Creating Classroom Buzz

Ivannia Soto, Kent Besocke, and Danny Magaña explain how to use reciprocal teaching to develop academic identities in English language learners

According to Diane August of the Center for Applied Linguistics, English language learners (ELLs) spend less than 2% of their school day in academic oral-language development. This is problematic because the foundation for literacy with ELLs is academic oral language. Additionally, when ELLs are required to speak, they often use shallow or basic forms of language, including one- or two-word responses (Soto, 2014). For teachers wanting to combat this problem, strategies like reciprocal teaching require students to extend their language, to think critically, and to justify their thinking, which are major instructional shifts for ELLs within the Common Core State Standards (CCSS).
In a similar fashion, the CCSS require students to “participate in a range of collaborative discussions, including one on one, small groups, and whole class” (Council of Chief City Schools, 2010). This, for some teachers, becomes a major shift in instructional practice. It requires relinquishing control and allowing students to grapple with ideas on their own. More importantly, it requires a teacher to be a facilitator of discussions in the classroom, instead of the person doing most of the talking and thinking.

The classroom with traditional instruction is teacher-centered, asks for exact, specific answers evaluated by the teacher, provides no extensive discussion, and involves mostly literal thinking and language use. This pattern does not offer the necessary practice English language learners need to improve. Students, especially ELLs, who go home to places where English is not spoken, must speak to learn and acquire language. The traditional classroom needs to shift to a newer approach: one that involves teacher as facilitator, encourages many different ideas, provides oral language practice in order to give opportunities for using academic language, and expects mostly higher-level thinking and language use.

What Is Reciprocal Teaching?
Reciprocal teaching is an ideal fit for instructional shifts emerging within the CCSS, as it requires students to do most of the talking, textual evidence gathering, and oral and written justification of their thinking. It is a highly effective strategy in meeting the language and literacy gaps that ELLs may have, and is a great first step in going beyond the teacher-centered classroom. The process takes some time and practice to set up in the classroom at first, but soon students collaborate and take control of their own learning. The image of students not always needing the teacher’s help every step of the way, and taking ownership of their own learning, soon becomes a testimony to the effectiveness of this strategy.

Specifically, reciprocal teaching refers to an instructional activity that takes place in the form of a dialogue between teachers and students regarding segments of text. The dialogue is structured by the use of four comprehension strategies: summarizing, question generating, clarifying, and predicting. The teacher and students take turns assuming the role of teacher in leading dialogue. At first, the dialogue may be more teacher directed, as modeling around the use of the four comprehension strategies is needed. Eventually, however, the purpose of reciprocal teaching is to facilitate a group effort between students to bring meaning to texts.

Reading researchers Brown and Palincsar (1985) selected each of the reciprocal teaching strategies as a “means of aiding students to construct meaning from text, as well as a means of monitoring their reading to ensure that they are in fact understanding what they read” (p. 66). Early research on reciprocal teaching was conducted at the elementary and middle school levels. An initial reciprocal teaching study by Palincsar and Brown (1984) produced significant results. This reciprocal teaching study was conducted by adult tutors working with middle school students who identified as fairly adequate decoders but very poor comprehenders, placed in small reciprocal reading groups averaging five in number. Instruction took place over a period of 20 consecutive school days, with effectiveness evaluated by having the students read passages about 450 to 500 words in length and answer ten comprehension questions from recall.

Performance on these assessment passages indicated that all but one of the experimental students achieved criteria on performance, which was identified by Palincsar and Brown (1985) as 70% accuracy for four out of five consecutive days. Additionally, qualitative benefits included increased dialogue, which occurred daily, and the experimental students functioning more independently of the teachers and improving the quality of their summaries over time. Students’ ability to write summaries, predict the kinds of questions teachers and tests ask, and detect incongruities in text also improved. Some of the same results have been demonstrated in a high school English classroom in South El Monte, California, with high numbers of ELLs.

Classroom Testimonial
South El Monte High School English teacher Danny Magaña says the following about his experience implementing reciprocal teaching in his classroom: “Reciprocal teaching allows students to follow a cyclical protocol. This protocol becomes habit and allows ELLs to follow a process with new pieces, whether it is analyzing language or literature or simply understanding meaning. Habit builds comfort levels, which makes it safer for ELLs when taking language or academic risks. The use of the word teaching in ‘reciprocal teaching’ allows the students to understand the reciprocity of the group relationship. They are empowered yet also held accountable, because they know they are responsible for teaching and learning from each other. Risk on the teacher’s part and the teaching of the word reciprocal are the ideal crossroads for beginning this process.”

For a teacher, being at the center and having students lined up in rows all period starts to run its course. Committing to
taking a teaching risk is the first step in trying something new, which usually results from teachers feeling frustrated that they are doing all of the work.

Observing the effectiveness of reciprocal teaching is the first step a teacher should take when implementing this strategy. Whether that entails having an instructional coach come in and model the process (as in Magaña’s case), watching a fellow teacher, or viewing various examples on Teaching Channel, it reinforces the idea that this strategy is possible and does work. For teachers, this can mean the difference between taking the risk to try something new and not.

Magaña suggests, “One of the best ways to give students ownership of the concept of reciprocity is to guide them to understand the word: reciprocal. Once students have a common understanding of what reciprocity means, they can then comprehend the importance of both listening and speaking in their group relationships. Learners grasp their dual role as both as teacher and learner.” Magaña uses the Frayer model for vocabulary development, and always before he begins reciprocal teaching. ELLs benefit from the Frayer model, as they learn to associate many words as related with the target word or concept, which is an efficient way to close the vocabulary gap.

When using the Frayer model graphic organizer, the name of the concept is placed in the middle of a four-squared chart. Students begin counterclockwise with the graphic organizer, at the bottom left-hand corner, by providing examples of a concept. The concepts are based on what ELLs know so far, after building background-knowledge experiences, which are essential to success with this strategy. The bottom right quadrant is reserved for non-examples, which are just as important as the examples, because when students know a word, they know what it is and they know what it isn’t. At the top right, students then illustrate their understanding of this concept, which is important for ELLs, who will often recall the visual before the linguistic label. Finally, students end at the top left quadrant by developing their own definitions, or the teacher may choose to also have a class definition (Soto, 2014).

**Scaffolding Reciprocal Teaching**

The following five steps make the process clear for implementing reciprocal teaching: 1) prepare an article that is chunked in parts and ready to go; 2) strategically group students; 3) have cultural norms set; 4) have the reciprocal teaching protocol on the wall; 5) have job descriptions with sentence frames in the hands of the students.

A reciprocal teaching session must be carefully mapped. A text must be divided into reasonable chunks. A chunk metaphorically represents what a learner can chew and digest in a given cycle. There are several methods of creating chunks depending on the type of text. Articles may be divided by paragraphs or similar themes. Novels can be a bit trickier. Depending on the skill level of the group, including long-term English learners (LTELs) in mainstream classrooms, chunks can be divided into paragraphs again, a designated number of pages, or short chapters. The chunks should never be long. A group may eventually decide on their own chunks. Moments of suspense, resolution, or even confusion make great places to stop and discuss.

Strategically grouping students is essential to success with reciprocal teaching, and it involves both analyzing achievement data (language and content scores for heterogeneous grouping), and something of an intuitive ability to read a class. Much needs to be taken into account, such as age, maturity level, and ability levels. Groups of mixed abilities are ideal, specifically for ELLs who need linguistic models. Ideally, placing ELLs in groups with both mid-range and upper-range ability levels will ensure that there is a more proficient other who can apprentice less proficient students into greater language skills. This should be balanced by placing higher-level readers with low-level readers, which can be mutually beneficial for all students in the group.

Magaña suggests, “Do not discount the need to group based on what is needed to manage a classroom. A successful reciprocal teaching classroom buzzes. An audible hum begins in the room when groups are successfully reading and discussing. Any disturbance in this hum is usually the signal for a teacher to step in. This may mean a need to clarify confusion or redirect misbehavior, if it emerges.” Visually, teachers should see students facing each other, with their texts and notes in front of them. Teachers may also take the time to show students what listening looks like: leaning in and looking at each other.

Just like any other assignment, students need to clearly know what is expected of them. Magaña uses specific procedures and norms in his reciprocal teaching sessions. He calls on students to read the procedures and norms out loud to the entire
class. These may change from day to day, but they are always reviewed, even if they are simply read in the group before students begin their new reading task. Some cultural norms that students will need to be explicitly taught include the following from Magaña’s classroom.

**Cultural Norms**
- Everyone has a job.
- Everybody reads out loud.
- Everybody notes his or her job.
- Everybody shares.
- Share questions with group members before asking the teacher.
- Be respectful of all opinions.
- No one is done until everyone is done.

**Modeling Reciprocal Teaching**
Students need to see reciprocal teaching before they can even start to use it, especially ELLs, who benefit from ample modeling and demonstrations of academic discourse. To effectively demonstrate the process, create a model reciprocal teaching group made up of teachers and students. Working with a smaller group of students ahead of time who can assist with modeling, is also helpful. First, set up the group right in the middle of the class, reminiscent of a theater in the round. Almost like a performance, this modeling allows students to be voyeurs in the process. The students in the class watch the model group as they go through a ‘round’ of reciprocal teaching. The students observing need to see how a group reads a text, chunk by chunk; how a group stops to discuss ideas; and how a group solves problems. By stopping every few minutes and discussing what the class should be noticing, the model group begins to reveal what an effective academic discussion looks like. The following is the reciprocal-teaching-round protocol that Magaña uses in his classroom.

**Reciprocal Teaching Protocol** (Round)
1. Predict (everyone)
2. Read the chunk (everyone)
3. Questions/curiosities (everyone)
4. Marginal notes (using sentence frames if necessary)
5. Clarifier shares
6. Connector shares
7. Visualizer shares
8. Summarizer shares
9. Repeat the process for the next chunk

**Reciprocal Teaching Roles**
Assigning specific unique responsibilities also adds a necessary pressure to reciprocate in the group relationship. By incorporating roles, each student is held accountable both individually and as a group. Each of these roles must be explicitly taught, one at a time, before students are expected to be successful with using their roles in a group setting. The following are the roles that Magaña uses in his classroom.

**Reciprocal Teaching Roles**
- Clarifier/facilitator — leads group discussion and either clarifies group confusion or asks for clarification
- Connector — connects reading to other media, world events, or self
- Visualizer — explains to the group what picture is created by the text
- Summarizer — does not summarize the text, but what the group discussion clarified or left unanswered

Teachers must remember that by simply starting the process of implementing reciprocal teaching, they will begin to see how it will work in their classrooms. Mistakes made early on should be viewed as valuable moments of learning for teachers and students. Reciprocal teaching does not happen overnight, but when it does, the results will be amazing.

According to Magaña, “A group with a well-established rhythm of student-based discussion and reading now faces one obstacle — the teacher. As teachers, we need to relinquish a certain amount of control to let students own the process.” However, reading and group discussion cannot go without teacher-led discussion/debriefing. Pausing a class to assess
progress and understanding is the teacher’s responsibility. Further classroom accountability during reciprocal teaching can occur with teacher power walks as teachers walk around the room to listen in on groups and identify responses that will take the group discussions deeper. Magaña further explains, “Refocusing mechanisms are very useful for a teacher wanting to interrupt groups to gain their attention. I ask my students to raise their hands when they see me raise mine. They know this signifies my need for their attention and quiet. Other mechanisms may include countdowns or other verbal/nonverbal cues.”

As with many repetitive procedures, there is a certain danger in not evolving. The aforementioned instructions are but a primer on getting started. They are a way to establish a habit that can easily be modified. Reciprocal teaching can be used across different content areas. Science, math, history, and other content-area teachers may decide on reading roles that suit their purpose for reading, so that reciprocal teaching can eventually become a school-wide effort. For example, math teachers may have students summarize a word problem, pose any questions that they have about segments of the word problem, predict how they will solve the problem, and make connections between math concepts. Similarly, science teachers can use reciprocal teaching alongside lab instructions, in order to ensure that the material has been thoroughly and accurately comprehended before a lab exercise.

References
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