Sheltered Instruction: Accelerating Student Success Through a Focus on Language and Peer Interaction

by Ruth Kriteman—Dual Language Education of New Mexico

Earlier this year, in the fall issue of *Soleado*, we re-opened the discussion of the components of sheltered instruction. As teachers, we are always looking for considerations, strategies, and activities that support our students in learning both grade-level content as well as the language that allows them to understand and discuss their learning. Our intentions are always good. We want to do what is best for our students, but it's hard to break patterns of practice, especially amidst the demands of the school year! Perhaps by focusing in on a couple of transformative considerations and practices,

Individually, students have taken notes from an oral reading of text; now in pairs, they negotiate and reconstruct the text from their notes.
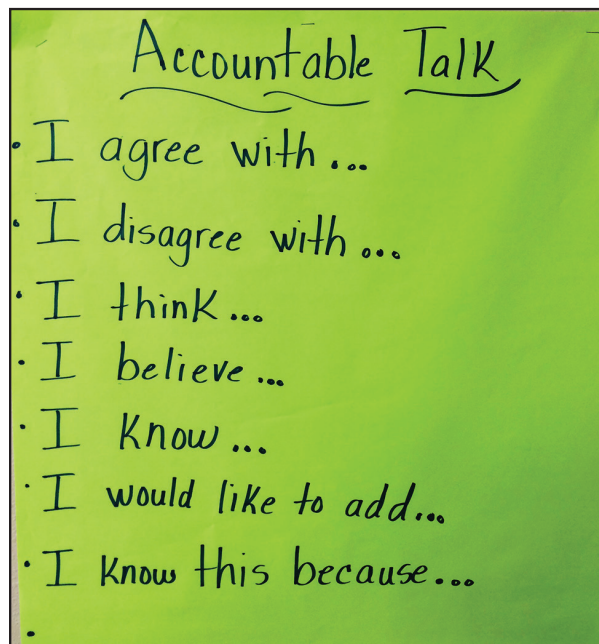
we might provide our students with more visible and explicit ways to access the academic language of our content.

The two sheltering components that seem to fit together nicely are a focus on language and planning for peer interaction. Research in second language acquisition has painted a very clear picture for us: In order for students to acquire language, they must have the opportunity to use that language in meaningful ways. That means that they must speak and listen to others; they must

wrestle with finding the right structures and combination of words to communicate their thinking; they must rework their message when their conversation partner fails to understand it; they must figure out ways to understand messages from teachers and fellow students even when they don't recognize all the words uttered; and they must make progress at accelerated rates in order to keep up with their English-speaking counterparts.

Pauline Gibbons famously used the metaphor of language serving as the window through which students and teachers look at content. For competent users of the language, the window is transparent. They are able to access the content without barriers. But, for those less proficient in the language, the window is frosted; it blocks access to the content. As a result, Gibbons advises us to be aware of the language we use and create opportunities for students to hear and use it, making content comprehensible and providing the necessary scaffolding for linguistic output. In order to do that, teachers need to identify both content and language objectives. So, for every, "Students will observe and compare properties of seeds and fruit," there is also, "Students will use comparative language like 'both',

Sentence frames support students' use of academic language across content areas.

'while seeds _____, fruit _____;' '_____ and _____ are similar in the way they _____; but are different in the way they _____." Likewise, for every, "Students will identify the cause and effect of the French and Indian War;" there is a companion, "Students will understand and use such phrases as: 'As a consequence …,' 'Therefore, … ,' '_____ contributed to _____,' or, 'One cause of _____ was _____; while another was _____.'"

One way to accomplish this focus on language is to choose three to five target academic language skills needed to meet performance or product goals, and weave them into content learning goals (Zwiers, 2014). So, while students are focused on the goal of learning how to analyze a literary text, specifically, character motivation and traits in *A Raisin in the Sun*, they are also intentionally being taught how to write a report that connects the play's scenes and dialogues to universal themes across history and literature. This does not mean only that the assignment is given—you will write a report that connects scenes and dialogues to universal themes— it means that the teacher will intentionally teach the organization of the report as well as connective words and phrases like 'likewise', 'as an illustration', and 'for instance'. Then, students can be assigned group or partner work during which time they are able to plan and negotiate with classmates how they will communicate the connections they have made and even co-write the final report.

While it may seem that the added layers of teaching and practice will add too much time to the lesson(s), the benefit to those students learning academic English will be immeasurable. Even those students with strong language skills will benefit from the additional interaction by developing important interpersonal, collaborative skills so prized by employers across the globe.

High-leverage skills needed in our increasingly globalized economy focus primarily on employees' ability to listen, speak and write complex and abstract concepts, and to collaborate in solving complex problems with co-workers (Zwiers and Crawford, 2011). Given the diversity of students populating our classrooms, the need to intentionally teach these skills is increasing.

Much research has been done by ethnographers highlighting the very different ways that communities socialize their children in the use of language. Some ways align nicely with the ways we ask students to use language in school: many students come to school having already practiced (at least at the level of incoming kindergarten students) how to describe a past event or how to justify the purchase of a much-anticipated toy. Students already familiar with a range of language functions, such as describing, justifying, persuading, explaining, and comparing, need only the chance to practice with more academic topics and increasingly complex language. But, those with little practice in the use of academic language functions need well structured and meaningful opportunities to engage in more academic conversations.

Rarely does just seating students around tables or arranging desks into team pods lead to the actual academic talk students need to practice. Instead, they continue the short response, informal talk that can happen in the cafeteria or school hallways. In order for students to get to formal academic conversations, the tasks given them must be structured in such a way as to require that talk. Here are some ways to create that context:

⊙ Instructions are given with built-in redundancy. In other words, instructions are given in various ways, including restating the task and modeling or

showcasing products that meet the requirements. In this way, students will understand more clearly what it means to "make observations" or "explain your thinking."

◉ Talk is necessary, not just encouraged, to complete the task. Gibbons refers to teachers purposefully facilitating an "information gap" in which different students, as members of a group or in a pair, hold different or incomplete information so that the only way the task can be completed is if information is shared. Students may be required to write a report on an event for which one pair of students receive information highlighting one perspective and another pair receives a different perspective. The pairing requires that the perspective is discussed and understood by each member of the pair before it is shared and discussed with those holding the other perspective on the event.

◉ The task is meaningful. Students learn much from authentic talk with a purpose. Some teachers tie topics of study to real world purposes. Discussions around the realities of those onboard the *Susan Constant* on their passage to Virginia becomes more powerful when the students need to plan what items they might pack and the activities they might consider in a similar situation.

◉ Students know how to work in groups. The more our students interact with technology in the form of computer/internet activities, video games and social media, the less skilled they are in face-to-face interactions. Many adults find it difficult to engage in paired or group work and prefer "just doing it all myself" because of the challenges of negotiating the work, valuing other's perspective and collaborating on the outcome. Likewise, students are often unsure of how to engage productively with their classmates. *Project* GLAD® makes great use of the T-Graph for Social

Skills, in which a social skill, such as cooperation or teamwork, is identified and discussed with the students. Students are then asked to pinpoint exactly what the identified social skill looks like and sounds like. Each positive statement is added to a t-graph with what might be seen—heads together, materials shared, all members busy; and what might be heard—inside voices, talk about the work, words and phrases like, "good idea" or "Let's also …" Team points are awarded when such behaviors are seen and heard during teamwork. Other teachers use teamwork norms and roles that help students to regulate their behavior and ensure more productive talk. When it has already been established that certain students will be in charge of various tasks toward the completion of the assignment, then time and energy are freed up.

A Truman Middle School student explains mathematics homework to a friend during lunch.

Of the eight components of sheltered instruction identified by DLeNM and outlined in the Fall *Soleado*, a focus on language is perhaps the most obscure. As proficient speakers of the language of instruction, teachers often look right through that window to the complexities of the content to which we have devoted our professional lives. But, with intentional consideration of the language that allows us to share that content with our students, and interactive structures that give the students opportunities to negotiate and practice that language, our classroom will become the best place for students to learn and be able to articulate that learning. And, isn't that why we got into teaching in the first place?

In the spring edition of *Soleado*, we will focus our our attention on a variety of ways to access prior knowledge and create shared knowledge. By using real items, picture files and hands-on activities we can focus the content, provide comprehensible input and motivation for comprehensible output!