

## *Building ELL language skills through Collaborative Reasoning*

**Summary:** English Language Learners can struggle with discussing text, missing out on a key opportunity to build their language and reading skills. In an article for *The Reading Teacher*, professors from NYU and Western Kentucky University discuss a research-based discussion strategy that has shown promising benefits for all readers and ELL students in particular.

### **Practical Applications**

The strategy detailed by the authors is called Collaborative Reasoning (CR) and it is a “peer-led, small-group discussion approach ... [in which] students read a text that raises an unresolved issue with multiple and competing points of view.” Specifically, in groups of 5-8, students wrestle with a “Big Question” raised by the text the class is reading. For instance, from the book *Stone Fox*, a Big Question might be “Should Stone Fox let little Willy win the race?” The purpose of CR is not for students to persuade others but rather for the group to cooperatively explore the tough questions raised by their text. Multiple research studies have found that CR positively impacts students’ critical thinking, social skills and academics, especially in the areas of speaking and writing (which is why it is such an effective strategy for ELLs).

CR is easy to set up. The steps are:

- **Select a complex text** – the book should have a clear point of controversy and enough reasons and evidence that students can create arguments from different angles; students need to back up their arguments in the discussion.
- **Design a Big Question** – it should be a “yes or no question requiring high-level thinking and judgment. Avoid ‘How’ questions.” In longer texts, multiple questions can be used.
- **Prepare an argument outline** – in order to best facilitate the discussion, the teacher should consider multiple positions his or her students might take and come up with evidence for each position.

Other features of an effective CR group are:

- It is student-led and free-flowing – the teacher sets up and teaches initial expectations, then sits on the ‘outside’ and observes, facilitating only as needed.
- For ELLs, a more gradual release of facilitating control as they learn how to respond to other students. Let ELLs take their time in formulating and giving responses even if it creates pauses in the discussion.
- For longer or more dense texts, utilize strong guided reading strategies to ensure that all students are coming into the CR with comprehension of the text.

### **Conclusion and Citation**

Collaborative Reasoning gives students, especially those who are ELLs, the chance to engage with text and their peers in a language-rich and rigorous way. Decades of evidence bears out that this is an effective strategy for improving students’ skills both academically and socially.

Stahl, K & Zhang, J. “Collaborative Reasoning: Language-Rich Discussions for English Learners.” *The Reading Teacher*, 65.4 (2011), pp. 257-260.  
<http://bit.ly/x3iAST> (subscription only).