

# 4

## Why should we focus on academic literacy?

### What do we need to understand about academic language?

Classroom coverage of language is understandably driven by the requirements of the subject, but without a focus on language development, learners will fail to secure the command of language that they require for high achievement.

Building on international research into language and frequency of word use in English language texts, REAL projects have explored ways in which classroom teachers can support learners in engaging with the demands of language acquisition.

The 1,000 highest frequency words account for 70–75% of individual words in any text. Tests that measure familiarity with these words are part of the REAL initial assessment framework for international new arrivals.

The most frequently used 2,000 words, known as the common core, cover 75–79% of most, if not all, texts that learners are going to encounter. Hence, the second 1,000 words occur much less frequently but knowledge of these words adds considerably to command of language.

The common core does not include much of the formal language required for high achievement. Research has identified an academic word list (AWL), which relates to words needed by students



to access and understand academic texts. It comprises 570 word families that are not in the most frequent 2,000 words of English but which occur reasonably frequently over a very wide range of texts.

The words are useful for learners studying any curriculum subject and consist of formal vocabulary such as *access, authority, define, environment, assume, criteria, imply*.

Each of the 570 'headwords' has a family of words attached to it, e.g. access – accessed, accessibility, accessing, accessible, inaccessible. When added to the 2,000 word-level list this provides access to approximately 90% of text.

These words are commonly used in the language of the classroom but often pass learners by. How can we be sure that all learners will know what we mean by the use of formal language unless we are explicit?

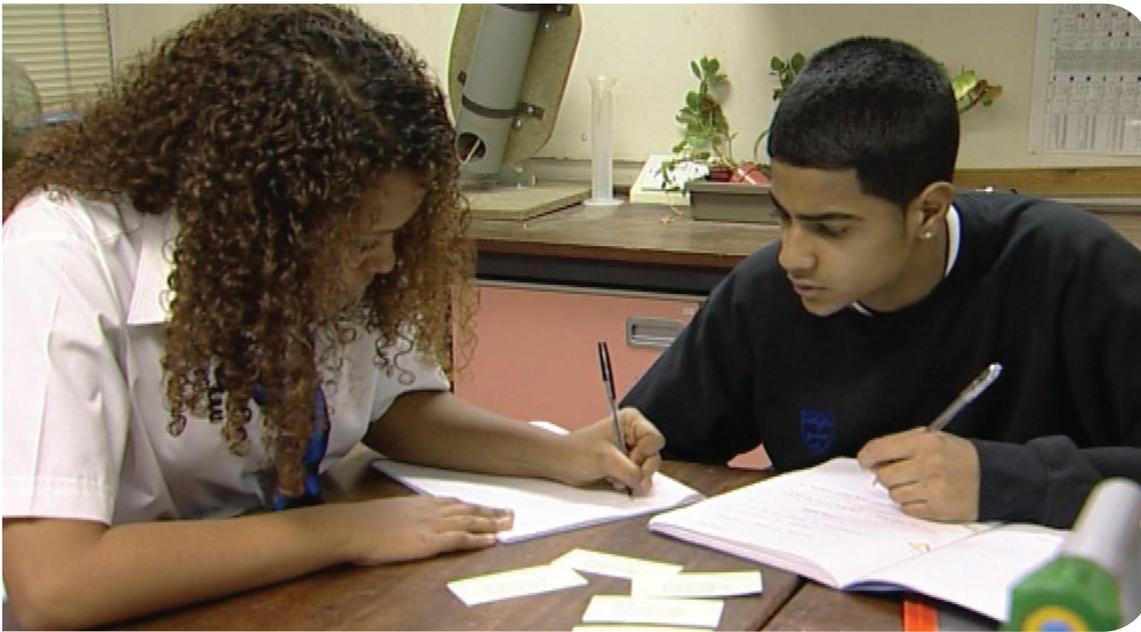
The AWL is divided into ten sub-lists according to frequency of occurrence in texts. Secure knowledge of this group of words is an important indicator of word-level proficiency, but is also a powerful asset in accessing the higher levels of academic tasks at each key stage. In fact, if a learner masters the AWL words then the subject teacher really is free to concentrate on the development of subject-specific language and can be more confident that learners with EAL have a secure base on which to build this specialised knowledge.

**Subject-specific language**

In addition to these words learners have to cope with the demands of learning subject-specific vocabulary. An example from the QCA science scheme usually taught in year 7 shows us how language demand can be broken down.

Example – Unit 7A – Cells				
Common scientific words	More specialist scientific words	Words with similar but distinct meanings	Specialist words with different meanings in scientific and everyday contexts	Words and phrases relating to scientific enquiry
Organ, tissue, cell	Membrane, cytoplasm, nucleus, chloroplast, vacuole	Membrane, skin	Cell, wall, tissue, nucleus	Variable, sample size, evaluate, magnification





## What can we do to measure academic vocabulary?

Familiarity with the AWL can be measured using simple online tools. The academic word test provides a quick measure of a learner's grasp of this key vocabulary. The test is a receptive word

recognition test, requiring the learner to match words from a list with a definition. An example question is given below:

	<b>Word</b>	<b>?</b>	<b>Meaning</b>
1	Area		Written agreement
2	Contract		Way of doing something
3	Definition		Reason for believing something is or is not true
4	Evidence		
5	Method		
6	Role		

The test can be completed at [www.realproject.org.uk/awlttest](http://www.realproject.org.uk/awlttest). A mark and feedback on the words correctly and incorrectly matched is provided through this tool.

## What can we do to enable students to develop their own language to access high challenge and achievement?

### Developing common core vocabulary

REAL has developed activities to support understanding of the use of the 2,000 word list. We have developed a range of texts which can be used as readers to enable students to learn how these words are used in contexts familiar to the learner at key stage 3. For example, in science, 'how materials change' or 'what organs are made of'. In history, 'towns in medieval Britain' or 'why was England invaded in 1066?' Each is supported by stimulus activities to develop use of language, for example, through vocabulary matching exercises or guided writing activities.

### Highlighting academic language

Familiarity with the AWL can be developed using a profiling tool within the REAL Toolkit. Text can simply be pasted into a web page that will return the same text with the AWL words highlighted. This tool allows teachers and learners to highlight formal vocabulary that may prove to be a barrier to EAL learners' engagement with learning. This enables particular attention to be drawn to these in the classroom to ensure that understanding is secure. We have found that this simple tool can have dramatic benefits when used by learners themselves with minimal input from a teacher.

