

oral language development correlates importantly with second language literacy development, particularly in the area of comprehension (August & Shanahan, 2006). Oral discussions provide meaningful opportunities for ELs to hear and practice discipline-specific language and vocabulary (Zwiers & Crawford, 2011). In addition to supporting their language and literacy development, academic discussions are a powerful way for ELs to learn and remember content. However, despite these benefits, the inclusion of academic discussions in classrooms with culturally and linguistically diverse students is especially lacking (Zwiers & Crawford, 2011). Additionally, even in instances where a teacher includes oral language activities, ELs may find the work challenging if they do not understand their expected role in the task they are working on or if they do not feel confident in using the level of language required for the task.

## How Do I Develop Effective Oral Language Activities for ELs?

A critical step in supporting EL engagement in academic conversations is developing oral language activities that will support their participation. To begin exploring this topic, read the following scenario, and then, answer the discussion questions that follow. You can find a discussion of this scenario on pages 88–89.

### APPLICATION ACTIVITY 4.1

#### Ms. Michael Scenario Reflection

**Scenario:** Ms. Michael’s fourth-grade class has been learning about the ways that Native Americans helped colonists in the New World. They have watched a short video on the topic and completed written questions about the video. Ms. Michael wants to build more academic conversations into her lessons, so before transitioning to a new topic, she asks students to *turn and talk*. She tells the students that each person in the pair should share one way Native Americans helped colonists. As the students talk, Ms. Michael walks around the room. She notices that many of her ELs, even those at intermediate and advanced levels of language proficiency, are saying very little or giving one- or two-word answers. She also notices that other pairs are off task, talking about what they want to do after school or what they did during music class. Ms. Michael feels frustrated and stops the activity after about three or four minutes.

## Discussion Questions

1. What might Ms. Michael have done to have better prepared her ELs to participate in the pair discussion?
2. What recommendations would you make to Ms. Michael about how to improve the oral task she provided to her students?

The scenario described above is a cautionary tale. Just providing students opportunities to talk will not necessarily lead to the desired results. As we can see in this scenario, despite Ms. Michael's good intentions, her oral language activity did not meet her expectations, nor did it benefit students to the extent that it might have. Zwiers (2014) makes three recommendations for supporting the development of oral language skills. We have described these, along with our understanding of their importance for ELs.

**1. Adapt activities to include authentic talk.** This strategy requires that during oral language activities, students do not merely read a prepared sentence or two from a piece of paper. They must have opportunities to speak authentically about the topic. This can be a challenge for ELs who may not have the language skills or confidence to do so. For more on helping ELs prepare for opportunities for authentic talk, see Practice 1 on page 92. In developing oral language activities, think about how you might structure an activity in order to help prepare students to speak authentically. For example, you might have students discuss a question in small groups and write down their responses. Then, they could practice sharing their responses with each other (without their notes). After they have had this opportunity to practice, students could change groups and share their responses with someone new.

**2. Use activities that develop meaningful and robust language.** As was described in the example before, students need opportunities to practice, refine, and deepen their oral language responses. Such practice is especially beneficial to ELs, as they are able to hear and use key vocabulary and academic language several times. It also provides ELs, as well as other students, with opportunities to hear the content explained in varied ways and to think about the content from multiple perspectives. Language activities that allow ELs opportunities to practice expressing their ideas in clearer and more compelling ways will support their oral language development. Examples of these types of activities include an interview grid, 1-3-6, and debrief circles. For an explanation of these activities, see pages 98, 104, and 106.

**3. Use open-ended discussion prompts.** Zwiers (2014) recommends discussion prompts that support evaluation. If you ask students to rank,

prioritize, or choose something, it is likely to foster greater discussion and debate among students than if you ask them merely to identify. As we saw in the scenario in Application Activity 4.1, Ms. Michael’s discussion prompt was insufficient to garner much student interest in the topic. Perhaps if she had asked students to identify the most important way Native Americans helped colonists and to support their answer with evidence, students might have had more to say.

The types of questions and prompts teachers develop are important for fostering student participation and engagement (Zwiers, 2010). Figure 4.1 provides examples of these types of prompts and questions that will encourage greater participation and student learning. Teachers can provide these types of prompts in a graphic organizer or a journal prompt prior to classroom discussions. We have adapted this table to include specific considerations for ELs.

In order to guide you in developing oral language activities that will support ELs’ active participation, we have developed a checklist that you can refer to. Throughout this chapter, as we introduce new strategies and recommendations, we will add to the checklist. See Figure 4.2 for the first criteria of the checklist.

*Think about an oral language activity that you included in a previous lesson that you taught. To what extent did you include authentic opportunities for ELs to speak, time for students to strengthen and deepen their responses, and engaging discussion prompts? What might you do to improve that activity if you were to teach it again?*

**FIGURE 4.1** Types of Questions, Considerations for ELs, and Examples

| Create questions that . . .   | EL Consideration  | Example Question  |
|---|---|---|
| Focus students on key content concepts.   | Ensure ELs have the proper scaffolding (e.g., visuals, glossaries, and home language support) to focus on key content concepts.               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is the <i>Bill of Rights</i>, and why is it important?</li> <li>• Draw a picture of the water cycle, and explain how it works.</li> </ul>   |
| Allow for divergent and personalized responses, as long as they connect back to evidence in the material being studied.   | Ensure that ELs’ background experiences and cultures are valued and drawn from during instruction.  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How does our school manage waste?</li> <li>• If you were a soldier during this time, would you have . . . ? Why?</li> </ul>  |
| Emphasize one or more thinking skills being developed in the lesson and unit. Such skills include questioning, interpreting, classifying, persuading, evaluating, analyzing, comparing, and synthesizing. | Provide supports so that ELs can engage in these higher-order thinking skills (such as sentence stems and frames).                            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What can you infer about the character’s relationship with his grandmother based on his actions?</li> <li>• What do you think is the most significant effect of the Industrial Revolution? Why?</li> </ul> |
| Deepen understandings and emphasize the essential objectives of the text, lesson, and/or unit.  | Ensure that ELs understand the essential objectives and that instruction of academic language is intertwined with instruction of the content. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What does this have to do with our goal of learning how plants get the materials they need to grow?</li> </ul>   |

Source: Adapted from Think-pair-share tips. Retrieved from <http://jeffzwiers.org/tools>

**FIGURE 4.2** Oral Language Activity Checklist

| Criteria  | Yes | No | Follow-Up Steps |
|---|-----|----|-----------------|
| 1. Have I developed an oral language activity that will allow students authentic opportunities to speak, provides students time to strengthen and deepen their responses, and includes engaging discussion prompts? |     |    |                 |

## What Practices Can ELs Engage in to Support Their Participation and Engagement in Oral Language Activities?

In order to support ELs' participation and engagement in academic conversations, we have identified four practices for supporting this engagement, as well as instructional tools that can support these practices. These practices were synthesized and adapted from Zwiers and Crawford's (2011) work to account for the specific strengths and needs of ELs. The four practices are as follows:



1. Come to the discussion prepared.