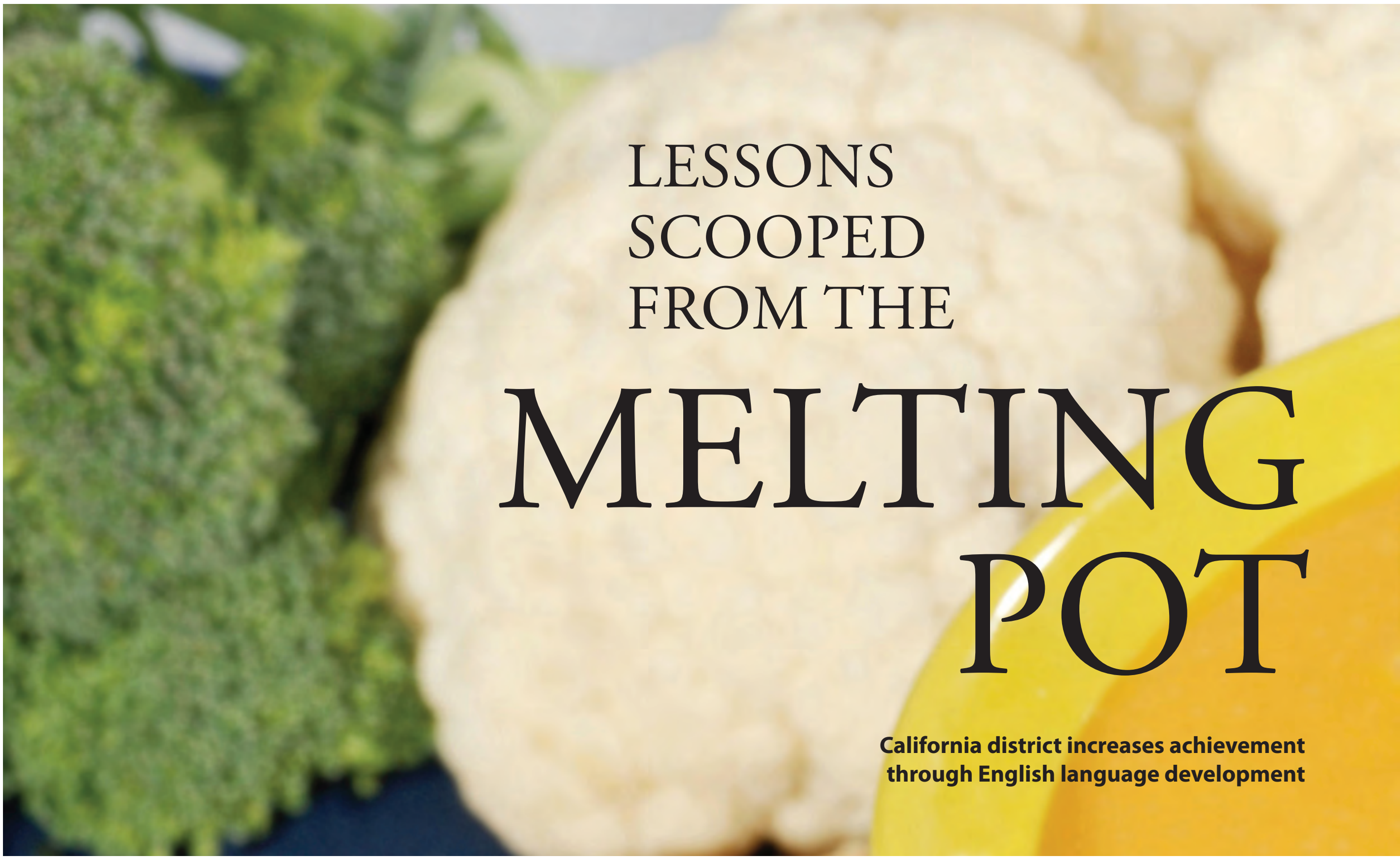

LESSONS SCOOPED FROM THE MELTING POT

California district increases achievement through English language development

By Nancy Frey, Douglas Fisher, and John Nelson

Consider the challenges facing one district: 27,000 students in 44 elementary schools in a southern California border district. Most students — 72% — are classified as English language learners as measured by the California English Language Development Test (CELDT). Although 65% of the students are Hispanic/Latino and speak Spanish as a first language, 16% are Asian/Pacific Islander and speak Tagalog, Japanese, or Korean as a home language. In 2003, the state's accountability system, the Academic Proficiency Index (API), scored the district at 689, far short of the goal of 800. Yet by the 2009-10 school year, this school system had reached 833, and 77% of the schools had met all of their accountability targets. All of this had occurred without appreciable change in demographics or staffing. How did the district get these breakthrough results?

The short answer is focused content-specific staff development that has been sustained for five years. However, what made this initiative unique was the choice of content. Rather than pursue a more conventional approach, such as a focus on mathematics, science, or history, the district chose English language development for all students, not just those designated through state measures. Using a gradual release of responsibility model of instruction (Fisher & Frey, 2008), the district elected to concentrate its professional development efforts on improving the academic language necessary for ELL students to achieve proficiency. To do this, the Chula Vista Elementary School District has been building the capacity of its teachers and administrators through school-based teams that customize learning for their context.

THE CONTENT: ACADEMIC LANGUAGE FOR ALL

A series of meetings and walk-throughs by district administrators in fall 2004 exposed a persistent barrier to language acquisition: little in the way of rich, academic student discourse. While classrooms were well-managed and taught by caring professionals, the teacher dominated classroom

talk. Decades of research backed up the concern that without the opportunity to interact using the language of the discipline, students would never acquire the academic vocabulary of the content (Cazden, 1988; Hicks, 1995).

The district leadership committee (headed by the third author, John Nelson) determined that it was not enough to merely declare that classroom discourse should increase. Teachers and administrators would need both a knowledge base and practical tools to achieve this. The district invited the other authors, both based at a local university, to partner in implementing a gradual release of responsibility model of instructional design to make discussion a cornerstone of the classroom. The content-specific professional development would focus on English language development of academic discourse, both verbal and written, to improve learning.

GRADUAL RELEASE

This model of instruction, first articulated by Pearson and Gallagher in 1983 and later expanded by Fisher and Frey (2008), consists of four phases of learning:

- **Focus lesson** to establish purpose, model, demonstrate, and think aloud to expose the cognitive moves of the expert (the teacher);
- **Guided instruction,** primarily small-group, to scaffold learning through the strategic use of questions, prompts, and cues;
- **Collaborative learning** through productive group work, where students work with peers to clarify their growing conceptual understanding; and
- **Independent learning** inside and outside of the classroom, for review, extension, and enrichment.

This instructional framework became the outline for all content-specific professional development in the district, including initiatives in algebra and integrated science. The linchpin of the gradual release of responsibility was the collaborative learning phase of instruction, when students work in partnership with one another to discuss, interact, and produce. However, it was vital for teachers and administrators to understand what constituted rich language development. Therefore, professional development also focused on academic language.

ACADEMIC LANGUAGE

Given the high number of ELL students, the content-specific nature of this professional development effort focused on academic language development. Over the course of the next several years, there were four recurring themes:

- **Planning for purposeful talk** by incorporating standards, establishing a clear purpose, and identifying learning, language, and social objectives for lessons;
- **Creating an environment that encourages academic discourse,** including the physical room arrangement, teaching the routines of talk, and scaffolding language;
- **Managing the academic discourse** through grouping and collaborative activities that increase confidence and provide students with ways to consolidate learning with peers; and
- **Assessing academic language development** using practical tools for monitoring progress and identifying areas of need (Fisher, Frey, & Rothenberg, 2008, p. 2).

The district leadership committee, which included teachers, building administrators, and central office staff, noted that implementing systemwide change would need to involve all 1,500 certified staff. Adding to the challenge, the 44 schools (six of them charter) represented a range of diversity. In addition to size, they varied according to socioeconomic status, number of ELL students, and rates of family involvement. A one-size-fits-all approach would not work well in a community that served new immigrants, a rapidly growing suburban area, and neighborhoods predating the district's inception in 1892. However, they had a powerful tool at their disposal — building-level teams.

Chula Vista Elementary School District
Chula Vista, Calif.

Number of schools: **44**
Enrollment: **27,000**
Staff: **1,400**
Racial/ethnic mix:

White:	**13%**
Black:	**1%**
Hispanic:	**67%**
Asian/Pacific Islander:	**14%**
Native American:	**1%**
Other:	**4%**

Limited English proficient: **35%**
Free/reduced lunch: **44%**
Special education: **11%**
Contact: **John Nelson,** assistant superintendent
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INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP TEAMS

The district had spent the early part of the decade establishing instructional leadership teams. Their primary role is to lead each school's effort to support the improvement of teaching and learning. The teams make decisions about the school's instructional program and leads and monitors the implementation of a sound instructional focus. The leadership teams consist of teachers (usually one teacher per grade level), the principal, and other members of the school community. Schools are advised to include representation from bilingual, special education, and other specialists on the teams.

The teams meet regularly to discuss instruction and review information gathered from analyses of student work and teacher assignments to determine schoolwide needs. In addition, they monitor full implementation of promising practices, planning and adjusting professional learning as needed. Perhaps most importantly, they are responsible for developing a plan to build capacity of all staff. They collect, organize, and display schoolwide data on student performance and monitor the effectiveness of current allocations of resources, adjusting as needed.

Using this existing structure, we involved the instructional leadership teams from each school in five daylong professional development sessions each year. The first half of the day focuses on a status check among school team members and work with the authors on building their knowledge base concerning language development and the gradual release of responsibility instructional model. The second half of each day focuses on capacity building, as teams construct plans for professional development they lead, as well as work with individual teachers who can benefit from additional coaching and mentoring.

Over the last several years, the instructional leadership team has evolved from a conduit for professional learning into a creator. During these professional development sessions, these teams created a bank of language frames for each grade level and content area to support the development of this instructional practice. Language frames provide students with a way to structure their academic discourse using complex rhetorical structures and content vocabulary. Teachers instruct students to use these language frames in their classroom discourse, especially during guided instruction and productive group work, and in their writing during independent learning. This bank of more than 200 frames provides members of each school's instructional leadership team with samples for use in working with teachers at their schools.

Examples of language frames include:

- How did (event, decision, law) impact (life, laws, society) today? (History)
- When I conducted the investigation of ______, I discovered that ______. (Science)
- My answer is reasonable because _____. (Mathematics)
- Based on _____, I predict the author's message will be _____. (Reading and language arts)

Similarly, teams have collectively created content and language purposes derived from state standards for each discipline and grade level. Establishing what will be learned and how students will use it is critical to ELL students (Hill & Flynn, 2006) and benefits all students. For instance, a teacher who begins a lesson by telling students that they will learn about the attributes of an isosceles triangle and will justify their answer to a partner using the terms *equal sides* and *equal angles* is establishing the purposes of her 3rd-grade mathematics lesson to her students. A teacher who begins a lesson by establishing a purpose related to understanding the life cycle of a frog provides students with several language frames, including "The _____ forms after the ______" and "I know that is a ______ because ______." As with the language frames bank, these team-created resources related to establishing purpose are available for all the teams to use in their schools.

WALK-THROUGH RUBRIC *Purpose* and *modeling* indicators of success

INDICATORS	Phase 4: Exemplary	Phase 3: Proficient	Phase 2: Approaching	Phase 1: Minimal
Purpose is established for content and language outcomes and is based on formative assessments.	Purpose is explicitly presented through content and language goals, which are based on content standards and the language demands of the task, as well as student needs identified via formative assessments.	Language and content goals are stated but are not well-connected to content standards or language demands of the task. Goals address student needs identified via formative assessments.	Only one purpose is stated (i.e. either the content purpose or the language purpose is missing) or purpose is not well-connected with content standards, the language demands of the task, or student needs as identified with formative assessments.	No content or language outcomes are stated or implied. Purpose is implied but not stated, and there is no evidence of the use of formative assessments to plan instruction.
The essential lesson elements of guided, collaborative, and independent tasks accurately reflect the established purpose.	All tasks that students complete throughout the lesson reflect the content and language purposes.	Most tasks that students complete throughout the lesson reflect content and language purposes.	Some tasks that students complete throughout the lesson reflect content and language purposes.	The tasks that students complete during the lesson are not consistent with the stated purposes.
Students can explain the purpose in their own words.	Randomly selected students can explain or demonstrate how the stated purposes related to their own learning.	Students can accurately restate the purpose of the lesson but lack a clear understanding of why they are being taught the content.	Students can restate portions of the purpose of the lesson but lack an understanding of why they are being taught the content.	Students are unable to correctly state the purpose of the lesson.
Teacher provides an authentic model.	Modeling includes naming the task or strategy, explaining when it is used, and using analogies to link to new learning. The teacher then demonstrates the task or strategy, alerts learners about errors to avoid, and shows how it is applied to check for accuracy. The modeling consistently contains "I" statements.	Modeling contains all the indicators (naming, explaining, analogies, demonstration, errors to avoid, and checking), but the teacher only uses some "I" statements.	Modeling contains some indicators (e.g. naming and explaining), but the teacher directs students through the use of "you" statements.	Modeling contains few indicators. The teacher uses "you" statements that focus on directions and process, not modeling of thinking.
Students use strategies and skills that were modeled.	After receiving adequate time in scaffolded instructional support, all students can complete tasks using the strategy or skill that was modeled.	After receiving limited time in scaffolded instructional support, complete tasks using the strategy or skill that was modeled.	Students move directly from teacher modeling to independent work, with little to no scaffolded instructional support.	There is a mismatch between what was modeled and what students are asked to do.

MOVING TO SCALE THROUGH CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

While the instructional leadership team plays an important role in this professional development initiative, it can't be the only source of information. Therefore, the district digitally records each session and houses the video on its portal for staff members to view anytime. In addition, tools like the language frames are also readily available to teachers. Although these resources are valuable, they do not compare to witnessing a live teaching event. For this reason, the district is invested in instructional walk-throughs within and across schools.

Once again, the instructional leadership team plays a crucial role. They have developed several rubrics of quality indicators for establishing purpose, modeling, and productive group work. Throughout the school year, teachers from several schools gather at one site to observe a series of classrooms. The host principal leads the discussion of what has been observed, using a quality indicator rubric. See sample rubric for walk-through on p. 27. The participants focus on patterns they observe; evaluation of the teacher is strictly prohibited. Other specialized walk-throughs are job-alike in nature, as when a group of administrators, or bilingual specialists, observe. These instructional walk-throughs provide the host administrator with valuable feedback about the current status of the academic language development at his or her school, while simultaneously building a common vocabulary among the observers about what constitutes quality instruction.

The district is invested in instructional walk-throughs within and across schools.

The purpose for the walk-through is vital and should not be overlooked in the rush to visit classrooms. Without a clear purpose, observers risk paying attention to different elements, only to discover that there is little common ground for discussion later. For example, a vaguely stated purpose such as "student engagement" might result in disparate comments on the number of students looking at the teacher, the amount of student work posted in the room, or even the teacher's general classroom management style. On the other hand, a specific purpose, such as "looking for evidence of teacher think-alouds to expose expert thinking," provides observers with a specific and observable event to look for. When the group members meet to discuss their observations, they confine their comments to description, not evaluation. City, Elmore, Fiarman, and Teitel (2009) go so far as to recommend that observers first individually write their observations on sticky notes. Members then meet as a group to sort the descriptive data into categories to look for patterns. The instructional leadership teams have developed quality indicators for each aspect of the instructional model. These quality indicators become the purpose statements for the walk-throughs, ensuring that teachers and administrators are working toward the same goals.

PROMISING RESULTS FOR STUDENTS

The results of Chula Vista's initiative on building the academic language skills of its students have had a profound effect on student achievement. In 1999, only one of the district's schools met its individual API target of 800; last year, 32 of its 44 schools had done so, and only three schools remain in program improvement. Much of this achievement has occurred because more ELL students are gaining steadily. Only 21% met growth targets in 2004; by 2008, 73% had done so. Their achievement translates to proficiency as well. In the last school year, 61% of the district's ELL students had reached proficiency, a key predictor of their ability to reach and exceed grade-level standards.

The content focus on English language development through a gradual release of responsibility model has served as an organizational tool to ensure that students are interacting and using academic English in all subject areas. By involving school leadership teams in the development, design, and implementation of professional development, the district has built internal capacity, and consultants are not traversing the district providing isolated, one-shot events. Instead, the district initiative has become part of the culture in Chula Vista.

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