

**How Do We Improve Teaching and Learning for English Language Learners?
Teacher Talk: Enabling ELLs to 'Grab On' and Climb High
By Jane Yedlin**

"My [ELL] children can do exactly what the other children can do, however, there are ways I [help them] that are different." Mrs. Romano. ESL teacher, 1999*

While the general school-age population in the U.S. has grown only 12% since 1990-91, the population of English Language Learners (ELLs) in schools has increased by 104%. The 2000-2001 census estimated the Massachusetts public schools' ELL enrollment at over 46,000 (Kindler, 2002). Given ELL population growth and recently diminished access to bilingual instruction in Massachusetts, California, and other states, many more language minority children entering U.S. schools in the primary grades face the challenge of achieving literacy in English. A monolingual, English speaking teacher is increasingly likely to face the challenge of teaching language, literacy, and academic skills to young children whose languages and prior experiences are unfamiliar to her. Few teachers feel truly well prepared for this task and indeed, the knowledge base is meager (Snow, Burns & Griffin, 1998; August & Hakuta, 1997).

The Critical Role of Teacher Discourse

Over the course of a long career in education which has afforded me the opportunity to observe the instruction of ELLs in dozens of classrooms, I have become increasingly interested in how teachers talk and what they say, especially in culturally diverse, second language and literacy acquisition contexts. My perspective on the critical role of teacher discourse in ELLs' language and literacy development is strongly influenced by the Vygotskian (1978) notion that talk in the classroom is important because it offers the student external dialogue that may be appropriated as internal dialogue. Language minority children, in particular, may depend greatly upon their teachers for the types of verbal interaction and linguistic input that support the development of oral English, English literacy skills, and academic English (Bartolome, 1998; Delpit, 1995; Guttierrez, 1995; Reyes, 1992).

Teacher Talk to ELLs During Writing Instruction This article reports findings from research on linguistic and other facilitative strategies used by an experienced and skillful ESL teacher to scaffold writing instruction in a multi-level class of ELL first graders. Children's writing development is reported elsewhere (Yedlin 2001, 2003); analysis of children's oral language will be forthcoming. In September 1999, the teacher, Mrs. Romano* told me about the responsibilities, complexities, and satisfactions of teaching ELL first-graders and about her expectations.

First grade is packed! We have goals to meet. From September to June ... [the children] do so much growing especially in ESL rooms, because [some of them] have so far to go with language. There's a lot going on all at the same time, learning, "This is your nose, "and "These are your ears." They're learning things like that [at the same time] they're learning the sounds of the letters and how to read. The kids have to learn ... not only the English language, but the language for rubrics, the language for assessment, ... the language for what's expected of them when they get to second grade. They need to know Dolch words, they need to know beginning sounds, ending sounds, middle sounds. Its a lot ... and with all that it's packed with, it comes with that much in reward because it's just amazing! I think my [ELL] children can do exactly what the other children can do, however, there are ways I [help them] that are different.

I found that the talk of this veteran first grade ESL teacher provided the 20-25 ELLs in her class with access to the types of language input and verbal interaction recommended to promote second language and literacy development (Ellis, 1984, 1994; Snow & Ferguson, 1977; Dickinson & Tabors,

2001; Snow, 1995; Wesche, 1994). Furthermore, the teacher's talk about language and text afforded children opportunities to understand and participate in academic discourse.

Features of Supportive Teacher Talk

Supportive teacher talk features:

- the use of physical props, graphics, pantomime, and gestures to represent ideas and facilitate children's comprehension,
- references to previously shared experiences which serve as background knowledge for new concepts,
- discussion of word meanings and text structures within meaningful, applied contexts,
- self-repetition and paraphrasing used to make language more comprehensible and to draw attention to important vocabulary, language features, and language patterns, and
- clarification and expansion of children's own oral and written language.

Analysis and comparison of teacher talk across whole-class writing lessons and individual writing conferences revealed that children received important, complementary types of language support in each setting. Group writing lessons exposed the children to structured academic talk about text, to the teacher's illustrative examples and experiences, and to opportunities to learn from and provide models for other children.

During individual conferences, while a teacher's aide supervised and assisted the other children's journal writing, Mrs. Romano responded to an individual child's written communication. She and the child engaged in dialogue about the child's topic, usually expanding and editing the piece. In the dyadic setting of the writing conference, the teacher adjusted her language scaffolding strategies according to the individual child's comprehension and proficiency levels.

Talk During the Writing Conference

Martin was a beginning ESL student. In his early conference, he and Mrs. Romano read, discussed, and expanded a November journal entry, originally consisting of a colorful drawing of his family and one sentence of written text, "I like my mom and dad and sister."

Analysis of this eighteen minute conference revealed Mrs. Romano's willingness and ability to sustain a dialogue in which many of her partner's turns were non-verbal: nods, smiles and shrugs. Mrs. Romano used talk about Martin's illustration as a basis for supplying language and for asking extending or clarifying questions: "Tell me who's who [in your picture]," "I bet that's your mom," "You're between your mom and your sister. What can you tell me about your mom?" Although Martin could answer Mrs. Romano's last question with the words "play game," he needed considerable help producing the sentence, "They play games with me." Unlike his classmates, he couldn't recognize and copy the words he needed from the word wall without assistance. Due to limited experience with the sounds of English, Martin wasn't able to invent spellings for words until Mrs. Romano pronounced each phoneme for him, asking him to point to the corresponding grapheme on an alphabet chart. But finally, after intensive word-by-word, letter-by-letter interaction, he produced a three-sentence story about his family which he proudly read over and over to anyone who would listen.

In another writing conference, Mrs. Romano helped Amy expand her two-sentence report of her visit to a friend's house, "I went to Nelda house. Her mom yell in us." In the writing conference excerpt below, we see the teacher suggesting a course of action (1), asking open-ended questions (3, 5, 7), and elaborating upon and re-fining Amy's brief and ungrammatical answers (13).

Excerpt from Amy's Writing Conference

1. Teacher: Well, let's figure out why Nelda's mom yelled at you.
2. Amy: (looks at teacher, squirms in seat)
3. Teacher: Why do you think Nelda's mom yelled at you?
4. Amy: (shrugs)
5. Teacher: What happened?
6. Amy: (smiles and squirms)
7. Teacher: Did something happen?
8. Amy: We was yellin'.
9. Teacher: You were yelling?
9. Amy: (nods sheepishly)
10. Teacher: Were you loud?
11. Amy: Yeah.
12. Teacher: Maybe we should say, "Nelda's mom yelled at us because we got too loud."
13. Amy: (smiles broadly and nods emphatically)

When the time came for Amy to say and write the new sentence (13), Mrs. Romano called her attention to the pronunciation, spelling, and meaning of the "ed" ending.

Talk During Whole-Class Lessons

During whole-class lessons, Mrs. Romano provided a broad band of input both comprehensible and challenging for children at different levels, despite the range of language proficiencies in the class. Unlike writing conferences, whole class lessons were highly choreographed events during which a carefully planned sequence of scaffolding activities prepared and enabled most children to accomplish an assigned writing task independently when they left the rug area and returned to their seats.

Mrs. Romano had made paper cutouts to represent and differentiate the concepts of character and setting. Each child had drawn and cut out a self-chosen character to write about in response to the teacher's introduction, "Draw a picture of the person you want to write about. That's the character of your story." Next, the teacher explained, "Draw a picture of the place where your story happens. That place is the setting." The characters were then pasted onto the scenes, and both character and scene were pasted onto a cardboard rectangle. In the transcript below, Mrs. Romano used her own storyboard to reiterate the words "character" and "setting" and to elaborate on their meanings (1, 4). Additionally, she demonstrated the meaning of two new words, "fold" and "focus." She further elaborated on the meaning of "focus" by its adjacency to the familiar, semantically related words, "pay attention" and "think about" (4).

Excerpt from Writing Lesson

1. Teacher: So what we did was everybody drew a picture of a character (points to drawing of Sam) that they're going to write a story about and a setting (points to the beach) where their story is going to take place. My character (points to drawing of Sam) is Sam and my story is going to take place at the beach (points to the beach).
2. Students: At the beach.
3. Student: Mines too.
4. Teacher: Okay. So we're going to take these boards that we made. We're going to fold them in half (demonstrates) and when we work, we're going to put them in front of us like this (stands partially folded storyboard in front of her on the table and looks into it) so that we can focus, pay attention to our character and our setting (focuses her vision on the storyboard, pointing to character and setting) and think about how we want our story to happen.

A few days later when I watched Mrs. Romano model the evaluation of her story, I understood why she said her motto is, "Reinforce, reiterate, and revisit again and again and again." Invoking once more the criteria for a good story, "In the beginning of the story, the author introduces the main characters and the setting," she then managed to repeat important literary terms and once more elaborate their meanings (1, 3, 5).

Excerpts from Follow-up Writing Lesson

1. Teacher: One summer day, Sam went to the beach with his family. That's the beginning of my story. Did I tell about my character?
2. Students: Yes.
3. Teacher: I did. There's my character's name right there in the beginning - Sam. So, I have to make sure in the beginning I mention my character and my setting. Did I mention my setting?
4. Students: Yeah.
5. Teacher: One summer day, Sam went to the beach. There's my setting - the beach.

Children's oral and written English flourished in Mrs. Romano's classroom. Her language and scaffolding provided a sort of metaphorical jungle gym or set of knotted ropes that enabled children to grab on and climb high. Her role vis-a-vis the children and the curriculum was like that of a wilderness guide, scouting ahead to find the easiest site for her party to cross the river, and then arranging stepping stones in strategic places, to help children negotiate the crossing. In Mrs. Romano's class, those who didn't need all the stepping-stones took bigger steps and leapt exuberantly over the stones they didn't need, while those with greater need for support jumped cautiously from stone to stone, proud of their accomplishment when they reached the other side.

Conclusion

As increasing numbers of students face the challenge of learning language, literacy, and content in English, increasing numbers of educators need staff development in this area (Wong-Fillmore, & Snow, 2000). High quality, ongoing, job-embedded staff development can help educators understand and facilitate language and literacy development. In many schools and districts there are ESL experts, like Mrs. Romano, on site. Those with ESL and bilingual expertise can often point out what is needed to make the curriculum more accessible to English Language Learners. Frequently, one of the greatest needs is for class-room talk that is more supportive of children's meaning-making. Although literacy is at center stage these days, we must be aware that literacy begins with language (Dickinson & Tabors, 2001). Children who cannot understand or participate in classroom talk are foreclosed from high achievement in reading and writing.

As stated earlier, the students in Mrs. Romano's classroom benefited from their participation in group lessons, as well as in individual conferences. In order to give students periodic access to the one-on-one and small group inter-actions that are so important for oral and written language development, teachers need the conditions that make such interactive contexts possible. In Mrs. Romano's class, it was the presence of an experienced aide that allowed her to focus on Martin and Amy. In other classrooms, team teaching, volunteers, cross-age tutors, small classes, and learning centers give teachers time to interact with individuals and small groups. Administrators who wish to promote ELL success must help teachers find time for these important interactions.

Author

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Note:

* Mrs. Romano and student names are pseudonyms throughout.

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