

Practical Strategies to Improve Academic Discussions in Mixed Ability Secondary Content Area Classrooms

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Introduction: The Need for Active/Accountable Student Response to Instruction

Research has confirmed what every teacher knows; students who are most in need of instruction, are least engaged in it! Noted literacy researcher, Keith Stanovich (1998), described this phenomenon as the "Matthew Effect" in learning, referencing the biblical parable in the book of Matthew in which "the rich get richer and poor get poorer". In other words, far too many under-performing adolescents view learning in the content areas as a "spectator sport" and are often allowed to adopt a passive role in their classrooms. In terms of effectively developing skills and knowledge in the content area disciplines, the implications are enormous. Classroom teachers need efficient and effective instructional strategies to insure that all students are actively and accountably responding to all lesson content.

General Engagement Strategies

There are a number of general engagement strategies or learning scaffolds teachers need to have in their instructional "tool kits" to activate and engage the full range of students served in mixed ability content area classrooms. Learning scaffolds function much like training wheels on a bicycle, allowing less proficient learners to successfully engage in higher level learning tasks until subsequent experiences allow for more independent functioning. One essential feature of these learning scaffolds is the provision of tangible evidence checks of student comprehension and response to the instruction. For example, a conscientious Language Arts teacher may prepare a thoughtful range of questions to guide discussion of a reading and be dismayed by the fact that only a few students bother to offer a response. An appropriate scaffold in this common scenario would be to require that all students write a brief response to the question using a sentence frame provided by the teacher, complemented by brief partner rehearsal prior to a unified class discussion.

We will briefly examine these scaffolding tools and then explore how to apply them to various lesson activities such as class discussions, concept teaching, and vocabulary development.

Essential Engagement Scaffolds

1. Partner Responses - assign each student a partner, ideally picking partners that are likely to be productive, give each student a number (e.g. ones and twos), and regularly stop whole class instruction and guide partners to share/compare/rehearse/etc. key lesson content. Have some simple yet efficient process for assigning partners (e.g. "...this row will be number one, this row is number two")
2. Choral Responses - when teaching key vocabulary, it is important to prompt students to practice pronouncing the new term together chorally, if it is a longer word it is helpful to guide students in pronouncing the word syllable by syllable. Choral responses can also include quick checks like, "put your finger under the first word in paragraph two, check your partner...", signaling or voting (e.g. "thumbs up if you agree") can also serve to quickly evoke a response from all students.
3. Communicative Language functions - students need a range of communicative language strategies to effectively participate in academic classroom discourse. To support secondary in developing the skills necessary for success in high school and beyond, schools need to intentionally help students develop proficiency in a wide range of language functions such as: asking a question when confused, using appropriate academic vocabulary in discussions, etc. The linguistic machinery necessary for competent participation in formal academic discussion is not developed through everyday casual social interactions. To support students in comfortably using these strategies, introduce and practice a few new expressions at a time, prior to having students engage in a structure that requires this authentic language. For example, during vocabulary instruction after partners have shared their examples with one another, you could hold them accountable for active listening by randomly calling on individuals to share their partners example while expecting them to use a complete sentence utilizing a formal citation verb such as:
"My partner _____, pointed out that"

Keep these language strategies posted in the classroom for easy reference during lessons and affirm students' efforts to apply them.

Below you will find an introductory "starter kit" of communicative language strategies that can be enhanced and extended over the course of the school year.

<p>Expressing an Opinion I think/believe that ... It seems to me that ... In my opinion ...</p>	<p>Predicting I guess/predict/imagine that ... Based on ..., I infer that ... I hypothesize that ...</p>
<p>Asking for Clarification What do you mean? Will you explain that again? I have a question about that.</p>	<p>Paraphrasing So you are saying that ... In other words, you think ... What I hear you saying is ...</p>
<p>Soliciting a Response What do you think? We haven't heard from you yet. Do you agree? What answer did you get?</p>	<p>Acknowledging Ideas My idea is similar to/related to _____'s idea. I agree with (a person) that ... My idea builds upon _____'s idea.</p>
<p>Reporting a partner's idea _____ indicated that ... _____ clarified that ... _____ pointed out to me that ... _____ emphasized that ...</p>	<p>Partner and Group Reporting We decided/agreed that ... We concluded that ... Our group sees it differently. We had a different approach</p>

4. Sentence frames/sentence starters - providing students with the beginning of an academic response, especially in writing, is a very effective tool for increasing the quality and quantity of student participation. For example, when preparing to discuss critical attributes of a character, after group/partner brainstorming individual students could be provided with the sentence starter;
"One critical attribute of the character is _____."
"I think _____'s most important attribute is _____."
 Sentence starters serve to both focus attention on critical content as well as provide students with the language support needed to engage in academic discussions. It also increases the likelihood that students will apply previously taught lesson terms in their formal writing and speaking.

The Challenge of Rigorous Inclusive Academic Discussions

Active engagement in rigorous academic discussion is absolutely fundamental to a successful secondary Language Arts classroom. However, research confirms what every teacher has observed, a relatively small handful of students tend to dominate most classroom discussions thereby deriving most of the benefit. The key to solving this ubiquitous problem involves carefully structuring each phase of the discussion to insure every student is prepared to contribute, supported in contributing, while being held accountable for actively contributing.

Key Principles for Structuring Academic Discussions

1) Provide/Clarify a focus question

- pre-teach vocabulary embedded in the question
- frame the question such that all can respond

2) Structuring thinking/processing time

- brief written response
- academic sentence starter

3) Partner rehearsal

4) Unified Class Discussion - Random calling on students

5) Additional Volunteers & Wrap up

These five core principles can be flexibly applied across topics and content areas depending on the import of the topic, needs of your students, and quality/quantity of the students' responses.

Comprehensive Academic Discussions

Comprehensive academic discussions are often appropriate when preparing students for a demanding reading that requires strategic attention coupled with actively building requisite background knowledge. The following example will help to clarify how these five principles coupled with the scaffolds described earlier are applied in a Language Arts lesson.

Example - Pre-reading discussion to prepare student for understanding the short story, Raymond's Run by Toni Cade Bambara

√ Focus Question,

We are going to read about a fascinating character named Squeaky, and how she earns respect from her friends or peers, let's begin by thinking about how we earn respect...

How do you gain respect from your peers?

- pre-teach ,the terms *respect* and *peer*

- model an example or two to jump-start student thinking, perhaps read it chorally with your students (especially helpful for English learners)

"One way I earn respect from my peers is by being a good listener."

J Structure thinking/writing/processing time

"Copy my example of being a good listener, then list as many additional ways you earn respect from your peers as you can in the next 5 min."

- provide 2-3 sentence starters to frame ideas into an academic response, prompt students to pick two of their best ideas from their list to put into a complete sentence using the sentence starters provided
- prompt students to use newly taught academic vocabulary by building them into the sentence starter (e.g. respect, demonstrated)

I gain respect from my peers by _____.

I demonstrate respect to my friends by _____.

- monitor students as they work to provide additional support as needed insuring **every** student is well prepared to engage in the discussion

J Partner rehearsal

"Ones, please choose one of your ideas and then share it with your partner, then twos please share your idea. If time allows, share your remaining thoughts." (then repeat w/the twos)

- it is important to remind students this is a formal discussion, and they need to use the target vocabulary (e.g. peer, respect) and complete sentences, etc.
- circulate around the classroom monitoring partner discussions, noting any possible of confusions or misunderstandings to clarify

J Unified Class Discussion - call on individuals randomly

"Jennifer, please start us off by sharing one way that you earn respect from your peers..."

- take care to not ask students to raise their hands to volunteer, randomly calling on students to contribute promotes accountability and focused attention
- remind students to use a "public voice" appropriate for group discourse
- prompt students to use appropriate academic language when their ideas are similar to classmates, e.g. *"My ideas builds upon/is similar to Eduardo's, ____"*

- may add a note taking task to promote accountable listening, e.g. *"Jot down at least one idea from your classmates that is different from those you have on your list."*

J Additional volunteers and wrap up

"We have time for two more contributions, who has an idea that is different from anything we've heard so far?"

- open the discussion as long as it appears productive
- add any additional ideas, help students make connections, link to the text to be read, etc.

Brief Academic Discussions

The same key principles described above for comprehensive academic discussions apply, only with every element being significantly telescoped.

Students will still need brief thinking time, question clarification, a quick example, however much time can be saved by eliminating the writing and reducing the rehearsal and unified class discussion.

For example, using the same illustration provided above, a 3-5 minute brief academic discussion could be structured instead of the more lengthy version described previously.

1) Provide/Clarify a focus question

*Think for a moment, how to you give and get respect from your friends?
Remember - respect means to admire, look up to, really like...*

- model; *"For example, I show respect by listening carefully to my friends when they have something to say."*

2) Structure Thinking Time

Give me a thumbs up when you can think of at least one way you show or earn respect...

3) Partner Rehearsal

Good, twos please share with ones, "I earn/show respect by _____", the ones, it is your turn to share.

4) Unified Class Discussion

We have time to hear from three of you (randomly call on 1-2, ask for 1 volunteer)...

5) Wrap Up

- Link back to the reading

"Today, we are going to read about an interesting girl named Squeaky..."

The basic elements of structuring a class discussion do not change, however teachers can choose to spend very little time or go into considerable depth depending on the needs of their students and the relative import of the content.

Conclusion

Active participation in classroom discussion is a key vehicle for deepening understanding and building comprehension. Regardless of the topic, any question worth posing is worth insuring every student thinks about and productively responds to. The 5 key principles to structuring academic discussions described above provide a "discussion tool kit" teachers can apply in almost any manner imaginable... but the bottom line remains, "if it is worth doing - we want **EVERY** student productively engaged in the doing"!

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