

## 4 Practices for Fostering ELs' Oral Language Development

by [Sydney Snyder](#) and [Diane Staehr Fenner](#)

Most teachers understand that pair and group work provide excellent opportunities for English learners' (ELs') oral language development. They usually recognize that each student has more time to talk than in a large group discussion and that students often feel more comfortable sharing their ideas in a small group environment. However, pair and small group discussions can also be highly beneficial to ELs for other reasons. Such discussions provide meaningful opportunities for ELs to hear and practice discipline-specific language and vocabulary (Zwiers & Crawford, 2011). In addition to supporting their language and literacy development, academic discussions are a powerful way for ELs to learn and remember content. However, ELs may find group work challenging if they do not understand their expected role in the task they are working on or if they do not feel confident in using the type of language required for the task.

In this article, we highlight four EL student practices adapted from recommendations from Zwiers & Crawford (2011) and practices demonstrated in Teaching Channel classroom video clips on academic conversations. These four student practices will foster ELs' oral language development and support them in engaging with challenging content. For each of the practices, we provide an explanation and share some Teaching Channel video clips that show the practices in action.

The four practices are:

1. Come to the discussion prepared
2. Use appropriate body language for discussions
3. Participate by taking turns
4. Make connections to what others have said

### 1. Come to the Discussion Prepared

In order for ELs to successfully participate in an academic discussion, they must have sufficient preparation in the content they will be discussing. To view a model of ways teachers can help ELs prepare and engage in academic discussions through small group work, take a look at the [video](#) of Ms. Groves's class discussion of "Siddhartha's Journey." In the video, Ms. Groves described having students do several close readings of the Siddhartha text and answer text-dependent questions that are open ended, are not only limited to questions with one right response, and require students to answer using evidence from the text. Students then shared their responses to the text-dependent questions in small groups.

In making recommendations for the types of questions and prompts teachers can develop to help students plan for think-pair-share activities, Zwiers (2010) makes some suggestions (see Table 1; ALDNetwork.org, 2013). We have added an EL-specific adaptation for each suggestion. Teachers can provide these types of prompts in a graphic organizer or a journal prompt prior to classroom discussions.

**Table 1. Types of Questions and Examples**

Create Questions That...	EL Adaptation	Examples
Focus students on key content concepts.	Ensure ELs have the proper scaffolding (e.g., visuals, glossaries, home language support) to focus on key content concepts.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is the <i>Bill of Rights</i> and why is it important?</li> <li>• Draw a picture of the water cycle and explain how it works.</li> </ul>
Allow for individual and differing responses (that are supported by evidence in the material being studied).	Ensure that ELs' background experiences and cultures are valued and drawn from during instruction.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How does our school manage waste?</li> <li>• If you were a soldier during this time, would you have...? Why?</li> </ul>
Focus on one or more thinking skills from the lesson and unit. Such skills include: questioning, interpreting, classifying, persuading, evaluating, analyzing, comparing, and synthesizing.	Provide supports so that ELs can engage in these higher order thinking skills (such as sentence stems and frames).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What can you infer about the character's relationship with his grandmother based on his actions?</li> <li>• What do you think is the most significant effect of the Industrial Revolution? Why?</li> </ul>
Deepen understandings and emphasize the essential objectives of the text, lesson, and/or unit.	Ensure that ELs understand the essential objectives and that instruction of academic language is intertwined with instruction of the content.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What does this have to do with our goal of learning how plants get the materials they need to grow?</li> </ul>

In structuring group and pair discussions, it is helpful for ELs to have their 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. As you saw in the video of Ms. Groves's class, she suggested that her students not always read from their notes. Similarly, this [video clip](#) of Ms. Brewer's class shows how sticky notes can be used to support EL student discussion. Sticky notes will help students hold on to their ideas without allowing them to rely too heavily on written notes in a discussion.

## 2. Use Appropriate Body Language for Discussions

It is important that ELs learn the expected body language associated with academic discussions. Zwiers and Crawford (2011) identify behaviors that are valued in school:

- 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 each other with the entire body
- Leaning toward the partner
- Showing understanding through head nodding
- Appropriate gesturing (not rolling eyes, sighing, or folding arms)

ELs may need some direct instruction in what is considered culturally appropriate body language for discussions. All the while, teachers of ELs should recognize and value how ELs might show respect and engage in discussions in their cultures. This [video](#) of Ms. Nguyen's 6th grade class provides an example of a *participation protocol* that demonstrates one way to teach students how to appropriately use body language to engage in a discussion. She includes the following criteria in her class's participation protocol: look at your partner, lean toward your partner, lower your voice, listen attentively, and use evidence and examples. As students are having discussions, she uses a checklist to monitor how well they are meeting these criteria.

### 3. Participate by Taking Turns

It is important for all students to take turns speaking. In pairs, it is likely that turn taking will occur naturally. However, in a small or large group, ELs might not have the opportunity to speak as much as their fluent peers. A tool such as a *talking rock* or *talking stick* (a rock or a stick that students hold to "give them the floor" to talk) can encourage all members of the group, including ELs, to take part in the discussion. Students can pass the talking rock or talking stick around in a circle, and the student who has the rock or stick can take the opportunity to say something or pass. The rock or stick can also be placed in the center of the group and students can take it as they have something to say.

In the video of Ms. Groves's class, we saw students pass around a talking rock as a way to support students taking turns and to encourage all members of the group to participate. An additional way to encourage turn taking is to teach and model strategies for inviting someone into the conversation (e.g., "Manuel, what do you predict the girl in the story will do next?")

### 4. Make Connections to What Others Have Said

Not only do students need to be able to share their own opinions by using evidence from texts or content material being studied, they also need to interact with the ideas of others. Modeling and providing ELs with key phrases can support them in their efforts to build on the ideas of others.

More specifically, *talk moves* are the discourse behaviors that students need to practice in order to effectively engage in a discussion. Such behaviors include: restating what was said, agreeing and disagreeing, asking clarifying questions, adding to or piggybacking on what someone has said, and making connections between ideas.

In this [video clip](#), the students in Ms. Simpson's class practice using talk moves in a whole group discussion during a math lesson. Students will need practice with talk moves before they are able to use them on their own in small groups or pairs.

In the video of Ms. Groves's classroom, we saw that she had sentence stems that were easily accessible to support ELs' use of talk moves, and, when monitoring the small groups, she referred students back to these stems. Another idea for using talk moves would be for each student to have a handout or index card with sentence stems that students could refer to during discussions. The table below provides some possible sentence stems for specific types of talk moves.

**Table 2. Talk Moves Sentence Stems**

Restating	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• So you are saying...</li> <li>• What I understood you to say is...</li> </ul>
Agreeing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I agree with (Yuri) because...</li> <li>• (Emma's) point about...was important because...</li> </ul>
Disagreeing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I disagree because...</li> <li>• I see it differently because...</li> </ul>
Asking for clarification	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Could you give an example of...?</li> <li>• I'm confused when you say...</li> </ul>
Adding to an idea	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I'd like to add to (Rosa's) point. I think that...</li> <li>• I agree with (Woo Jin), and furthermore I think that...</li> </ul>
Making connections between ideas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• When (Albert) said...it reminded me of....</li> <li>• I see a connection between what (Laura) said and what (Karolina) said. The connection is...</li> </ul>

Conversation mini-lessons can provide teachers opportunities to introduce a conversation skill to students and then have them practice it in a relatively short time period. Examples of possible mini-lessons could include asking each other for supporting examples, building on a partner's idea, and paraphrasing conversation themes. Mini-lessons should provide students opportunities to analyze examples of the conversation skill in practice, teacher or student modeling of the specific skill you are focusing on, and opportunities for students to practice and build independent skills.

## Conclusion

Pair and small group academic discussions can be an excellent way to foster ELs' language development and understanding of new content. However, in order for ELs to be a true part of and get the most out of these types of discussions, they need adequate support and structure to prepare for and participate in each activity.

## References

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