

# From Test Scores to Language Use: What English Learners Do in Real-Time Academic Communication

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# Shift in new standards

Stating basic  
concepts and  
facts



Providing  
explanations and  
descriptions  
grounded in  
evidence

# Misuse of terms

Explanation, description and argumentation in Science (Osborne & Patterson, 2011)

“Refer to details and examples in a text when **explaining** what the text says explicitly...” (CCSS 4.1)

“Explain the meaning of the word spoil”

What does it mean  
to explain?



What does it mean  
to describe?



# Why does this matter?

- If we're expecting young children to produce explanations and descriptions, our expectations should be clear
- Misalignment between standards expectations, teacher and student understanding can be a problem
- Important to clarify for all students, but especially for emerging bilinguals

# Explaining in English language arts

Explanations provide information on a topic for which the interlocutor lacks information

The case to be explained is understood as having in fact occurred and the explanation will serve to supply missing information

(Faye, 2007)

# Explaining & Describing in ELA

	Explain	Describe
Definition	<b>Description-giving explanation:</b> gives an account of something that the interlocutor does not already know	<b>Describe:</b> a prompted or unprompted account of someone or something
Definition	<b>Reason-giving explanation:</b> Is in response to an implicit or explicit “why” question for which the interlocutor does not already know the answer	<b>Describe the meaning of a word:</b> hereafter referred to as “define”



To what extent do young English learners produce explanations and descriptions in academic communication with the teacher during English language arts?





# Data Sources

Over a period of six months, two times a week ...

- Classroom observations
- Audio recorded eight, grade 4 English learners
  - Students wore recorders and microphones
  - Captured focal students' and interlocutors' talk
  - 288 hours total
    - Analyzed 40+ hours of ELA talk
- Interviews and informal conversations with focal students and classroom teacher
- Student background questionnaire

# Data Analyses

- Initial identification of explanations and description from previous paper
- Coded
  - Teacher talk
  - Type of questions: how, what, who, why, unspoken
  - Nonquestions: commands, sentence starters
  - Not informative

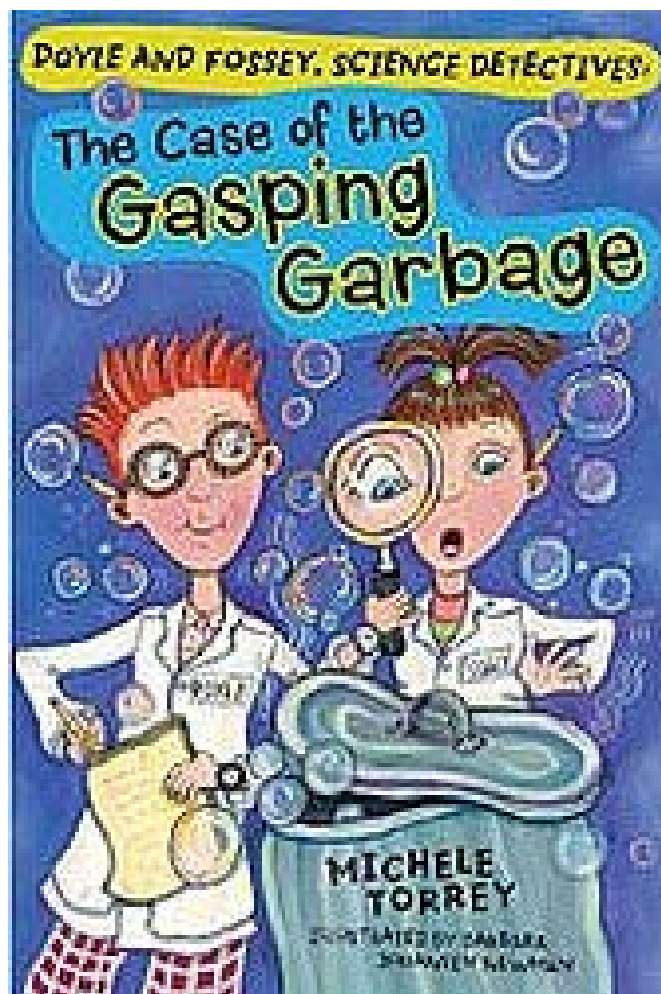
# Explanations almost never occurred and were not very rich

3 attempts of description-giving explanations, all in response to sentence starters or silence:

- **My analysis of this fossil is that** it is a green, light green block.

Seven attempts of reason-giving explanations, all produced by “successful” ELs:

- **I think this because** I see like lime green right here.



# The teacher didn't seem to have the tools to support production of Explanations

*Ms. Nielson*

**Why DON'T you think that there's a monster inside Olivia**

((2 sec pause))

*Olivia*

°Be:cau:se u:m°

*Ms. Nielson*

**=Why do you think the garbage can is making all the: gurgling noises ((8 sec pause))**

*Ms. Nielson*

**What do you think is going on in the garbage can  
What's your prediction. I think**

*Olivia*

°I th[ink°]

*Ms. Nielson*

**[think] the garbage can's gasping because**

*Olivia*

°I think the garbage ca:n is gasping becau:se u:m° ((2 sec pause))

((Clears throat)) °U:m°

*Ms. Nielson*

Complete your sentence

What do you think

What do you think's going on

*Olivia*

°Maybe the:re- there's a:°

°A:°

# Implications

- As a whole, ELs rarely produced explanations
  - How do we increase opportunities for explanation and description production?
- Supporting student talk takes more than using strategies in teachers' toolkit
- Thinking carefully about how the scaffolds we provide influence student responses

# Questions?

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# Extra Slides...

# CCSS Reading Standard 4.1

Refer to details and examples in a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from a text

# Descriptions occurred slightly more frequently

23 attempts to describe, produced by “successful” and “struggling” students:

**The next step to take is see if you could color stuff.**

# Students tended to use examples to produce definitions, but also used type of word and dictionary-like definitions

15 attempts at definitions, most from “struggling” students:

- Introduced means when you go to a museum they introduce you to someone
- That’s a nasty word
- Vote, to choose a leader