

## Developing English Learners' Skills for the Common Core through Constructive Conversations

by Constance Dziombak

Interest in the link between oral skills and literacy and my observations that students write the way they speak inspired me to enroll in Stanford University's Fall 2013 MOOC, "Constructive Classroom Conversations: Mastering Language for the Common Core State Standards." The objective of the course was to collect, analyze, and reflect on the quality of academic conversations in order to create more opportunities for students to engage in high-quality discussions.

As Stanford's Kenji Hakuta states, "[T]he Common Core has given us the gift of language (Hakuta, Zweirs, & Rutherford-Quach, 2013)." The National Common Core ELA Standards recognize the importance of developing speaking and listening skills; in fact, the objective of the Common Core ELA Anchor Standard #1 ELA for Speaking and Listening is to help students "prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively (Common Core States Standard Initiative, n.d.)."

Through language we learn, and through language we can demonstrate what we have learned. According to Vygotsky (1978), language is not only a means of communication, but also—and more importantly—it is a medium for intellectual development that helps learners broaden and deepen their understanding of significant ideas. High-quality, constructive academic conversations help improve students' oral, critical-thinking, and literacy skills. They also help build content and foster positive relationships between students and their peers.

The current nationwide emphasis on standardized testing to evaluate student and teacher performance focuses instructional practices on diagnosing and developing students' reading and writing skills. Assessment of discourse skills, however, seems to be neglected and opportunities to develop these skills limited. While English learners do engage in talk and turn, think-pair-share, and reciprocal teaching activities, how can we be sure these conversations foster learning?

Conversation analysis can give us a clearer idea of how and what our students are learning and identify the skills that need to be developed. In the Stanford MOOC, we used two tools to assess student discourse: the Alden Academic Language Network and the Conversation Analysis Tool (CAT) (Zwiers, O'Hara, & Prtichard, 2014).

The Alden Constructive Conversation Skills poster provides a paradigm for building ideas with four component skills: *create*, *fortify*, *negotiate*, and *clarify*. The CAT covers two dimensions—Dimension 1: Do turns build up an idea? and Dimension 2: Do turns focus on the knowledge or skills of the lesson's objectives? These dimensions are rated on a four-point scale: 3—clearly demonstrates; 2—partially demonstrates; 1—begins to demonstrate; 0—does not demonstrate."

High-quality academic conversations require an authentic and meaningful purpose, a clear and focused prompt, and sufficient background knowledge. In a meaningful discussion, students become autonomous learners using *teacher moves* for prompting

questions and asking for evidence. They develop strong skills in creating, fortifying, negotiating, and clarifying their ideas (Zwiers, 2013).

During my participation in the MOOC, I worked with two small groups of fifth- and sixth-grade advanced- and proficient-level ELLs, modeling and scaffolding discussions using the Constructive Conversation Skills paradigm and the CAT, along with ongoing teacher, peer, and self-feedback.

By analyzing conversations, I found that while students could create and fortify ideas to an acceptable degree, their clarifying and negotiating skills were the weakest. Students would get stuck when they didn't understand their peers' responses, and either did not attempt to ask for clarification—ignoring their peers' statements and continuing the discussions—or did not know how to formulate specific questions to help their partners rethink and re-explain their ideas.

Explanation and discussion of the MOOC and the importance of constructive conversations not only engaged my students, but also strengthened their meta-cognitive skills. After some work on building discourse skills, students became less dependent on scaffolding and started to make teacher moves. Modeling, scaffolding, and various forms of feedback helped improve the quality of discussions and students' clarifying and fortifying skills. Also, listening to recordings of my students' conversations made me more aware of their grammar and syntax errors that might otherwise go unnoticed.

Most interesting was the effect of the action research on my fifth-grade long-term ELLs who had particular difficulty in negotiating ideas. These three male students had trouble expressing their thoughts clearly and had the tendency to interrupt and talk over each other; in addition, their discussions often turned into arguments, and contrasting points of view could lead to insults. After several sessions working on their skills, however, the group began to actually listen to each other and negotiate their opinions in a respectful manner.

Students' comments regarding their experience developing discourse skills were positive. One student remarked, "It's important because it is all about sharing and being a good listener. We respect each other when we talk."; "We understand each other and hear each other and have a clear mind of what we are saying. It's important to express yourself well," commented another. On analyzing the recording of his own conversation, a student noted the usefulness of self-feedback, saying, "I need to make more sense because I could hear people telling me I don't make sense."

In conclusion, I believe that it is important to take a closer look at our English learners' discourse skills, an area that is not routinely prioritized by many teachers. Strong oral skills contribute to the development of critical thinking and literacy skills. Stanford's Constructive Conversation Skills paradigm and the CAT are useful tools to help us analyze student discourse and improve classroom discussions.

## References

Alden Academic Language Development Network and Constructive Conversation Skills poster, [www.aldnetwork.org](http://www.aldnetwork.org)

Hakuta, K., Zwiers, J., & Rutherford-Quach, S. (2013). *Constructive classroom conversations: Mastering language for the Common Core State Standards* Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University online course.

Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Zwiers, O'Hara, & Prtichard (2014). *Common Core Standards in diverse classrooms: Essential practices for developing academic language and disciplinary literacy*. Stenhouse Publishers |[ALDNetwork.org](http://ALDNetwork.org)

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