

# 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

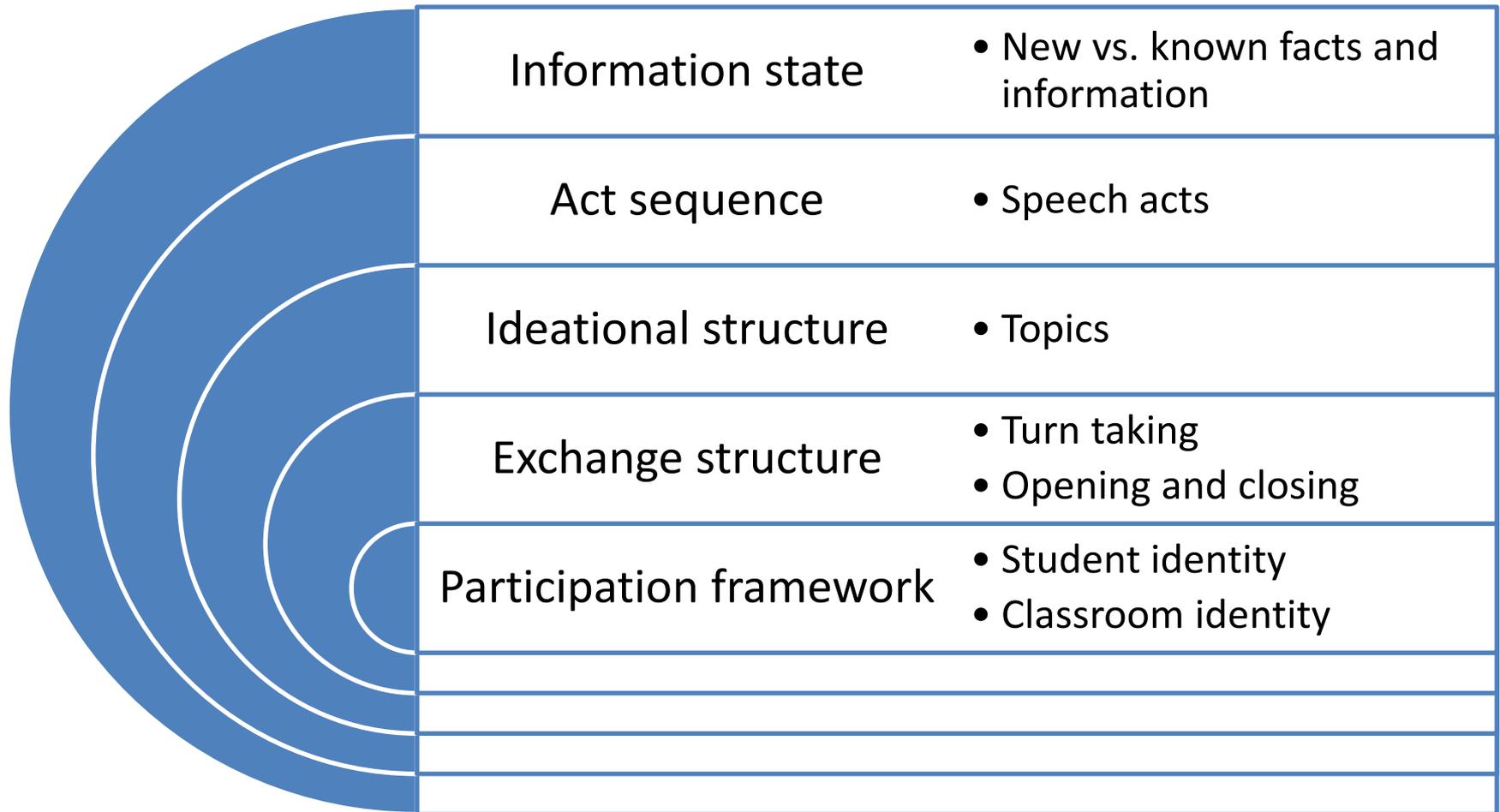
# The role of talk in classrooms

- 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



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



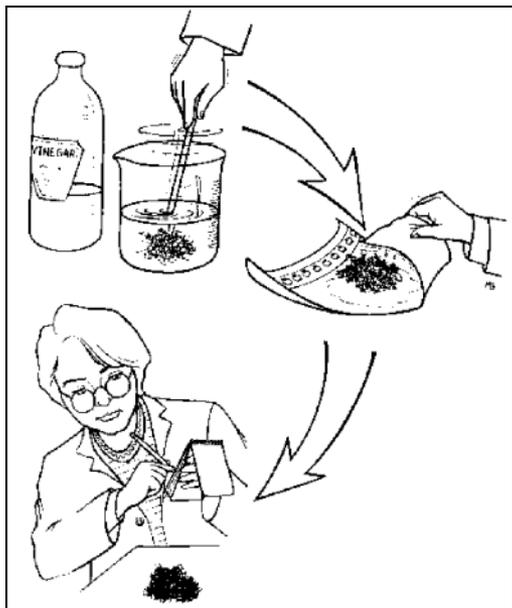
# Observing Academic Conversations

- 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]

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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

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- Questions?
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