When You Don’t Speak Their Language: Guiding English-Language Learners Through Conversations About Text

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Given the proper conditions and opportunities, linguistically diverse students beginning to develop proficiency in English can and will effectively participate in and learn from text conversations.

Early in the school year, when planning for a book discussion, Seth (all names are pseudonyms)—a third-grade teacher, native speaker of English—faced the dilemma of how best to support his English-language learners (ELLs) who were beginning to develop proficiency in the new language. Knowing that the students’ linguistic and cultural backgrounds were unfamiliar to him, Seth was unsure about his ability to help his students make sense of the text and relate text ideas to their relevant personal experiences. He questioned whether or how the students’ native language (in this case Spanish) should be accessed to make connections to an English text and to mediate the comprehension of text concepts and main ideas.

Although we (the authors for this article) advocate for the development of bilingualism and biliteracy (two of us are bilingual and biliterate), we understand that the majority of ELLs in the United States find themselves in classrooms where English is the only medium of instruction and are taught by English monolingual teachers, who, like Seth, have little confidence in teaching such students (Barron & Menken, 2002). Therefore, it is of critical importance that English monolingual teachers—who are encountering an ever-increasing number of linguistically diverse students in their classrooms—be supported in their attempts to fully access their students’ potential. However, the question of how these teachers can support beginning-level ELLs to make meaningful connections to texts when they may not speak the native language of their students or may not be aware of the cultural–historical experiences that have shaped their students’ lives, remains largely unanswered.

To address this question, we provide a detailed account of a literacy event (Bloome, Carter, Christian, Otto, & Shuart-Faris, 2005) involving teacher and peer interactions in which the teacher (Seth) sought to guide a group of three ELLs with beginning levels of English proficiency through the activity of discussing a text. Our data illustrate the ways by which the teacher strove to provide the ELLs with opportunities to seek their own understandings of the text and to serve as intellectual, linguistic, and social resources for each other.

Our interpretations in this study are inspired by two fundamental tenets of sociocultural theory put forth by Vygotsky and his colleagues that are directly connected to learning and teaching. First, our study recognizes the idea that learning is a mediated activity. Vygotsky (1978) recognized the crucial significance of social, cultural, and historical factors in learning and development; these factors not only influence thinking but mediate learning and development. Second, our study is grounded in the concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD)
characterized as “the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (p. 86). While there have been many interpretations of Vygotsky’s conceptualizations of the ZPD offered by modern scholars, we focus on the postulate that the experience of engaging in activities where assistance is provided can help to bring about the next (or proximal) phase of development. Such activities require deliberate actions by the teacher as he or she must attend carefully to students’ expressions of understanding or confusion and support students as they work through misconceptions, develop new understanding, and begin to use novel concepts in multiple applications.

Reading Comprehension Instruction for ELLs

Researchers concerned with second language acquisition argue that, in general, students learning an additional language develop a heightened awareness of linguistic elements in both languages simultaneously (Kenner, 2004), leading to the consolidation of existing knowledge about both the target and native languages and, at times, to the creation and use of hybrid forms of language such as codeswitching (Lantolf, 2000). For example, Martínez-Roldán’s (2005) study involving children enrolled in a second-grade Spanish/English bilingual class examined the effects of first language as a mediational tool for thinking and talking about the English text. The authors reported that the ELLs participating in the literature circles that they observed engaged each other in their attempts to understand the text by using English, Spanish, and codeswitching and were thus able to combine linguistic resources to create a wide repertoire of forms and codes with which to deepen reading comprehension. Similarly, Bauer and Manyak (2008) claimed that it is essential to provide ELLs with a variety of opportunities for linguistic experimentations involving first and second languages to enhance their comprehension of texts. Moll and Dworin (1996) organized a learning situation so that Mexican American students learning English could discuss their English texts in Spanish. Doing so enabled these students to achieve a much more sophisticated and higher level understanding of English text than if they had to use only English. In addition, Orellana and Reynolds (2008) reported on ELLs engaged in learning activities involving text paraphrasing and translating. They concluded that these activities are powerful comprehension tools as text ideas are summarized and meaning is represented in students’ own words.

The Research Context

In this article we report on our microanalysis of one particular literacy event involving text conversations between an English monolingual teacher, Seth, and three beginning-level ELLs, Gonzalo, Pedro, and Alicia (all names are pseudonyms). We specifically chose this literacy event because it brings to light the complexities involved in guiding ELLs through an English text, when the teacher does not speak the same language nor share a similar cultural background with the students. Also, the selected event serves to illuminate scaffolding practices that can be helpful to ELLs in small group as well as in whole group settings.

Setting

Lakeview Elementary School was located in a generally affluent rural area in the Southeast United States. However, due to a district rezoning, the school

Reflection Questions

- What topics should a professional development program on guiding ELL students through text conversations include?
- What criteria would you use to assess the effectiveness of reading programs in your school with ELL students?
- Describe the cultural assets of ELL students in your school. How do they compare to those cited in this article?
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suddenly received a large influx of students from low-
income families and of students who were recent im-
migrants to the United States and classified as ELLs.
The faculty was composed of mostly middle class,
English-monolingual, fe-
male teachers.

Although the school
district in which our re-
search was conducted fol-
lowed federal guidelines
for English-only instruction
in all subject areas, the
principal and many of the
teachers in this particular
school valued bilingualism
and biliteracy. Thus, they
hired a teacher of Spanish,
who twice a week taught
Spanish to native English
speakers and Spanish literacy instruction to students
who were native speakers of Spanish.

Participants
Teachers described Alicia, Pedro, and Gonzalo as per-
forming at the beginning stages of developing English
proficiency according to the state's standardized lan-
guage assessment and “not performing at grade level
in reading comprehension [in English].” All three
children were Mexican immigrants. Both Gonzalo
and Alicia had attended Lakeview Elementary for
about two years—even since they moved to the area.
They spoke Spanish with their parents and mostly
English with their friends and siblings. Although both
students seemed fairly advanced in conversational
English, they were just beginning to develop reading
and writing proficiency in the language. Pedro had
recently emigrated from Mexico (about 6 months be-
fore the onset of this research), where he had attend-
ed school and learned to read and write in Spanish.
He spoke only Spanish in the home and had not been
introduced to English prior to attending Lakeview.

Seth was an American of European heritage and a
native speaker of English. He had taught multilingual
populations within upper elementary and middle
school classrooms for about 3 years, and at the time
of the study, he was completing a masters’ degree
in language and literacy studies. Teaching second-
language students was an area of particular interest
to him; however, like many teachers who have ELLs
enrolled in their classes, Seth had little formal prepa-
ration for teaching linguistically and culturally di-
verse students.

Method
For this study we used the classroom microethno-
graphic method of research (Bloome et al., 2005),
which places the use of language and other systems
of communication at the center of what happens in
the classroom. Within this perspective, classrooms
are conceived of as complex places where teachers
and students use language for a myriad of purposes,
including creating meaning, establishing social rela-
tionships, organizing activity, and finding possibili-
ties to re-create culture and language. Thus, through
the empirical analysis of the talk occurring during
the book discussion, a microethnographic approach
provided a methodological tool that helped us to at-
tend to what people actually did in interactions with
each other and to focus on the co-constructions of
meaning during text conversations. Particular atten-
tion was placed on the ways by which the ELLs, in
interactions with each other and the teacher, used
language and other communication systems to take
part in the social, cultural, and intellectual exchange
during the book conversations.

The Literacy Event
In thinking about a text selection, Seth was unsure
of what books would capture his students’ interests
and be relevant to their experiences. He decided on
Curious George (Rey & Rey, 1969) for several reasons.
The Curious George series was his favorite to read as
a child and thus he had introduced the main book
characters to his class at the onset of the school year
and had described “the man in the yellow hat” and
George (as a monkey who gets in trouble) on various
occasions after that introduction, generating interest
in the books. Also, he had read an article (Richek &
McTague, 1988) on reading comprehension in one of
his university classes addressing the value of using
multiple texts that had the same characters, plot line,
and conflict. He thought the consistency among the
various Curious George texts would provide impor-
tant linguistic and contextual support for his ELLs’
comprehension. To start the unit of instruction, Seth
selected the very first book in the series so that the

The children... were able to identify patterns... in the text and language and thus began hypothesizing about the way the text worked as well as about reading per se.
children could develop shared knowledge about how the author first introduced Curious George to the readers.

**Connecting With the Text**

Before reading the book, Seth decided to have a discussion with the students by introducing some story words in conjunction with a picture walk, examining the first few illustrations in the book:

01. Seth: Where is George when he starts out do you think?

02. Pedro: A tree.

03. Alicia: [raises her hand] On top of the tree.

04. Seth: On top of the tree? Maybe...that’s one of the words [points to the word tree].

05. Alicia: He could fall.

06. Seth: Maybe he could fall?

07. Pedro: He could fall from the very top!

In this short exchange, both students (Alicia and Pedro) extended each other’s contributions with added details (lines 03, 07). Pedro, who started with one word (**tree**) that may have held limited meaning, elaborated on what Alicia had said, and was eventually able to provide a possible outcome for the short event under discussion (line 07). We also noted that in this interaction, Seth used much of the children’s language by recasting their utterances (e.g., words, phrases, or sentences) as questions (lines 04, 06). He also signaled the importance of the word **tree** (line 04). This interactional pattern continued with the students extending each others’ utterances and Seth highlighting for the children some important features of the setting, plot, and characters (lines 08, 10, 12, 17) below.

08. Seth: What else could happen?...[looks at Pedro] Did you think about anything else that could happen?

09. Pedro: They go...about where he lives and then, he see that monkey, and then... .

10. Seth: They? Who is the other person?

11. Pedro: Ah...the large yellow hat?

12. Seth: The man with the yellow hat, right?

13. Pedro: And the curious George he like, he is so curious he went to... .

14. Alicia: la ciudad [the city].

15. Seth: So, what do all of those, what do all of those events have in common?


17. Seth: They’re all problems. But why does he always have problems?

18. Pedro: Because he is just curious.

19. Seth: Right. George is curious.

In this exchange, we observed that in his attempt to find out what the students knew about the story, Seth continually restated what the students said with affirmative feedback (10, 12, 17). By doing this, Seth was signaling to the students that they were capable members of the group, that he valued their contributions to the conversation, and that their words were important. Additionally, his transposition of utterances to questions seemed to serve a very important purpose as it kept the students’ talk alive and in the present, providing time for students to consider what the text meant and if it required further explanation or elaboration. The questions were not meant to quiz the students about the facts but were instrumental for helping the students to clarify their thinking further and to connect their ideas and knowledge from their previous experiences with other texts. The students in turn participated, made predictions, and used each other’s and the teacher’s utterances (lines 02, 03, 05, 07, 11, 13) as well as phrases and concepts from the book (e.g., **large yellow hat**, **curious**) as they engaged in what seemed to be a shared discussion in response to Seth’s initial question and to expand on their language production. In lines 09, 10, 11, and 12, we observed an example of how Pedro’s uncertainty changed to understanding with Seth’s support. Here, Seth’s question “who is the other person?” cued Pedro to draw on information he had learned previously about Curious George books, and ask “ah...the yellow hat?” which was confirmed by the teacher.

Seth was able to assist the students in several ways. He helped the students focus on key story concepts, such as George’s curiosity that often got him into trouble (lines 17, 18, 19). His guidance was also instrumental in affirming and reiterating the children’s knowledge relevant to understanding important text concepts such as attention to the story characters (lines 10, 12). Seth also drew attention to repetitive language contained in the text (e.g., **man**...
in the yellow hat, curious, monkey, trouble) and to the structural features of the text (e.g., who the characters were, what the story problem was; lines 10, 12, 15, 17). He deliberately focused on a few text concepts and held ideas up for inspection as a way to invite students’ participation, promote clarity of thinking, and elicit precise expression.

Clarifying Misunderstandings and Deepening Understandings

After introducing the story, Seth began reading the book to the children. Throughout his reading, he paused and asked questions to check for understanding. The students were attentive, talked about the text, and clarified passages for each other by asking questions and responding to each other in Spanish. The following provides an example of such an exchange.

20. Seth: [reads] “The man with the yellow hat put George into a little boat and the sailor rowed them both across the water into a big ship”. Let’s stop there for a second. How do you think George feels right now?
22. Seth: You’re right. He does look happy [in the picture]. But how do you think he feels about where he is...inside a bag...on a boat?

At this point, Seth seemed to realize that Alicia was depending on the picture clues to answer his question. He elaborated on the picture to provide additional context information and drew the students’ attention to George being “inside a bag” to bring forth understandings of feelings.

24. Seth: Why do you think he is happy?
25. Gonzalo: Because he is going to a ship.
26. Seth: OK. So maybe he might be excited to be in a big ship? How do you think George would feel about being tied up inside a bag, though?

In this exchange, Pedro did not infer George’s feelings. Seth then provided additional contextual information “about being tied up inside a bag” (line 22) and returned to Pedro for an explanation. As seen in the following exchange, Pedro continued to focus on the smiling George instead of his circumstances.

27. Alicia: Scared?
28. Seth: Maybe a little scared. Pedro, what do you think?
30. Alicia: Como te sentirías si alguien te amarrara y te llevara en una bolsa y te llevara a...a... . [How would you feel if someone tied you up and took you away in a bag on a... ]
31. Seth: [Watches attentively, gazing at the children as they each spoke]
32. Alicia: [Turns to Gonzalo] Como se dice ship? [How do you say ship?]
33. Gonzalo: Barco [boat]
34. Alicia: ...a un barco? [on a boat]
35. Seth: Maybe a little scared?
36. Pedro: [nods] Yeah!

In the above excerpt, Seth and the students continued to address misunderstandings about George’s feelings by agreeing that George could be excited about being on a ship, but continued to probe (line 24) for additional information about George’s circumstances. Realizing that Pedro might need to elaborate his understanding of the story through using his first language, Seth offered some specific supports. First, he elaborated on the pictures, and then he distinguished feelings of happiness that George could have because he was on a big ship from those associated with “being tied up inside a bag.” Finally, he paused and provided an opportunity for Alicia to take on a mediating role, trying to assist Pedro. Note that, in so doing, she did not provide a verbatim translation of Seth’s question (“How do you think George feels about being tied up inside a bag?” [line 26, emphasis added]), but instead she elaborated on the question and helped Pedro comprehend the passage by establishing a connection between the reader (Pedro) and the text by asking: “How would you feel if someone tied you up, put you in a bag, and took you on a...?” (line 30, emphasis added). Also, not being able to recall the word for ship in Spanish, Alicia asked for Gonzalo’s assistance. He gave her the word barco, which could be translated as boat—a
possible synonym for ship (lines 32–34). This type of language brokering was common in the classroom and students often counted on each other to expand their linguistic resources and thus to advance their bilingualism while building understandings of academic work.

Although Seth did not completely understand the children’s discussion, by watching the interactions he recognized that they were attempting to assist Pedro. He segued on Alicia’s question by asking the question, “maybe a little scared?” (line 35) to which Pedro answered, “Yeah!” (line 36), indicating understanding of the inferred meaning of the passage. Had students not been allowed to use their common first language as a resource to make meaning, Pedro may have had only a limited understanding of the text. Instead, the shared use of their first language and the leadership of able peers served as supports for the elaboration and co-construction of meaning.

Focusing on Central Text Ideas
After reading the book, Seth gave each student a story grammar chart (Figure 1) to guide them through the text conversations with spaces for setting, character, problem, events, solution to problems, and feelings of characters as a tool to help students focus on the central themes and plot of the text.

As Seth and the students discussed the story, they continually added information to their charts. Often he asked questions that required the students to identify central themes, as with the question “what was he trying to do?” in the following example. Throughout the text discussion, Seth and the three students concentrated on the central information in the text. The students continuously added information to their charts as the conversations proceeded.

37. Seth: What was he trying to do?

39. Seth: He was trying to fly, but what did he find out?
40. Gonzalo: That he couldn’t.
41. Alicia: That he couldn’t and was very hard.

In the preceding example, Alicia continued to elaborate on a student’s previous utterance, moving the conversation forward. Core ideas in the text were revisited as the group discussed the story elements, words, characters, and setting. Then in reference to the chart, Alicia took them directly to a central concept—the problem of the story:

42. Alicia: ...I know what the problem is.
43. Seth: What do you think?
44. Alicia: He is curious?

The teacher responded by indicating that additional information about the story problem was needed. He signaled that they were talking about “important events” and that it may be helpful to consider Gonzalo’s earlier comments about events. Then, Seth continued to take the students through the pictures and the sequence of events until Pedro elaborated on the statement of the problem that Alicia had initiated:

45. Alicia: He want to learn how to fly.
46. Seth: And he ended up doing what?
47. Pedro: He was doing fly, but he going to the water.
48. Seth: Right. He fell on the water.
49. Alicia: So, he could die.
50. Seth: So we could say: “George falls in the water.”
51. Gonzalo: He fell in the water, off the boat trying to fly.
52. Alicia: When the man caught him.
Through building on each other's contributions, the children arrived at a more elaborate expression of their knowledge (lines 47, 49, 51), in particular, when Gonzalo explained the consequence of trying to fly and Alicia added "when the man caught him" to take the actions to their final conclusions (line 52).

Following this sequence of interactions, Seth and the children continued to discuss events in the story where George was curious. For example, Alicia began to recall that George was curious about the phone and called the firemen and was then taken to prison. In prison he saw a little girl and was curious about the balloon she was holding. This conversation went on for a few minutes, and as it progressed it became more evident that the children were collectively developing an understanding of the way the story worked and began creating many of their own connections and elaborations. For example, Pedro was excited when he concluded that George could fly:

53. Seth: He goes for a fly.
54. Pedro: Like a butter-fly.
55. Seth: George takes the balloons...?
56. Pedro: [Excitedly] Do you know something? Do you know something...George, he wants to fly like a bird and now he is flying, he...the balloons...and then he fly.

In this example, Pedro takes the conversation to a central text point: George is flying with the help of the balloons—also note that in so doing, Pedro first connected the word flying with a word he knew from another context (butter-fly, line 54), using a kind of private rehearsal. Here, Pedro not only made some linguistic connections in English, but he also made a discovery about George and his flying. Seth confirmed this interpretation.

**Broadening Interpretations**

This literacy event culminated with the students creating their own version of a Curious George story that they titled, *Curious George Goes to Mexico*. Seth described his guidance of this activity in the following way:

I simply told the children that we were going to write our own version of a Curious George story and that they would get to pick where it took place and what exactly happened using story maps (with title, characters, setting, conflict, main events, resolutions). Each of the students filled one out for their own story. Then we talked about them together to see what we wanted to do. So, they decided that it would take place in Mexico. I asked them to tell me the story, and I just wrote down what they said. I think that I probably made some adjustments when writing, but the ideas and words were all theirs. They really followed the story arc on their own and also used a lot of the language from the original books, like "He was only a little monkey," "George was curious about...." My favorite part is that they [George and Marisol, a female monkey in the students' story] have 10 babies and return to the jungle to feed them. We hadn't really talked about critical stuff—the fact that George was taken from Africa by a White man—but I love that they ended the story with George returning to the jungle.

The story went as follows:

p. 1: George was in Las Vegas and took a plane to Mexico.

p. 2: He put on Mexican clothes and tried to find a girlfriend.

p. 3: He saw a girl monkey, and he was curious about her. So, he went to buy her some bananas.

p. 4: But George didn't have money and the little boy saw him robbing the bananas for the girl.

p. 5: The police let him go free since he is only a little monkey.

p. 6: The bananas were good. He gave the bananas to Marisol, the girl monkey.

p. 7: Then George and Marisol went out to eat at a taco shop. El mesaro [the waiter] asked them what they wanted to eat. George said, "We want the best banana split."

p. 8: Two weeks later, George and Marisol got married. Everyone danced "La Cucaracha" at the wedding and there were fireworks.

p. 9: They had ten babies, but they returned to the jungle to feed them. They all lived happily...most of the time.

Creating a story is a generative task and more complicated than interpreting a story that is read to them or that they read. We noticed in this episode that the children’s performance on this complex task required them to reference and to use semantic and linguistic patterns from the *Curious George* stories they read with their group using linguistic skills that went beyond their current levels of competence in English (especially in the case of Pedro). The students’ performance was facilitated by the collective resources that the peers contributed to the discussion (e.g.,
revisiting text ideas, paraphrasing and translating concepts for each other, organizing text ideas around central concepts) and by Seth’s guidance.

With our analysis, we learned that each of the students was acquiring concepts and ideas about the story that made sense to them and were pertinent to their overall comprehension of the Curious George book (and eventually, the book series). In addition to concepts about the text, the ELLs were also acquiring linguistic abilities in English and knowledge about the story grammar. These specialized skills and knowledge were taken up by the children, enabling them to use the new language (English) for higher order thinking functions such as planning the story frame, creating a plot, remembering relevant aspects of the original story, negotiating the language to convey their thoughts, evaluating the course of events in the story, and to think critically about what George’s fate should be in the story (i.e., going back to the jungle).

Discussion of Findings

We have presented this example not as an attempt to provide the readers with a formula for instruction but, instead, to illuminate patterns of interactions that seemed to facilitate learning for the ELLs. As we observed, the children in Seth’s group demonstrated an expansion of their linguistic skills, of their knowledge about the text, and of their understandings of the central concepts in the story—which ultimately led them to higher levels of competence.

Notably, Pedro, who was a new immigrant student at emergent levels of English proficiency, through his participation in collaborative interactions was able to produce language that was relevant to the story (e.g., “because he is just curious”), make meaningful connections with the text (e.g., his startling discovery about George and his flying), and understand the way the story worked (e.g., his participation in the creation of Curious George Goes to Mexico). As he and the other two students worked in collaboration with the teacher and with each other to make sense of and to elaborate on the text, multiple ZPDs were formed while discussing the text, formulating questions and making connections to personal and contextual referents. In the course of such activity, all participants were actively and continually making use of each other’s utterances and the text as well as transforming them in ways that mediated their thinking (e.g., the language they used to talk about the story, their interpretations of the text). In this way, the children, in interaction with one another and with the teacher, were able to identify patterns (or themes) in the text and language and thus began hypothesizing about the way the text worked as well as about reading per se.

Importantly, the learning that occurred during such an activity did not follow a linear path, where the teacher would have pre-established skills for students to master incrementally. Instead, the learning that took place as the teacher guided and supported his students during text discussions was motivated by the students’ own interests and needs for support, and was dynamic and fluid in nature. Seth, who had goals for his students to understand the text’s central concepts and supporting features, guided the students’ learning to meet these goals, but his guidance was responsive to the students’ co-constructions of story meaning.

We acknowledge that, although the interactions between the participants in our example were clearly productive, the degree to which opportunities for Seth and the children to find solutions together, for the children to help each other, and for them to be collectively engaged in the content of the story might still be far from ideal. In fact, at times, some of the interactions depicted here might resemble a common classroom discourse pattern involving teacher initiation, student response, and teacher evaluation, or the IRE sequence (Mehan, 1979). However, we emphasize that, although the end result may be similar (i.e., students arriving at a coherent answer to the teacher’s questions), the process by which the teacher interacted with his students was markedly different from a simple IRE sequence. That is, rather than merely providing positive or negative feedback to the children, Seth’s responses to the students encouraged them to focus and to elaborate on central concepts of the story, to share their social and cultural experiences, and to build on each other’s knowledge and
linguistic productions. In this way, contrary to common patterns of IRE exchanges, the students were coparticipants in the interactions and, as such, much more apt to experience a sense of agency as they co-constructed meaning from the text.

As the students’ capabilities and understandings of text ideas gradually began to expand, the teacher increasingly allowed for unpredictability of comprehension outcomes, for students’ deliberate strides toward the expressions of their understanding about the story, and for equitable distribution of talk, making necessary adjustments according to the students’ linguistic abilities (in English and Spanish). Eventually, in the progression of our examples, both teacher and students initiated topics, changed the direction of the lesson, and related the learning to their prior experiences and their own questions. We argue, then, that these kinds of interactions can represent a possibility to transcend the simple IRE form of classroom discourse, which is typically highly controlled by the teacher. Moreover, in relation to ELLs in English-only classrooms, these types of instructional interactions can signify a departure from the view of these students as “those without” (i.e., the deficit perspective).

Implications for Teaching

In closing, we return to our original research question of how English monolingual teachers can support ELLs to make meaningful connections to texts. In so doing, we hone in and summarize some of the specific teaching practices we observed that seemed particularly supportive for these students.

First, Seth provided instructional spaces and time for collective language use and knowledge building. That is, often he reiterated what the students said, sometimes restated as questions. Through this practice, the teacher simultaneously validated the children’s use of language and modeled appropriate English usage. In addition, the recasting of students’ language served to provide the children with time to think about and clarify their utterances or draw connections to what others offered to the discussion. Second, he shared the instructional space with his students, relying on the children who had a common native language and more advanced English proficiency levels to mediate learning for others using both languages. Third, Seth created instructional conditions that invited shared learning, where students seemed to feel comfortable taking on several roles (e.g., leader, peer mediator, question asker) within the group. In so doing, Seth encouraged students to seek their own understandings of the text and to serve as intellectual, linguistic, and social resources for one another. Students elaborated on each other’s responses and often paraphrased the text or translated English ideas into Spanish to enable the text discussion. Fourth, he promoted purposeful and meaningful interactions within the social context of the text discussion, which helped the ELLs hypothesize about the story and enhanced their oral language development and use of text-specific vocabulary (Bauer & Manyak, 2008). Last, Seth, drawing from his own experiences as a teacher, relied on two familiar teaching actions to organize the text discussion with his ELL students: activating and building on students’ knowledge and focusing on and rehearsing central text concepts. Consistent with the studies cited in the literature review section of this paper, the teaching practices highlighted in this literacy event were especially helpful for ELLs.

In relation to the teacher in our study, our close examinations demonstrated that, even though Seth was at first unsure about how to proceed with the lesson, he had implicit pedagogical knowledge as an experienced teacher that became activated in response to the ELLs’ needs during the course of interaction. In light of this finding, we agree with Street (2001) who argued that the use of microanalysis to understand instructional activity can shed light on the intuitive, implicit pedagogical knowledge teachers often display and thus make this knowledge more apparent, systematic, and available.

Regarding the students, our observations helped us document that given the proper conditions and opportunities, linguistically diverse students beginning to develop proficiency in English can and will effectively participate in and learn from text conversations. However, our study also suggests that without these supports, these students’ academic potentials could be gravely underestimated.

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