

Pairs and groups

7 Making pairs and groups

The same students always seem to sit and work together. I want to form groups in more interesting or more useful ways.

Aim

To divide students up into pairs or groups to work on a task.

Introduction

Learners often need to work together in pairs or small groups of between three and six people. The default option is that students get together with people who are already sitting near them. This has the advantage of speed and doesn't require much thinking or movement, but does mean that learners may always work with the same people.

The ideas below suggest some ways of forming pairs and groups in more interesting ways. Many of these will involve some language use (such as asking each other questions) in addition to whatever the intended language work of the main group task will be (e.g. asking each other what TV shows they like).

Techniques: Basic options

- 1 Say the instruction, 'Get into pairs' or 'Make groups of three/four/five'. You could let students choose who to work with, or indicate with gestures or further instructions who could be in which groups and where the groups should form.
- 2 Alternatively, go round the class, allocating a letter to each student (e.g. the first student gets 'A', the second 'B' and so on, etc.). When all students have a letter, give an instruction such as, 'Make a pair with an A and B' or 'All A's work together. All B's work together' Or 'A's come over here. B's make a group by the window', etc. You can allocate letters in order round the class, or you could pre-plan groupings by deciding beforehand who will get which letter.

Technique: Playing around with some basic variables

Here are a few things to think about when making groups:

- 1 Do groups all need to be the same size, or might it be interesting to have different-sized groups?
- 2 Would it be better to create groups around *similarities* (e.g. interests, language level, creativity, ages, gender, etc.) or around *differences*?
- 3 Do you want to engineer certain people to work together (or *not* work together)?

Techniques: Making random groups

- 1 'Make a group with people who have the same colour bag as you / were born in the same month as you / like the same TV show as you / enjoy the same style of hot drink as you.' (Instructions like this may require students to talk briefly with others before they can start on the main task.)
- 2 Get all students to write their names on a slip of paper and put them in a bag. Pull out names to form groups.
- 3 Tell each student to write down their favourite animal (or dessert/shop/song, etc.) from a short list you show them (e.g. ice cream, chocolate, cake, fruit). When students reveal their words, form groups of people with the same items.
- 4 Instead of using group letters, choose a set of words the class has recently studied (e.g. types of fruit). Allocate a different word to each student. When everyone has a fruit, you can ask all the oranges to make a group, all the apples and so on.
 - 'Tiger, cow, dragon, etc.: Wild animals meet up by the window. Imaginary animals meet up at this table.'
 - 'Renault, McLaren, Ferrari, etc.: OK, all Ferraris drive over here and meet up; all Renaults race over there.'
 - 'Eiffel Tower, Big Ben, Uluru, Tower Bridge, The Louvre, etc.: Find partners from the same country.'
- 5 Make sets of cards. Each card should have one item from a lexical set (e.g. books: dictionary, encyclopaedia, coursebook, novel, atlas). Shuffle the cards and distribute one to each learner. Students should mingle, compare words and make a group that has one complete set of words.
 - 'Orange, purple, crimson, turquoise, etc.: Make a group with five different colours in it.'
 - 'Eggs, coffee, bacon, etc.: Get together and make a complete breakfast.'
 - Make sets of cards, but mix up lots of different sets of words (e.g. computer words, seaside words, food items, etc.) so that students must find others who have words that seem to be from the same set as their own word (e.g. 'mouse', 'monitor' and 'keyboard' will get together, but not in the same group as 'beach', 'waves' and 'pebble'). The group forming will take longer!
- 6 Prepare a meet-and-match task (e.g. different pictures, each cut up jigsaw-style into five pieces). Students mingle and try to find the other students who also have pieces from their picture.

Techniques: Making non-random groups

- 1 Ask learners to choose who they would like to work with.
- 2 Make groups based on results of a preceding activity, exercise or test (e.g. 'All students who got seven or more answers correct, work in a group over here').
- 3 Use a matching task, but don't distribute pieces randomly. Give out sets to people that you want to work together.

Techniques: Pairs

- 1 Tell students, 'Work with someone who ... is not sitting in a seat near you / you think will have a totally different view to your own / you have never worked with before / lives far away from you / is waving to you across the room now.'
- 2 Ask learners to write an anagram of their first names on a slip of paper. Collect the slips and redistribute randomly. Students have to try to unravel the anagram to find their new partner's name.

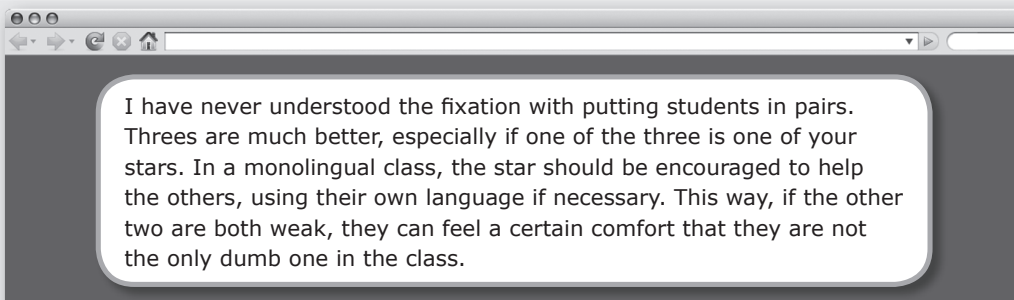
Techniques: Making pairs with no big moves

If you decide not to ask students to move at all, you still have a number of ways of making varied pairs:

- 1 Sideways: work with a student on your left for one task, and then the next task with the student on the *other* side.
- 2 Front/back: work with a student in the seat in front of you for one task, and then behind you for the next one.
- 3 Diagonally: well ... you get the idea!

Technique: Pairs or threesomes?

Consider the regular use of threesomes rather than pairs. Ken Wilson argues forcefully for this in his blog:



Questions for reflection

- Does the teacher have the *right* to decide who should or shouldn't work together? If one learner prefers to work with particular other people (and not with others), should we respect that?
- Do teachers have any responsibility to force learners into different working relationships?
- If you want to have same-sized groups and your group-making method produces uneven sizes, how could you quickly balance things out?

8 Keeping pair work and group work interesting

I find that I keep saying, 'Get into groups', and they all huddle together and talk for 10 minutes or so – and it's sort of OK, but never very exciting.

Aim

To add some variety and spark back into pair and group work that has become routine and predictable.

Introduction

Whether group work is a discussion, a problem-solving task, a shared exercise or whatever, teachers sometimes find that they need to add an extra element to help encourage students to participate fully and actively. One common way is to add a competitive element to work, calling the groups 'teams' and declaring the first to finish (or the team with the best answer or the most right answers) as the 'winner'. In the ideas below, I'll suggest some other ways that learners may find interesting.

Technique: Use different arrangements for pair work

For short discussion topics or *mingle* tasks:

1 Lines

Ask students to stand in two facing lines: Line A and Line B. Facing pairs from A and B talk about the subject. When you ring a bell or tap the table, everyone in Line A moves one place to their right, meeting a new person. (The person on the end of the line moves round to the other end.)

2 Wheels

The same idea works with two circles, an inner wheel and an outer one – the students in the inner wheel facing those in the outer.

Technique: Altering one variable

Sometimes altering just one variable (such as task timing or work position) can make a group-work activity different, for example:

- 1 Do an activity with a very tight, almost impossible, time limit. Ask students to do the task at speed, guessing answers or choosing the first answers they think of, not going back to check. Stick to the time limit (otherwise students won't take it seriously in future if you set a time limit for a task like this).
- 2 Do the activity standing up rather than seated. Or do it walking: keep moving around the room as you talk.
- 3 Do the activity, but only one person in the group can look at / read the task or text. This person has to read aloud or report to the others.
- 4 Do the activity, but only one person can write answers, make notes, etc.

Technique: Adding or changing ground rules

Adding or changing the ground rules for interaction, or adding restrictions, can be useful:

- 1 Set a new rule, e.g. after someone has spoken, the person on their right round the circle must speak next.
- 2 Give each group two balls made of material or some soft substance. Only students holding a ball may speak. They can throw it to another person at any time, but only after making at least some contribution to the activity.
- 3 Do the activity without speaking. Communicate with each other entirely using writing (e.g. using a shared large sheet of paper, notes on small slips of paper, via the whiteboard, or using technology such as emails, phone text messages, twitter, etc.).

Technique: Spies

This technique is particularly good for idea generation and creative problem-solving tasks.

After students have been working long enough in their groups to have come up with some ideas or solutions, go round the groups and theatrically whisper to one student of your choice in each group that their job is to be a spy – to go and sit with the adjacent group (pointed out by you) and find out what they have said, thought, achieved (but without joining in themselves). After a few minutes, the spies should report back to their original group with as much as they have learnt from their observations of the other group.

Technique: Pirates

This is similar to Spies (above), but the student from each group can browse around the other groups at will and steal anything he/she feels is useful or interesting.

Technique: Art gallery

This idea is good for activities that end with a creative, tangible product such as a poster, a piece of imaginative writing or a picture.

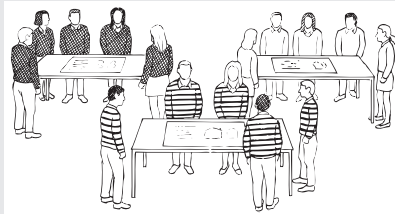
At the end of a group activity, invite each group to pin or stick their work on the wall or a noticeboard (or put it on a table) in different locations all around the room.

When the displays are ready, invite students to browse around the different exhibitions. You can also browse and chat with the visitors. At the end, you could lead a discussion standing by one or more of the exhibits (e.g. agreeing with students which was the most imaginative or most unusual item).

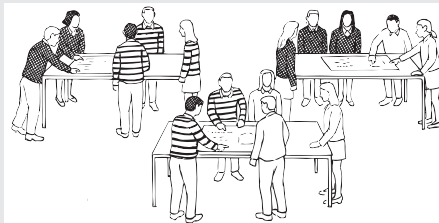
Technique: Carousel

An alternative to the Art Gallery (above) is a carousel.

This is a complex procedure to describe, but it's a great one to use in class as it really stirs things up and changes the challenge level in interesting ways.

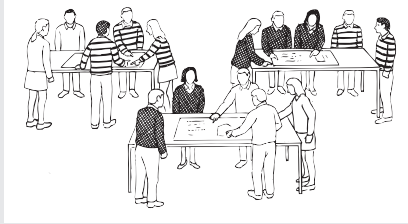


- 1 At the end of an activity, ask students to lay out their completed work on their table or the wall. Ask one or two members of the group to remain behind at their table. The others move on to visit another group. The *old* group members welcome the newcomers and show off their work, explaining it and the thinking behind it.



So, for example, two people in Group A remain behind while the three other Group A members move on to visit Group B, where they meet the two members of Group B who remained behind when their colleagues moved on to Group C!

- 2 After a suitable amount of time, organise another move (and this one will surprise them!). Ask the people who have recently joined a group to stay there, but the original group members now move on to rejoin their original group at their new table.



For example, the three members of Group A who visited Group B now stay at Group B's table. The original two remaining Group B members move on to rejoin the other Group B students at C's table.

Now that everyone has shifted round one table, the explaining task becomes more challenging as the people doing the talking are not those who designed the poster or made the answers, or whatever, but are those who have just heard about it from the previous group.

Technique: Don't give up on pair and group work!

Sometimes, when teachers first try pair or group work, they may monitor and find many students doing the task poorly or incorrectly or in their own language or not doing the task at all. Teachers may sometimes use this as an excuse to dismiss such work as useless and a waste of classroom time. But as Michael Lewis and Jimmie Hill point out, even if half the students are not working as directed, that still leaves many who are: 'As a result, instead of one or two students doing something useful while the others sit back, 10 or 20 students are working constructively. Teachers must not drop pair work just because it is not successful for all students all the time.'

So, don't give up on pair and group work. Seek ways to make it more interesting, engaging and accessible for more students. Monitor to help the confused make more sense of the tasks and to help bring the non-participants in.

Questions for reflection

- Divide the ideas up into (a) I've used this, (b) I'll use this or (c) I'd never use this.
- Check out what holds you back from using the ideas in Category (c). Just to push yourself out of your comfort zone, can you plan a way of using a Category (c) idea next week?

9 Encouraging quieter learners to speak in pairs or groups

When we do group work, I always notice a few students who seem to hide and manage to say nothing in their group. I try to encourage them, but what more could I do?

Aim

To find interesting ways to get reluctant students to speak in their groups.

Introduction

It's absolutely normal that some students will be shyer, less confident, weaker at English or less willing to speak – for whatever reason. Encouraging them to speak is part of our job, and part of that is to do with making sure that we allow space for them to participate. Often quieter, slower students simply get squashed out by the stronger, louder, more impatient students. Some of the time-honoured techniques, such as using a conch (see below), work on both managing the louder students and encouraging the quieter ones to speak up.

Technique: Conch

A *conch* is a shell which is either passed around person to person at meetings or is always returned to the centre of the circle, where whoever wants to speak next can retrieve it. Whoever is holding the conch can speak; if you don't have it, you can't speak.

You don't have to have a shell, but having some symbolic items to pass around (jewels, a shield, a rain stick, a horn, a cup/grail, an unusual stone, that weird souvenir you picked up on holiday) or to throw from person to person (a ball, a soft toy) can help give structure to speaking activities, whether in whole class or groups. It is most effective in situations where some individuals constantly talk over others and some never get a fair hearing.

Set the ground rules clearly (e.g. how long one person can speak, how many times each person can speak, the minimum contribution that each student should make); check that everyone understands and buys into them. If anyone breaks the rule, 'shhh!' them, or exclude them from the activity if it seems to be a deliberate act.

Once you have used your conch once, you will find that it becomes very usable in future activities. Everyone will remember the rules and how to behave, so with minimum set-up you can start the discussion.

I find that I sometimes introduce the objects that we will use for passing with a convincing (but entirely made-up) story of their ancient origins and deep mystical importance: 'These strange stones were found buried in the centre of Glastonbury Abbey in the year 1885. Some people believe that King Arthur ...'

Alternatively, if you like the idea of rewards in class, you could use objects (e.g. small packets of sweets) that will themselves become the prizes to the speakers who made the best contributions.

Technique: Discouraging passengers

In group work, some people tend to talk a lot whilst others say little, either because they can't get a word in edgeways or because they are OK with being passengers in the group. Here are some strategies for encouraging such learners to take a more active role:

1 Appoint quieter people as the chair

Give them some specific, stated duties. Putting learners in a facilitating role forces them to take a more active part.

2 Participation tokens

Hand out some tokens before a task. These could be coloured counters, money from a board game, pebbles, beads, Lego® bricks or anything that is small enough and which you have a quantity of. Each student would normally receive the same quantity, e.g. six tokens. When doing the task, each time a person speaks (for more than a short one- or two-word offering), they take one of their tokens and place it in the middle of the table. Once they have used up all their tokens they cannot speak again until everyone has also used up all their tokens, after which anyone can speak freely.

3 Participation tables

At the start of a group task, show students a table that they will have to fill in at the end (stating names and percentage of total participation in the discussion). At the end, all participants have to agree fair answers for everyone. See also Participation review below.

4 Close-up encouragement

Monitor group work and when you spot silent members, rather than tell off or persuade, try joining in with the group and saying, after a while, 'What do you think Ali?'

5 Set task guidelines

Before students start work, specify a rule, e.g. 'Each person in the group must state their views for at least one minute before you begin a general discussion.'

Technique: Random selection of who will speak in groups

Rather than allow anyone to speak at any time in group tasks, you can restrict speaking to randomly chosen students:

1 Wheel of fortune

Make little spinners with the letters A, B, C, D, E, F on them (for groups of up to six people. Each student takes a letter (e.g. C). When a person has finished speaking, the wheel is spun and the person with the letter pointed to can speak. If no one has the letter, anyone can say something.

2 Dice

Throw dice to achieve the same thing. (Students take numbers one to six. When the dice is thrown, the person with that number can speak.)

3 Lucky dip

Distribute a number of small pieces of card or paper to each group. Ask each student to write their name on five of them. When all names are written, they are turned upside down and mixed. A student picks one card, and that person can speak, giving their opinion. The next card is picked; then that person replies and continues the discussion and so on. The cards can be replaced and remixed.

Technique: Participation review

Help to raise learners' own awareness of their participation. After a group task, when you have dealt with all the issues arising and any language points that need work, invite one person in each group to lead a review of their group discussion. Hand this person one set of questions to ask the students in their group. Their task is to lead a discussion based on reflection and avoiding blame, recrimination, sarcasm and so on.

Which questions you offer can vary, but could include some of the following:

- Who do you think said most in our discussion?
- Who said least?
- Which people made interesting points during the discussion?
- Who did most to organise the group discussion?
- Which comments were the most exciting to discuss or argue about?
- What can be done differently next time?

Technique: Pyramid discussion – helping confidence to grow

This is suitable for creative or opinion-based discussion topics (e.g. a task where students have to rank things in order of importance).

- 1 Start by giving individuals a good amount of thinking time to make notes on their own.
- 2 Then get them to meet up and compare ideas in pairs. Require that the pairs come to a compromise decision/opinion that they can both agree with.
- 3 Now, form the pairs into groups of four, and once again ask them to come to a compromise answer that they all buy into.
- 4 Bring the whole class back together, and discuss the issues together.

By the end of this process, even weaker students might feel a little more confident in speaking. They have had lots of rehearsal time, saying the ideas again and again in pairs and groups. Also, they are no longer tied into their own original ideas, but can argue for the group view, which may be much easier to speak for and which they may have heard others saying. Necessary vocabulary, phrases and sentences will have been heard and perhaps learnt. Others from the same group might come in and support them in what they say, so they won't be entirely on their own.

Technique: Start in whole class; then hand over to groups

Try beginning a discussion in the whole class. Brainstorm possible ideas, headings, themes and arguments. Start discussing general issues. As it starts to get interesting or exciting, hand over to pairs and groups – who might (you hope) be fired up and ready to pick up from where you left off.

Technique: Use information gaps

An information gap is a much-used way of getting students to talk. Typically used in pairs: Student A knows different things from Student B (perhaps because they have read two different, but complementary short texts). This immediately creates a reason to communicate: They have something to say to each other. The discussion can involve comparing what they have learnt from their separate documents – and then maybe solving some puzzle or reaching a consensus or conclusion.

Technique: Community Language Learning

Here is an interesting ‘slow’ way of building up a fluent conversation. In the language teaching approach Community Language Learning, it is possible to create a whole conversation one sentence at a time. The technique may be worth trying with a low-level class or one that is lacking in confidence. You will need a way of recording individual sentences, spoken by different students at their seats, e.g. a dictation machine or a computer with WiFi microphone.

- 1 Explain what you are going to do to students; i.e. they will have a conversation about any subject they wish to (or on a subject set by you), and you will build it up sentence by sentence.
- 2 A student who wants to say something indicates this, e.g. by putting up their hand. When you come over, they use their first language to say what they want to say to you – or if you don’t speak their first language, they say the sentence as well as they can in English. You tell them a good English version of what they want to say and help them to practise saying it. When they are confident that they can do it, you switch on the recorder and they say their sentence into it.
- 3 The next person indicates that they want to reply to the first student ... so you go over ... and so on.
- 4 Slowly, over time, you build up a whole conversation which has been recorded.

Questions for reflection

- Do you generally allow quiet students to remain quiet in your classes? If not, how do you encourage them to speak?
- Do you really know why they are quiet? Is there a tangible, known reason?