



# Should we teach formal and academic language?

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# Fire Escape



# Academic Language



Language of Schooling  
(Corson, 1995; Snow & Uccelli, 2009)

- Academic language: “specialized language, both oral and written, of academic settings that facilitates communication and thinking about disciplinary content”  
(Nagy & Townsend, 2012, p. 92)
- Specific genre with expectations for structure, phrases, coherence, and vocabulary
  - E.g., nominalization, complex sentence structure, signposting, academic vocabulary etc.



# English Subject – LK20

- Students' academic English proficiency is a clear curricular aim.
- Students are expected to:
  - **write formal and informal texts**, including multimedia texts with structure and coherence that describe, narrate and reflect, and are **adapted to the purpose, recipient and situation** (Year 10)
  - **listen to, understand and use academic language** in working on one's own oral and written texts (Vg 1 – general studies)
  - **create texts relevant to the vocation** with structure and coherence that describe and document the pupil's own work and are **adapted to the purpose, recipient and situation** (Vg1 – vocational studies)
- Formal and Academic Language undefined



# Common Characteristics - Vocabulary

- Technical / discipline specific

alliteration  
foreshadowing

- General Academic

- Graeco-Latin cognates
- Connecting words

fundamental  
establish

analyze  
hypothesis

However, Moreover,

- Across frequency ranges
- Often not salient in a text
- Written and spoken language

sociopolitical factors  
electrical current



# Core Academic Language Skills (CALS)

Skills that have been linked to students' text understanding.

## Skills in argumentative text organization

(i.e., thesis, argument, counterargument, examples, conclusion)

paragraph-level structures (e.g., compare/contrast; problem/solution)

## Unpacking Complex Words Unpacking Complex Sentences

Understanding words referring to  
thinking or discourse processes  
(e.g., *generalization, argument*)



**Connecting Ideas Logically:**  
Discourse markers  
(e.g., *consequently, in other words*)

**Conceptual anaphors:**  
(words referring to prior reference)  
Demonstrative determiners (*this*)  
(e.g., *Water evaporates at 100 degrees Celsius. This process . . .*)

For ex., epistemic stance markers signaling a writer's degree of certainty  
(*Certainly, It is unlikely that*)



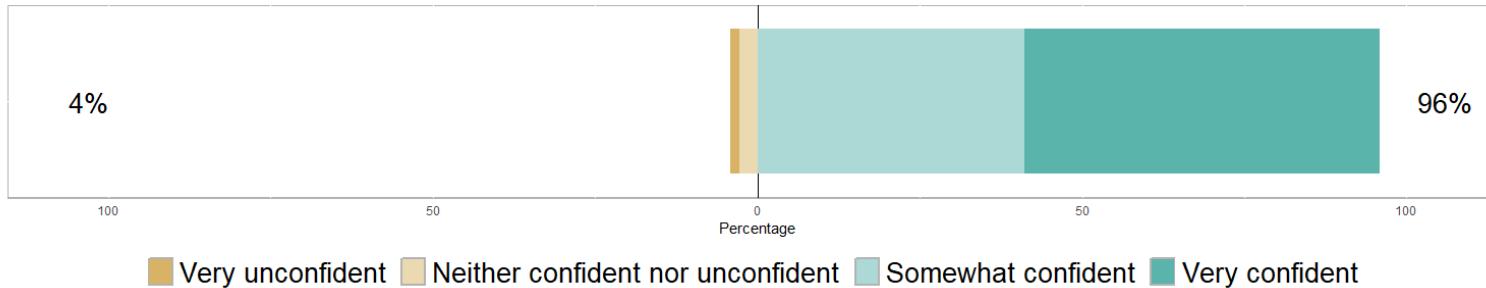
# Background for Study – Busby & Skjelde

- Norwegian research has shown that the majority of upper secondary school students lack the receptive academic vocabulary needed for academic reading (Lund & Busby, 2025; Skjelde & Coxhead, 2020).
- Previous research highlights the need for such knowledge and teacher support (e.g., Coxhead, 2020; Gardner & Davies, 2014; Schleppegrell, 2004)
- Little is known about English teachers' conceptions of academic language and the support they receive to develop this knowledge.
- Aimed to investigate how the concept of academic language is understood by teachers and what support they are given to develop their conceptualization of the construct.

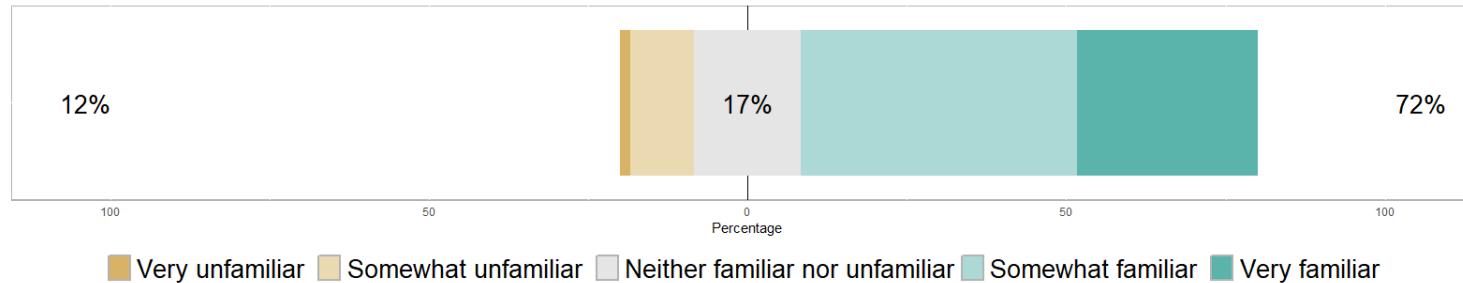


Participants: 73 Qualified English teachers working throughout Norway.

## Do you feel confident you know how to interpret what is meant by 'academic language' in the curriculum?



## To what extent do you feel familiar with the term *general academic vocabulary*?



# Explain to someone unfamiliar with the term *academic language*

- Majority (68%) of definitions referenced formal language

“Academic language is a **formal type of language**, mostly used in work- and educational settings.”

- Detailed definitions – linguistic dos and don’ts

the opposite of conversational language

“Academic language is **more advanced** English than **everyday** English. In its most extreme form it is normally used by professors. Typical for academic English is that you **avoid** using **slang** expression, **contractions**, **abbreviations** and **informal words**. Academic English is for example using more **complex sentence structure**, more **advanced vocabulary**, and **impersonal language**.”



# Explain to someone unfamiliar with the term *general academic vocabulary*

- Many (22%) referenced **formal and cross-disciplinary vocabulary**  
“Terms and set expressions that belong to the genre of academic texts.”

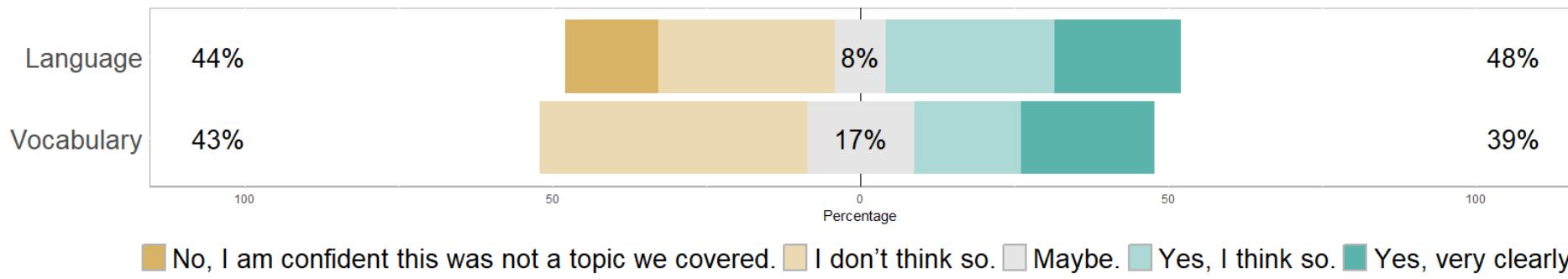
- 18% unsure
- Many (11%) incorrectly associated with discipline-specific vocabulary

“I would use the same as [for academic language]; more formal than everyday and with vocabulary more specific to a certain subject.”

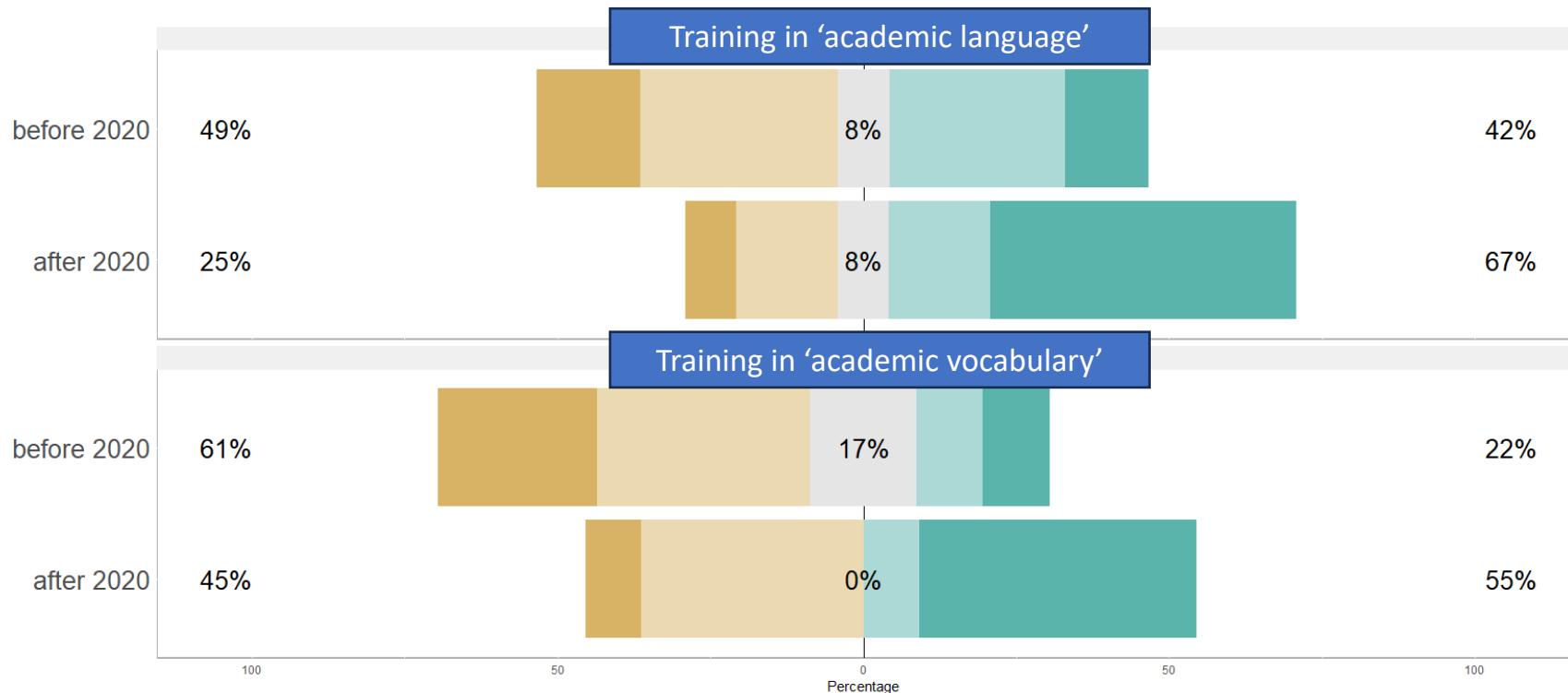
- 38% definition unprovided



# Educational Training



# Teacher training reported before vs after LK20



■ No, I am confident this was not a topic we covered. ■ I don't think so. ■ Maybe. ■ Yes, I think so. ■ Yes, very clearly.

# Development After Formal Training

14% had worked with colleagues to understand the concept of academic language

Under 10% reported having worked on defining general academic vocabulary

These findings suggest that after formal training, there are few opportunities for further development and training in understanding academic language.



# When asked to list training received

- Many had not received training
- Some had attended short courses
- Several reported learning more about the concepts on their own

“I had to write many academic papers during my studies, and **I learnt about it by doing it**, mainly.”

“I try to teach [my students] what I wish I knew when I went to university”.

“for the most part this is something I've **picked up from textbooks** and reading about the topic, in order to understand this new point in the curriculum”.



# Discussion - Groups

- How do you define academic language and academic vocabulary?
- Have you received instruction on this topic?
  - If so, what type?
  - If not, would you consider this helpful?
- Do you teach academic language to your secondary students explicitly?
  - If yes, how often and in what ways?
  - If not, what is your reasoning for this choice?



Each group presents their discussion briefly.



# Research Questions (Busby & Skjelde)

- What are upper-secondary English teachers' conceptions of academic language and general academic vocabulary?
- What training or support do these English teachers report receiving in relation to these concepts?
- What are English teachers' beliefs about the relevance of explicit teaching of academic English, and in what ways do they report integrating this into their teaching practices?



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# Methods

- Online survey asking about
  - Definition of academic language
  - Definition of general academic vocabulary
  - What kind of support/training received
  - How do they implement these concepts in teaching

# Implications

- If newly educated English teachers are to become qualified to help develop their students' academic language proficiency, our teaching courses should supply them with the knowledge they will need. Findings from the present study suggest this may be an area for improvement.
- Likewise – with an increased focus on the role of English teachers to provide an education that promotes College Readiness, there is an increased need for in-service teachers to also receive support.
- This need for support to enhance teachers' knowledge of formal or academic English should be recognized by both school leaders and university staff.
- We suggest that providing pre- and in-service L2 English teachers with an understanding for the complex nature of academic language may be necessary.



# Participants

- 73 upper secondary English teachers from every county in Norway
- Teachers of first-year general studies students
- Minimum of 60 ECTS in English
- Range of age and years of teaching experience

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Age		Years of Teaching Experience	
Mean	Range	Mean	Range
43.86	24-66	12.27	0-36

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# Tips for the classroom

- Vocabulary testing:
  - Stuart Webb: [Stuart Webb - Faculty of Education - Western University](#)
  - The Vocabulary Levels Test (VLT) measures receptive knowledge of the first 5000 most frequent English words – needed for reading comprehension.
- The Academic Word List (AWL) – needed for reading f. ex. newspapers
  - Averil Coxhead: [The Academic Word List | Te Kura Tātari Reo / School of Linguistics and Applied Language Studies | Te Herenga Waka—Victoria University of Wellington](#)
  - The list can be used to help you and the students recognize academic words in texts. Use a word profiling program (f. ex. ANT word profiler) to help you find the AWL words in the text.
- Translation test of academic cognates: (Skjelde, 2022) [Exploring L2 English students' knowledge and conceptions of academic vocabulary | Acta Didactica Norden](#)
  - Appendix C has 60 academic words that were used in the translation test. If you would like a test document and more instructions on how to use the test you can e-mail me.

