**3. A Low-Tech Intervention: Collaborative Reasoning**

In this article in *The Reading Teacher*, Zie Zhang (Western Kentucky University/ Bowling Green) and Katherine Dougherty Stahl (New York University) bemoan the fact that so many teachers preside over fast-paced, low-level question-and-answer classroom “discussions”, rarely giving students the chance to formulate their own questions and express extended ideas about complex issues. This is especially detrimental to language development of ELLs.

Collaborative Reasoning is an intriguing solution – small-group, peer-led discussions aimed at promoting intellectual and personal engagement. Here’s how it works. The whole class reads a text that raises an unresolved issue with multiple, competing points of view. Topics might include friendship, family obligations, justice, fairness, duty, equality, honesty, winning and losing, or the environment. Students then break into groups of 5-8 and discuss a provocative question raised by the text – for example, “Should Stone Fox let little Willy win the race?” (from *Stone Fox* by Gardiner, 1980) and “Are zoos good places for animals?” (from *A Trip to the Zoo* by Reznitskaya and Clark, 2004).

“Students are expected to take positions on the *big question*, support the positions with reasons and evidence, carefully listen, evaluate, respond to one another’s arguments, and challenge one another when they disagree,” say Zhang and Stahl. “The purpose is for students to cooperatively search for resolutions and develop thoughtful opinions on the topic.” Students learn how to manage their own discussions without hand-raising, with the teacher facilitating and scaffolding from the side – for example, modeling, thinking out loud, prompting, clarifying, challenging, reminding, summarizing and refocusing, encouraging, and fostering independence.

Zhang and Stahl say that two decades of research have shown Collaborative Reasoning to be an effective way to get all types of students talking more, improving their thinking, and developing important social skills. It’s especially helpful for English learners, who are often marginalized in conventional class discussions.

Collaborative Reasoning requires careful planning and preparation, say the authors. Here are their suggestions:

* Choose a complex text with ample evidence for both sides of an interesting issue.
* Read it carefully and come up with a big question that requires high-level thinking and judgment.
* Prepare an argument outline of the possible positions, reasons, and supporting evidence.
* When students first try small-group discussions, be aware that there may be some awkward pauses, especially among ELLs who are uncertain about how to express their views. Patience and support are important, with the teacher gradually relinquishing control as students become more confident and proficient.
* Have students debrief afterward.

“Collaborative Reasoning: Language-Rich Discussions for English Learners” by Zie Zhang and Katherine Dougherty Stahl in *The Reading Teacher*, December 2011/January 2012 (Vol. 65, #4, p. 257-260), <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/TRTR.01040/abstract>;

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