Facilitating Second Language Acquisition in Elementary and Secondary Physical Education Classes

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The increasingly diverse student population makes every teacher a teacher of English.

It is a well-known fact that cultural and linguistic diversity are increasing in schools across the United States. University teacher education programs now often require courses in multicultural education in an effort to sensitize future teachers to the needs of a wide variety of students. While this type of course addresses the issue of cultural diversity, it does not ensure that teachers are equipped to deal with the linguistic diversity that many will encounter. Increasingly, there is a need for teachers to become familiar with ways to make course content accessible to students whose native language is not English and to actively facilitate language acquisition for those students. In other words, all teachers are likely to find themselves in the position of being language instructors, in addition to content area teachers. Helping English language learners (ELLs) in all classes to further their second language skills has become such a priority for many school districts that some now require all new teachers to be certified to teach English as a second language (ESL), no matter what their content area.

While the physical education community has produced quality information and materials regarding multicultural approaches to physical education (e.g., Butt & Pahnos, 1995; Chepyator-Thomson 1994, 1995; Torbert & Schneider, 1992; Torrey & Ashy, 1997), articles that provide physical educators with the background necessary for creating and incorporating activities for second language development in the physical education class remain scant. Part of this lack of materials may be due to resistance on the part of some physical educators to view language and literacy as important aspects of their field (Deegan, 1994). Yet even the physical world of sport and physical activity can offer rich opportunities for linguistic interaction involving both social and academic aspects of English. In educational settings, individuals are often judged by their command of the spoken language, and they must be literate in the language that society uses as its primary means of communication (Block & Campbell, 2001).

Teachers with even a single ELL in their class must alter their instruction to ensure that the student has access to the course content and must make efforts to help the
student learn English. With the natural and abundant opportunities to supplement verbal explanations with physical demonstrations, a variety of movement activities, and other visuals, physical education teachers are already well equipped to make course content comprehensible (for further information, see Glakas, 1993). This article thus focuses on the second responsibility: facilitating second language acquisition. The article begins with an overview of the factors that are now believed to aid in language development. This is followed by examples of practical ideas that incorporate language learning into physical education classes.

**The Process of Second Language Learning**

Popular conceptions of second language learning suggest that languages are best learned through a process of immersion. While some learners gain a substantial degree of competence through informal exposure to and communication in the language, research in the past 30 years has found that simply exposing learners to a second language with little or no structured teaching will often leave them struggling to understand (Crandall, 1998; Echevarria & Graves, 2003; Ellis, 1997). Even for those who do gain a degree of proficiency, abstract or decontextualized communication (which is often used in school settings) remains challenging, requiring up to 10 years for acquisition (Cummins, 1981, 2000). A better understanding of how language is learned and of the linguistic needs of ELLs can help teachers adjust their instruction to aid the acquisition of language. The following brief overview of the major factors involved in second language acquisition—input, output, and feedback—may contribute to this understanding; for more in-depth information, see Long (1996), Pica (1994), and Swain (1995).

*Input.* Input from teachers is a necessity for language learning. More specifically, however, learners need input that has been modified to make it comprehensible to them. This does not mean that each word must be understood by the learner. Rather, the changes in the input should demonstrate the linguistic options that are available to the learner and should also highlight differences between the learner’s way of expressing a message and the way that the message can conventionally be expressed in the second language. The following example of interaction between a native speaker (NS) of English and an ELL shows how second language input can become modified (adapted from Mackey, 1999, pp. 558-559):

- **NS:** “There’s a jump rope on the floor over there.”
- **ELL:** “A what?”
- **NS:** “Rope, jump rope for jumping?”
- **ELL:** “Rope?”
- **NS:** “You can use it for jumping rope, for skipping rope. If you want to exercise you can use a jump rope. Jump rope.”
- **ELL:** “Ahh, rope, rope to jump you say jump rope.”
- **NS:** “Yeah.”

In response to the ELL’s confusion, the NS first repeats the new vocabulary, breaking it more clearly into its two parts. Then, noting further confusion on the part of the learner, the NS provides a definition.

*Output.* Swain (1985) first pointed out that the learner’s own spoken or written output may also be an important factor in second language acquisition. Production of the second language requires the learner to consider the ways in which a message can be created and, if the interlocutor does not understand part or all of the message, forces the learner to alter it in order to make it more comprehensible. In the following example, an ELL makes linguistic modifications in response to the NS’s need for clarification (adapted from Mackey, 1999, p. 559):

- **ELL:** “And always dreeb dreeb when move.”
- **NS:** “Huh?”
- **ELL:** “You move, always push the ball with hand, dreeb dreeble.”
- **NS:** “Oh, okay, yeah, be sure to dribble when you’re walking.”

In this case, the confusion of the NS results in the ELL producing a more precise pronunciation of the word “dribble.”

*Feedback.* The two previous examples illustrate another important factor in second language acquisition: feedback. A great deal of the feedback that a learner receives is implicit. In other words, what a NS says can generally be taken
as an example of what is possible in the language. Similarly, the learner may assume that any of his or her utterances that are not questioned are also correct.

In language acquisition, it is also important that learners receive information about what is not possible in the second language. This can also occur as implicit feedback, when a misunderstanding causes the listener to question the learner, as in the second example above. Such feedback does not always occur in response to a misunderstanding, however. ESL teachers often implicitly correct their students’ errors by rephrasing or recasting the student’s utterance without errors, as in the following example (adapted from Ellis, Basturkmen, & Loewen, 2002, p. 425):

Student: “I was at free-throw line.”
Teacher: “At the free-throw line?”
Student: “Yeah, and I was going to shoot.”

Here there is little doubt that the student’s meaning was clear to the teacher. However, with the addition of “the,” the teacher’s reformulation of the student’s words provides information that the student may be able to use to form correct sentences in the future, provided he or she was able to notice the difference between the original statement and the teacher’s recasting of it.

Because the learner may not notice implicit feedback, more explicit feedback should sometimes be provided. In the previous example, for instance, the feedback would have been more explicit if the instructor emphasized the word “the.” Teachers (and to a lesser extent non-teachers) may also provide detailed explanations as to what is possible and not possible in the language. Some learners will seek out this type of explanation by asking questions.

Extended conversation can often fulfill the need for input, output, and feedback. Discussions in which information must be explained and exchanged give opportunities for learners to negotiate meanings and receive feedback. The struggle to construct meaning and to be understood focuses attention on the features of the language, which may help learners to note and alter discrepancies between their own second language utterances and those of native speakers. In addition, for school-age learners, such opportunities for meaningful interaction also serve to develop important critical-thinking skills and familiarity with school-based tasks and norms of interaction.

All teachers with ELLs in their classes need to be aware of these linguistic requirements and need to build opportunities for this type of interaction into their lesson plans. Teachers also should be aware of their own speech, which may be somewhat slower to accommodate ELLs, but should still be natural. What appears to be simple to a native speaker of a language is often deceptively difficult for learners of that language. Therefore, instructors should not worry about simplifying speech. In fact, it is helpful for ELLs to be exposed to a wide variety of natural language. Teachers should remember to create opportunities for clarification, repetition, and demonstration, and should provide ELLs with the extended time they may need to respond appropriately (a special concern in a fast-paced physical education class). For further information and examples of content-teacher interaction with ELLs, see Verplaatse (1998).

**Worksheets and Activities**

Physical educators can also use worksheets and movement activities to help ELLs acquire the language.

**Worksheets.** While worksheets are commonly used in all levels of education, their use can be framed to specifically develop second language acquisition. In classes composed entirely of native speakers of English, information can usually be conveyed adequately through verbal presentation and demonstration. However, ELLs often require further support. The provision of printed materials is especially critical when physical educators use written material to meet cognitive competencies.

In order to ensure comprehension of new content and vocabulary, teachers can provide worksheets that summarize the important words, rules, and strategies of a new game. For example, students can be given a diagram of a baseball field on which they must record the names of the important parts of the field (e.g., first base, pitcher’s mound, left field, etc.) as the teacher points to these using a chart or the field itself. Any ELLs with lower proficiency might be given a chart on which the places are already labeled and be asked to underline them as they are discussed in class.

While this type of worksheet will help ELLs to understand the new content, the teacher must also provide further support to aid these students in developing their English. Worksheets for language practice can easily be made to accompany a diagram or list of new activities. Students might be required to use new vocabulary to complete fill-in-the-blank, matching, or labeling exercises. Given a list of vocabulary, students could sort the words or phrases by the sport that they pertain to, or by what type of word they are (e.g., movements, skills, terminology, etc.). The *Word by Word Picture Dictionary* (Molinsky & Bliss, 1994) is an excellent resource for these types of activities. It has eight chapters related to sports and recreation, as well as chapters on body parts and injuries. In addition, beginner and intermediate workbooks are available with exercises that accompany each dictionary chapter (Molinsky & Bliss, 1995a, 1995b). These dictionaries are also available in Chinese, Haitian Creole, Japanese, Korean, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, or Vietnamese bilingual versions, with the translations printed next to the English. These activities are a good option for teachers who have ELLs with different levels of English proficiency in their classes. Crossword puzzles are also helpful for students learning new vocabulary and spelling. Software for making crossword puzzles is widely available for a fee, but www.discoveryschool.com has a free and easy-to-use criss-cross puzzle maker at http://puzzlemaker.school.discovery.com/index.html.

**Movement Activities.** Movement itself affords numerous opportunities for physical educators to connect physical activity to vocabulary. According to Gardner’s theory of
multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1993, 1999), some students learn better through bodily or kinesthetic activities. Movement education, dance, and rhythmic activities can all be used to help students to connect written and verbal information in a creative way. For example, having students memorize and perform a particular dance or movement sequence provides the opportunity for thinking about language in a phonetically correct manner (Block, 2001). Other approaches may involve the use of stories and poetry that lend themselves to dramatic enactment and creative movement (Green, 2002; Morin, 2001).

Literacy
Although the term “literacy” is often associated with painstaking activities relegated solely to the English class, the truth is that literacy permeates our everyday lives. Physical activity and sport activities often incorporate elements of literacy (e.g., keeping score in bowling or reading the rules to a game). Literary and physical education also come together in completing a personal fitness assessment questionnaire. Physical education teachers can find additional means of weaving literacy activities into their classes simply by observing and noting the ways in which reading and writing naturally occur in life.

For homework, students can be asked to read written materials and visit web sites that supplement concepts and topics discussed in class (i.e., physical fitness, nutrition, sport). They could search these same sources for specific linguistic terms, such as “defense,” and examine how the terms are used or search for how many different forms of the word they can find (e.g., “defensive”). Learners with lower English proficiency might find pictures that demonstrate a specific activity word, such as “punting.” Students could be asked to bring in pictures or articles that provide examples of good or bad form, or examples of sportsmanlike or unsportsmanlike behavior. Any of these activities could be used as a five-minute sharing or discussion time at the beginning of class, and pictures or stories could be kept on a bulletin board for future reference.

Of course, literacy and language acquisition also can be developed through the classic activity of reading. There is an abundance of sports-related books available for young people. Choices can be made simply by browsing bookstores or asking a librarian. For teachers who are not comfortable assigning extensive reading in their physical education classes, these books may simply be placed in a visible location and made available for students who show an interest in them. In addition, it may be possible for the physical education teacher to team with English teachers to ensure that sports-related books are available. Vigil and Edwards (2002) discuss numerous ways that sports fiction can be incorporated into physical education, many of which are appropriate or adaptable for ELLs. The physical education teacher could also make it known that the class will be studying a particular sport at a specific time, so that the English teacher could draw the students’ attention to related books.

Listening and Speaking Practice
If an instructor has access to a TV, VCR, and video camera, students can videotape themselves performing a variety of skills and can also be asked to identify specific terminology. For example, they could articulate their physical movements during a practice segment or game situation. This activity could be continued throughout the semester, with students collecting different terms for each unit within the curriculum. Video clips can also provide oral practice with the language of description by having students describe certain skills or identify strategy. In addition, video clips can develop the language of comparison by having students note similarities or differences between two clips.

Many physical educators are sensitive to the importance of a multicultural perspective on physical education. One way to incorporate multiculturalism with language learning is to have students research the games or recreational activities of other countries, with ELLs in the class explaining a game from their (or their parents’) native country. Giving an explanation is linguistically challenging, but it can develop very real and natural speech skills. This task can be made easier for ELLs by encouraging them to support their explanations by demonstrating the actual props of the game. Such a presentation would also naturally encourage students to make comparisons with other sports they have learned. This type of activity could also be given to the teacher as a written report.

Physical education teachers also will encounter numerous opportunities to teach pronunciation. In particular, as students become excited or disappointed while participating in physical activities and games, aspects of pronunciation such as stress and intonation can be presented. For example, ELLs could benefit from learning ways of congratulating their teammates. At the same time that the actual vocabulary words are being presented, students can
also practice how to convey maximum emotion: “All riiiiight!” versus “All right.”

**Vocabulary**
While the learning of vocabulary has been previously mentioned, this section presents ideas for practicing new words. The ways to incorporate vocabulary into physical activity are endless. Cooperative activities offer one excellent way to incorporate vocabulary in physical education (Dyson & Grineski, 2001; Dyson & Rubin, 2003). Teams could be organized and presented with a variety of physical activities to complete based on written cues that are provided by the teacher. Cooperative activities could be expanded upon to include problem-solving activities that would facilitate language usage and development. Relay races using developmentally appropriate procedures (i.e., limited number of students per team, rotation of team order, etc.) could also be organized around the need to sort words or even to form sentences. The formation of teams could be accomplished by providing each student with a vocabulary card and having them team up with the people who have words on their cards that refer to the same sport, or that together form a coherent sentence.

Another important aspect of language education involves the teaching of idioms, the origin and meaning of which are frequently interesting, even for native speakers of a language. As common idioms arise in class, instructors can choose to explain how they are related to sports. For example, a teacher might explain how the boxing expression “throwing in the towel” refers to “giving up” in general. This idea can be developed into a more formal (and advanced level) activity in which ELLs, upon learning a sports term such as “curve ball,” can be asked to imagine how the term might be used idiomatically in regular conversation, in this case by guessing the meaning of “throwing someone a curve ball.” The ELLs can be assisted in this by being given short scenarios in which the idiom is used.

**Idioms Organizer** (Wright, 1999) is one book for ELLs that presents idioms by topic and includes a section on sports. It provides ideas on worksheets or activities specifically for ELLs involving idioms. Note, however, that this is a British book, and some idioms may differ significantly from American terminology. Other good sources for sports idioms are the *Dictionary of Sports Idioms* (Palmatier & Ray, 1993) and the web site http://sportsidioms.com/, which organizes idioms by sport. Appropriate idioms could be collected from these sources and used to create exercises and activities.

**Conclusion**
In many schools in the United States today, teachers are being called upon to be language instructors in addition to teaching their regular content. In order to do this effectively, it is necessary that teachers understand the basic principles of language acquisition. The summary of current thinking in the field of second language acquisition provided in this article is intended to help establish a foundation that physical educators can use to make informed decisions on how to facilitate language learning in their classes. The ideas presented in this article are only a sampling of possible activities and are intended to be used as a springboard to further ideas and discussion on this topic among physical educators. Teachers can use and adapt these activities for different ages and language proficiencies, always keeping in mind the multiple factors that influence language acquisition.

**References**
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ing on individual settings. Regardless of the problems, it is important for everyone involved to make a collective effort to break down these barriers to motivation. Unfortunately, many times the teacher is the only one who cares enough to challenge barriers to motivation. Physical educators must therefore continually advocate for the importance of physical education. Physical educators have chosen a profession that has lasting effects on the health and well being of the nation’s youths. No matter how difficult the challenge, it is important to break down the barriers that are causing a lack of motivation in students.

References

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