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D. Grouping Students

A. Different groups

There is **no real limit to the way in which teachers can group students** in a classroom, though certain factors, such as **overcrowding, fixed furniture and entrenched student attitudes, may make things problematic**. Nevertheless, **teaching a class as a whole, getting students to work on their own, or having them perform tasks in pairs or groups all have their own advantages and disadvantages**; each is more or less appropriate for different activities.

A1. Whole-Class teaching

When people think of teaching and learning, they frequently conjure up a picture of students sitting in rows listening to a teacher who stands in front of them. For many, this is what teaching means, and **it is still the most common teacher-student interaction in many cultures**. Though **it has many limitations, whole-class grouping like this has both practical advantages and disadvantages**.

● Advantages of whole-class grouping

- It reinforces **a sense of belonging among the group members**, something which we as teachers need to foster (Williams and Burden 1997:79). If everyone is involved in the same activity, then we are all **'in it together'**, and such experiences give us points of common reference to talk about and use as reasons to bond with each other. It is much easier for students to share an emotion such as happiness or amusement in a

whole-class setting. Twenty people laughing is often more enjoyable than just two; 40 people holding their breath in anticipation create a much more engaging atmosphere than just the person who sits next to you. In other words, if language learning is a collective endeavour, then 'learning takes place most effectively when language classes pull together as unified groups' (Senior 2002:402)

- It is suitable for activities where the teacher is acting as a controller. It is especially good for giving explanations and instructions, where smaller groups would mean having to do these things more than once. It is ideal for presenting materials, whether in pictures, texts or audio or video tape. It is more cost-efficient, both in terms of material production and organisation, than other grouping can be.
- It allows teachers to "gauge the mood"-to make a judgement about something, especially people's feelings or attitude of the class in general (rather than on an individual basis); it is a good way for us to get a general understanding of student progress.
- It is the preferred class style in many educational settings where students and teachers feel secure when the whole class is working in lockstep and under the direct authority of the teacher.

● Disadvantages of whole-class grouping

- It favors the group rather than the individual. Everyone is forced to do the same thing at the same time and in the same space.
- Individual students do not have much of a chance to say anything on their own.
- Many students are disinclined to participate in front of the whole class since to do so brings with it the risk of public failure.
- It may not encourage students to take responsibility for their own learning. Whole class teaching favours the transmission of knowledge from teacher to students rather than having students discover things or research things for themselves.
- It is not the best way to organise communicative language teaching or specifically task-based sequences. Communication between individuals is more difficult in a group of 20 or 30 than it is in groups of four or five. In smaller groups it is easier to share material, speak quietly and less formally, and make good eye contact. All of these contribute to successful task resolution.

A2. Seating whole-group class

There are many different ways of seating classes when they are working as a whole group. One of the most common is to have students seated in orderly rows. (see Figure 1)

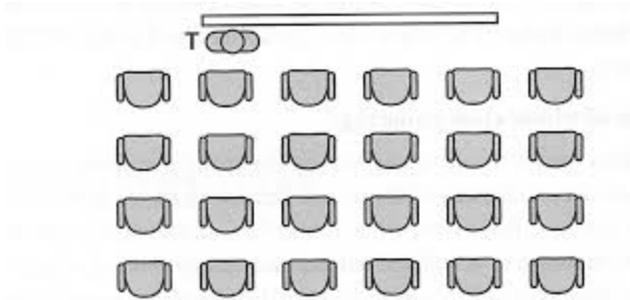


Figure 1; Orderly rows

There are considerable advantages to orderly row seating. The teacher has a clear view of all the students and the students can all see the teacher. Lecturing is easier with such a seating arrangement since it enables the teacher to maintain eye contact with the people he or she is talking to.

Orderly rows allow the teacher to work with the whole class. Some activities are especially suited to this kind of organization, such as explaining a grammar point, watching a video/DVD or a PowerPoint (or other computer-based) presentation, or using the board or an overhead projector. It is also useful when students are involved in certain kinds of language practice. If all the students are focused on a task at the same time, the whole class gets the same messages. It is often easier to create a good whole-class dynamic when students are sitting as one group—rather than many—in orderly rows.

Two other sitting arrangements are circle and horseshoe (see Figure 2). These are especially appropriate for small groups (i.e. fewer than 20 students). In a horseshoe, the teacher will probably be at the open end or the arrangement since that may well be where the board, overhead projector and or computer are situated. In a circle, the teacher's position—where the board is situated—is less dominating.

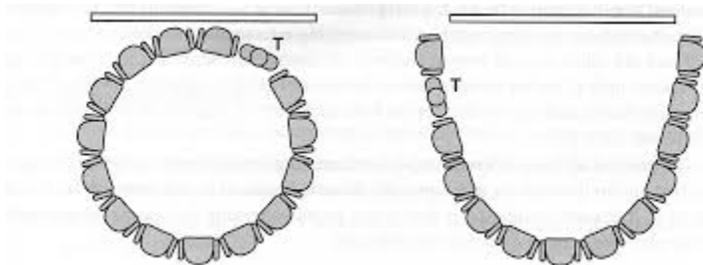


Figure 2; Circles and horseshoe

Classes which are arranged in a circle make quite a strong statement about what the teacher and the students believe in. With all the people in the room sitting in a circle, there is a far greater feeling of equality than when the teacher stays out at the front. This may not be quite so true of the horseshoe shape, where the teacher is often located in a commanding position, but, even here, the rigidity that comes with orderly rows, for example, is lessened.

With horseshoe and circle seating, the classroom is a more intimate place and the potential for students to share feelings and information through talking, eye contact or

expressive body movements (eyebrow-raising, shoulder-shrugging, etc.) is far greater than when they are sitting in rows, one behind the other.

In some classrooms students sit in groups at separate tables (see Figure 3), whether they are working as a whole class, in groups or in pairs. In such classrooms, you might see the teacher walking around checking the students' work and helping out if they are having difficulties - prompting the students at this table, or explaining something to the students at that table in the corner.

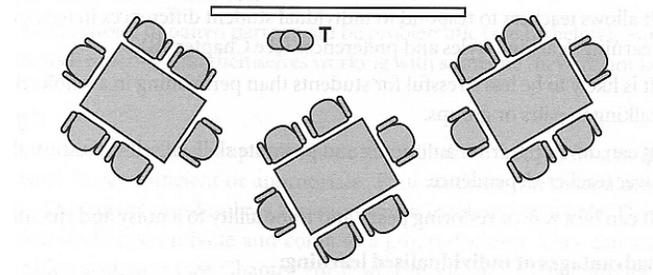


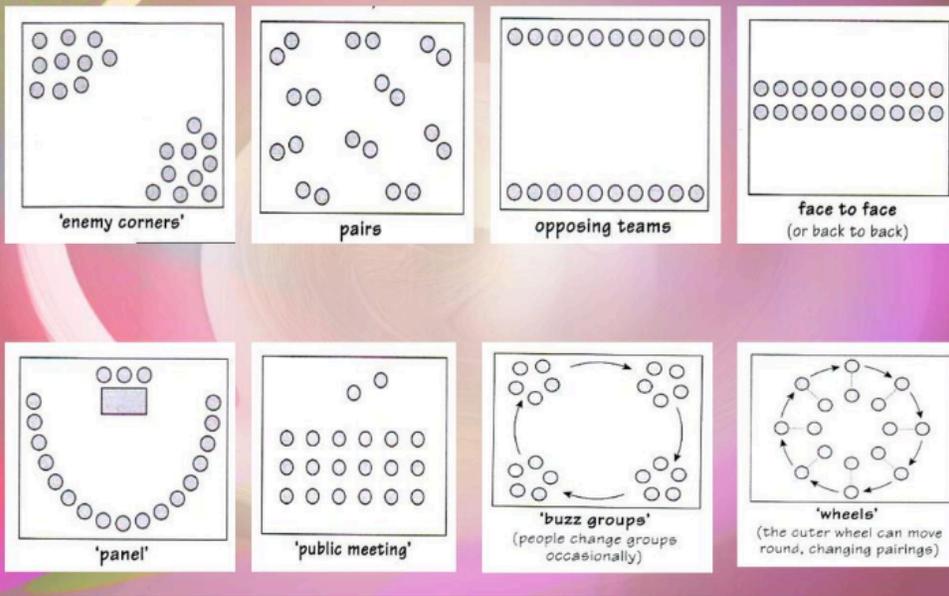
Figure 3; Separate tables

A huge advantage of separate tables is that group work is easy to arrange. Indeed, such an arrangement means that group work is likely to be far more common than with other kinds of seating. Separate table seating is especially useful in mixed-ability classes, where different groups of students can benefit from concentrating on different tasks (designed for different ability levels). Separate tables are more difficult to 'teach to' in whole-group activities, depending, of course, on the size of the room and the group. It is also important to bear in mind that students may not want to be stuck with the same three or four students forever. Nevertheless, when students are working together, such a seating arrangement is ideal.

There are other ways of seating students, of course. Jim Scrivener, for example, suggests groupings such as 'enemy corners' (where two groups get into opposite corners of the room), opposing teams, and face-to-face (or back-to-back), where students sit in rows to make pairs (Scrivener 2005: 89).

The point of all these different sitting (and standing) arrangements is that we should choose the best one for the students and, especially, the task. Insofar as we can make a general statement about it, it is worth pointing out that, where possible, varying the seating arrangements will make our lessons more dynamic and enjoyable.

Moveable seating arrangements



A3 Students on their own

At the opposite end of the spectrum from whole-class grouping is the idea of students on their own, working in a pattern of *individualised* learning. This can range from students doing exercises on their own in class, to situations in which teachers are able to spend time working with individual students, or when students take charge of their own learning in self-access centres or other out-of-class environments. Such individualised learning is a vital step in the development of learner autonomy. If we wish students to work on their own in class, we can, for example, allow them to read privately and then answer questions individually; we can ask them to complete worksheets or writing tasks by themselves. We can give them worksheets with several different tasks and allow individuals to make their own decisions about which tasks to do. We can hand out different worksheets to different individuals, depending upon their tastes and abilities. We can allow students to research on their own or even choose what they want to read or listen to.

Advantages of individualised learning:

- It allows teachers to respond to individual student differences in terms of pace of learning, learning styles and preferences.
- It is likely to be less stressful for students than performing in a whole class setting or talking in pairs or groups.
- It can develop learner autonomy and promote skills of self-reliance and investigation over teacher-dependence.

- It can be a way of restoring peace and tranquility to a noisy and chaotic classroom.

Disadvantages of individualised learning:

- It does not help a class develop a sense of belonging. It does not encourage cooperation in which students may be able to help and motivate each other.
- When combined with giving individual students different tasks, it means a great deal more thought and materials preparation than whole-class teaching involves. When we work with individual students as a tutor or resource, it takes much more time than interacting with the whole class.

A4.Pairwork

In pairwork, students can practise language together, study a text, research language or take part in information-gap activities. They can write dialogues, predict the content of reading texts or compare notes on what they have listened to or seen.

Advantages of pairwork:

- It dramatically increases the amount of speaking time any one student gets in the class.
- It allows students to work and interact independently without the necessary guidance of the teacher, thus promoting learner independence.
- It allows teachers time to work with one or two pairs while the other students continue working.
- It recognises the old maxim that 'two heads are better than one', and in promoting cooperation, helps the classroom to become a more relaxed and friendly place. If we get students to make decisions in pairs (such as deciding on the correct answers to questions about a reading text), we allow them to share responsibility, rather than having to bear the whole weight themselves.
- It is relatively quick and easy to organise.

Disadvantages of pairwork:

- Pairwork is frequently very noisy and some teachers and students dislike this. Teachers in particular worry that they will lose control of their class.
- Students in pairs can often veer away from the point of an exercise, talking about something else completely, often in their first language. The chances of misbehaviour are greater with pairwork than in a whole-class setting.
- It is not always popular with students, many of whom feel they would rather relate to the teacher as individuals than interact with another learner who may be just as linguistically weak as they are.
- The actual choice of paired partner can be problematic (see below), especially if students frequently find themselves working with someone they are not keen on.

A5. Group Work

We can put students in larger groups, too, since this will allow them to do a range of tasks for which pair work is not sufficient or appropriate. Thus students can write a group story or role-play a situation which involves five people. They can prepare a presentation or discuss an issue and come to a group decision. They can watch, write or perform a video sequence; we can give individual students in a group different lines from a poem which the group has to reassemble. In general, it is possible to say that small groups of around five students provoke greater involvement and participation than larger groups. They are small enough for real interpersonal interaction, yet not so small that members are over-reliant upon each individual. Because five is an odd number it means that a majority view can usually prevail. However, there are occasions when larger groups are necessary. The activity may demand it or we may want to divide the class into teams for some game or preparation phase.

Advantages of group work:

- Like pairwork, it dramatically increases the number of talking opportunities for individual students.
- Unlike pairwork, because there are more than two people in the group, personal relationships are usually less problematic; there is also a greater chance of different opinions and varied contributions than in pairwork.
- It encourages broader skills of cooperation and negotiation than pairwork, and yet is more private than work in front of the whole class. Lynne Flowerdew (1998) found that it was especially appropriate in Hong Kong, where its use accorded with the Confucian principles which her Cantonese-speaking students were comfortable with. Furthermore, her students were prepared to evaluate each other's performance both positively and negatively where in a bigger group a natural tendency for self-effacement made this less likely.
- It promotes learner autonomy by allowing students to make their own decisions in the group without being told what to do by the teacher.
- Although we do not wish any individuals in groups to be completely passive, nevertheless some students can choose their level of participation more readily than in a whole-class or pair work situation.

Disadvantages of group work:

- It is likely to be noisy (though not necessarily as loud as pairwork can be). Some teachers feel that they lose control, and the whole-class feeling which has been painstakingly built up may dissipate when the class is split into smaller entities.
- Not all students enjoy it since they would prefer to be the focus of the teacher's attention rather than working with their peers. Sometimes students find themselves in uncongenial groups and wish they could be somewhere else.
- Individuals may fall into group roles that become fossilised, so that some are passive whereas others may dominate.
- Groups can take longer to organise than pairs; beginning and ending group work activities, especially where people move around the class, can take time and be chaotic.

A6. Ringing the changes

Deciding when to put students in groups or pairs, when to teach the whole class or when to let individuals get on with it on their own will depend upon a number of factors:

The task: if we want to give students a quick chance to think about an issue which we will be focusing on later, we may put them in buzz groups where they have a chance to discuss or buzz the topic among themselves before working with it in a whole-class grouping. However, small groups will be inappropriate for many explanations and demonstrations, where working with the class as one group will be more suitable. When students have listened to a recording, to complete a task or answer questions, we may let them compare their answers in quickly-organised pairs. If we want our students to practise an oral dialogue quickly, pairwork may be the best grouping, too. If the task we wish our students to be involved in necessitates oral interaction, we will probably put students in groups, especially in a large class, so that they all have a chance to make a contribution. If we want students to write sentences which demonstrate their understanding of new vocabulary, on the other hand, we may choose to have them do it individually. Although many tasks suggest obvious student groupings, we can usually adapt them for use with other groupings. Dialogue practice can be done in pairs, but it can also be organised with two halves of the whole class. Similarly, answering questions about a listening extract can be an individual activity or we can get students to discuss the answers in pairs. We can also have a 'jigsaw listening', where different students listen to different parts of a text so that they can then reassemble the whole text in groups.

Variety in a sequence: a lot depends on how the activity fits into the lesson sequences we have been following and are likely to follow next. If much of our recent teaching has involved whole-class grouping, there may be a pressing need for pair work or group work. If much of our recent work has been boisterous and active, based on interaction between various pairs and groups, we may think it sensible to allow students time to work individually to give them some breathing space. The advantage of having different student groupings is that they help to provide variety, thus sustaining motivation.

The mood: crucial to our decision about what groupings to use is the mood of our students.

Changing the grouping of a class can be a good way to change its mood when required. If students are becoming restless with a whole-class activity - and if they appear to have little to say or contribute in such a setting - we can put them in groups to give them a chance to re-engage with the lesson. If, on the other hand, groups appear to be losing their way or not working constructively, we can call the whole class back together and re-define the task, discuss problems that different groups have encountered or change the activity.

