

Get lit: Helping English learners grow through intentional classroom conversations

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Summary: The article outlines culturally responsive activities in dialogic literacy instruction to create an inclusive classroom environment. An overview of dialogic theory and practice grounds the need for effective professional development in literacy instruction. Discussion of how to create engaged, dialogic communities through daily classroom routines and evidence-based practices shows how to support English Learners' literacy growth and increase linguistic responsiveness, especially with digital nativism.

Keywords: Dialogic pedagogy, literacy, English language learners, culturally responsive, oral language

Dialogic practice in literacy instruction

Dialogic practice (DP) nurtures confident, engaged readers and writers, and teachers in the field require essential tools to help ELs grow through intentional classroom conversations. This article provides an overview of the theoretical framework that guides dialogic pedagogy to apply in daily dialogic routines which educators can implement consistently in their classrooms to support ELs' linguistic and reading needs. The activities explore dialogue among peers, between teacher and student(s), and between author and reader.

Dialogic pedagogy in literacy instruction and intervention can benefit from effective professional development (PD) to support teachers' use of intentional conversation in classroom practices. Prior research on effective PD to support teachers' literacy intervention for ELs suggest teachers' implementation of differentiated, small-group interventions for ELs with literacy challenges is more effective than solely whole-class literacy or sheltered instruction (Baker et al., 2014; Shelton, Hogan, Chow, & Wexler, 2023). Effective PD can improve teachers' level of preparedness to deliver evidence-based literacy practices and facilitate activities which

- incorporate unique cultural and linguistic resources (i.e. funds of knowledge) (Moll et al., 1992);
- meet instructional reading needs;
- access culturally responsive instructional materials.

Theoretical framework

Building inclusive classroom communities with dialogic pedagogy can scaffold language for ELs. DP is one of the five key areas of culturally responsive teaching (NAYEC, Steed & Price, 2016). A DP literature review (Piazza et al.,

2015) reports that “[w]hen students engage in dialogue, particularly around texts and life experiences, they use new language, connect the known to the unknown, and expand their worldviews” (p.8). Dialogic classrooms provide opportunities for students to engage with each other, with texts, and the world around them.

Dialogic pedagogy as a theoretical framework has roots in Bakhtin's (1981) findings: “Emergent literacy develops during dialogic reading through a child's reciting of their interactions by heart and through retelling of the interactions ‘in one's own words’” (p. 341). Bakhtin (1981) believed meaning is constructed through conversation between people and between readers and texts. Grounded in social constructivist theory (Vygotsky, 2011), which posits that students experience and understand what they learn through frameworks of language and culture, dialogic practice centers students as co-constructors of meaning who understand texts they read and their world experiences through different perspectives. Prioritizing respectful discourse and empathy for one another's perspectives and experiences is integral to inclusive, diverse classrooms. In dialogic literacy instruction, there is no “right answer” or “ready-made truth” (Bakhtin, 1981); rather, learners search for meaning collectively through conversational interactions and academic oral language. Students and teachers share responsibility in co-constructing knowledge through discussion which results in multiple interpretations of meaning from texts and “with authors”, rooted in Rosenblatt's Transactional Reading Theory (1993).

Dialogic literacy pedagogy

Dialogic pedagogy is a powerful approach during daily routines in whole group and small group literacy instruction,

and during intensive, one-to-one instruction to develop ELs' emergent literacy skills (Kennedy & McLoughlin, 2023) across curricular content and in teaching English to newcomers. ELs often demonstrate difficulties with emergent literacy skills at the start of primary grades compared to Native English Speaking (NS) peers (Kennedy & McLoughlin, 2023). Research shows effective literacy instruction for NS and ELs necessitates attention towards students' oral language proficiency as it relates to what students are expected to read and how they are to engage during classroom activities (Jaekel, Jaekel, Fincher, & Brown, 2022; Kennedy & McLoughlin, 2023). Research emphasizes that DP, as a means of social interaction in reading, is essential (Piazza et al., 2015) and can disrupt narrow or singular definitions of meaning as well as address disparities in reading achievement (Kay, 2018). A 2019 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) assessment reported that 34% of eighth-grade students demonstrated proficiency in reading, highlighting disparities based on socioeconomic status, race, and disability (NCES, 2019). A dialogic literacy-centered classroom supports oral language proficiency and provides opportunities for students to engage in learning talk and talk with texts to create intentional, compassionate student-teacher relationships (Rosenblatt, 1993).

Effective implementation of dialogic pedagogy can help English learners to

- build language and vocabulary, increasing rate of language development (Kay, 2018),
- establish emergent oral language and early literacy skills,
- enhance knowledge and concepts of print,
- move beyond comprehension tasks of recall,
- deepen understanding of texts and relate to texts on a personal level.

Models of dialogic pedagogy

A dialogic teaching model (Alexander, 2017) introduces five principles to embed in instruction based on how “talk” is shaped by cultural and social perspectives. Classroom contexts vary in linguistic repertoires, cultural norms, and learning goals; there is a range of talk-based pedagogical skills and strategies.

According to Alexander (2017), repertoires in dialogic teaching framework include interactive talk, everyday life, teaching talk, learning talk, questioning, and extending to support ELs' language acquisition. The five principles in which DP can flourish in classroom culture are:

- **Collective**—Teachers and students address learning tasks together, as a group.
- **Reciprocal**—Teachers and students listen to each other, share ideas, and consider multiple viewpoints.
- **Supportive**—Students articulate ideas freely.
- **Cumulative**—Teachers and students build on their own and each other's ideas, to form them into coherent lines of thinking and inquiry.

- **Purposeful**—Teachers plan and facilitate dialogic teaching with educational goals, content, and language objectives.

These five principles offer great value in setting intentions for dialogic teaching and in guiding ongoing reflection of praxis. Supportive principle states students articulate ideas freely; without fear of embarrassment over “incorrect” answers, students can begin to help each other reach common understandings and challenge their beliefs in shared meaning-making interactions.

Another DP model, PEER, can encourage further dialogue at a high level through evaluation and expansion measures. As teachers move beyond validating responses in dialogue (to, for example, Yes/No questions) to encouraging additional thoughts, opinions, and connections to make meaning, higher level engagement occurs. More opportunities for oral language production also involve authentic questioning in which students ask questions and connect to personal experiences in the practice of uptake as well as pursue further inquiry.

PEER Strategy is an interactive reading strategy with the following principles:

- **Prompting**—Prompt the student to label objects in a book/text and talk about the text/story.
- **Evaluating**—Evaluate the students' responses at a high level.
- **Expanding**—Expand the students' language skills (oral and written) by repeating and adding on.
- **Repeating**—Encourage the student to repeat their language or “talk” (e.g. questioning, expanding).

As ELs become familiar with a text, the teacher uses higher level prompting to encourage students to go beyond labeling objects in the pictures to talking about what is happening and making connections. Evaluating at a high-level means moving beyond an affirming response (e.g. “Interesting! Great!”) to an incorporating response via elaboration, commentary, or a follow-up question (e.g. “Can you say more about that? Why do you think that? How do you know?”). Expanding means repeating learners' responses and adding on, which can lead to positive effects on oral receptive and expressive language (Kennedy & McLoughlin, 2023).

CROWD is another model that can inform strategies to use in teaching the talk with texts. Specific prompts teachers can use in reading books with learners are:

- **Completion**—Learners complete a sentence (e.g. rhymes; repetitive phrases).
- **Recall**—Say in their own words what has happened in the text or talk about a story that's familiar and relate to relevant events.
- **Open-ended**—Notice and talk about details in comprehension.
- **Wh- questions**—What, when, where, why, and how questions are used frequently.
- **Distancing**—Students reflect on their own experiences, bridging their home culture to the text and real world.

Dialogic practices in the classroom

Read-alouds in literacy instruction provide ample opportunity to apply the prompting model (e.g. CROWD). The distancing prompt contextualizes what students learn or read to make meaning through lived experiences and schema, including children’s linguistic repertoires, through talk. Code-switching (i.e. using dual languages in conversations) engages learners and builds confidence in oral language proficiency. Rereading the same text for different purposes and using dialogue to make meaning, supports literacy and language growth. For example, an emergent reader text, *Dot Likes to Dig* by Laura Appleton-Smith, demonstrates what recall prompts might look like in reading, writing, speaking, and listening activities to increase linguistic responsiveness. For example, texts with repetitive phrases or words builds vocabulary and confidence in oral reading. Completion prompts in interactive talk and writing scaffold students’ comprehension skills, as in summarizing. Students can recall the plot points or ideas in a story interactively, through talk, and transfer verbal recall to writing to aid comprehension. Open-ended questions allow students to make connections to text and deepen comprehension, and consistent use of ‘Wh’ questions supports meaning-making. Example questions to guide students’ talk, as modeled by teachers are “*What is Dot up to in the story? What three things does Dot take from the bathroom to bury? What is the problem in the story? Why do they think Dan is not mad even after all the mischief Dot gets into? How might you feel if you were Dan?*”

The PEER strategy also applies in read-alouds and close reads with the same text (e.g. *Dot Likes to Dig*) through teacher modeling. First, teachers can model how to look at the cover and infer what the book is about. Using labeling in a picture walk, teachers can model talk: “*Let’s look for clues on the book cover to help us infer what this book is about. When we infer, we use clues in the book and what we already know to figure something out. The title of the book is Dot Likes to Dig and because I see Dot pictured on a dirt pile outside with lots of things sticking out of it, I think this story is going to be about Dot getting into mischief. The title is Dot Likes to Dig so I think the mischief involves digging.*” Students can practice re-reading collaboratively for fluency practice. During a close read and prompting to encourage talk about the text, teachers can evaluate responses at a high level and expand language by adding on to students’ ideas.

Text-based questions for differentiated instruction (i.e. repeating language) aid deeper thinking and recall. Interactive writing in small groups involves students contributing to a piece of writing led by the teacher. Oral language supports interactive writing with positive effects on early literacy development of concepts of print, phonological awareness (i.e. counting out words or segmenting words), phonemic awareness (i.e. listening for individual sounds of words), word reading, fluency with rereads, letter formation, written words and spelling application, application of general knowledge or content knowledge (Kennedy & McLoughlin, 2023).

Intentional dialogue in interactive writing includes these ten steps:

1. Launch with a purpose and understanding of an audience;
2. Negotiate the message, or co-construct writing a piece with students’ input and ideas;
3. Rehearse the message, piece by piece;
4. Count the words in the writing piece;
5. Discuss with students where to start writing on the page;
6. Share in writing, as students take turns writing letters, words, or phrases as appropriate with different colors for assessment purposes;
7. Practice writing on paper or online (e.g. whiteboard, Google Jam board);
8. Scaffold and re-teach grammatical, phonological, or vocabulary concepts as appropriate;
9. Read and reread to make sense of writing;
10. Illustrate and share with the audience.

Another dialogic strategy is a penny debate, or structured, cooperative discussions which apply information from texts to claim a stance (e.g. agree or disagree) with a statement provided by the teacher on a relevant topic. Content knowledge is scaffolded to participate orally in the debate. This activity centers dialogue as each participant receives two pennies; students give a penny each time they speak. All students share twice. Using texts for evidence, students discuss their positions before the debate begins. The structure of this format provides space for practicing uptake, as teachers and peers ask expanding questions. Students must listen to peers’ comments during the debate to respond to peers.

An intentional dialogic strategy with texts means that both teachers and students ask authentic questions through reader-author dialogue. As students converse with authors and peers, evaluate author’s context, and recognize cultural or political identity of author(s), they learn to ask questions to scaffold dialogue with the “author persona.” Questions to guide classroom conversations are “Who is the author? Where and when was this text written? What else was happening there at the time? For what purpose was this text written? For what audience? What is known about author’s political stance(s)? What power or privilege do/did they have or want to maintain? How do I perceive this author’s persona? Would they be my friend, foe, or neither? Why?”

Conclusion

Helping ELs grow through intentional classroom conversations involves setting goals as practitioners. Practitioners identify ELs’ linguistic challenges to implement effective and culturally responsive strategies for increased engagement in literacy learning. Additionally, practitioners can modify and

scaffold dialogic instruction to build on ELs' funds of knowledge or "historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being" (Moll et al., 1992, p. 133).

Another goal is to explore and apply digital adaptations of dialogic activities in a collaborative and multimodal approach (e.g. Padlet). Lastly, practitioners can select and adapt multicultural children's literature in teaching the talk with texts. Dialogic learning strategies in the classroom to strengthen oral language competencies and early literacy

skills include daily dialogic routines, "penny debates" focused on cooperation, PEER Strategy and PROMPTS in teaching the talk with texts or children's literature, interactive read-alouds, interactive writing through talk, asking authentic questions in reader-author dialogue; and intentional use of multimodal and digital learning tools. Creating culturally brave and engaged dialogic communities involves increasing linguistic responsiveness and responding to the digital nativism of learners to equip educators with new tools for standards-based literacy instruction.

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