Academic conversations: Developing critical speaking and listening skills
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Overview

- New national standards provide an opportunity to examine the role of speaking and listening skills for English Learners (ELs) in academic contexts.
- This session will explain the importance of two types of conversations in academic contexts: whole-class conversations and small group conversations.
Turn and Talk

What words come to mind to describe “academic conversations”?

Discuss with a partner.
Academic Language

• Academic achievement gaps have been attributed to ELs’ struggle with “academic language”

• Scholars differ in the ways they define academic language:
  ▪ Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) /Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP)
  ▪ Competence
  ▪ Systemic Functional Linguistics
  ▪ Pragmatics
  ▪ New Literacy Studies
The role of talk in classrooms

• Talk is:
  – commonplace in classrooms
  – a central way to construct knowledge
  – important for “comprehensible output”
  – a complex professional skill for teachers

Conversation is like a tree that climbs you back (Erickson, 1981)
# Model of Discourse Coherence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Structure</th>
<th>Components</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Information state</strong></td>
<td>• New vs. known facts and information</td>
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<td><strong>Act sequence</strong></td>
<td>• Speech acts</td>
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<td><strong>Ideational structure</strong></td>
<td>• Topics</td>
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<td><strong>Exchange structure</strong></td>
<td>• Turn taking</td>
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<td>• Opening and closing</td>
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<td><strong>Participation framework</strong></td>
<td>• Student identity</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Classroom identity</td>
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From Schiffrin, 1988
Academic Conversations

• Academic conversations are:
  – Sustained
  – Purposeful
  – Content-rich

• Core skills:
  – Elaborate and clarify
  – Support ideas with examples
  – Build on or challenge a partner’s ideas
  – Paraphrase
  – Synthesize
Observing Academic Conversations

• Eighth Grade Science Classroom
  ▪ What are the rules for the interaction?
  ▪ Who can speak and when?
  ▪ What do you notice about “sentences” and words?
  ▪ Does the teacher support development of any core skills? If yes, which ones?
• [video]
Observing Academic Conversations

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Veronica: A color change?
Teacher: Color change. Okay, so a reaction would be a color change. What else did you see? Ben?
Ben: Part was red and part was black.
Teacher: Okay so our ending substance part was black part red. Okay what else? Philip?
Philip: It rusted.
Teacher: So our, obser—observation of the reaction would be that it rusted. Okay. Mmhmm.
Student: The string X or whatever it was. The metal stuff kind of looked thinner.
Teacher: You think metal looked thinner. Okay. What do you see in the paper towel underneath of the steel wool?
Student: A lot of fuzzy—
Teacher: Pick it up!
Student: Ew. It’s shedding.
Teacher: It’s shedding? Okay so does the rust hold together as well as the steel wool did?
Did the rust hold together—as well as the steel wool did?
Student: no
Teacher: So where should we put that?
Student: Ending substance
Student: Common name.
Teacher: Common name, that it didn’t hold together as well? Is that an ending appearance or observation of reaction?
Recommendations for teacher talk

• Initiation-Response-Evaluation (IRE) discourse often dominates classroom interaction

• Need to:
  – Move from IRE (evaluation) to IRF (Initiation-Response-Feedback) to offer students alternative interactional moves (e.g., repetition, recasting, reformulation, prompting)
  – Provide greater independence to students and opportunities for greater output
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• [video]
Frank: Ready?
Christine: No, read the directions stupid!
Frank: It said put in the two tips. The leads should not touch each other.
Ana: Esa cosa como el agua X bien...
This thing is like the water X good
Christine: Okay. Go.
Frank: Ah look at the salt.
Christine: Bubbles
Ben: No, it’s separating the salt from the water.
Teacher: Ana you’ve got to get closer. You’re going to miss it. Guys bring it over here so Ana can see it better.
Christine: It’s making bubbles.
Ben: You disconnected the battery.
Frank: I did?
Ben: Look at it.
Frank: That was not my fault.
Ben: Yeah it was.
Christine: And now it’s wet!
Frank: Shut up!
Ana: Poquito draga
It dragged a little
Ben: Don’t get shocked!
Christine: Bzzz.
Frank: Stop playing like that.
Ana: X ponerlo X...
Put it
Christine: Bzzz
Ben: Why don’t you just break it?
Christine: Get that away from my face.
Frank: Nothing’s happened.
Ana: Un poquito X...
a little X...
Ben: Yeah, look at mine! Look at that
Christine: Put it back in. You’ll break the circuit. Touch the two together.
Ben: Listen. Wham, you can hear it. It’s sizzling.
Christine: I heard it. It’s bubbling. Bubbling death!
Ben: Touch the pencil.
Christine: No, don’t. Oh my god, if you do the battery will explode.
Ana: Se esta saliendo del agua.
It’s coming out of the water.
Ben: It will?
Christine: It will just shard itself.
Frank: Get it away from me first of all.
Ben: Aahhh!
Christine: There might be a spark or two.
...
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Recommendations for student talk

• Provide clear and explicit instructions
• Make talk necessary for assigned task
• Assign a clear outcome for the group work
• Determine if a task is appropriate to students’ cognitive and linguistic ability
• Integrate the task with the broader curriculum topic
• Involve all students in the group
• Allow students ample time to complete the tasks and talk
• Teach students how to work in groups together (provide explicit rules and expectations)
• Create expectations about exploratory vs. performative oral language use
Conclusion

• Classroom talk is ubiquitous
• Talk is a complex professional skill for teachers
• Talk is a complex academic skill for students
  – Opportunities for talk are important for ELs’ conceptual and linguistic development
  – Supporting talk is important for ELs’ academic and linguistic success
Resources


Resources


• Questions?

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