

# Accelerating Oral Language with Academic Conversations

## Jeff Zwiers

*“Why did the author write this?”*

*“To teach us about courage.”*

*“Yeah, the guy was brave.”*

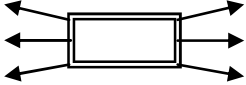
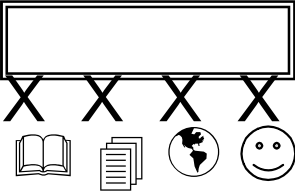
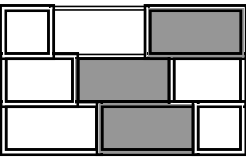
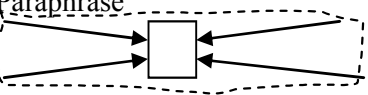

*“OK. What do we do now?”*

1. We worked with teachers who noticed that their students lacked skills to focus, deepen, and extend conversations about academic topics. The school was in a low-income setting in Northern California. Seventy-three percent of the school’s students were English learners, and 88% of the students qualified for free and reduced lunch. All students were academic English learners.
2. In the years leading up to this project, we taught and observed many lessons at various grade levels. We found that English language learners (ELLs) had very limited opportunities to engage in extended, meaningful talk in school, a conclusion that other research supports as well (Nystrand, 1997; Starman, Krol, & vander Meijden, 2005). English learners need to produce meaningful linguistic output to help them develop oral proficiency (Swain, 1985), but most whole-class discussions limit the amount of time each student gets to talk, and responding in front of many others often intimidates English learners.
3. Many classroom activities elicit short bursts of student output, such as think-pair-shares or vocabulary games. But we wanted a way to give students the training they needed to engage in extended discussions that involved constructing academic ideas with others (Cazden, 2001).
4. We calculated that paired conversations would enable the most talk per minute among our students: half of the class could talk concurrently. Yet most of the think-pair-shares that we observed were short and shallow. They offered students little chance to negotiate meaning or make decisions about the direction or depth of a conversation. Even when teachers gave students extra time in pairs, students didn’t automatically do the things proficient speakers and experts do to have powerful conversations (Zwiers, 2008). We predicted that equipping students with conversational skills would make meaningful academic conversations less of a rarity over time.

### What Makes a Conversation Academic?

5. We set out to analyze the features of an academic conversation. We analyzed both the ineffective conversations we had observed in schools and in our own lives, as well as the great discussions we’d had about books and movies. Then we looked at features of good academic conversations among 4th graders. Using Goldenberg’s features of effective whole-class discussions (1992) as a starting point, we took time to analyze what was happening in students’ paired conversations. We observed 12 student pairs and participated in 25 short one-on-one conversations with students about fiction and nonfiction texts, recorded these conversations, and analyzed the transcripts for features, prompts, and discourse moves that students used to extend and deepen their mutual thinking. Six of the most useful and teachable features—initiating a worthwhile topic, elaborating and clarifying, supporting one’s ideas, building on or challenging another’s ideas, paraphrasing, and summarizing—became our target conversational skills. As we taught these skills, we crafted prompts that students could use to prompt and respond in conversation, as well as visual symbols and hand gestures for each feature (see fig. 1). The visual symbols reflected a comparison between constructing a good conversation and building a house of meaning together.

FIGURE 1. Academic Conversation Skills and Prompts

Features/moves/skills of Conversations (with symbols & hand motions)	Stems for prompting the feature	Stems for responding
<p>Elaborate and clarify</p>  <p>(Pull hands apart)</p>	<p>Can you elaborate?            What do you mean by...?            Can you tell me more about...?            What makes you think that?            Can you justify that?            Can you be more specific?</p>	<p>I think it means that...            In other words,...</p>
<p>Support ideas with examples from this text, other texts, the world, &amp; one's own life</p>  <p>(Index finger on pinky of other hand, palm up)</p>	<p>Can you give an example from the text?            Can you show me where it says that?            What are examples from other texts?            What is a real world example?            What is an example from your life?            Are there any cases of that?</p>	<p>For example, ...            In the text it said that...            One case showed that...            An example from my life is</p>
<p>Build on or challenge another's idea</p>  <p>(Layer hands on each other and build up)</p>	<p>What do you think about my point that ...?            Can you add to this idea?            Do you agree?            What might be other points of view?</p>	<p>I would add that...            I want to expand on your point about...            Then again, I think that...            I see it another way...            Yet I wonder also if...</p>
<p>Paraphrase</p>  <p>(Put thumb and index finger together)</p>	<p>Is that clear?            Do you see what I'm saying?</p>	<p>So, what you are saying is that            Let me see if I understand you... is that right?</p>
<p>Synthesize whole conversation</p>  <p>(Cup both hands into a ball)</p>	<p>What have we discussed so far?            How should we synthesize what we talked about?            How can we bring this all together?</p>	<p>We can say that...            The main theme/point of the text seems to be...            As a result of talking, we think that we should...</p>

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## Scaffolding Conversation Skills

6. Our students required major scaffolding to use these skills effectively to construct more meaningful exchanges. When we showed students a poster of Figure 1 and asked them to practice using these skills to prompt a better conversation, they zipped straight through it as if it were a worksheet. Students needed to understand the recursive nature of conversations: ideas often keep emerging, needing fresh elaboration, support, and application.
7. To scaffold this cycle of ideas, we had students make visual reminder placemats. On one side of each box, they drew the symbol we had created to represent each conversational feature. We required students to memorize at least one prompt to start using the feature that each symbol represented. For example, they might memorize the phrase, “Can you elaborate on that point?” for the symbol of elaboration. On the back of each box, students wrote possible prompts for *responding* to the skill/move in question (e.g., “It means that...”).
8. Teachers modeled how to use the placemats recursively during a conversation, returning to one of the moves when the conversation lagged or veered to a nonacademic tangent. To reduce the dependence on the placemats, we taught students hand motions that they could use as they prompted each feature. For example, they pulled their hands apart while saying, “Can you elaborate?” For prompting for examples, we emphasized the order in the icon: text, other texts, world, and lastly, self. We wanted to train students to start in the text, then other texts, then think globally, and go to self examples last. Self examples were usually the easiest to generate and, if students started with them, they didn’t have time for the other types.
9. We also created a rubric with the features (Figure 3) that students used to self-assess after their conversations. Teachers also used the rubric at the end of the year to assess paired conversations. The rubric gave students a target for their talk.

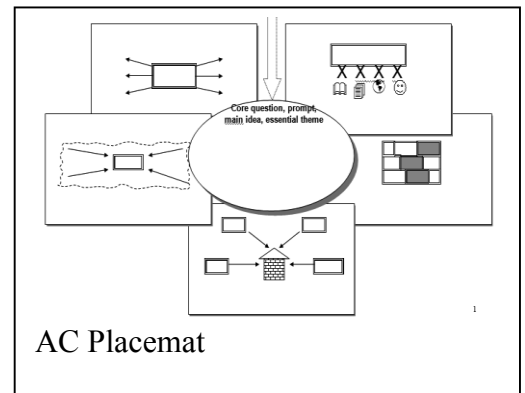


FIGURE 3. Rubric for Academic Conversation Skills

Skill \ Level	1: Below standard	2: Approaches standard	3: Meets or exceeds standard
<b>Maintain coherence of topic</b>	Ideas are disconnected and random; many tangents	Mostly on topic with a few tangents; some building off an idea	Generate logical theme(s); stay on topic; build on one another’s comments; paraphrase to focus
<b>Support ideas with explanations and examples</b>	Little or no support of ideas and themes; lack of appropriate prompting; examples not from the text	Some support of ideas with examples & clarifications; some use of prompts to encourage support	Appropriately prompt for and offer explanations, elaborations, and examples from the text, other texts, world, and own life
<b>Think and talk like experts in the discipline</b>	Remain at retell level; give few or no interpretations; don’t extend conversation; use social language	Some interpretations and applications to life; some use of discipline’s language and thinking	Appropriately interpret and apply ideas; use academic expressions and vocabulary; use other thinking skills
<b>Use appropriate communication behaviors</b>	Lack of focus on partner; interruptions; dominating conversation style	Some appropriate listening and turn-taking behaviors	Head nodding, eye contact, take turns, value and paraphrase partner comments

## A Typical Lesson with Conversations

10. With our guidance, the teachers explicitly taught each conversation feature. Here's a typical lesson. One of the teachers, Karen, points out on the poster the highlighted feature students will work on as they converse this day: elaboration. Students look at their cards and practice the hand motion and prompts for elaboration. Karen then reads a story about Columbus arriving in the Caribbean, stopping at times to elicit students' comments and questions. As students offer ideas and interpretations, she encourages them to elaborate.
11. At one point Karen asks, "Why was the boy afraid?" When Elia responds, "Because the guy just touched their gold," Karen asks, "Can you elaborate?" Elia answers, "I think the boy got all worried because that guy, Columbus, only wanted gold they were wearing. In the picture he looked mean." Karen uses Elia's response to create a pair-share prompt for the upcoming discussion, asking students to tell their partners whether they agree or disagree with Elia and why. She models using the sentence starter, "I agree with Elia's interpretation because..."
12. Karen leads a short whole-class discussion to brainstorm themes that came up in the story. This provides students with ideas for their conversations. Students write their top choices for themes and jot down any examples from the text that might support each theme. She reminds students that this quick writing will help them have better conversations.
13. Karen gives a mini-lesson in which she acts as one conversant and the whole class acts as the other. Students ask her in unison, "Why do you think the author wrote this story?" Karen answers, "Perhaps she wrote it to teach readers that it is important to listen to children." She waits a few seconds and then asks, "Now what might you ask me? Did I say enough?" Several students respond, "Can you elaborate?" Karen replies, "Well, it means that the adults don't listen to the boy's warnings about the visitors and their greedy actions. Later on it turned out that the boy was right, but it was too late."
14. Students first take out their placemats and review them, testing each other on the prompts associated with each symbol. Karen reminds students of the prompt that Elia offered, and then pairs students up to begin academic conversations. Karen moves around the room listening, interjecting at key moments, but letting students facilitate their conversations. She notices Juan and Ana using the starter phrases, placemats, and gestures to extend their conversation and encourages them to connect ideas to their lives and to try new vocabulary.

JUAN: I think it was about greed.

ANA: Can you elaborate that?

JUAN: Like, Columbus only touched the gold that they were wearing and not their skin. That maybe means the people don't matter, just the gold.

ANA: *[looking at the symbol for building on an idea]* I add that idea that Columbus's people took over the islands and made the boy's people into slaves. They probably wanted to steal all the gold and kill people, like pirates. What do you think?

JUAN: Yeah, but pirates mostly attack other ships.

ANA: *[thumbing through her cards]* How can we apply this to our lives?

JUAN: *[laughing]* I don't know. Maybe we shouldn't be pirates.

ANA: Or maybe we shouldn't be greedy.

JUAN: Yeah, we shouldn't think that because we have more guns and ships, or that we are bigger, that we have the...uhhh...

ANA: The right?

JUAN: Yeah, the right to take over other people and take their land.

KAREN: Can you elaborate with some modern examples?

JUAN: Like at school there are bullies and they shouldn't beat up others and take their money.

ANA: And what about when armies go in to take a country...for oil or land? I hear that still happens. But I wonder, should they fight back?

JUAN: We get in trouble when we fight back at school. Sometimes the fights get worse...[finding the “summarize” card] How can we summarize our conversation?

ANA: We can say we thought the story teaches us that people are more important than money, that greed is bad and bullying isn’t right,

KAREN: Another term for not right is *unjust*.

15. After conversing, all the pairs share their academic synthesis statements with the class and each pair writes an “exit ticket” synopsis of their conversation. Karen points out that Juan and Ana’s conversation uncovered a question that comes up throughout history. She encourages students to write down any big questions that remain. Finally, Karen has students reflect on the process and self-assess with a kid-friendly checklist based on the rubric shown in Figure 3.
16. These language learners’ conversation focused on a meaningful theme—greed and its effects on others. They connected this theme to real-world situations, found examples in the text to support the theme, constructed interpretations, generated a shared synthesis, and posed a question for future discussion. After four months of practice sessions like these, students began to use the conversation features more automatically.
17. In June, we analyzed transcripts of student conversations and noticed several changes:
  - a. Students improved at extending and deepening conversations. In each row of the rubric in Figure 3, students’ average scores increased. By June, these 4th graders were discussing meaningful themes in texts and applying them to their lives, rather than retelling parts of the story.
  - b. Students began using new vocabulary to communicate big ideas, not just create disconnected sentences or fill in the blanks for points on tests.
  - c. Students became more independent thinkers and talkers, shaping their conversations on their own.
  - d. Whole-class discussions improved as students used many of the prompts from their cards during group discussions. Instead of depending on the teacher to mediate comments, students built their responses on others’ ideas without “popcorning out” unrelated thoughts.
18. We hypothesized that academic conversations also contributed to other positive changes. Students showed improvement in writing (giving more evidence to support ideas), critical thinking, and using academic vocabulary to answer questions. Teachers noticed more student participation. In June, students engaged in more minutes per hour of on-task talk than they did in February. One student commented, “It sounds weird, but I feel like we’ve done something important after a good conversation.” The quality of discussions during history and science lessons also improved. The following academic year, many students asked their 5th grade teacher when they were going to start having academic conversations.
19. We are currently working on using academic conversations to build students’ academic grammar and vocabulary. Through mini-lessons and student models, teachers are seeing how to use paired conversations to build sentence complexity in oral contexts, conversing about topics that are of interest to them.
20. English language learners need accelerated language development. This acceleration is fostered by experiences that allow them to share their ideas, support them with evidence, and construct new knowledge with other students. This action research suggests that paired academic conversations can provide such experiences, equipping students with communication and thinking skills needed in school and beyond.