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Abha Gupta

Old Dominion University, agupta@odu.edu

Guang Lea Lee

Old Dominion University, lxlee@odu.edu

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Dialogic Teaching Approach with English Language Learners to Enhance Oral Language Skills in the Content Areas

Dr. Abha Gupta, Ph.D.

Associate Professor
Language and Literacy Education
Department of Teaching and Learning
Old Dominion University, Norfolk, Virginia
USA

Dr. Guang-Lea Lee, Ph.D.

Associate Professor
Early Childhood Literacy Education
Department of Teaching and Learning
Old Dominion University, Norfolk, Virginia
USA

One of the major challenges that teachers encounter with English Language Learners (ELL) centers on the development of oral language. As teachers we are aware that language begins in infancy and develops continuously throughout one's life via natural exposure to on a daily basis. For ELLs, however the lack of opportunities to practice a second language, underlines the need for teachers' attention to their oral language development. Oral language requires proficiency in multiple modes of language, such as speaking and listening skills including both, receptive and expressive abilities. Oral communication is a necessary and essential skill for effective functioning in the classroom. Oral language is a critical tool for children to use when expressing their knowledge, and a tool through which they ultimately gain knowledge about the world in which they live. It is necessary for thinking, learning, and academic proficiency in school.

With the growing number of children from immigrant families who speak a language other than English at home, the challenge is real for the classroom teachers in the United States of America (USA). The percentage of public school students in the United States who were English language learners was higher in school year 2012-13 (9.2 percent, or an estimated 4.4 million students) than in 2002-03 (8.7 percent, or an estimated 4.1 million students) and in 2011-12 (9.1 percent, or an estimated 4.4 million students) USDOE, 2015. It is estimated that students in the USA represent more than 1,000 cultures. During the 2010-2011 school years, 54% of public school students were White and 46% were students of color (Skinner et al, 2010). By the year 2050, the percentage of children in the United States who arrive at K-12 schools speaking a language other than English will reach 40% (Lindholm-Leary, 2000). Many of these students will also come from backgrounds of poverty, and parents with low levels of education. In 2011, 21% of school-age students lived in poor households (Skinner et al, 2010) with limited English proficiency.

The NCELA, National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition, (de Oliveira 2011) reports that currently more than 10% of the K-12 student population across the United States is comprised of ELLs, which equates to over five million students. In many school districts, more than 100 different languages are used across the district's students and families. It is easy for a classroom teacher to become overwhelmed by the linguistic diversity in the classroom. As Rajagopal (2011) puts it, "A common misconception about culturally responsive teaching teachers subscribe to is that students of different races need to be taught 'differently' – the "Asian way" or the "Black way" which can be intimidating due to a large mix of cultures represented in some of today's classrooms. I don't teach by race. I teach to their collective culture." In order to engage urban students, teachers need to know how to use students' culture and interests as tools to teach them (Noguera, 2003).

Teacher training programs do not adequately prepare teachers to address ELL's needs. Our teacher education programs do not emphasize teaching instructional techniques to work with ELL students. Most general education teachers do not have the training in language and linguistics needed to properly address the diverse linguistic needs of students (Gupta, 2010). Teachers learn the importance of content knowledge in their specific area, yet lack significant pedagogical knowledge to deliver content information through focusing on oral language skills.

The pedagogical approach highlighted in this paper, enhances the basic language areas of reading, writing, listening and speaking; all critical for ELL students. Common instructional methods do not effectively aid learning for ELL students. Since many ELL students are unable to learn content material due to limited receptive and expressive vocabulary, using instructional methods to enhance vocabulary will be highlighted in the paper.

This paper presents a dialogic teaching approach to promote oral language use that support learning in all content area subjects such as Social Studies, Science, Language Arts, and Math in primary schools. Dialogic teaching is a technique teachers use to help students effectively meet learning goals or accomplish tasks through dialogue. Alexander (2004) claimed that "dialogic teaching harnesses the power of talk to stimulate and extend pupils' thinking and advance their learning and understanding." He also believes that dialogic teaching is both just any teacher initiated talk such as the question-answer and listens-tell routines, nor the casual conversation. According to Alexander, "in dialogic classrooms children don't just provide brief factual answers to 'test' or 'recall' questions, or merely spot the answer which they think the teacher wants to hear. Instead, when teachers use dialogic teaching, students are guided to narrate, explain, analyses, speculate, imagine, explore, evaluate, discuss, argue, justify, and they ask questions of their own.

Gibbons (2015, p. 33) explained that dialogic teaching promotes students' exploration of ideas. According to her, "it creates shared understanding and space for students to explore new concepts, clarify understandings, and perceptions, not dominated or controlled by a single person, so that participants address their comments, questions, and statements directly to each other." Several researchers support this use of exploratory talk occurring in the classroom which they refer to as a dialogic teaching approach (Mercer, Dawes, & Kleine Staarman, 2009; Alexander, 2008; Mercer & Dawes, 2008; Haneda; & Wells, 2008; Lyle, 2008).

Teachers work with linguistically diverse students at various levels, and observe the impact of oral language on their literacy habits. Noguera (2000) urged teachers to avoid applying stereotypes to ELLs. Students' use of language demonstrates how oral language has a direct bearing on the mechanics of reading and writing. However, as the rigor of content area grows, teachers have limited time to address oral language issues. It is generally considered the role of the ESL/ELL teacher to work on the language aspects of ELL learners. Sometimes teachers skirt language issues due to their own level of discomfort with language instruction. Evidence exists linking oral language to the word recognition aspects of reading and/or the comprehension aspects of the reading model. It is important to consider that "not only are oral language skills linked to the code-related skills that help word reading to develop, but they also provide a foundation for the development of the more-advanced language skills needed for comprehension" (Cain & Oakhill, 2007, p. 31).

The authors experience of working with diverse students led them to a basic reconsideration of their approach to teaching literacy to one that emphasizes constructivists' view of oral language, one that was informed by the growing understanding of language, and the perspectives of Pressley 1998, Snow, et al 2007. Through their experience, they have come to the conclusion that oral language has much to offer in terms of literacy and learning especially to teachers and students in primary schools.

In this paper, the effect of oral language on literacy development and academic learning are explored. Also, best practices of using a dialogic teaching approach to build ELLs' oral language skills and enhance their academic learning are described and summarized. The research based dialogic teaching approach discussed in this paper is grounded in constructivists' view and demonstrates high effects on learning and improving student performance with respect to oral language development. Specific oral language instructional activities using a dialogic teaching approach that enhance the acquisition of oral language skills which promote academic learning presented in the paper include, Picture Description, Talk a Mile a Minute, and Puppet Role Play.

Effect of Oral Language on Literacy Development and Academic Learning

Competence in the spoken language acts as a necessary base for competence in literacy development and learning in content areas. Acquisition of oral language is indeed the foundation for literacy development and academic learning.

Children who develop strong oral language skills during the preschool years develop a strong foundation vital for their later achievements in reading, especially reading comprehension (Storch & Whitehurst, 2002). Children who lag behind their peers in oral language development however, are at-risk for later reading difficulties (Catts, Fey, Tomblin, & Zhang, 2002). Teachers need to be purposeful, enthusiastic, and engaging in their daily interactions and learning experiences (Assel, Landry, Swank, & Gunnewig, 2007) with the children in their classroom in order to help build a strong foundation in oral language and other emergent literacy skills. When planning for instruction to enhance oral language, teachers need to be able to reflect on students' current knowledge and ability and take it into consideration as they plan lessons. Teachers are focused when they set clear learning goals for the children. Teachers who are playful in their daily interactions and experiences with students make learning fun, engaging, and encourage them to use their oral language skills throughout the day. Oral language development and vocabulary are directly linked to reading comprehension. Ruddell (1966) observed that research strongly suggests that facility in oral expression, particularly vocabulary knowledge and an understanding of sentence structure is basic to the development of reading comprehension skill.

Other proponents (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002, NRP 2000) emphasize that vocabulary knowledge is strongly related to reading proficiency and overall academic success. Use of oral language promotes vocabulary. Vocabulary knowledge helps children decode words or map spoken sounds to words in print. If children read words that they already have in their receptive vocabulary, it will be easier for them to sound out, read, and understand them. In addition, they will be able to comprehend what they are reading. If the words are not in children's oral vocabulary, they have trouble reading the words and their comprehension is compromised (National Reading Panel, 2000). Oral language is essential for children to gain knowledge in all content areas. This knowledge is critical for thinking and learning about the world in which they live. To promote oral language development in content areas, Picture Description, Talk a Mile a Minute, and Puppet Role Play have been discussed below.

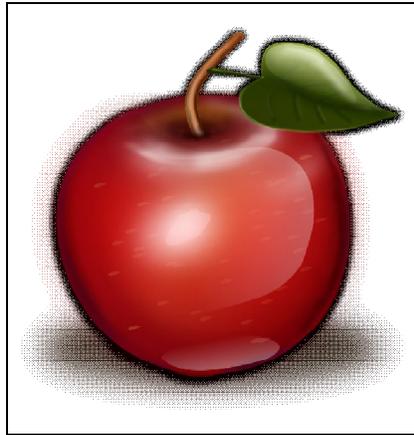
Strategy 1: Picture Description

In order to encourage oral communication and verbal responses among ELL students, visual description is an effective strategy to motivate students to respond verbally. This strategy allows students to talk without concern for syntax, grammar, pronunciation and other mechanics of writing. It engages students to interact in a meaningful way in a small group situation. Small groups provide non-threatening environment to students for practice before putting ELL students on the spot in front of the entire class. The activity provides a structured environment to engage in short conversations.

Research suggests a relationship between vocabulary and phonological awareness. Children who know a word and use it orally in conversation will analyze the sounds contained in that word more easily than those who do not know the word (Goswami, 2001). Thus, those children who participate frequently in conversations experience a positive impact on language development, particularly oral vocabulary (Girolametto et. al., 2004, Ruston & Schwanenflugel, 2010).

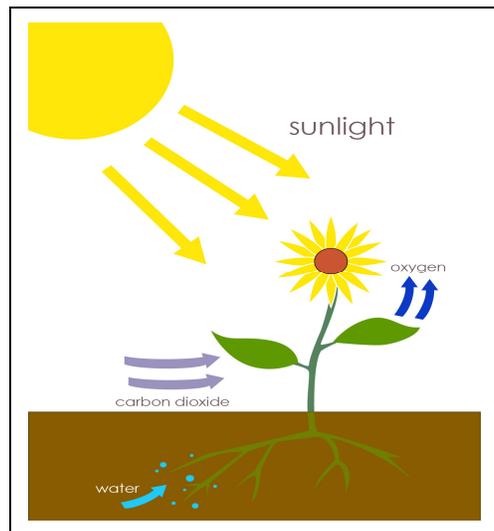
Getting started: The selection of words for instruction requires some planning on the part of the instructor. It is the critical aspect of teaching. The criteria for selection of words may include words that children are unlikely to learn on their own or are less likely to be exposed to. The teacher identifies the key words and pre-selects the conceptual vocabulary demonstrated by the pictures that are targeted for instruction. Make sure the pictures have clear visual quality and are at the appropriate level for the students. The teacher reviews the vocabulary words with the class to make sure they understand the words prior to beginning the activity. Paste the pictures on index cards or flashcards. Also teachers need to model the strategy with the class showing them how the strategy works before independent work begins.

The teacher selects a card with a target picture and without showing the picture to students; she describes the item or concept. Students will have to predict the name of the object in the picture, based on teacher's clues. For lower primary grades, it could be simple concrete visuals of objects, such as 'apple', 'toy', 'bird', or 'sun' etc. For a demonstration lesson, here are some of the descriptive statements that a teacher may use to describe the picture of an 'apple' and students have to figure out the word for the picture she has.



- It is a type of a fruit.
- It is mostly red in color, but sometimes you can find green ones too.
- It is round and delicious.
- It is white inside.

The demonstration of the activity will assist students to understand the task. Once the students understand the task, the teacher can assign the activity to students. Other students can describe their picture cards which could represent vocabulary words learned from the theme of vegetables such as, broccoli, cabbage, carrots, cucumber, zucchini, and so on. With lower grades it will be important to keep the pictures at a concrete level and simple and gradually move to higher abstract concepts in social studies or science.. Below is an example from science in fourth grade on photosynthesis.



- This is a process by which plants make food.
- Plants use sunlight.
- They use carbon dioxide from the atmosphere.
- They use water from the rain.
- The leaves make the food for the plants.

Independent Work: Place students in pairs or groups of three. While matching pairs take into consideration the level of language proficiency of students. Initially, similar level pairs match best, so that no one student dominates the task. Give each pair the same even number of picture cards. The pair can take turns to do the task. Once they finish, rotate the set of pictures with other pairs. Teachers can gradually increase the level of difficulty to more detailed pictures. For instance, pictures that illustrate action and activity, so students can tell what's going on in more words. Depending on the age and the proficiency level of the students and the image on the card, teachers can set the numbers as 5 to 7 sentences to describe the image on each sheet.

You can ask students to come up with a title for the image as well. Students get to practice generating sentences in an extensive manner, as they practice with this activity.

The activity can be done with the entire class as a review, recapitulation of the concepts. For the whole class activity, the teacher could pass around a paper bag or a hat that contains picture cards. Each student takes a card from the bag or hat without showing the picture to others. As students select the card and look at it without showing the card to their peers, check with the students to ensure they understand what it is and feel comfortable with the card. Otherwise, students could put that card back and pick another card. Although this is less likely to happen as the words would have been reviewed prior to doing the whole class activity. Once everyone has a card, the teacher can start with his/her card without showing the picture to students or telling what the picture is but, by describing it. Barrier games such as “Picture Description” makes students work collaboratively to use language to describe what the other student can’t see. This can be a motivating way to help students to practice a range of key vocabulary concepts in the content area while simultaneously building oral language skills.

Strategy 2: Talk a Mile a Minute

Language and literacy skills take place from whole to part. Students need to have a wider context for vocabulary development and for strengthening of their oral language including listening and speaking. This strategy encourages students to tell aloud a list of words that are related to the category. For instance, “things associated with ocean,” or “things associated with geometry” or so on. The words cluster around a theme in a list format. The objective is for students to say as many of the related terms to the theme within a minute. This strategy provides an effective method for reviewing concept words in the class. Students can be paired and each one can be given an index card in an envelope with a different category word written on the top of the card and a few related words listed below it that the class has reviewed that day. The words in the list are ‘taboo’ words that the player giving the clues cannot say. Player A with the index card will read out the category (target word) and player B has to guess all the words related to the category in the list. Teachers can supervise by having all the pairs get ready and then say ‘Start’ using a stopwatch. As soon as player B says any of the word from the list, player A will cross off the correctly identified word. Player A can provide oral clues for the words in the list. For instance, for the list word ‘triangle’, player A can say, “it has three lines”. The clue may not use any or part of the word from the list. It is recommended that teachers first do a demonstration of the activity before independent practice. Below are two examples from Math and Science:

Topography

Mountains
Rivers
Latitude
Longitude
Elevation

After the activity, teachers can lead a debriefing session by asking which terms were easier to predict and which ones were difficult. This provides a quick form of oral assessment about concept learning and review for lesson. These activities can be modified depending on the curricular needs. In a beginning literacy class, list words could be based on initial sounds such as “th” and the category could be “Th” words and the list could contain all sight words such as “this, that, then, them, the.” The strategy has many levels of application within a classroom whether it is content or skill being taught.

Th (Words Starting with Th)

This
That
Think
Then
The
There

Effective and playful instructional techniques motivate students to engage in learning. The activity not only introduces new vocabulary words and at the same time reinforces the previously acquired concepts and words as well.

Strategy 3: Puppet Role Play

Teachers can use a puppet role play strategy to support ELLs in becoming competent English language users as they participate in conversations about the content of a lesson they are learning. During the role play activity, students use puppets representing the people they are learning about. Rief and Heimburge (2007) believe that students who are resistant to speaking up in class can have a tremendous boost of confidence when they are given the opportunity to play the role of another person while “hiding” behind a puppet. When holding and manipulating a puppet with their hands, children naturally imagine the person being represented and act out scenes spontaneously. Children often prefer talking to, and through, puppets, and can feel more confident in their conversation ability when using such a tool. The puppets supply immediate visual support for meaning, and provide opportunities for language use in natural contexts as well as practice opportunities for meaningful oral language use. They allow children to orally express what they know using their imagination and creativity.

Teachers can use puppet role play approach in all content areas. For example, a Kindergarten teacher can use it when introducing the concept of community helpers. These can include police officers, firefighters, mail carriers, bus drivers, garbage collectors, etc. Children will enjoy pretending to be such community helpers and creating their own stories and adventures. Teachers can stimulate a dialog by asking questions to and about the puppet the students are holding. For example, the teacher might ask, “*Hi Police officer, what do you do to help people? Why do you like your work?*” Children will feel free to describe the role of community helpers as they pretend to be one. This helps to expose ELLs to more English language and conversation. During the role play, ELLs learn how English is used in real-life situations through interacting with people in meaningful dialogues, contexts, and actions.

Another example of role play, encouraging ELLs to speak in social studies content is through the use of famous historic figure puppets. For third grade students for instance, these could include historic figures such as Christopher Columbus, Jacques Cartier, or Christopher Newport. Teachers can make and provide puppets for students to use, or each student can select a person from history and make their own puppet using classroom art supplies. Each student, in turn, will then hold and present their puppet while explaining who the person is, where and when they lived, and what major contributions and roles he or she played in history. In this situation, students imagine themselves as the historical person and in fact make their presentation speaking through the puppet.

Through role play using puppets in historical settings, the students are re-living that era in history - speaking and acting like their chosen historic figure. Johnson (2009) recommended using puppets for creative dramatics with primary grade students, and noted that “a popsicle stick with a figure (face of a person) glued to it is a good starting place for puppet role play.” Students enjoy making their own puppets for biographical lessons using figures from both present day and historical settings. When children produce their own puppet, they feel a sense of pride and ownership in their learning, and will continue to actively engage in role playing and speaking with the puppet outside classroom. Rief and Heimburge (2007, p.111) affirm that “most children like to get involved in puppet role play. Whether the puppets are created commercially or made by the children, oral language seems natural with a puppet in hand.”

The teacher should model this puppet role play strategy, preferably with a fluent English speaking student, as a warm-up and a way to get students to imagine the person whose role they are playing and how that person might speak. To accommodate and include students who are less confident in speaking in front of the entire class, the class can be broken up into pairs. During the paired-up role play, each student will take turns asking and responding to specific questions the teacher has prepared. Teachers may need to scaffold and prepare questions to be used during the paired-up role play. A few examples of questions that can be used to learn about well-known historic figures are: *What is your name? Where did you live? When did you live? What happened at that time in your town? What did you do to help people? What was your belief? Why did you believe in that?* In this situation, one student plays the role of a reporter (interviewer) while the other portrays the historical figure and responds to the questions. After the interviewer-historic figure role play, the students can write out their questions and responses so that the teacher can evaluate the oral language ability and accuracy of the content. During the pair role play activity, the teacher should monitor and even participate in role plays where needed.

This is a great opportunity for the teacher to monitor phonological, semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic usage of language fluency, and meet and interact with students individually gauging their speaking ability as well as content knowledge learning.

Puppet role play is useful when incorporated in language arts classrooms. Students can make a puppet of a character from the story they are reading and act out scenes involving that character before or after reading the story. This type of retelling the story and talking from the character's (puppet) point of view provides opportunities to ELLs to practice English, encourages them to actively participate in the classroom learning community, and can enhance their oral language development (Kampmann & Bowne, 2011; Kirkland & Patterson, 2005). The ELLs play the role of their puppet while speaking to convey their oral message, all while engaging in fun role playing activity. For some ELLs who experience difficulty in speaking impromptu, scripts for characters appearing in the story can be created in advance. The students can use their puppets to read the scripts. In addition, children can make a puppet of themselves and engage in "dramatic role play around real-life issues, moral dilemmas, or ethical issue from a school or real life" (Johnson, 2009, p 197).

Discussion / Conclusion

This paper explored three collaborative dialogic strategies that primary school teachers can implement in all content classes, and that are designed to benefit ELLs who are building oral language skills and gaining content knowledge simultaneously. Three collaborative dialogic strategies explored in the paper include, Picture Description, Talk a Mile a Minute and Puppet Role Play. The selective strategies encourage students to express their ideas, practice language, interact with others, stimulate thinking, and build concepts through engaging in dialogue and interactions with peers. The strategies provide a platform and a structure for promoting verbal interactions. These strategies could be modified to include reading and writing tasks, which will further reinforce and advance the command of oral language skills. Although this paper is geared toward supporting ELLs, the dialogic strategies are beneficial for all students in that they not only focus on gaining proficiency in oral language, but also on constructing knowledge and quality learning overall.

In these collaborative and dialogic strategies, teachers provide a platform for increasing the quality and quantity of talk in the classroom. As ELL students need increasing amount of practice and exposure to the target language, teachers need to provide frequent opportunities for oral language interaction to take place within the classroom. By encouraging a culture of oral language in all content area classes, teachers can strengthen language and literacy skills, improve learning, and empower ELLs as well as English Only (EO) students.

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