

Creating Questions and Scaffolding Responses for Multilingual Learners: How Can Teachers Encourage Language Acquisition during Read Alouds?

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Abstract

Multilingual learners (MLs) are required to comprehend content-area knowledge while also acquiring a second language. Through purposeful planning, teachers can implement an instructional routine that fosters student wait-time, higher levels of thinking, and increases MLs' participation and engagement, and allows MLs to practice their newly acquired language. This paper outlines an instructional strategy that focuses on the creation of higher-level questions based on text and scaffolding MLs' responses based on their language acquisition level.

Multilingual learners (MLs) are expected to meet the same academic standards as their fluent English-speaking peers while simultaneously learning a second language. What scaffolds should teachers incorporate to ensure that MLs are processing literary content utilizing their newly acquired language? The purpose of this paper is to introduce and explain an instructional strategy that practitioners can incorporate into their read aloud routines. Given that oral language paves the way for reading and writing, this strategy incorporates a receptive and expressive practice for MLs. The scaffolds provided are based on students' level of language acquisition. While the strategy is appropriate for both narrative and expository text, I will provide an example of the strategy utilizing the narrative picture book, *Carmela Full of Wishes* by Matt de la Peña.

Second Language Acquisition

Acquiring a second language is a slow and gradual process. It requires explicit instruction and scaffolds to ensure this process is completed in a way that will promote students' academic success. Language acquisition theorist Dr. Jim Cummins (1979) introduced the distinction between Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS), conversational discourse, and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP), the language specific to the context of school. Academic language proficiency is defined as "the extent to which an individual has access to and command of the oral and written academic registers of schooling" (Cummins, 2000, p. 67). BICS, which is sometimes referred to as "playground" language, typically takes up to two years to acquire. This is the language that MLs use to communicate their basic needs and socialize with their peers. Because of its complexity, CALP is specific to content areas (e.g., scientific terminology) and can take up to ten years to acquire (Thomas & Collier, 2002). Given the amount of time it takes, the adaptations and modifications teachers incorporate can aid MLs towards language acquisition.

There are five stages of second-language acquisition that relate to speech only and are not overgeneralized to other language skills: Preproduction, Early Production, Speech Emergence, Intermediate Fluency, and Advanced Fluency (Krashen & Terrell, 1983). The Preproduction stage is often referred to as "the silent period," where students are not producing language. While students may have minimal comprehension without additional scaffolds, they are capable of nodding *yes* or *no*, drawing, and pointing. During the Early Production stage, students begin to produce one or two words. After approximately six months to a year, ML students enter the

Speech Emergence stage where they begin speaking simple sentences. In the last two stages, Intermediate and Advanced Fluency, students increase the length and complexity of their sentences. To reach near-native level of speech, it can take ML students up to seven years (Krashen & Terrell, 1983; Hill & Miller, 2013).

Application to Instructional Strategy

There are several important reasons why teachers need to understand these five stages of language acquisition. As students are passing through these stages, teachers can provide scaffolds to aid in their expression and text comprehension. Krashen and Terrell (1983) describe this as “working within their ‘zone of proximal development’” (p. 16). Vygotsky’s (1978) idea of zone of proximal development applies to language development. The idea identifies what an ML student is currently capable of understanding and speaking. The connection between a suggested student response strategy and ZPD is how teachers are meeting students at their level of language acquisition and providing scaffolds to encourage usage.

For example, accepting students’ ability to respond to questions either with writing, gesturing, or drawing based upon their second language acquisition level is essential for MLs. MLs in the Preproduction stage can think critically and express themselves nonverbally by using gestures such as pointing or completing an action like “circle” or “draw a picture.” (Hill & Miller, 2013). In the Preproduction and Early Production stages, ask MLs to draw a picture, whereas, in the Speech Emergence stage, MLs can complete a sentence frame. As students begin to enter more advanced stages, teachers can use sentence starters to help them with grammatical structures (Hill & Miller, 2013). Typically, the prompt you provide for Intermediate and Advanced fluency stages can be used for both stages. Assure students that they can respond in a way that is comfortable for them either with a quick write or a quick sketch. Provide students with either a sticky note, whiteboard and marker, or a piece of paper and increase wait time up to two minutes. Again, allow an additional two minutes for students to work in pairs discussing their writing/sketch with a partner. Teachers can be very strategic in partnering lower language students with more fluent speakers. Consequently, it is through these social interactions that learners can express their own ideas and exchange them with more proficient peers to construct meaning (Zhou, 2021).

After discussion, then call on the previously selected students to share their responses. Questions falling into the three lower tiers: *knowledge*, *understand*, and *apply*, may not necessarily require this strategy and processing with a partner. Teachers can select a variety of leveled questions using their discernment on lower tiered questions which lay a foundation for higher tiered questions. Typically, teachers focus on asking questions before, during, and after reading. The questions before reading can focus on making predictions based on the title and cover art. I have seen teachers do this by asking students about their background knowledge and experiences so that they can make a personal connection to the story. During reading, the questions can be from the lower tiers of Bloom’s taxonomy (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001) to establish an understanding of the characters, setting, and identifying the problem or theme. After reading, teachers can ask more complex questions that require the student response strategy. You can incorporate the strategy at any point during the read aloud. The exact number of questions asked during a read aloud is dependent on how many questions will establish an understanding of the story’s theme.

I teach undergraduate students how to implement this strategy during their read aloud routines. They have created an outline for students to utilize for before, during, and after reading.

After each question, students share their response with a partner. Figure 1 illustrates an outline created for “Molly on the Moon” by Mary Robinette Kowai. The teacher asked the first question before reading, then had students share with a partner. The second question was asked during reading with the same language routine. And finally, the last question was asked after reading and again, the students discussed their responses with a partner. Figure 2 is another example created for “Naming Ceremony” by Seina Wedlick and Jenin Mohammad and followed the same instructional routine.

Figure 1

Read Aloud Outline for Writing and Speaking Integration During Read Aloud

Molly On The Moon 

Draw the moon and what it'd look like to live on the moon:

Draw how Molly is feeling right now and write why:

Draw and write how Molly made her brother happy at the end of the story:

Figure 2

Read Aloud Outline for Writing and Speaking Integration During Read Aloud

NAMING CEREMONY

What do you think is inside the present?

Where do you think the family is?

What does your name mean?

The graphic organizer is a vertical rectangular box with a light blue border. At the top, the title 'NAMING CEREMONY' is written in a bold, pink, blocky font. Below the title, there are three questions, each followed by a large, empty rectangular box for a response. The questions are: 'What do you think is inside the present?', 'Where do you think the family is?', and 'What does your name mean?'. The entire graphic organizer is set against a light pink background.

Later in the paper, I will provide examples of how to generate question stems and scaffolded student responses using the picture book, *Carmela Full of Wishes* by Matt de la Peña.

Oral Language Development and Multilingual Learners

Best practices of reading and writing are not sufficient enough to help MLs develop English literacy skills. Researchers confirm that a rich and extensive oral language foundation is critical to the later development of reading and writing (Dickinson & Porche, 2011). However, MLs spend less than two percent of their school day in oral interactions. As a result, teachers must find a way to engage them in productive talk (August, 2011).

ML students often receive adequate instruction in word-level skills such as decoding, word recognition, and spelling; however, they struggle with text-level skills such as reading comprehension and writing (National Literacy Panel on Language-Minority Children and Youth, 2008). What should teachers implement into their practice that will address this area? According to Wright (2016), oral interactions for MLs need to be meaningful and authentic. Walqui and Heritage (2018) suggest integrating reading and writing into oral development activities which allows MLs to comprehend the text more deeply. The proposed strategy allows for the integration of writing and speaking during a read aloud.

Wait Time and Multilingual Learners

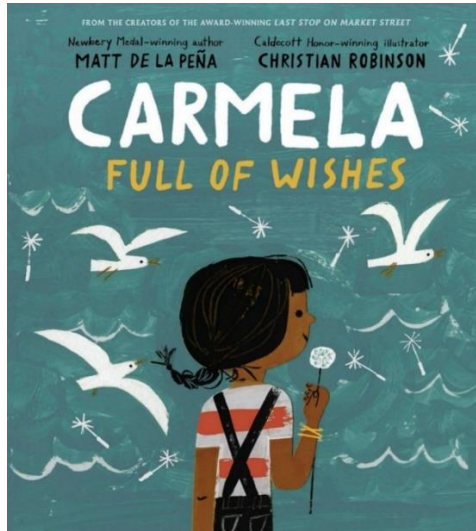
When teachers are reading aloud to MLs and pose questions based on the text, students may require additional time because these types of questions require more complex cognitive processing (Stahl, 1994). According to Rowe (1986), “to ‘grow’ a complex thought system requires a great deal of shared experience and conversation” (p. 43). Through analysis of tape recordings of high school and elementary school classes, Rowe (1986) examined the characteristics of discourse exchanges between the teacher and students. The researchers found just increasing the wait time to three seconds can improve the quality of discourse. The concept of providing wait-time, which is a brief pause after asking a question, can assist MLs with processing language and formulating a response in English. Furthermore, wait time can lower students’ anxiety and increase confidence and engagement in the lesson. It allows time for MLs to translanguage, thinking in one language then speaking in another (Süt, 2020; Wasik & Hindman, 2018; Holmes 2013). Teachers should consider asking questions from the top three tiers: *analyze*, *evaluate*, and *create*. Additionally, they may want to consider utilizing a structure where MLs can think deeply and process a response through writing and speaking. For instructional pacing and ensuring adequate wait time, teachers can set a timer for both the individual and paired responses.

Question Generation for Read Alouds

While creating questions, teachers should consider the top three tiers of Bloom’s taxonomy: *analyze*, *evaluate*, and *create* (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). At these higher levels, the implementation of this strategy will give students an opportunity to engage and interact with the text in a more meaningful way. As a result, this interaction will lead to deeper connections and comprehension (Wright, 2016). In this next section, I will demonstrate how to create questions using the children’s book, *Carmela Full of Wishes* by Matt de la Peña and suggested scaffolds for the five language acquisition levels. I chose this book for a third-grade read aloud because some of the story’s themes require readers to generate inferences. Making inferences is “a fundamental skill that enables the construction of coherent representations during reading comprehension” (Kendeou et al., 2020, p. 257). A skilled reader can understand and connect to relationships that are not explicitly stated in the text. Generating questions to help MLs understand these unspoken relationships are crucial for their comprehension. The strategy

incorporates generating questions from the top three tiers, providing a scaffold based on students' language acquisition level, and promoting discussion as outlined in the narrative text example.

Narrative Text Example



Carmela Full of Wishes, by Matt de la Peña and illustrated by Christian Robinson (2018)

This is a story about a young girl, Carmela, who is celebrating her birthday with her older brother and mother. Her mother gives her gold bracelets, and she often jingles them at her older brother to ward off his evil glares. She accompanies him to town to run errands and he's not particularly happy with her presence. As they travel through town, she finds a dandelion and ponders the right wish before she blows the white fluff away. Unfortunately, she trips and her scooter destroys her precious dandelion. Carmela begins to cry, and her big brother takes her to the sea where she sees a sky full of dandelion spores flying through the air. Since he was so kind to her, she decides he isn't so bad and removes her gold bracelets. There are other themes in addition to the sibling rivalry woven into this story such as migrant issues, and hope that her deported father can rejoin the family.

The process of selecting questions to use the student response strategy were created for the top three tiers of Bloom's Taxonomy, *analyze*, *evaluate*, and *create* (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). In this next section, I will provide question stems for each level and examples of how teachers can scaffold for each of the five stages of language acquisition. To implement the strategy, determine students' level of language acquisition, pose the question, and explain how you want them to respond. After they have recorded their response, ask them to share with someone to the best of their ability. If students are unable to respond with the scaffold provided, move down to a lower level or rephrase the question so that the student understands.

Analyze

Taking the time to analyze text allows us to make connections between facts and visualize the big picture while thinking about how details in the text are interrelated. How do students use the text clues to infer and determine meaning from another point of view? Possible questions to ask for students to analyze could be:

- Describe an alternative solution to the problem.

- What is the significance of this event?
- How does this event contribute to the story as a whole?

(Adapted from Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001)

Table 1 provides a question stem and possible student response structures based on students' language acquisition level. So far in the story, we have only been introduced to her mother and brother and the text reads: "...past the huge home improvement store where dad used to stand around weekend mornings, waiting for work" (de la Peña, 2018, p. 4). Her dad's location is past tense so students will have to analyze the situation and determine her father's location.

Table 1

Analysis Question Stems by Language Acquisition Level

Question Stems	Student Response Scaffolds for ML Students
<p>"Is Carmela's dad with the family? Where do you think he is?"</p>	<p>Preproduction "Can you shake your head <i>yes</i> or <i>no</i> - Do you see Carmela's dad in the picture? (No) Can you point to Carmela's dad in the picture? (No)"</p> <p>Early Production "If Carmela's dad is not in the picture, give me a word where you think he is? Can you draw a picture of where he might be?"</p> <p>Speech Emergence Provide the sentence frame, "I think her dad has gone to _____ because _____."</p> <p>Intermediate Fluency AND Advanced Fluency You can combine intermediate and advanced fluency and provide the sentence starter: "Carmela's dad is not present because...I know this because..."</p>

Evaluate

The next level is *evaluate* which means to make judgments about text supported with evidence. Suggested questions teachers could ask include:

- Which part of the text could be improved?
- In what ways would you improve this story?
- Did this story have an effective ending? Would you recommend the book, why or why not?

(Adapted from Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001)

In using the example from "Carmela Full of Wishes," the question posed asks students to evaluate the ending of the story on whether it was effective and if students would recommend this book (Table 2). When Carmela falls and crushes her dandelion and begins to cry, her brother

comforts her and takes her to the sea where she witnesses millions of dandelion spores floating in the air. Even though she sometimes feels annoyed at her brother, she realizes he does love her and she removes her birthday bracelets and places them in her pocket. She removes them at the sea because she no longer needs to “ward off” his negativity towards her since he tried to make a bad situation better for her.

Table 2

Evaluate Question Stems by Language Acquisition Level

Question Stems	Student Response Scaffolds for ML Students
<p>“Did you like the way the story ended? Would you recommend this book?”</p>	<p>Preproduction “Can you shake your head <i>yes</i> or <i>no</i> – Did you like the way the story ended? Would you want to read this book again?”</p> <p>Early Production “Can you draw a picture of what you liked about the ending?”</p> <p>Speech Emergence “Can you tell me with two to three words, did you like the way the story ended? Would you like to tell your friend about this book?”</p> <p>Intermediate Fluency AND Advanced Fluency “I think ‘Carmela Full of Wishes’ had an effective ending because....and I would or would not recommend it to.....because....”</p>

Create

According to Feng (2014), the questions teachers create and ask influence and induce students’ cognitive processing. Even though the majority of instructional time may be spent posing questions, they may not necessarily be at the higher levels. At the top of Bloom’s taxonomy is *create* which learners identify patterns, ideas, and facts to create something new or formulate a hypothesis. Suggested questions teachers could ask include:

- If you were the main character, how would you have reacted to this?
- What would this character think?
- Using evidence from the text, why do you think her brother questioned her if she made a wish?

(Adapted from Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001)

Carmela finds a fluffy dandelion outside the Laundromat and bends down to pick it and blow the white spores away. Before she could, her brother questions whether she made a wish because everyone knows you are supposed to make a wish. She lies to her brother and tells him she did even though she did not.

Table 3*Create Question Stems by Language Acquisition Level*

Question Stems	Student Response Scaffolds for ML Students
“If you were Carmela, how would you have reacted to her brother’s response?”	<p>Preproduction “Can you draw a picture of how you would have felt if your brother said that to you?”</p> <p>Early Production “In one or two words, can you tell me how you would have felt if your brother said to you?”</p> <p>Speech Emergence Provide the sentence frame: “Carmela felt angry towards her brother because he _____ to her.”</p> <p>Intermediate Fluency AND Advanced Fluency Provide the sentence starter, “If I were Carmela, I would have reacted to her brother’s response by....”</p>

Conclusion

MLs have the formidable task of thinking and expressing themselves in a newly acquired language. The purpose of this paper was to share a strategy for creating scaffolds based on MLs’ level of language acquisition. The strategy can be implemented during a read aloud routine so they can comprehend the story utilizing expressive language. It allows for differentiation based on MLs’ language acquisition levels and focuses on the importance of wait time.

When teachers are mindful to differentiate their instruction to meet the needs of ML students, it can lower students’ anxiety and increase confidence, engagement, and participation. The end goals should not only be for MLs to successfully express their understanding, but also be given opportunities to practice their newly-acquired language. Oral language does pave the way for reading and writing and these students need every opportunity to practice language.

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