

# Discussions4Learning

## Accountable Talk Equals Better Language Skills!

By Elena Zaretsky, PhD

### Dr. Zaretsky's Research with *Discussions4Learning*

For the past couple of years, *Discussions4Learning* has been a focus of Dr. Zaretsky's work. The use of the oral language development program based on dialogic teaching, using accountable talk (Michaels et al. 2008) and promoting rare word vocabulary acquisition, held a special promise for English Language Learners (ELLs) from low Socioeconomic Status (SES). ELLs attending urban Title I schools present a challenge to educators across the country. As children from different linguistic backgrounds, they enter school with very little exposure to English (Byalistok, et al. 2010, Hoff 2013). Even when controlled for SES, ELLs continuously underachieve in all areas of academics compared to their monolingual peers, with ever-widening achievement gaps (Hoff et al. 2013). Numerous authors have suggested that low English language proficiency among ELLs leads to difficulty in reading comprehension (August & Shanahan 2010), although early literacy development of ELLs may be similar to monolingual peers despite significant deficits in oral language complexity (Uchikishi 2005; Geva & Massey-Garrison 2013), deficits in vocabulary knowledge and language complexity (part of reading comprehension) (Hoff, et al. 2014; Rojas & Iglesias 2013), as well as narrative skills (Heilmann et al. 2010).

Previous research focused on explicit teaching of academic vocabulary to promote language proficiency among ELLs (Kelley, et al. 2010) in order to acquire cognitive academic language skills (CALS) necessary for decreasing academic disparity between ELLs and their monolingual peers, as well as the role of the teacher in increasing language proficiency among ELLs (Filmore & Snow, 2000). One of the more prominent areas of research in classroom discourse is the idea of creating "accountable talk" (Michaels et al. 2008) based on dialogic teaching style. Accountable talk is the process of actively listening to peers, which encourages students to state, restate, and defend their ideas through language exchanges. Therefore, **the use of a strictly oral language development program that does not require reading and writing skills, especially in the early stages of English language acquisition among ELLs, should provide special opportunity for improving English language proficiency and support acquisition of cognitive academic language skills.**

...the Low Proficiency ELLs who used *Discussions4Learning* increased their oral language skills and performed similar to the High Proficiency control group, erasing all differences in sequencing and topic maintenance of the narrative that were found at the pre-test.

### The Students, The School, and the Grades

Zaretsky's current research examines **the role of *Discussions4Learning* in improving narrative skills among ELLs from low SES attending urban Title I schools.** Narratives are considered an important and valid measure of language development widely used by researchers, speech-language pathologists, and teachers.

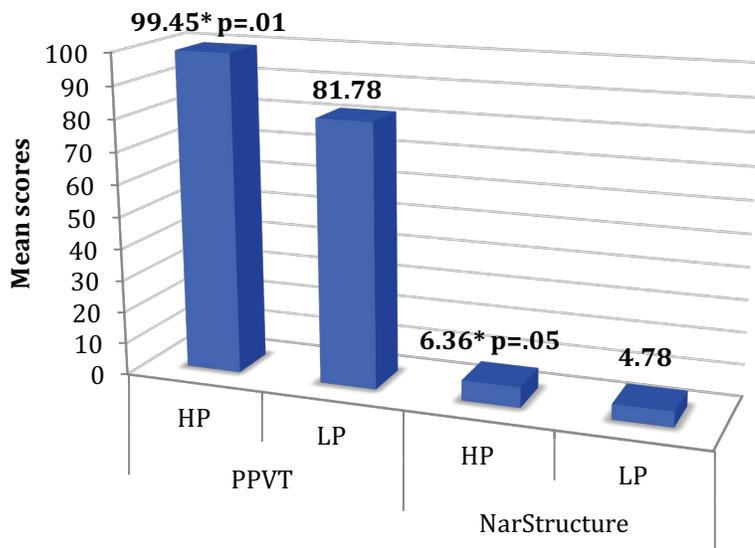
Twenty-two students from first, second, and third grade with low English proficiency (LP1) participated in the *Discussions4Learning* intervention to improve their overall language skills. Their ages were between five years and ten months old (grade one) to eleven years and ten months old (grade three). The average age was seven years and five months.

The control group that did not use *Discussions4Learning* included eleven students from the same low-income school with high English language proficiency (HP). They were between the ages of five years and ten months (grade one) and eight years and ten months (grade three), with the average age of seven years and five months. These students with high English language proficiency who followed the regular school curriculum served as the control group. (Note: There was a higher upper age-range for low proficiency students due to the group of 3<sup>rd</sup> graders who were newcomers to school and had almost no English. However, the average age was the same for both groups at seven years and five months old.)

**The Low Proficiency ELLs also surpassed the High Proficiency control group on mean length of utterance (MLU).**

At the onset of the study, both groups were given the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (PPVT4) as a measure of receptive vocabulary and were asked to produce elicited narratives based on four pictures, entitled “Sam’s Surprise”. The narratives were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed for Type/Token (T/T, where Type stands for different types of words, and Token is the total number of words used by the child for the narrative) ratio as a measure of vocabulary diversity, Mean Length of Utterance (MLU) as a measure of syntactic complexity, i.e., the use of appropriate grammatical inflections for tense, plurality, possessives, etc., retaining elements, sequences of events, references, and staying on topic.

In pre-testing, prior to the Low Proficiency ELLs using *Discussions4Learning*, the High Proficiency ELLs scored significantly higher on vocabulary ( $t(32) = -2.67, p = .01$ ), performing at the ceiling, while the Low Proficiency ELLs performed more than 1 standard deviation below the mean. (Note that at or below .05 is statistically significant, so the  $p = .01$  was highly significant in terms of the difference in pre-testing between the Low Proficiency and High Proficiency students. The High Proficiency ELLs were also better at developing overall narrative structure ( $t(32) = 1.96, p = .05$ ) in pre-testing.



**Fig 1. Differences in Vocabulary and Narrative Skills Among High and Low Proficiency ELLs.**

The PPVT standard scores are on the scale of M=100, SD=15; Total Narrative scores are M=10, SD=3.

**HP:** High Proficiency ELLs

**LP:** Low-Proficiency ELLs

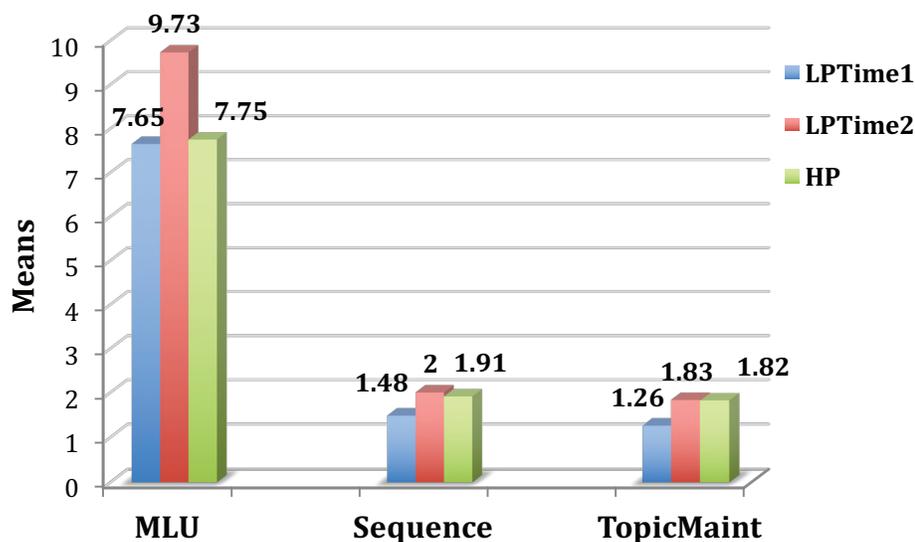
**PPVT:** Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test

**NarStructure:** Narrative Structure

The Low Proficiency group was exposed to *Discussion4Learning* for 15 weeks, 20-30 minutes, four days a week. As a post-test, children who were using *Discussions4Learning* were re-tested on their narrative abilities, using the same set of pictures for the story “Sam’s Surprise”. We reasoned that the use of the same set of pictures as a basis for the narrative is appropriate, given the time elapsed from the initial testing. It also provided the opportunity for comparison of the same exact skills before the experimental Low Proficiency group began lessons with *Discussions4Learning*, as compared to after.

The results were very encouraging: **Low Proficiency ELLs who participated in 15 weeks of lessons with *Discussion-***

*s4Learning* significantly increased their mean length of utterances (MLU), which signifies growth in linguistic complexity ( $p=.02$ ). These students were able to better sequence their narratives ( $p=.05$ ) and stay on topic ( $p=.04$ ). Moreover, compared with the initial data from the High Proficiency control students who did not participate in the *Discussions4Learning* lessons, the Low Proficiency ELLs who used *Discussions4Learning* increased their oral language skills and performed similar to the High Proficiency control group, erasing all differences in sequencing and topic maintenance of the narratives that were found at the pre-test. The Low Proficiency ELLs surpassed the High Proficiency group on mean length of utterance (MLU). These results cannot be accounted for by maturation, but rather by directly attributing oral language development through *Discussions4Learning* as a program that supports academically productive talk.



**Fig. 2 Post-test results on narrative development**

**MLU:** Mean length of utterance

**LPTIME1:** Low Proficiency students prior to *Discussions4Learning*

**LPTIME2:** Low Proficiency students after 15 weeks of *Discussions4Learning*

**HP:** High Proficiency students (control group, no *Discussions4Learning*)

**TopicMaint:** Topic Maintenance

**Sample of Elicited Narrative from a Low Proficiency English Language Learner prior to using *Discussions4Learning*:**

**Sam’s Surprise** (2<sup>nd</sup> grader at Level 1 English Language proficiency)

There is a car.  
 And dad was driving a car.  
 And then a girl wanted a puppy.  
 And then she looked at the puppy.

**Post-test from the same Low Proficiency (Level 1) ELL after 15 weeks of *Discussions4Learning***

Once upon a time, there was a man and a girl.  
 They went inside the car, and they drove.  
 Then, Sam saw a puppy shop, and she wanted her favorite pets.  
 Her dad and the girl got out of the car and saw a puppy.  
 And she wanted that puppy.  
 Her dad said, “I don’t know.”  
 And so, they got a puppy and she was holding it all day.  
 They went back to their house.  
 And then she was playing with the puppy.

## A Brief Biography of Dr. Elena Zaretsky

For more than two decades, Dr. Elena Zaretsky has been working with children, focusing on language and early literacy development. As a Board certified and licensed Speech-Language pathologist, she serviced children with Autism Spectrum Disorder, as well as the multicultural and multi-linguistic populations in the Boston Public School system. After graduating from Boston University with a PhD in Human Development and a focus on Developmental Psycholinguistics, Dr. Zaretsky became a faculty member in the Department of Communication Sciences and Disorders at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, and continued in the Department of Education at the University of Massachusetts Boston.

She is currently a Visiting Assistant Professor of Psychology, Research Scientist and Scholar at Clark University. Dr. Zaretsky has authored numerous articles in the area of language and literacy development among typically developing children, children with language disorders, and bilingual children. In addition, she examined the role of orthography (spelling) in the development of early literacy skills through comparative studies between English- and Croatian-speaking children, while also looking at the cross-linguistic transfer of language skills among bilingual children. She has presented her work at national and international conferences and has been an invited speaker at international symposiums and universities. The collaboration between Clark University and local public schools provides Dr. Zaretsky with ample opportunities for research in language development among English Language Learners (ELLs) of low social economic status (SES).



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