Using Instructional Conversations for Equitable Participation to Promote Students' Complex Thinking and English Language Learning

Lois A. Yamauchi
University of Hawai'i Mānoa

Abstract

Research suggests that teachers can promote their students' language and thinking skills by engaging them in activities in which they use the target and other languages to co-construct complex ideas, create tangible products, and solve problems with multiple solutions. Instructional Conversations for Equitable Participation are small group discussions in which all students and their teachers interact with each other to share multiple perspectives on topics that integrate what students already know from their home and community experiences. This approach emphasizes students using all of their linguistic repertoires, including those related to the target and everyday languages. The approach is based on Vygotsky's sociocultural theory and over 50 years of research on improving education for culturally diverse students in the U.S. and abroad. This paper describes research on Instructional Conversations for Equitable Participation and how English language teachers can incorporate these practices into their classroom instruction to promote students' complex thinking and language learning. It provides tips for teachers who would like to engage their students in these productive conversations.

Using Instructional Conversations for Equitable Participation to Promote Students' Complex Thinking and English Language Learning

Roland Tharp, the Director of the Center for Research on Education, Diversity, and Excellence (CREDE), pointed out that classrooms are often arranged in the "cemetery" model of education with rows of seats lined up like gravestones. No wonder, he noted, that many students are often passive and silent when their teachers, standing at the front of class, attempt to engage them in large group discussions. We know from research and theory that if we want our students to become proficient in English or another language, they need to be exposed to and use the language in meaningful ways (Carli et al., 2015; Lindholm-Leary & Genesee, 2014)

and actively engage in language learning strategies (Ardasheva et al., 2017; Barjesteh et al., 2014). We also know that students become independent and critical thinkers when they have opportunities to discuss topics with their teachers and peers and are exposed to authentic or situated contexts or problems (Abrami et al., 2015), and are active in their learning (Wittwer & Renkl, 2006). Students learn to think deeply when they talk about new and abstract topics that are connected to their own experiences and understandings. Peer conversations are important, but so are discussions that include the teacher, so that students have access to educators' expertise and language proficiencies. This may be particularly true when students are learning a new language, as the teacher is often the most proficient speaker of the target language.

Small groups are needed for teachers to be able to assess and assist individual students' language and thinking skills. Thus, teachers can promote important language and thinking goals by facilitating small group conversations with students about academic topics that are open-ended, engaging, and comfortable. Such interactions are more likely to occur in classrooms that are organized like our living rooms and dinner tables, rather than those that resemble a cemetery.
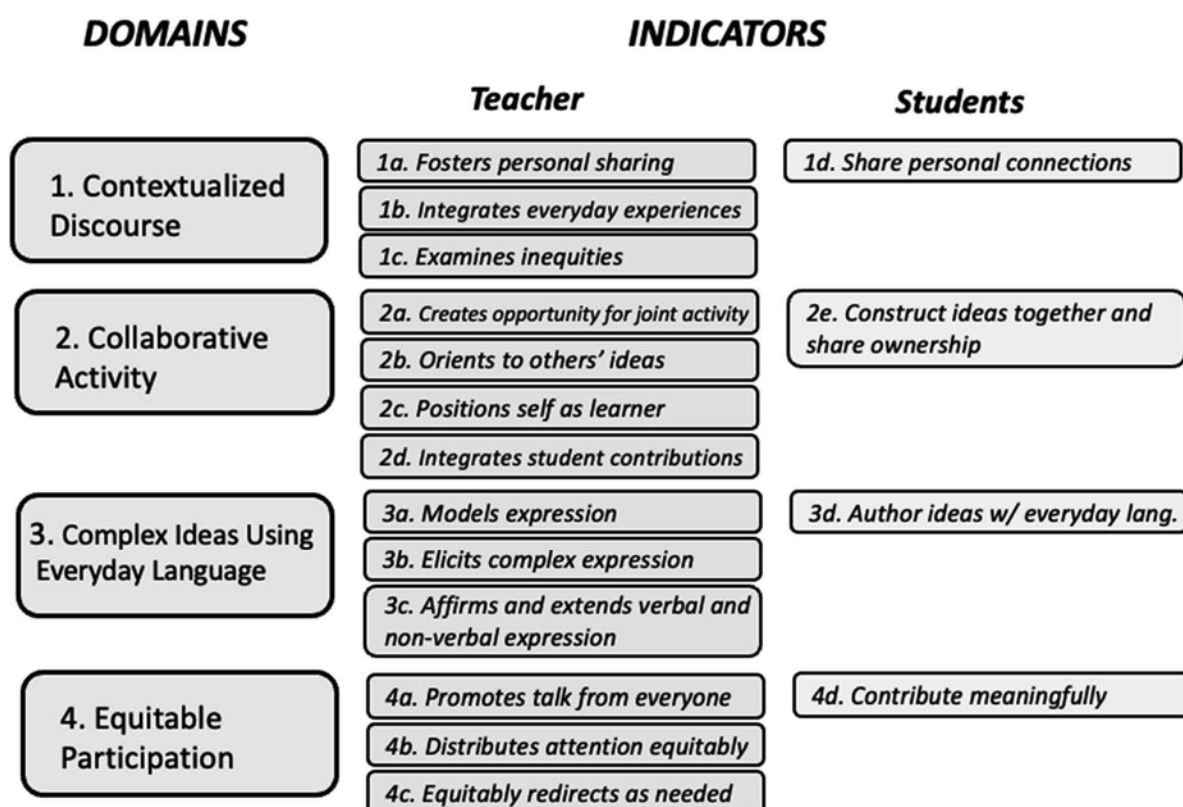
Instructional Conversations for Equitable Participation

Instructional Conversations for Equitable Participation (ICEPs) are small group discussions in which all students interact with their teacher and peers to share multiple perspectives about topics that integrate students' background knowledge and languages (Yamauchi et al., 2022). ICEPs are based on Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory and over 50 years of research on what CREDE researchers called Instructional Conversations–small group discussions between teachers and learners (e.g., Portes et al., 2018; Saunders & Goldenberg, 2007; Tharp et al., 2000). Instructional Conversations incorporate both instructional and conversational aspects of discussions. They are instructional in their focus on a challenging classroom goal, but also include conversational elements, such that students feel comfortable participating in the discussions, and the direction of the conversations are determined by what all participants say, not just by teachers. Although Instructional Conversations can be helpful to all students, they appear to be particularly effective for students who are learning a second language (Portes et al., 2018; Chapman de Sousa, 2017). After reviewing over 73 studies, the U.S. Department of Education determined that Instructional Conversation was the most effective strategy for reading achievement and second most effective for literacy development among English language learners (Institute of Educational Sciences, 2006).

Our research team has integrated Instructional Conversation with other CREDE strategies and research on equitable participation to develop ICEPs (Yamauchi et al., 2022). For example, ICEPs emphasize that the conversation is a Joint Productive Activity, such that teachers and students construct ideas together. With young children and second language learners, research indicates that teachers collaborating with their students to create a tangible product together–for example, cooking a dish or drawing a picture that summarizes what they are talking about–promotes learning and more talk from participants (Chapman de Sousa, 2017). ICEPs also incorporate what CREDE researchers call Contextualization, connecting students' prior knowledge and interests with the more abstract and new information that is being discussed.

Teachers using ICEPs ask students open-ended questions about what learners know from their everyday and cultural experiences and promote learners' use of all of their linguistic repertoires. For example, among English language learners in Japan, even if the conversation is in English, students may respond in Japanese. The teacher may respond in English, but should not admonish students for using Japanese or other everyday languages. In the next section, I describe what teachers need to do if they would like to conduct ICEPs in their classrooms. Some planning is needed to use the strategy, particularly if students are not accustomed to small group work or if teachers typically "float" around the classroom while students work independently or in small groups. ICEPs are organized as four domains. Figure 1 presents the domains and teacher and student indicators associated with each domain.

Figure 1

Four ICEP Domains and Indicators

Note. Reproduced with permission from Yamauchi, L. A., Jensen, B., Chapman de Sousa, E. B., & Kaʻanehe, R (2022). *Instructional Conversations for Equitable Participation (ICEP): Teacher learning materials.* Department of Educational Psychology, University of Hawaiʻi.

Tips for Getting Started

When preparing for ICEPs, teachers should plan for about a 15-minute conversation that could be longer with older students and shorter with younger ones. Educators should also organize the class into groups of 5-7 students that could be smaller for younger children. While the teacher sits with a small group of students for an extended period of time, the other students should be engaged in meaningful activity that does not require constant supervision. We suggest that students rotate through multiple, simultaneous, small group activities that are peer-directed. In a later section, I describe a system CREDE researchers call "Phasing In," to help teachers and students transition from a whole group orientation to a classroom that is organized as multiple, simultaneous activities (Tharp et al., 2000).

Clarify Expectations

It is helpful to explain to learners what ICEPs are and what is expected of them. Students should know that they should speak the target language as much as possible, but also feel comfortable to use their everyday languages. We tell students that one of the goals for an ICEP is for them to talk to their peers as much or more than they do with their teacher. We want students to talk freely, as they would outside of the classroom, so they do not need to raise their hands to speak. Teachers and learners should, however, make sure that the conversation is equitable, such that everyone has an opportunity to share their ideas. Those who are eager to talk (including the teacher), should make sure that they do not dominate the conversation. Likewise, those who are reluctant to participate, may need to be encouraged to speak more than they might naturally do. Teachers and students should listen carefully to what others say and ask for clarification and elaboration from participants. Learners should know that there are typically many answers to the questions the group will pursue together in an ICEP, and that the teacher is generally not looking for one "correct" answer.

Homogeneous and Heterogeneous Groups

CREDE researchers suggest arranging ICEP groups homogeneously, so that the teacher can differentiate the groups based on achievement (Tharp et al., 2000), which could be determined by language fluency. For example, one group might be made up of the most proficient English speakers in class, so that the teacher can use higher-level language to push language use in advanced ways. Likewise, when working with groups that are less fluent in English, teachers can slow down and simplify their language so that learners can keep up and feel comfortable participating, but still be engaged in complex ideas.

In their peer-directed centers, we suggest grouping students heterogeneously, so that more advanced students can also help peers who may need assistance (Tharp et al., 2000). Each time students transition to a new peer-directed center, they should be with a different group of students so that all students get to work with everyone in class. This will create more harmony, as students get to know everyone in class, rather than just a few.

In the appendix, I provide an example of a rotation chart that can be used for student groupings and rotations. We have used such a chart with adults and children as young as 5-years-old and also in Zoom online sessions, using break-out rooms for the small groups. Students need practice using the chart and moving to different groups, but they can learn to do this and often enjoy the opportunity to get up and move.

What Should Teachers Talk About?

There are many topics that teachers can consider for an ICEP. We suggest focusing the conversation on a topic or task that is difficult for students to accomplish without the teacher's presence. Otherwise, students could have the conversation in a peer-directed group without the teacher. English language teachers might work with their students to write a dialogue or play in English together. Educators could also use an ICEP to develop intercultural knowledge. For example, they might consider an ICEP to discuss similarities and differences between visiting someone's house or a restaurant in Japan and the US. We suggest using tangible objects to promote students' talk. For example, teachers could present students with photographs or artifacts from such visits in Japan and the US, and discuss what is familiar and what is less so.

For language learners and those who are younger, we suggest that teachers and students co-create a tangible product as they engage in an ICEP. For example, while talking about how the U.S. and Japan are similar and different, the teacher and students could create a chart together that lists or shows pictures of those similarities and differences. They could also cook a dish together using a recipe written in English and hold an ICEP as they follow the recipe and talk about what they are doing.

Equitable Participation and Open-Ended Questions

Equitable participation means that everyone participates in the conversation and the interests and experiences of all learners are included in the discussion. Letting students understand the goal of these conversations should promote their participation. Teachers sharing their own experiences also models for students how they can share their experiences. Asking open-ended questions is one way to promote a conversation that is equitable, when the questions invite all students to share what they are thinking or have experienced, and everyone has the opportunity to provide their input.

We suggest that teachers prepare open-ended questions that can guide their ICEPs. Open-ended questions invite students to share and expand upon their experiences and ideas. After someone shares their thoughts, teachers can invite other students to respond to what was said, instead of automatically responding themselves. Before ICEPs, teachers should brainstorm questions that will invite learners to share their thoughts, feelings, and ideas about the topic being discussed. A list of questions is helpful at the start of the conversation, but educators should not feel bound by those questions. Instead, they should let the discussion move naturally in directions in which the students want to go, as often would be the case in other conversations.

Values, Briefing, and Debriefing

In American classrooms, preschool to Grade 12, we find it helpful to start the school year by talking with students about what they value in a classroom. Instead of stating rules, we ask learners to consider the kind of place they want the classroom to be and how they will contribute to creating such an environment. For example, a class of younger children decided that it was important that "we take care of ourselves, each other, and the things around us." A set of values from older children could be "Everyone feels heard. No one is put down. We help each other and feel safe to try new things and make mistakes." Because students may come from different family and cultural backgrounds, setting classroom values helps to establish shared expectations for their time together. Helping students to articulate what they value for their time in the classroom can prevent classroom management problems when teachers are not directly supervising peer or individual activities and can help to resolve classroom management problems that arise.

Briefing

Since many students may be unaccustomed to participating in ICEPs and activities where the teacher is not present, we find it helpful to begin a lesson by providing an overview of what will occur. In the briefing, educators can tell students that there will be small group discussions with the teacher, in addition to peer or independent activities. Teachers should review the centers that students will complete without them and explain what learners can do if they need assistance or finish early. If they are using a rotation chart, teachers should make sure that learners understand how to use it.

Debriefing

After the activities are completed, it is also important for teachers to debrief about what was accomplished in the peer and independent groups and ask students about problems that arose during the rotations. For example, sometimes students are confused about which groups they are supposed to be in or there are classroom management issues to discuss. Teachers should remind students about the classroom values and discuss which values were and were not being reinforced. It helps to brainstorm with learners about how to manage similar problems in the future. In the briefing before the next time the class engages in center rotations, teachers can remind students about what happened previously and what the class thought they could do to avoid similar problems.

Center Rotations and the Phasing-In Process

Having students rotate to different centers is a way that teachers can sit with one small group of students at a time, while the rest of the class is productive. The number of centers teachers should plan for depends on how many students they have in their class and how much time they have for the rotations. If needed, center rotations can occur across multiple class sessions. As noted earlier, when students are engaged in an ICEP, we advise teachers to group learners homogeneously, but when students go to other centers, they

should be grouped heterogeneously. We also suggest that the heterogeneous groups vary each time students rotate, so that they work with different students throughout a class session.

CREDE researchers developed the Phasing-In process to transform a whole group-oriented classroom to one that is organized by multiple and simultaneous activities (Tharp et al., 2000). Throughout the process, teachers should use briefings to explain what will occur and debriefings to discuss what went well and needs to be improved.

In *Phase 1*, students become familiar with "follow-up work." For the first half of the class time, teachers instruct in a whole class format. For the second half of the session students work independently or in small groups on an activity that is based on what was taught to the whole group, and teachers "float" around the classroom to assist students as needed.

In *Phase 2*, educators teach a brief mini lesson to the whole class. After this, half of the class meets with the teacher for follow-up activities, while the other half of the class works independently. Then teachers switch the previous activities, such that the group that worked independently works with the teacher, and the other students work independently.

Phase 3 involves increasing the number of simultaneous activities. In this phase, learners practice rotating to different centers. Educators teach a short mini lesson to the whole class. Afterward, students rotate to centers that are organized as different 15-20 minute small group activities. At least some of the activities should be collaborative, such that students work together to create a tangible or intangible product. Other activities can be those that students complete independently, like writing in journals or reading or listening to audio books. Some of these center activities can be "permanent," such that the teacher can always use them whenever they organize center rotations. We suggest transforming what used to be organized as whole-class instruction into small group activities. Teachers should provide instructions at the centers on task cards, on a handout, or projected to the class so that students can refer to them. All of the activities should be those that learners can do without the teacher, but should be worthwhile and challenging. Using a rotation chart assures that students are with different peers at each center. As the students engage in the activities, teachers float around the room to assist the learners as needed.

Phase 4 is similar to Phase 3, except that one of the centers is an ICEP. That is, teachers have a center where they meet with small groups of students that they have assembled by achievement levels. At the ICEP center, teachers engage in an ICEP about a topic that incorporates aspects of ICEPs described above. The students rotate through the ICEP center and the other activity centers that are heterogeneously grouped. Before the rotations, teachers hold a briefing so that students know what to do in each of those centers and if problems arise. We advise making sure the instructions for each center are accessible. Each student should either have a piece of paper that specifies the order of their center rotations or teachers can project the center rotation schedule on the board. Teachers use debriefings to discuss what occurred in the peer-directed centers and to brainstorm how to manage problems that occurred.

Conclusion

  ICEPs are a way for teachers to engage students in activities that promote all learners using the target and their everyday languages toward goals of complex thinking and language development. We have found that students are motivated to participate in these conversations with teachers and peers and appreciate opportunities to share their experiences and learn about others. When teachers conduct ICEPs, they find it helpful to have a smaller group of students on which they can focus, such that they can assess students' understandings and language proficiencies and assist them in responsive ways. Although some preparation is needed for teachers and students to be able to hold ICEPs and use center rotations, once a system is in place, the resulting ICEPs are enriching to teachers and students and lead to engagement and learning (Yamauchi et al., 2022).

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Appendix

Sample Center Rotation Chart for 35 students

	Name	Rotation 1	Rotation 2	Rotation 3	Rotation 4	Rotation 5
1		A	B	C	D	E
2		A	C	D	E	B
3		A	D	E	B	C
4		A	E	B	C	D
5		A	B	D	E	C
6		A	C	E	D	B
7		A	D	C	B	E
8		B	A	C	D	E
9		C	A	D	E	B
10		D	A	E	C	B
11		E	A	B	D	C
12		B	A	C	E	D
13		C	A	D	B	E
14		D	A	E	C	B
15		E	B	A	D	C
16		B	C	A	E	D
17		C	D	A	B	E
18		D	E	A	C	B
19		E	B	A	D	C

20		B	C	A	E	D
21		C	D	A	B	E
22		D	E	B	A	C
23		E	B	C	A	D
24		B	C	D	A	E
25		C	D	E	A	B
26		D	E	B	A	C
27		E	B	C	A	D
28		B	C	D	A	E
29		C	D	E	B	A
30		D	E	B	C	A
31		E	B	C	D	A
32		B	C	D	E	A
33		C	D	E	B	A
34		D	E	B	C	A
35		E	B	C	D	A

Center A: ICEP with the teacher

Center B: Collaborative vocabulary activity

Center C: Listening to audio books

Center D: Journal writing

Center E: Collaborative activity to write a story together