

# Learning English happens best when conversation part of curriculum

April 29 2015, by Kristen Morales

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Students work on a collaborative project that's part of an "instructional conversation" model. The technique uses small groups of students to discuss a question or lesson and come to an agreement, and as a result the students-especially English-language learners-showed dramatic improvements in subjects across the board. Credit: Paula Mellom/UGA

A new teaching model using small groups significantly improves how well English-language learners increase vocabulary and reading comprehension, according to a pioneering new study by researchers at the University of Georgia.

Using a conversational instruction method, where a teacher presents small groups of students with a question and asks them to work out the answer among the group, English-language learners increased language skills and [reading comprehension](#) when compared with traditional classroom teaching.

The multi-year study, conducted by the Center for Latino Achievement and Success in Education at the UGA College of Education, also found these students made significant gains in subjects other than English/language arts. And, as an added benefit of the instructional model, all students-native English speakers and learners alike-learned skills such as listening, patience and respect. The results could have an effect on how English-language learners and other groups are taught, said Pedro R. Portes, the study's principal investigator.

"It's about improving cognition and their conversational skills," said Portes, executive director of CLASE and the Goizueta Foundation Distinguished Chair of Latino Teacher Education. "In comparing the academic outcomes of students who are taught with this conversational pedagogy in third and fifth grades, English learners are scoring significantly higher in reading and science on state standardized tests."

The study examined students in third and fifth grade, including 732 English-language learners. In English/language arts, science and mathematics, students taught with the conversational method, on average, increased their comprehension in these subjects between 14 percent and 25 percent above the control group. In areas such as reading, English-language learners still outperformed controls by 10 percent.

In general, Portes said, girls who are learning English score significantly better than boys in subject-specific tests. But the conversational method helped all English-language learners make up for ground lost in earlier years, and it was particularly effective for fifth-grade boys, who out-scored the control group in reading by a wide margin and also caught up with the girls taught with this method. Fifth-grade boys also out-scored the control students in science.

Portes, who has been studying this type of [teaching method](#) for decades, said this could lay the groundwork for a new standard in how teachers

interact with their students. Typically, teachers ask students direct questions and interact one-on-one. But in the small group model, "We're challenging students to work with each other and think."

The study is also unique in the method used to calculate its results. Over the years, Portes said, results of this small-group teaching method were more anecdotal or limited in scope. But the UGA researchers, using a \$2.9 million grant from the Institute of Education Sciences, focused on the effectiveness of small, teacher-led groups in classrooms across Georgia. They analyzed data from more than 1,500 students in 14 school districts. The study continues through the next school year with a final cohort of students using the Georgia Milestones test as a baseline.

Researcher Paula Mellom, associate director of CLASE and co-project director, said English-language learners might speak for no more than five minutes a day in a traditional classroom model, which is why the small groups can have such a profound effect on their success.

The key, she added, is how it's structured. Sometimes called "instructional conversation," or IC, the teaching method is used in addition to regular classroom activities. Typically, the class spends a portion of the day broken up into groups, or "centers," with students rotating from one to the next. Planning is key, Mellom said, because the teachers create student-led activities for other groups while the teacher leads one group using the IC method of discussion.

Now in their third year of the study, researchers can see the results of these focused small-group discussions not only in test scores, but also in how students interact with each other and express themselves.

In one classroom, for example, six [students](#) sit in a circle on the floor discussing sentence fragments. Their teacher has cut up a paper with a sentence on each and, one at a time, sets them down for the group to

discuss. Students take turns explaining why they think it is or isn't a fragment, and build a consensus on the correct answer based on their different arguments.

When a non-native English speaker is part of the group, the interactions with their peers help enhance their vocabulary as well as their comprehension of the topic at hand.

While the results of the study are still preliminary, Portes and his team are confident it will have an effect on the way English-language learners are taught.

"It's good for all children, but for those English-language [learners](#), it might be the difference between drowning and succeeding," Mellom said. "This type of teaching really does make it possible to open up and feel engaged in school."

Provided by University of Georgia

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