Interactive Learning with Multilingual Learners in Content-Area Classrooms

Introduction

Interaction is essential to learning. *Interactive learning* is known by many names, including *collaborative learning* or *peer collaboration.* It is key to multilingual learners' academic success, language development, and sense of belonging in any classroom community. A classroom that is anchored in interactive learning—as a daily practice for engaging students with complex ideas—can benefit multilingual learners by

- Promoting equitable instructional practices
- Expanding students' content-area knowledge and skills
- Supporting language development
- Bolstering student engagement

Equitable instructional practices provide opportunities for students to ask their own questions and construct their own knowledge; rather than being passive recipients of knowledge produced by others. Furthermore, equitable practices help promote a sense of belonging by ensuring that all students' ideas are consequential for their own learning and the learning of others. Equitable practices can also foster relationships of care and respect among peers and between teachers and students. Interactive learning supports students in building such

relationships and promotes a view of students as producers and not only consumers of knowledge.

Working with others to make sense of ideas, or sensemaking, expands **students' content-area knowledge and skills,** and is a fundamental component of the college and career readiness standards. These standards expect students to work together to solve problems and construct arguments using practices and concepts from the disciplines. Collaborative sensemaking gives students opportunities to experience using the practices and tools of the disciplines to learn more about themselves and the world.

Interaction also plays a fundamental role in **supporting language development** by creating a context in which students can practice expressing ideas and making themselves understood. Interaction pushes students to use language in new ways and builds their awareness of areas in which their language needs to develop. Interaction gives learners opportunities to experiment with language and test their hypotheses of how language works. When working collaboratively with others, students also have opportunities to learn from the language of their peers.

Finally, interactive learning **bolsters student engagement** by opening up opportunities for learners to interact with peers and ideas in ways that integrate multiple languages and modalities (such as gestures, physical objects, and drawings). Multilingual learners can draw on their full linguistic repertoires across languages, as well as on resources in the environment (e.g., objects and models) and multimodal representations (e.g., sketches and graphs), to negotiate meaning and form relationships with peers.

Understanding Interactive Learning

Interactive learning happens in many different ways in the classroom. Some learning activities may involve clarifying directions or sharing initial ideas, while others involve working together to deepen conceptual understanding or create a joint product. Preferably, interactive learning should offer students opportunities to both express or clarify ideas and co-construct new understandings.

In this WIDA Focus Bulletin, we discuss *expressing* and *co-constructing ideas*—two aspects of interactive learning that complement each other and are equally important for the learning and wellbeing of multilingual youth.

For examples of learning activities that include the expression and co-construction of ideas, please see the next page, **Closer Look: Sample interactive learning activities across the content areas.** The ideas discussed there draw from the *Framework for Equitable Instruction*,[1] developed by WIDA to support the day-to-day classroom instruction of educators serving multilingual youth. The theoretical foundations of the Framework for Equitable Instruction are described in Molle and Wilfrid (2021).

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1 Molle, D., Wilfrid, J., MacDonald, R., Westerlund, R., & Spalter, A. (in press). *The WIDA Framework for Equitable Instruction of Multilingual Children and Youth in Content-Area Classrooms.* (WCER Working Paper). University of Wisconsin–Madison, Wisconsin Center for Education Research.

Sample interactive learning activities across the content areas

EXPRESS *ideas*	CO-CONSTRUCT *ideas*
Instructional focus: elicit and make visible student ideas for consideration by others; get student ideas out 'on the table' in an equitable manner	**Instructional focus: engage students in collaborative exploration of ideas in order to deepen and transform understanding**
Examples:	**Examples:**
Science: Students share what they notice about a phenomenon they have just observed.	**Science:** Students compare data collected by different groups to identify similarities and differences in their findings.
Math: Students share a model that depicts the action of a story problem and an equation that fits their model.	**Math:** Students listen to and read one another's explanations and models; they support, question, or challenge one another's reasoning about the fit among the story problem, model, and equation; students collaborate on drawing a new model and writing an expression they agree on.
Social Studies: Students share what they know about a social issue and begin to generate questions to investigate.	**Social Studies:** Students weigh evidence gathered from different sources and discuss claims the evidence supports.
Language Arts: Students collectively decide how to go about finding the information they need to build background about the setting of a novel.	**Language Arts:** Students collaboratively plan, write, and revise a description of a key event in the story from the point of view of a minor character whose perspective is not included in the text.
Student actions: express ideas as clearly as possible; work to clarify meaning of own and others' ideas as needed.	**Student actions:** track the logic of ideas; decide whether to question, support, challenge, build on.
Teacher actions: press for and support clarity of expression; model and teach students how to negotiate meaning with one another; support and expect equitable student participation.	**Teacher actions:** probe reasoning as it is expressed; press for evidence or logic; prompt students to react to one another's ideas; foster metacognitive awareness of reasoning across disciplines as well as types of evidence and tools students are expected to use when they reason and build arguments in the disciplines; support and expect equitable student participation.

Expressing Ideas

Expressing ideas entails students sharing their thoughts and prior experiences. From an equity perspective, it is essential that multilingual learners have the same opportunities as their peers to put initial ideas on the table for consideration by others. It is especially important to validate the diverse cultural resources and ways of knowing that students bring to the classroom, by creating space for students to share their ideas without having to justify them—and without those ideas being immediately evaluated as right or wrong.

Expressing ideas often involves students using language to:

Interpret the directions and purpose of an activity

Before getting to work on solving a problem or answering a question, students can make sure that they have a shared understanding of what they are being asked to do and why it matters. They may ask questions such as, *what do we need to do?* Or, *what do we do first?* Interacting around the purpose of an activity gives learners opportunities to negotiate meaning with each other and make sure that everyone has a sense of how they are expected to engage in learning.

Contribute and clarify ideas

Expressing ideas gives students opportunities to say what they think and check that they understand the ideas of others. This checking can happen by paraphrasing *(you are saying that …),* highlighting *(so we need to subtract?)*, reviewing *(we all agree that …),* confirming *(your reason is that …)*, or affirming *(I agree that we should …)* what a peer has said.

Make and respond to requests, suggestions, and invitations

Making sure that everyone has the opportunity to speak, and to have a shared interpretation of what was said is not easy. When students are expressing ideas, it is important to pay attention to the ways in which we use language to ensure that everyone can contribute to and follow the conversation. Making requests (e.g., *can you draw this for me?*), suggestions (e.g., l*et's take turns*), and invitations (e.g., *what do you think?*) are important ways to foster relationships of care among peers and a sense of inclusion in multilingual learners.

Manage communication challenges

Speakers of any language frequently struggle to express themselves. Such situations are par for the course in language learning and are an important driver of the language learning process. When expressing ideas, students manage this challenge in a range of ways: describing in a circuitous way (e.g., *it's one of the things that … or it's what you use to … or it looks like a …*), paraphrasing, sketching, acting out, or taking time to look up what they want to say, among others.

Express varying degrees of certainty

An important skill that contributes to respectful and caring relationships is the ability to express varying degrees of certainty through language (e.g., *maybe they did this because … or one explanation could be that* …). When students phrase their opinions as possibly but not necessarily true, they open up opportunities for others to express alternative views.

Teachers can set their multilingual students up for success when expressing ideas in groups. Example teacher actions include

- Using a range of strategies to ensure that the purpose and steps of the activity are clear and explicit to students
- Centering group work around a question, issue, phenomenon, and so on, that provides a genuine need to talk
- Asking open-ended questions that invite students to share their experiences and ideas related to the topic
- Modeling several ways to ask and answer questions, and make and respond to invitations, suggestions, and requests
- Modeling the use of multiple representations (drawings, diagrams, charts, photographs, models) and language supports to express and clarify ideas
- Encouraging students to participate in group interaction in an expanding range of ways (such as initiating and maintaining a discussion, inviting peers to participate, building on previous ideas, summarizing ideas, and asking for clarification)
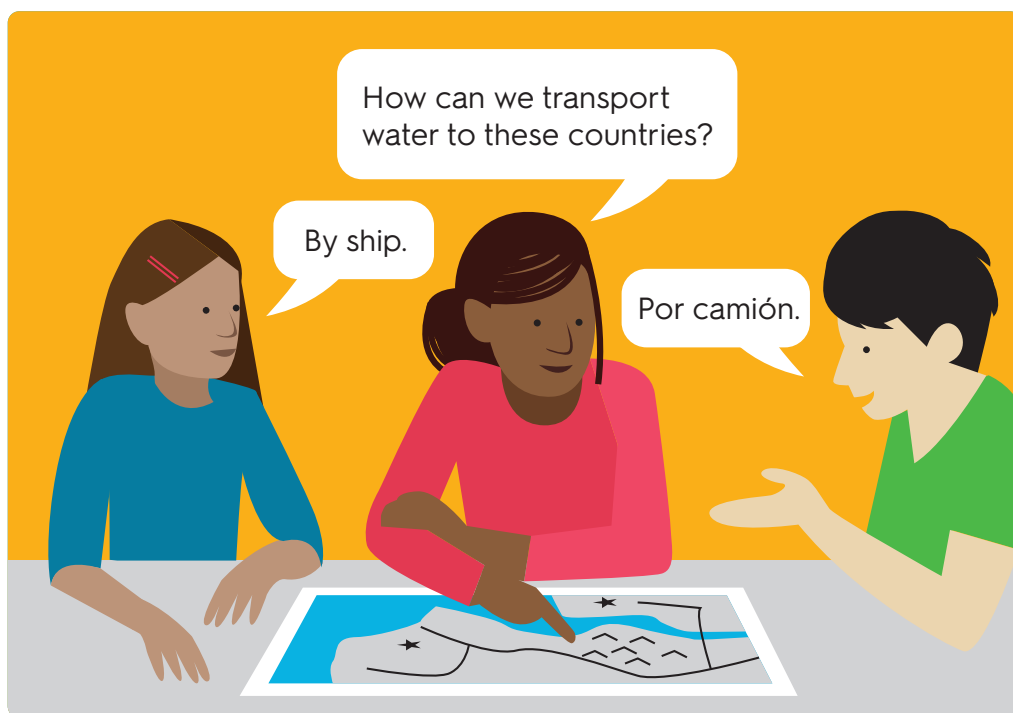
In the Closer Look vignette on the next page, Mr. Lee encourages interaction by posing an open-ended question about an experience that is part of all students' everyday lives. He emphasizes the importance of community and reinforces the expectation that every team member should contribute ideas. These expectations (along with the competitive nature of the activity) likely motivate students to actively solicit each other's ideas.

Encouraging Interaction in the Classroom

Mr. Lee stands by the door and greets the students as they come into his social studies class. On the board, the topic of the day's class is displayed: *We will make observations about water scarcity around the world.*

About 25 students in the class sit in preassigned seats at six tables. The class begins. Mr. Lee asks a student to read the topic for the day. The student reads the topic, and Mr. Lee engages the class in a short discussion about what it means to "make observations." He then tells the students that they will play a game. Each table will be a team. Mr. Lee asks the teams to generate as many examples as they can of different ways in which we use water. The team with the greatest number of examples will be the winner, but he tells the students that hearing everyone's voice is more important than winning. Mr. Lee asks the students to choose one team member at each table to record that team's ideas. He then sets a timer and the game begins.

Students lean toward their team members and begin rattling off ideas. A student at each table is furiously writing down notes. One hears phrases such as "do you have another example," "anything else you can think of," and "give me more" as students encourage each other to contribute. The timer chimes and Mr. Lee asks all scribes to put their pencils down. Teams count their answers. The winning team is announced, and Mr. Lee asks the class to show appreciation by snapping their fingers.

Mr. Lee projects a world map on the white board titled **Areas of Physical and Economic Water Scarcity.** He tells students who want to look at the map on their laptops that the link to it is available on the class website. Mr. Lee asks the students not to worry about the terms in the title for now. He tells them that they will write observations at their tables. He asks a student if she can model the process with him. The student agrees. Mr. Lee asks, "Which region or country would you like to look at?" The student answers, "Mexico." Mr. Lee asks, "What do you notice about Mexico?" The student says, "Mexico is red but the U.S. is blue, and Canada is blue." Mr. Lee then asks the class, "Now, can we use this observation to come up with a list of criteria for what makes an observation?" Students contribute ideas, which Mr. Lee writes on the board. They include: "based on the information we have," "may compare things to each other," "something you see only if you look closely," and "can be a pattern." Mr. Lee asks groups to generate as many observations together as they can, starting with a country, and then expanding to a region, continent, and the world. He asks that students take turns sharing observations, and that they ask each other questions to deepen everyone's thinking.

Mr. Lee concludes the activity by sharing with students that soon they will be doing research and building their own maps to show the distribution of different resources in a state, country, or region.

Co-Constructing Ideas

Another way in which students can participate in interactive learning is by co-constructing ideas. Collaborative co-construction contributes to new and often deeper understanding of disciplinary concepts, tools, and practices. When students have opportunities to not only share ideas but also work toward a shared product, they become active contributors to each other's learning. Engaging students in co-construction gives them opportunities to transform existing ideas and formulate new insights.

Co-constructing meaning often involves slightly different uses of language than expressing ideas, because the process of co-construction entails inquiry into one's own ideas and those of others, as well as the use of discipline-specific tools and ways of reasoning.

When engaging in the co-construction of ideas, students often use language to:

Support claims (e.g., arguments or explanations) with relevant information and related details

Co-constructing ideas often involves the analysis of a text, model, or data set. Arguments and explanations may look different across the disciplines, and understanding these differences helps students develop metacognitive awareness. For example, quoting from a text is appropriate evidence in language arts, while in math, evidence often includes references to formulas, theorems, properties of numbers, and so on.

Follow the line of reasoning in explanations or arguments

When engaging in co-construction, students not only make claims but also interpret the reasoning of their peers (e.g., *so you are saying that when we put it under the light, it will ...*). Interpreting someone else's reasoning is a complex skill that requires practice. A learners' ability to follow a line of reasoning often depends on their background knowledge of the topic and exposure to similar types of reasoning, as well as on the speaker's pace and use of modalities other than language (such as gestures and sketches) to illustrate their meaning.

Indicate logical relationships among ideas

Co-constructing ideas gives students opportunities to hone their skills in making logical relationships that are clear to them and explicit to their peers (e.g., *I am saying that if we add more salt, then ...*). This process contributes to mutual understanding. Often, being explicit about logical relationships also forces students to examine their own logic, and gives them a chance to refine it and correct any flaws in it that they encounter.

Analyze, critique, and expand ideas

As students co-construct meaning, they often compare ideas, challenge ideas, refute claims, provide a rationale for their assertions, elaborate on ideas, build on ideas, and engage in other actions that help deepen the group's understanding of the topic being discussed.

Express varying degrees of certainty

An important skill that contributes to respectful and caring relationships is the ability to express varying degrees of certainty through language (e.g., *maybe they did this because … or one explanation could be that …*). When students phrase their opinions as *possibly but not necessarily true,* they open up opportunities for others to express alternative views. Expressing varying degrees of certainty is also important in critically analyzing evidence, and determining under what conditions certain claims may be valid.

Teachers can support their multilingual students' engagement in co-constructing ideas in different ways. Some examples include

- Establishing classroom norms that value students' thought process over the correctness of their responses
- Choosing learning activities that create a need for students to figure something out together
- Soliciting, documenting, and exploring student ideas to advance the understanding of the whole class
- Setting small group tasks that motivate co-construction, such as asking groups to agree on one or two ideas to share, design one model to represent their thinking, or collaborate on crafting one sentence that summarizes their ideas
- Teaching and modeling student discourse moves (sentence frames) to help students develop ways of working together to co-construct understanding
- Modeling ways to incorporate multiple modalities when formulating claims (e.g., using combinations of text, data displays, diagrams, symbols, and mathematical expressions)
- Giving students opportunities to reflect on and set goals for the ways they work together. This may include showcasing student groups who engage in co-construction, and discussing with the class what makes their interaction particularly effective.

In the Closer Look vignette, Mr. Lee engages students in co-constructing ideas about a map of water scarcity. Co-construction in the lesson comes after students have had a chance to express ideas. This is often the case, because expressing ideas is a way for students to activate background knowledge. The activation can then serve as a foundation for deeper inquiry into topics, questions, models, representations, phenomena, and the like. Expressing and co-constructing ideas can follow each other in iterative cycles. After the co-construction activity in the lesson, for instance, we could envision a learning activity in which each group shares the patterns they noticed on the map (an example of expressing ideas). This activity could be followed by a different interactive activity, in which students work together to draft water policies for the municipality in which they live (an example of co-constructing ideas).

Interactive Learning, Reading, and Writing

Interactive learning is not just about getting multilingual students to talk to their peers. It is also a powerful way of strengthening their reading comprehension and writing competencies. Interactive learning gives multilingual students opportunities to make meaning of texts with others. One approach to this type of collaborative reading—reciprocal teaching—involves learners taking on different roles as they engage with a text: summarizing key points, asking questions and making connections, answering questions, and making predictions about what content will come next. This type of interactive learning combines both expressing and co-constructing ideas, as students share their ideas and transform their understanding of the text in dialogue with peers.

Interactive learning can also strengthen students' writing. As students negotiate ideas with others, they become better prepared to express these ideas in writing. Interaction provides an important opportunity for students to rehearse, clarify, and revise their ideas before they put them down in written form. Moreover, interaction supports students' writing by creating opportunities to talk about the writing itself. In a peer conference, for instance, interaction is a way for multilingual students to learn from their peers about ways in which they can improve their writing. One of the most important features of interactive learning is that it is not separate from other learning activities, such as interpreting or composing texts. Instead, it is an integral part of the learning process itself, and supports students' engagement in all their learning activities.

Interactive Learning in Virtual Contexts

Interactive learning is a versatile approach to instruction, and can be used in in-person and virtual contexts. In some cases, teachers may choose to leverage the opportunities for communication that virtual environments present—even when students are attending school face-to-face. Virtual contexts enable students to interact in real time (synchronously) as well as across time (asynchronously). Both environments are powerful engines for relationship building, language development, and content-area learning. For example, virtual contexts may enable students to

- Take a bit more time than is often available in oral interaction to formulate ideas
- Benefit from scaffolding by peers who may ask questions, share resources, offer explanations, and model language use
- Participate more equitably in discussions, because participation is more visible in an online environment
- Develop a joint product with peers by working in a shared workspace
- Provide and receive feedback from multiple peers by sharing an online version of a text they have composed (such as a PowerPoint presentation, a video, or written text)
- Receive just-in-time feedback from the teacher on phrasing, organization, or other features of language when the teacher can see students' individual screens

Interaction in these contexts may not always happen through talk: it may involve chat, written comments, or written posts. No matter the mode students use, interactive learning is beneficial for all students—and multilingual learners in particular.

Conclusion

Expressing and co-constructing ideas are related but distinct aspects of interactive learning. They build on each other and are important in their own right. It is essential that we do not conflate them, and that we design opportunities for students to both share their thinking and transform their understanding.

Strengthening Student Engagement in Interactive Learning

What do you notice about students' engagement in interactive learning in your classroom? The questions below provide guidance for noticing patterns in the ways students are expressing and co-constructing ideas in your classroom learning activities.

Use these questions to reflect on interactive learning in your classroom, or to discuss with a colleague.

EXPRESS *ideas*	CO-CONSTRUCT *ideas*
• Do students make efforts to help each other understand and express ideas? • Are students talking to each other or directing responses to me (the teacher)? • To what extent do students rely on the teacher to initiate and sustain dialogue? • Are all my students initiating ideas, or only some? • Are all students' ideas taken seriously by peers and me? • What questions seem to work well for eliciting students' ideas? • Where might I include more opportunities for students to share their experiences and/or their thinking/initial ideas? • How could I encourage students to respond to and build on each other's ideas? • Am I encouraging students to use language to express their ideas and not always emphasizing "academic language"?	• Are students talking about big ideas? What are some examples? How often does this happen? • Are students' ideas being elicited and built upon or used to advance learning? • Are students creating new understandings and products of learning together? • How frequently do students have opportunities to learn through interaction and dialogue with each other? • What kinds of questions seem to work well for strengthening reasoning by elaborating on ideas, challenging ideas, supporting ideas, etc.? • How does this interactive co-construction support students' writing or reading engagement and comprehension ?

Additional questions to think about:
• What kinds of guidance and feedback do students receive on their language use during interactive activities?
• As a class, do we co-construct norms and expectations for discussions and collaborative work?
• Are we interweaving classroom talk with reading and writing? In other words, do students talk about what they read, read about what they discuss, and talk about what they write?
• Are we talking about when and how to make transitions from interactive, unrehearsed talk to more formal or specialized written language? Do students have opportunities to work on these transitions collaboratively?

References and Resources

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