An Urgent Challenge

Enhancing Academic Speaking Opportunities for English Learners

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Introduction

Many challenges face public school educators, including the increasing number of English learners in their classrooms. Currently in California about 33% of elementary-aged students are English learners, and teachers are charged with two goals: (1) ensure that English learners acquire full proficiency in English as rapidly and effectively as possible and attain parity with native speakers of English, and (2) ensure that English learners, within a reasonable period of time, achieve the same rigorous grade-level academic standards that are expected of all students (CalEdFacts, 2014).

This is a demanding task for English learners as they need to master the English language while at the same time seeking to master academic content. If teachers are to effectively support English learners in becoming fully proficient in English so they can achieve the newly-adopted rigorous Common Core State Standards— which includes increasingly difficult levels of academic inquiry—they need to gain a fuller understanding of the issues and best practices. Simply put, enhancing support for English learners is an urgent challenge for educators.

The Importance of Academic Language

Students' ability to read, write, speak, and listen in English is essential to achievement in school, work, and society. Specifically, researchers suggest that students engage in academic language defined by Nagy and Townsend (2012) as "the specialized language, both oral and written, of academic settings that facilitates communication and thinking about disciplinary content" (p. 92).

A three-tier model of vocabulary words (Beck, McKeown, and Kucan, 2002) assists with this process. Tier 1 consists of common words that students use in everyday life. Tier 2 consists of academic vocabulary, which students need to succeed across disciplines. Words such as analyze, evaluate, summarize, and support are examples of essential academic vocabulary. Tier 3 vocabulary are content-specific words needed to understand various topics. During instruction educators need to support and guide all students to read, write, speak, and listen using Tier 2 (academic vocabulary) and Tier 3 (content-specific vocabulary) to deepen their knowledge level.

An emerging body of research points to the importance of oral engagement in classrooms to enhance learning (August & Shanadan, 2006; Brooks & Thurston, 2010; Gibbons, 2002; Soto-Hinman, 2011; Zhang & Stahl, 2011). Many researchers point to the work of Vygotsky who claimed that dialogue enhances student's thinking and learning (1978).

The National Literacy Panel on Language-Minority Children and Youth (August & Shanahan, 2006) concurs with the notion that oral proficiency in English is critical to student achievement, yet the panel suggests that this area is often overlooked in instruction. It is critical to understand this need when working with English learners who may speak fairly confidently in informal settings, yet lack the oral language proficiency to effectively engage in academic settings (Dutro, Levy, & Moore, 2011).

In contrast to native speakers of English, English learners have limited opportunities to engage in meaningful classroom conversations (Soto-Hinman, 2011; Zwiers & Crawford, 2009). Numerous patterns may lead to English learners engaging less frequently in academic discourse in classrooms: lack of high expectations for English learners to engage, not enough time devoted to oral language, limited academic and content vocabulary, lacking background knowledge in a curriculum that is Eurocentric in nature, and high stress level experienced when needing to speak in whole group settings (Aleman, Delfino, Johnson, & Perez, 2014; Miller & Endo, 2004; Zwiers & Crawford, 2009).

When opportunities arise to speak in class, English learners tend to remain passive or only utter a brief, sometimes one-word, response. Enhancing opportunities for English learners to orally engage at school becomes an urgent challenge and requires that teachers offer well-structured support (Soto-Hinman, 2011).

Our Project

Our project seeks to gain a closer look at the contrast of oral language opportunities experienced by English learners and native speakers of English in order to draw implications for practicing teachers. Specifically, we explored how often and when English learners and native speakers of English engage in academic speaking in K-8 classrooms. The conceptual framework for this study draws from research on language acquisition, academic language, oral language competence, and learning environments.

The EL Student Shadowing Observation Tool (Soto-Hinman, 2011), an instrument that provides data about English learners' instructional classroom experience, was modified and simplified to systematically collect data around academic oral language. This tool allows the researcher to monitor academic speaking opportunities, reflect on the data, and then consider ways to increase academic speaking opportunities.

Using the modified EL Student Shadowing Observation Tool, we collected data

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in 23 classrooms representing eight elementary schools in three different school districts. We focused each 30-to-40 minute observation on two English learners and one native English speaker and coded each student every five minutes for speaking with a partner, in a small group, and in the whole class setting. A total of 70 students were observed and coded.

Data Analysis

Quantitative analysis of the data revealed that there is a disparity between when and how often English learners and native English speakers engage in academic discourse. When speaking with a partner, English learners spoke in equal amounts with native English speakers. In small group settings, English learners spoke about 27%, while native English speakers spoke 73%. During whole group instruction, academic speaking dramatically decreased for English learners to 11%, but increased for native English speakers to 89% (see Figure 1).

Implications for Teachers

Equipped with a growing awareness of the need to provide extensive and meaningful linguistic opportunities to increase English learners' oral use of academic language, we returned to the literature to examine best practices (Aleman, Johnson, & Perez, 2014; Bondie, Gaughran, & Zusho, 2014; Brooks & Thurston, 2014; Checkley, K, 2014; Short & Echevarria, 2014; Sibold, 2011; Soto-Hinman, 2011; Zhang & Stahl, 2011; and Zwiers & Crawford, 2009).

Four principles emerged as central practices that teachers can use to increase oral academic language used by English learners. Though these strategies are good for all learners, they are essential practices to support English learners.

1. Hold high expectations of English learners to achieve the same rigorous standards expected of all students

At the beginning of the school year, teachers should establish norms about talking, explaining that academic talk will be an integral aspect of each school day. Essential here is the idea that all students are required, not just encouraged, to engage in academic discourse. When teachers state the learning goals of a specific lesson, they should also explicitly state language objectives as this helps students know what is expected of them.

2. Emphasize and teach academic and content vocabulary

Teachers must frontload the essential vocabulary needed for all students to engaged in academic discussions. Rather than overwhelm the students, focus on 3-to-5 key vocabulary words to aid discussion and deepen comprehension. To support English learners teachers can create word walls, word banks, visuals, realia, and graphic organizers that English learners can reference when asked to speak.

To aid comprehension for English learners, teachers should associate and connect new vocabulary to student's cultural background and experiences. Finally, teachers need to provide 6-to-10 opportunities for students to use the new vocabulary throughout the lesson or unit.

3. Provide structures/routines to scaffold conversation

In order for students to engage in productive conversations, teachers need to model and explicitly teach how to engage in academic discourse. To accomplish this, teachers can offer sentence frames that include both academic and/or content vocabulary. For example, teachers can suggest using a frame such as, "After reading and analyzing the chapter, my summary is..." By offering a sentence frame, students are empowered to begin the conversation. Students can practice using the frame by talking with a partner to finish the sentence.

Another way to scaffold conversation is to conduct a fishbowl conversation in which a few select students engage in an academic discourse using both academic and content vocabulary. The rest of the class observes the conversation, highlights a few things they observed, and then engages in their own small group discussion of the topic.

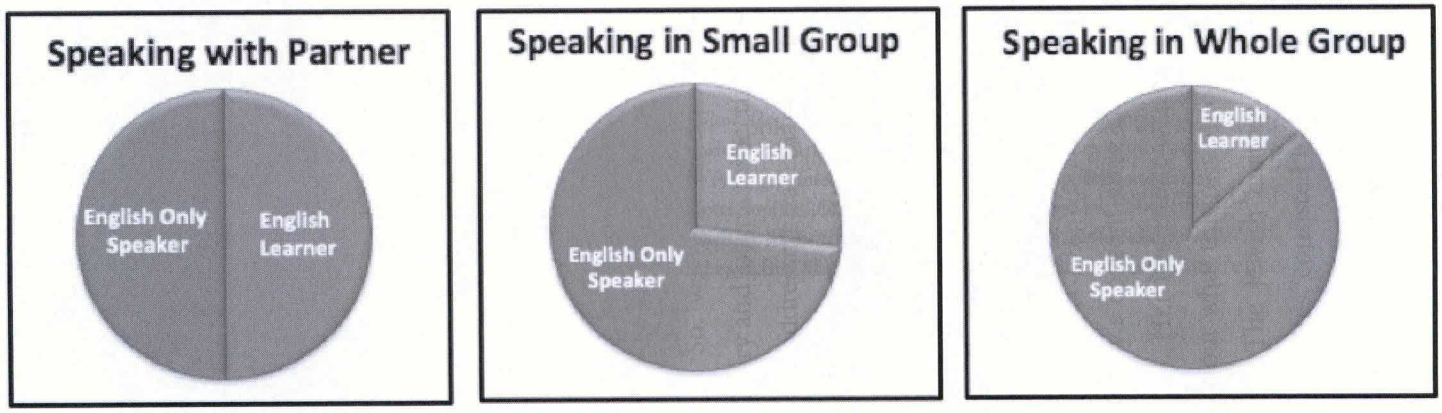
Teachers can also use a reciprocal teaching strategy in which students, in groups of four, are each given a role (Summarizer, Questioner, Clarifier, Predictor). After listening to the teacher or after reading a passage, small groups can discuss the topic by performing their specific role.

4. Increase opportunities to talk while lowering anxiety

Speaking in front of a whole class increases the level of anxiety for many students, especially English learners. Therefore, teachers should provide numerous opportunities for students to talk with partners. During whole group instruction, rather than ask a question of the whole class, teachers can ask students to "turn and talk" with a partner to discuss a concept.

Moreover, teachers can provide more small group experiences for English learners to build oral proficiency. By providing opportunities to talk with a partner and in small groups, English learners will gain

FIGURE 1
Results



confidence in speaking. When teachers listen in to partner or small group conversation, they can identify when an English learner has the confidence and competence to share in a whole group setting. The teacher can privately offer support to the English learner and invite them to share their idea with the whole class.

Conclusion

In summary, it is possible for teachers to help English learners accomplish the worthy goals of acquiring full proficiency in English as rapidly as possible and ensuring that they achieve the same rigorous standards expected of all students. By providing structured opportunities to practice oral language skills (both academic and content vocabulary) with partners and in small groups, teachers help increase English learner's oral use of academic language, which in turn deepens learning. These best practices equip educators with the necessary tools to meet the urgent challenge of enhancing academic speaking opportunities for English learners.

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