

Kagan Cooperative Structures Promote Language Acquisition

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Simple cooperative learning structures, called Kagan Structures, are used as part of any lesson to dramatically increase language acquisition. Kagan Structures are unlike traditional instruction, group work, or cooperative learning lessons. The structures avoid the pitfalls of all three of these approaches to instruction, but enjoy dramatic benefits. As we examine how Kagan Structures differ from traditional instruction, group work, and cooperative learning lessons, we see how the structures radically improve language learning.

Kagan Structures Are Not Traditional Instruction

I have trained teachers and observed classroom instruction in over thirty countries. The most common instructional strategy is for the teacher to call on one student at a time to respond to a question posed by the teacher. Using this approach to promote language learning is extraordinarily inefficient. For example, if a teacher wants each student in the class to have one minute of oral language output, in a class of thirty students it would take well over an hour if the teacher uses the traditional sequential structure of calling on one student after another to answer questions posed by the teacher. The teacher first calls on a student, the student then answers, finally the teacher responds to the answer by giving a correction, modeling proper use of the language, or praising the student. It takes about two minutes per student using this traditional way of structuring the interaction. How have the students spent their time? One minute of oral language production and 59 minutes of waiting their turn!

It could be argued that a teacher does not spend a straight hour of teacher-question, student-answer. This is true. The teacher may spend only ten minutes in the middle of the class and only five minutes at the end of class using that traditional structure.

The process is repeated, however, the next day and the next, so over the week the teacher has used up a valuable hour of class time to give each student only one minute of oral language production. Thus, this traditional approach to instruction is well designed to prevent language acquisition!

An additional major problem with the traditional approach is that teachers usually allow students to volunteer to be called on. It is the high achievers or more fluent students who raise their hands. Thus, the teacher ends up calling most on those who least need the practice and least on those who most need the practice.

In contrast, using Kagan Structures it takes only a few minutes to have each student receive a minute of oral language production, and the participation is equal. The Kagan Structures are carefully designed to maximize simultaneous interaction and equal participation. For example, if students are in groups of four the teacher might have students do a four-minute **Timed RoundRobin**, so each student in the class has their minute of oral language output. Thus, the teacher accomplishes in about four minutes what it takes the traditional teacher an hour to accomplish. How is this miracle accomplished? Through simultaneous interaction. Instead of one student at a time talking, one student in each group is talking. Applying the simultaneity principle, we can be even more efficient! It takes four minutes to give each student a minute if they interact in groups of four; it takes only two minutes to give each student a minute if they are in pairs, using a pair structure like **Timed Pair Share** (in each pair students take turns, each sharing for a minute while the other listens) or **RallyRobin** (in each pair students take turns giving answers).



Notice that Kagan Structures have different functions: **RallyRobin** is useful for creating an oral list as when students name animals or articles of clothing; **Timed Pair Share** is useful for elaborated speech as when students describe their weekend or share their opinions. There are literally hundreds of Kagan Structures, each with different functions, but all of the Kagan Structures are carefully designed to implement the four critical principles of cooperative learning.¹ We use the acronym **PIES** to symbolize the four basic principles of cooperative learning:



P = Positive Interdependence. Students are on the same side knowing the success of one helps the others and students cannot complete the task without the help of everyone in the group.



I = Individual Accountability. Each student must perform and his or her performance is seen by at least one other.



E = Equal Participation. Students participate about equally—they have an equal number of turns or an equal amount of time.



S = Simultaneous Interaction. Many students are participating at the same time.

Traditional instruction in which the teacher calls on one student at a time to participate fails to implement all four principles:

Students are not on the same side and do not need to work together; they can choose not to perform by simply not raising their hand; the high achievers participate more; and only one student at a time participates.

Kagan Structures Are Not Group Work

Many teachers think they are implementing cooperative learning when they are merely doing group work. And group work does not consistently produce academic and linguistic gains for all students. What is the difference? Group work is unstructured interaction. For examples, a teacher has students in pairs and asks them to “*Talk it over.*” Or a teacher has students in groups of four and asks them to “*Discuss it in your groups.*” Or perhaps a teacher has a worksheet or task for students to complete in their groups and says, “*Work together as a group to complete the task.*” In all of these situations the teacher has told the students what to do, but has not structured how they will do it. The teacher has not structured for **PIES**. The result is predictable, and often not positive for many students. Imagine a pair of students. One student is fluent in the target language and another student is an early language learner, or just less fluent. Who will do most, or even all of the talking? The most fluent student gets most or even all of the language practice. Inadvertently, for each pair in the classroom **the teacher has called most on the student who least needs the practice and least on the student who most needs the practice**. The results of group work on projects are the same: The more advanced students take over and get the lion's share of the practice so the gap in language learning between high and low achievers is increased. Unstructured group work results in very unequal participation with consequent unequal language development.

We say that whenever the teacher has not structured the interaction among students so all four of the PIES principles are built into the way they will interact, the teacher is doing group work, not true cooperative learning.

Kagan Structures Are Not Cooperative Learning Lessons

There are many different models of cooperative learning. Almost all well-researched models of cooperative learning, other than the Kagan Structures, are lesson based. That is they tell teachers how to do cooperative learning lessons. Although these cooperative learning lessons are carefully designed to implement the basic principles of cooperative learning, they fail to consistently produce gains. Unlike group work, the problem is not a lack of structuring for the basic principles. Rather, the problem is that these cooperative learning lessons are too complex and/or tedious. Teachers find them too difficult. After the initial enthusiasm dies down, teachers find it too hard to spend each night planning their next cooperative learning lesson, or find the scoring and grading too time consuming. I have talked with hundreds of teachers who were trained in various types of cooperative learning lessons and who did them for awhile with success, but who later abandoned them, finding the planning too difficult or finding the routine of teaching each lesson the same way too boring for their students and themselves. The problem is not whether the lessons work when implemented, the problem is that they do not lead to sustained implementation.



Kagan Structures are very much easier to implement. They do not involve special materials, planning, or preparation and do not require tedious scoring systems. For example, once a teacher masters the steps of [RallyRobin](#) or [Timed Pair Share](#), the teacher can use those powerful structures immediately in any lesson with no special preparation. It becomes as automatic to ask students to turn to a partner and do a [RallyRobin](#) as it is for teachers to call on one student in the class to respond. After all, if language development is the goal,

why would we want to call on one, to have just one student speaking, when at the same time we can have every student speaking about equally?

Kagan Structures are Easy to Implement Yet Carefully Designed to Ensure Gains

Kagan Structures avoid the primary pitfalls of traditional instruction, which allows about one minute an hour of oral language production and which results in very unequal participation and gains. It is unlike group work, which fails to implement the basic principles of cooperative learning and, like traditional instruction, results in very unequal participation. It differs also from cooperative learning lessons, which involve too much preparation and/or record keeping, which in turn leads to burn out and spotty implementation. Like group work, Kagan Structures are easy to implement, and like cooperative learning lessons, they implement the basic principles of cooperative learning, assuring success.

Kagan Structures are powerful for promoting language learning. Acquiring a second language is facilitated by three variables, Input, Output, and Context. We learn a language when we are exposed to comprehensible input. The Kagan Structures increase the amount of comprehensible input. Because students need to know what their partners or teammates are saying, they adjust their language to ensure comprehensible input. Output is increased dramatically. In order to offer a minute of language practice for each student it takes an hour of class time in the sequential, call-on-one-at-a-time, traditional format. Using pair structures the objective is reached in about two minutes! Finally, because of positive interdependence, Kagan Structures create a mutually supportive context for language learning. Students feel themselves on the same side, supported by their partners and teammates. In that context they are not afraid to try on unfamiliar language. Students, who would never raise their hand to speak with the whole class listening, readily speak to a supportive partner or teammates. **PIES** are critical for successful cooperative learning; they are critical also for language learning.

Reference

Kagan, S. & M. Kagan. *Kagan Cooperative Learning*. San Clemente, CA: Kagan Publishing, 2009.