



# Why is Learning Academic English Different from Learning Conversational English?

- Typically ELLs develop basic conversational English in two to three years. This is the language of everyday conversations and interactions.<sup>1</sup>
- These same children usually need five to seven (or more) years to develop academic language (vocabulary, literacy, and discourse) similar to that of native speakers.<sup>2</sup>
- The vocabulary demands of learning academic English contribute to this difference:
  - Native English-speaking children come to first grade knowing about 6000 to 8000 words, mostly from everyday spoken English, and then they add about 3000 new (mostly academic) words each year.<sup>3</sup>
  - Children learning English not only have to learn the words native English speakers brought to first grade but also must learn the words native speakers are adding to their vocabulary each year.
  - In order to read and comprehend texts, learners need to know 95 percent of the words in a text.
  - A few words that ELLs see only in academic contexts can make the difference between comprehension and non-comprehension.
  - While English language learners are working to drastically increase their vocabulary, they must also learn the other skills needed to read and write English.

Knowledge in a subject area is fundamental to ELLs' academic language development.

- Each word learned in math, science, and social studies involves multiple complex interconnected concepts.
- Students have to learn these interrelated concepts as well as the word in order to successfully use that word.



BRIEF

- o These words are not learned on the playground or in the lunch room; they must be learned by reading about and engaging in conversations about the complex concepts which they represent.
- o The development of these complex concepts is essential for academic achievement in school.

<sup>1</sup> Genesee, F., Lindholm-Leary, K., Saunders, W. & Christian, D. (2005). Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk, 10(4), 363–385.

<sup>2</sup> Collier, V. (1987). Age and rate of acquisition of second language for academic purposes. TESOL Quarterly, 21: 617-641.

<sup>3</sup> Nagy, W. (1997). On the role of context in first- and second-language vocabulary learning. In N. Schmitt & M. McCarthy, eds., Vocabulary: Description, Acquisition and Pedagogy. Cambridge:Cambridge University Press.

