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GETTING TO THE CONTENT OF THE MATTER

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Freeman, Y. & Freeman, D. (2009). *Academic Language for English Language Learners and Struggling Readers: How to Help Students Succeed Across Content Areas*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

ELLs (English language learners) face demanding tasks to perform on standardized tests and teachers of ELLs are besieged with demands to increase scores on high-stakes tests. The Freemans' book is designed for teachers investigating ways to connect content area curriculum for (ELLs) and to optimize learning. The text can be utilized for teaching a course in teacher education or as a professional resource to engage teachers in dialogue surrounding their practice. An application section at the end of each chapter provides questions to reflect, write about and discuss the information provided in the chapter.

In the foreword, Robert Marzano describes the challenges teachers face in the classroom. Secondary education demands high levels of competency and secondary teachers are "not trained to teach the basic reading and writing skills many of their students need" (p. ix). Marzano points to the fact that few "professional books in the marketplace provide strategies for simultaneously teaching secondary-level content area knowledge and developing the literacy skills of students who aren't well prepared for academics" (p. ix-x).

The Freemans offer teachers an effective framework based on research to teach both language and content. They provide a resource to improve reading and writing skills while supplying the academic vocabulary necessary in the content area. They explain that the focus of the book is to "bring together information from researchers, teacher educators, linguists, and practitioners in order to clarify some of the confusions about academic language and provide suggestions for how to help ELLs and struggling readers succeed in school" (p. xvi). The seven chapters in the book take the reader into the world of the classroom using the information "from researchers, teacher educators, linguists, and practitioners in order to clarify some of the confusions about academic language and provide suggestions for how to help ELLs and struggling readers succeed in school." (p. xvi). In the seven chapters, the Freemans deliver critical components for teaching academic language, the nuts and bolts about who needs it, "what it is, when and where it is used, the problems that textbooks cause, different aspects of academic language, how to write objectives to teach academic language, and how to engage students in effective instruction to build academic language proficiency" (p. xvi).

Chapter 1 describes the three types of English learners, "newly arrived with adequate

formal schooling, newly arrived with limited or interrupted formal schooling, and long-term English learners” (p. 3).

Chapter 2 distinguishes between academic and conversational language and provides a brief overview of Cummins’ Theoretical Framework. Jim Cummins’ work is widely recognized, respected and can be traced to the early 1980’s. He explains that he “developed the distinction between BICS (basic interpersonal communicative skills) and CALP (cognitive academic language proficiency) in order to draw educators’ attention to the timelines and challenges that second language learners encounter as they attempt to catch up with their peers in academic aspects of the school language” (Cummins, 2008, 71, as cited in Freeman & Freeman, 2009, p. 28). García (2002) points out that in “order to acquire high levels of academic English proficiency, students need to be able to read and write academic texts” (as cited in Freeman & Freeman, 2009, p. 42). Crawford and Krashen (2007) define the distinction describing academic language is the “decontextualized, cognitively challenging language used not only in school, but also in business, politics, science, journalism, and so forth” (p. 17).

Chapter 3 delves into making sense of the academic registers of schooling by exploring how teachers can plan instruction to help students with their oral and written language. This chapter examines some of the differences between oral and written academic language and how students acquire linguistic competence through membership in social groups (p. 47).

Chapter 4 leads the reader into coping with academic texts and textbooks and discusses the inconsistencies and authoritative nature of the content area textbook. A figure illustrates the different genres, features and examples in the academic disciplines (pp. 94-95). The chapter provides ways to engage reluctant readers and highlights the importance of supporting students while reading and writing different genres.

Chapter 5 shifts the focus to supporting academic writing at the paragraph and sentence levels. This chapter provides an understanding of the different levels of academic language and provides teachers with the necessary scaffolding strategies to encourage ELLs to write paragraphs using academic vocabulary.

Chapter 6 distinguishes between “two types of academic words: content-specific words and general academic words” (p. 123). The chapter discusses “four keys researchers have found to be essential for developing academic vocabulary, and how teachers can write content and language objectives at the text, paragraph, sentence, and word levels to help ELLs” (p. 123).

Chapter 7 wraps up the discussion with teaching academic language and subject-area content with examples from teachers who have worked successfully with ELLs struggling to develop academic language. The Freemans provide a functional, practical, and constructive text for teachers intending to meet the rigor of the ELLs in the education

world today.

Academic Language for English Language Learners and Struggling Readers offers hope in this era of challenging teaching times. Educators strive to bring comprehension to struggling readers and writers and “academic language is used to link prior knowledge and experiences with the generation of new concepts and cognition” (Wink & Wink, 2004, p. 98). The Freemans provide an indispensable foundational text for educators teaching ELLs struggling in the area of reading and writing in the content areas.

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