

Making Content Accessible for English Language Learners (ELL) in the Physical Education Classroom

Dr. Lisa Toscano

Manhattan College
Manhattan College Parkway
Riverdale, NY 10471, USA.

Dr. Lisa Anne Rizopoulos

Manhattan College
Manhattan College Parkway
Riverdale, NY 10471, USA.

Abstract

Many middle school teachers face unique challenges as they try to make both academic language and content accessible to English language learners (ELL) in the physical education classroom. Physical education is required of all middle school students and teaches about the importance of health and how to stay physically active for life. It also offers a unique and supportive environment for ELL students to improve their English fluency, build friendships and boost their self-esteem. The purpose of this paper is to describe several strategies for improving ELL students' understanding of content and expectations in the physical education classroom. These strategies hope to help teachers meet the unique needs of middle school ELLs through the use of culturally relevant pedagogies.

Key words: Physical Education, Middle School, English Language Learner, Strategies

Introduction

A 6th grade girl arrived as a newcomer from India, about two weeks ago. She is one of the English language learners in my Physical Education class. She has minimal language skills, refuses to dress in her gym outfit, and becomes confused with line up and workout routines. "When I give directions, she smiles, nods, and mirrors the other students as they follow a sequence of directions. At times, she just stands still, in confusion, trying to figure out where she should go next. I wish I knew how to make the content and routines more accessible, so she can quickly become an independent, productive student in our class."

This scenario clearly depicts the disparity for many other second language learners from around the world, that experience culture shock and language barriers and who are mainstreamed into English-only inclusion classrooms. The excerpt also illustrates the dilemma that many teachers face as they try to teach English language learners content-specific concepts as well as develop their second language. With the ever-increasing number of English language learners entering schools in the United States, it is imperative for all teachers to create an inclusive, positive learning environment for these students. According to the [National Center for Educational Statistics](#) (2011), 11.2 million students in 2009 spoke a language other than English at home and with as many as 500 languages spoken at any given time in any specific classroom. Specifically, an increasing proportion of ELL students are middle school students. These students are usually recent immigrants with gaps in their formal education or long-term ELLs who have not achieved a proficient level of academic or English coursework (Hakuta, August, and O'Day, 2009). Furthermore, Common Core State Standards were written for regular education students, and there are no plans to modify them in any way to meet the needs of English language learners (McLaughlin, Overturf, 2013). Therefore, there is a critical need to use English language learning strategies to communicate and teach students in the physical education classroom. These strategies are sound practice teaching for all students and should be incorporated in all lessons.

Stephen Krashen's Theory of Second Language Acquisition (1983) is a critical concept for students who are learning a second language.

Krashen's theory recognizes that students "acquire language in only one way, when they understand messages, that is when they obtain "comprehensible input.... More precisely, (students) acquire information when we understand messages containing aspects of language that we are developmentally ready to acquire but have not yet acquired." The importance of designing lessons that emphasize strategies for making input comprehensible, for English language learners in the physical education class, improves students' academic, social and emotional competence. Language is more comprehensible when it is context-embedded, where language is supported by both visual and oral cues (Cummins, 2000, Clement, 2012).

Twenty Five percent of students in the United States are children of immigrant parents, who are considered English Language Learners (ELLs) (Gandara & Hopkins, 2010). Although many of these students are proficient in the English language many need assistance. According to Nguyen & Watanabe, (2013), many schools do not have specialists on site to assist teachers in meeting the diverse needs of ELL students in their respective setting. Physical Education is uniquely positioned to create a low stress in a receptive atmosphere that supports ELL students' and English language acquisition through activity and hands on learning (Clancy & Hruska, 2005).

Physical Education classes use the power of play to provide opportunities for enhancing a child's feelings of mastery and promoting his or her sense of importance (Clements & Rady, 2012, Morris, 1999). Through the power of movement and the enjoyment of play, teachers can help all children feel connected to others when they feel included as an integral part of a game or a fitness activity. For example, in physical education class, sport and fitness games can introduce character building, encourage a sense of community and foster the use of cognitive skills in students. For the English language learner, this feeling of acceptance and success is critical for developing friendships and establishing connections with peers and students need to understand the message being conveyed by both the teacher and other students in the class. Movement is a powerful tool and physical education teachers can use games to assist any child in reaching his or her maximum cognitive, social, emotional and physical potentials. These factors anchor the need for effective strategies that enable ELL students to become active participants in the physical education class.

In order to make instruction comprehensible for English language learners, teachers must apply strategies that focus on nonverbal communication skills, control their vocabulary and use visual aids and graphic organizers. Teachers make their language more comprehensible by differentiating content and learning materials, so students are able to use cues and visuals to improve understanding. Technology is only one tool that can be used to scaffold student learning and motivate reluctant learners to develop their linguistic skills. Therefore, a variety of tools are needed to effectively communicate and provide the necessary support to language learners that catapult learning and second language acquisition in the Physical Education class.

The Total Physical Response Model

The Total Physical Response Model (Asher, 1982) is a language learning method based on the coordination of speech and action. This method attempts to teach language through physical (motor) activity and is an effective approach in the physical education class. According to Asher's model, students acquire new English vocabulary by listening to and carrying out spoken commands. Through scaffolding, modeling and repetition, students in the physical education setting that have English language learners, experience success because they are expected to mirror actions, thus reducing the pressure to speak. This is especially true for children at the beginning, pre-production stage of language learning who are focused on the nonverbal cues from the teacher and who pay close attention to physical movement and expressions to understand directions and content. Teachers may use the Total Physical Response Model to review and introduce new vocabulary before a lesson. For example, at the pre-production and early production level, games and puzzles that focus on the hidden or missing word or letter and then developing visual recognition activities such as jumping, hopping, running etc. The teacher must initially model the action required with the vocabulary word, and then provide multiple experiences to ensure understanding. As the teacher says the new academic language and models the behavior, the student understands what is expected and continues to associate the new word with the task. As new cues are taught, the constant reinforcement of previous academic language is required in order to improve retention.

Predictable Routines

"Routines are the backbone of daily classroom life. They facilitate teaching and learning" (Mohsen, 2008, Shalaway, 1998). English language learners especially benefit from predictable routines, because it reduces their anxiety about what is expected during the class period.

The use of predictable routines leads to successful communication in the Physical Education classroom and allows students to consistently follow particular procedures. Specifically, students usually begin the period by changing into their class attire, lining up in a designated spot, and then engaging in a warm-up exercise. Ideally this routine can be posted in the gym, with complimenting pictures and in multiple languages, so students can feel safe and confident in a possibly unfamiliar setting.

Visual Aids

English Language Learners greatly benefit from the type of scaffolding that makes extensive use of visual aids – hence the term *visual scaffolding* (Bruner, 1966). Though the use of diagrams and pictures, students can receive comprehensible input in the physical education class. For example, diagrams that illustrate the different parts of the body that are required to learn a specific routine or how to navigate a particular piece of equipment are very important. Diagrams, such as labeled parts of the body, enable the English language learner to identify the part of the body being presented in the class. As the teacher provides instructions, steps are written out with accompanying visual aids. Sequential picture books help ELL students imitate actions according to the visuals. Specifically, middle school students are learning how to complete a backward roll. The first page of the sequential picture book illustrates a student’s stretched body standing straight with hands up above the head. The book continues highlighting the different steps needed to complete the task. The illustrations are accompanied by a few key words to help students’ associate the words with the action. These key words are placed in the graphic organizers as both words and visual symbols that are quick and easy to recognize. The graphic organizer is an ideal learning tool, because it omits extraneous information found in most textbooks. Visual displays of familiar words can be placed on bulletin boards, so students know what is expected each week.

Cognates

A typical physical education class requires students to understand and apply a variety of unfamiliar terms and acronyms that relate to the body and health. Common academic words include repetition, repetitions, duration, time, and other terms associated with learning important concepts in the physical education class. One strategy that helps ELL learners understand new, important vocabulary includes the use of cognates. Cognates are words in two languages that share a similar meaning, spelling, and pronunciation. Especially for Spanish speaking students, cognates are an obvious bridge to the English language. For example, the word “join” in Spanish is *juntare* and the Spanish translation for the word “sport” is *sport*. The names of popular sports are also the same in a variety of languages. For example, the word “football” in Spanish is “futbol.” Cognates bridge a gap between what is known and new information.

Graphic Organizers

Graphic organizers are a type of visual aid that helps English language learners realize the relationship among concepts taught in class. It is estimated that 40 percent of secondary learners recall things that are seen or read (Gangwar, 2012). Therefore, it’s critical that teachers use webbing and diagrams to create mental images.

A brainstorm concept web can be used to activate students’ prior knowledge about a particular concept in health and physical education. Afterwards, English language learners can use a concept map to brainstorm ideas about how to eat a healthy diet. As students list different types of foods, they can make connections between those that are healthy and the ones that are not nutritious. Specifically, the food pyramid can be used as a follow-up to organize and categorize student responses.

Diagrams can be used to teach the academic vocabulary associated with the different parts of the body. Understanding the different parts of the body, and being able to communicate using these words, is not only an important part of the physical education class, but the students need this vocabulary to express themselves in their daily life. A body-diagram can be introduced with labels that represent the languages in the classroom. Several words can be introduced at a time and reinforced throughout the lesson. The diagram serves as a visual aid that identifies new academic vocabulary and connects the picture with a visual representation.

Modeling

Whenever a physical education teacher or student in the class is demonstrating a procedure, this is called modeling. Modeling involves showing the student what is expected, and for the English as a second language learner, repetitive and consistent modeling is essential.

According to Culp (2006) and Tileston (2004), many English language learners respond better to modeling and being paired with students who are proficient in English. Additionally, in the physical education class setting, these learners may be more responsive to activities that are kinesthetic, inductive in nature, non-verbal, visual and differentiated to determine skill level (Culp & Schmidlein, 2012). Many teachers use only verbal directions to support student learning, however, the combination of verbal and modeling increases the students' ability to complete a task or performance. As the teacher demonstrates a desired skill, the students listen and watch closely. The teacher conducts a "think aloud" and verbalizes each of the steps involved in completing the activity toward mastery. Using a "think aloud" during modeling shows the thinking process and common errors that students might make. Eventually, the student will internalize "teacher-thinking", and they will be able to complete the task on their own.

Modeling also involves the teacher using the academic vocabulary required for students to know for both social and academic success. Teachers must speak slowly and clearly and support verbal instructions with visuals and examples. The new vocabulary words used in each lesson can become part of a weekly vocabulary bulletin board used in class throughout the semester. Modeling also involves students in the class who provide samples of exemplary work.

Modify Speech

It has been estimated that "Approximately 30 percent of school-aged population has an auditory preference for learning, (Carbo, Dunn, & Dunn, 1986), therefore, a great deal of information is shared with students and received through speech. In order to help our students understand the message, teachers must enunciate clearly and slowly and pause between sentences or groups of thoughts. By making sure speech is slow and by checking for understanding, English language learners are given additional time to translate the words in their minds. The student hears the word in English and then translates the word in their minds in their first language, and finally, the child is able to interpret this word in English. Slow deliberate speech provides students with needed wait time to think about the words meaning and construct a meaningful response. When presenting, it is important to avoid idioms and slang words. For example, when playing a game of soccer, to wish teammate luck, it's common to say, "Break a leg." English as second language learners may take this saying literally and be offended by the message, therefore, it's important to avoid figurative language and unfamiliar slang.

Technology

The use of technology is an interactive and engaging instructional tool for middle school ELL students, because it helps the teacher differentiate and reinforce critical skills learned in class. The teacher's role is to facilitate learning by making the students see connections between what they already know and what they are going to learn through the use of a variety of electronic tools.

The use of applications, (Apps), using an iPhone or iPad, is becoming commonplace in the physical education class. Especially at the middle school level, students are expert at using technology and have already installed many entertainment apps in their phone. Therefore, it only seems logical to incorporate technology to help English as second language learners attain and retain new content. One specific app that seems especially useful is the Coach's Eye. Coach's Eye videotapes students performing a skill. Then, the video can be played back in slow motion, backward, or frame-by-frame. This is a useful visual aid, because verbal directions and comments may confuse English language learners, and this app gives them an opportunity to review and reflect on the teacher's comments using a visual representation. iPhones and iPads also have a built in video camera that can be used to videotape student performance for reflection. Adding verbal and written cues from the teacher to direct the student attention to certain words or aspect of the performance becomes a very valuable tool in engaging student learners (Mohnsen, 2008). These technologies provide augmented student feedback and help to enforce vocabulary words taught in fitness lessons

Students in physical education classes frequently use heart rate monitors and pedometers. Measuring devices like these provide active participation by students in fitness lessons and are usually linked to a fitness bulletin board with static visuals. According to Mohnsen (2008) static visuals include texts, pictures, graphics and three-dimensional models. Text convey information while pictures attract attention, provide realistic images of objects, document events, and speak to those who are hearing impaired, non-English speaking, or unable to read. In physical education, pictures are especially good for illustrating sport skill techniques and strategies.

Signals

The use of signals is an important concept in the physical education classroom. It is equally important that both the teacher and the students understand the meaning of these signals at the beginning of the year. Specifically, the whistle is blown to signal to the students that play- time is going to begin or it is over. A simple thumbs up or thumbs down can be used to assess if the student understands the concept being presented. Another commonly used signal, high five, positively reinforces student understanding. These signals especially help the English language learner in the preproduction phase, because oral language proficiency and vocabulary are limited and students understand much more than they are able to verbally communicate. Signals are also a class- established way of communicating; therefore, all students are confident to participate in classroom activities. However, teachers must use caution to use nonverbal signals that have similar meaning in students' culture. For example, in the Greek culture, the "circular finger-motion for Ok" has a negative meaning as opposed to our American interpretation. Therefore, it's important that everyone in the class correctly understands the meanings of these gestures. This may be accomplished through cooperative learning activities.

Cooperative Learning

Large group and small group instruction is another way to allow English language learners a chance to buddy up with students that are their age but who have different levels of language proficiency. The first element teachers must employ for cooperative learning to be successful is to make sure that the students are learning in a safe and secure environment (Mohsen, 2008). Icebreakers can be used to foster community in the Physical Education class and to create a risk-free, unthreatening learning environment. This allows students to become social with each other and develops trust among students as they work together to win a game or complete an activity. Since young adolescents are extremely interested in their peers, cooperative learning provides a perfect opportunity for them to interact and collaborate with their friends and peers (Allison, Rehm, 2007). Collaborative learning is especially important during the middle school years, because in one class there may be students from a variety of cultural and linguistic backgrounds and a level of language proficiency. It cannot be assumed that all ELL are the same, because they have limited English proficiency.

Cultural Responsiveness

Physical educators can help English language learners break through initial language barriers by fostering a class community where they feel safe be themselves. By tapping into students' prior knowledge students will believe their thoughts and ideas matter. Encouraging learners to compare, question, discuss, and reflect on their own ideas and the ideas of others is not only important for English language learners but for all learners.

Implementing culturally responsive teaching practices in physical education at the middle school level means being aware of diversity issues to plan everyday physical education lessons. According to Clements & Rady (2012), there are six culturally responsive teaching practices to assist physical educators in being effective teachers of diverse student populations.

- 1) Recognize cultural characteristics reflecting race and ethnicity
- 2) Become acquainted with students native countries
- 3) Recognize intercultural differences in gestures and body language
- 4) Address the needs of English language learners
- 5) Use nondiscriminatory selection techniques, international skill practice formations, and urban ways to start a game
- 6) Enhance the learning environment with themed bulletin boards and greetings

Many children from different cultures have diverse experiences in their country with physical education programs, and it's up to the teacher to create appropriate, culturally sensitive and effective instruction related to students' backgrounds and ethnicities. For example, a favorite book or cultural holiday can become the inspiration for a modern dance to show how movement and language share similarities when communicating feelings or ideas. Adding international games to the curriculum can also inform children about other people and their cultures. When played in an atmosphere of fun and teamwork, multicultural games may even broaden students' horizons, deepen their insights, and expand their feeling of affinity for people of different cultures. Students can make cross-cultural connections between sports in one culture to another.

Specifically, the North American activity of horseshoes can be easily compared to the game of Italian game of Bocce or Boules in French (Clements & Rady, 2012). This may lessen the culture shock and confusion of the ELL student and help peers develop an appreciation and sensitivity to diverse cultures.

Creating comprehensible input for English language learners is critical to fostering an inclusive, culturally responsive productive physical education class. In a time of changing global demographics, effective physical education that considers the needs of all students is a sound practice. It is the physical education teacher's responsibility to identify and reach out to content area teachers to obtain pertinent records and form partnerships for the success of their ELL learners. As teachers prepare to plan student-centered instruction that focuses on ELL students' language, culture, and social needs, the need to differentiate lessons and incorporate opportunities to make lessons comprehensible is imperative. Empowering all students to be productive, challenged members of the class learning community will foster sociocultural, linguistic, and academic success.

References

- Allison, B.N., & Rehm, M.L. (2007). Effective teaching strategies for middle school learners in multicultural, multilingual classrooms. *Middle School Journal*, 39 (2), 12-18.
- Asher, J. (1982). *Learning another language through actions: The complete teachers' guidebook*. Los Gatos, CA.: Sky Oaks.
- Bruner, J. S. (1966). *Toward a theory of instruction*, Cambridge, Mass.: BelkappPress.
- Carbo, M., Dunn, R., & Dunn, K. (1986). *Teaching students to read through their individual learning styles*. Prentice-Hall, p. 13.
- Clancy, E. M., & Hruska, B.L. (2005). Developing language objectives for English language learners in physical education lessons. *Journal of Physical Education Recreation and Dance*, 76(4), 30-35.
- Clements R. L. & Rady, A. M. (2012). *Urban physical education: Instructional practices and cultural activities*. Champaign Il, Human Kinetics.
- Culp, B. (2006). Classroom management for diverse populations. *Strategies*, 20 (1), 21-24.
- Culp, B., & Schmidlein, R. (2012). Preparing PETE students for culturally linguistically diverse learners. *Strategies*, 25 (7), 11 -14.
- Cummins, J. (2000) *Language, power and pedagogy: Bilingual children in the crossfire*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Gandara, P., & Hopkins, M. (2010). The changing linguistic landscape of the United States. In P. Gandara & Hopkins (Eds.), *Forbidden language: English learners and restrictive language policies* (pp. 7-19). New York, NY Teachers College.
- Gangwar, T. (2012). Are you a visual learner? Retrieved on August 24, 2013 at <http://visualteaching.ning.com/profiles/blogs/are-you-a-visual-learner>.
- Hakuta, K., August, D., & O'Day, J. (2009). The American recovery and reinvestment act for addressing the needs of English language learners. ELL Working Group on ELLs.
- Johnson, C.C. (2005). Making instruction relevant to language minority students at the middle level, *Middle School Journal*, 37 (2), 10-14.
- McLaughlin, M. & Overturf, B.J. (2013). The common core: Teaching K-5 students to meet the reading standards. Published by the International Reading Association, DE
- Mohnsen, B.S., (2008). *Teaching middle school physical education: A standards based approach for grades 5-8*. Champaign Il. Human Kinetics.
- Mohnsen, B. S. (2008). *Using technology in physical education*. Cerritos, Ca. Fitware Inc.
- Morris, D. & Stiel, J. (1999). *Changing kids games*. Champaign, Il. Human Kinetics.
- Nguyen, T.N., & Watanabe, M.F. (2013). Using visual supports to teach English language learners in physical education. *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation and Dance*, 84(8), 46-53.
- Pearson, P.D., & Gallagher, M.C. (1983). The instruction of reading comprehension. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 8, 317-344.
- Shalaway, L. (1998). *Learning to teach: Not just for beginners*. Scholastic, NY.
- Tileston, D. W. (2004). *What every teacher should know about diverse learners*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.