

Engaging ELLs Through Instructional Conversation

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The implementation of Common Core English language arts and literacy standards that call students to more sophisticated use of written and spoken English should signal a time of hope for English language learners, who often enough have been left behind academically despite two decades of advances in teaching and learning (Ahearn, 2004).

Promoting an action-based perspective for language development, language experts and researchers Leo van Lier and Aida Walqui, suggest that English language learners can acquire language more effectively by engaging in “meaningful activities (projects, presentations, investigations) that engage their interest and that encourage language growth through perception, interaction, planning, research, discussion, and co-construction of academic products of various kinds” (2012).

The rigor of the Common Core standards, rather than merely raising a higher bar for correct grammar or functional use of the language, instead should be a chance to engage ELL students in meaningful learning that meets their need for knowledge, uses their interests, and fully uses all their capacities as a person:

“The CCSS provide us with an opportunity to engage students in valuable actions, such as in English Language Arts, engaging with complex text and using evidence when interacting with others; and in Mathematics, maintaining high cognitive demand, developing beliefs that mathematics is sensible, worthwhile, and doable. A purely grammatical or functional progression will not get students to engage in these acts, or to become engaged, motivated, develop their autonomy, and succeed. It is essential that we do not miss this opportunity to integrate language, cognition, and action deeply and coherently (van Lier & Walqui, 2012).”

Changing Instructional Practice

Despite all we have learned about teaching and learning in the last century, education in the United States remains very teacher-focused (Dalton & Gallimore, 1991).

Furthermore, researchers found that teachers of English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) talk excessively in the classroom, so students have limited opportunities to use language in meaningful ways, which prevents them from developing complex language and thinking skills (Ramirez, Yuen, Ramey, & Pasta, 1991). When teachers ask students to elaborate on responses, however, they can promote students' deeper thinking and meaningful language acquisition (Echevarria, 2004).

Indeed, the National Early Literacy Panel noting the urgent challenge of teaching English language learners to read and write well, concluded that teaching reading skills alone is not enough. The panel recommended that "extensive oral" English development be incorporated as part of the literacy practices to be used with language-minority students (August & Shanahan, 2006).

Using Instructional Conversation

Knowing how to give students opportunities to engage in critical conversational practices is an essential part of the Common Core ELA/literacy standards. Content teachers must meet the challenge of making opportunities for ELL students to practice their listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills in each classroom (Walqui, 2012). One classroom approach known as "instructional conversation" provides English language learners with opportunities to link and reinforce speaking and listening, as well as reading and writing skills. This approach is a key element within a framework of five standards developed by the Center for Research on Education, Diversity, and Excellence (CREDE) at the University of California, Berkeley, which highlights best practices that research shows help students whose academic potential has been challenged by language, cultural barriers, race, geographic location, or poverty.

Using the CREDE framework, teaching through conversation, is deemed to be effective with all students but especially culturally and linguistically diverse students (Tharp, Estrada, Dalton, & Yamauchi, 2000).

The Five Standards of Effective Pedagogy include the following:

Standard I-Teachers and students producing together: The teacher plans for and facilitates collaboration with students and among students on learning activities through a variety of groupings and joint products.

Standards II-Developing language and literacy across the curriculum: The teacher develops students' aptitude in language, literacy, and content knowledge through scaffolded instructional activities.

Standard III-Making meaning by connecting school to students' lives: The teacher links the curriculum to the experiences and cultures of students to spark interest and motivation, including community-based activities and family participation.

Standard IV-Teaching complex thinking: The teacher challenges and encourages students to stretch their cognitive abilities, assisted by clear goals, high standards, and direct feedback.

Standard V-Teaching through conversation: The teacher engages students in academic dialogue, called instructional conversation, where students talk more than the teacher, in both teacher-student and student-to-student discussions.

Using Instructional Conversation

The practice of instructional conversation gives students opportunities for extended dialogue, addresses the need for a cognitively challenging curriculum, and moves teachers and students away from the typical patterns of teacher-directed instruction (Waxman & Tellez, 2002).

Teachers who use instructional conversation typically do the following:

- Arrange (their) classrooms to accommodate daily small group conversation.
- Guide conversation to a goal.
- Include all students according to their preferences.
- Ensure student talk occurs at higher rates than the teacher talk.
- Listen carefully to assess levels of students' understanding.
- Assist students' participation by questioning.
- Elicit students' views, judgment, and rationales.
- Require an instructional conversation product.

(Dalton, 1998)

These features promote collaborative structures for students to be able to think critically and further their language development. Thus, a key aspect of the literacy implications of the Common Core is the need to develop students' ability to think critically and practice using the academic vocabulary found in a text. Simply put, talking furthers language development in all areas. Research has affirmed that language knowledge gained through talking becomes the basis for developing essential reading and writing skills (Roskos, Tabors, & Lenhart, 2004).

For example, a study of 4th grade English language learners found that 63 percent of students who took part in instructional conversation about reading a short story demonstrated a clear understanding of the story's theme, while only 13 percent of students who took part in a typical directed-reading lesson showed the same understanding (Saunders & Goldenberg, 2009). (Both groups achieved approximately the same levels in a post-test of *literal* comprehension.)

Helping ELLs Make Meaning to Meet Common Core Rigor

The Common Core standards, however, are demanding a higher level of thinking beyond literal recall or opinion-making about their reading. The new instructional shifts of the Common Core ELA/literacy standards promote expanding opportunities for students at all language levels to engage in dialogue that moves beyond the "What?, Where?, When?" question types to more of the "how?" and "why?" questions. For example, specific College and Career Readiness Anchor standards for reading literature in grade 6 (RL.6.2) in part, calls for students to "Determine a theme or central idea of a text and how it is conveyed through particular details" (CCSSI, 2010) The grade 8 version of the same CCR anchor standard (RL.8.2) builds on that by calling students to not only determine a theme or central idea of a text but "analyze its development over the course of the text, including its relationship to the characters, setting, and plot" (CCSSI, 2010)

For example, College and Career Readiness Anchor standards for Speaking and Listening Standard 1, which addresses comprehension and collaboration-discussion, in part, calls for grade 11-12 students (SL.1) to "initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 11-12 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and

expressing their own clearly and persuasively” (CCSSI, 2010). That same standard expects students will use text-based evidence and other research “to stimulate thoughtful, well-reasoned exchange of ideas,” “probe reasoning and evidence,” “ensure a hearing for a full range of positions on a topic or issue,” and “determine what additional information or research is required to deepen the investigation or complete the task” (CCSSI, 2010). Clearly, the level of rigor in the new standards will require the active participation of ELLs that won't be met by vocabulary and grammar drills and passive learning that doesn't fully engage students in all modes of literacy.

Studies also highlight the critical role that instructional conversation plays in developing language for English language learners (Boyd & Brock, 2004). Hagg, Anderson, and Williams document what a constructivist classroom looks like where students are engaged in meaningful language interactions (Boyd & Brock, 2004). These authors describe what classrooms look and sound like when students are constructing meaning by engaging in instructional conversation. Their findings reveal that a rich language environment where students feel safe to engage in conversations with peers and teachers as they learn to make sense of a new language are most effective for children whose first language is not English.

In a comprehensive study of the research to date on what constitutes effective pedagogy for students whose first language is not English, Goldenberg (2008) points out that a strong scaffold for supporting ELLs in English-only settings provides opportunities for extended interactions with teacher and peers. Tharp (1988) makes clear the connection of the constructivist view of learning and language development. If the outcome for this vast group of students is to change, then the instructional conversation is one area that creates a bridge for students to access the academic language of the classroom. This group of ELL students continues to grow. According to Ahearn (2004), 40 percent of all school-age children will be English language learners by the year 2030. Thus, educating this growing population successfully creates an urgent need to implement best practices for effective instruction for ELLs. The instructional shifts of the Common Core demand that teachers create structures for quality student interaction in the context of academic rigor, high expectations, language focus, and quality curriculum (Walqui, 2012).

Instructional conversation can address the need for cognitively challenging curriculum that moves teachers and students away from the typical patterns of teacher-directed instruction currently ruling schools. Effective teachers of English language learners provide opportunities for extended dialogue as a way to bridge the gap that continues to widen for the vast majority of students whose first language is not English (Tellez & Waxman, 2006). The Common Core standards will challenge educators to create opportunities for ELLs to be fully engaged in rigorous academic work across all literacy modes—speaking and listening, reading, and writing-- related to each content area.