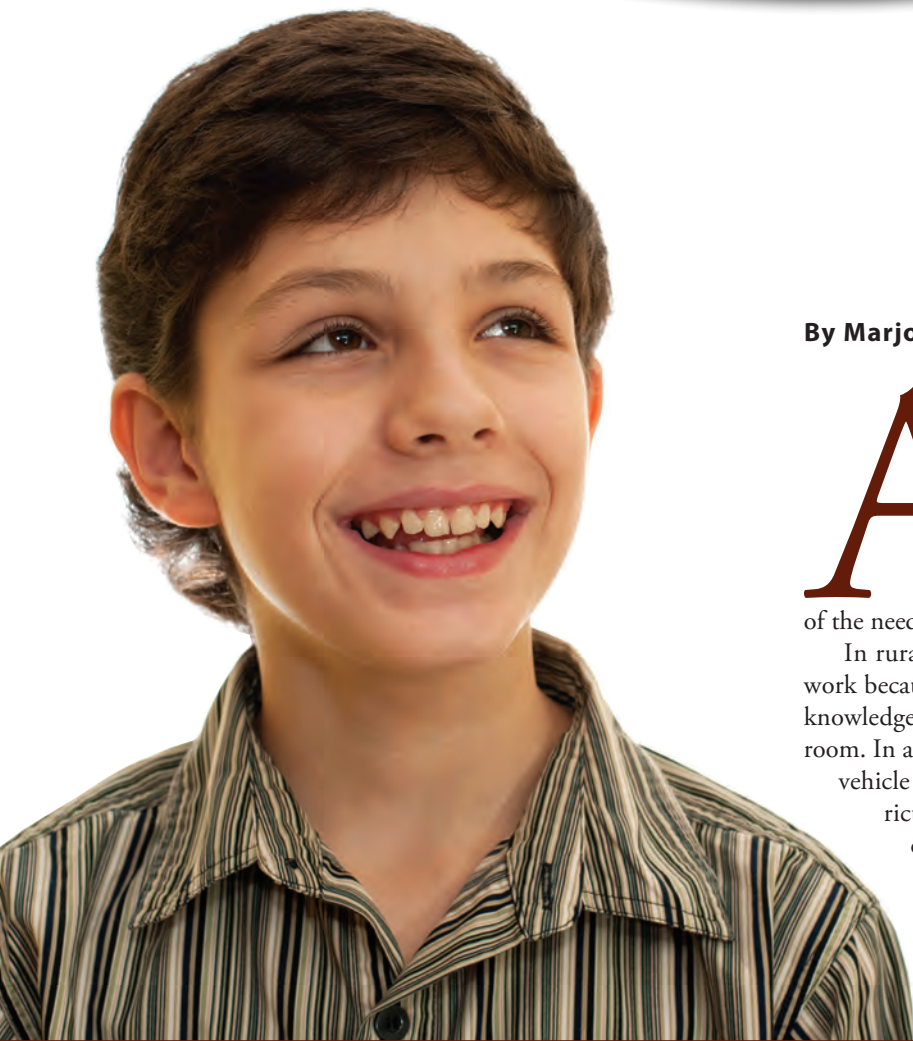


COACHING PROTOCOL GIVES RURAL DISTRICT

A COMMON LANGUAGE *for* LEARNING



By Marjorie C. Ringler and Debra O'Neal

Academic language has been referred to as a gatekeeper, something that stands in the way of academic success for native and nonnative speakers alike (Corson, 1997; Bielenberg & Fillmore, 2004). Short and Fitzsimmons (2004) focused on English language learners, asserting that those students must do “double the work” because of the need to learn academic English and content simultaneously.

In rural eastern North Carolina, many students do double the work because they speak nonstandard dialects, lack the background knowledge for school success, and thereby disengage from the classroom. In a yearlong series of workshops, we focused on coaching as a vehicle to improve academic language proficiency across the curriculum using the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol, a research-based model for integrating language and content in the classroom. The protocol was being widely adopted in North Carolina for mainstream classes with large numbers of English language learners.

The initial focus of the workshops was language

development for ELLs. However, participant teachers were telling us that these strategies would be effective for native speakers as well. As we began to research this idea, we shifted our focus to encourage academic language proficiency for all learners. Our goal became to help teachers first recognize the elements of academic language and then to see it as a second language. They learned that academic language is more than just content-specific vocabulary and adopted the protocol to teach this new language to all learners while teaching in all content areas.

With this broadened focus, we brought our workshops into more districts, encompassing seven counties to date. Some schools continue to implement the content, and others don't. Those districts that implemented the protocol successfully had three things in common: involved principals, involved district-level administrators, and a follow-up plan in place. Unsuccessful schools had uninvolved principals who booked the session, left for the day, and planned no follow-up activities. These experiences led us to create a program called Project CEO, which is based on these core beliefs:

- High-quality professional development starts with the principal.
- The principal must be part of the process, not just a facilitator.
- Peer coaching is essential.
- Teacher leadership is a key to the program's success.
- Participants need to see value in the content and be willing to take risks.

PHASES OF COACHING

Project CEO was a collaborative initiative between the authors and two schools, the only elementary school and middle school in Tyrrell County Public Schools, a small, rural eastern school district in North Carolina. The initiative included three phases.

First phase: Teacher buy-in

In the initial phase, participants developed a clear understanding of the content of the professional development, using the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol as a framework. The workshop gave teachers and

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administrators a clear picture of what this model classroom looks and sounds like. Teachers were initially skeptical, mindful of previous unsuccessful professional development experiences and initiatives that have come and gone. Because of their active participation in the initial phase, principals alleviated teachers' skepticism and doubt. They assured teachers this new model would benefit them and integrate well with existing initiatives. Teachers agreed that this model included strategies that would improve their teaching, aided by the trust and leadership of school principals.

Second phase: Coaching teachers

The second phase focused on coaching teachers, using three forms of coaching:

- Lesson planning coaching;
- Observation coaching; and
- Peer coaching.

Lesson planning coaching consisted of monthly meetings with each teacher to have instructional conversations about content and implementation of academic language proficiency strategies in their lessons. At first, planning sessions included coaching in the form of reflective questioning; however, teachers were quiet and reluctant to share because they felt that their teaching would be criticized. In time, teachers received comprehensible feedback using the language of the model, turning planning time into a time for dialogue and instructional conversations. Instructional conversations resulted in sharing and modifying lesson plans.

Observation coaching consisted of classroom visits by the authors to observe and provide comprehensible feedback using the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol’s observation instrument. We logged 610 contact hours in one academic year among 16 participants. At first, teachers were wary of the observations, fearing that the observations would result in a negative judgment of their teaching. Teachers expressed their fears to their principals, who listened and reassured them. Eventually teachers started to share with us their implementation challenges. For each challenge, we offered a creative solution, and, in time, teachers not only expressed concerns but also their successes. Unsolicited testimonies started filtering in from teachers, district-level administrators, and visitors.

Trust and credibility of the model grew, and teachers began to use the language of professional development and the language of the model to engage with us on their teaching practices. Practices in the classroom changed from teacher-centered to student-centered. Students now expect instruction to be engaging and challenging. Students walk into the classroom and look to the board for both their content and language objectives to see what they will be learning. When we visit classrooms and ask students about the ongoing activity, they respond with the content vocabulary and the academic process language. For example, “I am learning about the differences and similarities between a plant cell and an animal cell, and I am using a Venn diagram to describe them.”

Peer coaching was the third element of professional development. Elementary teachers were paired with middle school teachers as their peers. Once a month, each pair held a pre-conference, observed one another, and held a post-conference. At

first, teachers objected because it meant scheduling a time to leave the building to go to another school. We soon learned that the real reason for the objection was that teachers perceived no value in observing a different grade level. These coaching sessions were integral to the process, so the principals provided substitutes and time for teachers to conduct peer observations. Once teachers conducted a couple of observations, their perceptions of the value of peer observations changed. Middle school teachers saw students using academic vocabulary starting at kindergarten and began to understand how this practice was essential and necessary for success at the secondary level. They heard kindergarten children and 1st graders use terms such as equations, vertical, and horizontal. Fourth graders described geometrical rotations, reflections, and dilations. Similarly, elementary teachers were able to see how the concepts that they teach are built upon at the secondary level. Each teacher developed teaching practices that would help facilitate and ensure continuity in learning.

TEACHERS BECOME COACHES

As the school year progressed, teachers in the project became teacher leaders of the model. We continued our monthly coaching sessions, but a team of teachers now led the whole-group monthly meetings. In their schools, nonparticipating teachers asked to observe lessons. After the observations, teachers discussed what they saw and why they implemented the strategies that they did. District-level administrators sent visitors and teacher interns to observe these model classrooms as well. Students in these classrooms were able to explain to the observers what they were learning and why the strategies their teachers used were so helpful. Principals provided reading materials and strategies to interested teachers and then met with them to talk about the model and its benefits. Overall, teachers in the project were the catalysts of change by example. During phase three, this core group of teachers will facilitate the coaching with the whole-school staff.

The monthly coaching led teachers to become leaders in their profession. For example, six teachers at the middle school developed a digital story to describe the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol and its impact on teaching and student learning. All teachers contributed with pictures, quotes, and time to compose the story. They presented their story at a school board meeting and received rave reviews. In another example, four teachers involved in the project attended a national conference with us. During the conference, we coached the teachers on how to write a meaningful reflection about that day’s sessions to be shared via email with their colleagues at home. To our surprise, the four teachers devised another creative method to reflect and to engage their colleagues at home: an online challenge question. The teachers read articles relevant to their professional development and even teleconferenced with the authors of one of the books they read as a group.

SHARED GOALS BUILD STRONG PARTNERS

Our perspectives as East Carolina University faculty members from different departments informed our work in different ways. One of us — Debra O’Neal, from the Department of English — has a background in linguistics and teaching English as a Second Language and is a Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol trainer in the region.

The other of us — Marjorie Ringler, from the Department of Educational Leadership — was interested in English language learners from the leadership perspective and attended one of O’Neal’s sessions.

From that day forward, we began an instructional conversation that developed into a collaborative partnership. We find that while our individual areas of expertise give us strengths on one side in process and coaching and on the other in content, that line blurs as our work progresses and we both continue to learn from each other.

COACHING THROUGH THE EYES OF THE PRINCIPALS

The second phase showed principals that successful professional development must have intense follow-up coaching to ensure implementation with fidelity. Principals come to see the value of the model and do whatever it takes for teachers to be successful. The principals report that, as they walk the hallways, they see students engaged in learning the content and hear higher-order thinking expressed through student talk, teacher questions, and written student samples. They see teachers talking about teaching and learning. At district-level meetings, principals use the language of professional development and coaching to discuss teaching and learning and gauge whether the next initiative will provide the same level of coaching.

Third phase: Building capacity

Follow-up activities that make coaching a key component of sustainability for any professional development must be job-embedded, consistent, and meaningful (Showers & Joyce, 1996). As the first year of the project ends, newly developed teacher leaders will take the lead in creating professional development for the next year. By then, the entire faculty of the elementary and middle schools will be trained, as well as a new team of upcoming teacher leaders from the high school. As we prepared for schoolwide implementation, the new teacher leaders attended a planning meeting for the potential high school participants and took the lead role in summarizing Project CEO. The teacher

leaders confidently assumed the role of coaches, making a passionate plea to the high school teachers to embrace the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol to keep the continuity of student-centered learning and engagement. This small, rural district is a primary example of learning sustained by coaching that ultimately leads to the creation of teacher leaders.

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Connect the dots

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sustained unless we first draw attention to doing the ordinary well — solidifying times and places for getting important work done, and providing the necessary support and resources that allow schools to become vibrant places of learning for students and adults.

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