

**theme /** ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

BY MEG GEBHARD AND JERRI WILLETT

# SOCIAL *to* ACADEMIC

University-school district partnership helps teachers broaden students' language skills



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Learning about his grandmother's Puerto Rican music at her home in Spanish Harlem influenced Eric Velasquez to write and illustrate the autobiographical *Grandma's Records*. It was the centerpiece of a lesson plan for one 4th-grade teacher in the university-school district partnership. Children wrote stories and read them at a celebration for parents that included dancing to Puerto Rican music.

Jennie Perez began the 2003-04 school year with apprehension. Over the summer she had been assigned to teach a mainstream 4th-grade class. Perez (a pseudonym) had experience teaching younger students, including English language learners (ELLs), but she was new to teaching older students to read and write denser, more academic texts. Although her curriculum materials were new and aligned with state standards, she was worried that they would not be accessible to most of her students, half of whom were ELLs and all of whom struggled with reading and writing in academic ways. During the previous year, nearly all of the 4th graders attending this school scored at the "failing" or "needs improvement" levels on the state-mandated English language arts exam.

**Classrooms are becoming increasingly diverse — linguistically, culturally, and economically.**

As teacher educators and literacy researchers working in public schools, we have found that many teachers share Perez's concerns. Their classrooms are becoming increasingly diverse — linguistically, culturally, and economically. Federal and state

# A continuum of differences between everyday language and academic language

Everyday language	Academic language
<p>Example from a conversation in a 5th-grade science class about the relationship between different animals:</p> <p><b>The grass got burned up, so the grasshopper has nothing to eat; now the birds have nothing to eat and the animals that eat birds have nothing to eat.</b></p>	<p>Example from a 5th-grade science exam regarding ecosystems:</p> <p><b>A sudden decrease in the population of one type of organism in the food chain will affect all of the other organisms in the food chain.</b></p>
Greater use of everyday vocabulary.	Greater use of content-specific vocabulary.
Greater repetition of information.	Less repetition.
Greater regularity and simplicity in the sentence structures.	Greater use of more complex grammatical structures to pack more information into a single sentence.
Use of the conjunction <i>and</i> and <i>so</i> to convey connections between ideas.	Use of a greater variety of conjunctions and connective words and phrases to convey coherence between ideas (e.g. <i>however, furthermore, nevertheless, as a result, first, second, third, in sum</i> ).
Typically face-to-face and more interactive.	Typically the text must stand alone and is less interactive.
Greater use of gestures and intonation to convey meaning.	Greater use of formatting conventions and graphics to convey meaning (e.g. headings, paragraphs, charts, images).
Examples: telling a story, chatting online, writing notes to a friend.	Examples: giving a speech, writing an analytic essay, describing a science experiment.

Source: Adapted from Gebhard, Harman, & Seger, 2007.

## Professional development opportunities have not kept pace with demands on teachers.

policies such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and English-only mandates are holding them accountable for teaching content to students who are just beginning to use English for academic purposes. Most of all, their jobs have become more difficult because they have not participated in any sustained professional learning opportunities to learn how to support the social and academic development of ELLs.

A review of research suggests that these teachers are not unique. A national report indicates that the number of students who come from homes where a language other than English is spoken has more

than doubled from 6 million to 14 million in the last 20 years, and that these students are likely to drop out of high school at a rate that is three times greater than those who speak English at home (August & Shanahan, 2006). In addition, while federal and state policies have placed increasing demands on teachers, professional development opportunities focusing on the education of ELLs have not kept pace (Zeichner, 2005).

## THE ACCELA ALLIANCE

To respond to the reality that all

teachers need sustained professional learning opportunities to become both content and content-language specialists, the faculty at the University of Massachusetts created the ACCELA Alliance (Access to Critical Content and English Language Acquisition). ACCELA is a federally funded partnership between the University of Massachusetts and Springfield and Holyoke Public Schools. ACCELA was developed to support the academic language development of ELLs by addressing the critical professional development

MEG GEBHARD is an associate professor in the School of Education at the University of Massachusetts. JERRI WILLET is a professor and the chair of the Department of Teacher Education and Curriculum in the School of Education at the University of Massachusetts. They are the co-directors of the ACCELA master's degree program. You can contact them at Furcolo Hall, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, MA, 01003, e-mail: gebhard@educ.umass.edu and willett@educ.umass.edu.

needs of mainstream teachers. In designing the ACCELA Alliance, we were guided by four principles.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Based on the scholarship of educators in Australia (Cope & Kalantzis, 1993) and the U.S. (Schleppegrell, Achugar, & Orteiza, 2004; Schleppegrell & Go, 2007), ACCELA supports teachers in incorporating four concepts about language and language teaching into their work with ELLs and their families:

### 1. Language is a dynamic system of linguistic choices.

Throughout our lives, we learn to make different choices about how we pronounce sounds, select words, use different sentence structures, and organize information. We make these choices depending on what we are communicating about, our purpose, our audience, and our mode of communication. From this perspective, the job of the teachers is to broaden ELLs' abilities to use language more expertly across a variety of social and academic contexts. For example, an ELL will make different linguistic choices if they are telling a bilingual friend about an event on the phone or developing this event into a written narrative for class.

### 2. Academic language differs from everyday language in significant ways.

For ELLs, these differences take on even more significance, as ELLs are required to read and write about unfamiliar topics using technical language and drawing upon meaning-making resources that may differ from the language practices they use at home. As such, teachers need to make explicit the workings of school language to support all students in becoming critically aware of the differences between everyday and academic language (see box on p. 42).

### 3. Teaching academic language means more than teaching

## Planning curriculum to support ELLs' academic language development

- **Identify** a project that makes students' interests part of the curriculum while also attending to academic language development and state standards. In doing so, identify an authentic purpose and audience for students' work.
- **Identify** an academic genre that is well-suited to students achieving their purposes in reading and writing about this topic for this audience (e.g. a letter to a policy maker about a burning issue, a play they perform for another class, an action-oriented research paper).
- **Analyze** the linguistic features of this genre with attention to specialized vocabulary, sentence structures, and organizational conventions. Gibbons (2002) and Knapp & Watkins (2005) are two good resources for this task. Such genre analysis can also support teachers in designing instruction that is responsive to student interests while meeting local and state standards.
- **Provide** students with multiple models and explicit instruction in analyzing the linguistic features of this genre. Discussion of these models should be geared toward raising ELLs' awareness and control over targeted academic language practices.
- **Design** materials to support students in developing the ability to recognize and use genre-specific vocabulary, sentence structures, and organizational conventions (e.g. graphic organizers, guidelines for revision, assessment tools).
- **Provide** opportunities for students to collaborate with each other and teachers as they plan, draft, revise, and edit their texts. Collaboration and feedback should explore how linguistic choices support students in achieving their purposes in writing about this topic for this audience.
- **Track** changes in students' use of targeted academic language practices to reflect on and modify instruction and assess student academic language development.
- **Reflect** with students on using academic language to attempt to accomplish specific goals in their schools and communities.

Source: Adapted from Gebhard, Harman, & Seger, 2007.

### vocabulary.

Teachers and students must also attend to linguistic choices that operate at the sentence and organizational levels. They must learn to attend to different kinds of visual information such as images, charts, and formatting conventions, all of which are important aspects of academic literacy development. Teachers must also track changes in ELLs' use of targeted linguistic features to reflect on and modify instruction and assess students' academic language development over time.

### 4. The goal of academic language

### instruction is not to replace home and peer ways of using language.

Rather, ACCELA works to value the multiple worlds to which students already belong and to support them in participating in those worlds by teaching them to read and write across the curriculum. An important aspect of this effort includes valuing home language practices so students can stay connected to their communities and partici-

**The job of the teachers is to broaden ELLs' abilities to use language across a variety of social and academic contexts.**

pate more fully in a multilingual/multicultural economic and political world.

### STRUCTURES

ACCELA teachers complete a master's degree and earn a state license to teach English as a second language by taking courses on-site. These courses are organized around state and national standards for Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) as well as local issues and teachers' emerging research interests.

### SUPPORT

ACCELA teachers are assisted in exploring their own research interests by faculty and doctoral students from the University of Massachusetts who help them develop questions to fit local issues; analyzing local, state, and national standards; reading relevant literature; collecting and analyzing data; and developing action plans for work in their schools.

### COLLABORATION AND DISSEMINATION

ACCELA teachers regularly present their work to their colleagues,

principals, and district administrators as a way of collectively reflecting on the implications of their work for teaching and learning across institutional contexts. They also have collaborated on conference presentations (for examples, see [www.umass.edu/accela/](http://www.umass.edu/accela/)) and several publications related to ELLs' academic language development (Gebhard, Habana Hafner, & Wright, 2004; Gebhard, Harman, &

Seeger, 2007; Harman, 2007; Willett, Harman, Lozano, Hogan, & Rubeck, 2007).

**Jennie Perez invited families to a celebration where students read their work aloud, and teachers, paraprofessionals, students, and families danced to music mentioned in Eric Velasquez's book.**

### ACCELA IN PRACTICE

The ACCELA Alliance has funded about 65 teachers in Holyoke and Springfield Public Schools in earning a master's degree in education and a state license in Teaching English as a Second Language. Through coursework and the support of faculty and doctoral students, these teachers designed and implemented curricular units that were aligned to state standards, supportive of both content and academic language learning objectives, and responsive to student and community interests (see box on p. 43).

### A CLASSROOM UNIT EXAMPLE

#### Planning

In planning her unit, Perez first examined the genres 4th-grade students are required to use in the curriculum as well as the related content- and language-learning objectives in the state frameworks. This analysis revealed that students are asked to read and write narratives more than any other type of text. Next, Perez closely analyzed the language features of written narratives so she could improve how she taught, provided feedback, and assessed students' abilities to produce and analyze this type of text. Last, she identified award-winning Puerto Rican children's literature to incorporate into the curriculum to make it more engaging and culturally responsive.

#### Implementation

Following the guidelines in the box on p. 43, Perez asked students to read Eric Velasquez's *Grandma's Records* (Walker & Company, 2001). The author recounts summers at his grandmother's apartment in Spanish Harlem, where he was introduced to the sounds and steps of the merengue and the conga. Perez supported students in analyzing how Velasquez chose certain words and phrases to establish the setting, describe the characters, develop the plot, and

explore themes related to family and social change in his work. Then, Perez and the classroom paraprofessional wrote their own narratives about growing up in Puerto Rican communities modeled after Velasquez's text. Just as they had with the published text, students engaged in conversations about their teachers' language choices. Finally, in the writing phase of the unit, Perez instructed students to use what they had learned to produce and revise their own texts. To provide students with an authentic purpose and audience for the writing, she invited their families to school for a celebration where students read their work aloud, and teachers, paraprofessionals, students, and families danced to music mentioned in Velasquez's book.

#### *Reflection on student learning and dissemination of findings*

With a faculty member and a doctoral student, Perez analyzed changes in how students used language in their texts over time. This analysis showed that their narratives became longer and more coherent, showed greater use of a broader range of vocabulary words and sentence structures, and exhibited more features of academic as opposed to oral language. Perez presented these findings to her colleagues and her principal at the end of the academic year.

### CONCLUSION

Perez's project is just one of many action-oriented curricular units ACCELA teachers have designed and implemented in their classrooms. While not all projects were as successful as this one, her work provides an example of the power of providing teachers with sustained professional development opportunities in academic language development. Collectively their projects demonstrate that it is possible to teach ELLs to read and write in academic ways in

mainstream classrooms if students have an intermediate knowledge of everyday English and if teachers are provided with guidance and leeway in modifying mandated curricular packages. In addition, the work of participating teachers illustrates that attempts to support the academic language development of ELLs do not take away from teachers' abilities to support all learners. In fact, most ACCELA teachers developed a deeper understanding of subject matter and the specific language practices used to construct subject-matter knowledge. Finally, the teachers' projects make clear that teachers do not have to make the false choice between designing innovative projects or teaching to state standards and high-stakes tests. Rather, through ACCELA, Perez and many of her colleagues have demonstrated that they have the ability to design engaging projects that support all students, including ELLs, in reading and writing in academic ways and in exploring topics that matter to students and their communities.

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*By Jane D. Hill and Kathleen Flynn*

## features

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