



The Reading Matrix © 2009
Volume 9, Number 1, April 2009

Building Academic Language: Essential Practices for Content Classrooms, Grades 5-12

Jeff Zwiers (2007)

San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

ISBN: 978-0-7879-8761-9

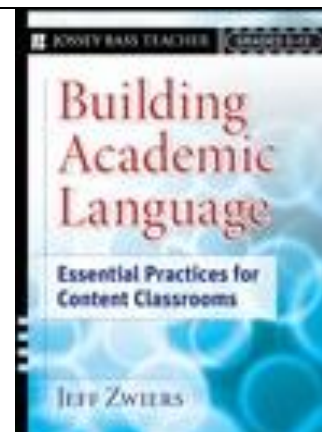
Cost: \$24.95

Pp. xv + 320 pages

November 2007

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A reading of *Building Academic Language: Essential Practices for Content Classrooms* (Zwiers, 2008) evokes memories of an earlier work, *The CALLA Handbook* (Chamot & O'Malley, 1994) in that both books are geared towards practitioners striving to help their students successfully navigate the world of academic literacy as they engage in reading and writing activities across the content areas.

The field has come a long way since *The Handbook* was printed. Since then, a series of works have been published on academic language. These works include thought pieces and theoretical perspectives on the nature and acquisition of academic literacy (Zamel & Spack, 2008); discussions on different genres and features of school literacy (Schleppegrell, 2004); academic writing in a second language (Belcher & Braine, 1995); academic writing development among Generation 1.5 students (Harklau, Losey, & Siegal, 1999); and descriptions of school and classroom frameworks that support the development of academic literacy by ELLs (Bunch, Abram, Lotan, & Valdés, 2001; Schleppegrell & Colombi, 2002).

Building Academic Language: Essential Practices for Content Classrooms is one of the most recent contributions to the arena of academic language development, and is different from most other works in the area because of its practical nature. Like its predecessor, it is also written in the style of a handbook in which, except for the first two chapters, the theoretical underpinnings relevant to classroom practice are very briefly highlighted and followed by elaborate discussions on tools and strategies that may be used to assist students as they face the challenges of content area literacies. The organizational plan for the book takes the reader from a discussion on the nature of language and academic literacy to specific descriptions of academic language in the content areas and strategies for developing this language in the classroom. Zwiers ends by discussing the importance of ongoing classroom assessments of student learning and the role that teachers must take to help low-performing students close the achievement gap.

There are several key notions in the book that merit elaboration. Three of these are 1) the need to help students focus on deeper levels of talk as a way of scaffolding thinking and

academic language use; 2) the use of metacognition and metalinguistic awareness to help practitioners analyze classroom interactions and to help their students develop academic literacy; and 3) the use of visuals coupled with writing to help develop academic thinking. Each of these is described below.

Zwiers makes the point that teachers often use many types of activities that promote classroom talk, but that there is a need to think about the quality as well as the quantity of talk. A focus on deeper levels of talk is a strategy that can be used to increase the quality of talk. This is done not only by talking to students about what a good classroom discussion sounds like, but also by modeling conversations that go beyond limited facts and unsupported opinions to include a planned direction, evidence, explanations, interpretation, and synthesis as appropriate—elements that lead to deeper levels of thinking, questions, and comments. Additionally, the teacher should explicitly point out the language of the discipline that is used in these conversations as well as other language that is used to construct arguments, to present cause-and-effect, comparisons, and other types of academic talk. Zwiers presents these as “brick and mortar words.” The former includes concrete and abstract items such as *transpiration*, *habitat*, *photosynthesis*, and *democracy*; the latter includes words that create coherent and logical sentences, such as *therefore*, *however*, *establish*, and *estimate* (p. 22).

The second notion involves the use of metacognition (thinking about thinking) and metalinguistic awareness (reflecting on the nature and functions of language in a specified context). Zwiers states that teachers often use metacognition to think about their classroom activities; for example, how they will introduce topics, organize activities, and use specific strategies to clarify student thinking. The use of metacognition should also be taught to students so that they stop to reflect on how they use language in their reading, writing, and conversations. More specifically, the idea is to extend their metacognition and apply it in the classroom by holding discussions about academic literacy development. One way to do this is by generating conversation around topics such as how to remember words or terms; the types of questions that help students think deeply about science, history or some other subject; how group work helps them develop language skills; and how they can use their ideas in the future (pp. 64-65).

The third notion builds on the work of Schleppegrell (2004) where she explains that academic writing usually involves thinking about analysis, causal reasoning, argumentation, and evaluation. Zwiers describes how to apply these ideas to academic literacy development in the classroom. He presents a variety of tools and strategies that will help students to organize and present their thinking in a logical way, and to transfer it to print. One effective tool for this is the development of visual organizers with the addition of text. The idea is to take different types of graphic organizers, add labels, phrases, or sentences and then use these to scaffold the writing of a report, essay, or any other type of academic narrative.

In sum, a major strength of this book is that it is replete with tools, activities, lesson plans, and information tables that can be applied in the classroom. Additionally, the author includes numerous illustrations of classroom talk and teacher comments across the chapters which greatly help the reader to better understand how some of the ideas and activities might actually play out in the classroom. A bonus in the book is the inclusion of four appendices which present tables with academic terms and “mortar” type phrases for building academic language, along with other useful information and classroom activities.

A gap in the book is in the area of working with culturally and linguistically diverse students. The first two chapters of the book take note of the additional challenges that these students face in learning how to use English in academic settings and in acquiring the cultural

knowledge that is necessary to succeed in mainstream classrooms. However, the author fails to address the specific needs of these learners in the remaining chapters. A few brief, but targeted statements added to the discussion in each of the chapters would have been helpful given that English language learners face the challenge of developing academic literacy in a non-native language. Such statements, for instance, could include ways that the teacher might help individual students to draw on their background knowledge and ways of knowing in order to make meaningful connections that will help them better understand science or history texts. The discussion on cultivating academic discourse in the classroom in Chapter 5, for example, might have specifically indicated that increased wait time is often necessary when prompting ELLs to respond not only because more time allows students to think about what they are going to say, but additionally, because the processing of discourse in English takes them longer. Likewise, the teaching of phrases that signal a contradiction or disagreement should be coupled with a discussion on norms of behavior in U.S. classrooms because in many countries it is considered disrespectful for the student to disagree with the teacher. Nonetheless, the author does point out that the strategies and tools presented throughout the book are effective in helping all students succeed, and the wealth of information in *Building Academic Language* certainly makes the book a major, most worthwhile contribution to the field of academic literacy.

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