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COOPERATIVE LEARNING

Mainstream teachers with both ELLs and English-dominant students in their classrooms can use cooperative learning strategies as a powerful tool for fostering language acquisition. According to most writers, there are a number of elements that set cooperative learning apart from other grouping techniques (Cochran, 1989; Johnson & Johnson, 1999). These elements include the following:

- Heterogeneous grouping (combining ELLs and English-dominant students in the same group)
- Positive interdependence (sinking or swimming together)
- Face-to-face supportive interaction (helping each other learn and applauding each other's successes and efforts)
- Individual accountability (requiring each group member to contribute to the group's achievement of its goals; typically, each member is assigned a specific role to perform in the group)
- Interpersonal and small group skills (communication, trust, leadership, decision making, and conflict resolution)
- Group processing (reflecting on how well the team is functioning and how it can function even better)

Educators have found that cooperative learning groups foster language acquisition in ways that whole-class instruction cannot. So what is it about these groups that make them such a rich opportunity for ELLs?

First, ELLs working in small groups have many more opportunities to speak than they have during whole-class instruction. Small groups “create opportunities for sustained dialogue and substantive language use” as students use language to accomplish the task at hand (Zehler, 1994, p. 7). In fact, cooperative learning groups “demand speech” because each member must carry out her role if the group as a whole is to succeed (Alanis, 2004, p. 222). Some roles you can assign and will need to thoroughly explain include recorder, final copy scribe, illustrator, materials collector, and reporter.

Group members must also “negotiate meaning” as they speak, meaning that they must adjust their language so that it is comprehensible to other members. In doing this, students ensure that all members are able to understand what others have said (Englander, 2002; Kagan, 1995). Because students are in small groups, it is easy to check for understanding and adjust the level of speech appropriately—something that a teacher or student cannot do easily in a whole-class session (Kagan, 1995).

Small groups offer the following additional advantages:

- **They allow for the repetition of key words and phrases.** According to Kagan (1995), “Language acquisition is not ensured unless input is received repeatedly from a variety of sources.” Repetition allows the ELL to move the content she hears “from short-term comprehension to long-term acquisition” (Kagan, 1995).
- **They require functional, context-relevant speech.** Speech that is personally relevant and related to “real-life” situations is more likely to add to an ELL’s fluency (Kagan, 1995).
- **They are “feedback-rich.”** Not only are there far more opportunities for feedback and correction in a small group setting, but the feedback and correction occur in the context of actual conversation, rather than in a formal instructional situation. An English language learner is less likely to feel self-conscious about being corrected in a small group setting (Kagan, 1995).
- **They can greatly reduce student anxiety.** Because small groups are supportive and interdependent, ELLs feel more comfortable speaking. As noted in Chapter 9, negative emotions (such as anxiety and lack of self-confidence) can impede language acquisition.

Bear in mind, however, that students who have recently arrived in the United States may be unfamiliar with group work. Kagan and McGroarty (1993) emphasize the importance of team-building exercises in creating a supportive classroom environment for these new students.

Generalizations from *Classroom Instruction That Works*

Three generalizations can be drawn about cooperative learning from *Classroom Instruction That Works*.

1. **Cooperative learning groups should rarely be organized by ability.** Groups should be heterogeneous—they should include both ELLs and English-dominant students. The ELLs will benefit greatly from being grouped with English-dominant students who can model correct English. Students in mixed groups also need to negotiate meaning. As ELLs strive to convey information, English-dominant students can scaffold language development by helping them find the right word or verb tense. They can also ask ELLs questions to elicit further speech.
2. **Cooperative learning groups should be small.** This makes sense for all students, but particularly for ELLs, who will feel more comfortable speaking in their new language in the confines of a small group of peers.
3. **Although cooperative learning groups should be used regularly, teachers should take care not to overuse them.** It is important to keep in mind that English language learners need time to independently practice the skills and processes that they must master.

Classroom Recommendations

There are four classroom recommendations regarding cooperative learning reviewed in *Classroom Instruction That Works*.

1. **Teachers should use a variety of criteria for grouping students.** Heterogeneous student teams maximize intercultural communication and increase possibilities for peer tutoring. There may also be times, however, when ELLs will profit from being grouped according to

Cooperative learning is perfect for students who are acquiring English. For example, I put one of my ELLs in a mixed group with students much higher than her and much lower than her. She is being challenged by having to explain what she is thinking to the lower ones, but she is also gaining knowledge by the language that the higher students are using. The ELLs find ways to say what they are thinking; they pick up vocabulary, and they learn how to say something from what the other students say. I think that grouping is definitely an essential component for students who are still learning English.

—L. M.

I have my ELLs in varying groups because, according to research, cooperative learning will be a valuable way for a lot of our students to learn. I have seen it happen!

—Cecilia Bailey,
Kayenta Intermediate School,
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language needs depending on goals and instructional objectives. If you have students with a similar primary language, a homogeneous grouping may be beneficial, particularly at the early stages of language acquisition. Since cognitive processes are taking place in their heads (and not in English), a group of like-language users can work to clarify content and stimulate discussion at a deeper level.

2. There are several types of cooperative learning groups that will help you vary group makeup. There are informal groups; formal groups, which last long enough for students to complete an academic assignment; and base groups, which are long-term and provide members with support throughout a semester or school year.

3. Teachers should manage group size. As discussed above, small groups are generally better than larger groups. This is particularly true for ELLs because the small groups increase talk time.

4. Combine cooperative learning groups with other types of classroom instruction. Cooperative learning groups should be used intermittently along with other types of lessons, as students also need time to practice skills on their own.

Classroom Example

Take a look at the example below to see how you can implement cooperative learning in your classroom with ELLs at varying stages of language acquisition.

Subject: Science

Content Objective: To know how natural causes change the world.

Mr. Higuera's 3rd grade class was engaged in a science unit studying how natural causes change the land and how these land changes then affect the world. After learning about the composition of rocks and how they change and about different landforms (e.g., mountains, canyons, plains, plateaus, islands), students were assigned to groups of four for a "jigsaw" activity.

Each student on a home team selected one natural cause for which to be responsible: water (e.g., rain, rivers), ice (e.g., hail, glaciers), wind (e.g., tornadoes, hurricanes), or force (e.g., volcanoes, earthquakes). Students then were reorganized into three-person, topic-alike teams (i.e., water, ice, wind, and force teams) to begin learning about the natural causes of change, how these changes subsequently change the land, examples of the changes, and how the land changes eventually change the world.

After the initial learning—which included students visiting different centers in the classroom that contained resources and information, reading information from two texts, watching a video, and checking a Web site on the Internet—students returned to their home teams, where they shared what they had learned about their particular natural cause and the changes it made. Each student was responsible for orally presenting and teaching the information to the home group, as well as providing an artifact of his findings (e.g., an essay and a physical or pictorial representation).

Once all of the students had presented their individual information, Mr. Higuera asked the home teams to do an assignment entitled “Natural causes change the land; these changes change the world.” He introduced the assignment as follows:

In your home team, prepare a group presentation in which you provide specific examples of this statement. Each team member must participate in the presentation in some way—that is, do part of the oral presentation, create a physical or pictorial representation to be used in the presentation, or write something to go along with the presentation. Be sure to include examples of all the different natural causes and the landforms you learned about, and tell us how the changes in land have changed or are changing the world.

The above activity could be modified for each stage of language acquisition.

Preproduction

Students can join the English-dominant students in developing physical or pictorial representations to share with their home groups and use in the group presentation. When sharing, these students can point to important parts of their representations, as they may not have all the vocabulary needed to explain the natural cause and its consequences. Preproduction students should not be expected to produce an essay, although they can copy words down to use as labels for their representations.

Early Production

Students will be able to connect with the English-dominant students when devising physical or pictorial representations to share with the home team. Plan for all students to go beyond the physical and pictorial by including graphic and kinesthetic representations as well as mental images. Early Production students can use nonlinguistic representations in the group presentation, along with single words and

two-word phrases. Their essays should consist of sentence starters that they complete with one or two words.

Speech Emergence

Students can read information from texts, particularly when they include graphs and pictures to aid in comprehension. These students will be less reliant on nonlinguistic representations for sharing with their home groups or in the presentations and can use sentences in explaining their examples. Their essays will reflect the sentences used in their explanations.

Intermediate and Advanced Fluency

Students can participate in all activities and work alongside English-dominant students to develop nonlinguistic representations. They will also be able to compose essays to go along with their artifacts. Expect to hear and see some errors as Intermediate Fluency students speak and write; fewer errors will occur with those students in the Advanced Fluency stage.

Now that you know what ELLs can do with the academic content, you can help further develop their language skills by remembering to implement the Word-MES formula. These students use a host of cognitive processes for learning vocabulary, including associative skills, memory, and inferential skills, to figure out what words mean based on what they look or sound like.

Preproduction

Students need help with word selection (e.g., *rain, rivers, hail, glaciers, tornadoes, hurricanes*).

Early Production

Students will benefit from you modeling correct English. Listen for any errors and remember to avoid overt corrections. If you hear students say “ail” for “hail,” for example, you can model the correct pronunciation by saying, “That is a picture of hail.”

Speech Emergence

Students need to have their language development stimulated, which you can accomplish by helping them put together more complex sentences. When they are developing their essays, for example, you can help them expand their English by looking for sentences that can be combined with conjunctions.

Intermediate and Advanced Fluency

Students need to work on sounding like a book. Listen to their oral presentations and help them by using synonyms for words that they already know. Also, make sure that they are not starting every sentence the same way, either in the oral presentation or in the essay.

When in doubt about what to do with ELLs at different levels, select any one of the Word-MES strategies. Any student will benefit from vocabulary growth, modeling of correct English, expanding English sentences to include more complex structures, and developing academic language that makes one sound like a book.

Summary

The jigsaw activity classroom example is a good illustration of a strategy that includes the key elements of cooperative learning. This activity adeptly shows how cooperative learning can help foster language acquisition for ELLs.