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Preparing Teacher Candidates to Address Academic Language for the edTPA: A Collaborative Teacher Educator’s Self Study

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Preparing Teacher Candidates to Address Academic Language for the edTPA: A Collaborative Teacher Educator’s Self Study

Abstract: 200 words or less

One of the more challenging skills that preservice teachers will need to master in order to pass the edTPA—the new performance-based assessment that measures teacher candidates’ readiness to teach—is academic language. Academic language consists of several components—vocabulary, functions, discourse, and syntax, and in order to successfully complete the edTPA tasks, teacher candidates will need to be able to demonstrate how they will plan the opportunities (functions) for students to use language (vocabulary, syntax, and discourse) in their learning activities. The presenters—teacher educators who have piloted edTPA in clinical settings—will help participants better understand the components of academic language and will demonstrate strategies (in language arts, science, math, and social studies) that will support the effective use of academic language in their candidates’ learning activities.

Content: 500 - 1,000 words

Title
Preparing Teacher Candidates for the edTPA: The Demands of Academic Language

Context and Purposes
The edTPA is a performance-based assessment that measures a teacher candidate’s readiness to teach. The assessment will be a mandatory requirement for all who wish to become certified teachers in Georgia beginning in the fall of 2015. Unlike the content-based GACE exams, the edTPA is designed to assess understanding of teaching and student learning through authentic demonstrations of teaching performance in classrooms. One of the critical components of edTPA is academic language, a term that encompasses all oral and written language used for academic purposes, i.e.: content understanding (Solomon & Rhodes, 1995; Fránquiz & Salinas, 2013; Zwiers, 2008). Each discipline contains specific academic language that all prospective teachers will be expected to know and utilize in ways that meaningfully engage their future students in that content. edTPA sets specific rubrics for assessing teacher candidates’ ability to identify and support language demands, as well as analyze students’ language use for content specific learning. As teacher educators, it is our responsibility to teach our candidates to support their students’ content learning through these language demands—the four specific ways that academic language (vocabulary, functions, discourse, syntax) is used by students to participate in learning tasks through reading, writing, listening, and/or speaking to demonstrate their understanding. What are specific edTPA standards related to academic language? How do we address these standards in teacher education curriculum to prepare candidates with the knowledge and skills to identify and support language demands associated with learning tasks for middle school students in content areas? How do we help candidates analyze students’ use of language to develop content
understanding? The purpose of this teacher educators’ collaborative self-study is to
describe and analyze our own approach to unpacking edTPA academic language
standards and integrating them into middle grades teacher education program course
work and clinical experiences in a public state university.

Methods
The presentation reports preliminary findings from a collaborative teacher educator's
self study. Data sources include teacher educators' self observations, reflections, as
well as artifacts such as course readings, activities, and assignments designed to
improve teacher candidates' knowledge, skills, and dispositions to address academic
languages in middle school classrooms.

The presenters—all teacher educators who possess interdisciplinary backgrounds in
language arts, math, science and social studies—have experienced successes teaching
these academic language concepts to students who have then demonstrated those
competencies in the field. Methods professors and field supervisors met to develop
shared understandings of academic language for teacher candidates.
We are working on an IRB that will allow us collect students' course related lesson
plans as evidence.

The presentation will include a brief overview of the edTPA framework on academic
language and a discussion of the components of the edTPA academic language—
definitions, examples, and ideal narratives about the use of academic language in lesson
planning. Additionally, the participants will have an opportunity to review sample lesson
plans that illustrate how edTPA prescribes the use of academic language in lesson
planning.

Evidence
The edTPA outlines four specific ways that students will use academic language.

Vocabulary is a multi-layered concept, involving subject-specific meanings that differ
across contents, academic terms utilized across disciplines, and definitions that apply to
specific disciplines. Language functions refer to the active verbs that support the content
and language focus of the learning task in a written objective or learning outcome.
Language functions refer to the content and language focus of the learning task and are
represented by the active verbs within the learning outcomes, e.g., analyzing,
interpreting, evaluating, comparing (Newmeyer, 1998). Discourse refers to how members
of a specific discipline speak, write, and participate in knowledge construction.
Teacher candidates are asked to present language functions as part of learning objectives
in their lesson plans and add specific tasks that address vocabulary, syntax, or discourse
and facilitate the use of academic language to meet the learning objectives. Discipline-
specific discourse is explicit and precise language for a distant audience, providing useful
ways for the content to be communicated. Discipline-specific discourse has distinctive
features or ways of structuring oral or written language (text structures) that provide
useful ways for the content to be communicated. Finally, syntax simply refers to how the
language (symbols, formulas, words, and phrases) is organized so that it makes meaning.
Teacher educators in this study developed detailed guidelines and rubrics to scaffold candidates in developing proficiency in addressing middle grades students’ academic language needs. During their clinic experiences, candidates are required to build all components of academic language into their planning, teaching, and assessment and analyze the impact of their teaching on middle school students’ learning.

**Results**
The presenters have worked with several student teachers who piloted the edTPA assessment. Students in the semester prior to and during their student teaching are receiving instruction on academic language and then applying that knowledge in their clinical practices. These results of these assessments will be shared and are being used by the presenters to improve instruction.

**References**