

KNEES TO KNEES, EYES TO EYES: USING “TURN AND TALK” TO IMPROVE EARLY LANGUAGE SKILLS

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ABSTRACT

With an Early Childhood classroom full of multilingual and beginning language learners, brainstorming and explicit planning was used to find ways to successfully engage students in the instructional strategy of “Turn and Talk”. Collaboration with a colleague, a coach, and an outside consultant allowed for thoughtful discussion around the importance of providing students an interactive structure to have meaningful discussions. “Turn and Talk” helped to engage students in back and forth conversations that developed language skills, increased academic vocabulary, and promoted peer connections. Reflection throughout the year helped the students and teacher to grow and improve their skills around the use of this instructional strategy.

“If your goal is to create a language rich environment, student exposure to language should be meaningful, deliberate, repetitive, and engaging – meaning it directly involves the students as active participants” (Connell, 2014). This quote from Connell is powerful. One way to meaningfully involve students in language is through “Turn and Talk”, an instructional strategy where students pair up or divide into small groups and engage in a back and forth conversation. When working with Early Childhood students it is important to intentionally plan ways for children to build language skills and have more academic conversations about the

current topic of study. In this article we will explain our experience with team collaboration, creating a hands-on visual, introducing the routine of “Knees to Knees, Eyes to Eyes” to students, and how it has improved language skills in the classroom.

TEAM COLLABORATION

At Kellom Elementary, the Early Childhood classroom receives students from three programs: Head Start, Special Education, and Pre-Kindergarten. Over half of these students are English Language Learners and/or beginning language learners. Based on their needs, we searched for strategies that would help us to improve the language skills of the students. Team collaboration began by reflecting with an instructional coach, an outside consultant, and a colleague to find ways to accomplish the goal of improving language skills throughout the classroom. We first met as a team to discuss why this goal was important and some ideas on how it could be implemented in the classroom. During this brainstorming, we decided that using the instructional strategy of “Turn and Talk” would help accomplish this goal. Part of our discussion included thinking about what might go through a student’s mind when a teacher says, “Turn and talk to your friend about this topic.” Examples we thought of include: “Where does my body go?”, “What do I say to my friend?”, “Which friend do I talk to?”, and “Can I sit and stare at a friend and hope that my teacher doesn’t ask me any questions?” Because of this conversation, we wanted to create some sort of routine that was easily accessible to students and answered their internal questions without having to ask a teacher. The structure also needed to be flexible enough to accommodate for: (1) student absence, (2) pairing students who speak the same home language, and (3) pairing students based on language ability. The use of a sentence frame would scaffold language, and a visual that students could hold would provide a concrete, hands on visual to make the routine clear and predictable.

According to Teaching Strategies GOLD, our district's tool to document Early Childhood students' learning, the language developmental range for 3 and 4-year-olds includes "engaging in conversations of at least three exchanges" (Burts 2016). Our task was to move students from virtually no language at the beginning of the year to brief conversations with peers and teachers before they moved on to Kindergarten. Knowing that many of our students had differing abilities, we broke down the skills needed to eventually engage in a brief conversation. The end goal would be for the students to be able to make eye contact, focus on a partner, take turns, and participate in a conversation.

CREATING THE VISUALS

We left the brainstorming session with a few new ideas and short-term goals to help move this process along. As our work around the "Turn and Talk" strategy progressed, a colleague developed a book with pictures that we could use as a teaching tool. Real pictures of the students in the classroom were used to help make meaningful connections. The steps of the book included pictures of students: (1) sitting knees to knees, (2) looking eyes to eyes, (3) student A talking while student B listens, (4) student B talking while student A listens, (5) student A responding to what student B said, (6) student B responding to what the student A said, (7) going back to their carpet spot. These visuals helped to answer many of those internal questions that students might be thinking while engaged in "Turn and Talk" time. Our plan was to read the book to students prior to each "Turn and Talk" session to remind students of the steps in the routine.

Figure 1: Popsicle sticks for conversation turn taking

After much thought, the use of popsicle sticks allowed for students to hold a concrete object in their hands (Figure 1). Velcro was used to attach pictures of students to the popsicle

stick. These pictures gave the students ownership and connected them to the activity. Each stick had 4 pieces of Velcro which allowed two alternating pictures per student. For example: student A, student B, student A, student B. Student A began the conversation and then removed their picture and passed the stick to student B. If the sentence frame was, “My favorite shirt is ____.” and the response frame was, “I heard you say that your favorite shirt is ____.”, the “Turn and Talk” time would begin with the two students sitting knees to knees and eyes to eyes. Then student A would hold the stick and say, “My favorite shirt is pink with flowers.” Student A would take their picture off the stick and pass it to student B. Student B would say, “My favorite shirt is in my closet.” and take their picture off the stick and pass the stick back to student A. Student A would say, “I heard you say that your favorite shirt is in your closet.”, take off their picture, and pass the stick to student B. Student B would say, “I heard you say that your favorite shirt is pink with flowers.” Students would then stick their pictures back on the popsicle stick with the Velcro, hand their stick back in to the teacher, and return to their spot on the rug. This structure allowed for each student to have two turns to talk and two turns to listen. The visual would help them to know whose turn it was and keep them focused on the task at hand.

INTRODUCING VISUALS TO CLASS

After thoughtful planning and preparation, it was time to introduce the concept of “Knees to Knees, Eyes to Eyes” to the class. We knew that the group of young students would not be able to handle themselves if they were given sticks with their faces on them and told to go and talk to each other. Small group instruction allowed for management of fewer students at one time and scaffolding of the visual in a way that would meet individual students’ needs. Support from a variety of individuals who regularly work in the classroom helped to make the partner sticks a success. They were introduced as a concrete visual for conversational turn taking. To help establish the basic back-and-forth principle in conversations, we used a toy that students enjoyed

so that they were motivated to participate. The students practiced taking a turn, taking their picture off the popsicle stick, and passing the stick and toy to a partner.

The next step was to apply language using a sentence frame. According to Alanis (2019), Another effective strategy we have observed is the use of sentence frames. It is often difficult for young children to organize their ideas into words, especially if they are doing so in their second language. Providing developmentally appropriate and linguistically accessible sentence frames helps children engage in structured conversations. (p. 10)

With this research in mind, a simple sentence frame was chosen and connections to the students were made so that they would be more persuaded to talk. The sentence frame was, “My favorite color is ___ because ___.” In small groups, the teachers were able to model the process and scaffold language for 3-5 students at a time. For some of the nonverbal or beginning language learners, we simply repeated each word in the sentence frame, and they chose a color to tell their partner.

With time and practice, the students became successful with "Turn and Talk" in small group and were ready to use their knowledge in large group. After reading a story, students were given the sentence frame, “I want to pretend to be ___ because ___.” The concept of pretending was reinforced throughout the story and a teacher modeled the sentence frame and gave examples. Students were told to think in their head for a few minutes before moving to partners. Next, the class quickly read the “Knees to Knees, Eyes to Eyes” book to review the procedures. Partner sticks were distributed, and students were given an area to sit. The sentence frame was repeated for additional practice and students were asked to begin. Teachers walked around to support students, listen to their ideas, and expand on their thinking. Though not all students were

proficient in using the sentence frame, they were all very interested in using the sticks to determine whose turn it was.

Later, we reflected as a team again and noticed that many students did not always have the vocabulary to answer the question or fill in the blank in the sentence frame. One way to solve this problem was to move the day the “Turn and Talk” strategy was used to later in the week so that we could introduce the subject on Monday, reinforce on Tuesday, and talk about it later in the week. This gave students practice using certain vocabulary words before adding the pressure of talking to a friend.

RESULTS

We practiced the “Knees to Knees, Eyes to Eyes” strategy many times over the course of the year. As a result, moving into partners has become a much smoother transition and allowed more time for students to focus on language. Students are having more complex conversations in center time and using more language throughout all areas of our day. Parents have also mentioned several times that they have noticed huge growth in their child’s language skills. While all students did not necessarily meet the goal of engaging in conversations of at least three exchanges, students showed growth in all language objectives including speaking clearly, using conventional grammar, and using an expanding expressive vocabulary. Based on observations recorded through the Teaching Strategies GOLD tool, 40% more students in our class were meeting their developmental milestone in the area of language from the fall to winter checkpoint. Based on classroom observations and data on language skills that is collected three times per year for state reporting, we were able to see our students grow and learn along with the teacher.

CONCLUSION

Through the process of collaboration and reflection, we created a structure for “Turn and Talk” that helped facilitate the learning of social rules of language and promote academic language use in a classroom. “Knees to Knees, Eyes to Eyes” and popsicle sticks with students’ pictures attached provided a structure that was predictable yet flexible enough for the surprises and interruptions that arise in the average classroom. This instructional strategy can be used in any classroom and is especially helpful for young students or students who are new to the culture and are practicing social norms. This process allowed students and teachers to grow and learn alongside each other.

THE AUTHORS

Sara Fedorchik has been an Early Childhood classroom teacher in Omaha Public Schools for the past 3 years. During those years, she has worked with three- to five-year-old students, including English language learners and students with a variety of abilities and disabilities in a school with a high population of free and reduced lunch students.

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