You know, my students never get a chance to talk, especially now that we have to concentrate so much on testing. We have to focus so much on decoding... on strategies.... I feel they don’t get to think and talk about what they’re reading. I feel like I’m always lecturing to them, telling them what to do, what to think, what the right answers are, just so we can make sure to cover all the materials. (Mrs. Lehmann, fifth-grade teacher)

Mrs. Lehmann’s description of her fifth-grade classroom probably holds true for many American classrooms, especially classrooms serving low-income English learners (ELs). (The teacher and student names used throughout the article are pseudonyms.) Fast-paced, low-level question–answer routines limit these students’ opportunities to talk, formulate their own questions, and express extended ideas about complex issues (Gersten, 1999). One alternative approach to classroom discussion, Collaborative Reasoning (CR), effectively provides a forum for extended meaningful communication and promotes language development and thinking skills of all students, including ELs.

What Is Collaborative Reasoning?
CR is a peer-led, small-group discussion approach that aims to promote intellectual and personal engagement in elementary school classrooms (Clark, Anderson, Kuo, Kim, Archodidou, & Nguyen-Jahiel, 2003). In CR, students read a text that raises an unresolved issue with multiple and competing points of view. The selected texts contain multilayered issues such as friendship, family obligations, justice, fairness, duty, equality, honesty and integrity, winning and losing, or environmental policy. Students then gather in groups of five to eight to deliberate on the big question raised by the text. Examples of big questions are, “Should Stone Fox let little Willy win the race?” from the story titled Stone Fox (Gardiner, 1980) and “Are zoos good places for animals?” from A Trip to the Zoo (Reznitskaya & Clark, 2004). Students are expected to take positions on the big question, support the positions with reasons and evidence, carefully listen, evaluate, respond to one another’s arguments, and challenge one another when they disagree. The goal of CR is not to reach a consensus or win a debate. The purpose is for students to cooperatively search for resolutions and develop thoughtful opinions about the topic.

CR discussion features open participation. That is, students talk without raising hands and waiting to be nominated to speak by the teacher. Students learn to take turns and help each other to avoid interrupting and stay on topic, just as adults would in a serious conversation. Students are expected to manage their own discussions. Ideally, students have control over what to say and when to say it, control over the

Jie Zhang is an assistant professor of educational research at Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green, USA; e-mail jie.zhang@wku.edu.
Katherine A. Dougherty Stahl is an assistant professor of literacy at New York University, USA; e-mail kay.stahl@nyu.edu.

The department editor welcomes reader comments. Katherine A. Dougherty Stahl is an assistant professor of literacy at New York University, USA; e-mail kay.stahl@nyu.edu.
topic, and the interpretive authority to evaluate the ideas being presented on the floor.

The teacher facilitates the discussion “from the side” and provides scaffolding when needed. The scaffolding strategies include modeling and thinking out loud, prompting, clarifying, challenging, reminding, summarizing and refocusing, encouraging, fostering independence, and debriefing (Anderson, Chinn, Waggoner, & Nguyen-Jahiel, 1998). Although teacher intervention is infrequent, the teacher’s scaffolding moves have a critical impact on student independent thinking and social participation (Jadallah et al., 2011).

What Does the Research Say About Collaborative Reasoning?

Research spanning more than two decades gives us evidence that CR positively affects student thinking, learning, and social skills. In comparison to recitations in the same classrooms, students talk a lot more and the talk is of higher quality in CR (Chinn, Anderson, & Waggoner, 2001). Without receiving any writing instruction, students who have participated in CR write better reflective essays than comparable students who have not participated in CR (e.g., Reznitskaya, Anderson, McNurlen, Nguyen-Jahiel, Archodidou, & Kim, 2001). Given more social and intellectual space, student leaders emerge to facilitate and guide the discussion (Li et al., 2007). CR works with all kinds of students, regardless of gender, race, socioeconomic status, or country (e.g., Dong, Anderson, Kim, & Li, 2008). CR is successful in most classrooms, and students quickly adapt to it.

Promoting English Language Development and Thinking Skills for English Learners Through Collaborative Reasoning

Programs featuring authentic and rich language usage benefit ELs (e.g., Kucer & Silva, 1999). For example, engaging in a classroom discussion approach, called Instructional Conversations, in which students and teachers interact with one another in a joint meaning-make process, improved fourth- and fifth-grade Spanish-speaking ELs’ reading comprehension and sophisticated understandings of significant concepts such as friendship (Saunders & Goldenberg, 1999).

Similarly, it stood to reason that rich CR discussions would be beneficial to ELs’ language and literacy development. Two fifth-grade classrooms in Illinois, one mainstream classroom and one sheltered bilingual classroom, received CR, and another two comparable control classrooms in the same school continued their regular English language arts lessons (Zhang, Anderson, & Nguyen-Jahiel, 2010). Students in the mainstream classrooms, a mix of primarily Latino and African American, received instruction only in English. The bilingual classrooms served Latino students who, because of their limited English proficiency, sometimes required Spanish support.

Students in the CR classrooms participated in two discussions per week for a total of eight CR discussions over one month. After the intervention, all students were assessed on English listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Students also completed two questionnaires about their motivation and attitudes toward classroom discussion.

Students who participated in CR outperformed their control counterparts, who did not receive CR, in all four areas. The differences were most significant in speaking and writing. Student speaking proficiency was measured by a storytelling task using a wordless picture book. Stories produced by CR students were much longer and more coherent. Reflective essays written by the CR students in response to a novel text were longer, had more diverse vocabulary, and contained a greater number of satisfactory reasons, counter arguments, and uses of text evidence. According to the questionnaires, CR students were more excited about discussions, perceived more benefits from discussions, and had more positive attitudes toward learning English than their control peers.

Collaborative Reasoning: An Illustration

To illustrate how CR works in ELs’ classrooms, we have chosen an excerpt from the first CR discussion of one group in the mainstream class (Zhang et al., 2010). Five Latino/a ELs and two African American students were discussing Ronald Morgan Goes to Bat (Giff, 1990).

Mrs. Lehmann: Stated expectations: (a) make eye contact, (b) listen carefully, (c) do not talk over
one another, (d) do not raise hands; relinquished control: “I am NOT part of your group. I am sitting OUTSIDE of your group.” OK. You’ve read Ronald Morgan Goes to Bat. And your big question is, Should the coach let Ronald Morgan play with the team?

Isabela: I think no. I think he should just let him practice and then when he is better he can get to play.

Shantell: I think he should let him play because it is not fair everybody get a chance and maybe he will get better one day.

Yasmin: I think he should get more opportunity.

Shantell: At least one or two opportunities.

Antonio: I think he should let him play, too.

Charlayne: I think the coach should give him one or two chances and if he is not better by those chances, he should not get play.

Shantell: I think the coach should give him like one or two chances but if he does not get better at least a little practice a little more.

Students: True.

Jorge: I think Ronald Morgan needs to practice a lot. He needs more confidence and so and stops closing his eyes.

[Several lines omitted]

Shantell: Does anyone has anything else to say?

[Several lines omitted]

Mrs. Lehmann: So all of you think that he should be allowed to play in the team?

Students: Yes.

Mrs. Lehmann: There are a lot of things that Ronald Morgan can’t do. Like, for example, he is afraid of the ball. If he is in the field, then he is supposed to be fielding the ball and if he is afraid of it, his team isn’t gonna win. It’s gonna make his team lose. Don’t all the sports teams wanna win, isn’t that why they play games?

Students: Yes.

Mrs. Lehmann: So if he is gonna prevent his team from winning and the coach obviously wants his team to win, then why should the coach let him play?

Although this was the group’s very first CR discussion, it already contained features typical of a CR discussion. With clear expectations and explicit norms, the students were immediately able to take the reins, manage their own turn-taking, and address the big question. Students provided good reasons to support their positions. They picked up on and responded to each other’s contributions. However, when the discussion became one-sided, Mrs. Lehmann intervened and challenged the group.

Collaborative Reasoning in English Learners’ Classrooms

Teachers who have used CR expressed that it is easy to implement. Nonetheless, successful CR discussions do not come naturally without careful planning and appropriate facilitation. These tips are important in planning for a CR discussion:

1. Select a complex text—A good CR text should raise a controversy or unresolved issue that is clear, important, and relevant to students. The text should have ample reasons and evidence for both sides of the issue.

2. Design a big question—Make it a yes or no question requiring high-level thinking and judgment. Avoid “How” questions. Varied
big questions can be posed for different sections of a long text.
3. Prepare an argument outline—Teachers should read the text carefully and consider multiple perspectives on the big question. Preparing an argument outline of the possible positions, reasons, and supporting evidence is most useful to evaluate student reasoning and better facilitate CR discussions.

Teachers should be mindful about several features of discussion dynamics in a bilingual class containing only ELs. First, discussions among students with limited English proficiency tend to be slow-paced and less fluid. It is not surprising because the students have difficulty expressing complex ideas in a less familiar language while still formulating their thoughts. Teachers should allow students time to work through these hiccups themselves, even though this creates pauses in the discussion. We have observed bilingual students’ progression from simple yes–no positions to more extended and complex language usage when given more intellectual and social latitude. It is also possible that accommodations that have supported conversations in classrooms with novice readers and challenged readers may be helpful in facilitating rich conversations with ELs (see Maloch, 2005, and Stahl, 2009).

Second, EL students may appear reluctant or less able to elaborate on ideas. They tend to generate short responses and wait for the teacher’s evaluation. It is important for the teacher to establish the norms for open participation at the very beginning as Mrs. Lehmann did and gradually relinquish control as students become more skilled in responding to one another and in fulfilling new roles.

Giving students the chance to take part in evaluating their own discussion in the debriefing session at the end of each discussion also helps students to adapt to CR more quickly.

Third, for longer texts (e.g., book chapters), students may need guided reading to ensure deep understanding of the text and better prepare for the CR discussion. In our study, bilingual students were observed rehearsing to themselves before participating overtly. Encouraging students to write their ideas in a literature response log before Instructional Conversations resulted in increased student participation and story comprehension, particularly for students with limited English proficiency (Saunders & Goldenberg, 1999). This same strategy may work for CR if spontaneous and genuine discussions are not sacrificed.

As Mrs. Lehmann reflected, “When we do CR, I see my students thinking critically. They’re evaluating what they’re reading and they’re evaluating what others in their groups are saying.” CR helps to bridge a gap in the education of ELs, providing them opportunities elsewhere limited in today’s schools to use English and to develop high-level reading and critical thinking.

Note
The authors wish to thank Kim Nguyen-Jahiel for providing insightful comments on the first draft of this manuscript.

REFERENCES

LITERATURE CITED