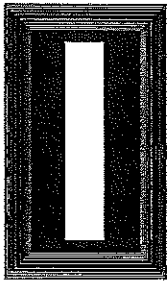


# Talking in Class Builds English Learners' Proficiency

by Donna Ross and Douglas Fisher



It's hard to learn a language when you don't use that language. While obvious, this simple maxim has been neglected in many classrooms. And with devastating results -- English learners aren't making adequate progress. We wonder how much of the achievement gap would be reduced if students were encouraged to talk, yes talk, in their classes. After all, as James Britton (1983) noted, "reading and writing float on a sea of talk" (p. 29).

Our experiences as high-school teachers (biology and English respectively) have taught us that we must plan for talk if that talk is going to be effective. The talk we are looking for is academic and interactive, meaning that students are regularly talking with one another and not just with the teacher. For us, this starts with an established purpose for talk.

## Establishing Purpose

Any visitor to a classroom knows that there are hundreds of things to attend to in a given lesson. This can be a problem for students who need to develop academic English. Without a clear purpose, different students pay attention to different things. While learning about the human eye, some will focus on sight in general, others will focus on anatomy; still others will focus on vision loss. Without a clear purpose, students may not realize that the lesson was intended to introduce them to technical vocabulary such as sclera, retina, macula, vitreous body, cornea, iris. As Marzano Pickering, and Pollock (2002) noted, a specific objective, is one of the evidenced-based ways teachers can impact student achievement.

But English learners need more than that. Remember that English language learners are doing double work, learning content and language simultaneously (Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007). Accordingly, effective teachers of English learners establish a purpose that includes both content and language goals. For example, a biology teacher might be focused on plant and animal cells, comparing and contrasting their structure and function. The purpose, then, would alert students to both the content (cells) and the language function being used (comparing and contrasting).

The content purpose or objective comes from the standard. The language purpose is developed from analysis of the linguistic demands of the task and the current knowledge or needs of the students. In general, there are three categories to consider when developing a language purpose:

1. **Vocabulary.** Depending on the content and the needs of students in the class, teachers might attend to specialized or technical words. For example, specialized words--words that change meaning in different contexts--in life science include tissue, rod, cell, vessel, slide, and culture. The technical terms, those with fairly fixed content meanings,

include the terms about the eye discussed above.

2. **Language structure.** Understanding language structure is a necessary component of academic literacy. That's not to say that students need to do endless pages of grammar worksheets, but rather need to periodically focus on the ways in which words work together to convey ideas. Teachers can establish a purpose related to language structure when they focus on subject-verb agreement, verb tense, plurals, auxiliaries, articles, and so on. In addition, teachers can focus on signal words. The English language is filled with words that provide readers and listeners with advance notice. We regularly signal sequence (first, next, then, finally), problem/solutions (because, consequently, despite, dilemma is), cause/effect (because, begins with, consequently, effects of, for this reason, if...then), and comparisons (although, as well as, as opposed to, both, but, by contrast).
3. **Language function.** In addition to vocabulary and language structure, teachers can consider the function that language plays and focus attention accordingly. In a given class meeting, students may express opinions, sequence information, summarize what they have read, persuade, or ask questions. These, and a host of other functions, provide students with practice in using academic language. When the teacher establishes a purpose, students are alerted to the important learning of the day. When a language purpose is clear to students, they can practice and develop their competence. In other words, the purpose provides criteria for their interactions with the teacher and with each other. And the feedback they receive, from the teacher or peers, can be targeted toward the established purpose. Without a clear purpose, students may talk with one another but not develop their academic language skills.

## Modeling

In addition to a clear purpose, students need examples of the academic language required of the task. They also need to see how experts think about the content at hand. Modeling is a powerful way for students to directly experience the thinking of others. As Duffy (2003) pointed out, "The only way to model thinking is to talk about how to do it. That is, we provide a verbal description of the thinking one does or, more accurately, an approximation of the thinking involved" (p. 11). Accordingly, teachers who want their students' proficiency levels to increase provide daily modeling of their thinking and academic language while reading. The important point here is that for this purpose the teacher does the thinking and does NOT call on students to respond to

questions. There are at least four categories of reading behaviors that can be modeled while reading (Fisher, Frey, & Lapp, 2008):

1. **Comprehension.** As readers, we use a number of cognitive processes as we read such as activating background knowledge, having a purpose, predicting, questioning, summarizing, inferring, and so on. For example, while reading a text about the circulatory system, the biology teacher established a purpose (I need to know how the circulatory system contributes to homeostasis. After all, that is one of the primary functions of body systems.), asked herself a question (I understand how the system moves nutrients around but I wonder how it helps maintain body temperature), made a prediction (I think I'll learn more about the types of vessels), and summarized at the end.
2. **Word solving.** Students can be taught to solve unknown words as they read when teachers give them the tools to do so. Using context clues, morphology, and resources help students figure out unknown words in real time. While modeling, the biology teacher noted, "It says that the heart pumps deoxygenated blood to the lungs. That little prefix tells me a lot. De- means without so I know that the blood going to the lungs in the blood that doesn't have oxygen."
3. **Text structure.** When readers notice the internal structure of the text, they remember more of the information and have a way to organize their notes. Informational texts come in five main types (problem/solution, compare/contrast, cause/effect, sequence, and descriptive). Narrative texts use a story grammar (setting, plot, characters, dialogue, literary devices, conflict, etc.). During modeling, the teacher can notice the text structure, take notes using an appropriate graphic organizer, and make predictions about the flow of what might come next. For example, while reading from a text on the circulatory system, the biology teacher noticed that the author was using a compare/contrast structure and chose a Venn diagram to organize her notes.
4. **Text features.** There are a number of extra-textual features that are added to texts to help readers make sense of the information: Graphs, charts, diagrams, illustrations, captions, bold or italic words, headings and a host of other features contain information that may or may not be included in running text. Teachers can model their use of, and thinking about, these text features so that students begin to use them in their own reading. For example, while looking at an illustration of the human eye, the biology teacher noted the scale on the bottom of the illustration and said, "Since this is drawn to scale, I can get a sense of how big and small various parts of the eye really are. I see, for example, that the pupil is about 1/3 the size of the iris

in this illustration. But I know that the pupil changes size, so I want to look at other illustrations so I can confirm this information."

In addition to teaching students how to think about and understand texts, modeling provides students with examples of the academic language they are expected to use. When students experience daily examples of this academic language and academic thinking, they appropriate it into their own behaviors. In other words, modeling serves to invite students into academic discourse communities.

## Productive Group Work

Purpose and modeling are necessary, but not sufficient, to radically improve the achievement of English learners. As we noted previously, students need to talk in class to develop proficiency with the language. As such, there needs to be time devoted each day to productive group work. But we have to point out that simply providing students time to talk in class, in the absence of a clear purpose and a modeled example, is inadequate support for most students to be successful.

Once students understand the purpose and have an example, they need time to work collaboratively with their peers. During this productive group work, students use language and receive feedback. And this is where the breakthrough results come into play. When students are using academic language, they're both learning content and developing language proficiency.

Drawing on the cooperative learning research, we understand that the following five features should be considered in any productive group work task (Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 1991): positive interdependence, face-to-face interaction, individual and group accountability, interpersonal and small group skills, and group processing. Of course, there are a number of classroom instructional routines useful in facilitating student-to-student talk, so we'll only focus on a few here.

**Reciprocal Teaching.** Students, in groups of four, read a text and have a structured conversation about what they've read (Palincsar, 1987). During this conversation, students predict, clarify, summarize, and question. In the beginning these roles are clearly defined but over time students begin to have an accountable conversation with one another using the four components. In doing so, they share their thinking using academic language. Along the way, they are questioned by their peers and receive feedback about their thinking and their language use.

**Collaborative posters.** When asked to create a visual display of information, students can work in groups on a collaborative poster. The key to the collaborative poster is accountability. Each student in the group must use a different colored marker and must contribute, in writing, to the poster. As you can imagine, there is a great deal of discussion along the way as students decide what to write, where to write it, and how to say what they want to say. Again, the very task requires students to use academic language and to receive feedback about their work.

**Learning stations.** Learning stations can be used in any content area to focus groups of students on a specific task. Their key to making learning stations productive lies in the design. Each student has to be

accountable for a product and there needs to be interaction. For example, during a science lab, each student might write and share predictions or questions for additional investigations at specific points in the experiment. During a book club discussion, each member might pose a question to the group for discussion and the group might summarize the discussion in an email to the teacher.

## Raising Achievement Through Talk

When students talk in class they learn how to negotiate content and language. They are apprenticed into the academic discipline and become members of the linguistic community. When they don't talk in class, they are passive observers of others' learning. And as Dutro and Moran (2003) remind us students need to learn English, not just in English. Through purpose, modeling, and productive group work students can learn more, and faster, than we previously expected. But more than that, as Shirley Brice Heath (2008) reminds us, "In the end, academic language is not just academic. It is life giving when it extends through the length,

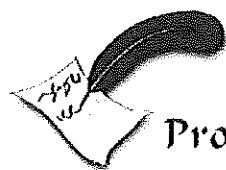
width, and depth of all that we can learn. Such language allows us to question, deliberate, negotiate, ponder, and imagine. Fluency and ease in this kind of talk helps us to find our way in the world and humanity to make the world a better place" (p. xiii). And after all, isn't that what we want for all of our students?

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# CATE Professional Writing Contest

## CATE Professional Writing Contest for Teachers & Educators

### 2009 Prompt

Schooling and teaching, by their very nature, are made up of, seemingly, endless choices. These days it seems as though professional curricular choices are being made for teachers and students at every level. At times, however, teacher choice is still possible and often clearcut, although the diverging roads may look quite different.

Pick a time when you faced a teaching road less traveled by and tell how your personal choice made all the difference for you and your students. Is there a literary work that has inspired you or your students to take the road less traveled?

Write a narrative, essay, or poem reflecting upon how the road less traveled made all the difference.

**Notice:** Deadline for entries August 31, 2009. This prompt will also be advertised in issues of the *California English* magazine.

First Place: \$250 & publication in *California English* and on CateWeb.org.

Second Place: \$150

Third Place: \$100

- Include writer's name, address, phone number, school and district.
- Articles are limited to 1500 words.
- The deadline for submission is August 31, 2009.
- Click on the Contests tab to read previous winners' essays at [cateweb.org](http://cateweb.org).

•E-mail manuscripts formatted in Microsoft Word to [okdelph@aol.com](mailto:okdelph@aol.com). Also, please mail back-up, hard copy to:

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