

# 'Celebrating Mistakes' and Other Ways to Help English-Learners

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Here's the latest installment in a series on ways to help ELLs develop more English-speaking skills ...

## 'Sometimes Overlooked'

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To become well-spoken and effective communicators, English-learners, hereafter referred to as multilingual learners (MLs), benefit from role models and practice speaking in the target language. Listening *and* speaking banks are essential yet

sometimes overlooked facets of language acquisition and academic success. Why? These two domains are rarely assessed on standardized tests other than language assessments, and the grade-level curriculum is already overwhelming. Many educators are left thinking that there is no time to provide students with opportunities to talk. On the other hand, students are given reading or writing assignments that are easily evaluated, so there's a heavier emphasis on reading and writing.

Yet, teaching MLs to speak a new language is important to their linguistic and academic success. Listening and speaking are investments for future reading and writing and overall literacy. When these two domains are overlooked, students suffer.

MLs are not monolithic, so individual consideration is a must. Some are born in the United States and learn two languages simultaneously. Others immigrate at various ages, with different levels of language proficiency and diverse experiences that all have effects on second-language acquisition. These are some questions to consider as you begin to plan speaking practices for MLs:

- At what age/grade level are they acquiring English?
- What types of language experiences do they have?
- What languages can they speak?
- Is their first language similar or very different from English?
- Are there cultural norms you should be aware of (eye contact, proximity, etc.)?

In classrooms today, we can ensure that MLs have equitable opportunities to develop language while acquiring the academic skills they need to be successful with the grade-level curriculum by creating daily and intentional opportunities for speaking practice.

## **ECHO, CHORAL**

ECHO reading is having students mimic reading that the teacher models first—providing an opportunity to hear the academic language, tone, prosody, fluency, and English-language structures from an expert reader before they read aloud as a class. CHORAL reading is reading aloud in unison as a class. Both methods help MLs hear prosody and practice fluency in English-language structures. ECHO and CHORAL reading are not actually asking students to speak their own ideas. These two methods create environments that get MLs comfortable with vocalizing in front of their peers. And that's important because if students are too afraid to open their mouths in class, speaking won't happen the way we wish it would. Students can ECHO/CHORAL read the learning objectives, a sentence, a paragraph, a poem, etc.

## Structured Conversations

Structured conversations offer a routine, set explicit expectations, and incorporate language and content. All of which benefit MLs. Typically, when we ask students to turn and talk to a partner, there is little structure involved. Kids turn to their partners, and the speaking and interaction that happen vary greatly from student to student. On the other hand, structured conversations such as QSSSA require teachers to provide learners with guidelines and a framework for the interaction. Students engage in a routine, knowing what the goals are and how to achieve them. There's no guesswork. Through effective structured conversations. the teacher ...

- Strategically and intentionally assigns partners or groups.
- Tells students how the interaction will take place (share in numerical order, share alphabetically by first names, etc.).
- Provides scaffolds such as sentence starters and visuals.
- Walks the room to listen in and observe interactions.
- Provides feedback and clears up misconceptions.

## Less Structured Speaking Opportunities

Two less structured and more lengthy opportunities for speaking include using wordless picture books and the Sketchnote Review (Gonzalez, forthcoming). Both of these methods allow for maximum use of visuals as well as strategic partnering of students. Teachers can increase or decrease accommodations by applying sentence stems for listening and speaking.

### *Wordless Picture Books*

- Provide students with an assortment of wordless picture books and allow time for learners to review them and select one to share with a partner.
- Strategically pair learners.
- Have students take turns “reading” the wordless picture book to their partners.

### Variations:

- Students can buddy read the pages, creating an increased need for listening.
- Students can read to a younger grade level.
- Provide sentence stems for additional support.

### *Sketchnote Review (Gonzalez, forthcoming)*

- Have students sketch note (take notes using visuals and words) on a topic during a lesson or as they read or watch a video.
- Provide students time to look over their sketch notes and prepare to verbally share them with a partner.
- Strategically pair students up and have them verbally share their sketch notes with one another as they point to each part of their notes. Offer sentence stems as necessary for listening and speaking.

## **Speaking of Language**

Multilingual learners who have experiences with languages other than English do not magically shut off the other languages as they walk into our classrooms. They use their prior language experiences and knowledge as they acquire new languages. Languages build on one another, and the process of language acquisition is fluid and dynamic. It can look one way today and another tomorrow. It can look this way for one student and differently for another.

Language and speaking develop through opportunities. I used to think a quiet classroom meant the teacher had good classroom management. Now, when I observe a quiet classroom, I wonder about language development. And I wonder about multilingual learners.

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**Valentina Gonzalez**

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### **‘Mistakes Should Be celebrated’**

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*“No sé inglés, pero estoy aprendiendo. Solo que no me gusta hablar [en inglés].”/I don’t know English, but I am learning. I just do not like to talk [in English].*

Yesenia shared this thought in a small-group reading lesson with other young Spanish-speaking students. Most young students learning English share this sentiment, and they are often hesitant to use English in the classroom. There are many reasons young students learning English are hesitant to speak in class. They often can’t find the right words to express exactly what they want to say and many times they are afraid of being chastised or laughed at for making mistakes. How do we help them overcome this fear? What can we do to help make speaking English less scary? How do we make students OK with making mistakes so that they can get the practice they need to become more fluent speakers?

It all begins with the classroom environment; classrooms must be places students feel safe taking chances. Mistakes should be celebrated for their effort, as mistakes are a crucial step in becoming a more fluent speaker. The classroom must be welcoming of all students' cultures and languages (García-Sánchez & Faulstich Orellana, 2022). Teachers should learn to view their English-learners through an asset-based lens. Learn to see the fact that they bring a distinct knowledge of the world that the classroom can benefit from (Delgado Bernal, 2002). Students feel loved and respected by their teachers, and peers feel less anxious (Krashen, 1985) about learning English. A welcoming and safe classroom leads to more academic risk taking for all students, but it is essential for students learning a new language and a new culture.

A safe and welcoming classroom environment isn't enough. The content must be meaningful and relevant for all students, but especially for English-learners. Learning is much more accessible when students can make connections to their lived experiences and across the content areas.

Keep in mind that your English-learners probably won't feel comfortable speaking right away. Before they will open up and speak, they need to be engaged to listen. Engaging read alouds are a great place to start. Can you find a high-quality picture book that is relevant to your students' home language? A native-Spanish speaker is more likely to be engaged by *Niño Wrestles the World* (Morales, 2015) while a native Chinese speaker may bring insight to *Watercress* (2021). Both students are more likely to provide oral responses to these books than to something more "traditional" like *Curious George*. They might not understand everything, but they'll pick up on cultural and linguistic cues that give them something to discuss (López-Robertson, 2022).

Once you have a classroom culture that is safe and engaging, here are a few day-to-day strategies for helping students speak:

- Provide scaffolds and stems for students to organize their thoughts before speaking.
- Daily opportunities to speak in small groups or peer to peer with native-English speakers.
- Listening to audiobooks.
- Karaoke (even if they aren't singing).
- Lots of questions—make asking questions something that all students do daily. It's an essential skill for speaking in any language and it leads to conversations.

- Patience—you're going to need more wait time with EL students than you do with native speakers of English.

Remember, we all want to be heard. Our EL students are no different, and it's frustrating to want to be heard and know that you're not expressing exactly what you want to say. When your EL students speak, be sure that your classroom is a place that they are heard. The more they believe that you are listening, the more they will talk. Celebrate these conversations.

**References can be found [here](#).**

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places students feel  
safe taking chances.**

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