Quality Student Interactions: Why Are They Crucial to Language Learning and How Can We Support Them?

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Current educational shifts brought about by 21st century standards, including the New York State P-12 Common Core Learning Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy ("the Standards"), aim to ensure that *all* students are college and career ready. Reflected in the standards are essential practices such as critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity. Students across all grade levels and content areas are now expected to engage critically with increasingly complex texts, use evidence to support their conclusions, evaluate the validity of arguments and counterarguments, present their ideas orally and in writing, and work collaboratively with their peers. Embedded within these standards are increased demands that students gain deeper understandings of content, engage in analytic and complex thinking about that content, and participate in discourse that is appropriate to the discipline. These three arenas of development—conceptual, analytical, and linguistic—grow simultaneously through participation in social interaction. Thus, it is essential that all students, especially English Language Learners/Multilingual Learners (ELLs/MLLs), be provided instructional activities that engage them in quality interactions that are intentionally structured to support their conceptual, analytic, and linguistic development and ultimately that promote their ability to apply these skills and practices on their own (autonomously) in new learning situations. By creating classroom environments and activities with abundant opportunities for purposeful student collaboration and discussion, teachers can capitalize on the ways youngsters naturally learn from one another.

Why is Social Interaction Essential in Learning Language and the Disciplines?

Throughout our lives, learning takes place in a social context. Starting at birth, a child first learns the practices of the home as s/he interacts with immediate and extended family members; then the child's learning expands to that of the neighborhood as s/he interacts with those from this wider circle; learning continues to expand as the child learns of the local community as s/he interacts with those in the local surroundings. Social interaction is the basis for all learning, particularly in the early stages (Walqui, 2006), as it is through interaction with others that ideas are acquired, eventually to be "owned" by the learner. This process, like an apprenticeship, is one in which teachers invite students to engage in activity with others, provide models of how to enact the behaviors in the activity, and provide the support needed for learners to practice and eventually appropriate these practices to themselves as their own. Inherent and central to these social interactions is language, which is the means by which learners co-construct knowledge. In the case of our classrooms, language takes on a disciplinary focus with learners appropriating the discourse necessary to communicate their opinions, ideas, and evidence in the manner appropriate within the particular content area or discipline. To achieve the full benefit of these learning interactions, it goes without saying that the conceptual, analytical and language practices central to the activity must be rich and stimulating.

In order to support deep conceptual and language learning, students—and ELLs/MLLs in particular—need robust opportunities for quality interactions. It is through continuous opportunities for quality interaction, that ELLs/MLLs learn disciplinary concepts, practices, and disciplinary-related discourse; along the way, they develop autonomy and agency in applying these concepts and skills without continuously relying on teacher authority. If learning interactions were limited to those between the teacher and student in classrooms, only a few would benefit and the opportunities for learning would end up being much more limited for all students. However, if we recognize that indeed there are possibilities for a variety of learning relationships between parties as they engage in interaction, as

suggested in an Expanded Zone of Proximal Development (van Lier, 2004), then the opportunities for learning are also broadened[1]. We can then recognize that interactions among peers, family members, and even the community can provide expanded opportunities for learning and development.

What Constitutes "Quality Student Interaction" and How Do We Make That Happen?

Most classroom interactions take place between the teacher and student/s, in which students rely on the authority and expertise of the teacher to initiate the interaction, guide the interaction, provide approval throughout the inter-action, and decide when to end the interaction. Even in current educational practice in which interactive activities, such as Think-Pair-Share, are becoming increasingly common in today's classrooms, we want to point out that not all student interaction is of the same quality. Typically, classroom interactions follow one of three patterns:

- **Initiation-Response-Feedback (IRF)** also called **Initiation-Response-Evaluation (IRE)**
  The IRF/IRE interaction is a very common pattern in which the interaction is dominated by the teacher. These interactions may occur between teacher-individual student or teacher-group of students (e.g., whole class, small groups). IRF/IRE interactions are designed so that students must simply answer the teacher's question and then look for the teacher's approval to know if s/he did so "correctly." Typically, there is very little room for variation in students' responses; in other words, there is a right or wrong response and it is the student's job to figure it out and respond accordingly.

- **Funneling**
  In this whole-class discourse pattern, the teacher guides students across multiple turns toward a given point. Although there are multiple turns, the flow of the interaction is dependent on the teacher's authority to initiate, direct, and conclude the interaction towards a particular end-point.

- **Focusing**
  Here, the teacher leads a discussion, either with an individual student or a group of students, that highlights key ideas and builds on student ideas toward a common understanding. While this interaction pattern allows space for some students to engage with ideas and co-construct understanding, it requires that they have grappled with and already have a baseline understanding of disciplinary concepts first.

These are not the kinds of student interactions that are the focus of this discussion. These kinds of typical classroom discourse patterns do not usually represent high quality interactions and do not support and encourage authentic dialogue—and learning—around meaningful and interesting discipline-based concepts. In these rather limited con-versations, the students do not "own" the conversation.

So, that begs the question: What does constitute "quality" student interaction? What does it look like? The answers are a bit complicated, as there is no simple formula for creating these learning opportunities. Quality student inter-actions are dependent on the goals of lessons, students themselves, and a variety of other dynamic, ever-changing classroom situations. However, several common features of quality student interactions can be identified and can serve as guideposts for teachers who are trying to shift their classroom instruction to center on more quality interac-tive learning opportunities.

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[1] For more information on the Expanded Zone of Proximal Development, please see the NYSED brief, The Zone of Proximal Development: An Affirmative Perspective in Teaching ELs, by Billings and Walqui.

Quality student interactions typically involve:

- **Open-ended questions:** When designing interactive tasks, the questions that guide student interactions must be carefully constructed, open-ended questions that stimulate student interest and that create the space for authentic, in-depth dialogue and student agency within the interaction. The goal is to promote interactions that are sustained over several exchanges and that focus on developing a concept or contemplating a topic, thus going beyond a simplistic and brief question-answer exchange. Open-ended questions spark multiple perspectives and the opportunity to search for deep inferences and meaning in texts, narratives, and problem sets.

- **Disciplinary practices:** Each discipline carries with it particular practices that are synonymous with that discipline. These disciplinary practices include specific key conceptual understandings, types of analytical tasks, and language practices. Generally speaking, within the disciplines there exist standard ways of doing things and talking about them. Therefore, it is critical to consider and incorporate the kinds of tasks, questions, and framing of discussions that support discipline-based thinking and that engage students as they interact in the practice of these unique protocols for hypothesis, analysis, synthesis and critique – all the while using language appropriate to the discipline.

- **Focus on key ideas:** It is important to identify key disciplinary concepts and ideas -- and design student interactions that pique students' curiosity to engage with these. Thoughtfully framing student interactions around the big ideas central to a discipline supports ELLs'/MLLs' engagement in critical thinking and dialogue around these notions. It also creates authentic purposes for learning and using associated academic language to carry out these transactions. A focus on disciplinary key ideas guides instruction to go beyond the simplest elements of a discipline, such as rehearsing a list of key vocabulary, and instead supports richer and more rigorous forms of engagement in which students are applying disciplinary language to tackle key disciplinary concepts and to communicate their ideas.

In using these guideposts to design quality student interactions, we can create the classroom spaces necessary for ELLs/MLLs to engage in academic conversations around big ideas across the curriculum. In doing so, we support ELLs/MLLs to apprentice into the practices associated with each discipline as they engage with the questions and themes that are central to each, all the while acquiring the disciplinary language needed to express their ideas and make sense of new learning.

Together, these features of quality student interaction lead to student initiative and student autonomy in which students engage around concepts in original, novel ways as they express their thoughts and opinions (Walqui and vanLier, 2010). For instance, in quality student interactions, including both teacher-student and student-student interactions, students are invited to take initiative in the interactive pro-

Quality Student Interaction	
What it *IS*	What it is *NOT*
• Sustained and reciprocal talk • Co-constructing understandings • Engaging in disciplinary practices • Maintaining academic rigor	• Scripted in advance with no room for variation • Dominated by a single party • Reporting of information already commonly known

cess. Students are encouraged to take the first step and demonstrate a willingness to engage. When students take initiative, they maintain a sense of autonomy in the interaction. Student autonomy is another characteristic feature of quality student interactions. While guidance and scaffolded support is provided by the teacher and/or other peers, students maintain some level of control over what is said in the interaction, thus producing language and ideas that are novel. By maintaining control of their contributions, students are given the space to practice and apply their

disciplinary understandings as well as to make choices in terms of the language they use to express these. Student autonomy is indeed the ultimate goal of quality student interactions because it is through this practice within a community of others that the individual begins to appropriate and use the knowledge and skill of a true master in the discipline or subject of study.

Going Beyond the Expert-Novice Student Interaction

When we consider student interactions, often the expert-novice interaction comes to mind; that is, the interaction between the teacher or a more knowledgeable peer and the learner. However, researchers have expanded our understanding of the types and benefits of peer interactions. Here, we identify three additional types of peer interactions (van Lier, 1996, 2004 in Walqui & van Lier, 2010).

1. **Interaction with equal peers** (peers with the same levels of knowledge): Learners with relatively the same levels of knowledge work collaboratively and together co-construct new understandings. Equal peer interactions can enable students to create zones of proximal development for each other, with their interactions giving rise to ideas, which are then shared with peers and then further advanced and developed through collaboration.

2. **Interaction with less capable peers** (a novice supporting another learner): In this interaction, a novice teaches another learner who has slightly less knowledge. This type of interaction supports both learners working in the zone of proximal development; as the novice articulates, expands, and clarifies ideas, both learners simultaneously are expanding their knowledge.

3. **Intrapersonal:** Once learners have gained enough understanding about a concept, process, and/or skill, they can work within their zone of proximal development and use the strategies and resources that they have internalized to guide and self-regulate their own learning. In this type of interaction, students have begun to appropriate new knowledge and language, and are capable of guiding their own learning for a particular realm. It is important to note that this is not a static learning space, and that students constantly move in and out of this realm as they approach new concepts, disciplinary practices, and language. Therefore, it is important to continue to provide opportunities for student-student quality interactions.

This typology of student interactions pushes our understanding of the possibilities for student interaction by going beyond what we typically think of (i.e., the expert-novice and/or the teacher-student interaction). We further expand this notion of student interaction by pointing out that each of these four types of interactions; expert-novice, equal peer, novice-less capable peer, and intrapersonal, are not limited to the classroom. In fact, these interactions can occur in the community, among peers outside the classroom, and within families. In all of these contexts, both within and outside of school, students can be invited into quality learning interactions.

How Can I Create Spaces for Quality Student Interactions in My Classroom?

Using the features of quality student interaction described earlier, along with an expanded understanding of the range of possibilities for student interactions, we offer several questions for teachers to use as a guide as you create opportunities for quality student interactions in your classrooms. These questions provide opportunities to consider the extent to which the interactions you design support students' engagement in sustained and reciprocal dialogue, provide them opportunities to co-construct understandings, and involve them in addressing the ideas of—and practicing the protocols for—thinking in specific disciplines. These questions can be used for initial planning and then converted into a rubric to help you assess the quality of the student interactions in your classroom so that you may make adjustments as needed.

Designing Quality Student Interactions:

- Are guiding questions/prompts open-ended?
- Do guiding questions/prompts ask students to engage in higher-order thinking about the topic (i.e., synthesizing, hypothesizing, generalizing, arguing)?
- Do questions/prompts encourage many perspectives or subtopics?
- Are tasks designed to create an egalitarian space such that every student has to participate and has to listen to peers?
- Are students provided the space to pose questions to one another, respond directly to each other, and ask for elaboration or evidence?
- Is authority distributed among the students to reach consensus in determining the validity and value of ideas discussed?
- Does the activity invite rigorous engagement (i.e., does it focus on central ideas, their interconnections, and analytical thinking)?
- Does it promote novel and extended thinking?

Quality Student Interaction in Action:

When designing tasks to support quality student interaction, we want to make sure that we provide students with a real reason to use language to describe, explain, and negotiate. Interactions are authentic and necessary when they bridge a communicative gap. This can be an opinion gap, a knowledge gap, or an information gap. The following vignette provides a glimpse of quality student interaction in action in a middle school classroom.

In Ms. Cohen's class at Ridgewood Intermediate School in New York City, students are simultaneously learning conceptual understandings, analytical practices and the language needed to express them. Ms. Cohen's ELL/MLL students are being exposed to experiential, language-rich, and rigorous study in which learning is facilitated through collaboration. In this lesson, students are exploring the poetry of Robert Frost. In this assignment, students are asked to jointly create a poster that synthesizes and critically analyzes the meaning of the poem, "The Road Not Taken". In order to complete their poster, the group must reach consensus on an illustration that synthesizes the gist of the poem, a direct quote from the poem, and an original quote reflecting the essence of the poem.

The whole group considers what original quote to add to their poster.

S1: I know. The quote can be, "I need to look more than a road"?
S2: It's supposed to be like a decision…We should write a little bit like a hard word, you know? How about this, "And then looked down far as I could…How about this, how about, "I looked far for the right decision"? No, it has to rhyme!
S1: Oh, I know.
S2: Do you remember how they said to…
S1: I need to look something more than a road
S2: So start drawing
S1: (turns to S4) Help me?

The two boys start to create the poster illustration while the two girls focus on the original quote. The girls become engrossed in an intense dialogue as they engage with the text and contemplate a range of vocabulary in search of a precise word suitable to expressing the meaning of the poem and meeting their desire to rhyme. Meanwhile, the boys return to the poem, repeating key phrases as they brainstorm ways that they can symbolically synthesize the poem and its deep meaning.

The boys have finished their illustration and become interested in the problem of completing the original quote.

S4: Rhyme something with "right" instead of "wrong."

S3: I know.

S1: And it gotta rhyme. (S2 has gone to call the teacher and now she returns with her)

S3: We think that after the "right" part, it's right, but we don't know.

S2: (reading) "I'm Robert Frost, I have a path to choose. I might choose the right, but it might be"

T: "but it might be wrong."

S3: But it doesn't rhyme.

T: You want it to rhyme?

S2: Yeah.

T: "It might be right. I might choose the right," the path that's right? Uhm, why don't you use homophones? What's a homophone for right?

S2: (writing in the air) Write.

T: So what did he do in his life?

S2: "I might choose the right, but I might be…"

S1: "I might choose the right road so I can write."

T: Use a homophone. (the teacher leaves)

S3: "I might choose the right that might help me write."

S2: (writing it down)

S1: We've got 5 minutes

S3: That's funny (referring to the picture)

S3: "I'm Robert Frost. I have a path to choose. I might choose the right that might help me write.

S3: Yeah, that's good

S2: Considering. Because he did choose a path and he started writing.

S3: "Yeah, but he chose the path that have to do with his writing.

In this transcript excerpt, it is evident that the two girls (S2 and S3) talk more than the boys (S1 and S4). However, with a historical view of these students, including their language and schooling backgrounds, one recognizes that they all started at different points, and they have all been progressing. As a result of sustained quality interactions, we see these beginning ELL/MLL students highly engaged in powerful discussion about potent academic concepts. This discussion is not only rigorous, but it is also sustained over several exchanges as students build on the topic, agreeing, disagreeing and thinking critically to support their position. Where students finally end (including making the task harder by having to have their original phrase rhyme) is good and novel to them, to the teacher, and to the class. It is through this sustained quality interaction that students are ready and able to grow together. They will finally share the presentation of their poster to the class and this is the time when they articulate their understandings which they developed through this exchange with their peers and their teacher.

We hope you found this brief informative and useful. Please see our other briefs for additional information on pedagogical issues related to the effective instruction of ELLs/MLLs.