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

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AERA 2015
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)
## Explaning & Describing in ELA

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Explain</th>
<th>Describe</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Definition</strong></td>
<td><strong>Description</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Description-giving explanation:</strong></td>
<td>** Describe:** a prompted or unprompted account of something that the interlocutor does not already know</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gives an account of something that the interlocutor does not already know</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reason-giving explanation:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Describe the meaning of a word:</strong> hereafter referred to as “define”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>is in response to an implicit or explicit “why” question for which the interlocutor does not already know the answer</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ms. Nielson</th>
<th>Why DON’T you think that there’s a monster inside</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Olivia</td>
<td>((2 sec pause))</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Nielson</td>
<td>Why do you think the garbage can is making all</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>the: gurgling noises ((8 sec pause))</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Nielson</td>
<td>What do you think is going on in the garbage can</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What’s your prediction. I think</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Olivia</td>
<td>((Clears throat)) °U:m°</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Nielson</td>
<td>[think] the garbage can’s gasping because</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Olivia</td>
<td>°I think the garbage ca:n is gasping becau:se u:m° ((2 sec pause))</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>((Clears throat)) °U:m°</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Nielson</td>
<td>Complete your sentence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What do you think</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What do you think’s going on</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Olivia</td>
<td>°Maybe the:re- there’s a:°</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>°A:°</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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