



Engaging ELs in Mainstream Classrooms

by [Meghan Odsliv Bratkovich](#) and [Andrew Paulsen](#)

Talking and using language is essential to the learning process, but English learners (ELs) in mainstream classrooms tend to talk and participate less than their peers (Zhang et al., 2016). Although there are myriad activities, strategies, and modifications available to teachers, they are often used to supplement “regular” teaching. This article takes a different approach and offers mainstream teachers a way of considering ELs from the outset and systematically structuring classroom communication in ways that promote classroom talk for all students, including ELs.

Together, we describe the process Mr. Paulsen, a former high school mathematics teacher, used to create this type of classroom and provide insights into why these structures work for ELs. Mr. Paulsen notes that nothing he does is necessarily new or original, but his combination of pedagogical actions can provide guidance to other teachers looking to create EL-engaging classrooms of their own.

Start Early

Build a Team

Creating an inclusive classroom community begins not by doing math, but by building a team. The first week of Mr. Paulsen’s class was dedicated to establishing a classroom culture in which everyone was recognized as a valuable member and was expected to participate fully and contribute to the team. First-week team building activities, such as [the human knot](#), [no-hands cup stacking challenge](#), [helium sticks](#), and [nonverbal birthday organization](#), allowed students to learn about each other, open lines of communication, and practice working with every student in the class, not only established friends or fellow ELs. These often humorous activities allowed students to build rapport and trust and, through the numerous attempts required for many of the activities, also gave students repeated opportunities to fail, work as a team, think divergently, and try different approaches until the goal was achieved.

Normalize Mistakes

Mr. Paulsen reinforced this concept of “failing forward” later in the first week by explaining emotional intelligence and the importance of a growth mindset (Dweck, 2008). For adolescents with still-forming prefrontal cortexes, understanding their own feelings allows them to better

understand their learning process, including the importance of making mistakes, persevering, and trying again. To emphasize that “mistakes are expected, respected, and inspected,” Mr. Paulsen showed a soccer highlight reel of Lionel Messi’s greatest goals scored, followed by a video of Messi at practice, taking kicks over and over, often missing the target, sometimes frustrated, but always making adjustments and trying again.

Because many ELs experience language-related embarrassment, anxiety, and fear of making mistakes that can impede their willingness to communicate (Pappamihiel, 2002), repositioning mistakes as part of successful learning works to remove some of these emotions and barriers to participation. Furthermore, any negative or teasing comments about mistakes—either linguistic or mathematical—were immediately addressed as essential to the learning process and positively reframed as opportunities to “grow your brain.”

Develop Communication Structures

Beyond conveying that imperfect communication is still important communication, Mr. Paulsen also taught many norms and routines to help facilitate classroom talk. These included voice volume expectations (where Level 0 is silence, Level 1 is for small group talk, and Level 2 is public-speaking volume which the entire class can hear) and bring-backs—call-and-response techniques, such as “clap once if you can hear me,” for transitioning students back to whole class activities.

Mr. Paulsen also taught students how to interact with one another in small groups and engage in standards-based mathematical skills, such as explaining individual and group thought processes, asking questions to other students, creating viable arguments, and critiquing the reasoning of others. Within small groups, each student was assigned roles, such as the reader who reads or repeats the problem, the rephraser who rewords the problem, and the moderator who ensures that everyone has an opportunity to speak. These roles served to distribute conversational responsibility across all students as well as to “translate” mathematical language into what Mr. Paulsen often refers to as “kid-friendly language.”

Combined, these routines enable all students to engage in academic talk and to quickly and seamlessly transition between activities. This collective learning reinforced that everyone is learning something new and together establishing a new status quo. In this way, ELs were not positioned as outsiders who were unfamiliar with the language and culture of the class, but as fellow insiders and knowers who understood the local language and customs.

Reinforce Culture Every Day

After learning teamwork and communication norms, Mr. Paulsen then applied these ideas to his mathematics classroom on a daily basis. Unlike many activities and strategies that are used in isolated lessons, these routines are deeply embedded in the classroom culture. They are used every day, several times a day, and give structure to student interactions and participation.

Leverage Talk and Silence

Mr. Paulsen generally organized his class using a “back and forth” style wherein students spent the majority of time working in small groups, he would frequently bring them back together as a whole class, then release them back to their groups. This modified think-pair-share interaction is often initiated by Mr. Paulsen asking a question, then saying, “just think silently for 10 seconds, silent Level 0. [10-second pause] Okay, go.” This silence gives students a few seconds for both understanding and preparing to produce language before being asked to speak to their group, rather than having English-fluent students contribute quickly while ELs are still interpreting the question.

Value Divergent Ideas

Whereas some teachers bring the class back together and either “cold call” on students or ask for volunteers to give an immediate response, Mr. Paulsen would “warm call” on students. Before bringing the class back together as a group, he would inform a few students, including ELs, that he would call on them to present and explain their answer to the group. Students then use the last minute of group work to double check answers and practice language with their group before being asked to speak in front of the whole class. Mr. Paulsen then used a bring-back to transition the class back together and call on the two or three students he warmed-called, ignoring any hands to volunteer or shout out answers. He strategically warm-calls multiple students from groups that solved or approached the problem differently, debated processes, or had interesting explanations, including groups with both correct and incorrect answers. This approach echoes the didactic value of mistakes, the diversity of mathematical expression, and that every student contributes mathematical knowledge.

Preserve EL Voices

Using philosophies to “never say anything a kid can say” (Reinhart, 2000) and rejecting perceptions that teachers are the gatekeepers of knowledge, Mr. Paulsen rarely confirmed right answers or restated what students said. In small-groups, many raised hands asking for help were answered with “I don’t know, ask your group,” leaving the task of explaining or confirming right answers to peers. Similarly, if answers were not heard or understood in whole-class discussions, students were asked to speak louder, repeat themselves, or ask a peer for help conveying their thoughts. Importantly, Mr. Paulsen never summarizes or repeats student answers or recasts EL speech into “correct” English and focuses instead on the mathematical meaning conveyed, thus encouraging, validating, and preserving EL voices.

Whole-class time is space for students to explain concepts and ideas to each other, not simply for the first student with a raised hand to state the correct answer for the teacher to confirm and then move on. For ELs specifically, this structure provides time to interpret questions, direction on mechanics of group talk, and opportunities to prepare language before being asked to speak in front of the class.

Conclusion

Though some may view this routine-based pedagogy as restrictive or authoritarian, these routines served to empower students by teaching them *how* to communicate with each other, not *what* to say. In this context, these structures did not force participation; instead they reduced communicative ambiguity by offering clear guidelines so students knew what to expect and what was expected of them. Furthermore, by participating in every bring-back routine, carrying out their small group roles, and explaining ideas to classmates, all students, including ELs, were habitually recognized and affirmed as knowledgeable members of the classroom community.

By considering EL needs from the outset, educators can create classrooms where ELs have the time and space to speak, where their voices are heard, and where they are never excluded, ignored, or left behind. Implemented alongside other best practices, this process has successfully been used and adapted with middle and high school contexts and with ELs at high beginning proficiency levels and above. We encourage other mainstream teachers in similar contexts to examine their own classroom communication and consider ways to account for ELs in the classroom culture, structure, and everyday routines.

References

- Dweck, C. S. (2008). *Mindset: The new psychology of success*. Random House.
- Pappamihel, N. E. (2002). English as a second language students and English language anxiety: Issues in the mainstream classroom. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 36, 327–355.
- Reinhart, S. C. (2000). Never say anything a kid can say! *Mathematics Teaching in the Middle School*, 5, 478–483.
- Zhang, J. N., Chunling, N., Munwar, S., Anderson, R. C. (2016). What makes a more proficient discussion group in English language learners' classrooms? Influence of teacher talk and student backgrounds. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 51(2), 183–208.

Meghan Odsli Bratkovich is an assistant professor of Foreign Language and ESOL Education at the University of South Florida. Her research focuses on teaching English learners in mainstream and content-area contexts and equipping teachers with the knowledge and skills to do so.

Andrew Paulsen is a former high school math teacher and instruction coach in Newark, New Jersey, USA. He is currently a senior advisor with Agile Mind, a national organization that transforms the teaching and learning of mathematics and science, while working to improve public education as a doctoral student at Vanderbilt University.