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Learning to Think in English

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Rather than treat high school English language learners like small children who are unable to understand, challenge them with higher-level thinking.

Tran, a high school English language learner, is working with his teacher as he learns how to form sentences in English:

TEACHER: Where is the tent?

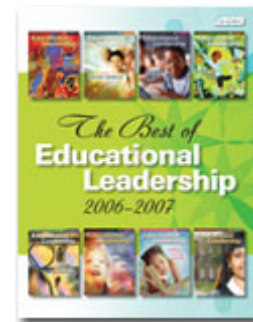
TRAN: It's behind the tree.

TEACHER: Where is the family?

TRAN: It's in the tent.

TEACHER: Where is the bear?

TRAN: It's in the jungle.



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A bear in a jungle? The teacher pretends to be shocked, and Tran laughs. A researcher in literary instruction who happens to be observing in the classroom that day asks, "Have you ever heard about any bears in jungles?" Tran confidently replies, "No, it doesn't make any sense. But you don't have to make sense, just make a sentence. Don't think!" (Fu, 1995, p. 82) In this lesson, a concentration on the basics of sentence formation has clearly short-circuited the meaning-making process, reducing learning to a thoughtless game.

As mainstream subject-matter teachers see increasing numbers of English language learners come into their classrooms, many wonder how they can provide challenging and meaningful instruction to students with limited proficiency in English. Are basic reading and writing skills in English a prerequisite of content-specific learning? Are English language learners capable of dealing with complex ideas in English?

Although English language learners may be limited in expressing their understanding and ideas in English, this doesn't mean that they lack critical-thinking skills. Several researchers (Cummins, 1994; Dong, 2004; Genesee, 1994) have emphasized the need for mainstream subject-matter teachers to develop English language learners' higher-order thinking skills, along with language and literacy skills. According to Jim Cummins, an interdependence in conceptual knowledge exists between a student's first and second languages. For example, an immigrant student who enrolls in a U.S. high school may have already mastered the concept of *adaptation* in his or her native language. The student may only need to acquire an additional label for this concept in English. Content teachers can gain access to students'

conceptual knowledge in their first language by tapping into background knowledge, scaffolding, and providing opportunities for students to transfer their knowledge into English.

It is crucial for teachers—especially at the secondary level—to develop English language learners' higher-order thinking skills. Research (Collier, 1989) has shown that it takes English language learners 5–7 years to develop proficiency in academic English, even though they develop their basic interpersonal communication skills in English in 1–2 years. High school students who are English language learners have limited time to catch up with their native English-speaking peers in academic English language proficiency. Therefore, it's not sufficient to teach them the technical basics of reading and writing alone. Instead, to take part in both the social and academic worlds of mainstream subject-matter classes, English language learners need to receive instruction that integrates literacy and critical thinking skills.

Learning a language is closely connected to learning to think critically in specific subject matter, just the opposite of the opening example in which Tran composed sentences that didn't make sense. By tailoring instruction to students' needs and meaningfully linking cognitive and linguistic elements in the learning process, teachers can help English language learners develop the higher-order thinking skills they need.

Posing Thought-Provoking Questions

Christine welcomed her English language learners into her 10th grade English class. She seated them close to her desk, checking for their understanding throughout the lesson. She tutored them in writing during her lunch hour, and she borrowed ideas and reading materials from their English as a second language teachers to tailor instruction to their needs. After a year, Christine saw a big improvement in these students as they progressed to her 11th grade English class.

However, she was surprised when Maria, one of her English language learners, mentioned that she didn't like Robert Frost's poem "The Road Not Taken." When Christine asked her why, Maria answered, "Because I don't understand it." Christine asked Maria to write down some of the questions she had about the poem. But Maria couldn't come up with any questions because she didn't know *how* to ask questions about a poem that she didn't understand.

Maria's difficulty caused Christine to examine her own teaching. Christine decided to make inquiry the cornerstone of her lessons, and she began restructuring lessons by teaching her students different questioning techniques.

She first modeled ways of formulating questions during whole-group reading sessions. Christine then provided students with a list of phrases that they could use to compose their own questions, such as, What does the author mean by..., Why does the narrator/character say or do..., What is your opinion of..., and How is this similar to or different from...? At the beginning of every lesson, Christine handed out sticky notes to her students, on which they wrote down questions they had about the selection they were reading; at the end of the lesson, she collected the written questions in a box. The following day, students randomly picked questions out of the box, which the class then addressed in their literature discussions. This activity—in which the teacher actively sought out student questions—soon became a daily routine. Students became more involved in class discussions because they knew that their questions might be the topic of the discussion. Moreover, they were interested in hearing what their peers and teacher had to say about their questions.

As the students became comfortable with the questioning strategy, Christine encouraged them to ask three kinds of questions: questions about the text and the author, questions connecting the text with the reader, and questions connecting the text with the world around them.

For example, when the class discussed “Sally,” a chapter in Sandra Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street* (Vintage Books, 1991), students’ questions about the text included the following: What does Sally look like? What does the author mean when she says Sally has “eyes like Egypt”? What kind of relationship does Sally have with her parents? How does Sally feel about staying on Mango Street? Another group of questions connected the character to students’ own thoughts and feelings: Do you think that people misunderstand Sally? Do you know someone who looks like Sally? Would you be friends with Sally if she were in our class?

Students also broadened their questions to connect with the world around them: Why did Sally’s father say that her beauty was trouble? If Sally were a boy, would her father have treated her differently? What does it mean to be a beautiful girl in your culture? What does it mean to be a beautiful girl in U.S. culture? Christine was delighted to see that her English language learners not only identified the confusing parts in the chapter but also asked thought-provoking questions about varied views of beauty among different cultures.

Christine did several noteworthy things. First, she encouraged curiosity and created a safe environment in which students were not afraid to reveal their ignorance about a topic. She made learners responsible for formulating their own questions, encouraging thinking skills as students sought and considered questions about perplexing text. She provided her students with language tools to frame their ideas. She modeled the questioning process and effectively used the box and sticky notes as a teaching tool. Once she gave students permission to both ask questions and seek language support, they became more willing to reveal their confusion and were able to move beyond the surface of the text to grapple with underlying ideas.

Inviting Students to Hypothesize

John also established a question-seeking routine in his 9th grade science class composed entirely of English language learners. He firmly believed that science learning begins with questions and that second language learners are as capable of thinking deeply about science topics as any other students are.

In John’s class, students’ questions drive the lesson. And there are no “stupid” questions. Even a basic comprehension question can serve as a departure for inquiry. What is crucial is generating questions and discussing them. According to John, this is an invaluable part of learning how to think about science.

For example, in a discussion about the food chain and how animals adapt to the environment, the word *gnus* came up:

ANNA: What are gnus? They talk about gnus on this page, but I don’t know what they are.

TEACHER: Let me read the paragraph. (*He reads it.*) You’re right, Anna. It talks about the lions eating the gnus, but what are gnus? Me being the teacher, I have no clue! Does anyone know what a gnu is?

MARIA: Maybe it’s a small animal.

TEACHER: How small?

MARIA: (*She indicates something about 5 inches long with her fingers.*)

David: Maybe it’s a lizard.

ANNA: Maybe it’s in the picture on this page?

TEACHER: Maybe you’re right. I don’t know.

CYNTHIA: Well, I think it's a big animal.

TEACHER: Why?

CYNTHIA: The passage says that if these gnus were no longer living, the lions would go hungry. I know that lions are big animals, so they must *eat* big animals. I think the lions would starve if they didn't eat big animals because big animals provide more food.

TEACHER: I think you have a point. Did everyone understand?

Using the question about gnus as the focal point of the discussion, John invited students to hypothesize and ponder their own answers. He taught them not to settle for easy answers. He encouraged them not only to ask questions but also to give rationales for their answers, thus developing a habit of active learning and thinking.

John's feedback is interesting: "Me being the teacher, I have no clue!" and "Maybe you're right. I don't know." His responses issued an invitation for open discussion and placed the teacher as one of the learners. By acknowledging the student's question about gnus and echoing students' responses without explicitly evaluating those responses, he placed student voice at the center of the discussion. Moreover, students had time to pose hypotheses, think about their responses, read the excerpt aloud, and examine the pictures in the text. This approach led to high-level responses.

Writing from Different Perspectives

Lee, a high school English teacher, taught a class of intermediate English language learners composed of 10th to 12th graders. Before beginning a unit on the history and culture of Native Americans, Lee learned that her students—who came from such countries as China, Korea, Colombia, and Haiti—had no prior factual knowledge of this topic. She activated her students' prior personal knowledge, however, by asking them to share what they felt when they were uprooted from their native countries to come to the United States. That created a good segue into a discussion of the American westward expansion and the ensuing conflicts over land.

Lee decided to use a series of texts that included Chief Joseph's famous speech "I Have Shaken Hands with a Great Many Friends" (Macmillan/McGraw Hill, 1988), as well as *Indian Chiefs* by Russell Freedman (Holiday House, 1987) and Karen Liptak's *North American Indian Tribal Chiefs* (Franklin Watts, 1992). Unlike most textbooks, these texts eased comprehension through first-person accounts and chronological storytelling formats. They made history come alive. Lee wanted her students to empathize with Native Americans; she wanted them to move beyond the text to assume historical roles so that they could understand the loss experienced by Native Americans. She also wanted students to think deeply about social issues, such as inequality, that pervaded U.S. history. To provide context, Lee showed the class pictures of places where Native American tribes had initially settled and called their attention to various books on Native American culture and history. She also read aloud certain excerpts and defined key vocabulary words—such as *treaty*, *restriction*, *capture*, *territory*, *promises*, *generous*, and *reservation*—to facilitate class discussions and writing.

Next, Lee conducted a class discussion on the concept of "points of view." She divided the class into two groups. One group took the point of view of Chief Joseph, a Native American tribal chief who led his people against the U.S. Army in 1877. The U.S. government had decided to open the Nez Perce homeland to white settlers and place the tribe on a reservation; Chief Joseph attempted to lead his people to freedom in Canada and fought with the U.S. cavalry along the way. The other group of students took the point of view of General Nelson Miles, the commander who led the U.S. Army to defeat Chief Joseph.

The class discussed several questions: What were some of the arguments that Chief Joseph made to defend his people's land? How would you feel if something dear to you were taken away? What were General Miles's beliefs during his battle against Chief Joseph, and why did he believe these things? As students contributed to the differing points of view, Lee noted their ideas on a T-chart. She then asked the students to compose two diary entries—on the basis of the reading material, their class discussion, and the T-chart—in which they assumed the personas of both Chief Joseph and General Miles. One student wrote the following two entries:

Sept. 30, 1877

Dear Diary,

Today is the saddest day of my life. Too many people died. We fought for freedom to travel, freedom to work, and freedom to think and talk. However, we lost. I'm so angry that they killed my family. They could live in peace with us, if they wanted to. But they didn't. They took our home, they took our freedom, and finally, they took our life. Please let us go. There isn't any reason that we have to live under their restriction. I must go to Canada, the land of the free.

—Chief Joseph

Sept. 30, 1877

Dear Diary,

Today is the best day of my life. I captured [Chief Joseph]. This is a big contribution in the battle against Native Americans. I don't know why they tried to escape to Canada. Our glorious nation promises them that we will let them live free in this territory. We are so generous with them, but they are not satisfied. We are more powerful, so they must obey our rules and our order.

—General Miles

In this unit, Lee used a number of strategies to guide, support, and prepare her students for higher-level thinking through reading, discussing, and writing. She activated students' prior knowledge and provided rich background information to contextualize an unfamiliar topic. She provided students with language tools to enable them to think using newly learned concepts. She worked with the class to come up with a T-chart to help them compare and contrast differing viewpoints. Using the perspective journal, she encouraged her students to step into the shoes of both General Miles and Chief Joseph. Studying the conflicting perspectives helped students learn about this era of U.S. history meaningfully and deeply.

Taking It to the Next Level

Teachers can help English language learners break through the initial language barrier by fostering a community in which students believe that their ideas matter, by tapping into students' prior knowledge, and by providing context-rich language resources. But breaking through the language barrier should not be the final goal of such instruction.

Mainstream subject-matter teachers have the responsibility of moving beyond teaching basic language and literacy skills to gaining access to students' ideas and making them visible in the classroom. By encouraging English language learners to compare, question, discuss, validate, and reflect on their own and others' ideas, teachers promote higher-order thinking skills and, at the same time, create active readers and writers.

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