**Academic Conversation Develops Deep Comprehension for English Learners**

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**Part 1: Getting Started**

Academic conversation is a strategy that increases student engagement and comprehension in content topics. It is ideal for English learners (ELs) because it gives them a safe environment to practice academic English with a peer who has more mastery. In August and Shanahan’s (2006) compilation of research on literacy for English learners, they suggested that the National Reading Panel (2000) reading strategies are effective for ELs to the word, or surface, level, but for these students to reach the deeper level of text comprehension, they need oral processing. This implies that they need to be taught the skills of using oral language in academic contexts, which are far different than those needed for casual conversation.

**Purpose**

To set up a conversation session, students need to be given the purpose, as with any lesson. Conversation will help them better understand the content, allow them to ask deeper questions, and let them explore their own ideas in a structured yet open format. Most people like to be social. Academic conversations channel students’ natural talkativeness into academic purposes.

**Norms**

Teaching the norms could take up most of the first lesson, and they should be reviewed at each session. Students need to understand that academic conversation may not work the same way as conversations with their friends, and may not match the conversational norms of their family or culture. Norms can vary by the subject matter and the age of the students but typically they include

1) I will listen to my partner.

2) I will respond to my partner’s comments.

3) I will share my own ideas and ask questions.

4) I will not interrupt.

5) If I disagree, I will do so respectfully.

6) My partner and I will draw conclusions at the end.

I like to give live examples with another teacher or student partner of what each one looks like/sounds like. Many teachers have students make “look like/sound like” charts with visuals.

Have a signal to begin and end the conversations, and practice it with the students ahead of time.

**Set Up Partnerships**

Next, organize the partnerships. Teachers of course should be aware of interpersonal issues between students. Most of the time, proximity is the easiest method. Lower level English speakers should be paired with someone who can assist them, typically someone of their language background who has a higher level of English. When partners are located, teachers can check by asking for “air five” – students hold their hands in the air about an inch apart to avoid passing germs.

Students must have an academic topic (or topics) to talk about. There are multiple ways to deliver the information and they will vary with students’ age and abilities. Read alouds, individual or partner reading, demonstrations, videos, sound recordings, a field trip or assembly are common sources. In general, it’s best to divide up the input into manageable pieces. People like to process bits of information at a time. The teacher can determine the chunks, or if the students are skilled enough, they can chunk text for themselves. In a strategy called Say Something, the partners decide together how much they will read, whether it’s a paragraph, a half page, or whatever. Then each person must “say something” – a comment, a question, a connection. As the conversation skills are introduces, the “say something” part can be more specific to a skill.

**Part 2: Using the skills**

**Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for Speaking and Listening**

Once the content has been delivered, students need skills on how to actually hold the conversation. According the Common Core State Standards for Listening and Speaking, students should

1. Participate in collaborative conversations with diverse partners about *(grade level) topics and* *texts* with peers and adults in small and larger groups.
   1. Follow agreed-upon rules for discussions (e.g., listening to others and taking turns speaking about the topics and texts under discussion).
   2. Continue a conversation through multiple exchanges.
2. Confirm understanding of a text read aloud or information presented orally or through other media by asking and answering questions about key details and requesting clarification if something is not understood.
3. Ask and answer questions in order to seek help, get information, or clarify something that is not understood.

Kudos to the teachers whose students are already able to do everything on that list. We are all headed in that direction, and, as with the other challenges presented by the CCSS, some practice is called for. By the way in case you were wondering, those are the Kindergarten standards listed above.

There are several sources available for conversation skills and structures. Jeff Zwiers and Marie Crawford (2011) present five key skills in their book *Academic Conversations: Classroom Talk that Fosters Critical Thinking and Content Understandings.* Maria Nichols (2006) and Dixie Lee Spiegel (2005) also offer plans for starting and developing classroom talk.

Working from the Standards above, we have already discussed grade level topics and texts (the input), and the agreed-upon rules (the norms). Now we need to keep students engaged through multiple exchanges. To that end, Zwiers and Crawford (2011) present the skill of Elaborate & Clarify. As with all the skills in their book, it comes with sentence frames and teaching strategies. The students’ task is to keep their partner talking until he/she has fully explained his/her thinking, more than a one-time, one-phrase response. Some frames for this skill are “Can you tell me more about..?”, “What do you mean by …?”, and “Can you be more specific?”

**Questioning**

Questioning taxonomies are also very helpful at this stage to help students probe their partners for more information. There are several that can lead to ask higher-order questions. Easiest to use is the leaf/root taxonomy, also known as skinny/fat. Leaf, or skinny, questions, are knowledge level questions. The answers are easily available in the text. Root, or fat, questions, are “below the surface” and require more thinking to answer. Costa’s Three Levels of Questions is also a favorite with its examples of Gathering, Processing and Applying information. The granddaddy of all taxonomies is Bloom’s of course, and it’s still useful, especially now in that it has been renamed with verbs (remembering, understanding, etc) instead of nouns (knowledge, comprehension, etc.) Regardless of the taxonomy you use, it’s usually counterproductive, at least at first, to set requirements on the type of question asked. We want kids to become fluent and comfortable with asking and answering each others’ questions, so that they continue to deepen the practice. Key word: practice. In my experience, the more they practice, the deeper their questions become.

**Role of the Facilitator**

The facilitator’s role is to provide the content input, teach the skills, organize the partners, and then, sit down and be quiet. Once the conversations have begun, the teacher must stay out of them, except to wander around and listen to the quality of the interactions. At a certain point, you will feel the conversations begin to die out, or change to casual conversation. Give your signal to end the session. Ask if anyone would like to share the ideas they were discussing. If there is reluctance, ask who will share what their partner was saying. Also ask who heard the particular discussion or question frames used. This is one of the ways to assess the conversation quality.

Deliver the next chunk of input and repeat.

**Deepening the Practice**

Practicing norms, smoothing locating a partner, and elaborating on text is just the beginning. Once students have practiced these skills for several trials, it’s time to add more. The next one for which Zwiers and Crawford (2011) list teaching ideas and language frames is Support Ideas with Examples. Students must be able to locate information in the text to support any assertion they might make.

Supporting Ideas is followed by Paraphrasing. This sounds easy on the surface. All one partner does is repeat back what he/she heard. As it turns out, this skill requires (and allows practice in) very careful listening skills. It will take at least a class session paraphrasing common topics to get skilled at this. The Telephone Game is a good way to show the importance of careful listening and repeating.

After Paraphrasing comes Synthesizing, or summarizing. The partners must come to a conclusion, or a recap of what they have been talking about. What were the main points? Main questions? Were there any disagreements and were they settled? Did each partner say something that stimulated thought in the other?

Last in the Zwiers/Crawford list of skills is Challenge or Build on a Partner’s Opinion. They place this one in the middle of the sequence, if there is a sequence. In my experience, this is very difficult for English learners to do. It also includes the use of all the previous skills. I like to teach this one after my group has reasonable fluency with the other four. It is very important to introduce this skill with a topic that is well known and high interest for the students.

**Part 3: Discussing Specific Procedures**

The Zwiers/Crawford strategies are useful for discussing narrative and expository text and lend themselves well to higher order questioning between teacher-student and student-student. Whole Brain Teaching (WBT) by Chris Biffle is another system that works well for literacy, and is particularly well suited for teaching and learning procedures used in math or science. WBT also works very well in combination with academic conversations as a signal system.

*Class/yes* is a great attention getter and action-stopper. The teacher says “Class” is some style of voice, varying each time. It could be fast, slow, in falsetto, in bear voice, anything the teacher chooses. Student respond with “Yes” in the same style of voice. As long as there is variety, students of all ages seem to continue to respond to this cue.

To begin the action, the cue is *Teach/OK.* After directions have been given (and content input, and norms reviewed), the teacher makes some physical gesture says “Teach!” Students repeat the gesture and say “OK!” The teacher might clap, snap, swing arms, do a “Travolta” with arms, or anything at all. The students do the same. As with *Class/yes*, the key is variety and enthusiasm. A bland “teach” will get a bland “ok” every time.

*Scoreboard*  is a procedure used by WBT teachers to track students’ success with *Class/yes* and Teach/OK. WBT also has its own set of *five classroom rules*.

*Mirror* is the strategy that lends itself best to teaching/learning sequential procedures, and still involves students with oral language processing. Students match a specific movement to words connected to content. To begin, the teacher says “Mirror” and holds up his/her hands in the classic mime pose of hands in front. The students copy this move. The teacher move hands around or makes other movements, and the students copy. The next stage is “Mirror with Words.” The teacher adds words to the movements that help students remember steps in a process. I have mostly used this in math procedures. Students of all ages like combining the movements, even high school if presented with verve! It aids memory and movement feels good.

All the WBT strategies are based on keeping a high level of energy in the classroom. The pace is fast, and engagement is typically high. All (or most) students are turning and talking about content at once, usually with a connected movement. It takes some practice, and it might not be your “style” at first, but teachers that use it are very happy with it.

The [Whole Brain Teaching website](http://wholebrainteaching.com/) has videos with many examples of these skills.

**Part 4: Assessment**

Assessment of the conversation is separate from assessment of the content. Zwiers and Crawford suggest recording and transcribing student conversations and cataloging the quality and quantity of specific uses of language. That will give detailed information of the students’ use of question forms, verb tense, syntax and more.

Alternatively or additionally, a teacher can circulate around the room during the conversation period and record instances of sentence and question frames heard on a tally form. Each conversation period can be compared to others for improvement in the use of frames such as “Can you elaborate on that?”, or “I think what you are saying is….”

The teacher can assign a student or pair of students to tally the use of frames, or the number of students responding to the WBT strategies. These “scouts” can be listening to the whole room, be assigned to one pair, or a limited number of pairs. The scout job would rotate often.

**Try It**

There are quite a few details to organizing conversations between students who might not be used to discussing content at deep levels. However, it’s better to start with a few steps at first than to never start at all. The rewards for these methods are great. Have fun talking!

**References**

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