

So...What's Academic Language? Transcript

Hi, I'm Jessica Keweshan, the edTPA Coordinator at Towson University. In this video, we'll look at what academic language actually is, the terminology that's used in edTPA, and some examples of ways to support students in acquiring and using academic language.

First of all, it's important to understand the difference between social language and academic language. We use language all day, every day, whether we're talking with a friend, ordering food at a restaurant, or sending a text message. We use this social language to communicate with other people.

Academic language is more specialized – it's the oral and written language that students need to master in order to learn academic content. Think about it – in classrooms, students are listening, speaking, reading, and writing all the time. This looks and sounds different in different subject areas, so you are going to want to think carefully about academic language in your content area.

First, let's look at one key element of academic language – vocabulary. Vocabulary can be words, phrases, or symbols.

Take a moment to think about some of the vocabulary that's specific to your content area. This can be a big challenge for students, so we want to be thinking about ways to support students in learning these terms and using them correctly.

Academic vocabulary can take some different forms. There are academic terms that are used across different subject areas – for example, you can analyze something in English class, you can analyze something in science class, in health class, and so on. However, we can't assume that students necessarily know what these terms mean – they have to actually be taught what those mean. There's also subject-specific vocabulary, like the examples that I showed on the previous slide. These can be words or symbols that are really only used in your field. Finally, there are words that have multiple meanings. These can be really tricky. For example, a *meter* is a unit of measurement, but it means something totally different in poetry, and it means something different in music. It's important to think about all of the different vocabulary demands that are involved in your lessons so you can plan for how to support students with that.

Next up, we have language function. Think about all the things we can do with language. Sure, if we're thinking about social language, we can list things like greeting somebody, expressing a feeling, ordering a meal, and so on, and those are important.

In terms of academic language function, here are some common examples. You're probably noticing that these could apply to almost any content area.

When you're thinking about language function in your lessons, you want to consider what students are using language for. So, it's great if they've learned some new vocabulary, but what are they actually going to do with it? Remember that language function can refer to oral language or written language. And if you're not sure what the language function might be in your learning segment, take a look at the verbs in your learning objectives. If students are going to have to explain the steps of photosynthesis, then they're going to need to be able to use language to

explain. If they are going to have to critique another student's art work, they are going to need language to critique, so they are going to need the vocabulary and structures in order to do that.

Let's get into the nitty-gritty with syntax. Here, we're thinking about how we put words and symbols together to actually communicate something.

For example, students might learn how to write sentences that show a sequence of events. In that case, they need to understand not just what the words first and then mean, but how words can be put together in sentences, and the order that the sentences have to go in.

But each subject area is going to have its own unique syntax. I can think about the specific rules involved in citing a source, for example. I can think about the rules for writing a formula in math, or how musical notation works. Chemical reactions are a syntax that you'll see in science class, whereas in English, you're probably not going to encounter too many chemical reactions, and you're more likely to learn about sentence structures when you're analyzing an author's purpose in a text.

So, remember, syntax refers to the rules for organizing language so that it communicates meaning. You can think about sentence structure – there are rules we have to follow so that our meaning is clear. I can use all the right words, but if they're not in the right order, they're not going to make sense. When it comes to syntax in our content areas, we need to actually teach students these rules – they're not just going to know them innately.

Finally, let's talk about discourse. Discourse is all about the structures for oral or written language in a certain content area. If syntax is about sentence structure on a smaller scale, then discourse is more about an essay or a speech structure on a larger scale.

Again, this is going to be specific to your discipline – science has certain structures that are different from social studies that are different from art. A lab report has a particular structure, and students in a science class are going to need to learn that. Lab reports probably aren't going to be super relevant to them when they're in art class, but that's where they're probably going to be learning about the characteristics of art genres. You want to be thinking about the discourse of your content area and what supports students are going to need to be able to do that.

So here is a quick summary of discourse. Again, discourse is about structure, but it's more macro than syntax. It's about a larger product that people in your content area would use to communicate ideas, whether that's orally or in written form.

Let's make this a little more concrete by looking at edTPA and the content area of education. Since you've been studying education for the last several years, you may not even notice some of the education-specific vocabulary, like learning objective, or rubric, or IEP. Still, there's definitely plenty of edTPA-specific vocabulary. Some might have seemed totally new to you, and other words you might have seen in other contexts but not encountered in your actual education classes.

Language functions are important here, too. You're using language to do a huge number of things in your portfolio. But even if we just consider the commentary, you're using language to

analyze your teaching, and you're using language to support your ideas with examples from theory. So there's a lot of different functions involved here.

We can think about the syntax involved with edTPA, too. There may be some specific structures that are new for you, like how to cite an example from research in a sentence within your commentary, or how to use time stamps from your video clips in your commentary. Again, these are the micro-structures that you need to learn or practice for this.

But in terms of discourse, so, more broadly, edTPA relies on the discourse of education. Here, you're writing a commentary – and while you may not have called it that in the past, you probably have written reflections on your teaching before. So that's a sort of structure that's used frequently in education. There's other forms of discourse, too – think about how you would structure language to give effective student feedback, or how you're asked in Task 3 to create a summary of student learning. So there are particular ways to do these things, and they're unique to teaching. You didn't start out knowing how to put these sorts of things together several years ago, but you were taught the expectations of your field. And so that's what we have to do for our students as well, whether you are teaching math or physical education or music. We want to be thinking about your content specifically.

Okay, so, what does that look like? We're going to take a look now at some options, but this is absolutely not an exhaustive list. They are just some possibilities. So if students are working with new vocabulary, a word wall or a word chart can be helpful as a reference for them. You might even add visuals to that to help make the meaning clear and help them remember what each of the words means.

In terms of language functions, it can be really helpful to model how to do the task that you're asking them to do and to think aloud as you do it. So, you're making the process visible for students, and they'll know how you are using language and why you're doing what you're doing.

You may choose to incorporate some whole-class practice, where the whole class is breaking down a particular text or particular visual representation, or the whole class is working together to write a text or create a visual representation of information.

Some other ideas include sentence starters or sentence frames. So this means that you're giving some of the words in the sentence and leaving other parts blank for students to fill in, so that they're able to follow the structure they need to, but still use their own ideas within that. You may choose to use a graphic organizer that's appropriate for the language demands that you're working with, so, you know, a Venn diagram for comparing, or a sequence chart for putting things in order. But I do think these are usually most useful when you're also showing students how to use them – not just giving it to them, but showing them how it can help them. You might also provide students with work samples or mentor texts that they can analyze and they can use as a reference.

So, that's just a quick list of possibilities. I would encourage you to think about your experience with the language of edTPA and what sorts of supports you have found helpful in navigating these new language demands – whether that's sentence frames you've been provided with, think-alouds that your professors have done, or samples that you've looked at, and so on –

because those sorts of supports that you have found helpful might give you some ideas of what might in turn be helpful for your students.

I also encourage you to refer back to your materials from your content area literacy courses, which may be very helpful for this portion of edTPA as well. If you have any questions at all about academic language or about edTPA in general, please feel free to reach out! Thanks!