

# Reaching English Language Learners Through Cooperative Learning

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This is a model of a cooperative learning lesson that allows all levels of ELL learners from preproduction to intermediate level to tackle tasks that are appropriate to their language proficiency skills and also that allows each student to take an important part in doing the group's assigned tasks since without each student's expertise, the group's task is incomplete.

Pre-service teachers and inservice teachers frequently hear that Cooperative Learning is an effective strategy for classrooms with English Language Learning (ELL) students in them. Cooperative learning strategies have been shown to improve academic performance (Slavin, 1987), lead to great motivation toward learning (Garibaldi, 1979), to increase time on task (Cohen & Benton, 1988), to improve self-esteem (Johnson & Johnson, 1989), and to lead to more positive social behaviors (Lloyd, et.al, 1988). For ELL students especially, cooperative learning promotes language acquisition by providing comprehensible input in developmentally appropriate ways and in a supportive and motivating environment. (Kagan, 1995).

In planning cooperative learning, teachers take several roles. First, teachers make pre-instructional decisions about grouping students and assigning appropriate tasks. Teachers have to be able to explain both the academic task and the cooperative structure to students and then must monitor and intervene when necessary. Finally, the teacher is also the one who is responsible for evaluating student learning and the effectiveness of each group's work (Cohen, 1998).

One fear teachers have about using cooperative learning is that low status students will not participate and/or that high status students will take over the group. Teachers must create groups that are equitable so that all students participate fully and use multiple-ability strategies (Cohen, 1998) if cooperative learning is to work. Teachers also need to convince students of three things: That different intellectual abilities are required in cooperative learning, that no one student has all of the abilities needed, but that each member of the group will have some of the abilities (Cohen, 1998).

In this articles we present a model of a cooperative learning lesson that allows all levels of ELL learners from preproduction to intermediate level to tackle tasks that are appropriate to their language proficiency skills and also that allows each student to take an important part in doing the group's assigned tasks since without each student's expertise, the group's task is incomplete. In short, this model lesson allows each student an equitable role in the overall task of the group. The lesson uses the cooperative learning strategies of Jig Saw and Numbered Heads Together to teach a language arts lesson on sequencing, learning descriptive language including action verbs, and writing smiles using Cynthia Rylant's book, *Tulip Sees America*.

With Jig Saw reading strategy, students are made responsible for one another's learning, help them with identifying purpose and important concepts in the text, and assist them with reporting information gained. (Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec, 1986). The Numbered Heads Together is another cooperative learning structure that is used for the purposes of intergroup cooperation and individual accountability. Using this structure, students in each home group count off from 1-4 and when a question is posed for the group to answer, only one member in the group will answer and he/she will not know ahead of time that he/she will be picked by the teacher. Therefore, the group will have to make sure that every member in the group knows the material well.

# Scene

Let's pretend that your class contains a large number of ESOL students, some of which are almost bilingual and some of which have absolutely no understanding of English at all. Previously, you have identified each student's ability to function in English using an instrument such as the Student Oral Language Matrix (SOLOM) (Pergoy & Boyle, 2001). You want to give cooperative learning a try because you have heard about its benefits for teaching students in classes such as yours. But, your cooperative learning manual gives you little guidance as to how to actually go about setting up cooperative learning so all of your students can take part and learn in the lesson.

## Step 1 - Starting from Home

First, organize your class into heterogeneous groups of four. These groups are your "home groups". Each group contains a child from each of the four levels identified by SOLOM or whatever identification tools you've used. Students need to understand that ultimately they are responsible to and dependent upon their home groups for their learning.

## Step 2 - Becoming Experts

After the home groups are established, you separate the students into "expert groups" whose composition is homogeneous by student ability. Students physically leave their home groups and join their expert groups to complete tasks that will give them expertise. Each expert group has its own tasks that are designed with that group's ability in mind. As soon as the class has settled into its expert groups, work begins on acquiring the expertise students will carry back to their home groups.

### Expert Group 1 - Map Readers

Expert Group 1 is composed of students who are in the pre-production or production stage of language acquisition but who need the extra support of a teacher or adult. These students are given the task of being the map readers. They will, with a teacher's or other adult's help, use a map of the United States to follow Tulip's trip. The map provides the realia that these children need and using the map and book together is a multimedia presentation of material. Expert group 1 will help the members of their home group track Tulip's trip across the United States.

### Expert Group 2 - Illustrators

Expert Group 2 is composed of those students who understand most English if it is spoken at a slow pace. But, they are still somewhat limited in conversation. The members of this group will be the illustrators. Their task is to match the pictures and words from the story and then to categorize them by state. Then, they write a sentence using each word and act out the action verbs "afraid, flap, bark, and swim." Since vocabulary acquisition is important to language acquisition, these activities will help the home group learn the vocabulary essential to the story.

### Expert Group 3 - Project Organizers

Expert Group 3, composed of your low-advanced readers who are generally fluent in their speech, are going to be your project organizers. Capitalizing on their fluency in English, you assign this group to orally sequence the story and then retell it in sequence to their home group. This group, with their more fluent speech, will be able to bring their less fluent home group peers up to speed on the events of the story.

### Expert Group 4 - Authors

Finally, expert group 4 is composed of your advanced level ELL who understand English without

difficulty and who are very close to their English speaking peers in vocabulary and English usage. These students will be the authors and journalists of their home groups. These students are assigned to identify similes in the story (there are lots) and then to write their own similes to show to their home groups.

## Step 3 - Returning to Home

Once the expert groups have acquired their expertise, they return to their home groups and teach their skills to the home group. The map-readers track the route of Tulip's trip on the map of the United States, the illustrators help the group to categorize the words by state and understand some action verbs. The project organizers keep the events of the story in their proper sequence, and the journalists teach the group about similes. Perfect!

## Step 4 - Showing What I/We Learned

But, how do you know that any shared learning has taken place? You give them a quiz, of course! Not a written quiz, but an oral quiz that is given in the Numbered Heads Together structure. In each home group, students count off from 1-4. You, the teacher, ask questions from the quiz you've constructed. Each group then has one minute to confer and make sure that everyone knows, and can explain, the correct answer. When time is up, you randomly choose a number from 1-4 and call on a home group. The student in the home group with that number must answer the question. If the question is answered correctly, the whole group gets one point. (See sample quiz) In this manner, you can assess each student's knowledge of the subject matter you planned without handicapping those students who lack sufficient fluency in writing and reading in English to take a more traditional quiz.

Sample Questions for Oral Quiz in Numbered Heads Together structure:

1. Name the last state the author and his dog visit.
2. What does Tulip see in Colorado?
3. What does the author mean when he says the "farms in Iowa are like castles in a fairyland"?
4. Which state does the author visit after leaving Nebraska?
5. In which direction do Tulip and the author travel across the United States?
6. Why does the author say "there's no wind like Wyoming's"?
7. In sequential order, list the states Tulip visits.
8. What might the author mean when he says "Tulip is an ocean dog"?

As a follow-up activity, students can ask family members or neighbors about trips they have taken and try to solicit details of place and description as Rylant does in Tulip. Student can report back the next day about their findings.

## Step 5 - Reflections

For cooperative learning to work, teachers do have to spend time in planning - sometimes more than they spend in planning traditional lessons. But, as in the example offered here, once the structure of cooperative learning is set in place, the activities can be used over and over in different configurations and in different content areas.

Cooperative learning as demonstrated by our model lesson works because it promotes transfer from group to individual learning. Johnson and Johnson (1989) capture the value of cooperative learning:

- I think I can
- I think we can
- We think we can
- We think I can

- I know I can

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