



Let Them TALK!

*To promote ELLs' literacy growth and content-area achievement,
don't neglect their English oral-language skills.*

Wayne E. Wright

As human beings, we spend the majority of our time speaking and listening. But despite the fact that oral language is such an important form of communication, schools tend to spend little classroom instruction time helping English language learners develop their English speaking and listening skills. This lack of attention hinders ELLs' literacy development and their academic achievement.

Oral Language Is Key

The research on English language learners' oral-language development is small compared with the research on other forms of literacy development. But two extensive syntheses of this research (August & Shanahan, 2006; Genesee, Lindholm-Leary, Saunders, & Christian, 2006) outline what we currently know.

One finding is that ELLs need time to develop oral English proficiency. No English as a second language (ESL) or bilingual program, overpriced software package, or Response to Intervention is going to make ELLs English proficient in a year or two. Effective programs for ELLs must be designed across several years and grade levels.

We also know that standardized tests of English proficiency often fail to fully capture the oral skills of bilingual students. Thus, teachers need to use ongoing authentic formative assessments throughout the school year. By assessing and understanding ELLs' current levels of oral English, teachers can provide the type of instruction that will enable their students to move to higher levels and ultimately attain English proficiency.

The research also shows that ELLs need some English proficiency before they can benefit from interaction with native English speakers and that using the home language to instruct beginning-level ELLs contributes to their academic development. We can't simply throw beginning ELLs into mainstream classrooms, hoping that being immersed in an all-English environment will lead to rapid English proficiency.¹ These findings make a strong case for bilingual education, which

gives ELLs the best opportunities to develop English proficiency while they progress academically (Wright, Boun, & García, 2015). Where bilingual programs are not feasible, teachers can still provide native-language support, even if they themselves do not speak their students' home languages (Wright, 2015).

Effective bilingual programs include not only content instruction in the students' home language but also daily ESL instruction and sheltered English content-area instruction. The amount of sheltered content instruction varies depending on the bilingual program model but typically increases across the years of the program. These supports are important at all levels of English proficiency, not just at the beginning levels.

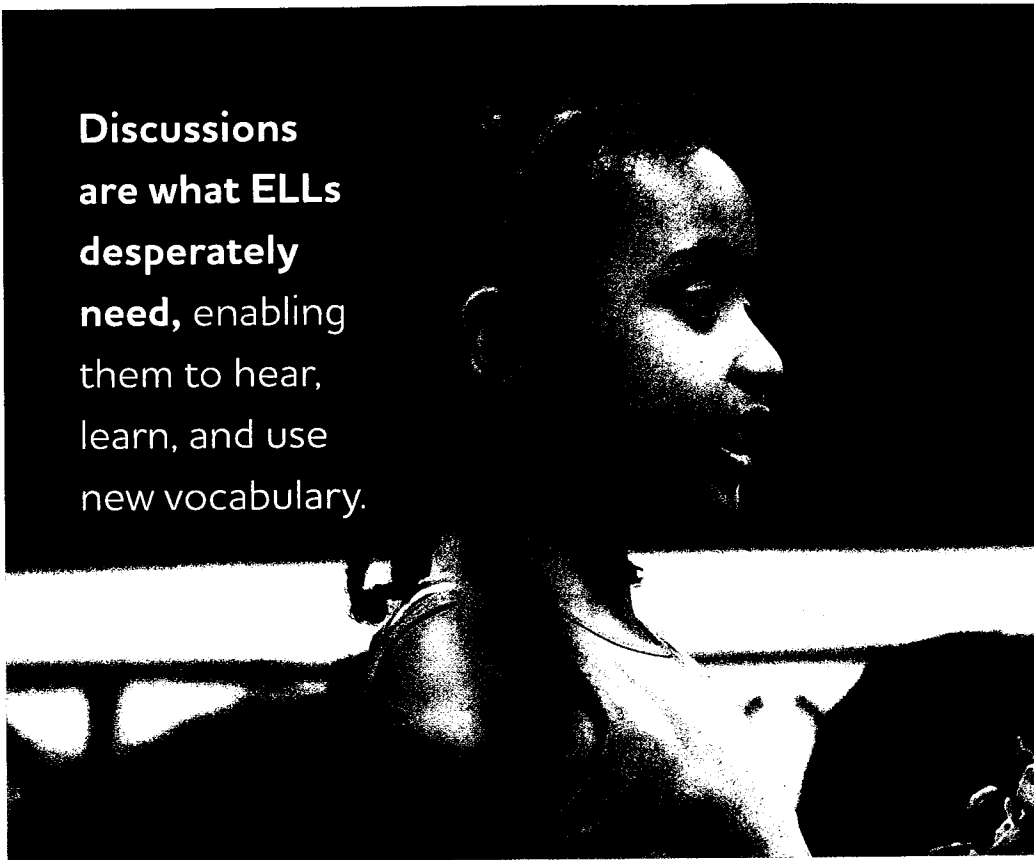
Regardless of the program type, "just good teaching" of reading and writing is not sufficient for ELLs to develop English literacy skills. Research has revealed a tight relationship between oral language proficiency and higher-level literacy development. As the National Literacy Panel on Language-Minority Children and Youth commented,

An important finding that emerges in the research is that word-level skills in literacy—such as decoding, word recognition, and spelling—are often taught well enough to allow language-minority students to attain levels of performance equal to those of native English speakers. However, this is not the case for text-level skills—reading comprehension and writing. Language minority students rarely approach the same levels of proficiency in text-level skills achieved by native English speakers. *The research suggests that the reason for the disparity between word- and text-level skills among language minority students is oral language proficiency.* [emphasis added] (August & Shanahan, 2006, p. 4)

This finding confirms what many teachers have observed: When schools don't provide

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T: Who does Napoleon blame for destroying the windmill?

S1: Snowball.

T: Did Snowball destroy the windmill?

S2: No.

T: What really destroyed the windmill?

S3: A storm.

T: That's right! It was destroyed during a storm. Napoleon is using Snowball as a *scapegoat*. That means . . .
[goes on for three minutes]

There was actually very little discussion going on in this typical “classroom discussion.”

Bring ELLs into Discussions

Too often, teachers are so rushed to cover the required curriculum they may feel they don't have the luxury to have deep discussions with their

effective oral-language instruction, ELLs often develop word recognition, spelling, and decoding skills but struggle to comprehend what they read. Many teachers call this “barking at print.” The better ELLs can speak and understand English, the better they can read and comprehend it, and the better they can write it.

Developing ELLs' English Speaking and Listening Skills

The Common Core State Standards have placed new emphasis on oral-language skills for all students, including English language learners. (See “How Will the Common Core State Standards Affect Oral-Language Instruction for ELLs?”) Theories of second-language acquisition tell us that interaction for authentic and meaningful communication purposes is essential for ELLs to develop their

oral-language proficiency in English. Yet students typically get insufficient opportunity for such interaction in the classroom. As the watermelon-smashing comedian Gallagher poignantly remarked, “They send us to school to learn to communicate, but all day long the teachers tell us to shut up!”

My university students and I once observed a middle school classroom where students sat in a circle discussing the book *Animal Farm*. The teacher stood in the middle and directed the discussion. It seemed like a great discussion—but when my students analyzed their video transcript of the lesson, they discovered that the teacher did over 95 percent of the talking! Only a few of the students spoke, and those who did gave only short answers to the teacher's narrow questions. For example:

students. My former kindergarten teaching partner once complained about this pressure: “It's like we say to a student, ‘I'm sorry, but I can't listen to your story about your puppy because I have to read you this book about a dog.’” Yet discussions are what ELLs desperately need, enabling them to hear, learn, and use new vocabulary and language structures that are essential to language proficiency.

One effective approach for encouraging more student talk during classroom discussions is to use open-ended and higher-order questions and short probes that require students to elaborate, such as, “What else did you notice?” “Why do you think that was?” “What do you think is going to happen next?” “Tell us more about that.” “How do you know that?” “Val, do you agree with Mai? Why not?”

In this way, the teacher can scaffold and support student participation in whole-class and small-group discussions by structuring opportunities for students to think deeply about academic content, to tackle complex texts, and to express and elaborate on their ideas orally.

To support English language learners as they participate in such discussions, teachers should increase wait time because ELLs may need time to process and translate in their head before they are ready to respond. Teachers should also adjust the way they talk, taking into account the students' proficiency levels to ensure the students can understand. Here are some suggestions:

- Slow down. Use a slower rate of speech when talking to beginning-level ELLs than you would in normal conversation with proficient speakers, but maintain a steady pace. Increase the pace as students progress to higher levels of proficiency.

- Speak clearly (but don't over-enunciate to the point where the words sound unnatural).

- Speak at a normal volume. Shouting does not make English more comprehensible.

- Use simple sentence structures with beginning-level ELLs (subject-verb-object). Avoid long, complex sentences with embedded clauses. As students make progress, increase

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How Will the Common Core State Standards Affect Oral-Language Instruction for ELLs?

The Common Core Speaking and Listening Standards focus on comprehension, collaboration, and the presentation of knowledge and skills. For example, Anchor Standard 1 calls for students to “prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.” Anchor Standard 4 expects students to be able to “present information, findings, and supporting evidence such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.” Anchor Standard 5 addresses the strategic use of digital multimedia to convey data and information.

Some ELL advocates have welcomed this new attention, hoping that if teachers are more accountable for the oral-language development of native-English speakers, they will also be more attuned to the language needs of ELLs. Some advocates also hope that highly scaffolded experiences with complex text, as called for in the Common Core English language arts standards, will provide ELLs with the types of language exposure and input they need to accelerate their English proficiency.¹ Others, however, worry that such scaffolds will be neglected and that higher expectations and increased testing will leave ELLs even further behind.

¹Fillmore, L. W., & Fillmore, C. J. (2012). *What does text complexity mean for English learners and language minority students?* Stanford, CA: Understanding Language, Stanford University. Retrieved from http://ell.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/pdf/academic-papers/06-LWF%20CJF%20Text%20Complexity%20FINAL_0.pdf

the complexity of the vocabulary and syntax appropriate to their English language proficiency.

- Emphasize key vocabulary through frequent repetition of these new words throughout the week and across subject areas.

- Avoid idioms, unless they are explained or were previously taught.

- Avoid cultural references that may be unfamiliar to ELLs, unless they are explained.

- Use gestures, facial expressions, objects and materials from everyday life, and other visual clues.

- Repeat, paraphrase, or use other techniques when ELLs do not understand something said by you or another student. (For example, during a class discussion —“Excellent Jeffrey! So you are saying sprinklers provide the flowers in your garden with the water they need. Yes, plants need water to grow. Patricia, what else do plants need to grow?”)

Teachers must also respect the silent period many newcomer and beginning-level ELLs go through during their first few days, weeks, or months of school. Silence does not mean they are not learning. Rather, they are receiving and processing comprehensible input. With proper scaffolding in a welcoming classroom, they will soon be ready to talk.

I once had a kindergarten student from Cambodia who seemed



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and acting out stories, also provide rich opportunities to practice new vocabulary and language structures.

To promote students' listening skills, teachers can use techniques such as total physical response (TPR), long a staple of ESL teachers working with beginning-level students. In TPR, teachers issue short commands requiring a physical response (such as "stand up," "put the pencil on the book," and "run to the corner"). TPR techniques can also be used with intermediate and advanced ELLs in content-area lessons: for example, issuing such commands in a geography lesson as "point to a peninsula" or "draw a river in

to be in her silent period—in both Khmer and English—longer than my other ELLs. I called her mother and asked, "Does your daughter talk?" The mother laughed and assured me that her daughter came home every day and told her all about what she learned and did at school. Soon enough, she was joining in more on songs and chants and participating in our shared readings of books.

Encourage Speaking and Listening Throughout the Day

During all classroom activities, teachers should take a strategic approach to correcting student errors in speech. The easiest way to make students afraid to talk is to correct them every time they open their mouths. Instead, teachers should focus on correcting errors that impede comprehension and use techniques such as recasts to model correct usage:

S: My mom buy me shirt red.

T: Your mom *bought* you a *red shirt*?
Nice! My wife bought me a blue coat.

Explicit instruction and corrections should focus on rules that students are ready to learn, as determined by their level of English proficiency:

S: We have four pet in our house.

T: Remember our lesson on plurals?
How would you say more than one pet?

S: Pets.

T: Pets. You got it! Now try that sentence again.

S: We have four pets in our house.

Additional instructional practices that can develop students' speaking skills include songs and chants, oral retellings of books they've listened to or read independently, and oral presentations on a variety of topics across the content areas. Interactive activities, such as role-plays, debates,

the valley between the mountains."

Teachers can also develop students' listening comprehension by having them listen and respond to audio or video recordings on high-interest topics at appropriate levels of difficulty, which are readily available on the Internet. Books, including those that the teacher has read aloud in class, can be kept at a listening center along with audio recordings for repeated listening practice. These books and recordings can be sent home for additional practice.

Let Them Communicate in Small Groups

The most effective technique for helping students with their English language development, however, is simply to provide ample opportunities for them to interact and communicate in the classroom for meaningful purposes. Cooperative learning is a


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natural way to provide such opportunities across the curriculum. Consider, for example, a typical whole-class discussion on sources of pollution. In a 10-minute discussion, only a handful of students are likely to be able to share their ideas, and each may only contribute a few phrases or sentences. English-proficient students typically dominate such discussions.

In contrast, during the same 10-minute period, cooperative-learning structures such as think-pair-share, concentric circles, or numbered heads together could give *all* students the opportunity to engage in more extensive conversations.

Information-gap activities, in which each student is given information that the other student needs for both of them to complete a specific task, provide additional opportunities for authentic communication. For example, in a role-play activity involving buying shoes, the “buyer” could have a list of shoe brands and types she is interested in and the amount of money she has to spend, while the “seller” could have a list of shoes, their prices, and special offers.

Focused Instruction and Meaningful Interactions

Research has made it clear that oral language development is essential for English language learners’ literacy and academic achievement. Although schools should provide bilingual instruction for ELLs when possible, whatever kind of program they’re in, these students also must receive daily ESL instruction and sheltered content-area instruction. To achieve their full potential, ELLs need focused listening and speaking instruction, as well as ample opportunities to develop their oral English proficiency through meaningful interactions in the classroom. 

¹This sink-or-swim immersion approach was declared illegal in 1974 by the U.S. Supreme Court in *Lao v. Nichols*, 414 U.S. 56.

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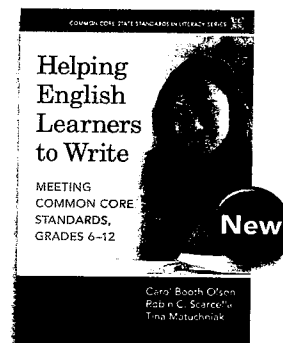
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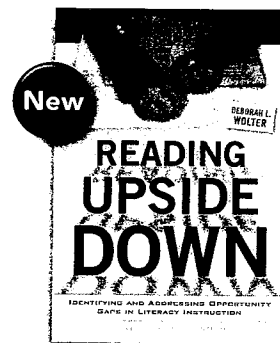
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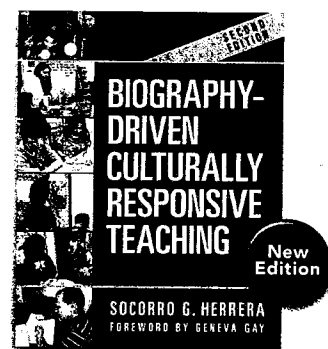
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