

Strategies for
Content Accessible

Second Edition

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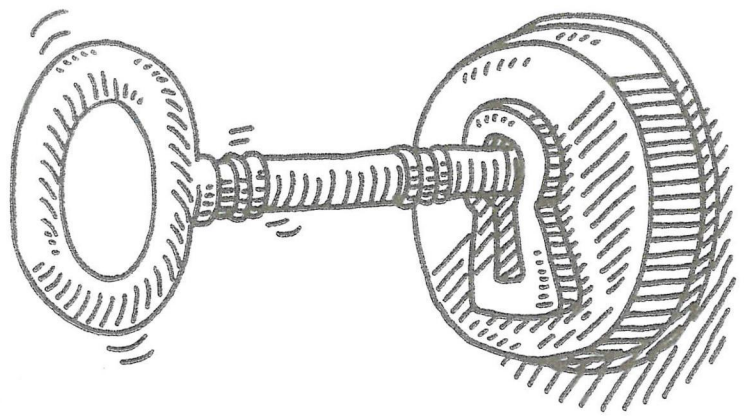
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PEER LEARNING: FOSTERING MLs' ORAL LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT AND CONTENT UNDERSTANDING

Mr. Hernandez's eighth-grade science class, which is about 20 percent emergent multilingual learners (MLs) of varying proficiency levels, is working on a unit on the relationship among organisms within an ecosystem. They have learned key vocabulary, read a short text on the topic, and answered open-ended questions about the text they are using. In order to reinforce the material before their next activity, Mr. Hernandez has prepared a set of discussion questions that require students to use the new vocabulary and provide evidence to support their thinking on the topic. Students are seated in groups of four with their desks facing each other.

Before beginning the activity, Mr. Hernandez reviews with students that the purpose of the lesson is for students to gain a deeper understanding of the topic but also to practice their discussion skills. He asks students what it looks like to actively listen to another student. A couple of students respond, saying that they should be facing the speaker and



Source: iStock.com/asiseeit

making eye contact with the speaker. Mr. Hernandez also refers students to the word bank of unit vocabulary that they have as a handout and sentence stems on the wall that they can use when having a discussion (e.g., I agree with _____ because _____). As the students engage in their discussion of the questions, Mr. Hernandez walks around the room with a checklist (Figure 4.1). He takes notes of the types of skills students are using in their discussions (e.g., supporting ideas with evidence, clarifying, and building on one another's ideas), and he records which skills the students need to work on. He also copies down some key ideas that students share. He will present these to the whole group as a way of reviewing important ideas and recognizing the contributions students have made during the discussion.

Mr. Hernandez knows that content standards require that students be able to effectively participate in different types of conversations and with diverse partners. Students are expected to build on others' ideas and express their own ideas clearly and persuasively. Mr. Hernandez also knows that including peer learning opportunities, such as academic conversations, regularly in instruction can benefit both his MLs and non-MLs in terms of their academic language and literacy development, content understanding, and critical-thinking skills (Zwiers, 2019). He recognizes that supporting MLs' oral language development will provide a foundation for their literacy development (Escamilla et al., 2022). However, in order to have MLs effectively participate in peer learning, they need explicit preparation, scaffolded support, and instruction in what it means to participate including an understanding of their teachers' expectations for participation, as well as validation of what participation may look like in their home culture (e.g., rote learning, limited opportunities for discussion) (Staehr Fenner & Teich, in press).

REFLECTION QUESTIONS



Reflect on the scenario from Mr. Hernandez's science classroom.

1. How did Mr. Hernandez prepare the emergent MLs in his class to participate in the small-group discussion?
2. What additional scaffolds or supports might you add to this activity? Why?



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In this chapter, we discuss the importance of including peer learning opportunities in instruction, explain why peer learning is important for MLs, and provide guidelines for developing effective peer learning activities. We then describe four student practices that will foster MLs' engagement in peer learning activities in order to support their oral language development and their engagement with challenging content material. We include tools that you can use when planning and implementing peer learning activities and give you some recommendations for

FIGURE 4.1 DISCUSSION CHECKLIST

Key: (1) needs additional support in achieving expectations, (2) meets expectations, and (3) exceeds expectations

different types of peer learning activities to use with MLs. We also include recommendations for using peer learning activities with ML newcomer students and students with limited or interrupted formal education (SLIFE).

Why Is It Important to Focus on Peer Learning for MLs?

Most teachers understand that partner or small-group peer learning activities provide excellent opportunities for MLs' oral language development because each student has more time to talk than in a large-group discussion. In addition, students often feel more comfortable sharing their ideas in a small-group setting, increasing student engagement. However, if appropriately structured, pair and small-group discussions can also be highly beneficial to MLs for other reasons. Figure 4.2 highlights some of the key benefits of peer learning for MLs.

FIGURE 4.2 BENEFITS OF PEER LEARNING FOR MLs



Oral language development supports literacy development in a second language, particularly in the area of comprehension.



Academic discussions are a powerful way for MLs to learn content as they provide meaningful opportunities to hear and practice content-specific language and vocabulary.



Peer learning activities support MLs in developing stronger social emotional skills, academic identity, agency, and voice.



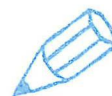
Peer learning activities provide opportunities for formative assessment.

Sources: August & Shanahan (2006); Escamilla, Olsen, & Slayik (2022); National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, & Medicine [NASEM] (2017); Zwiers (2019).

In the 2017 NASEM report *Promoting the Educational Success of Children and Youth Learning English: Promising Futures*, peer learning is identified as a promising and effective practice for emergent MLs at all grade bands: K–5, 6–8, and 9–12. However, despite the many benefits of peer learning for MLs, opportunities for MLs to engage in academic speaking remain limited. In her work shadowing K–12 MLs across the county, Soto (2021) estimated that MLs appeared to be

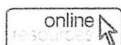
spending approximately 5 percent to 10 percent of their school day engaged in academic speaking. However, Gibbons (2015) notes that the percentage of time students engage in conversations should be closer to 30 percent. Additionally, even in instances where a teacher includes peer learning activities, MLs may find the work too challenging if they do not understand their expected role in the task they are working on, if they do not feel confident in using the level of language required for the task, or if the task differs greatly from their cultural expectations.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS



Reflect on student speaking time in your context.

1. How often do MLs have the opportunity to engage in discussion with their peers about what they are learning?
2. If opportunities for MLs to engage in discussions are limited, why might this be?
3. Where do opportunities exist to build in more time for ML peer interaction?



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How Do I Develop Effective Peer Learning Activities for MLs?

A critical step in supporting ML engagement in academic conversations is developing peer learning activities that will encourage their participation. To begin exploring this topic, read the following classroom scenarios, and then answer the discussion questions that follow.

APPLICATION ACTIVITY 4.1: GRADE 4 LESSON COMPARISON

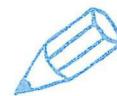
Ms. Michael's Lesson: Ms. Michael's fourth-grade class has been learning about the ways that colonists interacted with Indigenous Americans in the New World. They have watched a short video on the topic and completed written questions about the video. Ms. Michael wants to build more peer learning opportunities into her lessons, so before transitioning to a new topic, she asks students to turn and talk. She tells the students that each person in the pair should share one way colonists interacted with Indigenous Americans. As the students talk, Ms. Michael walks around the room. She notices that many of her emergent MLs, even those at intermediate and advanced levels of language proficiency, are saying very little or giving one- or two-word answers. She also notices that other pairs are off task, talking about what they want to do after school or what they did during music class. Ms. Michael feels frustrated and stops the activity after about three or four minutes.

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Mr. Thomas's Lesson: Mr. Thomas's fourth-grade class has been learning about the ways that colonists interacted with Indigenous Americans in the New World. They completed a graphic organizer while watching a short video on the topic. Mr. Thomas strategically paused the video to discuss key ideas and provide time for students to add information to their graphic organizers. Mr. Thomas wants to build more peer learning opportunities into his lesson, so before transitioning to a new topic, he instructs students to turn and talk. He writes the prompt on the board, "Which action by the colonists do you believe was the most impactful to Indigenous Americans in the New World? Why?" He provides sample sentence stems for students to use during their turn and talk and models the activity with a student volunteer prior to asking students to engage in discussion with their partner. He also informs students that he will be circulating the room, listening for key ideas and evidence students share. As the students discuss their ideas, Mr. Thomas walks around the room taking notes on key ideas he hears and providing additional support to pairs as needed. He notices that the emergent MLs at the beginning to intermediate levels of language proficiency are referencing their graphic organizers and sentence stems throughout the activity. To conclude the activity, Mr. Thomas displays his notes and highlights several key ideas he heard students discussing.

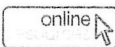
APPLICATION ACTIVITY 4.1 REFLECTION QUESTIONS



Compare Ms. Michael's and Mr. Thomas's lessons.

1. Which teacher, Ms. Michael or Mr. Thomas, more effectively prepared their emergent MLs to participate in the pair discussion? Explain why.

2. What recommendations would you make to Ms. Michael about how to improve the peer learning task she provided to her students?



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Ms. Michael's lesson described above is a cautionary tale. Just providing students opportunities to talk will not necessarily lead to the desired results. As we can see in this scenario, despite Ms. Michael's good intentions there were several missed opportunities, as her peer learning activity did not meet her expectations, nor

did it benefit students to the extent that it might have. Mr. Thomas strategically planned his peer learning activity to more appropriately support his emergent MLs, including providing time for students to prepare for the discussion using a graphic organizer, modeling expectations for the discussion, sharing optional sentence stems, and providing an open-ended discussion prompt. Zwiers (2014, 2019) makes several recommendations for supporting the development of oral language skills. Walqui and Heritage (2018) provide six guidelines for promoting quality interactions for MLs during peer learning activities. We have made connections between these researchers' suggestions and synthesized them, along with contributing our own understanding of their importance for MLs.

1. Adapt activities to include authentic talk and scaffold ML

participation and growth. This strategy requires that, during peer learning activities, students do not merely read a prepared sentence or two from a piece of paper. They must have opportunities to speak authentically about the topic (Zwiers, 2014, 2019). This can be a challenge for emergent MLs who may not yet have the English language skills or confidence to do so. Be sure to include appropriate scaffolds to support ML participation and growth (Walqui & Heritage, 2018), such as sample sentence stems that increase in complexity and a word bank with visual supports. For more on helping MLs prepare for opportunities for authentic talk, see Practice 1 later in this chapter. In developing peer learning activities, think about how you might structure an activity in order to help prepare students to speak authentically. For example, you might have students discuss a question in small groups and write down their responses. Then, they could practice sharing their responses with each other without their notes. After they have had this opportunity to practice, students could change groups and share their responses with someone new.

2. Use activities that develop meaningful and robust language.

As was described in the earlier example, students need opportunities to practice, refine, and deepen their oral language responses. Such practice is especially beneficial to MLs, as they are able to hear and use key vocabulary and academic language several times. It also provides MLs, as well as other students, with opportunities to hear the content explained in varied ways and to think about the content from multiple perspectives. Peer learning activities that allow MLs opportunities to practice expressing their ideas in clearer and more compelling ways will support their oral language development and content understanding. Walqui and Heritage (2018) highlight that oral language activities are most effective when they challenge MLs and are designed to incrementally build students' language and content understanding. Examples of these types of activities include the 1-3-6 protocol and debrief circles. For an explanation of these activities, see Figure 4.12.

3. Be selective in addressing errors and intentional in providing

feedback. Walqui and Heritage (2018) highlight that during peer learning activities MLs may produce language that is comprehensible but that

contains errors. They recommend focusing on providing feedback on errors related to making sense of the academic content, rather than focusing on correcting errors of language production. For instance, if a student uses a technical vocabulary word in a way that interferes with understanding, the teacher can directly explain how to use the word in context in order to support understanding. Teachers should consider the strengths and needs of the individual MLs in their class (e.g., English language proficiency levels, language goals, personality) when making decisions about how much feedback to provide.

4. **Use engaging discussion prompts that create a need to talk and contain clear expectations and directions.** Zwiers (2014, 2019) recommends discussion prompts that require students to share information and build one or more ideas. The prompts should align with clearly defined lesson goals and integrate reading and writing (Walqui & Heritage, 2018). If you ask students to reshape, choose, or do something with ideas, it is likely to foster greater discussion and debate among students than if you ask them merely to identify. Zwiers (2019) identifies the following verbs to use when developing engaging prompts: *agree on, create, clarify, argue, decide, rank, prioritize, come up with, solve, evaluate, combine, compare, choose, fortify, build, weigh, and transform*. As we saw in the scenario in Application Activity 4.1, Ms. Michael's discussion prompt was insufficient to garner much student interest in the topic as it simply asked students to identify. Students in Mr. Thomas' class had more to say because he used a discussion prompt that asked students to both prioritize and explain.

FIGURE 4.3 ENGAGING DISCUSSION PROMPT

Students watch a video and read a text about how to combat climate change.

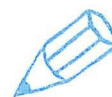
The teacher is considering using *one of the following prompts* for students to engage in a discussion on the topic.

- A. Compare the key ideas for combatting climate change from the video and the text.
- B. With your partner, compare the ideas shared in the video to the ideas shared in the text. Which ideas for combatting climate change are most likely to succeed? Explain your reasoning.



REFLECTION QUESTION

Which prompt related to combatting climate change in Figure 4.3 is more effective? Why?



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The types of questions and prompts teachers develop are important for fostering student participation and engagement (Ward Singer, 2018; Zwiers, 2010). Figure 4.4 provides examples of these types of prompts and questions that will encourage meaningful communication and student learning. We have adapted this table (Zwiers, 2010) to include specific considerations for MLs.

FIGURE 4.4 TYPES OF QUESTIONS, CONSIDERATIONS FOR MLs, AND EXAMPLES

CREATE QUESTIONS THAT ...	ML CONSIDERATION	EXAMPLE QUESTION
Focus students on key content concepts.	Ensure MLs have the proper scaffolding (e.g., visuals, glossaries, and home language support) to focus on key content concepts.	Discuss the purpose of the <i>Bill of Rights</i> . Agree on why it is important.
Allow for divergent and personalized responses, as long as they connect back to evidence in the material being studied.	Ensure that MLs' background experiences and cultures are valued and drawn from during instruction.	With your partner, come up with a list of all the ways your school manages waste. Rank your list from most effective to least effective.
Emphasize one or more thinking skills being developed in the lesson and unit. Such skills include questioning, interpreting, classifying, persuading, evaluating, analyzing, comparing, and synthesizing.	Provide supports so that MLs can engage in these higher order thinking skills, including modeling the skill, posting sentence stems and frames, and providing time for MLs to practice the skill.	Consider the character's actions throughout the story. What can you infer about the character's relationship with his grandmother based on his actions?
Deepen understandings and emphasize the essential objectives of the text, lesson, or unit.	Ensure that MLs understand the essential objectives and that instruction of academic language is intertwined with instruction of the content.	Think about today's activity. What does the activity have to do with our goal of learning how plants get the materials they need to grow?

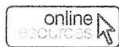
Source: Adapted from Think-pair-share tips by Jeff Zwiers. Retrieved from <http://jeffzwiers.org/tools>

REFLECTION QUESTIONS



Think about a peer learning activity that you included in a previous lesson that you taught.

1. To what extent did you include authentic opportunities for MLs to speak, time for students to strengthen and deepen their responses, and engaging discussion prompts?
2. What might you do to improve that activity if you were to teach it again?



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What Practices Can MLs Engage in to Support Their Participation and Engagement in Peer Learning Activities?

In order to support MLs' participation and engagement in peer learning, we have developed four practices for supporting this engagement as well as instructional tools that can support these practices. These practices were synthesized and adapted from Zwiers and Crawford's (2011) work to account for the specific strengths and needs of MLs. The four practices are shown in Figure 4.5.

FIGURE 4.5 FOUR PRACTICES FOR SUPPORTING MLs IN PEER LEARNING ACTIVITIES



We will be discussing each of these practices in depth, providing example scenarios to illustrate the practices and tools that can support the practices. In addition to focusing on these practices, it is also important for teachers to create a classroom climate that supports sharing diverse ideas, respectful listening, and active participation. Students need to understand that academic conversations during peer learning activities are an opportunity for them to think more deeply and critically about a topic, and they will be able to do this deeper-level thinking when they take the opportunity to share their ideas and listen to the ideas of others. In fact, research indicates that peer interaction provides an opportunity for scaffolding language learning as MLs receive feedback from one another on language forms, which supports future learning and use of language (Blum-Kulka & Snow, 2004; Kibler, 2017).

Practice 1: Come to the discussion prepared.

In order for MLs to successfully participate in an academic discussion, they must have sufficient preparation in the content they will be discussing. It is unfair to expect MLs to engage in pair or small-group tasks in which they feel unprepared to contribute. In order to support MLs in being prepared for the peer learning activity, you can draw on many of the strategies that we address in this book, including the following:

- Using scaffolded materials (Chapter 3)
- Modeling (Chapter 3)
- Explicit vocabulary instruction (Chapter 5)
- Developing academic language at the sentence and discourse levels (Chapter 6)
- Instruction of essential background knowledge (Chapter 7)
- Strategies for supporting reading and writing (Chapter 8)

This doesn't mean that peer learning activities should only be used to summarize what students already know but rather that MLs should have sufficient content and language knowledge and support in order to be able to take their understanding of the content to a deeper level. For example, in the opening vignette about Mr. Hernandez's eighth-grade science class, prior to the discussion, students had learned key vocabulary, read a short text on the relationships among organisms in an ecosystem, and answered open-ended questions about the text. Students were also given a word bank containing the list of vocabulary that they had been studying and sentence stems to support their participation in discussions.

In structuring group and pair discussions, it can be helpful for MLs to have written ideas or notes for reference. However, it is also important to help students transition to being able to speak without the use of notes so as to support more authentic

conversations. For example, students could use sticky notes to write down ideas that they have that they want to share with the class as they are reading. In this way, students can remember their big ideas but not be overly dependent on written notes in a discussion.

Part of supporting MLs in being prepared is also helping them build their confidence to participate in academic conversations. For example, you might first have students think about their responses to a text individually and take notes on their responses (as was described above with the use of sticky notes). Then, they can share their responses with a partner. This structure allows them to practice in a lower anxiety-producing context. Finally, you can ask students to share their responses with the whole group. In addition to building confidence, this method also allows MLs to process the academic content and language from reading about it, writing notes about it, saying it to one person as a rehearsal, and then saying it confidently to the whole group as a more polished product. It is important to note that some MLs (those with lower levels of language proficiency or those who are less confident speaking in front of a group) may need more time before they are ready to speak in front of the whole class.

Practice 2: Be aware of nonverbal communication.

In order to effectively participate in peer learning activities, students must understand that there are certain cultural expectations for how they should conduct themselves when participating in a discussion. Zwiers and Crawford (2011) identify the following nonverbal communication behaviors as those valued in an academic setting:

- “Appropriate” eye contact (which can mean not constantly staring at the other person but also not always looking down, away, or past the other person)
- Facing one another with the entire body
- Leaning toward the person speaking
- Showing understanding through head nodding
- “Appropriate” gesturing (not rolling eyes, sighing, or folding arms)
- Showing interest by laughing and smiling appropriately
- Using encouraging language to promote continued conversation (e.g., uh huh, hmm, interesting, yes, okay)
- Interrupting to ask for clarification if needed (pp. 41–42)

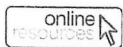
It is likely apparent from reviewing this list that these behaviors are the expectations of teachers from the dominant culture, and it is important to note that nonverbal communication may be incongruent across cultures (Staehr Fenner & Teich, in press). It is also worth noting that the rise of online communication

through social media and its acceleration during the COVID-19 pandemic may have had an impact on all students' use of and understanding of nonverbal communication (Paradisi et al., 2021). Explicitly teaching and practicing these skills is essential to supporting students' understanding of the role of nonverbal communication during peer learning activities.

Expected nonverbal communication in U.S. culture may not be appropriate in other cultures or for neurodivergent students, and you should exercise caution in how you use nonverbal communication when interacting with students from diverse backgrounds (Staehr Fenner & Teich, in press). You can provide students with some examples of how expectations of nonverbal communication vary among cultures as a way of getting the discussion started, and you can also ask students to provide their own examples. For example, in the United States, making eye contact with a speaker shows that you are interested in what they have to say. However, in other cultures, eye contact may be perceived as a challenge, or extended eye contact between members of the opposite sex may be considered taboo. As you explain what is considered expected nonverbal communication in U.S. culture, be sure to demonstrate respect for your MLs' cultures and validate them.

REFLECTION QUESTION

How might the MLs in your classroom have different understandings or expectations for what a conversation looks like (e.g., both in terms of nonverbal communication and communication patterns)?



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Another strategy for teaching MLs about expected nonverbal communication for conversations is to model nonverbal communication that does not align with what is valued in U.S. academic settings. To do so, you could find video clips to share or do a role-play with a coteacher (if you have one) while the class observes. Then, you could discuss what reactions the students observed and what alternative nonverbal communication could look like. You could also use this opportunity to discuss how cultural expectations for nonverbal communication vary among cultures (e.g., in some cultures, students stand up when the teacher enters the room).

In order to reinforce understanding of nonverbal communication, you could use an observation checklist to monitor student communication (see Figure 4.1 as an example). You could also have students complete a self-assessment in which they reflect on their own nonverbal communication during discussions (see Figure 4.6 as an example).