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# Turn up the Volume on Academic Talk!

by Nonie Lesaux

You might predict from this title that we are encouraging far more noise in classrooms across the country. In a way we are. But we're focusing on the other meaning of the word *volume*—the *amount* of talk we need in classrooms for optimal student learning. We need more talk and we need more productive noise—the sounds of students talking and working together; the sounds of learning.

One of the most effective tools in the classroom to promote learning and critical thinking is talk. Language reflects how we think, how we process and remember information; it is one of the most important ways that we represent and extend our thoughts and ideas (Vygotsky, 1978). Talk can be formal discussion or informal conversation. With language, we're able to go much beyond the here and now. We can discuss, compare, and justify present, past, and future events. We can describe what is happening around us or imagine what is taking place far away. Language opens up ideas and experiences that would otherwise not be possible to contemplate, understand, and learn about. We need to help learners to gain a curiosity and interest in language. They must become everyday language learners and users. We can do that by posing open-ended questions to our students and engaging in real dialogue with them, dialogue where we as teachers don't control all the turn-taking or know all the answers. By fostering and scaffolding academic talk, we will build language literacy and content skills and knowledge.

There are three guiding principles that teachers can incorporate in their classroom practices and curriculum to promote students' academic language.

- Students need more structured opportunities to talk
- Effective classroom talk is about more than asking questions
- Keep students reading for academic language skills

## 1 Students need more structured opportunities to talk

We know that children living in poverty, including many English language learners (ELLs), are less likely to participate in academic conversations at home than children of higher socioeconomic status. They are less likely to be engaged in conversation where they make predictions about an upcoming outing, justify their claims with evidence, and articulate causes and effects. For these students to succeed academically, we need to teach these more sophisticated discourse patterns in classrooms. Yet when we look back on educational practices for hundreds of years past, we see that students have been taught to listen quietly as the teacher talked, so that they would learn. Unfortunately, that has not been a successful strategy for many children.

Across the nation, teachers dominate classroom talk (Cazden, 1988; Heath, 1978; Snow, Tabors, & Dickinson, 2001), yet they are not the ones who need practice talking. If we are going to close achievement gaps and develop *all* students' critical thinking and oral and written language skills, we need to provide them with significant opportunities to do so. Despite national calls for instructional frameworks that focus on *Reading, Writing, Listening, and Speaking*, instructional research tells us very clearly that

speaking is the neglected standard. Students do very little speaking in classrooms and when they do, it qualifies as basic communication—it is not dynamic or engaging and it is not academic talk. Students answer low-level questions with one or two word replies, respond to directives, confirm information, and often repeat what the teacher says as part of a lesson. And if speaking is the neglected standard, listening is the misunderstood standard—*passive* listening, like

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following directions, is the norm. Developing *active* listening skills as part of our academic language requires instructional practices that force students into dialogue and debate that centers on rich concepts and builds up reasoning skills and background knowledge.



- ▲ Each unit includes a Big Question that spurs ongoing student discussion and dialogue and develops high levels of academic talk.

We need to infuse more opportunities for productive talk into our classrooms, especially in classrooms with ELLs and other at-risk students who need strong supports to develop their thinking and reading comprehension skills. *National Geographic Reach* is a program designed to address this need for ELLs and their classmates. In every unit, and across the lesson cycle, there are interesting things to talk about (i.e., big ideas on themes young learners can relate to) and structured opportunities to teach students how to participate in classroom talk effectively (i.e., language frames to help organize their thoughts and opinions, key vocabulary around the topic). *National Geographic Reach* presents, for example, collaborative learning activities to get students talking and practicing their active listening skills, and scaffolded support for teachers to lead effective discussions about big ideas. The wrap-up projects in each unit provide opportunities for oral presentation to practice academic talk.

## 2 Effective classroom talk is about more than asking questions

One of the most common scenarios where students are given opportunities to speak in the elementary school classroom is the whole-group lesson. Consider the commonplace read-aloud. The teacher reads a story, pausing every now and again to pose a question to the group. Some students raise their hands with a candidate answer, and the teacher calls on a student to respond. In this whole-group scenario, the teacher directs the lessons and the opportunities for talk by students are quite limited.

To change the balance of talk in the classroom we need more than whole-group scenarios where the teacher controls a question-answer discussion and students answer one at a time. That practice hits upon only a small group of students and often those who are most proficient and high performing (Fisher, Frey & Rothenberg, 2008). We also can't rely almost exclusively upon the strategy of questioning

as a tool to promote classroom talk. Researchers have found explicit, “right there” questions—questions about the here and the now or questions where the answers are easily found in text—are used between 50 percent and 80 percent of the time in classrooms (Watson & Young, 1986; Zwiers, 2008). These questions serve primarily one purpose—to evaluate students' understanding about something relatively concrete and literal. Engaging students with talk that will promote their thought, language, and reading skills can't just be about assessment for the teacher's purpose (Cazden, 1988).

Effective instructional practices for classroom talk focus very seriously instead on dialogue to promote learning—it is the back and forth discussion that fosters critical thinking, develops verbal reasoning skills, and builds background knowledge. This discussion is also a way for students to work through and sharpen their ideas and informed opinions. Think about the times when you have sharpened and clarified your own thinking by talking something through with a peer. We need to provide similar opportunities to our students.

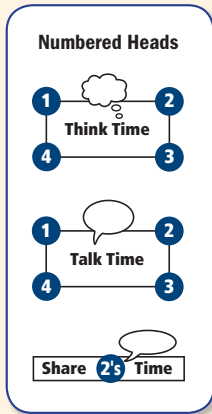
Good language instruction is at the core of the *National Geographic Reach* program. It is a program whereby instruction in academic language, including academic talk, centers on a big question featured in every unit. In order to grapple with big questions, students and teachers discuss the many answers to open-ended questions that ask students to imagine, plan, think, wonder, speculate, and articulate answers, which should lead to further dialogue. The program features instruction that draws significantly on the teacher's and the students' personal connections to the topic and promotes academic talk that is collaborative in nature. In many program lessons, students have to take a stance and debate a point of view, or do some research to role-play as part of a collaborative project, and report out to their peers as experts. In each one of these structured opportunities to talk, we ask students to learn from their peers by observing and listening, expose them to rich and engaging text that features academic language, and also use specialized language registers and vocabulary words to improve their academic language skills.

## 3 Keep students reaching for academic language skills

In planning instruction that will create classrooms filled with student academic talk, with dialogue and with open-ended questions that foster debate, deliberation, and wonder about big ideas and the world, we cannot simply meet students where they're at. We need to pull them along!

We need to teach the language of schooling through stimulating and challenging learning environments—classrooms filled with scaffolding opportunities to develop their language and thinking skills. Just as a toddler needs oral interaction with older siblings and adults who use more sophisticated language, language beyond the toddler's proficiency level, to develop his or her first language fully, so do our learners need exposure to more advanced levels of language use with scaffolding, modeling and frequent practice in the classroom.

Yet ironically just as the texts and the language needed for academic success become more difficult, less instructional time is devoted to student talk and oral language development.



◀ **Talk Together activities and Cooperative Learning Routines provide frequent opportunities for students to use academic language.**

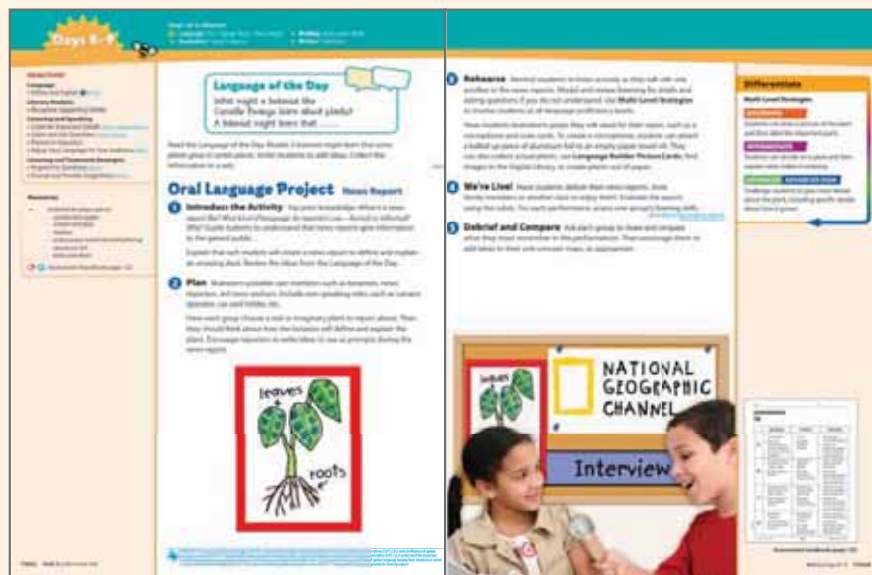


*National Geographic Reach* aims to shift the trends we see in standard practice; its design was guided by the principle that students need ongoing structured and scaffolded opportunities to develop their academic language skills. Its success in developing academic language depends upon good peer interaction and scaffolded discussions (August & Hakuta, 1997; Ellis, 1994). That means we teach students how to take turns, respect one another's ideas, and confirm their understandings of what a classmate said. We model what good conversations look like and how one builds on the ideas of others. The *National Geographic Reach* Teacher's Edition focuses on designing effective lessons and learning opportunities to increase academic talk in our classrooms, encouraging teachers to take advantage of built-in

opportunities for peer scaffolding to push students forward, while paying careful attention to groupings. Every *National Geographic Reach* unit features multiple lessons and opportunities to foster academic language. At the end of each unit students participate in a collaborative project that encourages dialogue and discussion focused on the big question. Each unit also includes a writing project that provides opportunities for increased academic talk and scaffolded learning with peers, especially during the prewriting and editing phases when students share ideas with a partner, and when students edit each other's work and learn how to give feedback effectively. Throughout the program, language frames and Multi-Level Strategies provide scaffolded support to move students from forming basic sentences to making comparisons, giving opinions, and justifying choices to their peers.

## Conclusion

If we are to close achievement gaps and support *all* students' academic development, especially that of ELLs, our classrooms should be filled with talk that centers on big ideas and complex concepts that are worthy of discussion and debate and engaging for our students. To do this we need to strike more of a balance between teacher talk and student talk—increasing student talk and decreasing teacher talk to provide more meaningful language learning opportunities (Cazden, 2001; Fisher, Frey, & Rothenberg, 2008; McIntyre, Kyle & Moore, 2006; Saunders & Goldenberg, 1992). It also means we need to expand teachers' repertoires to go beyond questioning and get students speaking. The lessons that promote students' academic and active listening skills are those that engage students to work and think together about a problem, see others' points of view, and better understand the knowledge and experiences they bring to the issue, as well as those lessons that engage students to think about big questions and ideas.



◀ **Each lesson cycle includes a Theme Theater or Oral Language Project that engages students in using and elaborating their language skills.**