IN THEIR OWN
WORDS

HOW TEACHERS
CAN INCORPORATE
STUDENTS' NATIVE
LANGUAGE INTO
THE CLASSROOM

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I n our professional development work with teachers of English learner students, we have identified eight practices that support English learners' access to complex tasks and text (Apodaca, 2007). Two of these strategies — talk and native language use — are particularly beneficial for their intellectual, cultural, and economic advantages. With professional learning supports, teachers can become knowledgeable about the benefits of these strategies for students and empowered to use them, even if they are monolingual speakers.

Research shows that English learners are too often denied access to complex tasks that address grade-level standards (Walqui et al., 2010). Teachers have told us they believe lack of English proficiency makes complex work impossible or that they fear frustrating students into withdrawal.

But in our work at the University of Pittsburgh's Institute for Learning, we have seen that it is possible to change this deficit thinking. When teachers see other educators incorporating scaffolds for talk and native language use, they begin to recognize that English learners can engage in high-level tasks successfully even after struggling (Moser et al., 2011). Video and classroom transcripts are excellent tools to engage teachers in this learning and are especially powerful when content-area teachers and English learner teachers view them collaboratively.

BILINGUAL SUPPORT

Teachers sometimes have a misconception that using the native language with English learners is a "crutch" that impedes learning. In fact, meta-analyses show that native language use supports the development of English skills while promoting understanding of new concepts (Genesee, Lindholm-Leary, & Christian, 2006; Rolstad, Mahoney, & Glass, 2005). English learners who have access to native language instruction often outpace academically those who do not (Genesee, Lindholm-Leary, & Christian, 2006). Native language use allows students to struggle with complex and cognitively demanding text productively and demonstrate their learning. It also reinforces English learners' pride in their cultural identities and empowers them to learn alongside their peers.

Some teachers argue that they can't use this approach because they don't speak their English learners' native languages. But we have identified several supports that make it possible.

The following four examples demonstrate specific strategies monolingual teachers can use and the professional learning supports needed to enact them. We highlight teacher-student interactions we have witnessed that embody the strategies. The transcript excerpts included are taken from videos that capture real situations from our professional learning work with teachers. Teacher-student interactions have been transcribed verbatim.

1. Co-teaching with a bilingual teacher

One effective strategy is for monolingual teachers to partner with other teachers or staff who speak students' native languages. In the example below, a monolingual literacy coach taught a lesson with a bilingual classroom teacher assisting her. The bilingual teacher translated questions the coach posed to students so those who struggled to understand English could understand and respond.

In this example, English learner students demonstrated that they understood the text the class had read not only literally but also inferentially. They shared valuable insights that may well have been missed if the students had only been given the opportunity to hear questions in English — and they did so in English.

EXAMPLE 1: **Co-teaching with a bilingual teacher**

Coach: Now that you know what is going on in some parts of the world, what do you think about your own life now? How can you relate that information to …

Teacher: Can I say that in Spanish? Sabiendo esta información, ¿Cómo nosotros podemos tomar esta

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información y relacionarla con nuestra propia vida? How can we connect that?

Student 1: Those kids are a having a different life, not like ours. They are, like, working and we are not. We're learning in school and they're, they have to work for money.

Student 2: They're working because they don't do the … their parents, for the people that they work, they don't pay them that much money, and they have to get food on the table. That's why they have to work. They don't have no choice.

Coach: So this is interesting. I hear, well, it is not fair, they should be learning, but not … Anna is saying, but they have no choice. Their parents need food on the table.

Student 3: I want to add something to Anna …

Teacher: Go ahead, Beltron. He is giving you time to talk, thank you, Carlos.

Coach: Remember we are talking about how this relates to your own life.

Teacher: Right. Nuestra vida. ¿Cómo lo que nosotros leimos ahora mismo lo podemos relacionar con nuestra vida. What do you think?

Student 3: They are working because they want to learn and they are paying for the school. And we don't pay for school.

2. Peer support in the native language

In another example during the same lesson, it was a peer rather than an adult who provided the translation. One student (Roger) was unable to

respond in English, so he added to the conversation in Spanish. Another student (Valerie) was asked to interpret for him. See the example below.

Roger was alluding to boycotting companies that use child labor in an effort to get these companies to cease the practice. Other students then built on his idea, suggesting boycotts of products that have high status among the students, such as Nike shoes. The teacher then chimed in to highlight that these ideas were connected to a previously-read text.

In other words, the student who answered in Spanish not only sparked discussion of a more advanced topic but also connected the current text to a previous text. He tackled challenging texts, engaged in productive discussion of them, and furthered everyone's learning.

EXAMPLE 2: **Peer support in the native language**

Teacher: So they still going to keep working but they need better conditions.

Student 1: Yeah, like they, they, if they get hurt, they gotta like, like, like take care of them. Like pay them more. Oh, if they don't want their childs to work, they should pay more so that, their parents …

Teacher: Roger wants to say something. There you go, Roger.

Student 2: Y si ellos pueden comprar la banana. La compañía no va hacer rica.

Teacher: All right. OK, can someone just say what Roger said, Valerie?

Student 1: He said that if we start buying up the rest of the companies, with Mexican money, so they are going to stop child labor.

Student 3: But they don't only have to stop buying bananas from Ecuador. They have to stop, like, using the shoes that, the Nikes, they have to stop using …

Teacher: OK, these are things that we learned in other QTA articles.

3. **Previewing with an article in the native language**

The next example is from a lesson taught by a guest teacher (one of this article's authors) to 8th-grade beginner English learners. These students were not only in the beginning stages of English language acquisition but also had little background knowledge on the topic of the lesson — desegregation during the civil rights era in the southern United States.

To boost background knowledge before the lesson and make the lesson more accessible, the teacher gave the students two Spanish language paragraphs about Ruby Bridges, the first black child to integrate a school in New Orleans, Louisiana. After reading the paragraphs in Spanish, they then discussed in English the famous Norman Rockwell painting of Ruby Bridges on her first day at the school.

During this discussion, in which the teacher motivated students to ask probing questions and unpack challenging ideas, a student asked about the angry mob protesting the integration of the elementary school. See the example at right.

In this exchange, a student asked a series of questions to unpack why the angry protesters weren't arrested. When the teacher encouraged the student to consider reasons why the protesters were allowed to continue, this led to a discussion about the concept of protesting and how concepts such as freedom of speech and freedom of assembly may unfold in the United States.

The previous paragraphs in Spanish had primed the students to think about concepts of racism, desegregation, and how people in the United States protest legally. Such a discussion would often be considered out of reach for beginning English learners, but with the appropriate scaffolding in the native language, even beginning

English learners are frequently able to respond and also facilitate discussion of higher-level concepts and ideas (Fung, Winkinson, & Moore, 2003).

EXAMPLE 3: **Previewing with an article in the native language**

Teacher: So they were struggling or grappling with this idea of black and white children going to school together. So over here at this table, the young man in green, you wanted to add to this?

Student: No, it's OK.

Teacher: OK, yes?

Student: Why did the government say that the black need to be with the white people in the school? Why did the people want to kill the little girl? Why don't they put the people who do it in jail?

Teacher: So that is a good question. So if there's this angry mob that's threatening this little girl, why weren't those people being put in jail? That's a very good question. Would somebody like to respond to that, what you're thinking? There's this angry mob of people. Yes?

Student: Because the angry mob was …

Teacher: Protesting?

Student: Protesting, like, so they can't do that, 'cause a bunch of people, and so they're not gonna know who is gonna, who is in the angry mob.

Teacher: Hmm. So maybe if they're protesting but they haven't done anything violent yet, then they can't arrest them? Yeah?

Student: Because they're protesting, 'cause they don't want them to be together, and that — if they're not doing nothing. They're just accusing her, because they just want, they just don't want her to be together with the other kids, the white kids, because they think she's different. She's different from the others.

Teacher: So they're protesting.

They're not actually doing anything physically to hurt Ruby. There's that threat, she has bodyguards, but they haven't actually done anything to hurt her, so maybe that's a reason why they couldn't arrest them.

Student: They want her to get out of the school.

Teacher: They want her to not be in that school. Right. So let's continue reading. Let's go on to the next paragraph.

4. Turn-and-talks in a multilingual classroom

Turn-and-talk among small groups of students who share the same native language can lead to more engagement among students during whole-class discussion of a text. In the example below, high school students with beginning to intermediate English skills from multiple native language groups examined a complex literary text that focused on the experiences of adolescents not unlike themselves. "Cross talk" represents points at which students discussed the teacher's questions within their small groups of same-language peers.

In conversation with us before the lesson, the teacher had said her students were often silent during the English language discussion if they were not given an opportunity to prepare what they would say by testing out their ideas in a small group of same-language peers. But as the example shows, the cross-talk strategy can change that, even when the teacher is not familiar with students' native languages.

EXAMPLE 4: **Turn-and-talks in a multilingual classroom**

Teacher: Stop right there. What does that mean, "the silent one"?
Student 1: Like he's really quiet.
Student 2: Quiet.
Student 3: Quiet.

When teachers have the time and guidance to prepare lessons that incorporate the native language as an asset rather than a liability, they can create opportunities for English learners to demonstrate their true capability.

Student 1: He just likes to be really quiet, doesn't ever want to answer.
Teacher: OK. Why would Alejandro be the silent one?
Cross talk
Student 1: Maybe he's, like, afraid —
Student 4: Doesn't know the language.
Student 1: Like, afraid to, like, talk.
Teacher: Maybe afraid to talk. What else?
Cross talk
Student 5: Maybe he didn't know English.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

We recognize that how native language is used in the classroom depends on the context and available resources. Professional learning is an essential resource to make these strategies feasible, especially professional learning that allows content-area teachers and English learner specialists to collaborate.

When teachers have the time and guidance to prepare lessons that incorporate the native language as an asset rather than a liability, they can create opportunities for English learners to demonstrate their true capability. We suggest beginning with one or more of the following ways to give access and build teachers' capacity for working with English learners.

- **Text selection**
  Rigorous text discussions require challenging texts worthy of conversation. Teachers should have the opportunity to engage collaboratively in identifying and analyzing potential texts for their complexities, considering discussion topics and key vocabulary to teach directly, and determining places in the text where English learners may need additional support. This process equips teachers to plan how and when to use the strategies highlighted in our examples.

- **Developing initial and follow-up questions**
  After analyzing a text carefully, teachers in professional learning communities benefit from taking time to prepare questions that will allow English learners to enter into a challenging text in English. Open-ended, text-based questions that encourage students to talk about ideas, characters, and events in a text are a good starting point for conversation.

  It is equally important to consider how follow-up questions can push students to provide evidence for their responses, expand on their ideas, or work through possible confusion.

- **Classroom structure and peer-assisted learning**
  Teachers in professional learning communities should prepare for the kinds of interactions, including those among peers, that support the strategies described here. It is important to consider one's specific classroom or school, including the different native language groups, levels of English language acquisition, and personality types represented.

  Some students and groups may respond better to certain strategies than others. For example, students who tend to be quiet may feel more willing to share their ideas with a partner.

Students who are further along in their English acquisition can help beginning English learners who share their native language.

Dedicated time and collaboration can help teachers consider these factors and meet students' needs. Effective instructional strategies that incorporate talk and native language use require intentional planning, but they are possible for all teachers and they can enable the success of all students.

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