# Kagan Structures: A Miracle of Active Engagement*

In this article, we contrast a conventional classroom lesson and its environment with a classroom where Kagan Structures are brought in. We discuss the benefits of the Structures and explain why this alternative approach to classroom organisation works much better and has a long-term learning effect. Then, we present six of our favourite Kagan Structures that are particularly suitable for the language-learning context, and we offer you an overview and the support to apply them in your daily teaching routines.

For an in-depth presentation of the Structures and our approach to cooperative learning, you can read *Kagan Cooperative Learning* (2009).

Traditional Instructional Strategies vs. Kagan's Cooperative Structures

Let's compare a typical traditional English language lesson to an English language lesson using Kagan Structures. For example, we might want to teach direction vocabulary with prepositions of place and direction: *next to, down, into, out, up, above, below.*

In a traditional classroom, the teacher may provide some direct instruction, then do a wholeclass question-and-answer session. During the question-and-answer session, the teacher usually asks questions, then has students raise their hands to volunteer answers. Alternatively, the teacher may ask a question, and nominate a student to respond. Finally, the teacher may assign an activity for individual work and have the students independently practice the new skill. Sound familiar?
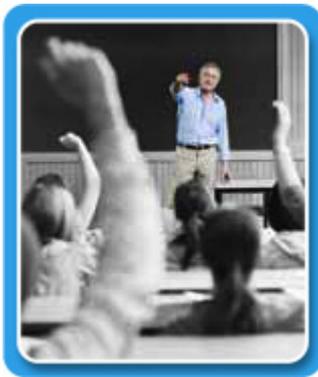
Traditional learning is either whole-class, with the teacher leading the class, or independent practice work. As we'll see below, traditional learning lacks a high level of active engagement, creates a more intimidating learning environment, and often fails to establish an effective communicative context for natural language acquisition. Cooperative learning offers a powerful alternative for language teaching—interaction! Many teachers believe Kagan Structures are instructional strategies designed to promote cooperation and communication in the classroom, boost students' confidence and retain their interest in classroom interaction. The Structures work in all teaching contexts—regardless of subject, age group, and number of students in class—and are a particularly powerful tool for teaching a foreign language. They are doing cooperative learning by introducing pair and group work. However, unstructured pair and group work lacks the basic principles of effective cooperative learning, and therefore, does not produce the gains of true cooperative learning. There is a vast difference between Kagan Structures and conventional pair or group work. Kagan Structures carefully engineer student interaction to maximise cooperation, communication, and active engagement by all.

The teacher who is fluent with a number of Kagan Structures would teach the same lesson quite differently. She would likely still provide some direct instruction, but skip the whole-class question-and-answer session, and not do the individual exercise. Instead, she would choose a Kagan Structure that will involve everyone, and encourage sharing and

> **Kagan Structures carefully engineer student interaction to maximise cooperation, communication, and active engagement by all.**

cooperation. On the subject of directions, the teacher might have the students do a RallyCoach— students work in pairs and take turns answering the activity questions. Or, Match Mine would be another productive structure for this lesson. In Match Mine, partners sit on opposite sides of a barrier. One partner, the "Sender," places items in an arrangement. The other student, the "Receiver," tries to match the sender's arrangement, using only the sender's verbal directions. Students use the direction vocabulary in a functional way: Place the square <u>next</u> to the triangle. Place the circle <u>below</u> the triangle.

Choosing a cooperative learning structure over traditional methods creates a dramatic positive difference in English language learning. We now know that there are many styles of learning and multiple intelligences. What works for some, may not work well for everyone. Therefore, we need a variety of strategies to reach and teach our students with different learning styles and intelligences. If we always use lectures and independent exercises, we may inadvertently create barriers to English learning for many students. If, instead, we use a variety of structures as we teach, we engage the different learning styles and students' multiple intelligences. The variety creates greater novelty, increases motivation, and maintains attention. Kagan Structures also create greater engagement, lower anxiety, and promote natural language acquisition. Let's see how.

Cooperative Learning Increases Engagement for Everyone

One attribute that sets cooperative structures apart from traditional instruction is that structures don't call for voluntary participation. In the traditional classroom, the teacher asks students a question, and only those who know the answer, or who are daring enough to respond, raise their hands. The rest of the class can opt out. When students have the option of nonparticipation, many don't participate. This is especially true for shy students, lower achievers, and early language learners. The result: They don't learn as much or as quickly.

There is a direct connection between student participation, engagement, communication and subsequent language learning.

With Kagan Structures, participation is not voluntary. Participation is required by the Structure. In RallyCoach, students take turns. Both partners have a very specific role and they cannot accomplish the task without working together. It is the same with Match Mine. Students must communicate accurately to complete the task. In the traditional classroom, the structure does not require participation from every student. It is the same with Match Mine with pair work or group work. If pair or group work is not structured properly, one student can simply do the work, while the others watch, or even tune out. In contrast, the Structures hold every student individually accountable for participating. There is a direct connection between student participation, engagement, communication, and subsequent language learning.

In the traditional classroom, when one student answers at a time, the ratio of active engagement is quite low. What's more, the rest of the class sits quietly and there is very little involvement. During our cooperative learning practice, the class is divided into pairs, and at least half of the class is generating language at any time and the other half is directly receiving comprehensible input and practicing active listening. This radically increases the opportunity to decode and produce language.

Cooperative Learning Lowers Anxiety

Learning and using a foreign language can be stressful. In the traditional English classroom, the teacher quizzes students in front of the entire class. Students may not know the correct answer, may be apprehensive about speaking in public, or may be self-conscious about their accent. In global surveys, public speaking ranks as people's greatest fear, beating fear of death, spiders, flying, and confined spaces. Whole-class settings for language learning are often perceived as threatening situations. We know from both language learning theory and brain research that stress negatively impacts attitudes, learning, and memory.

With RallyCoach and Match Mine, students are working with just one other student. Most Structures encourage pair work or work in teams of four. Students who would experience anxiety in a whole-class

setting feel more comfortable speaking English in a more intimate setting. Cooperative groups are less intimidating than whole-class settings. This is especially true in cooperative classrooms in which the teacher uses teambuilding to establish trust and encourage support among teammates.

Cooperative Learning Promotes Natural Language Acquisition

There's a big difference between learning about a language and actually acquiring the language. Too many language courses teach students about the language. Not enough courses allow students to actually use the language in a functional way. In our example of the traditional classroom, students learn about directional vocabulary. They learn to correctly complete exercises. But are they really building fluency? Results say no.

Many Kagan Structures naturally develop fluency by sidestepping the transference gap.

In the real world, we don't fill out exercises on the proper use of language. But we often do need to give instructions and follow directions. When the situation of language acquisition (exercise work) is too different from the situation of performance (giving directions), a transference gap is created and fluency is not acquired. Match Mine sidesteps the transference gap: the situation of acquisition (giving and receiving verbal directions) matches the future situation of performance (giving and receiving verbal directions). Many Kagan Structures naturally develop fluency by sidestepping the transference gap.

Too often, language courses fail to build functional fluency. Students learn how to conjugate verbs, memorise vocabulary, and learn grammar rules, but too often miss out on the opportunity to use language frequently in a functional way. With the Structures, students not only learn about directional terminology, but they actually implement them to accomplish a goal. Natural language acquisition among infants is based on frequent social interaction. Cooperative structures provide the social setting for language use and offer students many more opportunities to receive input, interact in the target language, and practice oral production of the language.

Many Kagan Structures naturally develop fluency by sidestepping the transference gap.

Developing English fluency consists of four major inter-related language objectives: we want to build oral comprehension skills so students can understand what they hear; we want to build oral fluency skills so students can communicate with others; we want to build writing skills, so students can express themselves clearly and correctly; we want to build reading skills so students can read with comprehension and accuracy.

A wonderful feature of the Kagan Structures is that they are instructional strategies that can be used repeatedly.

To accomplish these four language goals—reading, writing, speaking, and listening—we need an array of teaching tools. That's exactly what Kagan Structures are. Each structure is a different language-teaching tool designed to develop different skills. Some structures are more suitable to build vocabulary skills (e.g., Match Mine). Others are ideal for practicing language skills such as grammar (e.g., RallyCoach). A third category of structures develops interaction, fluency, and speech elaboration (e.g., Progressive Timed Pair Share). Then, Structures like the Flashcard Game are great for simply memorising the breadth of vocabulary terms and phrases students need to learn. Many structures simultaneously address multiple objectives that go beyond the four language objectives outlined above.

We have developed over 200 Kagan Structures for promoting interaction in the classroom. Because cooperation and communication are two hallmarks of the Kagan Structures, they are particularly well adapted to English learning. A wonderful feature of the Kagan Structures is that they are instructional strategies that can be used repeatedly. They are not limited to one particular exercise, but are designed as shells so you can slot in any activities and target language. Once you learn some basic Structures, you can

integrate them easily into your daily English lessons. For example, you may use RallyCoach today on directional words, but you can use it again tomorrow for proper use of question words.

Six Structures for the English Language Classroom

Here are six sample Kagan Structures we encourage you to experiment with:

Match Mine: Match Mine is terrific for developing communication skills. Students must use the target vocabulary correctly to achieve a successful match.

Language functions: Vocabulary builder, Functional communication, Oral language production

Advantages: Develops target vocabulary based on the content of the game. Develops ability to give and follow instructions accurately.

Structure summary: Partners on opposite sides of a barrier communicate with precision in order for one to match the other's arrangement of game pieces on a game board.

Description: The teacher assigns students to pairs. Each partner receives an identical game board and game pieces. The game board and game pieces can be based on any vocabulary topic such as food, clothing, sports, careers, verbs, and so on. For example, to practice human body vocabulary, the game board is an illustration of a person. The game pieces are numbered arrows. The pair sets up a file folder barrier between them so they can't see each other's game boards. One partner (the "Sender") arranges the numbered arrows pointing to different body parts. Then, the "Sender" describes her arrangement of arrows on the illustrated body and the "Receiver" attempts to match the Sender's arrangement exactly: Arrow #1 is pointing to her left ear. When the pair thinks that they have correctly made a match, the "Sender" and "Receiver" compare their arrangements to see how well they did. If the game pieces are arranged identically, the pair celebrates their success. If the game pieces don't match, they congratulate their efforts, then discuss how they could have communicated better to make the match.

Timed Pair Share: With Timed Pair Share, no students get left behind. Everyone must participate

Language functions: Fluency, Elaboration, Oral comprehension

Advantages: Half the class is actively producing language at any time, while the other half is actively listening. All students must participate. Students listen attentively so they can respond appropriately. Students regularly practice producing language on various topics.

Structure summary: Partners take timed turns listening and sharing.

Description: Timed Pair Share is one of the simplest cooperative learning structures—and one of the most powerful. The teacher states a discussion topic, how students are to pair, how long students will have to share, and selects who will go first. It is perhaps the easiest way to infuse cooperative interaction into just about any point of the lesson. For example, What do you predict this text will be about? Face partners and share for thirty seconds each. Partners with the darkest clothes begin.

When you compare Timed Pair Share to its traditional counterpart—selecting one student to share with the class—its true power is revealed. With Timed Pair Share, half the class is active at any one time, while the other half listens attentively. In the traditional class, only a single student in the whole class is active at any time; the rest of the class may easily tune out. With Timed Pair Share, no students get left behind. Everyone must participate. Students practice speaking and sharing their thinking and opinions in English. They

practice listening attentively. A single Timed Pair Share versus selecting one student in the class probably doesn't add up to much, but when you consider how often teachers ask questions every day, then multiply that by the number of days in the school year, this simple little Structure has the power to dramatically improve language skills.

Variation: Progressive Timed Pair Share. In Progressive Timed Pair Share, students take turns sharing with different partners on the same topic. Each time they share on the topic, the time limit is increased. This gives students the opportunity to start small and work their way up to more elaborated sentences, phrases, and ideas. As they hear ideas and language from their partner, they can incorporate what they've heard into their own turn to speak.

FlashCard Game: The Flashcard Game facilitates mastery of English words, phrases, and rules.

Language functions: Vocabulary, Grammar, Memorisation

Advantages: Develops mastery through repetition and peer tutoring. Students learn by quizzing and being quizzed. Students receive immediate feedback.

Structure summary: Partners (Tutor and Tutee) proceed through three rounds as they quiz each other with flashcards, master the content, and win their cards.

Description: The Flashcard Game facilitates mastery of English words, phrases, and rules. Students need flashcards to play. If no flashcards exist for the content, students can easily make their own. The flashcards can take many different forms, depending on the content to be learned. For vocabulary words, one side of the flashcard has a picture and the answer is on the back. For grammar, the card can have future tense on one side and past tense on the other side. Once the cards are made up, students proceed through three rounds in pairs to memorise the content. In Round 1, the "Tutor" shows and reads the front and back of the flashcard. Then, the "Tutor" shows the front of the card and the "Tutee" gives the answer for the back. If the "Tutee" answers correctly, the "Tutor" offers a praiser and gives the "Tutee" the card. If the "Tutee" answers incorrectly, he or she does not win the flashcard. The "Tutor" offers a hint or shows the answer again. When they have gone through all the cards, the pair switches roles and goes through the cards again.

For Round 2, fewer cues are given. The "Tutor" shows the front of the card and the "Tutee" tries to win back the card by giving a correct answer. When both students win back all their cards, they move on to Round 3. In Round 3, fewer cues are given yet. The "Tutor" says what's on the front, this time without showing the card. The "Tutee" tries to win back the cards with the correct answer.

The Flashcard Game is done in rounds to improve the likelihood of success at each round. Students are the "Tutor" and "Tutee" and get repeated practice and immediate feedback

RallyCoach: RallyCoach transforms independent work to cooperative work.

Language functions: Grammar, Vocabulary Comprehension, Questions, and Skills

Advantages: Students verbalise problems and answers. Students receive frequent and immediate feedback. Students receive peer help and support. Students are all held accountable for participating.

Structure summary: In pairs, students take turns answering problems while the other coaches.

Description: RallyCoach is ideal for peer tutoring and support during practice time. Students pair up. If students are seated in cooperative teams of four, they pair up within their own team. If not, the teacher may

assign students to pairs. The pair receives a worksheet or multi-part task. The problems are typically mastery-oriented practice problems, such as grammar practice. But RallyCoach can also be used with more challenging or creative problems such as written responses. In the pair, one student is the "Solver" and the other the "Coach". The "Solver" answers the problem, verbalizing the answer before writing. The "Coach" watches and listens. The "Coach" offers help if needed. When the "Solver" solves the problem, the "Coach" offers praise, Great job, partner! Partners switch roles and the "Solver" becomes the "Coach" for the next problem.

RallyCoach transforms independent work to cooperative work. During practice sessions, two heads are better than one. Partners can pool their knowledge and provide peer help and support when necessary. Partners hold each other accountable to the task. While working together, students also get to practice speaking as they verbalise answers.

RallyRead

Language functions: Reading, Fluency, Comprehension, Listening

Advantages: Students develop language fluency. Promotes active engagement since half the class is either actively reading or actively listening. Develops reading comprehension because students must respond to frequent comprehension questions.

Structure summary: Partners take turns reading and checking for comprehension.

Description: RallyRead is an effective structure for building reading fluency and comprehension. The teacher assigns the reading text. It can be a story, a blog entry, an email, a newspaper article—anything at the appropriate level of difficulty. The teacher informs students how often they need to switch readers. Partners can switch every sentence, every paragraph, or every page, depending on students' ability levels. Partners can also switch roles on timed intervals, such as every minute. Partner A reads his specified reading period. When finished, he asks his partner a comprehension question. For example, Where did the dog go? Partner B answers. If correct, Partner A praises, Good listening! If incorrect, Partner A offers help, referring the partner to the appropriate reading passage so the partner can find the correct answer.

RallyRead is often preferable to independent reading because students get the opportunity to practice their fluency skills and also get practice in rhythm and intonation. Words often come out differently when pronounced than when read in one's head. RallyRead also develops listening skills. Students must listen actively for comprehension to correctly respond to their partners. While teacher read-alouds are good to model proper pronunciation, they lack the active student participation that RallyRead offers.

Talking Chips

Language functions: Communication regulator, Fluency builder

Advantages: Every student is held accountable for participating. Develops speaking and listening skills

Structure summary: Teammates place a "talking chip" in the centre of the team table each time they talk. When they're out of chips, they may not talk until all teammates have used their chips.

Description: Each student receives one "talking chip." The chips can be any kind of game token, or a pen, pencil, eraser, slip of paper, or any other tangible item. It is preferable if each student has a unique colour for his/her chips. The students are given an open-ended discussion topic such as, Where in the world would you most want to live and why? In order to speak, a teammate must place his or her chip in the centre of the team

table. It is his or her turn to speak. Teammates cannot interrupt and must practice respectful listening. When he or she is finished, another student places his or her chip in the centre of the team table and is free to add to the discussion. When a student uses his or her "talking chip", he or she cannot speak until all teammates have added to the discussion and placed their chip in the centre of the table. When everyone has had a chance to speak, each student collects her or his chips and continues with the discussion, using "talking chips" or start again with a new topic.

Talking Chips regulates discussion, ensuring that everyone participates and everyone contributes. Shy students, low achievers, and less-fluent students are encouraged by the social norms of the structure to fully participate and develop their language skills, too

Dr. Spencer Kagan & Miguel Kagan

References

High, Julie (1993). *Second Language Learning Through Cooperative Learning.* San Clemente, CA: Kagan Publishing. This book applies Kagan Cooperative Learning Structures to language learning.

Kagan, Spencer & Kagan, Miguel (2009). *Kagan Cooperative Learning.* San Clemente, CA: Kagan Publishing. This is a recent revision of Dr. Kagan's classic book on cooperative learning. It is the most popular and comprehensive book in the field.

Kagan, Miguel (2009). *Match Mine Language Builders.* San Clemente, CA: Kagan Publishing. Based on the structure Match Mine, this book contains 30 ready-made cooperative learning games covering common vocabulary words and concepts.