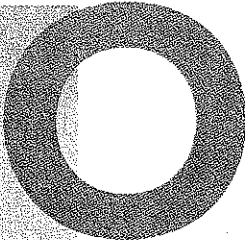


GIVE THEM FIVE

Five questions teachers of culturally, linguistically, and socially diverse students want to be asked in their teacher evaluations

Rachael Gabriel and Eliana Rojas





ver the last four years, 46 of our 50 states revised their teacher evaluation policies to include more frequent observations of practice; more connections to measures of student growth and achievement; and stronger connections to human capital decisions like hiring, firing, promotion, and tenure.

Though many teachers welcome additional observations and opportunities to work with evaluators to improve teaching and learning, the emphasis on observation and measures of student achievement can also make some teachers anxious—particularly teachers who work with students for whom English is not a first language and whose classroom experiences and achievement trajectories do not match their monolingual peers.

As researchers have demonstrated, generic observation tools designed to be applied across grades, subjects, and contexts may not capture the elements that are most important for excellent English language learner (ELL) instruction (e.g., Lopez 2011, 2013; Lavigne & Oberg de la Gaza, forthcoming). It is often up to teachers and administrators to find ways to use evaluation routines to support instruction for ELLs.

In order to investigate how administrators can most accurately and productively evaluate the instruction of ELLs, we held a focus group with teachers of ELLs who are developing their pedagogy, advocacy, and leadership skills as part of a master's degree or graduate certificate program in curriculum and instruction with concentration in bilingual education at the Neag

School of Education, University of Connecticut. We asked them:

- To reflect on what they most wanted administrators to know about appropriate and effective pedagogical discourses and classroom dynamics for ELLs
- Whether existing tools for observation consistently capture those elements
- What these elements look like in observations and how observers can most productively identify and discuss them with all teachers to increase the quality of instruction

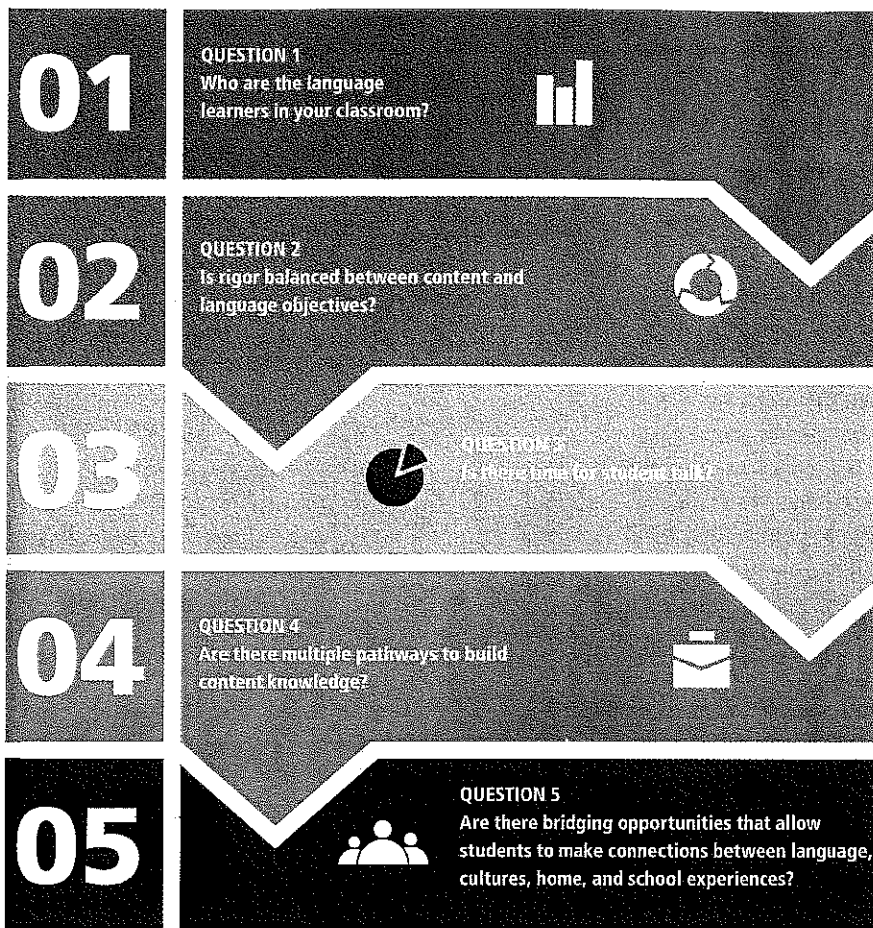
As a result of these focus groups, we've generated the top five questions teachers of ELLs want to be asked in evaluation conversations—questions that will highlight and guide the important work of balancing content and language objectives to support the achievement of all learners for whom English is not a first language.

Identifying ELLs

Question 1: Who are the language learners in your classroom? Now, more than ever, it is important to look beyond district-generated statistics to investigate who the language learners are in the classroom, including those who may not be identified, have been recently exited, or do not have complete records to be provided with an official label. Struggling students are often caught in a transition between schools or designations without the support or attention they need as emergent bilinguals.

More than 20 characteristics describe the learner identities of ELLs, including reasons for immigration, socioeconomic status, date and age of arrival, previous educational trajectory, and immigration status. Even if





Talk Time

Question 3: Is there time for student talk? Research on language development for ELLs has provided two important insights:

- 1) Many of us have to rethink wait time when working with ELLs
- 2) We use language to learn language

Specifically, where wait time for a native speaker is usually three to five seconds, students who are translating in their minds or selecting English words to go with their thinking may benefit from much more time before being asked to respond, as well as having the opportunity to talk in small groups before raising their hands to speak. These opportunities to build in student talk may take more time than in monolingual settings, but are powerful instructional tools for both content and language learning.

The more opportunities students have to formulate and reformulate content-related ideas in English, the stronger both their content and language outcomes will be. Though it's easy to assume we're doing students a favor by not calling on them, all students—but particularly ELLs—need opportunities to use language for learning. Moreover, there are many ways to elicit oral responses—even from students who are shy or unsure of their word choices.

Wong Fillmore's (1991) model of second-language learning identified three components that contribute to student progress: interest from learners, proficient speakers who support and interact with learners, and an environment that supports relationships between learners and proficient speakers. Students may not wish to participate if the teacher expects them simply to recite low-level knowledge or if the teacher sets low expectations for them. Clarity, wait time, higher-order

official school records estimate that there are few identified ELLs in a given classroom, the teacher should observe the language needs and proficiencies of their students. Often, students have not been appropriately identified as ELLs. Encouraging the teacher to investigate and respond to students' individual language and academic needs provides greater context for decisions about grouping, differentiation, assessments, wait time, and specific language or content objectives.

Balancing Rigor

Question 2: Is rigor balanced between content and language objectives?

Teachers of ELLs know that rigor rests between content and process. Classrooms with ELLs will have both language and content objectives, and

the balance of these contributes to the difficulty and ambition of the lesson. In order to ensure teachers have high expectations, and that this ambitious instruction is rated fairly, evaluators should be able to identify the content and language objectives of the lesson. In conversations with teachers, the combination of these objectives should guide estimations of rigor. If rigor implies higher-order thinking, then the difficulty of language structures and vocabulary being used (and its differentiation within the discourse of the activity) needs to be recognized in the assessment process. Knowing that evaluators have this in mind when observing will not only put ELL teachers at ease, but also encourage their full engagement with the challenge of teaching language and content simultaneously.

thinking, and high expectations influence the quality of teacher interactions with all students, but some pertain more specifically to the participation of ELLs.

Allowing students to demonstrate their understanding in varied ways will help ELLs develop trust and the assurance to try again later. Similarly, techniques such as using visuals that reinforce spoken or written words, having students chart and sort cards with answers in different languages, and using technology to support individual translations all promote reflection, interaction among class members, and language development.

Similarly, immigrant students may come from cultures that do not expect students to ask or answer questions during classroom discussions. These students often perceive teachers as having elevated status and may think that, as students, they should respectfully listen—rather than talk—in the company of their teachers. Because U.S. classrooms are often less formal (e.g., teachers sitting on the floor, students working in groups) than their previous educational environments, students from immigrant families sometimes take a while to adapt to the typical question-answer sequence that is common here.

In addition, language acquisition theory hypothesizes that language learners experience an initial silent period, which is time spent receiving the language as input prior to developing language-production skills (Krashen & Terrell, 1983; Saville-Troike, 1988), so allowing students to demonstrate their understanding in writing or via collaboration with peers while still creating an environment where students can use language for learning may be more appropriate than demanding oral participation.

Building Knowledge

Question 4: Are there multiple pathways to build content knowledge? Excellent ELL instruction, like robustly differentiated instruction in general, offers multiple pathways for knowledge building so that the challenges of language are not the only mediating factors in student learning. Teachers of ELLs are often on the cutting edge when it comes to introducing and elaborating on content beyond just reading and talking about it. Evaluators

observing their instruction should see other pathways to learning like demonstration, experimentation, and application. Asking about these pathways will support ELL teachers' efforts to consistently find and provide them, while reassuring teachers that they will not be penalized for departures from traditional instruction.

In order to build new content knowledge, teachers need to acknowledge students' previous experiences, including individual

Table 1. Top Five Questions with Related Indicators of Effectiveness from Popular Commercial Rubrics

This table shows the correlation between the top five questions teachers of ELLs want to be asked and the indicator of effectiveness as described by common teacher evaluation tools. Note: The table's numerical system is directly correlated with the Danielson Framework for Teaching and the Marshall Rubric and is best utilized with reference to those frameworks, which can be found using the links below.

"Top Five" Questions	Danielson Framework for Teaching Correlate	Marshall Rubric Correlate
Who are the language learners in your classroom?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1b: Demonstrating knowledge of students 2a: Creating an environment of respect and rapport 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ae. Teacher anticipates students' misconceptions Ab. Teacher shows warmth, caring, respect, and fairness for all students Eb. Teacher shows great sensitivity and respect for family and community culture, values, and beliefs
Is rigor balanced between content and language objectives?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1b: Demonstrating knowledge of students 1c: Setting instructional outcomes 1e: Designing coherent instruction 3e: Demonstrating flexibility and responsiveness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Af. Teacher designs lessons with clear, measurable goals Ag. Teacher designs highly relevant lessons that will motivate all students and engage them in active learning Ah. Teacher designs lessons that use an effective mix of high-quality multicultural learning materials and technology Ch. Teacher gets all students highly involved in focused work in which they are active learners and problem solvers
Is there time for student talk?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2a: Creating an environment of respect and rapport 3a: Communicating with students 3b: Using questioning and discussion techniques 3c: Engaging students in learning 3e: Demonstrating flexibility and responsiveness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Bj. Teacher consistently has students summarize and internalize what they learn and apply it to real life situations
Are there multiple pathways to build content knowledge?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1c: Setting instructional outcomes 3a: Communicating with students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1h. Teacher designs lessons that use an effective mix of high-quality multicultural learning materials and technology 1i. Teacher designs lessons that break down complex tasks and address all learning needs, styles, and interests
Are there bridging opportunities that allow students to make connections between language, cultures, home, and school experiences?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1c: Setting instructional outcomes 1e: Designing coherent instruction 3a: Communicating with students 3b: Using questioning and discussion techniques 3c: Engaging students in learning 3e: Demonstrating flexibility and responsiveness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 3d. Teacher hooks all students' interest and makes connections to prior knowledge, experience, and reading 3h. Teacher successfully reaches all students by differentiating and scaffolding

The Danielson Framework for Teaching: <http://devel.danielsongroup.org/framework/>

The Marshall Rubric: <http://usny.nysed.gov/rttt/teachers-leaders/practicerrubrics/Docs/marshall-teacher-rubric-jan-2014.pdf>

understanding and interactions with the curriculum. This implies sorting out multiple interpretations of concepts. For example, some students may be used to Celsius, where 20 degrees is extremely hot, while in the U.S., we use Fahrenheit, where 20 degrees is quite cold. Others may be adapting to U.S. customary units rather than the metric system.

Students may need to get used to new curricular concepts like integrated universal mathematics for all instead of differentiated (or regular algebra vs. honors algebra) and curricula sequences (such as algebra before geometry). In addition to all of this, older ELLs may still be processing mathematics thinking in their native language. These conceptual differences could hinder students' thinking processes, motivation, and readiness to solve problems (Rojas, 2010).

Building Bridges

Question 5: Are there bridging opportunities that allow students to make connections between language, cultures, home, and school experiences?

Learning content and language simultaneously is demanding work for students; it requires motivation, engagement, and persistence. Teachers' ability to both invite and create connections between content, languages, home, previous school culture, and other life experiences—including previous interactions with the curriculum (Rojas, 2010)—makes an important difference for ELLs. The relevance and coherence of instruction means the difference between frustration and motivation for language learning. The presence of connections to existing funds of knowledge and interest means the difference between low-level, skill-based approaches to content and higher-order, concept-oriented approaches to content. Evaluators

should see students articulating connections, sharing examples from their prior knowledge or experiences, and engaging in learning with a clear purpose.

Teachers of ELLs told us that they want to be asked how they have invested the time, energy, and knowledge building it takes to create relevant, coherent, connected learning opportunities. Such conversations not only honor important efforts in this area; they also hold teachers accountable for sustaining and expanding them.

Many of the questions teachers want to be asked about the instruction they provide for ELLs aren't explicitly referenced in most commercially available tools for teacher observation. Still, they are each deeply connected to the indicators of effectiveness described in commonly used observation tools. Table 1 shows the correlation between the top five questions teachers of ELLs want to be asked and the indicator of effectiveness as described by the Danielson Framework for Teaching and the Marshall Rubric as examples of widely used, commercially available tools for teacher observation.

Considering these questions while observing and discussing instruction will not only level the playing field for teachers who take on the challenges of teaching language and content simultaneously; it will also support their efforts—and thereby the success of their students. **PL**

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