

Ideas for handling pair work and group work

Pair work and group work are an integral part of most language-learning classes and provide many advantages to language learners, including:

- They ensure that all Ss get many opportunities to practice the target language.
- They provide variety in classroom activities, and so keep Ss engaged.
- They allow Ss of different language proficiency to learn from one another.

Arranging pairs and groups

One challenge is setting up the pairs or groups. Here are some suggestions:

- Pair or group Ss by different language proficiency levels. Pairing stronger Ss with less proficient ones allows peer teaching to take place. Less proficient Ss often feel more comfortable asking questions of a classmate rather than of the teacher. The stronger S is challenged by having to explain the material.
- Pair or group Ss randomly. To form random groups, try any of the following:
 - (1) Have Ss count off (e.g., from 1 to 4). All the “1s” form a group, all the “2s,” and so on.
 - (2) Write numbers on slips of paper and mix them up. Ss draw slips and work with Ss with the next number (e.g., S1 and S2, S3 and S4) or set of numbers (e.g., Ss 1 to 4 form a group, Ss 5 to 8, and so on).
 - (3) Have Ss form groups by what they are wearing, such as a particular color.
- Allow Ss to group themselves. The danger with this, however, is that friends will form pairs or groups and speak about personal things as opposed to doing the activity.

Regardless of the arrangement you use, vary pair and group members often. This way Ss can interact with most of or all of their classmates, thereby building a class community.

Tips for effective pair work and group work

- *Model the task before having Ss do it.* Many tasks fail because Ss do not completely understand what to do. State the instructions simply and clearly, and, when possible, have Ss come to the front of the class to demonstrate the activity.
- *Set time limits for tasks.* Setting time limits ensures that Ss use their time effectively. Establish a signal to indicate time is up; for example, clap your hands.
- *Assign specific roles to group members.* These roles are leader and secretary. The leader makes sure that the task is carried out correctly and ensures that group members speak English. The secretary writes down the group’s answers and reports on what the group discussed. In addition, it is of critical importance that all Ss are doing something productive during group work. There is a danger that when it is not a S’s turn to speak, he or she will lose interest. To avoid this, make sure that each group activity has a focused task – so that when Ss are not speaking, they have to actively listen. For example, if Ss are discussing their favorite foods, have Ss make a note of a food each person likes or find someone who likes the same food. Make sure Ss report what they have heard.
- *Monitor pairs and groups as they work.* Circulate and remind Ss to use English. Make note of problematic language points to reteach later.

Pair work and group work are tried-and-true classroom techniques. Trying out ideas such as the ones here and sharing ideas with other teachers can lead to their effective use.