CTQ Collaboratory

Unlocking Language for English-Learners

By Justin Minkel

Eighty-five percent of the students at my school speak English as a second language. Many of these children come to us in kindergarten without knowing the English words for "pencil" or "butter." But by the time they leave us in 5th grade, they're talking confidently about cytoplasm, the associate property of multiplication, and key features of informational texts.

What's the secret to this dramatic growth? It comes down to a few simple factors:

- Explicit language instruction in structures of English that are invisible to native speakers.
- High expectations paired with individualized instruction.
- A school where every teacher is trained in ESL techniques, in a district where everyone from the custodians to the superintendent respects the family, nation, and culture that each child comes from.

In my last class of 2nd graders, only seven of the 24 English-learners were reading on grade level at the beginning of the year. I looped with the kids, and by the end of 3rd grade, 23 of the 24 were proficient or advanced readers.

When I think back on the teaching techniques that made the biggest difference for that class, two come to mind: Using the **gradual release of responsibility** instructional model; and providing more time for students to talk.

Here's what these approaches look like in my classroom.

Gradual Release of Responsibility

The theory sounds simple. To teach any skill, you go through four stages—sometimes in an hour-long lesson, sometimes over the course of several weeks.

1. *Think-aloud:* First, the teacher models not only how to do the skill, but what she is *thinking* while she does it. (Kids can see what we do—but they can't see what we think.)

Take this example: Let's say we want to teach the kids how to fly a kite. The teacher takes the class outside and they watch her fly a kite for a few minutes. As they watch, she says: "I just felt a gust of wind, so I'm going to unspool a few feet of string to let the kite go higher. I see some power lines and trees over there on my right, so I'm going to walk left in case the kite swoops down."

2. *Guided practice:* Next, the kids do the skill with the teacher, telling her what to write or do.

The students tell the teacher what to do to get the kite in the air and keep it there. They might take turns holding the spool of twine, but the teacher is right there with them.

3. *Productive group work:* The kids work on the skill together, usually in pairs or groups of three or four.

The teacher divides the kids into teams, gives each team a kite to share, and lets them go off to fly it. She walks around asking questions, offering suggestions, and making notes for the discussion the class will have later.

4. *Independent practice:* The students do the skill independently.

Each student now gets his or her own kite and goes off to fly it.

When a lesson flops, I realize it's usually because I left out one of these stages. Maybe I didn't explain what was going on in my brain as I modeled a strategy like using visual cues to figure out unknown words in a text. Maybe I jumped from the mini-lesson straight to the independent stage without giving students time to work on the new skill with the support of a partner or team.

When I give enough thought to each stage, the results can be amazing. First graders who couldn't write an opinion piece on Monday are doing it independently by Thursday.

This might not seem like an ESL-specific technique—and it works just as effectively with native English speakers. But the model builds in purposeful language at each stage of a lesson, including plenty of opportunities for kids to not only *hear* rich academic language but to *speak* it.

These speaking opportunities usually occur in small groups. Nervousness can cripple oral language for English-learners who are shy about making mistakes in front of the whole class. Talking to a partner or two feels less threatening for most students than speaking in front of 20 or 30 peers.

More Time for Students to Talk

Every teacher I know (myself included) talks too much. The most successful days in my class tend to be the days where I talk least, giving students more time to talk, think, and do.

I assign kids a conversation partner for the week, and they do about 20 "think-pair-shares" a day. I usually provide some kind of written sentence frame to support their language. Here are a few examples:

"I predict that _____." (For reading or science)
"We know how many _____. We need to figure out how many ___." (For talking through math word problems)

"I think _____ because _____." (For any subject)

Invisible Language

I support these partner conversations by teaching the kids invisible language: "mortar words" like articles and prepositions, not just "brick words" like nouns and verbs.

Nouns are easy to teach through visuals like the illustrations and diagrams in books. Verbs are easy, too, because students can act them out.

What's harder for English-learners to pick up are "mortar words" used to connect the nouns and verbs in sentences. Prepositions like *under* vs. *behind* or *in* vs. *on*. Other mortars include the markers for verb tenses, like the "-ed" at the end of regular past-tense verbs.

I often say or write these "invisible words" in Spanish so students can connect their home language with English. I also provide a chart with key question words (*Why, Who, How,* etc.) in both English and Spanish.

I also build mini-lessons on language into **writer's workshops**, guided reading, and sentence frames on the board for the many think-pair-shares. It's useful to write two "word banks" on the board before students do a think-pair-share—one with the "brick words" and another with the "mortar words."

Last week, my 1st graders played a game where they built a figure with pattern blocks, then told a partner how to build the same figure. The sentence stem was, "Put a (*shape*) _____ the (*shape*)." For example, a student might say, "Put a *trapezoid* **beneath** the *hexagon*."

The first word bank had pattern blocks taped to the board beside each shape's name. The second word bank was a list of prepositions: beneath, on top of, to the left of, and so on.

Questions Worth Talking About

Finally, I give the kids good questions to discuss. By good question, I mean a question the teacher doesn't already know the answer to.

For example, when we read *Fantastic Mr. Fox*, I don't ask, "How many fox kits do Mr. and Mrs. Fox have?" It's a simple question with only one right answer.

Instead, I ask, "Was it OK for Mr. Fox to steal from the farmers?" I don't know in advance what the kids will say, and there are plenty of "right answers."

"Yes! Those farmers were mean and nasty."
"No! Stealing is wrong, even if you're stealing from somebody mean."
"Yes! If he hadn't stolen, his babies would have starved to death."

Kids like to think. They like to talk. If we ask good questions and teach them the language they need, even beginning English-learners will say brilliant things.

I once heard Scott Shirey, head of the KIPP Schools in Delta, give teachers this advice: "Assume

your students can learn anything."

Language is a door. Locked, it shuts kids out of the opportunities they need. Open, it's a portal to the lives they dream about.

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Photos of Justin Minkel's class provided by the author.