

Adjusting Our Talk with ELLs

By Wendy Seger | Categories: English Language Learners

We've learned a lot about talk and the English Language Learner (ELL). We know that early on, the ELL may not produce much talk. We know that an opportunity to engage in conversation with peers during lessons is an essential practice in developing academic language. We know that building a safe and supportive learning community in the classroom will help keep affective filters low, allowing ELLs to take risks to share their ideas aloud, making adjustments in their talk as they become more proficient. But exactly how can we adjust our talk to support the ELLs who enter our classrooms with limited experience speaking English?

Some very practical suggestions can be found in a short article from the February 2016 issue of *Educational Leadership*. In the article, "Let Them Talk," the author, Wayne E. Wright, suggests a few practices that are familiar to those implementing lessons that are part of CCC Collaborative Literacy. One effective practice is **increasing wait time**. ELLs with limited proficiency may need additional time to think; they may need to process and translate in their heads before responding. Another effective approach is to begin with **short probes** that lead to **open-ended questions**, allowing ELLs 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?" "Do you agree with...? Why not?" This type of questioning encourages more student talk during discussions and creates opportunities for ELLs to think deeply about academic content, to tackle complex texts, and to express and elaborate on their ideas orally. Use of this practice also shows recognition that students' ability to speak a second language has nothing to do with their ability to think abstractly.

Taking into account the differences in students' proficiency levels, teachers may also find it helpful to adjust their talk in the following ways:

- **Slow down.** Use a steady, but slower rate of speech when talking to beginning level ELLs than you would in normal conversation with proficient speakers. 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 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-"Thank you, Miriam! 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 are also provided suggestions about other ways to adjust their language, such as how to make questions more comprehensible for ELLs, in the Introduction of our Collaborative Literacy programs as well as the ELL Notes featured across the lessons.

One last suggestion (based on my own experience as a second-language learner): Smile when you talk. It is an humbling, often anxiety producing experience to change cultures and learn a new language. The kind and warm manner in which we speak will put the new learners at ease and show them that we care first about them and then, about how they learn.

Wright, W.E. (2016). Let them talk! Educational Leadership, 73(5), 24-29.

Read Wendy's previous blogs, "Building Vocabulary through Learning the Language" and "The Power of Images for the English Language Learner."