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Newsletters

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Academic English Key to Long Term Success in School

The key to long-term success in school is to become proficient in academic English. This variety of English represents the advanced forms of English needed to enter and complete higher education as well as to advance in the labor market. When the California high school exit exam is required for graduation in 2004, all public high school students will need to be proficient in academic English.

Currently, few students in California are proficient in academic English. Even the most successful high school graduates in California—the top 12 percent who enter the University of California—often have not mastered academic English: one-third fail to meet the freshman writing requirement and must take remedial writing. And half of all California State University freshmen—those from the upper third of California's high school graduates—require remediation in English.

What is academic English?

Academic English is very different from the English used in everyday, ordinary situations. Although both require a series of linguistic competencies in the four language skill areas—reading, writing, speaking, and listening—there are several important differences. First, although both academic English and everyday English entail reading, writing, speaking and listening, academic English makes more extensive use of reading and writing, and ordinary English makes more extensive use of listening and speaking.

Second, some competencies play a more important role in academic English than they do in ordinary English. For example, the accurate use of grammar and vocabulary are more critical in academic writing than in everyday conversations.

Third, in academic English, specific linguistic functions—such as persuading, arguing and hypothesizing—are more important than other functions—such as narratives. This is the exact opposite in everyday English.

Fourth, in contrast to ordinary English, academic English is cognitively demanding and must be learned without contextual clues—students must rely on their prior knowledge of words, grammar and pragmatic conventions to understand and interpret it.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, academic English requires a much greater mastery of an extensive range of linguistic features than ordinary English. The key words here are mastery and extensive. While words and phrases may be used inaccurately in ordi-

nary conversation, academic English requires their mastery. Academic English also requires a more extensive knowledge of English. For instance, to be competent in academic English, one must know over 20,000 word forms as well as the grammatical restrictions governing their use.

But academic English involves more than language skills; it also requires several other skills. One is metalinguistic awareness, or the ability to think about language. This awareness enables writers to choose correct word forms (agitated or agitating) and reflect on subject-verb agreement, pronoun reference, and verb sequencing. Another is background knowledge that enables one to comprehend what is being read. Finally, academic English entails higher-order thinking skills and abilities that enable students to evaluate and synthesize material from a number of sources, to determine the credibility of sources, and to distinguish fact from skewed opinion.

How is academic English acquired?

Children do not pick up academic English subconsciously by talking to their friends, whether or not their friends are speakers of Standard English. This is because academic English is not used in casual conversations. This makes the task of acquiring academic English daunting for many children, even native English-speaking children who come from highly literate households.

Good reading instruction is essential for the development of academic English. However, even this is not enough. Instruction that is focused on language itself is crucial to learning academic English well. The instruction must have several characteristics: (1) it must provide students with abundant exposure to academic English and get students to use this English accurately in their speech and writing; (2) it must focus the students' attention on the features of academic English; (3) it must provide students with appropriate feedback concerning their use of academic English; and (4) it must provide explicit instruction of specific aspects of academic English including vocabulary, morphology, syntax, and cognitive strategies.

Unfortunately, instruction in academic English is often missing from California classrooms. Current statewide standards and assessments do not adequately address all the competencies associated with academic English. Hence, classroom instruction often targets only some aspects, especially those that are currently assessed in the state's Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR) program. This shortcoming is less problematic for more informed

and resourceful middle class families and schools that can push for local policies and practices to provide the necessary instruction. Some schools, for example, have instituted their own writing programs that teach all forms of academic writing.

English learners who enter California classrooms without a strong foundation in reading and academic language in their home countries may need even more intensive instruction in academic English than those with this foundation. However, even those who do have this foundation may still have difficulty acquiring academic English and require intensive instruction. Individual factors play a role: for example, whether students are motivated to learn academic English, whether they have the time to study it, whether it is easy or desirable for them to interact with proficient English speakers, whether the proficient English speakers deign to interact with the English learners, whether the English learners are motivated to read.

Yet, at present, we lack a sufficient research base to fully understand how English learners develop academic English. The federal government has initiated a major research program to develop such a knowledge base. With the largest population of English learners in the United States, California should participate in this effort.

—**ROBIN SCARCELLA AND RUSSELL W. RUMBERGER**

NOTE: This article was based on a discussion paper, “Academic English: A Conceptual Framework,” that will be published by UC LMRI in the fall.

PUBLICATIONS

Teaching Children to Read: An Evidence-Based Assessment of the Scientific Research Literature on Reading and Its Implications for Reading Instruction

National Reading Panel — The National Reading Panel officially released its report on scientific research-based reading instruction and its readiness for application in the classroom. The report clearly articulates the most effective approaches to teaching children to read, the status of the research on reading, reading instruction practices that are ready to be used by teachers in classrooms around the country, and a plan to rapidly disseminate the findings to teachers and parents.

The Panel found that for children to be good readers, they must be taught:

- phonemic awareness skills – the ability to manipulate the sounds that make up spoken language;
- phonics skills – the understanding that there are relationships between letters and sounds;
- the ability to read fluently with accuracy, speed, and expression; and
- to apply reading comprehension strategies to enhance understanding and enjoyment of what they read.

Also included in the Panel’s findings:

- While it is generally accepted knowledge that teachers are vital to children’s success in learning to read, little research about teacher education exists. Teachers must understand how children learn to read, why some children have difficulty learning to read, and how to identify and implement the most effective instructional approaches.
- Rigorous research is needed to understand the potential of computers in reading instruction.
- While asking children to read silently is an accepted practice, the research demonstrated that it was not as effective as guided oral reading in helping children become fluent readers.

In addition to assessing the wide range of research studies currently available, the National Reading Panel also actively sought insight and information from teachers, administrators, researchers, teacher educators, and parents. It is the Panel’s hope that those involved in this process will continue the dialogue in the ongoing challenge of ensuring all children learn to read. This report can be found on the Panel’s web site at www.nationalreadingpanel.org or at www.nichd.nih.gov.

High School Exit Examination (HSEE): Year 1 Evaluation Report

Lauress Wise, Carolyn De Meyer Harris, D.E. (Sunny) Sipes, R. Gene Hoffman, J. Patrick Ford (HUMAN RESOURCES RESEARCH ORGANIZATION (HumRRO)) — The Human Resources Research Organization (HumRRO) was selected through a Request for Proposal (RFP) process to conduct an independent evaluation of the High School Exit Examination (HSEE).

This preliminary report is presented in six chapters with an Executive Summary, references and technical appendices. This report describes the evaluation activities through June 2000, summarizes the results of these activities, and offers initial recommendations based on conclusions from these results. Some results from a field test of HSEE questions were not available for this report. A supplemental report will be summarized by August 25th that includes further analyses.

Key findings of the evaluation are:

- A great deal of progress has been made in developing the HSEE.
- The results to date are quite positive as indicated several measures of the quality of the multiple choice test items.
- Much more needs to be done before operational administration can begin.
- The results reflect a concern that students are currently not prepared to pass the exam.

The last finding is of particular concern because a key legal question is: Will students have adequate *opportunity to learn* before taking the HSEE?

The report includes one primary and three specific recommendations related to the development and implementation of the High School Exit Examination. The primary recommendation, based on the last two findings, is:

The State Board of Education, Legislature, and Governor should give serious consideration to postponing full implementation of the HSEE requirement by one or two years.

A copy of this report can be found at: http://www.cde.ca.gov/statetests/hsee/HumRRO_YR1_Report.PDF

IMPORTANT!

UC LMRI’s Headquarters’ email and website addresses have changed:

Email: (insert name)@lmri.ucsb.edu
Website: <http://lmri.ucsb.edu>

Please update your records to reflect this change.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Hispanic Scholarship Fund (HSF) (formerly: National Hispanic Scholarship Fund, please note change) announces its General Program Application for award year 2000-2001. Awards: normally range from \$1000 to \$3000 Application Period: August 3rd to October 15th 2000

HSF scholarships are available to students who:

- Are of at least half Hispanic background (one parent fully Hispanic, or both parents half Hispanic)
- Are a United States citizen or Permanent Resident (with proof of residency)
- Are enrolled in and attending an accredited college full-time from the Fall through Spring (or Summer) terms. (undergraduates min. 12 credits each term, graduate students min. 6 credits each term)
- Have earned at least 15 undergraduate credits, from an accredited college in the U.S. or Puerto Rico.
- Have a minimum Grade Point Average of 2.7 on a 4.0 scale (3.5 on a 5 point scale)

For an application: After the first week of August download from our web-site at <http://www.hsf.net/> or, send a stamped, long-business envelope (9"x 4") addressed to yourself, after August 2000, to us at:

General Scholarship Program
Hispanic Scholarship Fund
One Sansome Street, Suite 1000
San Francisco, CA 94104
e-mail HSF at: info@hsf.net

CONFERENCES

September 17-20, 2000. University of South Carolina Continuing Education, "The National Conference on Multicultural Affairs in Higher Education." San Antonio, Texas. <http://www.rcce.sc.edu/mac>

September 18-20, 2000. U.S. Department of Education, "7th Annual Regional Conference on Improving Americas Schools." Sacramento, CA. <http://ncbe.gwu.edu/iasconferences/>

October 2-4, 2000. U.S. Department of Education, "7th Annual Regional Conference on Improving Americas Schools." Louisville, KY. <http://ncbe.gwu.edu/iasconferences/>

October 13-15. Center for Multicultural Literature for Children & Young Adults, "Reading the World III: A Conference Celebrating Multicultural Literature for Children and Adults." University of San Francisco, San Francisco, CA. <http://www.soe.usfca.edu/childlit/>

November 2-4, 2000. California Reading Association 34th Annual Conference. San Jose Convention, San Jose, CA. <http://www.californiareads.org>

November 4, 7, 2000. Hispanic Association of Colleges & Universities (HACU). "HACU's 14th Annual Conference, 'Changing the Landscape of Education: Hispanics in the New Century.'" Albuquerque, New Mexico. <http://www.hacu.com>

November 11, 2000. Duodécima Jornada Pedagógica Internacional Para la Educación Bilingüe, "Un Futuro Sin Fronteras." Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles, California. This one-day conference is conducted entirely in Spanish. Paper submissions due on September 15, 2000. For more information, contact Reynaldo Baca, School of Education, University of Southern California; phone: (213) 740-2360; email: baca@usc.edu. <http://lmri.ucsb.edu/ProfDev/tocprofdevel.htm>

November 15-19, 2000. National Association for Multicultural Education. "10th Anniversary Celebration, 'Real Magic: The Realization of Multicultural Education in the Everyday.'" Hyatt Orlando, Kissimmee, Florida. <http://www.inform.umd.edu/NAME/news.html>

December 13-15, 2000. U.S. Department of Education, "7th Annual Regional Conference on Improving Americas Schools." Washington, DC. <http://ncbe.gwu.edu/iasconferences/>

UC LMRI Staff Appointments

The UC LMRI is delighted to welcome two very talented students to our staff, Randall Ehren and Maria Zamora.

RANDALL EHREN, our new Systems Administrator, is a Psychology major at UCSB. He grew up in Long Beach, CA and has been interested in computers for the past 8 years. When he started UCSB he thought about majoring in computer science, but decided that was more of a personal learning area and that a different major would be more challenging. Half of the job as System Administrator is dealing with people, the end-users, so studying Psychology will help him understand how to work with people better. He currently lives in Goleta with his girlfriend who also works for UCSB. On the weekend Randall usually catches the latest movies and eats out in downtown Santa Barbara. When he graduates Randall would like to work for either Sun Microsystems or Apple Computer as a web application developer or system administrator. With another two years before he graduates, Randall will be working with us for a while.



MARIA ZAMORA is our student assistant who performs duties in many areas. Maria is a transfer student from College of the Sequoias in Visalia, CA. This is her second year at UCSB as a Spanish and Pre-Psychology Major. After Maria graduates with a Spanish and Psychology degree, she plans to apply to graduate school in the College of Education at UCSB. Maria wants to work in the Education field so that she can help others achieve a higher education. It is very hard to decide on whether to go into counseling or teaching since Maria is



interested in both. Maria does know that she wants to be a part of the solution to the lack of Minorities obtaining a higher education. Maria is a valuable addition to the UC LMRI staff from her related educational background and having been an English Learner, herself, when she began elementary school.

UC LMRI People in the News

Effective July 1, 2000, three current members of the UC LMRI Faculty Steering Committee—**Adalberto Aguirre, Jr.**, Professor of Sociology at UC Riverside; **Lily Wong-Fillmore**, Professor of Education at UC Berkeley; and **Robin Scarcella**, Associate Professor of English As A Second Language at UC Irvine—have been re-appointed to new three year terms. **Hugh B. Mehan**, Professor of Sociology at UC San Diego, has resigned from the committee to devote more time to his role as Director of the Center for Research in Educational Equity and Teaching Excellence at UC San Diego. Replacing Mehan for the remaining two years of his term is **Paula Levin**, Lecturer with Security of Employment in the Teacher Education program at UC San Diego. Dr. Levin received her Ph.D. in Anthropology from UC San Diego in 1978. Her research interests are anthropology and education, research design, and curriculum development and evaluation.

Russell W. Rumberger, Professor of Education at UC Santa Barbara and Director of UC LMRI, presented a paper, “Who Drops Out of School and Why,” at the National Research Council’s Committee on Educational Excellence and Testing Equity Workshop, “School Completion in Standards-Based Reform: Facts and Strategies,” Washington, D.C., July 17-18, 2000.

Lily Wong Fillmore, Professor of Education at the UC Berkeley and UC LMRI Steering Committee member participated in the Consortium of Social Science Associations, Center for Applied Linguistics and the Linguistic Society of America inaugural event in the 2000 congressional briefing series on May 8, 2000. A panel of linguists discussed the importance of language to a person’s educational success and future economic well-being.

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