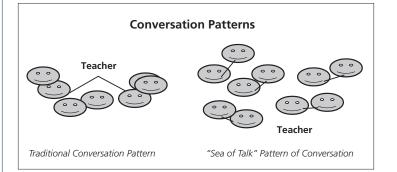# Interactive Literacy: Changing the Face of Whole-Class and Small-Group Instruction

Linda Hoyt

Traditional interactions between teachers and students have shown that teachers do the majority of talking while students sit passively. Those students who do talk are often the predictable few who raise their hands quickly and love to be heard. Just as predictably, teachers know which students have learned to keep their hands down with their eyes averted in hopes that they will not be called upon. This interaction results in a very small number of learners getting to speak, resulting in a sluggish attitude about comprehension as struggling learners quickly learn that if they are quiet long enough, a more verbal peer will speak out and let them off of the hook.

To recast this interaction and elevate the productivity of our instructional time, educators need to raise the level of responsibility for all learners and "float the learning on a sea of talk."

Conversation Patterns

Teacher

Teacher

Traditional Conversation Pattern   *"Sea of Talk" Pattern of Conversation*

In the traditional instructional model, the teacher poses questions to a group of students, having individuals raise their hands to answer. One student responds while the rest listen. In the reconceptualized setting, each student identifies a Thinking Partner. The teacher provides input, asks a question, and then directs all students to talk to their Thinking Partners. This quick-response opportunity allows all students to engage in meaningful conversation related to the topic. After the 20–30 second burst of "Turn and Talk," the teacher once again provides input, poses a new question, and challenges the partners to "Think Together" again.

This fast-paced interaction is perfect for attention-deficit learners as they have the opportunity to move physically each time they turn to a partner. The format supports expansion of oral language and increases content retention as students immediately *use* content-related vocabulary in their partner conversations. Student attention improves, more content is retained, vocabulary is expanded, and learners do more thinking—a winning combination.

Interactive Reading

"Turn and Talk" experiences help us to reconceptualize whole-class literacy experiences, turning them into Interactive Reading. During Interactive Reading, students meet with Thinking Partners to work with a text selected by the teacher. During the introduction of the selection, the teacher introduces the content and highlights a comprehension strategy. The teacher watches the clock and provides a "Turn and Talk" within every five minutes of instruction to ensure full engagement for all students. Careful timing of "Turn and Talk" moments also ensures that learning is "floating on a sea of talk" and that the content vocabulary is actually used by the students.

When individuals raise their hand and want to share, a teacher can direct individuals back to their Thinking Partners. Once the "Turn and Talk" reflection is complete, shared thinking is celebrated when partners share in the larger group so that others can hear their collaborative reflections.

Once the introduction and strategy focus are in place, students work with their partners and begin to read the selection together. Partners can be directed to focus their talking on a "Think Together" in which they think collaboratively aloud about the target comprehension strategy. The teacher circulates to observe partners with the goal of assessing strategy use, monitoring the quality of partner conversations, and determining levels of student success with the selected reading passage.

It is often helpful to have students use sticky notes to mark stopping points in their texts. These stopping points provide opportunities for reflective midstream pauses in reading which, according to recent brain research, have many positive benefits.

Interactive Reading can energize whole-class instruction, enhance oral language proficiency, and improve retention of content and vocabulary!

Small-Group Strategy Instruction

Small-group instruction has a strong and well-defined research base with clear benefits for differentiating instruction and lifting learner performance. Use of the term "Small-Group Strategic Reading" reinforces the notion that the instructional purpose of the small group is to support the implementation of a reading strategy or skill, not to teach the book. The book is a tool in which students will practice the target learning. Students quickly learn the rhythm of focusing on a strategy or skill in an explicit way, practicing the learning together, and then talking about the strategy and how it helps us as learners.

This emphasis on strategy also can assist teachers in keeping group times short and very focused. Students understand expectations since each small-group session opens with a conversation about the strategy. Whether reinforcing a strategy or skill introduced in whole group, or introducing a new strategy or skill, a small group of only five or six students at a time allows teachers to more easily assess understanding, reteach as needed, and answer individual questions. As in whole-group instruction, it is helpful during small-group time to have students identify a Thinking Partner and take moments to engage in a "Turn and Talk." Punctuating Small-Group Strategic Reading with interactive partner talk keeps energy high, engages students with language, and makes it clear to all that we are taking an active stance in our learning. Everyone has the responsibility to engage, to think, and to apply learning.

A few ideas for stimulating richer conversation:

- Show students what knee-to-knee and eye-to-eye conversations look like. Create a fishbowl by gathering the class in a circle with two students in the middle. As the two carry on a conversation, the class will see active listening in action.

- Practice active listening when students talk during class discussions. Consciously give them eye contact, lean a bit toward them, and say something that piggybacks on their statement. Then, ask what they noticed about how you were listening.

- Encourage students to build on each other's statements, such as, "Is there anyone who could link up to what Alia just said? Who can piggyback on Jonah's comment? Can anyone extend the idea we have started?" This teaches how to conduct responsive conversation rather than just show and tell.

- Take notes while students are talking. Then, refer to these notes and make statements such as, "I heard _____ say that _____." Or "I am noticing a connection here. A minute ago, Juan said _____ and yesterday I see in my notes that Alicia said _____." Quoting students and using their names affirms deeper thinking and reminds the students that their thoughts are valued.

- Teach students to label statements as deep or surface-level thoughts. Students can then make statements such as, "At first I was thinking on the surface level and I noticed that Sylvester was a donkey. Now I am thinking more deeply and I realize that what is important is that he is in a family and his parents love him very much."

Reflections

Teacher talk is important. It is an opportunity to open windows into the world of literacy through carefully crafted, explicit instruction. But the teacher's voice needs to be frequently punctuated with the voices of the students. A careful balance of teacher input, "Turn and Talk," and then a return to teacher input ensures high levels of student responsibility and floats the learning of a sea of talk that will carry students into their future as readers.

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