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## **Language for Scholars: A Communication Skills Building Program**

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### **Abstract**

*In this article we discuss a communication skills building program Leap Learning Systems calls Language for Scholars (LFS), a program developed at the request of a not-for-profit agency in 1994 to help 8th grade urban students who had received scholarships to private high schools. The LFS program focuses on building classroom communication skills called Academic English.*

### **Academic English**

For our purposes, we define Academic English as the effective use of listening and speaking skills in a school setting. According to Joos (1967), every language in the world has five registers: frozen, formal, consultative, casual, and intimate. Teacher instruction, standardized tests, and job interviewers use the formal register. Not all students are exposed to the formal register at home (Payne, 1996), but all students can benefit from direct instruction about its parameters. Using Academic English within the classroom setting allows students to more successfully process and retain classroom content. Teachers and youth workers can benefit from discussions about Academic English as well. Learning about the parameters of Academic English provides teachers and youth workers with a systematic way to generate effective feedback in academic related activities. As noted by Clark (1999), students who are attentive listeners have the ability to influence the attitude of the speaker. Barr, Dittmar, Roberts, and Sheraden (1997) found that academic performance is strengthened when listening skills are actively taught. Researchers conducting a longitudinal study of African American youth at the University of North Carolina Child Development Institute are currently investigating the effect of social communication skills on achievement in school.

### **Respect for Social Dialects**

Working in ethnically, culturally, and economically diverse settings, we have been careful to acknowledge the value and usefulness to students of their own social dialect (ASHA Social Dialects Position Statement, 1983, Craig & Washington, 2004). Students' social dialects are of value in conversing with peers, their immediate and extended families, and the social networks in their communities (Rickford, 2000). Our approach is to teach the use of Academic English as a tool that supplements students' social dialects. The tool of Academic English may be used when necessary in class work, oral presentations, interviews, and in more formal communications. Participants learn the value of each style of communication and when and how to use each style.

The LFS communication program maintains respect for home and cultural speaking patterns at all times. Participants work in an intensive program developed by speech-language

pathologists to address active listening, pragmatics and speech production skills in a variety of realistic situations. The program goes beyond focusing on ‘public speaking’ skills to utilize the knowledge base of speech-language pathologists regarding speech and language production systems, sociolinguistics, and metalinguistics.

### **Eligibility to Participate**

Participants have ranged from 5th grade through college. Adjustments are made in the level of difficulty of activities for grade level. Both general and special education students are included. Participating teachers, when observing speech-language pathologists leading a Language for Scholars program, become empowered to maintain the communication challenge in their own classrooms and become effective reinforcers.

### **SLP Support for an LFS Program**

The adult academic adult learning literature states that listeners absorb and retain one-tenth to one fourth of what they hear (Swanson & Holton, 1997). Learning occurs when the eyes, ears, mind and body are ready to engage (Ely, 1986). When students practice listening more effectively during LFS programs, they will retain more information, improve problem-solving skills, and develop increased connections among background knowledge, foreground knowledge, and new concepts. Teachers can actively influence students’ listening skills by emphasizing the process of information gathering, organizing and oral presentation.

The listening components of an LFS program include teaching the use of effective eye contact, attentive silence, audience behavior, posture of involvement, and relevant questions. Current writers strongly indicate that these are not just cosmetic skills, but crucial aspects of successful engagement in the academic or after school learning process. Active listening and Academic English use translate to improved grades, high school and college success, and preparation for employment (Swanson & Holton, 1997; Barr et al., 1997; Clark, 1999; and Wagner, 2006)

Student follow-up after an LFS program indicates that what they learned about intentional listening has remained a touchstone for their participation in classes and employment.

The speaking components of the Language for Scholars program are designed to be integrated into classroom and youth activities. Leap Learning Systems has designed speaking activities that emphasize clarifying thoughts, learning by talking, presenting in front of peers and small audiences, and logically expressing ideas. The program emphasizes individual Speech Goals that may include projection, articulation, effective use of gestures, eye contact, facial gestures appropriate body language, reduction of filler words while increasing specific vocabulary, grammar, conversational “rules,” formal handshake, and greetings.

The speaking components of an LFS program are supported by a number of research studies that describe the language of the classroom. As some students have more experience with the classroom language forms encountered in their school, students’ use of academic morphophonemic elements may increase Craig and Washington (2004). Wilson (1997) discusses the beneficial impact on school success of directly teaching classroom oral communication skills. Kaufman, Prelock, Weiler, Creaghead, and Donnelly (1994) remarked that metapragmatic skill training, including use of effective classroom language, can be taught effectively in a collaborative classroom program with teachers and coaches. The need for building communication skills, specifically Academic English, also is supported by a review by Wagner (2006). He notes that high school students must be better prepared for the 21st century academic and employment world in which communication, presentation and information processing skills are necessary.

Student follow-up by Leap Learning Systems after an LFS program indicates that what they learned about intentional listening has remained a touchstone for their participation in classes and employment.

### **LFS and RTI**

LFS and academic language interventions have the potential to be a beneficial part of response to intervention models. The responsiveness to intervention (RTI) process is a multi-tiered approach to providing services and interventions to struggling learners at increasing levels of intensity. As a school wide prevention approach, RTI includes changing instruction for struggling students to help them improve performance and achieve academic progress. To meet the needs of all students, the educational system must use its collective resources to intervene early and provide appropriate interventions and supports to prevent learning and behavioral problems from becoming larger issues (Ehren, Montgomery, Rudebusch, & Whitmire 2008). The active listening and use of Academic language skills in LFS when part of Tier 1, 2 or 3 intervention could have positive effects on the students overall success in reading and classroom participation. Craig, Zhang, Hensel, and Quinn (2009) concluded; “The findings support a dialect shifting–reading achievement hypothesis, which proposes that AAE-speaking students who learn to use SAE in literacy tasks will outperform their peers who do not make this linguistic adaptation” (p. 839).

### **Program Outline**

A successful LFS program developed within a school will involve working with special education and general education administrators. A natural entry point for speech-language pathologists in the schools may involve focusing on special education students about to transition to the world of work or to post-secondary education. Another entry point may involve, as our program did initially, eighth grade students transitioning to high school. For example, we have become involved with Summer Bridge programs that work to mitigate Summer Learning Loss of eighth graders and have authored programs for them. Academic English programs have the potential to improve the communication skills of nearly all students.

The speech-language pathology team in a school system, by training, experience and knowledge base is in a position to develop well-defined Speech Goals (ours include complete articulation, use of functional body language, and functional intonation, among others). The skill sets of speech-language pathologists allow them to be effective facilitators of the intensive practice required to produce lasting change.

LFS programs are highly structured, short term and involve teachers or program leaders. Goals of the programs are mapped to the amount of time available. During a session, all students who are enrolled by the school or agency participate fully in exercises and activities. Shorter programs (2 to 4 hours) raise an awareness of the utility of Academic English and introduce two to four Speech Goals. Medium length programs (6 to 12 hours) develop functional use of all Speech Goals; students will be able to utilize Academic English in a culminating program event and maintain Academic English awareness into classroom settings. Longer programs (30 to 35 hours – a typical school week) allow students to become highly skilled in the use of Speech Goals; students report maintaining functionality, in some cases, through college.

Speech goals are presented in a highly structured manner by a speech-language pathologist/facilitator to large or small student groups. Individual work is carried out when a student receives reinforcements as they take their turn in front of their group. The gains for users of Academic English are emphasized: students will be better listeners, better learners, improve class participation and improve their ability to convey a clear message. They are told that these skills will transfer into better grades and academic performance. Speech Goals are presented, explaining the rationale for their use, and are always taught by increasing positive

communication behaviors. Feedback is presented, as speech-language pathologists have been trained to do, in a positive manner, with specific cues for improving performance. Intensive practice is emphasized (our program aims for 10 to 12 responses per hour for each participant in a 15-student group). At the very beginning of the program, students and staff are “given permission” to provide and accept feedback. For many participants, an LFS program will be their first experience with communication critiques; leaders consistently and fairly explain the level of the communication bar for Academic English and positively support each speaking trial.

When collaborating with classroom teachers or leaders (in after school programs) we have found that pre-program training is crucial to ensure that all adult leaders understand rationale, goals, activities, and how to provide feedback to the students. After giving non-speech-language pathologist give leaders ‘permission’ to supply feedback about oral performance, we find that they are able to maintain the Academic English format in their own classrooms or leader sessions.

### **Program Content**

Materials, assignments and activities focus on improving the clarity of the message, not, for example, focusing on the number or type of articulation errors. Feedback is directed toward increasing skills, for example, for the Speech Goal 1) Articulation: “Say all the sounds in the word”, 2) Intonation: “Pick out the most important word in the sentence”, or 3) Body Language: “Add a strong stance”.

The speech tasks presented to students progress along the following paradigms: 1) little if any formulation required (counting) to greater formulation (two minute speech), 2) little communication stress (reciting in groups) to greater communication stress (speaking in front of a group), 3) brief length of message (introduce yourself) to lengthier presentation (debate participation) and 4) one Speech Goal addressed to more Speech Goals addressed simultaneously. Some of the activities include: group recitation, handshakes and introductions by name, ‘language arts workshop’, and conversation workshop.

### **Evaluations**

The program includes pre-and post assessments of student speaking skills (a standard presentation from a script that includes primary and other languages spoken), with specific scoring in student’s use of Speech Goals with respect to achieving clarity of their message. This assessment is used to develop participant’s individual Speech Goal targets that serve as a touch point for all feedback during the program.

We have also developed a pre- and post assessment of student content knowledge that helps leaders determine the level of awareness of communication among participants.

Written reinforcers are provided during the programs by leaders; these are tallied at the end of the program to help determine level of student participation and effectiveness of the leaders in providing the appropriate number of reinforcements per student.

Speech Goals are scored by speech-language pathologists trained in assessing the Speech Goals of choice for the program. Using videotapes when possible, observers not familiar with the students assess speaking performance before and after the programs. We have developed a five-point scale that provides criteria for each rating. For example, for the Speech Goal: Full Articulation (1 = the message is significantly impaired to 5 = the message would be understood without difficulty by any audience). This rating system was designed to quantify communication improvement by Speech Goal when reporting out results to teachers and administrators. Table 1 shows changes that can be expected from a group of seventh and eighth grade urban, culturally diverse students after a five-session program of LFS activities followed by teacher support in the classroom. Similar results can be obtained across all grade levels.

*Table 1: Changes in seventh and eighth grade student Speech Goal skill ratings during a Language for Scholars program*

Table 1: Changes in seventh and eighth grade student Speech Goal skill ratings during a Language for Scholars program		
	Pre – video rating average	Post – video rating average
All classes	1.8	3.9
Score of: 1 = message clarity severely impaired 3 = message moderately impaired 5 = complete clarity of the message		

Students typically change at least two scale points after an LFS program when all Speech Goals are averaged. In programs where eight Speech Goals are addressed, we find two scale changes on up to six of eight goals. Their performance in a culminating speaking event (presenting a debate, a 2-minute speech or a team presentation) shows demonstrable formative change. Students develop the ability, with subtle cueing by leaders or teachers, to use Academic English when necessary in the classroom.

Changes observed by parents and teachers indicate the success of students in adding Academic English as a communication tool in other venues (Table 2). Teachers and parents remark on the clarity and effectiveness of student communication away from the classroom.

*Table 2 Average number of Speech Goals per student still requiring improvement after an LFS program*

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Pre Program	Post program
6 Speech Goals	2 Speech Goals

Benefits: In fifteen years, LFS/Academic English programs have served more than 4000 students, recording positive change in over 95% of participants. Teachers report continuing improvement in spontaneous student use of Speech Goals and students maintain gains up to eight years after the program. Self-reports by student are typical:

“[I learned] how to articulate my words better, how to stand in front of a crowd, and how to use my body to show emotion” (rising high school freshman)

"My biggest fear is presenting my [business] plan but I think the [LEAP] session made me a better speaker." (a community college freshman)

“The three skills in life to be successful: show up, pay attention, and participate will make me successful in class and other school activities.” (a rising high school Junior)

“I learned how to use the way I speak to impress my teachers.” (a rising high school freshman with a scholarship into a private high school)

“My favorite part of LFS is when we were taught how to speak properly. I didn’t know how much I had to learn and how much I have to work on; they really helped me with

my listening and class participation skills.” (a high school junior recalling LFS program from 2 years previously)

“LFS helped me so much in my high school and college experience, that I want my students to have a similar experience. (a returning LFS graduate who is now a middle school teacher)

“Language for Scholars is an incredible gift to young people. It gives them a sense of self confidence and self-esteem that they didn’t possess at the start of the program.” (Rosy Santiago, Education Director Daniel Murphy Scholarship Foundation)

\* Leap Learning Systems, a not-for-profit 501C-3 organization, authors and delivers research-based language and literacy development programs to educators, students and their families across Chicago and beyond, particularly those in underserved communities.

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