

Strategies in Action: Supporting English Language Development

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Third Grade: English-instructed classroom with four Spanish-speaking Multilingual Learners.

Setting:

The third-grade class is immersed in an integrated thematic unit on Civics and Participation in Government (History-Social Studies Standard: continuity and change). They have been learning about the role of rules and laws in our daily lives, and the basic structure of democratic decision-making in the United States. No better time to support students in developing the language to state their opinions, cite evidence, and persuade change. At the end of the unit, students will be asked to write a persuasive (opinion) piece, advocating for something they would like changed at some level of government.

Prior to beginning the unit, like every teacher of young children, Ms. Meadvin knew that her children were skilled at the art of persuasion. After all, they started at a young age, trying to convince their caregivers to let them have another cookie or stay longer at the park. However, while Ms. Meadvin's native English speakers have been flexing this muscle in English, her Multilingual Learner students' skills of persuasion are more established in their home language. In addition, regardless of home language, her students have engaged in persuasion in informal settings with peers and well-known adults. All of her students will need explicit instruction in constructing a coherent argument and the persuasive language structures required to convince others in the kind of formal situations called for in this unit—a principal, the student body, a school board member, or the President!

Lesson:

Building the Language of Persuasion

Before the content gets demanding, Ms. Meadvin wants to build the students' language and skills of persuasion, and so she kicks off the unit with a Persuasion Bootcamp. She introduces a key [graphic organizer](#) the students will use throughout the unit to construct their arguments—both oral and written. The graphic organizer has separate boxes for distinct purposes:

- a blue box at the top to state the position,
- a series of three red boxes to cite reasons with accompanying evidence and rationale,
- followed by a final fifth green box for the concluding statement.

She begins by modeling and practicing the use of the graphic organizer with a familiar topic the students will care about: Should schools serve dessert at lunch? As she talks through her position, she fills in the boxes on the graphic organizer with words and phrases to capture her rationale, while modeling sophisticated, persuasive language structures as she goes.

Ms. Meadvin has the students repeating and practicing the words and phrases with partners multiple times. This serves as the foundation for persuasive writing, and will ensure her students are successful on their performance task at the end of the unit.

"It is my position that we should not serve desserts with school lunches. These are my reasons. First of all, desserts have sugar which is bad for their teeth and they can end up with cavities. In addition, desserts stop being special when you have them all of the time. Furthermore, the sugar can make students jumpy and it's harder to settle down and study after lunch. In conclusion, I strongly recommend that school lunches no longer include desserts. So, what do you think?"

The students, unable to contain their enthusiasm for the topic, chime in with their opinions, rationale, and counterarguments. Pinning the graphic organizer to their Persuasion Language Function Wall, Ms. Meadvin asks children to recall some of the sophisticated language she had used for each section of her argument. Writing the language onto the Persuasion Language Function Wall, the teacher extends the color-coding from the graphic organizer, recording a "state the position" list in blue: "It is my position," "I believe," and "I contend", etc. For "reasons and rationale," she writes "First of all," "In addition," "Furthermore," "One reason is" using a red marker. She also includes words and phrases for explanation: "because," "results in," "one impact." And finally, in green, she creates the concluding statement options: "In conclusion," "I strongly recommend," "I heartily urge." During this entire first day of Persuasion Bootcamp, Ms. Meadvin has the students repeating and practicing the words and phrases with partners multiple times. This serves as the foundation for persuasive writing, and will ensure her students are successful on their performance task at the end of the unit.

But, Ms. Meadvin recognizes that her Multilingual Learners will need more targeted instruction and practice to build the vocabulary and language structures of persuasion used in English. So, she gathers a small group of Emerging Level students at the Persuasion Language Function Wall for a Designated English Language Development (ELD) lesson focusing on a few of the language structures of persuasion, addressing the ELD standards related to "cohesion" and the use of transition words. She poses a provocative situation to the group: "The principal is going to cut time from recess in order to create more learning time in the classroom. What do you think? Is this a good idea? Do you agree?"

Immediately, they start responding, voicing their positions, and Ms. Meadvin prompts and draws from them why they hold those positions—repeating their views as full sentences and encouraging their use of the persuasive language structures. One student responds, "To eat a snack." Ms. Meadvin amplifies and models, while pointing to the Persuasion Language Function Wall. "Yes, one reason recess is important is so that students can eat a snack. If recess is shortened, one impact might be that students will not be able to eat a snack and might not have energy for learning later."

After several minutes of generating these responses and recording them on sentence strips, Ms. Meadvin pulls out two sentence strips with the connecting transition words/phrases—"because" and "results in"—placing them in front of the students alongside their already recorded reasons. Students then work together to construct more sophisticated sentences using these transition words to build their argument.

Over the next few days, Ms. Meadvin continues Persuasion Bootcamp to practice using sophisticated language structures required to construct persuasive arguments with familiar topics. She works both with the whole class and small groups of Multilingual Learners, to ensure instruction is targeted and the class has a strong grasp of this skill. By taking the time to pay careful attention to persuasion and by building the Persuasion Language Function Wall, the students will have the scaffolds and supports necessary to engage with the content of the unit and excel in their final arguments—and, hopefully one day impacting change on a very real scale.

Reflection questions

1. When one of Ms. Meadvin's students offers a short response, she recasts the student's answer and models a more academic, complete sentence response. What do you think would happen over time, if Ms. Meadvin continues the practice of introducing longer phrases and more academic terms in her teacher language? What are other ways for a teacher to use intentional language and modeling to serve the ELD of Multilingual Learners?
2. Ms. Meadvin's learners need to use persuasive language to advocate for legal or government changes (the culminating task in their civics unit). Persuasion is a language function, or, a way of using academic language for a particular purpose. What is an example of an academic language function that learners in your class need to know to engage in one of your lessons? Why is focused instruction on functional academic language important for content learning?
3. What is one takeaway that you can apply to your own practice in supporting Multilingual Learners' English language development?