vocabulary is appropriate etc
- Academic English is cognitively demanding, so when students are engaging with both subject content and academic English at the same time, the cognitive load will be high. Having good metalinguistic awareness means that once learners have engaged with the subject matter

and constructed their text, they have the knowledge required to edit and revise it, focusing on making sure that their language is effective and appropriate for the given task.

Sociocultural/Psychological Dimension

All communication happens within particular social contexts and cultures, and this is true for academic English. The sociocultural dimension involves such as attitudes and beliefs, behaviours and practices which are shared by members of a community.

- Students may be linguistically adept, but if they don't know how to behave in our academic culture, they are still likely to struggle: Students need to understand that it is okay to ask a teacher for help, or that they need to request and not demand in an email. This type of knowledge isn't usually explicitly taught – it has to be modelled and encouraged by us as teachers.

- As we share our knowledge, we are also sharing the values, beliefs and behaviours associated with it. This can be a good thing because it enables students to understand and assimilate them, enabling them to belong to the community which possesses academic English. However if these values and behaviours directly oppose or conflict with students' home values and beliefs there is a danger that students may disengage and stop learning. We need to make sure students are not forced to accept all, but rather have space to explore and evaluate these beliefs and practices, so they can make choices about which to discard and which to maintain in the different contexts and communities they belong to.

Language means power, and those who possess a prestige form such as academic English hold power which can be used to exclude those who don't. So despite the difficulties of researching, assessing and teaching academic English, Scarcella maintains the importance of pushing forward in the endeavour.

Links to the Science of Learning – things to try and test!

Facts always precede skills so it may be helpful to get children seeing and explicitly finding examples of language. That way they will know vocabulary and structures exist and what they look like before they are asked to use them. This also relates to students having enough knowledge and vocabulary to be able to engage with new content.

Academic English has to be taught. Children acquire their first spoken language naturally, but everything else to do with language has to be learnt (reading and writing). Academic language is another step along from reading and writing, so has to be made explicit.

To teach academic English, we need to be aiming for **deep knowledge** – the ability to manipulate and use language effectively. This needs conceptual understanding – not just factual surface knowledge.

Language doesn't seem to build logically block by block and what learners produce is more than and different to the original input. We need students to be able to use language to think and learn as well as to communicate ideas in new ways, and so we need to give them access to enough language (and space to make errors) to enable this emergence to occur.

So:

The first logical requirement would be a language-rich environment; one where language is visible and talked about generally and explicitly.

Learning something new requires **repetition** over time (with sleep between), so keep coming back (briefly) to language points. Don't spend a whole lesson teaching them – just show students language elements in texts, or model your use of language as it occurs, but do it often. Use regular questioning and quizzes, reading and writing tasks etc to get recall and development of language concepts, which is what is required to make sure the learning will be accessible to the learner in the future. And remember to embrace error to enhance learning!

Memories need to become **deep** and **semantic** – ie conceptual and decontextualized, so if all teachers regularly highlight academic language during their lessons and give opportunities for practice and recall, students can develop and deepen their concepts in a range of contexts. The goal is for students to reach automaticity in academic language use, with no transfer problem because the concepts are language-embedded, not subject embedded.

Once academic English is automatic, then the working memory load should be reduced as whole concepts take the same space as single facts so learners can focus on what they need to be learning in your subject, rather than on decoding or producing texts.

Sooo?

Ultimately, the idea isn't that you suddenly become an expert in language (unless you want to). It's just to be aware of the components of academic English to help you make sure that the language in your subject area becomes visible and practiced by students, enabling them to add to their academic English repertoire.

Going into the future, where so much new knowledge is coming to light across our subject areas as well as areas we don't even know about yet, and fake 'knowledge' abounds, it is crucial for people to be able to access and share this knowledge critically and effectively. Our jobs as teachers must be to give our learners the knowledge and skills to do this – this is what academic English is about!