



# Let Social Interaction *Flourish*

*When new English language learners  
and experienced English speakers talk  
and collaborate, everyone benefits.*

**Anny Fritzen Case**

**T**he tension was palpable as I surveyed the group of high school students participating in the after-school program, their desks haphazardly arranged into a horseshoe. They represented six countries and collectively spoke nine languages. With students' English language proficiency ranging from beginners to native speakers, multilingual banter filled the room.<sup>1</sup>

The group's goal was to create a welcome video about their school, Central High School, and we were at a crossroads. Although a small group of students sat perusing photos related to the project, the overall group chemistry was clearly off. Two fully proficient English speakers glared across the room at three ELLs who were laughing about who-knows-what. Several desks down, a young man from Tanzania sat silently, appearing utterly confused. As a researcher and former teacher who had planned and



was leading these after-school sessions, I was experiencing anew the complexity of classroom life, particularly in the context of cultural and linguistic differences.

Throughout my career as an English as a second language teacher, teacher educator, and researcher, I've learned that facilitating interaction among language learners and their peers who are more experienced English speakers is both challenging and promising. I'd been hoping the students involved in this project would experience some of the well-established benefits of interaction between students from both groups—mutual sharing of linguistic and cultural knowledge, friendship, and a classroom community enriched by diverse voices (Case, 2015; Lantolf, 2000; Walqui, 2006; Yoon, 2008).

Yet research also suggests that interaction between ELLs and experienced English speakers is often superficial, strained, or avoided altogether.

Bringing linguistically and culturally diverse students together is an important first step, but once students are in proximity, those very differences—as well as obstacles like social awkwardness, perceptions about competence and investment, and lack of shared vision—can impede meaningful interaction (Harklau, 1994; Miller, 2003).

We faced similar challenges in our project. But these students still managed to pull together, complete the video, and proudly present it to administrators. The video is now available to help orient new students to this school, at which 15 percent of the 1,500 students are English language learners and 60 percent receive free or reduced-price lunch. More significant than the end product itself, however, were the relationships that developed among these linguistically diverse students.

Drawing on experiences and

insights from students who participated in this project, I offer four suggestions for fostering generous and mutually beneficial interaction among ELLs and their native-English-speaking peers.

### **Embrace Interactional Challenge**

Teenagers are smart and capable. They're also highly sensitive to social discomfort. When we ask them to interact with students from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds, the situation heightens social risks and students' vulnerability.

For example, Victoria, a proficient English speaker in 11th grade, described how she'd attempted to reach out to an English learner but stopped when she didn't get a response. She interpreted the situation this way: "If somebody random just came up to you, it's just as scary as going up to somebody yourself." Asked why she hesitated to initiate interactions with ELL peers, she admitted, "I have a thing about being in awkward situations. I try really hard not to be."

English learners can feel the same way. Gilbert, a 16-year-old refugee from the Congo, explained, "Most of the immigrants . . . they're feeling too much nervous and so most of the time, I find them hanging by themselves." Engaging with people who speak different languages can be as uncomfortable and uncertain as it is enriching and worthwhile.

Whereas teachers' priority may be the assigned task, for students—especially teenagers—the social component often reigns supreme. Openly acknowledging that interactions among students who don't share a language may be peppered with awkward moments prepares students to accept and work through the struggle. Although their goal is not to prevent challenges (impossible, even if it were desirable), teachers can help students imagine scenarios in which interaction could break down and

brainstorm possible responses, with questions like these:

- How could you respond if you're having trouble understanding one another?

- How would you feel if you were in a classroom in Russia and all your peers were speaking Russian?

- What are your options if you feel uncomfortable with the direction the project is taking?

It helps to design a shared project whose structure provides students with “social permission” to engage with one another. For example, assigning groups removes the tricky social maneuvering of selecting peers to work with. If students are required to talk to a certain number of people or get responses to a set list of questions, the structure of the task both sets up the conversation and provides a way to gracefully end it. Because of the vulnerability often embedded in such interactions, keep peer groups stable for a period of time to allow positive working relationships to develop.

Finally, helping students debrief the experience by sharing their struggles, successes, and lessons learned supports a classroom culture where interaction between fully proficient English speakers and English learners is valued and where students continually refine their ability to engage with others.

### **Cultivate a Person-First Perspective**

Despite the tremendous diversity of the students labeled “English language learners,” language often tends to become their defining feature. Consequently, instructional scaffolding frequently revolves around anticipating obstacles rooted in real or perceived language barriers. For instance, teachers are often advised to aid linguistic comprehension by using visuals, targeted vocabulary instruction, modeling, and speech modification. Although helpful, these

interventions may not prevent or solve all language-based difficulties, especially those that occur in the context of authentic, spontaneous interactions between students. Willing students can become frustrated.

Julia, a proficient English speaker in our video project, explained, “I don't know what to do when [ELLs] don't understand. I try to think of some way to show them or help them understand, but they don't get it. And I get it, and I get frustrated.” In

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a similar vein, Hamisi, a 10th grade ELL, described how he “felt bad because [the English speakers] were asking many questions and [the ELLs] couldn't even talk and respond to the questions—[yet] they kept on asking.”

Overemphasizing language barriers can have the unintended consequence of framing ELLs as a language problem rather than focusing on their contributions. This framing also can discourage ELLs from reaching out to English-speaking peers. Yet language-based challenges are real and significant, so it's useful to learn from the experiences of students who successfully interact with peers from different language and cultural backgrounds.

A key attitude that students who build friendships across linguistic differences demonstrate is sincere interest in one another as individuals: Instead of seeing the language barrier

first, they see a person. For example, Peter, a 9th grader from Tanzania, told me some students bullied and spoke rudely to immigrant and refugee students in his school. Yet he'd still made friends with both ELLs and native English speakers. Not long after his arrival, two boys began saying hello to Peter in the hallways and then chatting with him. They discovered common interests in music, sports, and their social lives. These boys appreciated Peter's easy-going personality, didn't get overly concerned about language difficulties, and eventually became Peter's friends.

We've all seen English learners who don't speak the same first language become friends, at least partially because they share the experience of not yet being fully proficient in English. As Asha from Somalia explained, “A lot of my classmates—like Spanish people, Burmese—we didn't know English, so we are best friends.” Positive peer relationships can develop without a shared language or culture. Sometimes, simply reminding students of this possibility can open doors.

Obviously, educators can't compel friendships among students, but they can help teenagers navigate the terrain. In addition to equipping students with multilingual dictionaries and strategies for negotiating understanding—such as rephrasing ideas, gesturing, and checking for understanding—educators also can intentionally cultivate a mindset that encourages students to see one another as individuals first. You might give students some basic instruction on employing digital tools—like Google Translate or Google Images (changing the language the search engine uses)—to overcome language barriers and convey ideas through images as they talk to English learners.

A teacher's personal example sets the tone. Ask yourself questions like, What do I know about the English

language learners in my class? When was the last time I purposefully noticed and included them? When was the last time I had an individual conversation with a particular English learner? Honest reflection on such questions can lead to greater intentionality around your language, professional decisions, and attitudes.

For instance, rather than characterizing English learners through the lens of a language deficit (“This is Asha. She doesn’t speak English”), educators can speak about students in a way that provides opportunities for their peers to get to know them as multifaceted individuals (“Asha loves to sing and play video games, and she speaks three languages”).

Another way to broaden students’ perspectives is to show a video or distribute a text in a language spoken by ELLs in your classroom. When native English speakers grapple with a text they don’t understand, they experience a taste of what ELLs consistently encounter. This activity also positions ELLs as experts, a stance they too rarely experience at school.

In addition, educators can open up conversations about culture, which can be a more formidable stumbling block than language. Cultural underpinnings strongly inform the way one person interprets another, but such underpinnings are often invisible. For example, cultural differences can cause us to assume that someone is rude or polite, engaged or disinterested, ambivalent or pushy when, in fact, that person is simply communicating in a way that’s consistent with his or her culture. Culturally based cues are also transmitted in nonverbal ways, such as body language, laughter, or speech volume; researchers like Geneva Gay (2002) have described culturally based communication patterns in depth.

Midway through our video project, two proficient English speakers expressed frustration that the ELLs weren’t taking the project seriously.

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They described how the English learners “clowned around” and were generally “wasting time.” From the ELLs’ perspective, however, their jovial manner wasn’t signaling disengagement—it was a sign of investment with their peers. As Juma explained, “We were working together, nobody was mad at each other, nobody was fighting, we [were] just talking and laughing.” This participation style reflected the students’ gender, age, and personalities, but it was also rooted in a cultural value of privileging relationships over tasks.

As these students’ differing ways of approaching the video project came to a head, we had to pause and regroup. I invited the students to describe their concerns to their peers. The ensuing conversation was both awkward and constructive; as we moved forward, I observed a greater degree of flexibility and acceptance on the part of both groups of students. As educators teach and discuss different cultural styles of interacting and communicating, students can learn to be more open and curious and less judgmental of one another.

**Choose Multimodal Tasks**

The nature of a shared project can foster or discourage interaction. Promising tasks require significant contributions by both ELLs and non-ELLs and give diverse students

opportunities to lead, offer expertise, and make decisions, rather than be relegated to inconsequential participation. It’s helpful to include many tasks that allow students to participate through different modalities requiring varying types and levels of English proficiency. For instance, the video project involved reading and writing to create the script (a high language demand), but also required other modes of expression, such as creating art, acting, and using technology. When an ELL and non-ELL collaborated to edit photos and select music for the video, both were able to make meaningful contributions that didn’t require high levels of English.

Group tasks that invite multicultural perspectives that frame ELLs’ linguistic and cultural backgrounds as assets, rather than obstacles, enhance students’ chances to interact. In a social studies class, students might compare different countries’ textbook descriptions of a historical event. In science, students could explore environmental impacts of global warming in different regions of the world. Tasks such as these, which invite lively discussion and perspective sharing among ELLs and their peers, are conducive to multimodal expression and honor diverse cultural viewpoints.

**Balance Structure and Flexibility**

Finally, teachers can facilitate interaction by providing explicit but flexible guidelines. Assigned roles, prescribed time tables, and clear processes can be helpful, assuming they allow for unexpected situations. When interactional challenges and other problems arise, students benefit from opportunities to creatively negotiate their collaboration rather than being constrained to focus narrowly on task completion. Overly specific guidelines may lead students to simply follow instructions without seriously engaging in the task or with one another. In these cases, when another

student “gets in the way” (such as by not understanding the question), that student may be sidelined or resented. With sufficient flexibility, students may be more likely to creatively prioritize joint effort.

For example, during the video project, a small group got derailed because some ELLs were struggling to understand their group’s task, which was to create a short video segment giving advice to a new student. Marisol, the non-ELL who was trying to lead the group, exclaimed in frustration, “I can’t make them understand!” She asked Nadif, another student who spoke English well, to help. Nadif started talking with the English learners and discovered they all shared a love of soccer. This group eventually produced a simple video declaring, “Soccer is the best in the world!” Although this product wasn’t exactly what had been assigned, it still accomplished several of the goals (practicing with the video equipment, collaborating, and combining language and images to inform). Throughout the project, Nadif displayed this willingness and ability to improvise with his peers. It earned him their affection and respect.

### Stepping Outside the Comfort Zone

As society grapples with globalization and conflict along racial, cultural, and linguistic lines, the need to cultivate students’ skills at collaborating and communicating across linguistic and cultural difference has never been greater. In a keen observation, Marisol (a 12th grader) mused, “[People] just feel comfortable with their kind. . . . It’s a comfort zone—you know, it’s my people, they speak my language; we know the same music.” Schools and classrooms can be an ideal laboratory to support students as they step out of such comfort zones.

By encouraging honest communication, a person-first orientation,

multimodal tasks, and a balance of structure and flexibility, educators can help students learn to interact generously and respectfully with peers from different backgrounds. Along the way, they may even find out—as video project participants discovered—that peers who’d previously been strangers were actually “cool kids.” ■

<sup>1</sup>Project participants included, besides beginning ELLs, students who were fully bilingual by this point in their school careers, but weren’t native English speakers (because they came from families where English wasn’t the home language). Others were native English speakers.

*Author’s note:* All names in this article are pseudonyms.

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