Tips for Encouraging English-Learners to Practice Speaking

April 21, 2023

iStock/Getty

As someone who has been learning Spanish most of my life, I know it can be challenging and scary to speak in a new language.

And I've seen my English-language-learner students experience similar feelings.

This multipart series will feature practical recommendations from teachers on how to encourage our students to get past that reluctance and develop speaking fluency in English.

Today's contributors also participated in this 10-minute podcast.

'Communication Cubes'

Laleh Ghotbi is a 4th grade educator in a Title I school in the Salt Lake City school district. She came to the United States in August 2000 and got two master's degrees in English, her second language:

I am an educator from a diverse background, so this topic resonates with me on a personal and professional level. My own children are (former) English-learners, and I work in a Title I school where 11 out of my 17 students are English-learners. I have created a classroom environment where *all* of my students often raise their hands to share answers to the questions in discussions and offer insights about different topics.

Over my career working with kids from diverse backgrounds, I have learned that creating an inclusive and safe environment for students is the first step toward developing their speaking skills—a classroom free of judgment, where students can express their thoughts and feelings without the fear of making mistakes or being laughed at. To achieve this, from the first week of school, I hold weekly community/relationship-building circles with my students. I state expectations and give an example of how positive feedback can empower our peers. We talk about how we need to try to stay positive and not use hurtful comments. I share my personal experiences with learning a new language and talk about my own children who were sadly bullied for years because they were different. Kids can relate to these types of examples and show more empathy toward each other.

One strategy I use is to ask noncontent-related questions for building student confidence in participating in discussions. In my classroom, I utilize communication cubes in our community circles or whenever we have free time. Questions on the communication cubes are about students' opinion or feeling about a certain topic, so there is no wrong answer. Each student rolls the cube, reads the question, restates part of the question as s/he answers to it. This activity allows students to practice their reading skills, make statement sentences they can use in writing prompts, and verbal communication skills.

The best part about the communication-cube activity is that the class is learning more about one another, which brings them closer together and fosters a supportive learning community. For example, when one of my very low readers read the

question on the cube correctly, all the students started clapping for him. If he struggles with a word, a person close to him leans over and whispers the word, and he repeats it. I love watching my students supporting and teaching each other.

There are many strategies for supporting emerging bilingual students in learning academic language. A priority for supporting English-learners is building background knowledge. Students can speak about the topic of the lesson if they comprehend it. I often use visual vocabulary and videos to provide some background information about the topic. When I pose a question, I ask students to first talk with a partner before sharing their answers. Students feel more confident when they have the opportunity to share in pairs before the whole-class discussion.

Building students' vocabulary bank is another way of developing language skills. In my class, we learn 8-15 new vocabulary words each week. Students learn the meaning of the vocabulary words through fun practices such as matching cards for pictures and the words, drag and drop activities where they use context clues to choose the correct vocabulary word, and their favorite, climb the mountain competition on Nearpod, which is on the last day of each week when they had enough practice to master the vocabulary words.

Another tool I use is Dyad reading. Students are paired based on their reading skills. A strong reader is paired with a high-medium reader and a medium reader with a lower reader. The stronger reader in each pair points to the words and tries to move his/her finger faster than the speed of his/her partner's reading speed but not too fast that they give up. After each paragraph, they answer orally the questions about the text or summarize what they read in their own words. Dyad reading is an effective way of building reading, speaking, and writing skills.

From my many years supporting English-learners, I have learned we need a safe learning environment and a variety of fun and engaging activities for daily skills practice.

> **"Creating an inclusive and safe environment for students is the first step toward developing their speaking skills.**
>
> Laleh Gholbi
> Education Week

'Creating a Safe Environment'

Anastasia M. Martinez is an English development and AVID Excel teacher in Pittsburg, Calif.:

We all know that acquiring language proficiency does not happen overnight; it is a daily intensive workout in reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills that would lead to language development. When I started learning English in elementary school, my teachers used a lot of grammar-translation methods, where students read and listened to texts and translated them into their first language. By the time I got to middle school, English was my least favorite subject; I could understand what I heard or read but could not say a word. It was that invisible wall in my mouth that just did not allow me to produce a sound.

What changed was starting an English course in high school where students and teachers only interacted in English. I still have goosebumps remembering my first interaction with an English-speaking guest speaker there when I had the courage to raise my hand and ask my first question in English about a barbecue in the United States. Years later, I became a language-development teacher; however, I still remember what helped me break that invisible wall and start speaking English.

Here are some ways that could help students practice their speaking skills in any classroom:

Create a safe and respectful space

As a language learner, the safe space that my teachers created at my English school was one of the catalysts that helped me break that invisible barrier that stopped me from using my voice in the classroom. Creating a safe environment in my classroom that is free of judgment is essential for me as a teacher now. It helps students understand that we are all on our learning journey and mistakes are a part of our learning.

Celebrate successes

Allowing room for even small celebrations of students' success boosts students' confidence and encourages them to use the language in the classroom. In my classroom, we use celebration snaps (borrowed from AVID Excel) when students notice that other students use high-level words or target vocabulary in speaking, they do quick snaps to acknowledge that student.

Being mindful of reducing TTT

As teachers, we want to share everything we know with our students, but actually reducing teacher talking time (TTT) would benefit language learners and all students more. Teacher talking time is the amount of time a teacher spends talking in the classroom for lecturing, giving directions, or participating in instructions. To help language learners improve their productive language skills, they need more time in the classroom to engage in meaningful conversations where they can use the target language. This is exactly why the amount of time a teacher spends talking should be reduced. When teachers speak less in the classroom, their role changes into being a facilitator rather than a conductor.

Provide ample opportunities for students to practice structured conversations.

Giving students opportunities to practice new vocabulary in a structured conversation helps them not only remember the concept better but also practice the target language in a conversation. In my classroom, when students share with partners or in small groups, students have roles. For example, when partner A is speaking, partner B is listening with their whole body (eyes are on the speaker, body turned to the speaker) or listening and taking brief notes.

I usually provide sentence frames for students so that they know how to start their answers. Before students share with their partners, I give them a couple of seconds to create their answer with a sentence frame and target language, then students signal that they are ready (thumbs up, for example) and then share with each other. Allowing this wait time gives students a chance to have their answers ready, and they feel more confident when sharing with their peers and later with the whole class.

> **"**
>
> **I usually provide sentence frames for students.**
>
> Anastasia M. Martinez
>
> Education Week

'Building Background Knowledge'

Ivannia Soto, Ph.D., is a professor of education and the director of graduate programs at Whittier College, where she also coordinates the Bilingual Authorization program. Soto has authored and co-authored 12 books (and many articles), including Shadowing Multilingual Learners*:*

There are four important ways to assist multilingual learners (MLLs) in developing speaking skills. These include:

- Creating a community for language risks and an assets-based approach.
- Building background knowledge for authentic conversations.

- Scaffolding language with sentence frames for a variety of purposes and intentional pairs or groups.
- Creating authentic speaking opportunities.

Creating a community for language risks and an assets-based approach takes planning before MLLs are ever placed in pairs or groups to begin practicing speaking skills. As educators, we must have and hold high expectations that our MLLs *can* and *will* rise to the level of our discourse expectations. We must also *want* to disrupt silence. MLLs have been relegated to silence for far too long, and we must realize that the person doing the most talking is doing the most learning (Soto, 2021). We must plan for student talk to happen by intentionally embedding it into our lesson plans and hourly teaching goals.

Students can often only actively listen for about 15 minutes, so we must plan for ongoing speaking opportunities during each lesson. Creating a community for language risks also means that students know that the classroom will be a safe place to practice new language with each other. MLLs in particular need to know that they will not be made fun of or overly corrected but, rather, will be supported and encouraged.

Building background knowledge for authentic conversations is essential to developing speaking skills, as it provides MLLs with enough content by which to actually have an authentic conversation. Just as when students write, they need to adequately build background knowledge around a topic, so do MLLs need to build enough content to have a conversation that is sustained with multiple rounds of evidence and dialogue.

MLLs can build background knowledge around a topic via multiple short reading selections (that eventually become longer), short video clips around a topic, or a series of photos (especially helpful for lower proficiency levels). Using multiple modes for building background knowledge will also engage students. Building background knowledge becomes the content scaffold that MLLs need to engage in conversations.

Now that the content scaffold has been developed, MLLs will also need language scaffolds in the form of sentence frames. The sentence frame should match the purpose of the conversation that the MLL is engaged in. For example, if the purpose of the conversation is to express an opinion, then it is fine to use a sentence frame such as, "In my opinion . . . ", or "I think or believe that. . . ." However, sentence frames used should also vary according to the purpose of the conversation. MLLs

should also be given other sentence-frame tools such as predicting ("I hypothesize that. . . .) or co-constructing ideas ("My idea builds upon ___ idea. . . ." Additionally, MLLs will be most confident using sentence frames and taking language risks when they are paired with a partner or in a group that is one linguistic level above them. We certainly want language models for our MLLs, but we don't want a partner who will take over the conversation. As such, it will take time for the teacher to plan pairs or groups by reviewing language-proficiency results for appropriate groupings.

Once all of the pieces of having a conversation are in place, teachers should create authentic speaking opportunities. This may also take some planning as it may take MLLs outside of the classroom. For example, perhaps MLLs in the upper grades can be paired with MLLs in the lower grades, and they can support their learning. Or, within one's own classroom, MLLs can prepare for a debate in groups, where they share the background knowledge and evidence that supports their claim. MLLs can make presentations to an administrator on campus or record a conversation that they had at home with their parents or siblings.

Teachers and students should be patient with themselves as they begin to use the above tools. There may be times when things like noise levels become frustrating or sentence frames don't quite work. Eventually, as teachers listen to rich student conversations, they will realize it was worthwhile in building MLL confidence and knowledge.

> **"**
>
> # Teachers should create authentic speaking opportunities.

Ivannia Soto

Education Week

'Peer Practice'

Jody Nolf is an associate language and literacy specialist at Vista Higher Learning. For more than 20 years, she taught English and reading to middle and high school students. Six years ago, she transitioned into the world of ESOL as a full-time coordinator and advocate for multilingual learners, creating professional development and working with educators around the United States:

English-language learners (ELs) come from diverse backgrounds and experiences, and not all of them are eager to practice their new language. Oral fluency combines both active (speaking) and passive (listening) skills, and whereas listening is usually the first to develop in proficiency, speaking does not always come so easily. The key is for educators to provide opportunities for ELs to practice their communication skills in a low-stress environment. Several examples of such opportunities include teacher-led choral responses, classroom practice with peers, and web-based practices.

Teacher-led choral response is a great first step to encouraging ELs to practice speaking skills. When students aren't singled out to speak, the affective filter, i.e., any barrier to learning such as anxiety or lack of confidence, is lowered. For

example, if the teacher is modeling the use of a new vocabulary word, she will ask the students to repeat the word back to her in unison. Even if the EL is a newcomer who only whispers or mouths the word so as not to draw attention to herself, she has still taken the first step of forming the word in her new language.

Another way that educators can help ELs develop their speaking skills is peer practice. This method encourages students to engage with one another, usually in small groups or pairs. These small groups reduce the <u>affective filter</u> because the EL student only needs to practice with one or two other students, rather than an entire classroom. For example, ELs might not readily volunteer to present in front of the class where all students focus on that one speaker. Instead, teachers can have students practice with a simple sentence frame of fill-in-the-blank interview questions that students can practice with a shoulder partner. This method is especially beneficial for students to acclimate to one another, thus lowering the affective filter even further. It also enhances listening skills. Students learn about each other while discovering interesting background details about their peers.

A third way that educators can help ELs develop speaking skills is to use web-based practices. The internet is filled with great tools for ELs to practice their new language skills, including speaking. These exercises are usually one-on-one experiences, thus lowering the affective filter while providing excellent learning opportunities. Flipgrid and Speakpipe are fun, easy-to-use resources that allow students to record themselves. The students can play back their recording and then self-evaluate, rerecording if desired.

> **"**
> **Teacher-led choral response is a great first step to encouraging ELs to practice speaking skills.**
>
> Jody Nolf
> Education Week

Thanks to Laleh, Anastasia, Ivannia, and Jody for contributing their thoughts!

The new question of the week is:

What are the best ways to help English Language Learners develop speaking skills?

Consider contributing a question to be answered in a future post. You can send one to me at lferlazzo@epe.org. When you send it in, let me know if I can use your real name if it's selected or if you'd prefer remaining anonymous and have a pseudonym in mind.

You can also contact me on Twitter at @Larryferlazzo.

Education Week has published a collection of posts from this blog, along with new material, in an e-book form. It's titled Classroom Management Q&As: Expert Strategies for Teaching.

Just a reminder; you can subscribe and receive updates from this blog via email (The RSS feed for this blog, and for all Ed Week articles, has been changed by the new redesign—new ones are not yet available). And if you missed any of the

highlights from the first 11 years of this blog, you can see a categorized list below.

- It Was Another Busy School Year. What Resonated for You?
- How to Best Address Race and Racism in the Classroom
- Schools Just Let Out, But What Are the Best Ways to Begin the Coming Year?
- Classroom Management Starts With Student Engagement
- Teacher Takeaways From the Pandemic: What's Worked? What Hasn't?
- The School Year Has Ended. What Are Some Lessons to Close Out Next Year?
- Student Motivation and Social-Emotional Learning Present Challenges. Here's How to Help
- How to Challenge Normative Gender Culture to Support All Students
- What Students Like (and Don't Like) About School
- Technology Is the Tool, Not the Teacher
- How to Make Parent Engagement Meaningful
- Teaching Social Studies Isn't for the Faint of Heart
- Differentiated Instruction Doesn't Need to Be a Heavy Lift
- How to Help Students Embrace Reading. Educators Weigh In
- 10 Strategies for Reaching English-Learners
- 10 Ways to Include Teachers in Important Policy Decisions
- 10 Teacher-Proofed Strategies for Improving Math Instruction
- Give Students a Role in Their Education
- Are There Better Ways Than Standardized Tests to Assess Students? Educators Think So
- How to Meet the Challenges of Teaching Science
- If I'd Only Known. Veteran Teachers Offer Advice for Beginners
- Writing Well Means Rewriting, Rewriting, Rewriting
- Christopher Emdin, Gholdy Muhammad, and More Education Authors Offer Insights to the Field
- How to Build Inclusive Classrooms
- What Science Can Teach Us About Learning
- The Best Ways for Administrators to Demonstrate Leadership
- Listen Up: Give Teachers a Voice in What Happens in Their Schools
- 10 Ways to Build a Healthier Classroom
- Educators Weigh In on Implementing the Common Core, Even Now
- What's the Best Professional-Development Advice? Teachers and Students Have Their Say

- Plenty of Instructional Strategies Are Out There. Here's What Works Best for Your Students
- How to Avoid Making Mistakes in the Classroom
- Looking for Ways to Organize Your Classroom? Try Out These Tips
- Want Insight Into Schooling? Here's Advice From Some Top Experts

I am also creating a Twitter list including all contributors to this column.

Related Tags:
Teaching Strategies