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Listening AND Learning

Recent statistics suggest that only 56% of Black students and 55% of Latino students who enter the ninth grade graduate with a high school diploma four years later, and only 12% to 14% graduate having met the requirements to attend a state university (Friedlander & Darling-Hammond, 2007). The reasons most often cited for those statistics are boredom and lack of engagement. For English language learners (ELLs), the odds are just as grave. According to a study by the Tomas Rivera Policy Institute,

Students reclassified in 8th grade as “proficient” in English [meeting the criteria to no longer be classified as an English learner] had two-thirds the odds of failing the 9th grade, and half the odds of dropping out—some of the lowest figures among all students ever identified as ELL. (Flores, Painter, Harlow-Nash, & Pachon, 2009, p. 2)

The study suggested that meeting the criteria to no longer be classified as an ELL in middle school occurs a little too late for many ELLs. Something must be done sooner and systemically so that ELLs make progress in academic and English language development. How can educators engage all students, especially ELLs who may have academic and English language gaps when they enter secondary settings?

The Needs of ELLs

Many ELLs who enter secondary school settings have obtained long-term English learner (LTEL) status. Those students are in grades 6–12 and are not making adequate progress in either English language proficiency or academic language development across content areas. According to Olsen (2010),

These students struggle academically. They have distinct language issues, including: high functioning social language, very weak academic language, and significant deficits in reading and writing skills.... Long Term English Learners have significant gaps in academic background knowledge. In addition, many have developed habits of non-engagement, learned



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Shadowing English language learners (ELLs) helps educators gain firsthand knowledge of where the gaps in their language development lay. ● On the basis of their observations and achievement data, participants explore strategies to support students. ● Next steps include selecting and using instructional strategies that support ELLs' language development in targeted ways.

passivity and invisibility in school. The majority of Long Term English Learners want to go to college, and are unaware that their academic skills, record and courses are not preparing them to reach that goal. Neither students, their parents nor their community realizes that they are in academic jeopardy. (p. 2)

Because of the lack of structured academic talk in classrooms, many ELLs are allowed to hide out in classes or are perceived as being proficient in English only because they are required to speak for short segments of time. For example, teachers may initiate a discussion with a closed-ended question (e.g., "What is the setting of this story?") that requires only a one-word response (e.g., "New Mexico"). Often, in fact, instead of targeting the specific needs and gaps that students have and using both scaffolding and accelerated instruction as needed, cognitively disrespectful (i.e., too easy and not developmentally appropriate or challenging) curricular materials are watered down to use with ELLs.

Many ELLs are also not receiving appropriate English language development that reflects their language proficiency and developmental levels. In fact, Flores, Painter, Harlow-Nash, and Pachon (2009) also suggested that

reclassified ELLs [students who had accelerated through English language proficiency levels, and had met criteria to no longer be classified as ELL] were also significantly less likely to fail 9th grade or to dropout, and much more likely to pass [high school exit exams] or to take an AP course. (p. 2)

Although reclassification to non-ELL status is not necessarily enough to help students meet grade-level academic expectations, it is the first hurdle that ELLs must cross to be subject to the rigorous academic expectations that will prepare them for college and beyond.

Figure 1

ELL Shadow Study Observation Form

Demographic Data

STUDENT: Eduardo	SCHOOL: Si Se Puede High School	
ELD LEVEL: Level 3 (Intermediate)	GENDER: Male	GRADE LEVEL: 9th
YEARS IN US SCHOOLS: 10 years	YEARS IN DISTRICT: 10 years	

Academic Speaking and Listening Portion

Time (five-minute intervals)	Specific activity/location of student	Academic speaking (check one)	Academic listening (one-way or two-way)	Student is not listening	Comments
8:00	Student is speaking to class	<input type="checkbox"/> Student to student (1) <input type="checkbox"/> Student to teacher (2) <input type="checkbox"/> Student to small group (3) <input type="checkbox"/> Student to whole class (4) <input type="checkbox"/> Teacher to student (5) <input type="checkbox"/> Teacher to small group (6) <input type="checkbox"/> Teacher to whole class (7)	<input type="checkbox"/> Student mostly listening to student <input type="checkbox"/> Student mostly listening to teacher <input type="checkbox"/> Student mostly listening to small group <input type="checkbox"/> Student mostly listening to whole class	<input type="checkbox"/> Student is reading silently <input type="checkbox"/> Student is off task	Student uses academic language stem to complete his response

ELL Shadowing

Creating awareness of ELLs' schooling by seeing firsthand their academic and language proficiency needs is essential to systemically closing literacy gaps. An eye-opening way to see and create urgency around the academic language needs of ELLs is shadowing, a technique whereby educators spend a day in the life of an ELL to monitor his or her academic language experiences. After receiving professional development about the specific academic language and active listening needs of ELLs, shadowing participants are assigned to individual students and receive profiles of

their achievement data (e.g., grade-level state assessment and language proficiency results), as well as recent student pictures, so that they can identify their students.

Once educators have met their ELLs "on paper," they triangulate the data by monitoring their ELLs' academic language and active listening at every five-minute interval for at least two hours. Participants use the ELL shadowing protocol to monitor to whom the ELLs are speaking and listening.

USING THE ELL SHADOWING PROTOCOL

The top portion of the ELL shadowing form (see figure 1) is used for demographic data and to begin to analyze trends in the data set. For example, an educator who begins

to transfer information from his or her ELL profile may notice that the English language development (ELD) level does not match the number of years that the student was in the United States, making the ELL an LTEL because he or she has been in the system as an ELL for six years or more. Participants may also notice that their ELLs have not progressed by one English language development level a year or that they have stalled out at a particular level for several years. Those sorts of observations allow educators to become better acquainted with the specific gaps that ELLs in their own classrooms may be experiencing.

Once participants have reviewed the achievement data for their own ELLs, they use the academic speaking and listening portion of the ELL shadowing form. In the first column, participants note the exact time of the observation at every five-minute interval. It is important that in the second column, only activities that occur at the top of the five-minute interval are documented. Anything else that occurs after the top of the five-minute interval can be added to the comments section.

In the third column, observers use codes one through four to document when students are speaking. Codes five through seven are for teacher talk only and are intended to capture moments when the student is not speaking. The type of student listening, either one way (lecture) or two way (dialogue), is documented in the fourth column. The observers record whether students are either reading or writing silently and not listening in the fifth column. Lastly, additional comments that cannot be coded by the academic speaking or listening modes are then captured in the final column. Observers capture data in this manner at every five-minute interval for two hours.

DEBRIEFING THE SHADOWING EXPERIENCE

Once all educators within a system have shadowed for a two-hour period of time, they congregate so that general trends regarding ELLs' listening and speaking needs can be examined. Those data should also be compared with the students' achievement data. The observation data often answer the *why* of the trends and patterns in the achieve-



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ment data. Those data also begin to suggest next steps for teachers both individually and within a system, one of which is often that more structured academic oral language development strategies must be planned for and used often within classrooms. As noted by one teacher in District 6 of the Los Angeles Unified School District, where ELL shadowing began, "The person talking the most is the person learning the most, and I'm doing the most talking!"

Next Steps

ELL shadowing is not a silver bullet. In and of itself, it is meant to create urgency about the needs of ELL students across a system. After shadowing is completed, it is essential that schools develop a systemic plan to create more opportunities for ELLs to produce academic language across content areas. Some of the schools that I work with have chosen to systemically adopt specific strategies that elicit more academic oral language development across a school day, such as think-pair-share, the Frayer model, and reciprocal teaching.

Think-pair-share (see figure 2) is an explicit way to teach the academic register of language and is a good place to begin when first trying to elicit more academic talk in a classroom setting. Unlike partner talk, which can be used for a brief academic language exchange, think-pair-share, when structured appropriately, explicitly teaches students to think about their thinking (metacognition) and provides ELLs with the additional time that they need to process new language and content.

The think-pair-share strategy also trains all students in how to listen carefully to their

Figure 2

Think-Pair-Share Organizer

Question	What I Thought (Speaking)	What My Partner Thought (Listening)	What We Will Share



Once you've experienced a day in the academic life of an ELL, it is truly difficult to turn away and not change practice.

partners and paraphrase responses. Listening and speaking are especially important because they are scaffolds for reading and writing. Teachers also benefit from this strategy as they learn to better develop open-ended questions that are linked to the objectives and standards that they are teaching.

The middle and high schools that I work with in the Norwalk–La Mirada Unified School District in Norwalk, CA, first began with a small teacher-leadership group of representatives from across the content areas. Those teachers began exploring and implementing think-pair-share strategies into their daily practice. I met with teachers over a six-month period in spring 2011 (the professional development has continued in the 2011–12 school year), and we worked to perfect what seemed

like a very simple strategy. The teacher leaders learned how to develop open-ended questions using Bloom's taxonomy, how to incorporate academic language stems so that ELLs knew how to syntactically formulate academic responses, and how to teach students to listen carefully so that they would paraphrase responses and not just hear responses.

Each of those moves within think-pair-share were powerful in amplifying and not simplifying academic language across a school day and across content areas. In this manner, the plan after ELL shadowing is just as important as shadowing itself. The strategies without the shadowing context, however, will often be implemented in vain or without teachers really understanding the true academic language needs of ELLs in a classroom setting. Once you've experienced a day in the academic life of an ELL, it is truly difficult to turn away and not change practice. **PL**

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