

HOME INDUSTRIES ABOUT CONTACT

Search

SLR
landscape
structures

Add fun and excitement
to your playground.



Language register: What is it and why does it matter in education?

Erick Herrmann

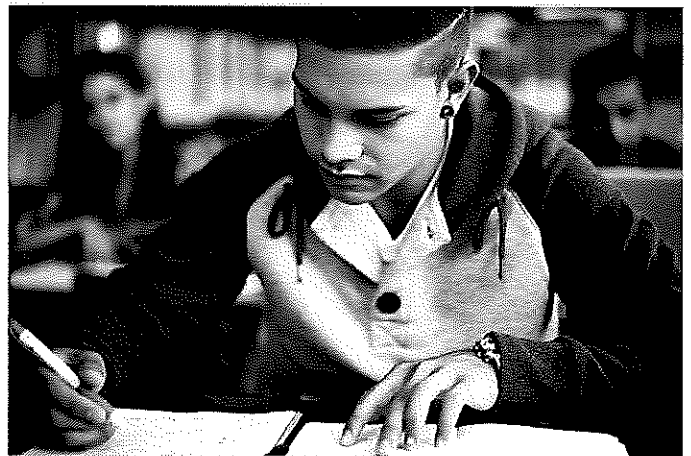
Wednesday, November 18, 2015

0
COMMENTS

Share this article

Many teacher and parents today lament a lack of formality in student language, especially writing. Ask any educator about the use of so-called "texting language" in student writing, and you will likely see eye rolls, a pained look on their face, hear a sigh or complaint about the decline in language.

What students may not understand, however, is language register — different language and levels of formality are used in different situations and scenarios. While most people have a working understanding of the concept, students may need to be taught or reminded that different scenarios call for different language.



Perhaps the first considerations for students, when speaking or writing, are audience, topic, purpose and location. Many students need to be explicitly taught about these ideas and how to adjust their language use based on these considerations. When working with English learners, explicit instruction in vocabulary and syntax is important.

Audience

Students need to understand that different audiences require differing types of language.

For example, the way they speak to their parents may differ from how they speak to their siblings when they are alone. The language they use will likely change when speaking with friends, and should change again when speaking in school.

Similarly, when writing, students should adjust the formality, tone, and vocabulary used based on who the writing is intended for.

Topic

Different subject areas in school and differing topics require differing styles of speech and writing. Mathematicians, scientists, historians, artists, musicians and others use differing styles when speaking about or writing about the subject and topic at hand.

For example, when writing in science, students should avoid the use of metaphors or unnecessary language, being as concise as possible while getting the appropriate principle, finding, description, etc., across to the reader. It is critical that we, as educators, share with students the differing language styles used in the subject areas we are discussing and learning about.

Purpose

Students should clearly understand the purpose of their writing or speech. Is it to inform, argue, persuade, describe, narrate, share cause and effect, or some other purpose? When students are clear on the purpose of the writing or speech, they can more accurately choose the language register to use.

Additionally, teachers will need to explicitly teach students the appropriate general academic vocabulary that pertains to the specific language function. Teachers can include instruction on specific sentence frames, starters and signal words to help students choose the most appropriate language for the purpose of their writing or speech.

Location

Location can, and often does, dictate the appropriate register to use. In a school setting, the language and formality used in the classroom should differ from the language used in the hallways or on the playground. Similarly, the vocabulary and syntax used to answer a simple question versus giving a formal speech in the classroom differs.

Students should know that the way they speak and the words they use in a library versus a restaurant versus a shopping center differ, and they should adjust their language register accordingly.

The considerations listed above will help students begin to understand how language should be used in differing contexts. Once they understand these, or while learning about the considerations, students can learn about and be given examples of the five language registers.

It is helpful for students to learn about register, especially if students are from culturally and linguistically diverse homes. As people are interacting with others, it is acceptable to move from one register into an adjacent register without any problems or awkward moments. However, skipping a level or even more than one level may be considered inappropriate or offensive.

- **Frozen/Static Register:** This register rarely or never changes. Examples of frozen register include the Pledge of Allegiance or the Preamble to the Constitution.
- **Formal/Academic Register:** This register includes academic language from speeches, proclamations and formal announcements.
- **Consultative Register:** This register is formal and acceptable speech often used in professional settings. Some examples of this register include discourse between teachers and students, judges and lawyers, doctors and patients, and between a superior and a subordinate.
- **Casual Register:** This register is used among friends and peers, and includes informal language including slang and colloquialisms. Casual register is often used among friends, teammates, etc.
- **Intimate Register:** This register is reserved for close family members such as parents and children and siblings, or intimate people such as spouses.

In the context of schools and instruction, it is important to note that students can be taught about the five registers and when they are used, but perhaps more importantly should be taught the language that is used in the first three registers listed.

Students will encounter the language in the Frozen/Static Register as they study social studies primarily. The Preamble, Pledge of Allegiance and other examples are exemplary resources to teach history along with language and word choice.

Speeches, lab reports and other examples of the Formal/Academic Register are also prime candidates for close reading and analysis of text and language. Lastly, the Consultative Register should be focused on in schools as students learn to interact with teachers, administrators, guest speakers and each other. Utilizing and practicing this register allows students to incorporate skills such as interviewing a professional or practicing being interviewed for a job, or speaking formally to another.

While teaching students about the five registers may not be high on the teaching priority list, being aware of register is helpful as teachers prepare students for a variety of contexts and task. The language involved in each of these registers provides rich opportunities for language and content instruction, especially for English learners.

Teaching the audience, topic, purpose and location in regard to language, including speech and writing, will benefit students as we help them to achieve academically.

Share this article