

## We Can Talk: Cooperative Learning in the Elementary ESL Classroom

### Summary E

Annela Teemant & Stefinee E. Pinnegar

Cooperative Learning has long been recognized as an important group work strategy that supports second language acquisition. One of its strengths is the context it provides students for interaction and negotiating meaning. This ERIC Digest analyzes how cooperative learning provides the kind of input, output, and context that supports second language acquisition. Please only read the segment on “Output” in this Digest for the purposes of this activity. As you read the segment, identify specific ways that cooperative learning provides opportunities to learn academic content and language. Consider also how teachers can create grouping structures and cooperative learning activities that create optimal conditions for the second language.

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**Spencer Kagan, Kagan Cooperative Learning**

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Language acquisition is determined by a complex interaction of a number of critical input, output, and context variables. An examination of these critical variables reveals cooperative learning has a dramatic positive impact on almost all of the variables critical to language acquisition.

### Input

Language acquisition is fostered by input that is comprehensible, developmentally appropriate, redundant, and accurate.

**Comprehensible.** To facilitate language acquisition, input must be comprehended (Krashen, 1982). Students working in cooperative groups need to make themselves understood, so they naturally adjust their input to make it comprehensible. The small group setting allows a far higher proportion of comprehensible input, because the speaker has the luxury of adjusting speech to the level appropriate to the listener to negotiate meaning—luxury not available to the teacher speaking to a whole class. The speakers can check for understanding and adjust the level of speech easily

when speaking to one another, something not easily done when speaking in a large group. Input in the cooperative setting is made comprehensible also because it is often linked to specific, concrete behaviors or manipulatives.

**Developmentally Appropriate.** Even if language is comprehended, it will not stimulate the next step in language acquisition if it is not in the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978). The developmental level of any student is what he or she can do alone; the proximal level is what he/she can do with supportive collaboration. The difference between the developmental and proximal levels is called the zone of proximal development. The nature of a cooperative group focuses input in the zone of proximal development, stimulating development to the next stage of language development.

**Redundant.** A student may receive comprehensible input in the zone of proximal development, but that will not ensure language acquisition unless the input is received repeatedly from a variety of sources. The cooperative learning group is a natural source of redundant communication. As the students in a small group discuss a topic, they each use a variety of phrases providing the opportunity for the listener to triangulate in on meaning as well as receiving the repeated input necessary for learning to move from short-term comprehension to long-term acquisition.

**Accurate.** Accurate input—communication that is grammatically correct with proper word choice and pronunciation—facilitates language acquisition. In this area, the traditional classroom may have an advantage over the cooperative classroom, because the teacher is the source of most speech. Peer output is less accurate than teacher output, but accuracy in the traditional classroom is purchased by preventing student output, a price far too high for what it purchases. Frequent communicative output produces speech acquisition far more readily than formal accurate input.

## Output

Language acquisition is fostered by output that is functional and communicative (Swain, 1985), frequent, redundant, and consistent with the identity of the speaker.

**Functional/Communicative.** If speech is not representative of the way a speaker will use the language in everyday settings, it will add little to the speaker's actual communicative competence. Memorization of vocabulary lists or verb conjugations does not increase fluency, because learning about a language is quite different from acquiring the language. Display behavior such as, "The clock is on the wall," or "This is a glass," is not representative of actual speech, and practice of formal, de-contextualized speech creates transference problems that hinder acquisition. The cooperative group provides the arena for expressive, functional, personally relevant, representative language output that is critical for language acquisition.

**Frequent.** Students to a large extent learn to speak by speaking. The single greatest advantage of cooperative learning over traditional classroom organization for the acquisition of language is the amount of language output allowed per student. In the traditional classroom, students are called upon one at a time. During this whole-class question-answer time, the teacher actually does more talking than the students, because the teacher must talk twice for each time a student talks: first asking the question and then providing feedback in the form of praise, comment, or correction opportunity. Thus, in a classroom of 30, to provide each student one minute of output opportunity takes over an hour. In contrast, to provide each student one minute if the students are in a pair-discussion takes a little over two minutes. In the cooperative setting, with regard to language output, we can do in two minutes what takes an hour to do in the traditional classroom!

**Redundant.** Students become fluent if they have the opportunity to speak repeatedly on the same topic. Many cooperative learning structures, such as Three-Pair Share and Inside/Outside Circle are explicitly designed to provide redundancy of output opportunities. Even informal, cooperative learning discussion provides redundancy as students discuss a topic with each of their teammates. There is not enough time in the traditional classroom to call on each student to talk more than once on a topic.

**Identity Congruent.** Practicing classroom speech that is not consistent with a student's identity will not lead to later fluency, because the student will not want to project the identity associated with that speech. Cultural groups will resist acquisition of the dominant language if the very use of that language signals assimilation that is being resisted. The less formal, peer-oriented, expressive use of language in the cooperative group represents language use closer to the identity of many students than the formal use of language practiced in whole-class settings. The more identity-congruent language facilitates language acquisition.

## Context

Language acquisition is fostered if it occurs in a context that is supportive and motivating, communicative and referential, developmentally appropriate, and feedback-rich.

**Supportive/Motivating.** The traditional classroom is far from supportive as students are "right" or "wrong" as they are called upon to answer questions before the whole class. Students in a cooperative group are more motivated to speak and feel greater support for a variety of reasons: (1) They are more frequently asked questions; (2) they need to communicate to accomplish the cooperative learning projects; (3) peers are far more supportive than in the traditional classroom because they are all on the same side; (4) cooperative learning structures demand speech; (5) students are taught to praise and encourage each other; and (6) students are made interdependent so they need to know what the others know. Because of these factors, students "bring out" their teammates, providing words or phrases to make speech inviting and easy. Cooperative learning provides a supportive, motivating context for speech to emerge.

**Communicative/Referential.** In cooperative learning groups, we communicate over things we are making. We speak in real time, about real events and objects, to accomplish real goals. We negotiate meaning. Our communication that is functional refers to what is happening in the moment. This communicative language facilitates language acquisition, and it is quite in contrast to the abstract "talking about" topics that often characterize whole-class speech.

**Developmentally Appropriate.** Some students are not ready to give a speech to a whole class but are quite at ease talking to one, two, or even three others. Speech to a whole class is often formal and less contextualized than speech within a cooperative group. It is easy to ask for a crayon from a friendly peer; it is hard to speak before the whole class in answering a question or speaking on an assigned topic. Speakers within a small group have more opportunities to enter discourse at the level appropriate to their own development.

**Feedback Rich.** Students talk to each other, providing immediate feedback and correction opportunities. Feedback and correction in the process of communication ("Give me that," "Sure, you take the ruler," etc.) leads to easy acquisition of vocabulary and language forms, whereas formal correction opportunities ("What is this?" "This is a ruler," etc.) lead to self-consciousness and anxiety, which inhibit rather than facilitate language acquisition.

In 20 minutes of whole-class, one-at-a-time interaction, a student is lucky to get one feedback opportunity; in the same 20 minutes of cooperative interaction, the student might receive half a dozen feedback opportunities—all in a natural context easy to assimilate. As we examine how cooperative learning transforms input, output, and context variables in the direction of facilitating language acquisition, we conclude: Cooperative learning and the ESL classroom—a natural marriage.

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Kagan Cooperative Learning 27134 Paseo Espada, Suite 303, San Juan Capistrano, CA 92675 Phone: 800-933-2667

Fax: 714-248-7680

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ERIC Clearinghouse on Languages and Linguistics 4646 40th Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20016-1859

(202)362-0700 / (800)276-9834

[eric@cal.org](mailto:eric@cal.org)

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## Annela Teemant

Indiana University/Purdue University, Indianapolis (IUPUI)

Annela Teemant is Professor of Second Language Education (Ph.D., Ohio State University, 1997) at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis. Her scholarship focuses on developing, implementing, and researching applications of critical sociocultural theory and practices to the preparation of K-12 teachers of English Language Learners. Specifically, she has collaboratively developed and researched the Six Standards Instructional Coaching Model and pedagogy. She has been awarded five U.S. Department of Education grants focused on ESL teacher quality. She has authored more than 30 multimedia teacher education curricula and video ethnographies of practice and published in *Teaching and Teacher Education*, *Urban Education*, *Teachers College Record*, and *Language Teaching Research*. Her work describes how to use pedagogical coaching to radically improve the conditions of learning needed for multilingual learners. She has also taught adult intensive English in the United States, Finland, and Hungary.



### Stefinee E. Pinnegar

Brigham Young University

A St. George native, Dr. Pinnegar graduated from Dixie College (now DSU) and Southern Utah State (now SUU). She taught on the Navajo Reservation then completed an M.A. in English at BYU. She taught for 5 years in Crawfordsville, Indiana. She then completed a PhD in Educational Psychology at the University of Arizona (1989). She was faculty at Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo, before coming to BYU. She helped develop and now directs the TELL program. She is Acting Dean of Invisible College for Research on Teaching, a research organization that meets yearly in conjunction with AERA. She is a specialty editor of *Frontiers in Education's* Teacher Education strand with Ramona Cutri. She is editor of the series *Advancements in Research on Teaching* published by Emerald Insight. She has received the Benjamin Cluff Jr. award for research and the Sponsored Research Award from ORCA at BYU. She is a founder of the Self-Study of Teacher Education Practices research methodology. She has published in the *Journal of Teacher Education*, *Ed Researcher*, *Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice* and has contributed to the handbook of narrative inquiry, two international handbooks of teacher education and two Self-Study of Teaching and Teacher Education Practices handbooks. She reviews for numerous journals and presents regularly at the American Educational Research Association, ISATT, and the Castle Conference sponsored by S-STTEP.



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