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FEATURE ARTICLE

Equal educational opportunity for English learners: ESL teachers' conceptualizations on the importance of academic language

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This qualitative interpretive study showcases views and perceptions of K–12 teachers of English as a second language (ESL) in a North Carolina school district regarding the importance of academic language to ensure equal education opportunities for English learners. Framed by sociocultural theory, the study's findings report current, practicing teachers' perceptions regarding why access to academic language development is essential, in the context of both specialized ESL program services and content area classrooms. Study results also reveal demonstrations of facilitating academic language development in the context of K–12 public school classrooms to foster equal educational opportunities at school and within the community.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Public school student demographics in the United States has transformed to include large populations of English learners (ELs) across the nation. Research indicates the changed contours of public school classrooms generate continued considerations regarding ELs' equal access to educational opportunities. More specifically, ELs as a group include a wide range of multilanguage learners, providing schools with significant linguistic and cultural assets (Gottlieb & Castro, 2017). Furthermore, educational reform remains inclusive of protective legislation to ensure all students have access to curricula. The federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA; U.S. Department of Education [USDE], 2015a) provides specific guidance for safeguarding students' access to rigorous, grade-level concepts for learning. Given this focus on equal access to curricular concepts via academic language (AL), educators are called to specifically respond to ELs' diverse needs (Gottlieb & Ernst-Slavit, 2014). Similarly, the Common Core

State Standards, now implemented in many states, include pedagogical facets for listening, speaking, reading, and writing across grade-level instruction with content-based literacies in mind. Even with acknowledgment of language functions in the content areas, K–12 classroom teachers in all disciplines continue to struggle with precisely how to address ELs' linguistic challenges (Dove & Honigsfeld, 2013; Gibbons, 2015; Kolano, Davila, Lachance, & Coffey, 2014; U.S. Department of Education, 2015b).

Following suit, North Carolina's population of ELs has also dramatically increased. In the 2016–2017 school year, North Carolina reported the EL population had passed 100,000, nearly 7% of the overall student population (Public Schools of North Carolina State Board of Education Department of Public Instruction [NCDPI], 2018). Although nearly 75% of North Carolina elementary school students currently classified as ELs were born in the United States, between 2009 and 2013 the percentage of ELs also identified as "immigrant" (meaning born outside the United States and enrolled in a U.S. school less than three academic years) remained steady at 7.5%. These percentages indicate the state is continuing to enroll first-generation ELs (NCDPI, 2017). Research also suggests that variation in ELs' ages, grade levels, academic backgrounds, and life experiences contributes to the complex nature of designing and implementing English as a second language (ESL) program services (Wong-Fillmore, 2014). Specifically, there are unique pedagogies for designing and delivering instruction for ELs arriving from all over the world while also attending to the needs of children born in linguistically diverse communities within the United States where adults communicate in a language other than English (August & Shanahan, 2010). An additional layer to these educational complexities includes increasing numbers of long-term ELs who are not achieving English proficiency despite receiving language support services for 6 years or longer, therefore begging the question: Have we really achieved equal educational opportunities for ELs?

In response to the continued need to study equality in education and increased opportunities for ELs, the purpose of this research was to examine one North Carolina school district's ESL teachers' perceptions on the importance of AL and ELs' access to its development. Framed by sociocultural theory and principles of academic language development, the study's purpose emphasized teachers' definitions and operational conceptualizations of academic language as well as their expressed roles in facilitating ELs' equitable access to curricula. The study's guiding research questions were as follows:

1. How do ESL teachers describe academic language?
2. What are ESL teachers' perceptions regarding the importance of academic language?
3. How do ESL teachers conceptualize their role in ELs' development of academic language, including the instructional planning process?

2 | RELEVANT LITERATURE

The George Washington University Center for Equity and Excellence in Education conducted a comprehensive literature review of academic English to inform educational efforts to improve instruction for ELs in Grades K–12 (Anstrom et al., 2010). The research team's report focused on three areas of interest: (1) defining academic English, (2) teaching academic English, and (3) preparing teachers to incorporate it in their practice. Similarly, the U.S. Department of Education in its 2012 federal guidance on providing language services for ELs examined extensive studies on academic language and its constructs. Focal points from the literature synthesis were particularly connected to this study, supporting the research questions with connections to notions about how academic English is conceptualized differently among researchers and practitioners. Literature

also consistently distinguished academic English used in school from everyday social language that is used differently across K–12 disciplines (USDE, 2012). Likewise, research indicates that language development depends on meaningful, active interaction in socially oriented contexts for transformed practices (van Lier, 1996; Vygotsky, 1978). Therefore, teachers are obliged to design strategic opportunities for students to be actively engaged in peer-to-peer interactions using academic discourse necessary to fully participate in rigorous curricula (Cummins, 2014; Gottlieb & Ernst-Slavit, 2014).

Additional research and current literature strengthened the point that for academic English proficiency to develop teachers should consider both the academic content and the language necessary to communicate about the target content (Kibler, Walqui, & Bunch, 2015). Academic literacy development requires that teachers facilitate students' understanding text organization and the multiple meanings of words unique to each discipline, as well as how to use the language patterns specific to each content area (Valdés, Kibler, & Walqui, 2014). Conclusively, many researchers agreed that it is important to teach essential features of academic English, including the "academic vocabulary, grammar, and discourse structures common to specific content areas" (Anstrom et al., 2010, p. v); restricting academic language teaching mainly to vocabulary instruction would be limiting and less effective.

Others who investigated the nature and importance of academic language for student success focused on various related findings in their reports. Most recently, members of the Academic Language Development Network team (O'Hara, Zwiers, & Pritchard, 2012) published a research brief that included a framework for academic language and literacy development. Based on a synthesis of their literature review and classroom observations, they established three dimensions of academic language—vocabulary, sentence-level language, and discourse-level language—and they are included in the World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment (WIDA, 2007, 2012) framework for academic language development. These dimensions are significant in the literature with regard to the Common Core State Standards. Given the current era of standards and high-stakes learning, rigorous pedagogical practices aim to accomplish the following: (a) acknowledge and build on students' own linguistic and cultural strengths while also addressing their unique academic language needs, (b) expect students to master content and develop the most important language skills related to the content, and (c) require students to use academic language with appropriate complexity in an authentic way on a regular basis (O'Hara et al., 2012).

Even with specific guidance regarding academic language development and in-depth considerations for teaching and learning, decades of attempted school reform continue to struggle to improve ELs' academic achievement. There remains a notable, unsettling disconnect between effective teaching and learning academic language with diverse student populations (USDE, 2010; Walqui, 2000a, 2000b). Nationally, ELs continue to be labeled as an at-risk population, failing to meet improvement targets for academic progress in multiple academic subject areas, across grade levels (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2014, 2010; Nieto, 2012). Correspondingly, there is heightened awareness related to being mindful of complex equality gaps in education, and dismantling barriers regarding equal and equitable access to rigorous curricula, in spite of linguistic and cultural diversity. K–12 teachers need specialized skills to effectively design and deliver lessons that consider learners' identities and social practices, positioning themselves as informed advocates to ensure all students have the opportunity to maximize intellectual dimensions of engagement in their learning experiences (Gottlieb & Castro, 2017; Nieto, 2012; Orfield, 2014; Stetsenko, 2016). The review of relevant literature substantiates the point that educators and education researchers must remain focused to better understand the essentials for ELs' educational progress, truly facilitating equal educational opportunities through academic language development.

3 | THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is framed by Vygotskian canons of sociocultural theory (SCT) combined with conceptual facets of academic language development and pedagogical competencies for language learning. The investigation focused on ESL teachers' views and perceptions of academic language development, its significance for students, and its pedagogical shapes in the context of content-based ESL instruction. Specifically, the research examined participants' conceptualizations of the teaching and learning processes, why students' access via active learning of academic language is beneficial, and teachers' demonstrations of facilitating academic language development in their classrooms. With these guiding conceptual principles, the study's theoretical framework was threefold.

The primary theoretical component situated the study on Vygotsky's (1978) work in the origins of SCT to serve as a solid theoretical foundation. Fundamentally, the research is framed by the Vygotskian perspective that views thinking, the nature of language, and development as active processes that transform from learners' interpersonal to intrapersonal constructs of knowledge (Vygotsky, 1986). Vygotsky's approach supposes learners' development is socially shared and contextualized, aligning the nature of learning with social justice ideologies and equality, therefore leveraging human development as an avenue to social change (Stetsenko, 2017; Vygotsky, 1997). At the pedagogical forefront of learning in the context of teachers as learners in this case, Vygotsky's theory of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) recognizes constructs of knowledge as largely complex, more than a series of static, discontinuous events (Vygotsky, 1998). Collective and purposeful learning from the Vygotskian view emphasize the notion that constructing knowledge is flowing and communicative, while also considering the importance of the construction of knowledge between people. Vygotsky's considerations for spontaneous and systematic language learning pose teachers, along with their students, to move beyond a series of disconnected individual constructs toward communities and, because the nature of language itself is designed for us to make contact with others, to join the ongoing, collective exchange to construct new knowledge (Lantolf, 2010; Stetsenko, 2009).

Expansions on Vygotskian-based pedagogies extend the importance of learners' interaction as well as shared roles in active, dynamic learning, connecting learners' development to their self-perceptions and their views of potential and future applications of knowledge (Stetsenko, 2016). The use of ZPD as an intentional tool for mutually relevant educational development encompasses the process of co-creating knowledge and co-developing new pedagogical skills (Lantolf, 2010). The ZPD with language teachers as with learners proves contextually helpful in that teachers' knowledge, advanced through engagement, about academic language learning and teaching can be more effective than information that is only self-discovered. Linking back to Vygotsky's (1978) original definition for emphasis, the ZPD "is the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (p. 86). Tenets of SCT are therefore well suited for all stages of teacher development, including in-service teacher education, because teachers interact with their peers to offer and receive support and guidance in deepening their understanding of current research-informed practices for their students and further mastering their craft.

Specifically, in regard to language development, Vygotsky's (1978) emphasis on the nature of learning as a social process solidifies certain mediation mechanisms that help learners go beyond their present capabilities. Language, as a dynamic process, serves as a critical tool to create and communicate new meanings as well as to support new learning; thus, ESL teachers have a natural tendency to rely on precise use of language as one way to communicate about their practice inside the classroom as well as outside of it as they prepare for lessons, analyze student progress and learning outcomes, and

reflect on their own effectiveness. Ultimately, academic language learning obliges effective instructional practices as critical aspects of EL student education (Honigsfeld & Dove, 2010). Broadened sociocultural perspectives on the dynamics of language should lead to increased access to linguistic complexity and grade-level expectations in the teaching and learning processes.

In connection with this study, literature related to sociocultural supports, human potential, and educational inequalities also indicates the importance and value of *shared concern* for EL student progress to truly address equal educational opportunities. Stetsenko (2017) reminds educators to consider that

> all persons' "potential is realized in the course of activity-dependent generation of open-ended, dynamic, and situated development processes that are critically reliant upon sociocultural supports, tools, mediations, and access to requisite resources, especially through education" (p. 112).

These concepts powerfully reflect, align with, and advance the philosophies of knowledge to action and equal educational opportunities for ELs.

In addition to Vygotskian theory, this study also considered principles of academic language development. Considerations for operationalized academic vocabulary development, lexical access, and reading comprehension in the context of school were employed. Current and relevant literature suggests that ELs need explicit instruction to understand key terms from a text in order to fully participate in the learning experience, while also attending to the power dynamics of language in school (Beck & McKeown, 2008; García, 2009). Additionally, literature also supports language use as a critical aspect of academic language development (Walqui & van Lier, 2010; Zwiers, 2008; Zwiers, O'Hara, & Pritchard, 2014). Likewise, the context of language development in an era of standards-based, content-based instruction gives structure to the complexities of equal educational opportunities via academic language development (van Lier & Walqui, 2012). Equal access to academic vocabulary, grammar, prosody, oral academic discourse, and higher order thinking with both concrete and abstract concepts, with equality gaps in mind, may more fully address ELs' linguistic and sociocultural needs for academic progress (Cloud, Genesee, & Hamayan, 2009; Orfield, 2014).

Accordingly, the study's theoretical frame united with pedagogical competencies for language learning, beginning with the national standards for teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL). The national standards pinpoint ESL teachers' crucial and significant role centered on language development by means of students' active participation in content learning, across all the content areas (TESOL, 2007). Honigsfeld and Dove's (2010) theoretical perspectives on the pedagogical necessity for student engagement drive the focal point that teachers must have in-depth knowledge regarding the features of academic language and bring this knowledge to pedagogical action in the teaching and learning processes. The researcher places emphasis on sociocultural connections, mindfulness regarding educational equality, affective dynamics, students' risk-taking abilities with language, native language literacy, and linguistic nuances, as well as background knowledge, as crucial considerations in effective instructional planning and delivery.

4 | METHODS

We conducted a qualitative, interpretive case study (Erickson, 1986; Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2014) to gain clarity on ESL teachers' perspectives regarding the importance of access and students' active learning of academic language in one North Carolina district. Specifically, the study aimed to explore

teachers' demonstrations of facilitating academic language development in the classroom. With structural tenets from sociocultural theory and frames on student engagement, the study's purpose was three-dimensional. Accordingly, the study's guiding research questions were as follows:

1. How do ESL teachers describe academic language?
2. What are ESL teachers' perceptions regarding the importance of academic language?
3. How do ESL teachers conceptualize their role in ELs' development of academic language, including the instructional planning process?

4.1 | Context for the case

The study's construct was selected based on Merriam's (1998) interpretive model in order for the researcher to "gather as much information about the problem as possible" (p. 38). The intent of the data collection and analysis were to develop a categorical continuum that conceptualizes a different approach to the task—in this case, a specialized understanding of one district's ESL teachers' perceptions of academic language development. The participants' district had a formalized 3-year plan to amplify teachers' competencies related to academic language development, with an intentionally designed series of professional development for the district's K–12 ESL teachers, nearly 200 in total. The interpretive study participants (Yin, 2014) worked in K–12 ESL classrooms as well as the district-level office on a core ESL team providing curricular and pedagogical support to the ESL teachers.

Of North Carolina's K–12 students in public schools, over 250,000, a prodigious 17% of the total student population, report on the Home Language Surveys that a language other than English is spoken in the home. The North Carolina General Assembly indicated in the annual Language Diversity in North Carolina Report that approximately 7% of the linguistically diverse students are classified as English learners according to federal guidelines, and thus they are entitled to language assistance program services (NCDPI, 2018). Specifically, nearly 85% of the ELs are Spanish-speaking with Arabic, Vietnamese, Chinese, and Hindi/Urdu as the next four language groups, respectively. That said, the total number of students' languages other than English reported statewide were 336. Likewise, a district with more than 200 languages represented was selected as the research location. With a broad scope of ELs in mind, and the specialized nature of ESL instruction in this context, the study's data collection and analysis considered multiple data sources.

4.2 | Data sources

Through purposeful sampling (Merriam, 1998), the study's approach allowed for the exploration of the research questions in various multileveled contexts, reflecting district nuances. ESL teachers and district level ESL professionals represented both purposeful sampling and sample of convenience, informed by researchers' fostered relationships (Stringer, 2014) with both groups. For case-study data triangulation (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), multiple sources of evidence were examined in the context where the data were collected over a 6-month period. Data sources included a survey and a face-to-face interview/collaborative discussion, as well as artifacts and document analysis.

4.2.1 | Survey

A survey was utilized with the district's 180 ESL teachers, incorporating multiple item types. Seidman's (2013) research protocol shaped the initial questions and invited participants to self-report

demographic data, such as professional credentials, length of time working with ELs, and other general information. For the purpose of this study, participants were given a list of nine open-ended questions, organized around the topics of describing academic language, articulating their decision-making processes for planning and teaching academic language, and their views on the importance of academic language development. Finally, they were asked to describe their views regarding their own roles within the process.

4.2.2 | Focus group interview/collaborative discussion

Another data source for the study included a focus group audiorecorded interview/discussion with a stratified sampling of the district's ESL district level core team. Focus group questions prompted more in-depth discussion of the concept of academic language and its importance and the perceived roles teachers play in helping ELs develop proficiency in academic language. The 60-minute interview/discussion took place on site at the district's central office where the core ESL team is housed, in the context of their own environment, to capture deeper understandings of the participants as they were in their workplace. The interview/discussion was transcribed, resulting in verbatim transcriptions for coding.

4.2.3 | Artifacts and documentation

Triangulated data sources included artifacts and documentation from the district's ongoing professional development series targeting the topic of academic language development with the ESL teachers and the district-level ESL core team. As an organized initiative, the case district began a formalized professional development program to build understanding among its ESL instructional leaders concerning how core instruction may be strengthened to better meet the needs of English learners. Researchers examined and coded archival curricular materials and ESL teachers' professional development outcomes through the lens of the research questions. The 295 coded photographs indicated several artifacts were teacher-generated during professional development sessions while others were supporting documents from district-created curricular supports. Artifacts and documents included text examples and language objectives from unit plans, teacher-made posters regarding their connections to academic language during the professional development sessions, and additional outcomes such as a recorded, simulated public service announcement about academic language development across the content areas from the ESL teachers' perspectives.

4.3 | Participants

The case district's 180 K–12 ESL teachers were invited to participate in the initial survey portion of the study. Of the 180, 103 completed the survey, yielding a nearly 60% participation rate. Cross-curricular perspectives were considered, because content-based ESL instruction is provided at both elementary and secondary levels. The focus group was comprised of nine participants from the district's core central office ESL team of coordinating teachers and program administrators. Specifically, these nine participants included four with an emphasis on the elementary grades, four with an emphasis on the secondary grades, and one K–12 team member. The focus group participants were an integral part of the research given the nature of their roles as they provided the K–12 ESL teachers with curricular and pedagogical support regarding academic language development with English learners via school site-based visits and centrally designed professional development.

4.4 | Data analysis

Data were analyzed according to interpretive case study design (Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2014), for descriptions to construct explanations (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008; Yin 2014). The data analysis via open-ended coding (Saldaña, 2016) exercised categorical culling, grouping, and recoding processes to analyze refined, emergent data patterns and trends. Integration of general thematic and categorical structures from coding survey responses, focus group's transcribed interview/collaborative discussion, and the artifacts and document data led to data categories and subcategories within the holistic data set to respond to the research questions (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

5 | FINDINGS

Study findings highlight authentic participant responses, which were qualitatively categorized into three overarching themes (Saldaña, 2016; Corbin & Strauss, 1998): (a) academic language defined, (b) the importance of academic language, and (c) educators' roles. These three larger themes, with the respective research questions, also revealed subthematic information regarding academic vocabulary, academic success, and accessibility to academic language in the context of school.

5.1 | Academic language defined

The majority of teachers defined academic language as a special form of written or oral communication needed for school success. One participant referred to it as "the language a student needs to understand content area information or may use in a school setting." Many participants emphasized various features of language with an implied comprehensive definition. Although academic vocabulary, language structures, and discourse (word-, sentence-, and text-level understandings of academic language) were all present in participant responses, a unified common understanding and comprehensive definition of academic language was not noted. Although one survey question targeted conceptualizing academic language, several participants shifted their connections to teaching and learning modalities for active learning, the manner in which the teacher delivers instruction, and/or communicating with others, and/or listed the four domains of language taught in the classroom.

Emphasis on academic vocabulary needed for academic language and conceptual understanding in core content areas was a recurring theme. Several teachers explicitly connected academic language to state and district initiatives such as the North Carolina Essential Standards or district level curriculum guidance. One elementary ESL teacher wrote,

> I use [names district curriculum] for each grade level's science and social studies standards to guide the academic language that I need to include in my lesson. I try to front load this language so that they can take it back to the classroom and be successful. For instance, when first-grade students were learning about rocks, I included words such as *dull*, *shiny*, *rough*, *smooth* … etc. Then when they started learning about properties in their classroom they were able to contribute the information that they knew about the topic.

Another elementary ESL teacher shared the approach to activating prior knowledge and building background though vocabulary learning and the use of graphic organizers. The participant responded in the survey by writing,

I attempt to include the essential language/vocabulary taught to the UPCOMING units to be studied. This is done in order to frontload as much information and vocabulary as possible. It also allows us to be able to recognize those students who lack background knowledge in specific areas. In addition to this, I always teach study skills and usually try to match that with Thinking Maps as much as possible.

Extending the participants' responses, the focus group participants also discussed and described academic language. These viewpoints are noteworthy, as the district's core ESL team provides support to the ESL teachers, giving multidimensional details to the topic. One focus group participant expressed,

Academic language is definitely something that's needed to acquire any kind of new or deeper understanding of content in general. But it's not just the understanding of that content, but your ability to be able to express your comprehension of that learning. With the new Common Core, and how Common Core is more explicitly using academic language in all standards, students have to be able to do that and that expression of their understanding is probably one of the most difficult parts of academic language and teachers being able to model how that looks and sounds in the classroom and that the students have intentional and purposeful practice with that language in order to be able to express their understanding.

Sequentially, defining and emphasizing the importance of academic language as well as implementation strategies were often intertwined in teachers' responses, indicating how their theoretical understanding and practice-based, pedagogical thinking seemed connected.

5.2 | The importance of academic language

Although all participants indicated academic language development is important, over 80% of the participants repeatedly acknowledged the need to prepare ELs for academic success in the core content areas, and identified the means to achieve that to be through academic language instruction. One participant made an explicit connection to rigorous assessments implemented in the state: "Due to strenuous testing requirements in my state I want my students to understand what is being asked of them." Another noted that all students could be considered academic language learners who need to build (or continue to extend basic) language skills: "I believe that everyone needs academic language. I teach assuming that no one knows and needs to be taught from scratch. I'm a strong believer of foundational skills." Yet another participant carefully elaborated on the importance of making disciplinary distinction in academic language use. The participant said,

It is very important to develop academic language in order to help students develop their skills in using and understanding the oral discourse, the text types, and the subject-specific vocabulary that are typical in the particular content area. Teachers may use a variety of methods and strategies to both explicitly teach students the norms of academic language in the content area and to help them incorporate these norms in their everyday classroom usage of language. For example, a social studies teacher may highly scaffold the process of constructing an argument based on historical evidence, how to communicate a thesis in an essay, or how to debate a political point of view. Or an elementary mathematics teacher might help students understand the conventions expected for

showing their problem-solving work, how to explain alternative solutions to a problem, or how to interpret mathematical symbols.

Approximately one fourth of the participants noted that ELs need academic language to achieve equal membership in the general education classroom, to participate and engage in classroom interactions, and to be able to complete tasks assigned by all teachers. As one elementary ESL teacher stated, academic language is a *gatekeeper,* making the profound connection to equality and access in education (Chávez, Nair, & Conrad, 2015). The ESL teacher participant said, "I think of language as the gatekeeper for students and people. If you [students] can talk like a group of people, then you will be included. If you can talk like a banker, you will be given the opportunity to be a banker."

Finally, several participants emphasized the importance of academic oral language skills as a gateway to disciplinary literacy and academic achievement or as an entry point to literacy skill development, reemphasizing their associations with sociocultural equality and access to content in school. Sociocultural nuances related to constructing new knowledge are visible in survey responses included in these ESL teachers' comments:

> Academic language is what allows students to have coherent, informed, relevant conversations about school-related topics. Speaking academic language increases their ability to write well, read and comprehend more complex texts, and increase their overall understanding of how various domains and content areas are connected.

Additionally, this teacher acknowledged how unique each academic task might be, also connecting the relevance of oral communication, development and success:

> Developing academic language knowledge for ELs is critical to their success in the classroom. Every learning task has different language demands so students need to learn the skills for developing academic language very early. Developing communication skills will be enhanced and since oral language skills develop faster than written ones [usually], this can be begun in early elementary years.

Academic language proved to be one of the dominating themes in multiple data sources, but another key theme than emerged from the data was related to redefining educators' roles in support of ELs.

5.3 | Educators' roles

Most teachers participating in this study identified with the role of teaching academic language. With this in mind, approximately 5% of the participants admitted they feel significantly challenged with the program structure at their school because they would like to have increased time with their students. Other challenges posed were related to teachers' conceptualizations that many English learners are beginners who need foundational skill building or what was called survival English in the context of school, whereas a few strongly embraced the emerging role and responsibility to primarily focus on academic language instruction as an ESL teacher. One participant stated, "I support the classroom teachers with what they are teaching and apply the vocabulary in my ESL classroom so the students will hear the academic language multiple times in different ways." Some participants also articulated the importance of collaborating with their general education colleagues. This collectively expressed professional agency as teachers of academic language or role models for their general education peers supports the sociocultural importance of purposeful collaborative transformation in practice. One participant noted,

My role is an important one because my [EL] students come to my class to better under-
stand and practice the language they are hearing and expected to use daily in their regular
classroom. Collaborating with the content area teachers and identifying needs of the ESL
students is crucial. It is my job to then take those skills/vocabulary/language and develop
ways to assist students in learning, understanding, and retaining it to then use in class
and the real world.

Participating teachers acknowledged that unlike conversational English, academic language is not
readily available to many ELs and teachers must make a concerted effort to make academic language
accessible to ELs and ensure that students also begin to internalize and actively use more complex
academic language in all content areas.

Among the subthemes of role definition, collaboration with grade level teachers, integration of
district level curriculum and other instructional guides aligned with state standards to make decisions,
and vocabulary instruction across the content areas created an actively engaged classroom where
students used the four language domains of speaking, writing, reading, and listening while frequently
interacting with each. Likewise, other complex materials were identified. One teacher particularly
stood out with her response, stating,

For the past three years or so, I have been using ESL [names district-level curriculum] as
well as grade level science from [names the same system] as the basis for my instruction
(for Grades 3, 4, and 5). My goal is to more directly and constructively support classroom
teachers with their science instruction. For each unit of study, I have created a general
outline that includes essential questions, texts, and other resources to be used as well as
a list of key vocabulary. I send this outline to the teachers so that they know what I am
teaching and can inform me of areas of most need for any of their students in my class.
Over the years, I have created resource binders categorized by topic: weather, rock cycle,
landforms, plants, animal adaptation, food chains, solar system, body systems, etc. In each
binder are copies of texts and activities at all literacy levels that I use and share with my
fellow teachers. The binders are a work in progress as I am constantly adding new texts
and resources to help reach even the most novice of students. So when a classroom teacher
says to me "What can I do with this student? He/she can't read the materials/texts that we
are using in our science class," I can go through my resource binders to see if I have a text,
short reader, or activity that will help meet that student's needs during science instruction.

Conclusively, most teacher participants agreed that a key component of their role was collaborating
with other general education teachers for the successful facilitation of academic language develop-
ment with ELs. These conceptualizations, framed by sociocultural theory, indicate the importance of
collaborative pedagogical practices, highlighting the teachers' development and learner agency based
on collective, transformative efforts (Stetsenko, 2009). Ultimately, the study's findings are paralleled
by research and literature, supporting the importance of collaboration for equitable, engaged, success-
ful language learning with ELs (Dove & Honigsfeld, 2013).

6 | DISCUSSION

In discussions of the study's findings, the K–12 ESL teachers from this large, urban school dis-
trict with a broad scope of ELs contributed detailed insights regarding understandings of academic

language, its importance for ELs, and conceptualizations of their roles in its development. Participant teachers' current views as practitioners in the field provided insight into fundamental aspects of equal education opportunity within language development program structure, framed by the collective, sociocultural nature of teachers' construction of knowledge.

The study's qualitative findings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008; Erickson, 1986) from open-ended survey questions directly connect to research questions regarding defining academic language, its importance for ELs, and teachers' roles in its development. Study findings suggest a resounding majority of the participants equate academic language to vocabulary and language development for *access to content*, and as a contingent aspect of academic success in school. These notions would indicate that the teachers have strong and substantial abilities related to recognizing the significance of equality in education as well as the complexities of and sociocultural nature of collaborative practices for language development with their learners (Orfield, 2014; Stetsenko, 2017). Furthermore, the collective notions indicate that the teachers view any cause for ELs' lack of access to the language needed for their development as highly problematic, solidifying their commitment to the betterment of ELs' equal access to human resources, socioculturally dynamic learning experiences, and developmentally appropriate supports for school success.

Likewise, from Research Question 2, findings indicate the participants agreed that ELs must master academic language to have academic success in school, reconnecting once more to the ideological importance of sociocultural resources via equal access and experiences in education (Chávez, Nair, & Conrad, 2015). Similarly, the participants' responses conceptualized that when ELs' comprehension is hindered, there is a lack of vocabulary development, resulting in unequal access to content. These responses are noteworthy, given that the ESL teachers are designing and delivering content-based ESL instruction while also collaborating with other content-area general education teachers. The relevance is the simultaneous and sociocultural extension of students' linguistic and metalinguistic learning along with teachers' development goals beyond static vocabulary instruction with content language and academic discourse in mind (Schleppegrell, 2013).

In discussion of Research Question 3, findings from the open-ended survey questions, focus interview/discussions, and artifacts and documents demonstrated the participants' conceptualizations of their role within the academic language development process as directly related to preparing ELs for equal access to classroom content information and therefore affording ELs with equal educational opportunities in the context of school. These findings are also substantial in connection with sociocultural pedagogies that foster and enhance learners' potentials (Stetsenko, 2017). Teachers saw themselves as important factors, human resources to further their learners' development. On a parallel continuum, the teachers also gave merit to their own constructs of new knowledge via collaborative, transformative practices while working with content teachers.

Additional study discussions revealed that the teacher participants were unified in academic language defined, its sociocultural importance related to ELs and equal access to content, as well as their leading roles in students' development of academic language, while also providing a platform to further investigate details regarding pedagogical operationalization. On a parallel note, participants' responses connected in conceptual ways that also tied back to the district level professional development series with its focus on academic language development and the sociocultural nature of collaborative teaching and learning. In numerous responses participants made direct connections and relevant references to district-level curriculum resources as well as connections to professional development workshops they identified as collaborative and beneficial for expanding notions of academic language development with ELs, understanding its importance, and clarifying their educator roles with their students. The view of connectedness to district information on academic language within the conceptualizations from the sociocultural perspective might suggest the interpersonal and intrapersonal impacts on teachers' learning while participating in the district's support for pedagogical betterment.

Furthermore, details from the focus group interview/discussion noted elements of reluctance present in ESL teachers' verbalizations of deeper dimensions of pedagogical considerations with ELs, providing space for further professional support, specifically with regard to richer sociocultural learning. Ultimately, noteworthy study details showed that participant ESL teachers clearly understand the importance of academic language, for equal access to content, and expressed their roles within the process.

7 | IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

ESL teachers in this study were fully credentialed professionals with noteworthy levels of commitment and willingness to collaborate and collectively work toward ELs' further development of academic language and to articulate the importance of equal access to language and content in K–12 education. The uniqueness of the study's findings was revealed in that teachers individually expressed their intrapersonal conceptualizations of their own role in ELs' development of academic language, also based on interpersonal connections as the district's group of ESL teachers. Finally, the teachers also self-reported instructional choices and practices that ranged from expressing reluctance to entirely incorporating a new role of supporting academic language and disciplinary literacy across all core content areas. The unique range and contextually based variations solidify the sociocultural connections to these teachers' collaborative communities in order to make meaning of and construct new knowledge. Given that this study included a large-cross section of ESL teachers of different levels of educational background and work experience, teaching in urban, suburban, and rural areas, teachers across the country or region are likely to face similar challenges in identifying what academic language is, how important it is to EL success, and how to best define their own roles and responsibilities in contributing to the planning, instructional, and assessment process centered around academic language, and mindfulness to equal education. Through the study's discussion of its findings there is an indication that the majority of participating teachers have internalized the importance of deconstructing academic language and are willing to embrace a new role of teaching academic English and disciplinary literacy skills in collaboration with their core content teachers.

The study also evidenced that the majority of teachers continue to emphasize vocabulary instruction as an entry point or main pathway to academic language instruction, making room for new articulations of broader sociocultural, pedagogical approaches and further understandings of the dimensions of their instructional practices. With these ideas and concepts in mind, some recommendations for future research might include the following:

1. Replicate the study in several other states to compare the ways in which teachers define academic language and its importance as well as their own role in teaching academic English.
2. Disaggregate elementary and secondary data to compare and contrast ways in which elementary and secondary teachers define academic language and its importance as well as their own role in teaching academic English.
3. Expand the study to include additional EL teachers' general education counterparts who serve the same ELs to uncover shared or mismatched understandings of what academic language is, how its importance is defined, and how each group of teachers defines their own role in teaching academic English and disciplinary literacy.
4. Expand the study to include classroom visitations and observations to document how teachers actualize their own beliefs about equal and actively engaged academic language instruction.

8 | CONCLUSIONS

The numbers of English learners indicate the shift in student demographics nationwide is not a temporary phenomenon. Academic language development, as indicated in this study's findings, is a fundamental aspect of EL student success, in both ESL classrooms and content area classrooms. Despondently, teachers still feel ill prepared to sincerely address the linguistic and academic needs of these culturally and linguistically diverse students, and therefore the challenges of EL students' equal opportunities in education remain. This study and its corresponding findings and recommendations address ways for ESL teachers and their colleagues to support development with English learners. These crucial relationships bridge ESL instruction and content-based academic language development. By examining the intersectionality of academic language as it is described by ESL teachers, the importance of accessibility to language development from the sustained teachers' perspective, and their roles in the processes, this study authentically responds to supporting achievement of the promise of equal educational opportunities for English learners. In closing, the study also provides a foundation for further research and replication to focus on impact and student learning.

9 | THE AUTHORS

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