WORKING WITH
ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS
SECOND EDITION
To Rich,

for thirty-five years

of friendship, music, and adventure
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To Andrea, Rebecca, Brian, Maggie, and Shep, for their patience and nuzzling while I lived in Writing & Revising Land.
Since publication of the first edition in 2000, many kind readers have taken time from busy lives to email feedback on the book. Their notes of support often included a wish list for what they’d like to see in a follow-up edition. More feedback and wish list items came from my graduate students at the University of San Francisco and from teachers in my staff development workshops in the public schools. Those reader suggestions, plus the need to update terms and resources with the passage of time, drove the changes in the second edition.

The biggest change—and the one most often requested by readers—is the addition of a Discussion and Application section at the end of each chapter. Discussion questions focus on the chapter’s key concepts and can be used for personal reflection or for faculty-wide dialogue. Application items ask teachers to act on the concepts, putting specific strategies and techniques to work in the classroom. Other changes and additions in the second edition include:

• updated and expanded teacher resources section
• updated and expanded reference list
• updated and expanded acronymn list
• English language learner (ELL) student samples
• teacher tools and templates
• teacher/program self-assessment charts and checklists

I’m glad to report that the heart of the book—the classroom stories and teacher coaching reflections—remains unchanged, again, per reader suggestion and consensus. And the original top ten questions are back for another run. Wherever I teach or consult, these are still the most frequently asked questions by teachers new to working with English language learners.

Thanks to everyone who offered thoughts on the first edition and shared stories of your many successes and continuing challenges in the schools.

I invite and welcome reader feedback on the second edition.
How do I get my reluctant speakers to speak English?

**READER’S GUIDE**

English Language Learner Issue: Increasing second language speaking

**Key Ideas**
- Increase time and opportunities for meaningful talk
- Reduce teacher talk
- Incorporate students’ personal interests
- Provide emotional “safe ground” for language risk-taking
- Encourage English speaking while honoring students’ first language

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Content:</th>
<th>Music; soccer; drama</th>
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**The Classroom Story**

**Holdouts**

The dog padded into the classroom and sniffed. He quickly separated all the pertinent smells: The frogs were in the back, hamsters to the right, the teacher’s lunch—turkey on whole wheat—was in a drawer in a desk up front, and all the second graders were in the middle. Mr. Nakano, or “the Dog Guy” as he was affectionately known at Hampton School, gave a gentle tug on the animal’s thick, braided leash. Nico stopped and stood motionless for a moment, then swished his broad tail a few times and sat down.

He looked friendly, but this was the biggest dog any of Cathy Sobil’s kids had ever seen, too big for them to get up and pet right away. Even
Josh and Oscar, who were almost constantly in motion, stayed in their desks. The Saint Bernard weighed close to two hundred pounds and was about the same height sitting as a second grader was standing. The Dog Guy stressed how gentle Nico was, but kids were not so sure. It looked like you were a goner if he sat on you and you could probably drown in his slobber.

Mr. Nakano, the husband of one of the Hampton teachers, popped into the K–2 classes about once a month with a new dog for a show-and-tell. He ran a part-time dog-walking service in town and wanted to “share the wealth.” Few teachers minded the short, impromptu visits. Students loved seeing and learning about the different breeds. The Dog Guy was a walking encyclopedia of pooch facts and was also great with kids. A few students were invited to the front of the classroom for a quick pet, and then Mr. Nakano asked for questions. Hands waved wildly all around the classroom. Bernabe asked something in Spanish. The Dog Guy told the class his Spanish was a little rusty, so one of Cathy’s bilingual students translated the question, “How much does Nico eat every day?” A barrage of other questions followed.

Over half the class (eleven kids) spoke Spanish as a first language. Of the eleven, three were almost as comfortable in English as Spanish. The remaining eight had tested out as LEP (Limited English Proficient) on the district’s English language proficiency instrument, scoring at the beginning, early intermediate, or intermediate level. Cathy noted that nearly all the second language learners asked the Dog Guy a question about Nico, mostly in English. But Erica, Gustavo, and Ofelia held back.

Holding back in English across a wide range of activities had been the pattern for the three kids since the start of the year. They spoke a few words of English now and then, but only if directly encouraged by the teacher or a classmate. Cathy’s other beginners were “on track” and progressing nicely in oral English. But here it was November and all three remained reluctant speakers, especially Ofelia. Even Nico, the “gentle giant,” had been unable to provoke an English response from them. By the end of the school year, all would be using English, including “The Silent Ofelia” as Cathy had secretly dubbed her. Yet each would follow a different path into second language speaking.

**Erica**

While students completed book response journals, Cathy asked Erica to join her at the listening center and help unpack a box of CDs. Every week
the center showcased a different genre of music. As each CD was unpacked, Cathy commented briefly on the cover art, hoping to spark some conversation with Erica. Erica took the selections—Cajun, rockabilly, big band swing, Latin jazz, blues, baroque—and arranged them in two neat rows across the center's table. Teacher and student put on headphones and gave each of the CDs a quick spin. Erica listened politely to the teacher's running commentary on every selection, offered a one- or two-word response to the occasional question, but generally remained quiet throughout. This isn't working, Cathy thought. She had seen Erica several times at the center, eyes closed and head back, mouthing words and humming along with Ray Charles, Chavela Vargas, or The Beach Boys. The girl obviously loved music and Cathy thought going through the CDs and letting her choose the week's selection might get her talking. But so far, nothing.

The box was nearly empty when Erica fished out a CD by Irish fiddler Martin Hayes. The cover was pleasant but did not seem particularly talk-inducing. Hayes stood alone, pensive, hugging his violin to his chest. Erica stared intently at the picture, then suddenly opened up. “I know, Teacher! I know violín!” She popped the case and slid the disk into the player. A smile spread ear to ear. Then more language: “In México, in Michoacán, and I do the violín! And Alejandro, my brother he play!” Over the next few weeks, music, and violin music in particular, became Erica's focal point for English speaking. She brought her violin to school and gave a miniconcert for the class with her fourth-grade brother. With Cathy's help, Erica prepared and practiced one or two sentences to say before playing each song. Her short introductions provided the name of the tune, the genre, tempo, and country of origin. She learned the English names for some parts of the violin—tuning pegs, fingerboard, f-holes, soundpost—and used those terms to answer classmates' questions after the concert.

Each Friday, students reviewed the week's CD selection, sometimes orally and sometimes in writing. After the success of her miniconcert, Erica began volunteering oral reviews almost weekly—whether the selection contained a violin or not. Her reviews, brief at first, quickly expanded. By the beginning of December, Cathy estimated that Erica had doubled her English output; by the end of February, she had quadrupled it. She was still talking music, but also math, science, history, the works. Erica was now using English with the teacher, with her classmates, and with the Dog Guy, who for balance sake, rolled into Hampton the next month with a Chihuahua named Betty.
Gustavo
Gustavo’s T-shirt said it all: I DON’T PLAY SOCCER . . . I LIVE IT! Cathy knew the boy would play soccer twenty-four hours a day if school and his parents would allow it. He was on two teams and spent most weekdays and nearly every weekend on a soccer field, either at school or at one of the regional parks. Maybe Gustavo’s love for soccer, Cathy reasoned, was like Erica’s violin music—a good and handy route to English speaking. In PE, she had the boy help teach the class a variety of soccer skills. Unfortunately, Gustavo used little English to explain the finer points of ball handling—trapping, dribbling, passing, heading, and shooting—in large part the teacher realized, because his demonstrations were so good, only minimal explanation was needed. Cathy went back to the drawing board.

In her daily pull-aside ELD (English Language Development) sessions, the teacher incorporated several soccer-related activities, one on Pele, the legendary Brazilian star whom she knew Gustavo idolized. She made sure the class library was stocked with a number of soccer magazines. She also had the kids describe clips from a soccer blooper video one day. Finally, Cathy had a parent volunteer tape a soccer story that Gustavo could listen to as he followed along in the book. The story had lots of pictures and used language slightly above the boy’s present English level. Surely, Gustavo would want to speak with her—or the parent volunteer—about the book, which another student had labeled “super good.” Gustavo talked about the book, but only a little, and only at Cathy’s urging.

A month of playing to Gustavo’s soccer interest had paid few dividends. Cathy detected a small increase in the amount of English the boy was speaking, but that may have been wishful thinking on her part, she admitted, after putting so much work into the sports activities. Gustavo still spoke Spanish almost exclusively with his Spanish-speaking classmates and used English only when he had to. Cathy eased off the soccer, but continued to “pull” the boy into English with ELD sessions and lots of interactive work with native speakers.

By the end of the year, Gustavo’s English had taken flight. He now used as much English in class as Spanish. What had happened in the interim—what spurred English talk so effectively, Cathy believed—was friendship. Over winter break, Gustavo had become best buddies with Marty. Their families attended the same church and began socializing. Marty joined one of Gustavo’s soccer teams. Sleepovers and dual-family
barbecues and camping trips followed. In and out of school, the boys became inseparable. They spoke mostly English together, a terrific help for Gustavo’s second language development. But to her delight, Cathy discovered language was running in both directions. Marty was starting to use some Spanish, not just with Gustavo, but with several other Spanish speakers in the class.

**Ofelia**

Ofelia was another kettle of kid fish, thought Cathy. Erica and Gustavo were reluctant to speak English; Ofelia was unwilling. Playing to what appeared to be a strong interest—science—proved of no help. The girl stayed tight-lipped in English with or without magnets, microscopes, or plant experiments. She readily responded in Spanish when Cathy used one of the bilingual students as a bridge, but rarely in English. Socially, Ofelia had isolated herself from half the class. She was as uncommunicative with her native English-speaking peers as she was with the teacher—not unfriendly, but retiring and painfully shy. Cathy began hooking Ofelia with Susana any time kids worked in pairs. Susana was congenial and low-key. She was also bilingual, a little more comfortable in English than Spanish. The pair chemistry was good, but not magic. After a month, Ofelia spoke more English with Susana than anyone else in the classroom, but that still meant at most only a few sentences a day. Based on Ofelia’s responses in ELD sessions and other classroom activities, Cathy knew the girl’s comprehension of oral English was good and getting better. And she was starting to write some in English.

But speaking progress was glacial. When Ofelia did use English, she worried about how she sounded and how she put words together. She often followed up an English utterance with, “Is OK, that word, Teacher?” or “This is good when I say . . . ?” The girl was scared to death of getting English wrong—in front of the teacher and in front of her classmates.

Given the girl’s second language “fear-factor,” Cathy never dreamed Ofelia would open up on stage. Cathy read daily to kids, right after lunch. Books the class found especially appealing got a second or third read, sometimes with students acting out the storyline in tandem with the teacher’s reading. For the playacting, students went to the “costume closet,” a large cabinet in the back of the room, and pulled out appropriate items. The closet was stuffed with a wondrous array of wigs, shoes, thrift store clothing, props, puppets, rubber animal noses, and masks. Kids
took turns as actors and could change their nonspeaking part into a speaking one if they wanted and if they could make their words “help the reading.” The speaking parts typically amplified the basic storyline or took it in new and unexpected directions, which both teacher and kids found exciting.

For *Lon Po Po: A Red-Riding Hood Story from China* by Ed Young (1989), Ofelia played one of the three sisters who are home alone when visited by a very hungry wolf pretending to be their Po Po—their grandmother. Dressed in a long black wig, Chinese print blouse, and hanging on to a rope and a basket the sisters use to outwit (and kill) the wolf at the end of the story, Ofelia suddenly interjected, “You are bad wolf!” Cathy immediately abandoned the text, took the cue, and ran with it. She turned to Charles who was playing the wolf and asked him, “OK, Wolf, what do you say to that?”

Ofelia argued back and forth with the wolf in English for no more than thirty seconds, and only that one time in the story, but it was a start, Cathy reminded herself. And there would be more plays. Lots of them.

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**Reflections**

**Car Show**

Teaching would be a lot easier if all kids used the same car and the same road to get to their second language. If all students drove new Ferraris or old Ford clunkers we would know their traveling speed—fast or slow. And if they all took Highway Ten and never Highways One through Nine, we would know which part of the road map to highlight to help them along. But kids move into their second language at different speeds and in different ways. That fact makes teaching a lot more exciting—imagine a car show with a hundred different models and another with only one or two—but a lot tougher.

Cathy saw Erica, Gustavo, and Ofelia moving at a slower clip with English speaking when compared to most other second language learners. It looked like Erica and Gustavo were driving Ford Fairlanes, and Ofelia, maybe a Model T. Cathy felt all three needed a gentle push down the road. But what kind of push for each child?
In our coaching dialogues, Cathy and I reflected on two essentials for increasing second language speaking—time to talk and a reason to talk. Time to talk meant more than giving kids time to motor comfortably down the developmental highway. It also meant providing them time and plenty of opportunities to talk in the classroom. Cathy told me one of the first requests she made after coming to Hampton was for new furniture, exchanging individual student desks for round tables. The tables made it easier for students to work together, to speak together. Though students sometimes worked alone or as a whole class, most activities were collaborative in nature and done in pairs or small groups. Cathy’s favoring of collaborative, constructivist work over teacher-driven, teacher-delivered learning produced a class where kids talked as much and often more than the teacher. More talk and its flip side, more listening, meant more time for students to acquire the raw materials of speech—sounds and words tied to appropriate meanings, structures, and settings. More talk gave kids something to talk WITH. But why talk, why pick up the raw material, use it, and extend it, if there wasn’t something you wanted to really talk about?

A reason to talk meant choosing and structuring activities in ways that made talk meaningful, activities where students felt a need to talk, couldn’t help but talk. This in turn required curriculum content that engaged kids and reflected personal interests. Cathy took time to find out what Erica, Gustavo, and Ofelia enjoyed in life—music, soccer, and science experiments—and then incorporated those interests as best she could into the program. Meaningful talk means less “compliance” talk, the sort of talk I sometimes see in traditional ELD sessions. In such sessions, students respond to a series of teacher prompts, for example: What color is the horse? Tell Alfredo where you live. Ask Abdul if he likes strawberry ice cream. What did the girls do yesterday? Students dutifully comply and fulfill each teacher request to speak, but do so with the fewest words possible, rarely volunteer information or pose questions, and are glassy-eyed and detached much of the time. May the God of Teacher Coaches forgive me, but whenever I have to sit through a “Zombie ELD” session like that I always pray for a fire drill—something, anything, to get me and the kids out of the classroom.

Cathy worked hard at providing Erica, Gustavo, and Ofelia opportunities for meaningful talk, in and out of the ELD sessions. Unfortunately, honoring and exploiting personal student interests cannot guarantee English speaking miracles. Music-related activities were key to Erica’s
speaking development. Soccer- and science-based activities for Gustavo and Ofelia, however, never paid off as Cathy anticipated. Kids have a remarkable way of turning on the second language tap when and where they want, regardless of teachers’ carefully orchestrated attempts to get them to turn it on sometime and somewhere else. Gustavo's English poured out with a classmate rather than with the teacher. For whatever reason—both needing a confidant, the soccer connection, a match of temperaments—Gustavo and Marty clicked. Activities with his new buddy provided Gustavo with hours and hours of comprehensible input—understandable messages—fundamental to developing communicative competence in a second language (Krashen 1985a, 2003).

Seeing a student gain so much language away from school can be sobering for some teachers, especially when the teacher has put a ton of time and energy into “maximizing language acquisition in the classroom,” to quote Cathy. Cathy's efforts complemented Gustavo’s out-of-class learning, but could never have replaced it.

From Drills to Romance
In workshops and coaching sessions, I sometimes tell the Maricela story to reinforce the importance of outside, learn-with-a-friend language acquisition. Maricela was a young woman I went ga-ga for on my first trip to Mexico as a college kid about thirty-five years ago. I hit Mexico with enough Spanish to order a plate of enchiladas and that was about it. I had been a bomb-out case with the audiolingual method in high school Spanish. The method emphasized mimicry, rote memorization, pattern drills, and canned dialogues, and left me—and thousands of other students around the country—with little second language for real communication (Brown 2007). My first year in college Spanish was better, but not by much. We spent the majority of time listening to the instructor's elaborate grammar explanations and doing Spanish-English literature translations. There were occasional opportunities to use the second language for authentic conversation, but they were few and far between.

Maricela, on the other hand, provided me with all the authentic conversation I could have hoped for. I met her at a restaurant in Mexico City and for two months I lived and breathed Spanish with her—at dinners at her parents' house, at concerts, museums, markets, archaeological ruins, and on travels to San Miguel de Allende and Oaxaca. Within a few weeks, I was speaking Spanish—not perfect Spanish by a long shot, but Spanish that got my basic points across, something I had been unable to
do after several years of formal school Spanish. My second language take-off was hardly mysterious. I had the two key items that Cathy always tried to put in place for her English language learners: time to speak (round-the-clock) and a real reason to speak (friendship, romance, and culture).

Some teachers and districts, rather than leave friendships and the sort of language learning that springs from them to chance, have formalized the process. Often called ESL Buddy Programs, the programs hook each new immigrant second language learner and family with an EO (English Only) student and family. New and established kids and families socialize and discuss the ins and outs of school. And as was the case with Gustavo and Marty, they often turn language acquisition into a two-way street.

Taming the Crow
Ofelia frequently comes to mind when I’m asked about attention to language form. She is a great example of the kid whose editing crow is a real squawker. The editing crow sits on the shoulder of lots of kids—and lots of adults too—and listens for language errors. Any error detected in pronunciation, comparative adjectives, or word order, for example, and he screams bloody murder. He is ever watchful, always on guard for the speaker’s deviation from standard English form.

Sometimes we need to be squawked at, of course, need to pay close attention to language form. Imagine not monitoring your speaking for slang and double entendres when making a formal presentation at an education conference. Or imagine the student who never gives a second thought to verb forms, unconcerned that the use of *I go* for *I went* could get in the way of communication. Form clearly matters. And research suggests that form-focused instruction within communicative-based, student-centered programs can increase students’ rate and level of L2 acquisition (Doughty 2003; Williams 2005). When used and listened to judiciously, a good editing crow can help our speaking and our writing be more effective. Unfortunately, kids like Ofelia who overedit, whose crow shrieks at the drop of a final consonant or a blown phoneme, are so focused on language form, so worried about making errors that they often speak as little as possible. We need to use and risk with language to grow with language. But not speaking has its advantages: We stay on emotionally safe ground. We make fewer mistakes, and fewer mistakes can mean less criticism and hence, less embarrassment.

Knowing exactly what constitutes safe ground for one child versus another is tricky. Cathy told me she was close to passing over Ofelia for a
part in the Lon Po Po drama because of the girl's language shyness. She changed her mind at the last minute and invited her up on stage. Though Cathy and I were never sure, perhaps the read-aloud drama enabled Ofelia to stay safe while risking in her second language. The sister character—not Ofelia—could make all the English errors she wanted. Either that or the girl really hated wolves! Regardless, the drama activity provided a good little push down the speaking road.

Postscript
I run across fewer and fewer teachers these days who see a student’s primary language as an impediment to learning, something that must be “rooted out” and crushed as soon as possible. But they exist. I met a middle school PE instructor a few months ago who assigns ten push-ups to any student he catches speaking a language other than English. The fellow told me he believed the policy was “equitable” because he doled out the same punishment to kids regardless of language used—Spanish, Cantonese, Farsi, Korean, Vietnamese, Navajo, what have you.

So, here’s a tip of the hat to Cathy and all teachers who encourage English speaking, who give the gentle push when needed, but do so without ever denigrating students’ first language or suggesting they give that language up in any way. Thanks! ¡Gracias!

Discussion and Application

Discussion
1. No student group is ever monolithic. Any group we might name—Kinders, special ed, gifted, at-risk teens, 11th graders who salsa dance—contains students with a range of interests, experiences, personalities, skills, and aptitudes. This helps explain why within our group of English beginners, some students talk from day one, others gradually open up over several months, and still others are so reluctant to speak we’re not sure they’ll ever start.

Think about your own group of English language beginners. How many charge-ahead-from-the-git-go speakers do you have? Gradually developing speakers? Reluctant or highly reluctant speakers? Set aside concerns about the accuracy of L2 talk for a moment, and reflect on the frequency and quantity of talk. How often and how much are your beginners using English? Are they using their second language across the curriculum? Initiating in English? Asking questions? Risking mistakes in
English? Volunteering comments or speaking only when prompted or questioned?

2. Some students go through a mostly silent phase of several weeks or even months at the start of their L2 journey. They may use memorized words, phrases, and sentences known as formulaic language (Wood 2002), but are generally “quiet as church mice” as one teacher described a couple of her new immigrant fourth graders to me. They soak up language, but don’t produce a lot. Other students, depending on interest level and background, may use varying amounts of English in different academic settings—completely close-mouthed during a literature circle discussion, for example, and then nonstop talkative during a rock and mineral sorting.

Beyond our silent phase and situation-specific nontalkers, however, we may still have a few students, including some adults, who plateau out—at least in the classroom—at the beginning and early intermediate levels. They start and stay mostly silent. While their classmates move from formulaic “chunks” to full-fledged discourse, using longer and longer stretches of language for extended communication, our plateau students remain stuck at an earlier developmental level. These are our L2 minimalists, typically favoring holophrastic forms like, “Take!” over the lengthier and more communicative, “I want to take the hamster home this weekend!”

What specific activities and strategies are you using with your reluctant/plateau students to increase the frequency and quantity of L2 speaking? What’s working? What’s not?

3. Think about how your district identifies, assists, and monitors the L2 progress of its highly reluctant speakers. Are the procedures effective? Are human resources being used in an efficient way? Are some students falling through the cracks and not getting the help they need?

Application

1. Though far from a sure bet, as Cathy would quickly remind us, playing to student interests opens the L2 speaking door for many second language learners. But it’s hard to play to those interests if we don’t know what they are. One quick way to learn about what students like to do in and out of school is through a short interest inventory, either oral, drawn, or written. Inventories can be as simple as a short “Favorite Activities” list as in
2. Apart from incorporating student interests, consider the ways Cathy and other teachers increase L2 speaking, including:

- making content engaging
- favoring authentic talk over compliance talk
- emphasizing fluency over accuracy
- helping students know when and when not to listen to the “editing crow”
- having students share orally with a pair buddy or small group rather than the whole class
- having students talk through a puppet or role-play character
- configuring furniture for student-to-student talk
- paying attention to students’ affective needs
- never forcing L2 production
- encouraging the use of second and first languages
Name ___________________ Date ____________

Circle your THREE favorite interests.

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Figure 4–2. Interest inventory. Students give specifics. For example, for collecting: U.S. and Mexican coins. Music: playing guitar with my sister. Reading: manga (Japanese comics) like Inu-Yasha (1998).
• doing more collaborative activities
• reducing teacher talk

Choose a new or infrequently used item from the list above and implement it in your classroom. Keep a daily journal noting any significant changes in the frequency and quantity of L2 use by your reluctant speakers. Include periodic verbatim samples to document student growth. If there's little or no change after a couple weeks, keep that item, but add another to the mix. Turning an L2 speaker from reluctant to enthusiastic takes time—and a variety of strategies!

3. If your school or district lacks an ESL buddy program, get one going! The programs come in all shapes and sizes to help newly arrived immigrant students and their families adjust to a new culture, learn English, and succeed in school. Investigate existing buddy programs in neighboring districts and beyond. Determine what program elements would work best for your given population, then put a small proposal together and formally submit your ideas to The Powers That Be. Hint: The program will have a much better chance getting off the ground—and being effective—if immigrant students and family members are involved at all stages of the planning, implementation, and assessment process.
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