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Preparing ELs for Academic Interaction Listening Expectations
by Kate Kinsella

College and career readiness initiatives within the United States aim to prepare K–12 learners for increasingly complex life, learning, and work environments. Across the school day, young scholars are expected to experience lessons integrating meaningful task-based interactions. The anchor speaking and listening Common Core State Standard for upper elementary and secondary coursework details expectations for productive lesson discussion and collaboration: SL1 "Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade (3-12) topics and texts, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly" (CCSS, 2010). The standards architects clearly envisioned young scholars dynamically interacting with peers, thoughtfully voicing their perspectives on lesson content, and authentically listening. Though interdisciplinary educators readily assign problem-solving and complex literacy tasks to peer working groups, all too often they have failed to equip multilingual learners with the requisite expressive and interpretive skills. A consistent area of instructional benign neglect is explicit preparation in both the verbal and nonverbal expectations for attentive listening during content-based lesson interactions (Kinsella, 2016).

Students approaching core content in a language they are striving to master embark upon standards-aligned lesson interactions with pronounced listening challenges. Rubin (1995) points out that listening during lesson exchanges poses inordinate processing demands on second language learners because they "must store information in short-term memory at the same time as they are working to understand the information" (p. 8). In other words, the challenge of interpreting a teacher's discussion prompt and expectations for a partner interaction or the assigned classmate's perspective lies in the necessity to process input immediately and accurately, unlike in reading, where there is an opportunity to reread and digest the message.

Attentive Listening Training: When Is It Needed?

Effective communication during a collaborative process requires more than a relevant lesson prompt, an affable elbow partner, and a conducive seating arrangement. As an instructional coach, I have observed multiple red flags during lesson observations that signal the need for a strategic intervention.

Predictable indicators that a class has not received practical training for the attentive listening demands of academic interaction include students who are displaying one or more of the following behaviors:

1. not maintaining eye contact or nodding to demonstrate active engagement;
2. speaking quickly and softly, prohibiting their partner's accurate auditory processing;
3. failing to ask clarifying questions when they have missed a portion of a partner's response or don't understand;
4. offering ideas that have already been contributed without recognition; and
5. not providing affirming feedback when lesson partners suggest an approach or provide relevant content.

Introducing Physical Features of Attentive Listening

To effectively implement interactive lesson tasks with multilingual learners, it's important to provide initial instruction in the physical features of attentive listening in U.S. classroom settings. Norms and expectations for body language during face-to-face exchanges can differ subtly or strikingly across cultures and communities. Within workplace and academic settings in the United States, for example, there are fairly consistent expectations that individuals establish and maintain eye contact while conversing, whether with peers or superiors, to demonstrate engaged listening and a modicum of respect. However, development of this critical "soft skill" is often overlooked in teacher preparation to work with students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. We shouldn't rely upon our students' ability to function as armchair anthropologists, skillfully noting communication protocol distinctions between their prior schooling and current setting.

In my experiences supporting multilingual learner communicative competence in K–12 and higher education, eye contact has proven to be the most nuanced and sensitive component of nonverbal communication. I advise preparing thoughtful notes to draw from when introducing this variable rather than improvising and running the risk of further confusing students about protocols for face-to-face interactions. I offer the following commentary for my students as a starting point for discussion.

Sample Notes for Introducing the Importance of Eye Contact

In the United States, looking at someone's eyes as you speak shows respect and active listening. It is so important in North American society that there is an expression "to make eye contact," just like two magnets making contact and not coming apart. Looking away may tell the speaker that you are not interested, distracted, nervous, or unprepared.

This isn't universal. In some communities and cultures, eye contact may not be so necessary or have different rules for showing respect, such as a child not looking directly at an elder's eyes while speaking. Adjust your behavior and respectfully follow what you know to be appropriate at home and in your community. But at school and work, it is an expectation that you look directly at a person's eyes when they are communicating

important information to you. It is also vital when you speak to people who are helping you in official places, like a doctor's office, a bank, or a police station.

Preparing Visual References for Nonverbal Features

Taking into consideration the class's age range and context for schooling, it is useful to prepare a visual reference to graphically illustrate physical attributes of attentive listening. For example, the poster shown in Figure 1 was designed for elementary learners in a dual language program as part of a professional development initiative to increase the quality and quantity of academic interactions taking place across the school day. Students become more mindful of their body language during class discussions, whether teacher-led or with peers, when complemented by

- nonjudgmental explanation,
- modeling,
- orchestrated practice, and
- respectful reminders.

Conscientious attention to how they are presenting themselves physically during interactions serves English learners well as they navigate the school day communicating with different teachers, instructional aids, classmates, counselors, and administrators.

Figure 1. Demonstrating attentive listening: nonverbal communication.

Building Productive Verbal Skills for Attentive Listening: Discussion and Collaboration

Classroom academic interactions include two major task types: **discussion** and **collaboration**. Many educators use the terms *conversation*, *discussion*, and *collaboration* interchangeably. If an

English learner transitions from foundational coursework in a newcomer support context having only been instructed to "think-pair-share," it can come as quite a surprise when core content-area teachers incorporate rigorous lesson tasks with expectations for mature discussion or collaboration.

Types of Academic Interactions

- **Discussion:** <u>exchanging ideas</u> on an assigned topic with a lesson partner, group, or class, drawing from text evidence, lesson content, background knowledge, or prior experience
- **Collaboration:** <u>working together</u> with a lesson partner or group on an assigned task to create a mutually agreed upon and jointly constructed response, solution, or project

Both academic interaction types necessitate more accountable listening than casual sharing. To lighten the cognitive load for English learners, educators across subject areas should strive for lexical precision when assigning lesson interactions and specify whether it is a brief informal conversation using everyday English, an academic discussion, or a collaborative endeavor. In this way, novice English speakers will at least approach the task with a clearer idea of the interaction process and intended outcome.

Addressing Language Functions for Discussion and Collaboration

To engage appropriately in a lesson interaction and demonstrate attentive listening, all students benefit from planned, intentional instruction in expressions to accomplish a range of communicative purposes or functions (Dutro & Kinsella, 2010). Academic discussion and collaboration involve several overlapping language functions, but collaboration requires an additional linguistic skill set. Both entail expressive uses of language, such as stating and supporting opinions with evidence drawn from text sources, background information, or experience. Productive discussion and collaboration focused on academic content similarly hinge on recognizing others' responses by agreeing, comparing, or building upon what has been stated.

Additionally, within a mature discussion or task-based collaboration, effective partners seek clarification when a contribution isn't entirely clear and restate to ensure they have a firm grasp on intended meaning. Successful collaboration begins with equitable discussion, gleaned either through a roundtable exchange or elicitation of ideas by a proactive team member. However, the stakes for comprehension are much higher with a collective response than with a simple exchange of ideas. True collaboration on an assignment requires additional language skills for providing feedback, making suggestions, and negotiating before jointly completing the task and reporting on behalf of the team.

Sample Language Functions and Expressions for Discussion and Collaboration

Compare Ideas	**Agree With Ideas**
• My idea is a lot like (*Name's*). • My (*opinion, reaction*) echoes (*Name's*). • My response is similar to (*Name's*). • My (*response, experience*) is comparable. • (*Name*) and I have similar understandings.	• I agree with (*Name*) that _____. • I completely agree with (*Name's*) idea. • I share your perspective. • I see your point. • A point well taken.
Restate Ideas	**Build Upon Ideas**
• So, you think that _____. • So, your (*idea, opinion, example*) is that _____. • So, you're suggesting that _____. • Yes, that's (*right, correct*). • No, not exactly. What I (*said, meant*) was _____.	• My idea builds upon (*Name's*). • I appreciate (*Name's*) perspective, and I would add that _____. • That is a point well taken; however, I would point out that _____.

Sample Language Functions and Expressions for Collaboration

Contribute Ideas	**Affirm Ideas**
• We could (*say, put, write*) _____. • What should we (*say, put, write*) _____? • I think _____ makes the most sense. • I think _____ would work well. • I think we should (*add, include, consider*) _____.	• That makes sense. • I see what you are saying. • That's a great (*idea, suggestion, solution*). • That would work. • I completely understand.
Clarify Ideas	**Report a Partner/Team's Ideas**
• I don't quite understand your idea. • I'm not certain I understand your position. • I have a question about _____. • What exactly do you mean by _____? • Can you explain what you mean by _____?	• My partner (*Name*) pointed out that _____. • My partner (*Name*) indicated that _____. • According to (*Name*), _____. • We (*decided, concluded, determined*) that _____. • Our (*response, reason, opinion*) is that _____.

Preparing Directions for Lesson Interactions With Attentive Listening Tasks

We can support English learners in understanding the speaking and listening expectations for planned lesson interactions by preparing clear visual displays. In research and lesson coaching experiences, I have observed English learners approach partner and group interactions unclear about the procedural and linguistic expectations and needlessly struggling.

Rather than entrust the roles, steps, and anticipated responses to their auditory processing, prepare a set of visuals for common discussion and collaboration tasks. Embedding direction slides in presentations works well, as does displaying direction cards with a document camera. As students develop their repertoire of useful expressions for common attentive listening tasks, such as comparing and restating to verify understanding, proceed to more complex language priorities such as paraphrasing and building upon and affirming ideas.

The slides shown in Figure 2 were developed for a schoolwide endeavor to maximize student verbal engagement and initiate all students, English learners and English-only alike, to cross-disciplinary expectations for academic discussions.
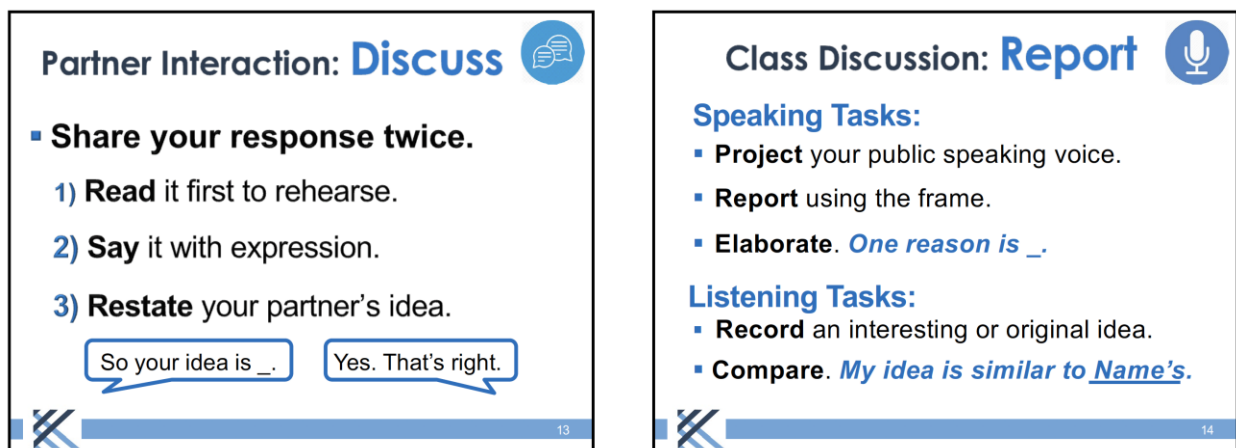
Figure 2. Sample direction slides for partner discussion and class discussion.

Establish Concrete Listening Tasks for Class Discussions

Beginning with novice English speakers in elementary and secondary contexts, I have experienced considerable success establishing dual goals for attentive listening in class discussions: 1) the focused listening and possible brief note-taking task; 2) the language function(s) and key expressions.

1. Focused Listening

Prior to launching a unified-class discussion, concretize students' listening task in terms of the specific content they should focus upon and strive to record. Merely encouraging students to "listen carefully" is not likely to reap promising results. In addition to establishing consistent norms and expressions for attentive listening, such as comparing and building upon previously stated ideas, specify the content you are anticipating, whether an effective strategy for solving a problem or a serious impact on the environment.

2. Identifying Key Content

Having clarified and visibly displayed class discussion expectations, as in the slide (Figure 2), I am well poised to facilitate a brief postdiscussion partner interaction requiring peers to identify the key content that caught their attention. Knowing the class discussion will be followed by a partner interaction builds in greater accountability for engaged listening.

I follow the brief partner exchange by calling on a few students to share with the unified class what they found most compelling, using the assigned frame, for example, *An effective strategy I heard was* _____. This final reporting activity proves to enhance student interest while creating another vehicle for affirming students' unique contributions and respectful listening.

I recommend preparing a suite of response frames such as those shown in Figure 3, each incorporating a different type of listening goal for discussion prompts within your curricula. Consider drawing from these common targets for tasks within language and literacy instruction:

- a strong argument
- a well-justified position
- a thoughtful analysis
- a creative interpretation
- a relevant example
- a possible reason
- a major cause
- a serious effect
- a unique perspective
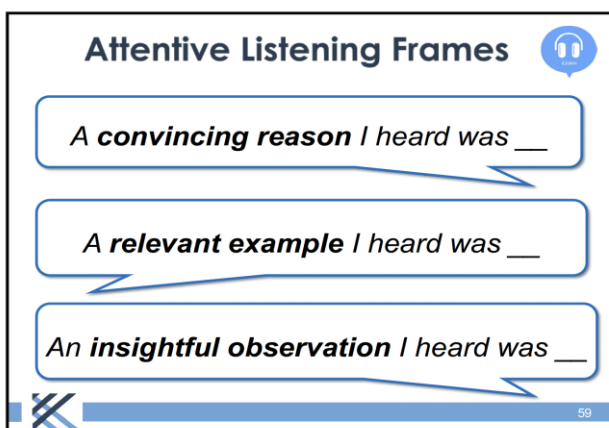- an interesting experience

Figure 3. Attentive listening frames examples.

Final Thoughts

Instituting school-wide teaching practices for academic discussion and collaboration with established speaking and listening expectations will increase the odds that multilingual learners

are equitably prepared to handle with aplomb the demands of real-life listening during vital interactions in their social, academic, and professional lives.

Additional Lesson Resources

- [Language for Attentive Listening](#) (Appendix A)
- [Attentive Listening Tasks: Partner Interaction and Class Discussion](#) (Appendix B)
- [Language for Academic Interactions: Discussion and Collaboration](#) (Appendix C)

References

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