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Embracing the New Normal: Infusing Academic Language and Technology to Empower ELLs

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Cover Page Footnote

Research (Devaney, 2014; Freiberger, 2017a; Martinez et al., 2016) suggests a paradigm shift began even before the unprecedented "new normal." Technological innovations and students' increased comfort levels with mobile devices led the infusion of new online applications and "edu-gaming" into curricula (Freiberger, 2017a). In delineating how traditional schooling concepts are now "in perpetual beta," one scholar commented, "Learning is leaving the building. It is [no longer] stuck between the walls… There has never been more agency in the hands of the learner…than there is right now" (Richardson, 2017). He further elaborated, "Five billion people will be online by the end of this decade… [As a society], we are now turning to technology to pursue the things we have a passion for more often than not" (Richardson, 2017).

It is no longer a question of "whether" students will experience some form of blended, hybrid, or remote learning; myriad opportunities now exist for teachers to experiment with technologies to spark dialogue, increase student interest and self-reflection, and motivate students to partake in differentiated classroom activities. New technological communicative approaches can have immeasurable benefits for English Language Learners (ELLs). Educators can also keep the proverbial conversational flow going strong via well-planned topics, thought-provoking discussions, and respectful yet probing questioning techniques. Focusing not only on enhancing academic language, but also delving into various new technologies should help improve language development and overall academic performance for our ELLs.

Unlocking the Secrets to ELLs' Classroom Success

Many of the observations made in this article are based on experiences collaborating with an accomplished educator and children's book author after a school principal entrusted me to gather data and document student progress for a district project. Collaborating with Mr.

Christopher Holley made this process seamless. After carefully considering the most frequently utilized (and most curricular-relevant) words on Averil Coxhead's High-Incidence Academic Word List, together we developed comprehensive lesson plans that included differentiated, interactive classroom activities. The content was rigorous, and based on immediate feedback provided, scaffolding strategies helped the vast majority of students to better fathom.

Over the course of the next several months, I developed multilingual teaching materials, infused time-tested TESOL methodologies, and modeled how students could utilize academic language in daily conversations. A second, follow-up observation by the principal delineated a 147% increase in academic language utilization via student discourse compared with the prior lesson. The principal was pleased and informed me she would be utilizing the data to inform school-wide professional development for the following academic year. More importantly, however, the class of English as a New Language (ENL) students was able to conduct erudite conversations and fathom high-level, rigorous material with aplomb. This experience solidified the importance of infusing technology into carefully-planned lessons and modeling academic language for students to practice in their daily lives.

Education in Overdrive

The intense emphasis on student autonomy, particularly in K-12 learning institutions, requires students to read, comprehend, and comply with challenging directions, assignment checklists, and project rubrics. Students today are expected to self-reflect and become self-reliant almost immediately, regardless of home language proficiency levels, duration of English exposure, or length of stay in the United States. Add new apps and online protocols into the modern educational mix, and you have a recipe for stressed-out students, tense teachers, and pressured parents. ELLs and former ELLs are expected to meet rigorous state standards

designed for native English speakers, leading some consultants to discount Dr. Cummins' (2008) extensive research, corroborated over 30 years, that most ELLs approach grade-level norms within five to seven years. However, Cummins' research is even more pertinent in "the new normal," fully online or hybrid models in which so many teachers and students find themselves. More support is needed, and educators can plan for instructional success regardless of whichever teaching method is implemented.

Shifts in the Common Core Does Not Mean Learning Must Become a Bore

Current shifts in core learning standards call for more in-depth vocabulary knowledge and a keener understanding of using text-based evidence (EngageNY, 2018). Regrettably, emphasizing academic texts over multimodal learning strategies may lead to hackneyed recitation and colorless text regurgitation. As a consequence, non-native English-speaking students may be required to regurgitate for prolonged periods rather than engage in pithy, hands-on, practical learning experiences that emphasize vivid visuals, and multilingual vocabulary cards for more rapid understanding.

In New York, shifts in the Common Core specifically state, "Students build knowledge about the world (domains/ content areas) through text rather than [via] the teacher or activities" (EngageNY, 2018). This shift has led some school districts to focus on deciphering complex text—often without visual supports—rather than providing the appropriate scaffolds ELLs need. Requiring teachers to quickly whiteboard doodle or "model" a scattering of high-level vocabulary words before delving head-long into plentiful pages of complex text without brief introductory videos or frontloading relevant terminology via vivid vocabulary cards and other significant supports departs from best practices. Technology use in the classroom help students

tap into talents and provide the scaffolding and differentiation educators may be seeking. In addition, technology could aid students in delving into different learning modalities.

Removing Scaffolds

ELLs may be able to fathom rigorous concepts, but not without classic, effective techniques commonly utilized by practitioners in our field, even in remote or hybrid learning environments. Chief among these are modeling, frontloading vital vocabulary, incorporating realia and visual aids, utilizing sentence frames (sentence starters), activating schema (prior knowledge), employing interactive communicative activities, and infusing technology. Technology can provide differentiation by increasing diverse activities, lowering scaffolds, or removing them altogether when ELLs no longer need them. The terms may change, but the quintessential essence of what we do, and the time-tested techniques we as practitioners use to meet rigorous standards designed for native English speakers, even fine-tuned and infused with technology, remains essentially the same.

While we aspire to empower, students also need to be held accountable for partaking in their own learning and academic progress. "Accountable talk" is one measure commonly used by practitioners to help empower students to discover their individual voices; it refers to the academic language infused in Socratic seminars and other academic discourse predominantly utilized in classroom settings. Although we encourage, prompt, and applaud mini-milestones, at some point we also need to remove the scaffolds. Students need to ask when they don't fathom, provide opinions and reasons to support them, ask for and provide evidence, and politely agree or disagree with peers (Fisher et al., 2008, p. 99). This can be done either in-person or via Google Classrooms, Zoom break-out rooms, or in other blended or hybrid learning environments.

Academic Language: A Tool to Create Classroom Equity and Empower ELLs

Perhaps as a consequence, academic language should be carefully considered by educators to motivate and improve students' lives in direct, tangible ways (Nushi & Jenabzadeh, 2016). Academic language, utilized predominantly in primary and secondary schools, as well as other institutions of higher learning, tends to increase along with students' ages and corresponding grade levels (Breiseth, 2014). Thus, ELLs struggling with more advanced vocabulary terms tend to struggle with arcane text and the accompanying academic language utilized in their core content classes.

To meliorate motivation and spark students' solicitude to fathom, educators may want to consider infusing academic language via differentiated, interactive learning activities. For instance, in addition to referential classroom posters and extensive word walls, either online or in-person, students could bring academic words to life by completing graphic organizers depicting colloquial English on one side and academic English on the other (Breiseth, 2014; Freiberger, 2017b). Twiddla and Jamboard may prove valuable for this purpose. While Twiddla is described on the company website as an "online whiteboard for the modern classroom" and often used as a canvas to spark creativity, Jamboard, an interactive whiteboard, could also help increase collaboration by promoting creativity via the creation and careful arranging of notable notes, great graphics, and eye-catching images.

Vivid visuals and delineating English by subject, such as Language Arts or Science, may also help. One great resource to expand vocabulary knowledge is TeachersWithApps, a useful resource that could save teachers valuable time and aid in the aggregation of quality educational apps. Another great resource is offered by Scholastic because the company offers grade-specific information and electronic learning resources specifically tailored to enhance language learning

for ELLs. The company also offers prudent suggestions and resources across grades for increasing ELLs' academic performance. Bilingual students could also translate high-level academic English into their native languages to instill confidence and improve classroom communication for non-native speakers.

Providing a solid foundation in academic language not only increases students' communicative competence, but it also improves vocabulary knowledge and verbal expression (Freiberger, 2017b). Infusing academic language into classroom dialogues on a more frequent basis should also, in turn, translate to "multiple data sources that measure stronger academic growth levels across grades" (Freiberger, 2017b).

Imagination Station

Research delineates that brief, quality, relevant videos can engage ELLs, enhance comprehension and vocabulary development, and promote 21st-century learning (Ellevation, 2018). Educators may therefore want to consider using Edpuzzle or YouTube videos (infused with poll or quiz cards) to create more interactive learning experiences. Carefully selecting text-relevant vocabulary words to introduce with vivid visual images in multiple languages for non-native speakers also makes for engaging conversational discourse, and is a reliable approach to introducing arcane text. Vocabulary.com, Magoosh Vocabulary Builder, and Anki or Quizlet may thus prove beneficial. Indeed, educators should invariably help students connect text-to-self, text-to-text, and text-to-world. In addition, investing the time to aid students in distinguishing between big ideas and supporting details should also lead to enhanced overall comprehension and higher test scores.

Consider forming in-person or remote classroom "work stations" for small groups of ELLs to collaborate. While the concept may no longer be au courant, students may appreciate

having options when it comes to deciding which activities to choose to partake in. Activities may include scrambling and unscrambling sentences, placing sentence strips in sequential order, or vocabulary matching utilizing images, words, and sentences, or a combination of the three. Grammar games, such as highlighting in sentences nouns, adjectives, and verbs with distinct colors, may also be utilized to engage ELLs. Educators may also want to consider rotating work stations every fifteen minutes to ensure students remain engaged. Supplementary materials may include hands-on manipulatives, multimedia clips, songs, chants, teacher modeling, and related materials that support core content instruction (Echevarria et al., 2008). Thankfully, a great reserve of online resources is available for teachers across grades to empower ELLs.

Timeless Children's Classics: The Real Literacy Sages for the Ages

In addition to using helpful apps and educational technology to enhance higher-level thinking skills and spark classroom motivation, exposing our youth, particularly ELLs, to sensational, spunky stories could yield bountiful benefits in multiple areas. With appropriate scaffolds, delving into beloved children's classics enables students to become better aware of answering and questioning techniques, improves higher-level cognitive thinking, and develops story sequencing savvy and prediction-making prowess--not to mention enhances vocabulary development. There are also ample online resources, such as storylineonline.net and Let's Learn NYC!, where young people could either hear classic stories read aloud by accomplished actors or engage with lucid literacy lessons by seasoned educators, respectively. Not only ELLs, but also all students could become familiar with cognates, diction, phonics and phonemic awareness, and common English speech patterns. Children could also benefit by improving their grammar, expression, and intonation, and analyze story structure, which includes setting, plot, conflict, resolution, and conclusion from "basic" books for beginners.

Let's ensure <u>Frog and Toad</u> not become curricular roadkill to not violate the principle of the Language Experience Approach, namely, that reading material should be not only relevant, but also "both accessible and pleasurable" (Colombo, 2012). Let's neither sauté <u>One Fish, Two Fish, Red Fish, Blue Fish</u> nor disbar Dr. Seuss from practicing his alluring alliterations and very distinct versification because these materials, perfect for younger students becoming familiar with language and literacy, may not be deemed rigorous. While educators should now strive to infuse useful technology and high-level academic language in lessons, it should not be at the expense of beloved children's classics. Choose instead to keep the eggs and ham green as you continually upgrade your students' academic language proficiency and strive to polish their vocabulary sheen.

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