Providing Language-Focused Feedback

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As you observe math teachers, look at the language supports they are providing as well as opportunities to provide additional language supports to ensure all multilingual learners can engage in rigorous content.

Learning Goal versus Language Goal

The learning goal should target the intended learning in the lesson, and the language goal focuses on the target language. What language should students use to demonstrate their understanding? This can include academic vocabulary, but it should also include functional language as well. For example, if a teacher wants students to clarify and justify their answers, then clarifying and justifying language should be called out and examples given ("My first step was…I did this because…I think this is the answer because…"). As you are observing the teacher, ask yourself has the teacher planned for the target language? What evidence in the lesson supports this?

Receptive Language: Understanding the Task and Text

Teachers should analyze a lesson to determine the language demands. In math, this can take several forms, and there should be clear evidence of this in a lesson. First, teachers should analyze what language students need to know to be able to perform the given math task. This can include mathematical academic language. For example, if the lesson focuses on adding fractions with mixed numbers, students will need to know terms like numerator, denominator, whole number, mixed number, and equivalent fractions to understand the mathematical task in front of them.

Feedback should focus on what academic language is highlighted and how it is supported. Listing terms is not enough; instead, teachers should include word walls, illustrated dictionaries, and examples to fully support linguistic comprehension.

Once the teacher knows what academic language must be supported, then the teacher should analyze the language used within the lesson. What language appears in the math problems? Will students need support to understand the problem?

Below is an example of a 6th grade problem used in a teacher's classroom that is about 80% MLLs. Most of her students are at an intermediate level of language proficiency, but she does have two students who have only been in the country for six months and they are beginning to learn English.

The Problem

A teacher is planning a class trip to the aquarium. The aquarium requires 2 chaperones for every 15 students. The teacher orders a total of 85 tickets. How many tickets are for chaperones, and how many are for students? (IM 6-8 Math, Grade 6, Unit 2, Lesson 16).

This is from a 6th grade unit focusing on ratios, so the teacher has called out proportion and ratio as key academic vocabulary. These terms are added to the illustrated word wall.

Looking at the problem, the teacher worries that some of her students are not familiar with the terms aquarium and chaperone, and she thinks some may be confused with the multiple meanings of the term ticket. She finds visuals to support the terms, and she adds them to her presentation so she can review the terms before the class works on the problem to get.

Concept Review

The **aquarium** is where we can see fish and other ocean life.

A **chaperone** is an adult who is watching kids on a field trip.

A **ticket** shows you have paid to get in.

If you are observing a teacher and you see that the academic language is supported as well as the language of the task and text, then the teacher is thoughtfully providing language scaffolds for MLLs. If the language is not supported, then this is an opportunity for growth and this can be addressed in your feedback.

It is also important to consider the various students in the room. Does the teacher seem to know students' language levels? Do all students receive the same support? While this can be hard to tell in an initial observation, asking for more information can help to ascertain the student needs in the classroom. In this classroom, the supports are the same for all students. This teacher can provide some additional supports for her two students who are new to the country. In your feedback, you could suggest she provide them with printouts of the illustrated key terms so they can refer to them throughout the lesson. She could also provide a word-to-word dictionary or a bilingual glossary to provide native language support.

Productive Language: Supporting the Language Students Need to Use

In every math class, students should be producing language whether they are engaging in academic conversations or writing their answers down. Whatever the structure or prompt, MLL students will need productive language support to be able to demonstrate their understanding. As you observe teachers, look for what language students must produce, either orally or in writing, and look to see if the teachers support productive language.

What can productive language support look like? Supports can and should vary based on student need. If students are being asked to engage in an academic conversation, then the teacher can provide sentence stems to help students understand how they can begin their answers. Students who are newer to learning English might benefit from a sentence frame which is more of a fill-in-the-blank response that uses simple language.

If a teacher is asking her students to share their solutions to a math problem with a partner using clarifying language to explain what process they used to solve the problem, she could support the language in several ways.

For students who are at an intermediate level of language proficiency or higher, they might need a sentence stem to help them get started. The teachers can provide a few options:

I solved this problem by…

The first step I took to solve the problem was…Next, I…

For students who are beginning to learn English, a sentence frame can help them to construct the language.

First, I __. Next, I _____. Finally, I _____. My final answer is _____.

Giving students this frame along with an exemplar answer to a similar problem using this frame can help them to understand the language they need to produce.

Some students with greater language proficiency may just need to see an exemplar response to a similar problem to understand what language they need to produce.

Students must also have opportunities to produce language. If teachers are doing the majority of the talking, work with teachers to provide additional opportunities for students to talk, whether as a whole class or in groups. Teachers should try not to say something if a student could say it instead. For example, if a student relays an answer to the class, the teacher then summarizes that answer for the class. Instead, the teacher could ask a student to summarize the classmate's answer. This gives more students an opportunity to talk and feel successful in math.

As students are producing language, it is essential that they have some independent think time to gather their thoughts and construct the language they need to demonstrate their understanding.

Feedback Tips

Some teachers are just beginning to understand how to support language needs, and it is important that feedback address what they are doing well and what they can try to incorporate in the next lesson. As you observe, write down lots of notes and include what is going well. If a teacher provides a visual, recognize that. If a teacher calls out vocabulary, note that. You want to recognize everything a teacher is doing to support language because that recognition can help to cement the practice. Supporting language can be challenging, and teachers need to know their efforts matter.

Areas for growth should be addressed as well, but limit suggestions to one or two so teachers do not get overwhelmed, and they are more likely to be able to implement the feedback immediately. Here is an example of what language-focused math feedback can look like:

Hi Teacher X! Thank you so much for welcoming me into your classroom today. I was able to see all the Number Talk and the beginning of the Three Reads, and it looked like the students actively engaged in the lesson and had a lot of fun!

Here are a few thoughts.

Keep doing
- You defined mental math, so students understood what you expected of them, and they knew using the white board was an option as well.
- You provide a lot of positive narration for the students.
- Students know how to gesture to show they have an answer for the Number Talk.
- You scribe student responses after they shared which provides a visual so students can connect the language to what you have on the board.
- When students reacted to 3-digit multiplication, you told them they were awesome, and they could absolutely do this problem—and they could!
- You circulated to see how students are progressing in the problem.
- Questioning required students to share their thinking: "How did you know?" and "How did you solve this problem?" and "Can you tell me more about that?"
- A wide variety of students were able to participate.
- You keep the pacing crisp, and the students are very engaged.

- You connected the last problem in the string to yesterday's learning, so students were able to make connections in strategies as well.
- You reviewed key vocabulary and provided visuals. You showed students the pack of tickets you are selling at your school.
- You discussed the Drive for Schools fundraiser that provided local context and helped students to make connections to their own world.

Consider doing

- Instead of summarizing for students ("I heard Andrew say he skip counted"), consider asking a student to summarize instead: "Who can tell me what strategy Andrew just shared?"
- Try giving students some independent think time before asking them to share aloud. MLLs often need this time to determine what they want to say in English.

Nice work today! You really embraced the strategies today, and I was impressed with how your students engaged. I can't wait to see tomorrow!