



Chapter 9

Encouraging Interaction between ELLs and Native Speakers

Please note: The term limited English proficient (LEP) and English language learner (ELL) are both used to describe students who are not native speakers of English. The term ELL is more frequently used in recent literature in the field and as such is used more frequently in this guide. However, the terms are interchangeable.

In these chapters, we have discussed the many challenges of blended classrooms. However, these classrooms can also have significant benefits for learners. One of the potential benefits is the opportunity for interaction (speaking, listening, and working together) between English language learners (ELLs) and native speakers, which can be rewarding for all students in the class. However, studies have shown that substantive interaction does not often occur naturally in the classroom and it is not easy to foster. In addition, interaction is not enough in and of itself to improve ELLs' spoken English and academic skills.

In this chapter, we will review the benefits of student interaction in blended classrooms and consider the important elements of classroom interaction that can support ELLs in their language acquisition. Cooperative Learning, a well-researched approach to classroom interaction, will be discussed and five activities that could be used to promote interaction in a blended classroom will be described.

Benefits of Interaction

There are many potential benefits of interaction between ELLs and native speakers in a blended classroom.

- **Cross-cultural relationships**

There are clear social benefits to interaction, as ELLs establish relationships with peers and become more integrated into the school community. Moreover, interaction provides ELLs and native speakers with important exposure to other cultures and perspectives. At least one study has shown that ELLs who have many opportunities to interact with their native speaking peers have better attitudes toward school in general.

- **Assistance from peers**

Native speaking students (preferably those who have been trained to do so) can provide assistance to ELLs, answering questions and explaining words and concepts. This frees up some teacher time and provides ELLs with more individualized attention.

- **Language development**

Well-designed interactive activities have been shown to promote oral language development in ELLs over time. Ideally, the classroom interactions provide opportunities to hear, read, and practice academic and more social language, leading to faster gains in English proficiency than would have been attained in classrooms with little or low quality interaction between students. More study is needed in this area, but research has shown at least some correlation between structured opportunities for interaction, sustained over time, and increases in ELLs' scores on language proficiency tests.

Challenges

The CTE teacher who wants to reap the aforementioned benefits of interaction in his blended classroom will need to contend with several challenges.

- **Pairing up students isn't enough**

To encourage students to interact, teachers are told to pair them up or put them in small groups. However, grouping in and of itself is not enough to create useful

interaction. The kinds of interaction that naturally occur in these groupings do not necessarily provide sufficient *input* (language that ELLs can comprehend) and opportunities for *output* (creative language use, whether it be speaking or writing) for ELLs' language development. Instead, interactions may be brief or they may be hurried along by students who just want to get to the answer and complete the task. Native speakers may do the work for ELLs, excluding them from active participation. Native speaking students who want to help ELLs may not know *how* to provide that help, or the mismatch in students' language abilities may be too great for meaningful collaboration to occur.

- **The language of academic interaction**

Most interactive tasks assigned in blended classrooms assume that students have a certain level of language ability. They require academic language skills that teachers are often unaware of and that ELLs have not yet developed. For example, students completing an interactive task may need to express an opinion, express agreement or disagreement, interrupt a classmate politely, or ask for clarification. These are academic language skills that are often assumed, and yet they are usually not emphasized in the casual, social speech that ELLs use more often.

- **Cultural differences**

When it comes to instruction of ELLs, one size does not fit all. Different cultural groups of students will have different expectations of themselves, their teachers, and their educational experiences. Some students may be accustomed to classrooms in their home countries in which the teacher is a strong authority figure. In this tradition, it would be considered impolite to question the teacher and speak with other students during class. Therefore, they are confused by the norms in U.S. classrooms, where the instructor often sees his role not as an information disseminator but as a facilitator, helping students construct knowledge together. Moreover, in U.S. schools there are often unspoken rules regarding when students are not allowed to speak to each other (e.g., during tests), and when they are expected to speak and participate actively (e.g., interactive problem-solving tasks, whole-class discussions). These, also, can confuse

ELLs to whom the unwritten rules have not been explained. In sum, ELLs will likely have different cultural, and personal, expectations, experiences, and preferences that could be misunderstood by a teacher.

Strategies to Promote Useful Interaction

Despite the pitfalls, CTE teachers can use the strategies described below to construct useful and frequent opportunities for interaction among ELLs and native speakers in blended classrooms.

- Explicitly teach the language of interaction**

In order to participate in an interactive activity, ELLs may need to be taught *how* to participate. Research has clearly shown that interaction alone is not enough to increase ELLs' language proficiency; instead, they must be explicitly taught the academic and language skills necessary for the completion of the interactive activity. This is a level of instruction to which CTE teachers may be largely unaccustomed, but it can become more natural over time.

Before teaching, think through the interactive activity you have planned. What will the students have to do and say in order to complete the activity? Will they have to form certain types of questions to ask their partners? Will they have to state an opinion? Will they have to argue a position? What actual language will likely be needed (e.g., *I think that _____ because _____*; *Actually, I disagree*; *That's true, but _____*; *Could you repeat that?*; *Could you rephrase that?*)? What vocabulary words will need to be used, and are they known to the ELLs in the class? Take the time to ask yourself these questions during lesson planning. Build time into the lesson to review and practice the necessary words and phrases with students. Model the interactions in front of the class with a native speaking volunteer. Then, monitor interactive activities carefully in order to provide support to ELLs, so that they have the tools to be successful. If you notice that a number of students are struggling with the same thing, consider putting the task on hold for a few minutes while you present and practice the needed language with the whole class.

This recommendation, while important, is often (and understandably) difficult for content teachers to implement. Consider asking an ESL teacher or other ESL support staff in your school for help in identifying the academic language needed to complete tasks and in developing language objectives for interactive activities, at least initially.

- **Group appropriately**

It is not always appropriate to mix ELLs and native speakers together in the same group. As discussed in Chapter 3 of this series, *Strategies for the Multilevel Classroom*, it is important to match the type of student grouping with the goals of the activity. If discussion is the goal of the activity, mixed grouping can be ideal. If the goals of the activity are accurate responses (e.g., correct answers to reading comprehension questions), same-ability, or non-mixed, grouping may be preferable, because it allows students to work together on tasks that are appropriate to their proficiency levels, share information in their own languages if possible, and take the time they need to complete the work.

- **Consider culture**

As mentioned above, learners may come from cultural groups that hold different expectations of education and of students' behavior in school. Put judgment on hold as you consider all the possible reasons for ELLs' behavior. Remember that the way things are done in U.S. schools is not necessarily the same in other countries – even things we take for granted, such as raising one's hand in class, staying absolutely quiet when taking a test, asking for clarification when one doesn't understand, or taking a stand on a particular issue during a class discussion or debate.

Also, take care to make the expectations, procedures, and outcomes of interactive tasks very clear to ELLs, modeling them when possible. Be aware that all ELLs, and all cultural groups, are not alike. What works for one individual or cultural group may not work for all. The teacher is advised to keep an open mind and discover for himself what works for his unique group of learners.

- **Use cooperative learning activities**

Cooperative learning is an approach to teaching in which students with different levels of ability work interdependently on learning activities. Each student in a group has a role to play that is essential to the learning and to the successful completion of the task. Ideally, these conditions help all students feel that they have contributed to the achievement. There is quite a variety of cooperative learning activities described in the literature, many of these can be adapted for blended classrooms. Ideally, these activities are structured so that interaction is guided, rich, and meaningful to students.

Cooperative Learning Activities

Below are five cooperative learning activities that lend themselves to use in a blended CTE classroom. As always, the teacher will need to plan these carefully ahead of time, considering the needs of ELLs and implementing the strategies to promote interaction described above. In addition, ELLs should be allowed to use their native languages, when possible, for clarification throughout the activity.

- **Interviews and surveys**

In interviews and surveys, pre-determined question prompts are provided for students, who either ask these questions of one partner (interview) or all the students in the class (survey) and then record their classmates' answers. Each student is obliged to both ask and answer the questions, and then report the findings to the class afterwards at the request of the teacher. The teacher might record the findings on the board or lead students into the next phase of the activity, in which they might chart the results or draw conclusions from the information collected.

When using this activity in a blended classroom, the instructor should review and practice the questions before the activity begins, check students' comprehension of the words in the activities, and carefully explain and model the instructions. The instructor may also need to review how students might ask for clarification if they do not understand a partner's response, or how to ask for their partner's name and spelling of that name, if they need to record individuals' answers.

- **Think – Pair – Share**

This is a three-step cooperative activity. First, the instructor poses a question orally and also writes it on the board. Students take time to think silently about the question. Secondly, students pair up and share their thoughts with each other. Finally, students share their answers to the question with other pairs or with the class as a whole.

When using this activity in a blended classroom, the instructor should make sure that students comprehend the question before they complete the first step. They should also review, before Step 2, the language for expressing an opinion and asking another person what they think and why.

- **Poster projects and group presentations**

Group presentations, role playing, and poster-creating projects can be useful interactive tasks for blended classrooms. In these activities, the teacher assigns an essential role to each member of the group. The role can be matched to the ability level of the student. The members of the group then work together to design a presentation or a poster with information that they then have to share with the rest of the class. A role could be as simple as creating artwork for the poster, writing down the words that others dictate, or orally presenting just a small piece of the presentation. As mixed groups work, they should be monitored closely by the teacher to ensure that ELLs understand their roles and that other students are allowing them to participate fully.

- **Numbered heads together**

This activity can be used as a review of previously learned content. Students are placed into groups of 4 and each is given a number (1, 2, 3, or 4). Then, the group receives a question and must work together to decide upon an answer to the question. Then, the teacher calls out a number (e.g., 3), and the person from each group who has been assigned the number 3 must give his or her group's answer to the question.

As always, when using this activity in a blended classroom the teacher should make sure that ELLs understand the questions they are assigned and have practiced the language structures that they would use to answer it. The questions themselves should be designed in such a way that they are easy to understand and can be answered with the pre-taught language structures. (See Chapter 4, *Adapting Materials for English Language Learners*.)

- **Four Corners**

Four Corners is a versatile activity that can be used both for introduction of topics and for review. The teacher begins by asking a question related to course content and then providing four answer options for that question. The question should be open-ended and controversial enough so that students could have varying opinions on the best answer. Then, the teacher places 4 posters, each with one of the answer options, in each of the four corners of the room. Students move to the corner that contains the answer option that they choose. Then, the groups assembled in each corner (or pairs of those students, if there are a number of students in the same corner) are given a few minutes to discuss the reasons why they chose that answer. Then, the same small group works together to pick the top two reasons among those discussed. Finally, they can announce those reasons to the class and/or write them on the poster in preparation for whole class discussion.

Before this activity begins, the academic language needed for stating and defending opinions and reasons should be reviewed and practiced. In addition, the teacher should ascertain that all ELLs understand the meaning of the question and the 4 answer options.

Conclusion

The benefits of interaction for student in blended classrooms far outweigh challenges involved in planning and implementing them. CTE teachers can use strategies to promote useful interaction, including pre-teaching key language needed for the task, grouping students appropriately, and making use of cooperative learning activities like those

described here. Finally, the CTE instructor should note that this and the other chapters in this series offer tools and guidelines, but instructors themselves will need to make decisions, likely through trial and error, about which techniques are appropriate for their unique group of students.

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