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## Starting Conversations with Content Area Peers [Out of the Box]

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# Out of the **box**

## Starting Conversations with Content Area Peers

by Jenelle Reeves

**W**e could wow them with numbers.”

Two ESOL teachers, a curriculum coordinator, and I—a teacher educator—were brainstorming ideas for kicking off an in-service program for a local high school’s content area teachers. The topic: linguistically appropriate content area instruction for English language learners. Our audience would be harried teachers in the middle of a busy spring semester. The four of us had worked hard to secure two hours of in-service time, and we wanted to start off on the right foot. That meant grabbing the teachers’ attention and opening our conversation on teaching with English language learners on a positive note. The question was, how could we do that?

Starting off with statistics, as one of our team suggested, was one way to go, and I had used that tack before in in-service programs. The numbers were certainly attention grabbing. This school, a small city high school in the southern United States, had seen the number of English language learners double in the past year, and the state had experienced a 315 percent increase in English language learners over the past decade (National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition 2004). A neighboring state had gone from 10,000 to nearly 60,000 English language learners in the same time span. And census projections were for future immigration increases (U.S. Census Bureau 2004).

These statistics had good shock value, and the implications were clear: if teachers had not yet had English language learners in their classrooms, they would soon, and in ever-increasing numbers. I had recited similar statistics before, supporting the numbers with helpful charts and graphs. Sharp intakes of breath and expressions of surprise among my audience members told me the technique had worked. But I began to wonder, at what price?

### Is Fear Productive?

I could not shake a feeling of unease with a statistics-based conversation opener. In examining the kind of attention the recitation of newcomer statistics stirred in the audience, I realized that no small part of the reaction might be fear. The teachers were already feeling some discomfort in the face of the inclusion (or impending inclusion) of English language learners in their classrooms. This discomfort had, in fact, been instrumental in winning us the in-service time. English language learners were a new kind of student for this district, and anticipating the changes these students would bring was unsettling to many in our audience.

Would the recitation of English language learner statistics, accurate as they were, be a productive way to open our conversation? Not if it tapped into a discourse of fear that was already apparent

in the region and the nation as a whole: the fear of an immigrant invasion.

Finding evidence of that fear is not difficult, and the news media are a good place to begin the search. The language used in the media to describe the recent increases in the immigrant population commonly suggests that the United States is in the midst of a full-fledged invasion. Tuning into cable and network news broadcasts, you are likely to hear about the *influx* of immigrants, the *flood* of illegals across the U.S.-Mexican border, and the *inundation* of U.S. schools by non-English-speaking students. Such language conveys images of teeming hordes of outsiders pouring into the country, laying siege to U.S. language and culture.

The rhetoric might stir up already-simmering anti-immigrant sentiment or plant the seeds for it, but it would not open a conversation with content teachers on the productive note we were striving for. We could easily lose an already skittish audience of teachers to the discourse of fear that shock-and-awe statistics could produce. The beginning of our conversation with content area peers ought to bolster their confidence in their ability to include English language learners in content learning, and reduce the distance between these learners and their content teachers. Perhaps the conversation we started at this in-service could help subvert, or at least throw into question, local and national narratives of fear.

### Principles for a Productive Dialogue

How, then, could we open a productive dialogue? In this article, I offer three principles to guide you as you initiate conversations with content area peers: make it personal, make it positive, and make a connection.

#### Make It Personal

Telling content area teachers about English language learners' lives is one way to facilitate the inclusion of these learners. In my experience in schools with small or emerging English language learner populations, many teachers know little about learners' experiences as linguistic and cultural outsiders. Teachers may have little experience as second

language learners, for example. Helping teachers see through the eyes of English language learners may deepen their empathy for newcomers.

A language submersion activity can be an effective way to personalize the experiences of English language learners. This activity has the advantage of capturing the audience's attention as well as focusing that attention on the often frustrating experience of learning content in a second language. In other words, in a language submersion experience, you put teachers in English language learners' shoes.



*I offer three principles to guide you as you initiate conversations with content area peers: make it personal, make it positive, and make a connection.*



Our team chose this approach to starting a dialogue with content area teachers. One of our team members, a fluent Spanish speaker, volunteered to be a Spanish language content instructor. During the submersion experience, she delivered a short lecture on Central American social class structures entirely in Spanish. The lecture was devoid of context clues as to its content: no pictures, no examples, no repetitions, and no clarifications of any sort. Most of the teachers struggled to make sense of the lecture, and a sense of frustration quickly set in. Groans, nervous laughter, and, eventually, grumblings in English broke out among the teachers. On the mock quiz following the lecture, our audience, with the notable exception of the Spanish language teachers, performed quite poorly.

The lecture was given again, this time with pictures, repetition of important words, emphasis on cognates, and opportunities for students to interact. On the second quiz, the teachers performed much better. Surprised by their ability to understand some of the sheltered lecture in Spanish, many of the teachers reported finishing the activity with a new sense of what it might be like for the English language learners in their classrooms.

As a conversation opener, the activity was a big success. It grabbed the audience's attention, made the content-learning experience of English language learners personal to the teachers, and led smoothly into a discussion of sheltered instruction techniques. (For similar activities conducted with English language learners' mainstream peers, see Kubota et al. 2000 and "I Was Lost before the End of the First Minute," *Essential Teacher*, Summer 2004.)

#### Make It Positive

The difficulties of English language learner inclusion, particularly at the secondary level, were well known, or at least well rumored, within our content teacher audience. But tales of hardship are not the only stories about inclusion. Success stories are relatively easy to come by, and sharing them is another avenue for starting a conversation on a positive note. ▶

Local stories of success with English language learner inclusion will likely prove most effective. You can collect testimonials from teachers and English language learners in print or video format before in-service meetings. For an even more powerful punch, have speakers relate success stories in person. In a pinch, you can find success stories in much of the recent TESOL literature, including this magazine. See also Cary's (2000) *Working with Second Language Learners: Answers to Teachers' Top Ten Questions* for vignettes of success with K–12 English language learners; for a detailed case study of a multilingual elementary school, consider Schechter and Cummins' (2003) *Multilingual Education: Using Diversity as a Resource*.

### Make a Connection

For TESOL professionals, making connections with English language learners and establishing working student-teacher relationships may seem quite simple and straightforward, even old hat. Content teachers who are new to English language learner inclusion, however, may find this a challenge.

In my experience with content teachers, one of the most frequently mentioned concerns is the size of the language and cultural barrier separating them from English language learners. Teachers' perceptions of the barrier may exaggerate its size, but, real or imagined, the barrier can stymie teachers' efforts to establish a productive student-teacher relationship. You can help shrink the distance between English language learners and their content teachers by encouraging a connection between the two.

Perhaps the most obvious way to foster this connection is to bring English language learners and teachers together. You may not be able to do this within the time and space of an in-service program, but there are other ways to lay the groundwork. A conversation opener that fits the constraints of in-service programs is the presentation of student-produced videos. Through this medium, English language learners introduce themselves to teachers and tell what

they need in content classrooms. Producing a video may provide rich language learning opportunities for English language learners; you could even point out this benefit.


Technological innovations such as e-mail, Web-based chats, and online discussion boards can also facilitate a connection between English language learners and teachers who are at a distance, whether literal or figurative. Online discussions, in particular, can be effective in getting English language learners' voices heard above the cacophony of traditional, face-to-face class discussions that are, more likely than not, dominated by native English speakers. Teachers may well be surprised by the participation of English language learners, whose silence they had thought to be a sign of disengagement.

In addition to helping teachers connect with English language learners, you could also pay attention to the link between newcomer and veteran teachers of English language learners. When veteran teachers are not on-site, you can again turn to technology to make this connection. An electronic discussion list, such as the Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages Electronic Lists (TESL-L; see <http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/~tesl-l/>), is one connection-making forum.

### Deal with the Numbers

Choosing to start your conversations with content area teachers without shock-and-awe statistics does not mean that you should ignore the numbers. In the past twenty-five years, the United States has undergone an immense immigration boom, and schools are enrolling record numbers of students who speak a first language other than English. Local and national newcomer statistics are relevant to teachers' work, and teachers will benefit from an awareness of the shifting demographics in their schools. Providing this information in thoughtful, nonsensationalizing ways is essential as you initiate productive conversations with content area peers.

Frank discussion of newcomer statistics can be accompanied by frank discussion of anti-immigrant sentiment, English-only ideologies, and the receiving society's fears. As your conversation with content peers progresses, discomfiting discussions of fear, racism, and xenophobia may arise; therefore, establishing a productive dialogue from the beginning is essential.

Considering the importance of the relationship between ESOL professionals and content teachers, it is critically important to consider how you engage colleagues in conversation about effective English language learner inclusion. If you open your conversations with content area peers in a positive way, it will set the tone for harmonious, mutually beneficial relationships to follow. 

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