

What Is the Difference Between Social and Academic English?

Social English is the language of everyday communication in oral and written forms. Examples include:

- when your students are talking to their friends on the playground or in the school bus
- when you and your students are having an informal face-to-face conversation
- when your students go to the grocery store and read the shopping list

ELLs' social English may start developing within a few months. However, it will likely take a couple of years before ELLs fully develop social English skills in listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

Academic English and social English are not two separate languages. Academic English is more demanding and complex than social English. An ELL student with social English proficiency may not necessarily have the academic English proficiency. It is important for you, the teacher, to make this distinction. Academic English is the language necessary for success in school. It is related to a standards-based curriculum, including the content areas of math, science, social studies, and English language arts.

To facilitate academic language development at the kindergarten level, you can focus on oral language development around themes like plants, Mexico, and dinosaurs. You can include art, manipulatives, and dramatic play. In first grade, you can add reading and writing with a focus on thematic units and literacy development through phonics and storybooks. In the second and third grades, you can focus on higher order literacy skills around the thematic curriculum, as well as using novels, anthologies, trade books, and basal readers. You can begin by explicitly teaching academic vocabulary in the content areas. For example:

- In math you can teach your students all the terms for subtraction, like "subtract," "take away," and "decreased by."
- In science, you can teach the terms to connect the parts of an experiment, like "therefore," "as a result," and "for instance."
- For social studies, you can teach the words and also the

background knowledge that ELLs will need. For example, when you mention Thanksgiving, an English-speaking student may think of the first European settlers on the east coast during the 17th and 18th centuries. But for an ELL, the word "Thanksgiving" may not mean much by itself.

- In English language arts, you can teach ELLs by using basic graphic organizers for word development to visually represent knowledge. ELLs can write a word and then explore its connections and relationships.

Why is it important for ELLs to develop academic English?

ELLs come to school not only to learn how to communicate socially, but to become academically proficient in English. Learning social English is just the tip of the iceberg. Just because they can speak on the playground, talk to peers, and use everyday English does not mean that they are up to speed in academic English. To the contrary, these ELLs are not yet proficient enough to handle the standards-based curriculum. They lack the academic vocabulary needed to develop the content knowledge in English that they will need to succeed in future schooling. By recognizing these two types of proficiencies, you can help expedite your ELLs' academic English.

Although there are no official lists of academic English words available, we have suggestions on how to select appropriate vocabulary words to teach ELLs.

How can I identify my ELLs' level of English proficiency?

Both social English and academic English are demanding tasks. One is needed to communicate and the other to succeed in academics at school. Learning both types of English well may take at least four years. However, it is important to note that students will learn at different rates, depending on a variety of variables, including students' existing English proficiency, primary language literacy level, and the quality of the instruction they receive.

Since the ELLs in your classroom probably have different levels of language proficiency, your challenges will be unique with each student. An important first step is identifying your students' levels of English language

development. Most ELLs are at the beginning or intermediate levels of English proficiency. The following descriptions of the stages of English language development may help you recognize your ELLs' level of English proficiency.

Beginning stage

ELLs at the beginning stage demonstrate comprehension of simplified language, speak a few English words, answer simple questions, and use common social greetings and repetitive phrases. They make regular mistakes.

Intermediate stage

ELLs at the intermediate stage speak using standard grammar and pronunciation, but some rules are still missing. Their level of comprehension is high and they can ask or answer instructional questions. They can actively participate in conversations, retell stories, and use expanded vocabulary and paraphrasing.

Advanced stage

ELLs at the advanced stage use consistent standard English vocabulary, grammar, idioms, and oral/written strategies similar to those of English-speaking peers. They have good pronunciation and intonation. Advanced ELLs initiate social conversations. They use idiomatic expressions and appropriate ways of speaking according to their audience.

Visit our Assessment and Placement section for more on assessing your ELLs.

What can I do to help my students develop both social and academic English?

You can do both in your classes. Once you have determined your students' levels of proficiency, you can help them develop social and academic English without watering down the curriculum. Here are some ways you can involve ELLs through meaningful social language that stimulates their academic English growth.

Begin with social English

As much as possible, use the ELLs' background knowledge of what they know and bring to school. Include many contextual supports through visuals, maps, charts, manipulatives, music, and pantomiming. You can also use Total Physical Response (TPR) activities to help ELLs learn by doing.

Use social English to teach academic English

As ELLs reach the intermediate level, use social English with contextual support to teach academic English. Add content vocabulary in your lessons or units. Cooperative group projects with more advanced ELLs or English-speakers are also helpful for intermediate ELLs.

Challenge students' thinking

Use Bloom's taxonomy to make sure you are challenging students' thinking. ELLs at different stages of English proficiency can be challenged to think at higher levels, even if their vocabulary and expressive skills are fairly limited.

For example, early intermediate students might be learning about urban and rural life in the United States. Lessons would focus on vocabulary and being able to produce short statements. Students can be expected to:

- know what they can find in a U.S. city and in the country (knowledge and comprehension)
- determine whether someone lives in the country or city based on a description of what they see (application)
- name two or three ways in which cities and rural towns are similar and different (analysis)
- draw typical city and rural scenes (synthesis)
- say whether they would prefer to live in the city or the country and give one or two reasons why (evaluation)

The important point is that advanced English is not required to engage ELLs in advanced thinking as long as you are aware of the language proficiency levels of your ELLs and adjust the language expectations accordingly.