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Social and Academic Vocabulary – What's the Difference?

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What is Social Language?

Social language is the simple, informal language we use when talking face to face with family members and friends. It allows us to use contemporary or slang terms like "cool," "awesome," or "dude." We can also communicate feelings, needs, and wants using symbolic hand gestures for drink, eat, hot, cold, hurt, or tired. Social language also includes writing emails, friendly letters, and texts or retelling stories.

For some, social language does not come naturally. Special needs children may need specific instruction in social language and behaviors, such as greeting people, giving and receiving compliments, apologizing, and making polite requests. They may also need instruction in understanding nonverbal language (facial expressions and body language), respecting rules of personal space, and using an appropriate tone of voice and volume for different environments. For example, some children might address a teacher in the classroom in the same tone and volume they use speaking to friends on the playground.

With exposure, practice, and interaction, social language will develop continually. Role playing, teacher and peer modeling, and viewing age-appropriate videos are good tools for students to observe social language skills and behaviors. Teachers and parents can set up opportunities to use and encourage appropriate social language and behaviors with real incidents that come up in class or at home; for example, having the child/student practice greeting or saying good morning (and good-bye) to their teachers, classmates, or siblings.

What is Academic Language?

Academic language is different from everyday social language. It is the vocabulary students or adults must learn to succeed in the classroom or in the workplace. We use academic language to describe and comprehend complex ideas, process higher-order thinking, and understand abstract concepts. Academic language is what students read in textbooks and on tests and what they hear during instruction in the classroom. Students with limited or low academic language skills are more than likely to have low academic performance in classroom settings.

Academic language can be particularly challenging for English language learners (ELLs). Teachers can ease these students' anxiety by incorporating their cultural differences in the classroom. Sharing cultures, identities, and experiences builds relationships and acceptance among all students. ELLs will feel pride and comfort in the familiar which in turn will build self-esteem and confidence about learning.

Teachers and parents can enhance academic language and vocabulary skills using direct and indirect approaches. Having students memorize words and definitions should **not** be part of either approach. Memorizing lists of vocabulary words is not only boring but an **ineffective** practice for adding new words to students' vocabulary. Memorizing does not teach students how to use the words in context or generalize them in other areas.

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Teachers can help foster academic vocabulary by providing enrichment experiences for students whose home life may not include much activity outside the home beyond the school day.

Direct Experiences Include:

- Taking field trips to museums, art galleries, zoos, and business environments.

- Participating in after school programs or school-sponsored travel and exchange programs.

- Mentoring by peers, members of the school staff, school volunteers, or community leaders.

- Involving students in local service or learning projects or job shadowing (for older students).

Indirect Approaches Include:

- Providing extracurricular experiences open to *all* students before or after school that focus on academics: math, science, book clubs, etc. Special needs and ELL students can learn academic as well as social language from their peers.

- Participating in group or paired-learning projects focused on a particular subject area.

- Inviting guest speakers to share information about their job using specific vocabulary from his/her workplace: reporters, lawyers, nurses, engineers, professors, politicians, etc.

- Listening to and participating in informal debates addressing current or historical events.

Indirect Approaches — *continued...*

- Watching educational television programs and films about a variety of subjects to build background knowledge before teaching more precise academic vocabulary; for example, watching a show about Russia and its people (because they cannot go there!) before the geography lesson.

- Playing word games: crossword puzzles, word searches, vocabulary board games, online word/vocabulary games, software, or apps that focus on academic subjects.

- Brainstorming the meanings of academic vocabulary terms using a variety of word webs, for example: election, photosynthesis, polygons, etc.

- Using student writing logs as an activity during or at the end of the day to note particularly challenging vocabulary, write down questions, or practice new vocabulary in context in confidence. The teacher can respond to the student with simple comments and get an overview of what the student does or does not understand.

- Monitoring students' comprehension of academic vocabulary in a variety of contexts: answering questions with short paragraphs, creating a game show format, using vocabulary flash cards, having oral question and answer sessions in small groups, etc.

- Providing parents word lists related to content students are currently learning, and encouraging ELL students to do similar activities like the ones listed above in their native language. ELL students will be able to comprehend meanings of new vocabulary better in their own language as they are learning to express their meanings in English.

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