Accelerate English Learner Success

Students Participate in Collaborative Discussions

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September 2024

WestEd.org

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This brief is part of a series that highlights key features of high-quality instruction for English learners and the role formative assessment plays in their success. Formative assessment supports teachers to enact these features by providing them with tools to gauge and react to student learning in real-time. These practices also support students to assess their own learning which enhances their sense of agency. Overall, the series illustrates how instructional methods and assessment practices work together to improve English learner outcomes. This brief addresses the following two features:

- quality instruction for English learners supports them to engage in structured opportunities for collaborative discussion in which they develop ideas and make meaning with peers, and

- quality instruction for English learners nurtures a learning culture in which all students (ELs and non-ELs) participate together to support each other's learning.

Quality instruction for English learners supports them to engage in structured opportunities for collaborative discussion in which they develop ideas and make meaning with peers.

Introduction

Social interaction is an important facet of learning that is required to develop language, content knowledge, and analytic practices. Sociocultural learning theory proposes that knowledge develops through engagement in social interaction with others.[1] This theory builds on cognitive research, which highlights the importance of individual meaning-making, prior knowledge, and metacognition to advance learning.[2] English learners benefit from opportunities to interact meaningfully with their English learners and monolingual English-speaking peers to collaboratively build knowledge about intellectually rich content. In integrated settings, students with emerging levels of English proficiency may say less at first in discussions. While their participation may be initially peripheral, it is helpful when it is recognized as legitimate by their peers.[3] As they continue to be supported to participate in structured interactions, they will improve their listening skills and engage with the complex language use of others, ultimately

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moving from imitating to approximating and finally to appropriating the language of their peers into their linguistic repertoire.

Two types of discourse—exploratory and explanatory—comprise these interactional opportunities.[4] Exploratory discourse supports students to speculate, imagine, and conjecture about what might be and to jointly construct new understandings. Explanatory discourse supports students to share what they know in a given field or situation, develop arguments, construct explanations, and provide descriptive accounts.

These two types of discourse have different language requirements regarding how vocabulary and sentence structure come together to create meaning. For English learners, teachers can call attention to and provide scaffolding for how to achieve the purposes of exploratory or explanatory discourse through disciplinary language, e.g., by role-playing conversational moves.

> **Discourse** provides an important arena for students to extend their thinking, to make it visible and audible, and to participate in a shared learning experience. A key attribute of discourse is a shift in focus from individual to collective meaning making.

When students engage in conversations centered on their learning, they deepen their content knowledge and language skills by learning with and from peers. Through dialogue, learners can share ideas, challenge each other's thinking, and co-construct a shared understanding. This process is crucial for deep learning while providing a disciplinary context for language use. Additionally, these conversations create ample evidence of students' learning status that peers and teachers can use to provide meaningful feedback.

To enact this feature of quality instruction for English learners, teachers

- design regular opportunities for students to engage in academic discourse based on meaningful prompts and tasks accompanied by well-structured routines and appropriate linguistic support, and
- utilize these discourse opportunities as a major source of evidence of learning.

Formative Assessment Support for This Feature: Peer Feedback

Students' engagement in discourse in formative assessment-centered classrooms relies on deeply understanding the lesson learning goal. This supports collective meaning-making as students explore new understandings with the goal in mind. They press on the edge of what they know, as when collective understanding slowly evolves through students building on other's ideas. Students use evidence from discourse to reflect on their own and their peers' learning status and progress toward the goal.[5] It is the case that students' questions or prompts may, at times, elicit silence in the moment rather than talk as students ponder, wonder, and reflect.

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Bailey and Heritage discuss the active steps of collective learning in terms of regulation processes.[6] These include shared regulation and co-regulation. Shared and co-regulation processes rely on interaction with peers to move learning forward.

In highly interactive learning environments where students engage in collaboration and joint construction of knowledge, social modes of regulation emerge in which group members regulate their collective learning (**shared regulation**) and students support the regulation of others (**co-regulation**).

Shared regulation relates to students collaborating to meet learning goals through projects, discussions, and other forms of engagement. Note that this is not student engagement for its own sake but intentional student interaction focused on achieving learning goals.[7] An important aspect of shared regulation is collaborative discussion or extended discourse. Through discourse, students create a shared space where their individual meaning-making processes connect to one another, enabling them to learn with and from one another. Students become attuned to the rhythm of turn-taking, the act of listening to their peers, and their responsibility to both contribute to the discussion and to leave space for others to do so.

Co-regulation is about working with peers, but instead of working in a collaborative structure, it leverages peers to share their knowledge, analyze their peers' words and work, and give feedback to advance one another's learning. In classrooms that prioritize co-regulated learning, greater collective efficacy often arises among students.

Collective efficacy is the belief that the group (students and the teacher together) can more positively impact their learning if they work as a team.

Co-regulation is supported by the formative assessment practice of peer feedback, which involves both individual reflection and collaborative discussions. Peer feedback is the practice of students analyzing evidence of learning (what another student says, does, makes, or writes) in relation to an interpretive framework, i.e., the success criteria, and then giving actionable feedback. Another way to put it is that students locate where other students are in their learning and then give clues, hints, suggestions, or wonderings related to where they can go next.

When students give and receive feedback, they engage in productive, reciprocal discussions about their feedback, for example, asking clarifying questions, discussing how the feedback relates to their own work, and sharing suggestions for improvement and next steps. They also justify the feedback they provide to peers (e.g., reflecting on specific evidence, sharing how it relates to learning goals and success criteria, and explaining how their feedback will strengthen their peers' work). Students who take in feedback reflect on what they want to implement and then make improvements. At times, they check back in with the person who gave them the feedback to confirm they are on the right track. In classrooms where peer feedback is a

common practice, giving spontaneous feedback and support becomes a natural part of the learning process.

Teachers support the peer feedback process by designing structured occasions for students to learn how to give and receive feedback. They provide opportunities for students to practice and reflect using protocols and then engage in the practice as a regular part of daily learning. Teachers also provide clear communication about why students engage in peer feedback and its benefits for learning.

The lesson example below demonstrates how discourse and peer feedback can fit into the overall flow of a lesson. It also shows various ways teachers can scaffold the concepts, processes, and language associated with the lesson learning goal and success criteria.

> **Vignette: Early Elementary Lesson Example[8]**
>
> This lesson takes place more than halfway through the academic year in a 2nd grade classroom, with a majority of students designated as English learners. The teacher begins the lesson by having students review what they have already learned about reading fluency. This gives students the opportunity to identify a specific area of fluency that they would like to get feedback on. Students have recently learned how to read out loud "like the character" by paying attention to clues in the text that will indicate how a character might be feeling, and many students select this as the area of focus for their peer feedback. The text passage students read aloud to a peer is tricky, and many students work together to figure out how to read it fluently during peer feedback.
>
> This lesson starts with the teacher introducing the learning goal, which is written on chart paper with the success criteria and posted at the front of the classroom. The teacher and students all read it out loud together.
>
> *Learning goal*: I am learning how to read with fluency.
>
> The teacher then asks all the students to turn and talk about their idea of what this means with a shoulder buddy. When they're done talking, she has the pairs share out. They each share their understanding of an aspect of the criteria. The success criteria are fairly detailed because students have been learning about different aspects of fluency over the past several months, and they have added criteria as they learn more about specific characteristics of fluency. Students will use these throughout the lesson as the basis for their peer feedback and self-assessment.
>
> *Success criteria*: I am fluent when I read.

- *smoothly*
  - read words accurately
  - read words automatically
  - read words in phrases
- *with meaning*
  - understand words as I read them
  - pay attention to punctuation
- *with expression*
  - with feeling
  - sound natural
  - show how the character is feeling
  - follow punctuation marks
- *at just the right speed*
  - read quickly and easily BUT not too fast or too slow

During the paired discussion, the students share what they know about fluency. One student offers, "You would be reading with expression by reading with feeling."

Her partner says, "When the person, the character, is speaking, you have to read with expression when they're speaking."

The previous student asks, "You mean you would have to sound like a character when they're speaking?"

"Yes!" she says.

Back in a whole group, the teacher goes through the success criteria in more detail with the students. The pattern of this interaction is characterized by the teacher saying the first part of the criteria and the whole class chiming in together to complete the idea. The teacher also uses this time to correct any misconceptions students may have and reinforce key vocabulary. This step is critical for students to internalize the success criteria that they will use when providing peer feedback and self-assessing during their independent activity.

The teacher then introduces a role-playing activity with students. She says, "Today, you're going to help me by giving me some feedback on my reading fluency. You're going to be thinking about if there is an area where you see me doing a great job with reading fluently, and you want to give me a star on that? You're also going to be listening to me read and help me make some improvements with my reading fluency." The teacher shows a familiar reading passage on the overhead projector and then reads it out loud to students. She asks them to think about what will be her star—something she did well, and what will be her step—an area for improvement. After she finishes, the teacher asks students to think about what feedback they'd give her and write it down instead of telling her right away. Once students have written down their ideas on a template which includes spaces for the students' names, a star, and a step (which is a structure the teacher provides for peer feedback), the teacher calls on individual students to share what they wrote, selecting students based on whose names appear on the popsicle sticks she pulls out of a cup. Note that all students will be able to share an idea since they've been given thinking and writing time to formulate their thoughts and the words needed to express them before being asked to share publicly.

When students comment, the teacher asks them further questions to get elaboration and clarity. Sometimes, she paraphrases using more precise vocabulary. She also asks other

students if they have anything to add. This process not only helps the student in the exchange with the teacher, but all the students listening to it. It models the type of discussions students will be having when they move on to give feedback to their peers. This explicit instruction is also critical for this group of English learners who are gaining the needed language to undertake the task.

In the next activity, students silently read a text excerpt from a decodable book they are reading as a class. The teacher asks them to each set an individual goal for reading fluently based on the success criteria. She says they may already know what they want to work on based on past feedback, including past next steps they were given. She prompts, "You want to think about what your goal will be for today. This is the goal you want to get feedback on." Students fill out a handout with their personal goals.

For the remainder of the lesson, students engage in giving and receiving peer feedback about their reading and determining next steps. In one example, Partner A says, "I want to read words accurately and at just the right speed." After he reads the text excerpt, Partner B gives feedback, pointing to the text. "Right here, when you were reading new rules,' you said 'rule' instead of 'rules,' and here, when you said 'and soon,' your voice wasn't high like it should be [because of an exclamation point]. But on the rest of the words, you were reading pretty good."

As students are giving one another feedback, the teacher checks in with each student group. As she listens to student pairs, she is paying attention to the fluency of the student who is reading, and she is also listening and writing notes about the qualities of feedback provided by the partner. Given the significant percentage of English learners in the classroom, she pays particular attention to how students are using language while they are giving feedback. She asks questions meant to help them as they listen for indicators of fluency, frequently referring students back to the success criteria to deepen their understanding of the qualities of fluent readers.

When they finish providing peer feedback, students each set a new personal learning goal for themselves using a rubric with faces arranged from happy to sad. The teacher concludes by telling students they did a great job with their goal setting, giving specific feedback, and setting next steps for reading fluency.

Structured opportunities for English learners to engage in discussion about the success criteria are integral for activating what they know about reading fluency and then for participating in peer feedback in a meaningful way. The teacher supports this effort by continuously listening to partner conversations and asking questions to deepen their understanding.

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Quality instruction for English learners nurtures a learning culture in which all students (ELs and non-ELs) participate together to support each other's learning.

Introduction

If English learners are to be encouraged to engage in learning beyond their current knowledge and abilities, they need a steady and supportive environment in which to try new things. This includes creating and nurturing a classroom culture in which all students feel confident that their teacher and peers will be supportive of their attempts to try out new ideas and language.

In this type of learning environment, English learners trust that their teacher and fellow learners value their mistakes and regard them as sources of new learning. Learners listen to what others say with interest, are comfortable asking for support, and invest time and effort to understand one another[9]. Students are supported to take risks with their language and sharing of ideas. They have access to classroom affordances such as posted anchor charts, task directions, and language supports (e.g., formulaic expressions and images).

To enact this feature of quality instruction for English learners, teachers

- demonstrate and cultivate trust and respect for all learners,
- provide models to support students to take risks and support one another,
- create a physical environment that enables learners to explore and expand upon their current learning, and
- establish and practice norms for listening and responding to each other's ideas.

Formative Assessment Support for This Feature: Establishing Acceptance, Accountability, and Appreciation

A supportive learning environment and culture of learning are foundational for the successful implementation of formative assessment. To conduct formative assessment effectively, students need to feel they can openly share where they are in their learning, including their partial or emergent ideas, show willingness to listen to one another, and accept and value peer feedback. This type of learning culture also creates an environment in which student assets are invited, acknowledged, and valued. It includes three primary components:

- acceptance and promotion of trust and academic risk-taking,
- accountability for one's own and other's learning, and
- appreciation of each person's unique gifts and perspectives.[10]

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Acceptance and promotion of trust and academic risk-taking: In the educational context, academic risk-taking refers to the challenge of letting oneself be seen as an emergent learner with an openness to trying new practices, particularly when there are uncertain outcomes. In a learning culture, teachers and students take the time to understand the status of their own learning. They accept where they are as a natural stage in the progression of learning. When trust is established, they share this learning status with others to learn more effectively with and from peers.

Accountability for one's own and others' learning: Accountability in the context of formative assessment for English learners can be recast as students' personal and collective commitment to learning, academic success, and increased agency. This includes a commitment to one's own ongoing learning (through study, observation, feedback, and reflection) and a commitment to supporting the learning of others. By using interpretive frameworks such as success criteria, rubrics, scales, continua, and other learning progressions, each individual can be accountable for regularly making sense of their learning status, supporting peers to do the same, and taking action to reach learning goals.

Appreciation of each person's unique gifts and perspectives: Each learning community member has something unique to offer others in support of their collective learning endeavor. With this frame, students can more easily turn to one another for input and feedback on their learning. Regardless of one's learning status, each person can add to the overall learning of the group. For example, by using learning goals and success criteria, each person in a learning community has the knowledge they need to give descriptive, actionable feedback to others about the work they produce. This levels the playing field between peers. Every member of the classroom community can assume a leadership role by giving meaningful feedback, even if they are at an emergent learning stage in language or content.

In the following example, students are able to engage in a rich and meaningful discussion based on a trusting learning culture that elicits usable evidence of learning.

Vignette: Early Elementary Lesson Example[11]

In this classroom, 1st and 2nd grade students gather on the rug in the front of the classroom to start thinking about math. Students have been working on "decomposing" and "composing" numbers during the week, breaking larger numbers apart into their component parts - groups of 1s, 10s, and 100s - and then reassembling them. At the beginning of this lesson, the teacher sits in a chair next to the whiteboard and tells students they're going to do an activity "just to warm up our brains to start thinking numbers, to start thinking patterns." The warm-up activity the teacher asks them to do is to brainstorm possible patterns that can be made from a necklace of colored beads. She shows her students a picture of the necklace with four red beads and four yellow beads and asks them to imagine the beads rearranged in different designs so that each necklace they think of has a different pattern made up of the same eight beads. She asks, "How could you organize those beads?"

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Various students share their ideas with the whole class while the teacher writes down mathematical representations of their ideas on the whiteboard. She also asks clarifying questions to students as they try to make their thinking clear. Many of the students in this class are English learners and need scaffolding to support their understanding of mathematical language and to express their mathematical thinking. Some of the strategies the teacher uses in her exchanges with students during this warm-up activity include

- paraphrasing and extending student speech, often with more precise vocabulary,
- restating and writing student ideas on the whiteboard for the whole class to reference,
- providing formulaic expressions that support students to stretch their language (e.g., *One pattern could be…*),
- questioning to get students to elaborate their explanations, and
- using key vocabulary (e.g., *even, equal, whole numbers, decimals,* and *grouping)* within the context of the discussion so that students are able to learn the words and related concepts simultaneously.

During this warm-up, students are encouraged to express their thinking as they seek to make meaning of the mathematical concepts. Here is a series of exchanges that occurred between students and the teacher during the warm-up.

> **Sandra**: Well, that's two, and then well, you have to add them up all together because eight is an equal number, and so you can do, but you can do this with a lot of numbers, but one thing it has is where maybe you have two groups, and you can't do that with a seven because all the groups want the same amount. So, you can't give three to one group and four to the other group, cuz that wouldn't be fair. So, you add, so it would have to add up to be four and four.

> **Teacher**: So, Sandra is saying that the number eight is an equal number. And that it's an equal number, whereas seven is not. Hmmm. Tomas, what do you think?

> **Tomas**: Of course, because, say, you would count by twos like that because, you see, it's an equal number because four plus four is eight.

> **Teacher**: Okay.

> **Tomas**: And just like Sandra said, seven is made with three and four.

> **Teacher**: So, you're saying, Tomas, that you agree that eight is an equal number.

> **Tomas**: Yes.

> **Teacher**: Equal in the sense that if we take that number and partition it into two groups we can end up with four and four?

Tomas: Yes. And these are the equal numbers, like if I counted by twos. Two, four, six, eight. Those are all equal numbers.

Teacher: All equal numbers? Does everyone agree?

Luca: I'm in disagreement.

Teacher: What is your disagreement?

Luca: I think every number is an even number because if you take a five, for example, you can split it into two and two, but then you take the extra one, and you split it in half.

By providing this opportunity for multiple viewpoints and disagreement, a student introduced the concept of fractions into the conversation, which many students may never have considered before in terms of equal shares and partitioning.

As the conversation continues, the concept of whole numbers is introduced by a student and picked up by the teacher: "Now I heard someone use the word "whole." Was that you, Kaya?" The teacher highlights the word "whole" on the whiteboard and asks how this relates to the idea of "equal." After some more discussion, she asks, "What's even?" Students articulate their evolving understanding, even after one student identifies the "right" answer. Together, the class develops a shared understanding of the concept to support the distinction between the ideas of "even" and "equal." Through this conversation, students are able to develop a definition of even numbers as "a number made up of two of the same whole numbers."

In this discussion, the teacher also uses the word "partition" and paraphrases it as "break apart" before students are introduced to it in the learning goal. Later, when she asks students to share what they think it means in the context of the learning goal, all students have already been exposed to it. At the end of the warm-up, the teacher remarks, "I have to say, that was a great discussion." She describes what she learned about students' number sense, whole numbers, and how they represented the number 1.

The teacher and students in this classroom have established and practiced norms for engaging in collaborative discussions and have created a learning culture in which all students feel free to openly share their ideas and are interested in the ideas of others. In this lesson, the teacher also intentionally designed instruction that moves from an accessible entry point– students discussing possible patterns with beads on a necklace– to discussing more complex ideas about even numbers that can be partitioned into two of the same whole number. She also provides support to enable all of her students to participate, regardless of mathematical or language proficiency. This includes planned scaffolding, such as paraphrasing, questioning, and the provision of formulaic expressions that support students to share their ideas. These supportive elements come together to ensure a safe learning environment where all members of the learning community are able to collectively advance their content and language development.

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- Students Take Ownership Over Their Learning With Formative Assessment

Endnotes

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[2] For example, see Bransford, J. D., & Johnson, M. K. (1972). Contextual prerequisites for understanding: Some investigations of comprehension and recall. *Journal of Verbal Learning and Verbal Behavior, 11*, 717–726; Dochy, F., Segers, M., & Buehl, M. M. (1999). The relation between assessment practices and outcomes of studies: The case of research on prior knowledge. *Review of Educational Research, 69*(2), 145–186.; Piaget, J., & Inhelder, B. (1972). *The psychology of the child*. Basic Books.

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[6] Bailey, A., & Heritage, M. (2018). *Self-regulation in learning: The role of language and formative assessment*. Harvard University Press.

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[8] This example is based on a lesson taught by Jennifer Daniels at Esperanza Elementary School, Sunnyside Unified School District, in Tucson, AZ.

[9] Walqui, a. and vanLier, L. (2010). *Scaffolding the Academic Success of Adolescent English Language Learners*. WestEd.

[10] Heritage, M. (2021). Formative Assessment: Making It Happen in the Classroom. Corwin.

[11] This example is based on a lesson taught by Gabriela Cardenas at the UCLA Lab School.