Increasing Academic Oral Language Development

Using English Language Learner Shadowing in Classrooms

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Introduction

According to Diane August (2002), a senior research scientist at the Center for Applied Linguistics, English Language Learners (ELLs) spend less than two percent of their school day in oral language development. Worse yet, when ELLs are speaking in school, it is often not about academic topics or rigorous content. Instead, according to Gibbons (2002), ELLs are relegated to shallow forms of speech, such as those which require only one-word responses.

This lack of academic oral language practice is detrimental to the acquisition of English, as well as to the access of grade-level content area material, which are both mandated by Title III of the *No Child Left Behind Act*. Similarly, the National Literacy Panel on Language-Minority Children and Youth (2006) suggests that oral language development is the foundation of literacy. In order for ELLs to become proficient in the basics of English, as well as grade-level academic English, it is imperative that they be given repeated and more complex opportunities to speak about academic topics across the school day.

One way to systemically create awareness around the importance of academic oral language development, or "academic talk," is to train teachers in ELL shadowing. During this process, teachers monitor the academic language and listening opportunities of ELLs at five-minute intervals over a two-hour period of time. This process allows teachers to become more reflective about their own practice, especially as they see how few opportunities ELLs typically do have for academic oral language development.

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After participating in shadowing, teachers become much more sensitive to embedding "academic talk" into their lesson design, and school district office and school site administrators begin to tailor professional development around increasing opportunities for academic oral language development. In this article I will explain why academic oral language development is important and how to embed ELL shadowing into either a teacher education program, a district, an individual school, or a county office of education staff development program.

The Importance of Academic Oral Language Development

Historically, the four literacy domains—listening, speaking, reading, and writing—have been taught separately, with an emphasis on reading and writing as the "academic domains." For ELLs, however, this process of teaching each of the domains as segmented components of language is not as effective. The students' needs are great and they have little time to waste in closing the literacy gap. Instead, Gibbons (2002) notes that the domains of listening and speaking are as important as reading and writing, and they must be planned for in order to happen effectively in the classroom.

Specifically, it is helpful for educators to connect speaking to writing and listening to reading, as each of these two pairs involve similar processes. Speaking and writing are focused on output, while listening and reading are about input and comprehension. If we allow ELLs to talk about their writing before they complete the writing itself, it will often be more detailed and coherent. In this way it becomes clear how foundational literacy is to oral language development.

Similarly, when we connect listening and reading as active processes, greater comprehension can be elicited. In this way structured and frequent academic oral language development techniques can be embedded into teachers' daily instructional practice. Once teachers experience the silence and therefore invisibility of their ELL as they shadow a student, they will begin to see the negative results of allowing their ELLs to remain quietly passive in a classroom setting.

How to Shadow an ELL

Shadowing is the process of following a student over several hours (at least two hours is recommended) and monitoring both their academic oral language and listening practices. Doing this allows teachers, administrators, and community members to become sensitive to the academic oral language development needs of ELLs and begin to change instructional practices by embedding more "academic talk" into their instructional design.

Such shadowing projects have been conducted in districts, county offices of education, and colleges across California, including the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), Hayward Unified School District, Norwalk-La Mirada Unified School District, and Lucia Mar Unified School District; Kern, Santa Barbara, Stanislaus, and San Luis Obispo County Offices of Education; as well as Whittier College (Whittier, California), Biola University (La Mirada, California), and Claremont Graduate University (Claremont, California). Through these projects educators and pre-service teachers gain a glimpse into a day in the life of ELLs in their school settings.

Participants are first trained using a protocol form (see Figures 1 and 2) with which they monitor the domains of listening and speaking at five-minute intervals

throughout a two-hour time period. It is important to note that participants are not ready to formally shadow ELLs until they have studied both the elements of "academic talk" in the classroom as well as the different forms of listening that they will monitor.

At the university level, students do not learn to shadow an ELL until mid-way through the course, by which point they have amply studied academic speaking and listening. In a district and county office setting, an entire day of training occurs around the academic oral language and active listening needs of ELLs before participants ever shadow an ELL in a school setting—this is typically done on Day 2 of professional development training.

Following the protocol, participants identify who the primary speaker is—whether it is the student or the teacher—and track that primary speaker and who is being spoken to at five-minute intervals. In addition, the type(s) of listening involved in the interaction are also monitored, for example whether one-way or two-way listening is taking place. One-way listening is an interaction in which students are taking in information, such as during a lecture. Typically, in one-way listening, there is no room for clarification or questions. In contrast, two-way listening allows for clarification to be made, since the interaction is dialogue-based. That is, the interaction is considered a conversation.

Throughout the shadowing project, participants are often astounded by the fact that the teacher is doing most of the talking, with much of the interaction being lecture-based, despite the fact that the teacher's primary duty is to develop the ELLs' language.

Figure 2 shows the shadow study form filled out for two intervals of a classroom interaction. In the first language exchange at 10:20 we see that the ELL has just engaged in a song during English/Language Arts time. Therefore, "academic talk" has been coded as a 4, because the primary speaker is the student singing with the entire class. Singing has been noted in the two-way listening exchange as the student is interacting in talk as well and not merely listening as he sings. Under the comments section, the observer has written down any anecdotal notes important to the interaction. Here, specifically, the observer has noted that the student is attentive and nods that he is ready to sing.

During the 10:25 exchange, the student engages in an instructional read aloud. Here, the exchange has been coded 2 under academic one-way listening because the student is taking in information and not being asked to respond. Academic speaking has also been coded 2 because the teacher is the only one doing the talking while she reads the book aloud to the whole class. Students continue to code interactions this way every five minutes for two to four hours.

The shadowing project allows teachers to begin to find and recognize patterns regarding who is doing most of the speaking in classrooms, and what kinds of listening ELLs are often asked to undertake. Students soon begin to notice that the primary speaker in classrooms is often the teacher, as indicated in the second box under primary speaker (and numbers 5-7) in Figure 2. Similarly students find that the listening interactions are often one-way, or in lecture mode, with little room for questions or clarification on the part of the ELL.

In this manner the shadowing project illuminates for teachers the absence of opportunities for academic oral language practice in the classroom. Through this process educators are able to reflect on their own instructional practices and how such practices may positively or negatively impact student achievement. For example, one teacher in LAUSD's District 6 stated, "The person talking most is the person who is learning most. . . . And I'm doing most of the talking in my class!" This process reveals the urgency for changing instructional practice across levels as it often reveals ineffective teaching practices.

Next Steps After Shadowing

After the shadowing experience it is imperative that steps then be taken at the classroom, school, and district levels. At the district and school levels, teachers must be given opportunities for focused professional development about how to create more academic oral language development in their classrooms. At the teacher education level, professors must both model effective academic oral language engagement and demonstrate how to embed such practices in pre-service teachers' instructional design. For example, at all levels, the most basic yet powerful technique for academic oral language development is a method called Think-Pair-Share.

With the Think-Pair-Share method, teachers who have students with early levels of proficiency can utilize academic oral language development stems, whereby

Figure 1
Blank Shadowing Form

ELL Student Shadow Study Observation Form

Student First Name: _____ Grade: _____ ELD Level: _____
Gender: _____ School: _____

Time	Specific Student Activity/Location of Student 5-Minute Intervals	Academic Speaking	Academic Listening 1-Way	2-Way	No Listening (reading or writing silently)	Not Listening (student if off task)	Comments

Primary Speaker	Mostly to Whom?	Primary Speaker	Mostly to Whom?	Primary Listener	Listening Mostly to Whom?
Your Student	1. Student 2. Teacher 3. Small Group 4. Whole Class	Teacher	5. Student 6. Small Group 7. Whole Class	Your Student	1. Student 2. Teacher 3. Small Group 4. Whole Class

the first part of a sentence is provided as a frame, such as "I heard my partner say . . ." or "The evidence from the text demonstrated that the character . . . ." Students can then be taught how to effectively formulate their responses when using the Think-Pair-Share technique, and teachers can be purposeful in the kinds of questions that are posed.

To do this teachers can enact a fishbowl practice in which two students are in the front of the classroom and model a conversation for everyone. In this way the two students model each part of effective Think-Pair-Share behaviors, such as thinking about their responses first and finding evidence from the text to substantiate their thoughts (think). The two students can then model a dialogue (share) whereby they build off each other's responses, demonstrating that the dialogue should be a two-way response which also assists students in the domains of listening and speaking.

It is also important to note that the kinds of questions that are posed should elicit elaborate language and not just one-word responses. Teachers should take the time to develop open-ended questions, with multiple entryways into the conversation, and allow students to have extended conversations. For example, "What were the characters motivations and why?, instead of "Was the character's motivation problematic?" The first question allows for more extended talk, as well as higher-order thinking, whereas the second question can be answered using only a yes or no response.

After teachers begin to embed Think-Pair-Share into their daily practice, they can try more sophisticated academic oral language development structures such as Reciprocal Teaching or Literature Circles. These two group techniques structure the academic oral language development process so that each student has a role and accountable for academic talk in a classroom setting.

Reciprocal Teaching also allows students to become proficient in four of the good readers habits. These include summarizing, questioning, prediciting, and connecting. In a classroom setting each student can take on one of the roles related to good reading habits, and then have a deeper conversation around a piece of text from those four good reader perspectives.

For example, one student will write down the three most important ideas from a text as the Summarizer, and another student the three most important questions from that same text as the Questioner. It is important to note that students, especially ELLs, will oftentimes need more time, practice, and scaffolding with a new skill, and must be explicitly trained in how to have such academic conversations. Fishbowl modeling, again, is advised before ever sending students to independent practice with Reciprocal Teaching.

Similarly, it is important for the teacher to directly model how to complete each Reciprocal Teaching role before students independently engage in each task. Each role should then be rotated with each new text or conversation, and teachers must monitor the language itself by rotating around the room to listen in on conversations.

In this way, these two techniques—Think-Pair-Share and Reciprocal Teaching—become ways for teachers to do their part to increase academic oral language development systemically, which will also raise English skills and apprentice ELLs into academic language expectations. Teachers can then continue to strategize and commit to other ways in which they can increase academic oral language development practice, the foundation of literacy and access for ELLs, into their every day practice.

References

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Figure 2
Completed Shadowing Form

ELL Student Shadow Study Observation Form

Student First Name: _____ Grade: _____ ELD Level: _____
Gender: _____ School: _____

Time	Specific Student Activity/Location of Student 5-Minute Intervals	Academic Speaking	Academic Listening 1-Way	2-Way	No Listening (reading or writing silently)	Not Listening (student if off task)	Comments
10:20	"Never Give Up" English language arts song. Summing up—"make a long story short"	4		singing			Preparation for lesson B, paying attention, watching. Head nodding to "Ready?"
10:25	Instructional Read aloud of Miss Rumphius	2	2				

Primary Speaker	Mostly to Whom?	Primary Speaker	Mostly to Whom?	Primary Listener	Listening Mostly to Whom?
Your Student	1. Student 2. Teacher 3. Small Group 4. Whole Class	Teacher	5. Student 6. Small Group 7. Whole Class	Your Student	1. Student 2. Teacher 3. Small Group 4. Whole Class