

Bridging the achievement gap for English language learners

Manor ISD narrows the achievement gap by accelerating academic language growth with Speak Agent

At the fast-growing Manor Independent School District located outside of Austin, Texas, over 38 percent of students are English language learners. These students are expected to master the same standards as their native English-speaking peers. Meredith Roddy, Director of Bilingual and ESL Programs, is tasked with closing the achievement gap between ELL students and native English-speaking students.

"I think of it as an opportunity," says Roddy. "It's about finding the right resources to engage ELL students with language and content area learning."

Roddy turned to Speak Agent as a tool for developing her students' academic language, which is a major factor in their performance. She also aimed to help her teachers differentiate instruction.

Speak Agent is a classroom instructional technology that helps narrow the achievement gap by building students' academic language in any K12 content area. Roddy provided Speak Agent with Manor's elementary science curriculum, and within a couple of weeks they developed customized interactive games using a variety of learning modes. Each interactive game embeds formative assessment to provide a real-time picture of each student's proficiency in content area language. Speak Agent aligned its tool directly to the district's curriculum and to TEKS, the Texas state standards.

"Speak Agent is a good fit because we didn't have to change our curriculum to accommodate it," says Roddy. "It was tailored to our needs. It complements our existing scope and sequence."

Boosting engagement and confidence

Roddy started using Speak Agent last September to support Manor's science curriculum in four second- and third-grade classes. She says teachers found it easy and natural to implement Speak Agent since it aligned with what they teach every day. They observed students using the learning games with enthusiasm and finding Speak Agent easy to use independently and together on their iPads and computers.

"They study exactly what they need to study without it being a chore," says Roddy.

Speak Agent has also helped students' confidence. "ELLs may feel overwhelmed when they're confronted with complex vocabulary beyond their level of linguistic fluency," adds Roddy. "So we're engaging them with a game-based tool that helps them be less intimidated by academic language."



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Results and gains

Since implementing Speak Agent at Manor ISD, second-graders who used it to study science saw a 10.3 percent improvement on a third-party academic vocabulary assessment versus 2.8 percent for second-graders who did not use it. Third-graders who regularly used Speak Agent saw similar improvements. The gains occurred after approximately six hours of use over a 12-week period in fall 2017.

Based on the double-digit percentage performance gains and reliable vendor support, Roddy deployed Speak Agent to four more classes in January.

"We appreciate anything that gives our ELL students a leg up and especially value Speak Agent's strong visual component," Roddy says. "This is a tool that has been customized in English as well as Spanish for our bilingual students. That's a real asset for our English language learners."



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