

Inclusion of English Language Learners in Kagan Cooperative Learning Activities

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Background

Students who do not speak English as their first language are the fastest-growing segment of the student population (*Short, 2000*). In the decade between 1990 and 2000 the population of non-native speakers of English in U.S. public schools grew 105%, while the overall school population increased only 12% (*Kindler, 2002*). English language learners (ELLs) need to simultaneously learn the language of instruction and master the cognitive challenges presented by the curriculum in order to achieve grade level competency in subject areas (*Gersten, 1996*). ELLs are at risk of educational failure because they often do not acquire sufficient language and literacy skills to be successful in school, including reading and writing well in English and being able to understand and discuss cognitively complex ideas (*Crandall, Jaramillo, Olsen, & Peyton, 2002*).

Over the past few decades there has been more emphasis placed on the needs of individual learners for language and cognitive development. Student to student interaction with an emphasis on oral language and communication have replaced the previous teacher-centered curriculum (*Cohen, 2000*). However as stated by Newman and Nyikos, (1999) “regular content-area teachers in America’s classrooms are ill-prepared to meet the needs of their English language learners, having received little to no pre-service or in-service education in effective methods for educating these students” (*Newman & Nyikos, 1999*).

Stages of Language Acquisition

The typical classroom in the U.S. today has a mix of students who are native speakers of English and who are English learners. The English learners in one class may include students who have recently arrived in the United States and students who speak another language at home, but who have been attending school since kindergarten in the U.S. The range of speaking ability demonstrated by ELLs can span the entire scope of the stages of language acquisition described by Krashen and Terrell (1983): Pre-Production, Early Production, Speech Emergence, Intermediate Fluency and Fluency.

Pre-Production. The Pre-Production stage of language acquisition can last from 10 hours to six months (*Reed & Railsback, 2003*). Students at the Pre-Production stage have little receptive vocabulary. This stage is also known as the “Silent Period” because students may not speak at all. During this important stage students are listening to the verbal expression of teachers and

classmates and observing nonverbal clues to try to comprehend what is being said (*Krashen & Terrell, 1983*). A pre-productive student's ability to understand vocabulary and concepts presented by the teacher is dependent on the teacher's ability to use a variety of instructional strategies to convey meaning in addition to verbal articulation. Graphs, pictures, gestures, modeling, manipulatives, music, and visuals are some of the tools that teachers can use to support the comprehensibility of their instruction.

Early Production. Students at the Early Production stage of language acquisition have gained enough receptive vocabulary and social language that they can express ideas with one or two key words. This stage lasts approximately six months past the Pre-Production stage. Because they will be using their first words in an unfamiliar language, these students will make many mistakes in pronunciation, and may speak with an accent that hinders communication (*S. Krashen & Terrell, 1983*).

Speech Emergence. The Speech Emergence stage lasts up to one additional year beyond the Early Production stage of language learning. At the Speech Emergence stage students use words and phrases to express ideas. They have a large receptive vocabulary and understand much of what is said to them so that new words and phrases are easily identifiable by them. Students at this stage continue to make many mistakes as they experiment with using vocabulary and grammar constructs. These students primarily use the present tense to express ideas, no matter what the time context may be of the details of their narrative (*Krashen & Terrell, 1983*).

Intermediate Fluency. The longest phase of the language acquisition process is the stage of Intermediate Fluency. It can take as long as five to nine years for second language learners to acquire the social and academic language skills to be fluent speakers of English (*Thomas & Collier, 1997*). At this stage receptive vocabulary is extensive and fewer mistakes are made while students master grammatical constructs and increase their vocabulary. Although students at this level are not reading and writing at grade level, their oral language may approximate that of native speakers (*Krashen & Terrell, 1983*).

Significant Differences Between Social and Academic Language

In addition to the challenges of developing language ability through all stages, second language learners experience the difference between two streams of language context: social and academic. Jim Cummins (*1981*) identified the language of social interaction as Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (*BICS*). Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (*CALP*) refers to language specific to content area instruction, e.g. social studies, science, mathematics, etc. (*Cummins, 1981*).

BICS is acquired by school children on the playground through their social interaction. The language of making and enjoying friendships is often very contextualized and repetitive. For example, if a child styles their hair in a new way, he or she may have a dozen conversations in one morning about the what/where/who/how/why of this personal event. During each interview by a different friend the child rehearses the details and may be able to add more language in describing the new hair style based on the answers to the questions posed in previous conversations.

CALP is the language of the classroom, tests for competency in content areas, and for standardized testing. Research by Thomas and Collier (1997) discovered that it takes between five to nine years for ELLs to acquire academic language. CALP is more difficult to acquire because new words may be difficult to contextualize. For example, in a science lesson about weather students may not understand the concept of snow because they have always lived in a subtropical climate. Simply translating the word “snow” into their first language, may not give students any more information about the concept. Teachers need to adapt instruction and incorporate strategies that will meet the language learning, as well as the academic proficiency needs of the students (Cohen, 2000).

Comprehensible Input and Sheltered Instruction

Accomplishing the tasks of meeting academic content and language learning needs is a challenging, and sometimes impossible task for some teachers (Gersten, 1996). Krashen (1981) published the theory of Comprehensible Input that describes that language learning takes place as a result of understanding what is being said. The responsibility to make instruction comprehensible to students with minimal language skills belongs to the teacher. Teachers need to know how to adapt instruction to meet a wide range of students’ language and content learning needs simultaneously (Cohen, 2000). For all language acquisition stages it is important to support students with various contextual clues that make vocabulary and concepts comprehensible.

The system of instructional strategies that transforms lecture into accessible new content and language information for language learners is called sheltered instruction. Sheltered instruction strategies provide alternate ways to understand content material other than by the academic explanation (Newman & Nyikos, 1999). Examples of sheltered instruction include:

- using visual aids such as pictures, charts, graphs and semantic mapping
- using graphic organizers to illustrate the relationship of information,
- pre-teaching key vocabulary before a lesson,
- connecting new information to students’ prior knowledge, and
- supplementing lecture with demonstration and multi-media examples of content

material.

As stated by Short (2000), “high-quality sheltered instruction classes provide frequent opportunities for interaction and discussion between teacher and students, and among students” (Short, 2000). Academic language is acquired through opportunities to interact with the teacher and with peers to address questions about the content (Egbert & Simich-Dudgeon, 2001). Ongoing assessment of student comprehension is critical to verify that input is indeed comprehensible. In the planning of every lesson teachers need to address the question of how to include second language learners in academic discussions.

Importance of the Basic Principles of Kagan Cooperative Learning for Language Learning

Cooperative learning provides students with increased opportunities to interact about lesson content and practice using academic language. Through interaction students can clarify understanding, negotiate meaning, and apply concepts presented by the teacher (Egbert & Simich-Dudgeon, 2001). Cooperative learning is linked to effective instruction of language and content when the basic principles of **Positive Interdependence, Individual Accountability, Equal Participation** and **Simultaneous Interaction** are integral to frequent student interaction as in Kagan Cooperative Learning (Kagan & High, 2002).

P **Positive Interdependence** means that a gain for one student is associated with gains for others, and that help is necessary in working together to accomplish a learning task. The Affective Filter Hypothesis explains that when a student experiences fear in the classroom setting, learning can not take place (Krashen, 1981). Making mistakes when speaking is unavoidable during the process of acquiring a new language. When children are anxious about making mistakes they become reluctant to speak and participate (Einhorn, 1999). As members of cooperative learning teams, ELLs can feel safe to experiment with new language and ideas without concern with errors in pronunciation, syntax, or grammar (Egbert & Simich-Dudgeon, 2001). When students feel that their partners are encouraging and supporting their successful contribution they are not as concerned about pronunciation or grammar errors and will speak with less inhibition (Kagan & High, 2002). With a lowered Affective Filter and increased oral language production students can acquire the academic language that will be measured as evidence of achievement of performance standards.

In Kagan Cooperative Learning students are held individually accountable for their appropriate participation in all interactions. Students understand that if the teacher asks a question, every person in a group, pair or the entire class will have to take part in the response process. Students

benefit from a culture of **Individual Accountability** in which they realize that they are all responsible to understand the information shared by the teacher and the questions posed by the teacher so that they can participate in the cooperative activity (*Kagan, 1994*). As the responsibility for learning is shifted away from the control of the teacher, students have the opportunity to take more responsibility for their learning (*Cohen, 2000*).

E **Equal Participation** refers to the phenomenon in Kagan Cooperative Learning that all students are included in the interactive response to the teacher's questions. When a non-speaker joins a classroom the teacher may wrongly assume that the student can not understand any of the instruction and needs to be excluded from activities designed to assess comprehension until sufficient language has been acquired. If non-speakers are not expected to participate in responding to questions that check for understanding, they are at risk for tuning out during the lesson and not meeting the learning objectives. If the teacher utilizes instructional strategies that make the content accessible for non-speakers, then it is critical for all students to expect to participate in questions about the material.

S One of the main reasons to use cooperative learning for second language learners is that there are more opportunities for student interaction and practice using content vocabulary and developing mastery of academic skills. As noted by Short (2000) second language learners benefit from much more interaction and language practice in class" (*Short, 2000*). When the teacher asks a question and structures student interaction in Kagan Cooperative Learning, instead of one student responding in front of the entire class, all students are engaged in sharing their answers simultaneously. The **Simultaneous Interaction** of all students in the classroom that is part of every Kagan Cooperative Learning structure creates a participatory culture in which students expect to have the opportunity to respond individually, so they realize the importance of understanding the question as well as the lesson.

Kagan Cooperative Learning (*Kagan, 1994*) offers over 150 specific strategies that structure student interaction for working together in pairs, teams of four, or as a whole class. These strategies are called structures in Kagan Cooperative Learning. Most of these structures have names that are descriptive of the details of interaction. For example, Timed-Pair-Share times the turn for each student in a pair as they share their thinking on a topic; in Team Interview each student in a team of four takes a turn sharing information and being interviewed by teammates; in a Line-Up students sequence information alphabetically, numerically, etc., by individually representing data and standing in place as an entire class. Every Kagan Cooperative Learning structure incorporates **Positive Interdependence, Individual Accountability, Equal Participation** and **Simultaneous**

Interaction. These basic principles ensure full inclusion of ELLs at all stages of language development

Accommodations for Language Learners

If a student is at the early stages of oral language development, the teacher needs to make accommodations so that assessment of comprehension can be determined. Accommodations for assessment have been widely discussed in terms of summative evaluative measures, such as standardized tests. Testing accommodations can improve the potential of ELLs to demonstrate knowledge (*Abedi, Hofstetter, & Lord, 2004*). ELLs need to be similarly accommodated throughout all phases of instruction so that acquisition of new language and content can be verified in advance of testing. Critical accommodations for early language learners include strategies that will allow them to demonstrate understanding of new input. The oral language required for participation must match the students' capacity for speaking.

To determine that students understand the lesson, teachers need to check for understanding often. Questions to verify comprehension should be posed so that all students can contribute their thinking. Teachers need to be cognizant of the oral language ability of the students so that response modes are consistent with students' language acquisition stages. A common mistake made by many teachers of ELLs at the early stages is assuming that because students can not verbalize their thoughts, they also do not understand the lesson or the teacher's question, and they do not have an opinion to share. Although a student at the Pre-Production stage may not be able to say anything to show that they understand, they may be able to figure out the entire meaning of a lesson if the teacher has effectively utilized sheltered instruction techniques. In spite of the fact that students with emerging oral language skills have difficulty expressing ideas about new content information, they can and should be actively involved in activities that challenge them cognitively and encourage their acquisition of academic content and language (*Egbert & Simich-Dudgeon, 2001*).

An additional challenge to the classroom teacher is the need to address the cognitive development in addition to the language development of the students. Some researchers have suggested that until students reach the Intermediate Fluency stage of language development they should be asked simple questions, e.g. yes/no, either/or, or who/what/where that require one-word answers (*Reed & Railsback, 2003*). If it takes as long as two years to reach the Intermediate Fluency stage, and if teachers never ask any difficult questions, a student might conclude that the teachers believe they are not capable of thinking critically.

Rather than limiting the difficulty of the questions posed by the teacher. It would better to limit the difficulty of the oral language required for answering the question and keep the cognitive challenge of the question complex. Instead of simple questions for limited language of response, a teacher can

use challenging questions that require limited language, or even no oral language in response. At every stage of second language learning there are response modes that can be used to engage students in demonstrating understanding of the lesson.

For students at the Pre-Production stage, no oral language can be expected. Kinesthetic response modes accommodate a lack of oral language for these students. Answers to questions posed by the teacher can involve:

- Pointing
- Pantomime
- Movement
- Using manipulatives
- Drawing (a line to show matching items, or pictures), or
- Performing an act (solve a math problem, sequence items or pictures, etc.).



Students at the Early Production stage of language acquisition are comfortable producing one and two words rather than phrases or sentences. At this stage students can respond to the teacher's questions using all of the kinesthetic strategies as well as using one or two words to name, list, categorize, etc.

Speech Emergence is a stage in which students feel comfortable using stock phrases and short sentences. Brief responses are appropriate for students at this stage as well as having them give reasons for their answers and paraphrase each other to increase usage of new vocabulary.

Students at the Intermediate Fluency stage can speak extensively. They benefit from the opportunity to use new vocabulary to paraphrase the teacher's explanation of important concepts. In cooperative learning groups with students who are at lower stages of language acquisition the students with intermediate fluency provide additional comprehensible input and opportunities for teammates to hear critical academic terms used repetitively.

With the suggested model, students are organized in the classroom in teams of four students who have mixed levels of language proficiency. The teacher presents the content of the lesson and frequently has students work cooperatively to respond to questions about the content. Students will demonstrate the extent of their

comprehension through their responses. Through use of Kagan Cooperative Learning structures, all members of a team will participate actively, although students will be speaking in a manner consistent with their stage of language acquisition.



For example, consider a science lesson about nutrition and the food groups. After the teacher has presented information about different food groups he or she needs to check for understanding of the content and vocabulary of the lesson. In cooperative learning teams, students will work together to answer questions, repeat key vocabulary and apply key concepts using the Kagan Cooperative Learning Structure called **Categorizing**. In this activity students would categorize pictures of different foods according to their nutritional composition. Students would first draw a representation of the food pyramid on a large piece of paper, perhaps at first trying to recreate the teacher's diagram from memory. Every student on a team could be responsible for drawing a different section of the pyramid. The teacher could then provide a selection of pictures of a variety of foods to every team. When it is a particular student's turn, he or she would select a picture and place it in the appropriate category. The other student(s) might have to agree on the placement before it is someone else's turn. If the pictures are applied to the drawing of the pyramid with tape or glue, the poster could be displayed on the classroom wall when finished.

Once teams have finished their task, they could compare answers with other teams. At the beginning of the instruction on this unit of study, the number and difficulty of the challenge of the foods to be categorized can be limited. After the students became more familiar with the content, this activity could be repeated and the difficulty could be increased.

In this sample students at the Pre-Production stage of language learning are fully included in the group interaction. Although not speaking, they could correctly categorize a picture to demonstrate comprehension. If their teammates are at more advanced language stages, they would benefit from listening to the other students using the academic vocabulary of the lesson. Students at the Early Production stage of language learning may say the names of individual foods or pyramid categories as single word utterances. Speech Emergent students can be expected to say something about why they choose a particular category. Intermediate Fluent and Fluent speakers can elaborate on the reasons for their choices and help their teammates

utilize correct vocabulary for the activity. As noted by Kagan & High (2002, p.12) “through full inclusion in classroom activities that require understanding concepts and applying new knowledge, language learners have full access to curriculum.” With Kagan Cooperative Learning as a sheltered strategy ELLs can acquire language proficiency and achieve grade level competency in subject areas.

Summary

The growth of the English language learner population has been dramatic. Many teachers do not have training or skills for simultaneously teaching language and content to students who have limited oral language skills. Teachers of English language learners need to know how to involve students in effective cooperative learning activities that are adapted to provide full inclusion of students at the beginning stages of language acquisition. Student interaction that incorporates positive interdependence, individual accountability, equal participation and simultaneous interaction, as in **Kagan Cooperative Learning**, supports the cognitive development and acquisition of academic language that lead to educational success. This strategy can help ensure that no child is left behind.

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