

Mingles in the Foreign Language Classroom

Switching conversational partners in the English as a foreign language (EFL) classroom has long been an effective way to involve students actively in communicative interactions and increase their talking time. But based on my observations and experience, few foreign language teachers actually use this classroom management strategy on a regular basis. There are reasons why teachers are reluctant to incorporate *mingles*—activities that involve switching from one interlocutor to another—into their lessons, including fear of distractions, lack of time, and uncertainty about when and how to apply them. The aim of this article is to describe a few examples of mingles and share advice on how to use them effectively in the EFL classroom.

What is a mingle?

A mingle is an activity where a student approaches a classmate, talks for a while, and then moves on to speak to another classmate. This type of interaction is typically informal, though it can be formal as well, such as when students conduct opinion

polls or interviews and address multiple respondents in order to reach a specified goal.

The distinctive features of a mingle activity are that all the students work simultaneously, in pairs or small groups, and switch from one classmate to another while speaking, listening, and taking notes. Face-to-face interaction with at least a few other students is the principal goal. As soon as two individuals have finished an interaction, they change pairs either at random or in an organized fashion; for example, if they are standing or sitting facing each other in two circles, pairs change when one circle moves clockwise. As for the teacher, he or she cannot control every student involved in a mingle activity and usually focuses on those who may need special support.

The organization of mingles relies on the *gap-difference principle* and may take the form of the information gap, the experience gap, the opinion gap, or the knowledge gap (Rees 2003), motivating students to change partners in order to discover the

information or facts necessary to close the gap. In arranging mingles, the teacher takes advantage of actual differences among students or intentionally creates differences by providing sufficient materials to highlight the diversity among students. For example, every student goes around the room writing down the birthdays of ten other students, or the teacher hands out partial information about an English-speaking country to each student, who then fills out a table by collecting missing data from every classmate in the room.

Mingles are similar to real-life situations in which we seek the same information from different people in order to find something out or to share the same story. According to Robertson and Acklam (2000, 18), mingles “allow constant repetition of a particular question or collection of the opinions of many students.” This gives students the opportunity to repeat the same utterance several times, which gradually raises confidence in their use of English. Therefore, mingles promote both accuracy and fluency, provided that they are properly organized into the lesson plan.

Mingles also enliven lessons because students move around and talk to their classmates without the teacher’s direct supervision. Every new partner brings some novelty to the communicative situation and, willingly or unwillingly, students learn to take into consideration the characteristics of their interlocutors. To reach understanding, they need to speak clearly and sometimes explain certain points or words as they adjust to a new partner. As a result, students feel both more relaxed and more involved.

A mingle activity should not appear out of the blue in an isolated fashion, however. Students should be prepared for the activity in terms of both language and content. Therefore, a few exercises that allow them to brush up on needed language forms and to organize their ideas should precede mingles. Mingles are part of a chain of tasks intended to achieve a certain, well-specified goal. While doing mingle work, students collect and process varied information and opinions. The outcome achieved in the mingle is a prerequisite for the subsequent work performed by every student either in class or at home. Students get a broad perspective of the issue under discussion, which forms the founda-

tion for further, more challenging tasks, such as project or research work and essay writing. Therefore, the student’s responsibility for the process and its outcome grows considerably. Indeed, these characteristics of mingles produce notable benefits for students in terms of requiring interaction, collaboration, and critical thinking.

Mingle procedures

The mingle activity can be implemented by (1) walking around and talking freely with other students or (2) rotating pairs, where students form inside and outside circles and face each other; each student from the outside circle, after speaking with the person facing him or her, moves one step (or one seat) clockwise to speak with a new classmate from the inside circle. The rotating-pair mingle typically requires more organization.

A wide variety of materials are appropriate to use with mingles, including texts, pictures, videos, objects, or problems for discussion. In addition to incorporating speaking and listening, mingles can feature writing, drawing, and dramatic action. Moreover, keeping in mind the students’ proficiency levels and readiness to work independently, the teacher can involve all the students in the mingle activities or only half of them (in which case the other half will be engaged in a different activity).

With mingles, the teacher is guided by the need to (1) avoid monotony of the lesson flow; (2) provide ample practice for every student; and (3) prepare students properly for a more challenging activity. All mingle activities are governed by considerations of allotted time, the number of students each person is to address, and the assignment, which can be either standardized or different for every student in the classroom.

In general, the key idea of this classroom management strategy is “diversity of students—diversity of materials and tasks” (Borzova 2008), which promotes meaningful student interaction and creates an amplified learning environment offering varied opportunities for effective learning and communicating. Practical suggestions for teachers that describe mingle activities include “a tea party strategy” (Jonson 2006, 194–196); questionnaires (Edge 1993, 71); opinion polls (Klippel 1984, 5); surveys (Seymour and Popova

2003, 13–14); “find your match” (Vogt and Echevarría 2008, 112); and “find out who” (Klippel 1984, 54).

Three types of mingle tasks

Depending on the lesson, mingle tasks in the EFL classroom can focus on (1) language (form-focused mingles); (2) communicative functions (form-focused mingles in communicative disguise); and (3) meaning (meaning-focused mingles). Examples of these tasks are illustrated in the following sections.

Form-focused mingles

Form-focused mingles are aimed at sub-skill reinforcement through active recycling of vocabulary and grammar. Following are two examples of such tasks.

Form-focused mingle 1

The materials used in this mingle activity depend on the grammar or vocabulary the teacher wants the students to recycle. To begin, each student receives and completes a writing task, such as the following types:

- Use the correct form of the verb in brackets: “Jack London [be] born in San Francisco.”
- Insert the correct form of the missing words: “It _____ a lot _____ time and effort to _____ grammar.”
- Change the sentence by inserting the word in brackets: “Have you been here before?” [*when*]
- Change the underlined subject of each sentence into the plural form: “Every child needs love and care.”
- Arrange the given words into a meaningful sentence: *like, place, there, home, no, is*.
- Add at least two words that you know for each blank to create a meaningful combination: _____ a conclusion; a/an [*adjective*] decision; to come up with a/an [*noun*].

The teacher quickly checks the students’ work. The student then becomes the “expert” regarding the item and mingles, switching from student to student, asking for answers, and checking the accuracy of the responses.

Possible follow-up activities: The teacher asks every “expert” to choose the most difficult examples on his or her card and either

explain the rule or dictate the sentence to the whole class.

Form-focused mingle 2

Each student is given a different sentence. The teacher makes sure that there is the same number of sentences as there are students. Students mingle and dictate their sentence to everyone. When each student has written down every sentence, students form pairs and arrange the sentences into a coherent story that they read aloud later as a class. This activity can be conducted as a whole class or in large groups.

Possible follow-up activities: The students compare the facts in the text with actual conditions, or they change the story so that it is true to their lives.

Form-focused tasks are often ignored by communicative methodology. But my experience shows that students need this type of task to retain language forms in their long-term memory and master sentence-building mechanics. Another advantage is that students simultaneously learn the material while teaching others. Moreover, mingle classroom management allows students to complete many more assignments within the same time period and thus improves the automaticity of their subskills. It makes learners more confident while talking and writing and thus facilitates both the accuracy and fluency of their speech. Such tasks therefore play a supportive role in the development of English communicative competence.

Form-focused mingles in communicative disguise

Form-focused mingles in communicative disguise help learners practice grammar and vocabulary in simple situations with a focus on communicative functions, such as asking for advice, making suppositions, or expressing regret. Sometimes students are expected to act out short dialogues in standard situations, such as asking directions, inviting everybody to do something together, or planning a weekend.

In order to achieve a communicative goal with this task, students repeatedly address different classmates while using prescribed language items. As a result, the monotony of repetition is enlivened by the diversity of partners, who each time contribute something

new to the content depending on their personal experience, opinion, or attitude towards the subject matter. This reflects the wide diversity of content that is possible to express within the unity of the language that is to be practiced (Larsen-Freeman 2012). Two classic examples are the mingle tasks “Find Someone Who _____” and “Poll Your Classmates.”

“Find someone who _____” task

This task allows students to practice different tenses. To practice the present simple tense, half the students complete a survey on how their classmates spend their weekends, evenings, summer holidays, winter holidays, etc.

For practice with the present perfect tense, the situations will change, and half the students will complete a classroom survey by finding out answers to questions such as these:

- What interesting places have you visited?
- What useful books have you read?
- What exciting movies have you seen recently?
- What well-known people have you met?
- What exotic dishes have you tried?

Variation: Every student gets a jumbled question. The first task is to restore the correct version and check the result with the teacher. Then each student asks every classmate to do the same task and answer the question.

Possible follow-up activities: Working as a class, students report their findings by summarizing the answers. Then they can do a quick write-up, either answering the questions they asked or mingling to describe their classmates’ experiences.

“Poll your classmates” Task 1

Students write down three singers, school subjects, sports, or other things or activities they dislike. Students mingle and address others by turn to find somebody who has similar dislikes. For example: “I can’t stand _____. Do you agree with me?” (I suggest “dislike” here rather than “like” because students are usually asked to express their preferences. As a result, many have trouble explaining why they do not like something. Asking students to talk about their dislikes from time to time provides practice with this function and related vocabulary.)

Possible follow-up activity: Ask the students to decide which classmate or classmates they have much in common with.

“Poll your classmates” Task 2

In this task students set out to find out how well they know each other. Each student receives a different classmate’s name and polls all the other students about this individual, taking brief notes to remember who says what about that person. Then each student checks the answers with the person he or she has been asking about to see if the findings are true. The questions can be written on the board. For example:

“Does _____ enjoy going to school? Why do you think so?”

“What is _____’s favorite subject? Why do you think so?”

“What school subject does _____ dislike? Why do you think so?”

Possible follow-up activity: As a class, the students discuss who knows each other very well, supporting their conclusions with the facts from the answers they received. Then they write their own answers to the same questions.

“Poll your classmates” Task 3

Each student is provided with a text containing a description of an imaginary family, town, school, street, or house. The text has several versions that do not exactly match. Students mingle with others and ask questions to identify these differences. The questions can be written on the board or displayed on an overhead projector, or students can make up their own. Here is an example of a text describing a town. In parentheses you can see differences that could appear in another version of the text (each version of the text would have something different in these sentences):

This nice town is located in the north (west) of the United States on the bank of a beautiful river (on the shore of a beautiful lake). It is possible to get here either by ferry or by car (only by car). It takes about fifty minutes (half an hour) to drive to this place from the nearest city. More than eight thousand (nine thousand) people live here. The majority of the residents are retired (students of the college

located here). This place is visited by crowds of holidaymakers because it is a well-known ski resort (nature reserve). Another tourist attraction is the local spa center (Museum of Indian Crafts). It's a great place to visit to become familiar with a typically American lifestyle (to relax).

Possible follow-up activity: First the students point out the differences they spot, and then use the text as a model to speak and write about a real town.

“Poll your classmates” Task 4

Each student receives a different text, which should be short—less than ten sentences—and meaningful. Brief descriptions of famous cities, places, popular hobbies, or controversial opinions about school or fashion work well in this activity. The students read their texts and prepare a few questions based on them. While mingling, they ask everybody to read the text. Then they retrieve the text and ask their partner to answer the questions they prepared or to reproduce the text. This usually takes about two to three minutes. It is important to provide texts that arouse varied emotions or thoughts. This activity can also be done with photographs or pictures; for example, students show photos of young people wearing extravagant clothes and then ask questions about teen fashion.

Possible follow-up activities: The students discuss which ideas from the texts they agree or disagree with, which place they would like to visit and why, or what impressed them in the pictures they saw.

“Poll your classmates” Task 5

Each student acts out a short conversation with every student in the classroom by (1) inviting everybody to do something together and planning a weekend (the teacher creates a calendar of events in the place where the students live) or (2) asking directions to a certain place.

Examples for Option 1:

1. Students look through the calendar of events for the coming month. Each student chooses one event and by mingling, invites everybody in the class to attend it. “How about going to _____?” Or, “Let's go to _____.”

Students note how many people are interested in attending as well as the reasons their classmates give for wanting to attend or not.

2. The whole class ranks the events according to their popularity and explains the reasons they are popular or unpopular.

Examples for Option 2:

1. Students think of their favorite place in the city and how to best explain the directions to that place from the school.
2. Students mingle with others and ask, “How can I get to your favorite place in our city from here?” Students listen to the directions and guess what the place is.
3. As a class, students discuss their favorite places in the city.

Possible follow-up activity: The teacher asks pairs of students to act out a similar conversation in front of the class, changing some details of the previous situation.

Form-focused mingles in communicative disguise should be used often because this type of activity is an essential step forward to authentic communication. Though students are bound to use certain language structures or text models, in their reactions they are expected to connect those structures or models to real-life experiences and express their own attitudes. These tasks are especially helpful to students with low proficiency levels and in mixed-ability classes.

Meaning-focused mingles

In a meaning-focused mingle, students share and collect both information and opinions, which they will later use for doing projects or research. This information is derived from varied texts distributed by the teacher or based on the students' personal experiences. Therefore, meaning-focused mingles can be based on (1) sharing the content of texts (short stories and cases, ads, statistics, research findings, opinions) or (2) collecting information and opinions with polls and questionnaires. The texts and questions can be offered by the teacher or created by students themselves. The interaction is focused on the exchange of facts, opinions, problems, or attitudes related to the topic, which is discussed from different angles. Every student acts both as a source and as a collector of certain information, becoming the agent of interaction. Students notably improve their lan-

guage subskills (both grammar and vocabulary), which are practiced and brushed up through the simultaneous practice of all skills (reading, speaking, listening, writing, and thinking). Taking notes in the course of mingling reinforces those subskills and also helps students develop the useful habit of listening and jotting down the key ideas of what they hear.

In these tasks, the student motivation for interaction is evoked by an information/opinion gap as well as the need to prepare for a subsequent, more challenging activity. The diversity of information and opinions related to the same subject matter enriches the learning environment and provides a basis for critical thinking. The following meaning-focused mingles provide an argumentative approach to problem solving as compared with a learning situation in which students work with a single source of information.

Meaning-focused mingle 1

1. Students first work individually with different authentic materials (texts, problems, situations, Internet sites, or photos) by scrutinizing their personal experiences for related information or by creating questionnaires. They prepare for further interaction.
2. Students next interact with others by sharing the information or by asking for opinions and facts. The work is organized either as a walking-and-talking mingle or in rotating pairs and requires taking notes. Working in rotating pairs, students sometimes are asked to exchange their materials and then, doing the task with a new partner, use this new material for interaction. The latter variation is suitable for students with higher proficiency levels.
3. Students analyze the collected data (classify, compare, identify pros and cons, evaluate, look for evidence, and finally come up with their own ideas).
4. Students present their findings and discuss their opinions with the whole class.
5. Students write summaries or draw conclusions.

Meaning-focused mingle 2

1. Students conduct a survey on the role of the Internet in teens' lives and pre-

pare four or five questions that help them draw a well-grounded conclusion. (The teacher can offer each student a subtopic to avoid identical questions: the Internet and learning foreign languages, school subjects, music, cooking, sports, traveling, jobs, shopping, and making friends.)

2. Students first answer the questions themselves and then decide if the questions are appropriate for achieving the goal. They introduce changes, if necessary.
3. While mingling, students ask everybody in the classroom to answer their questions.
4. Finally, students compare and analyze the answers they have collected and prepare a presentation of the findings.

Meaning-focused mingle 3

1. Each student gets a card with the names of three pastimes; after analyzing the three activities, they list the advantages and disadvantages of each pastime. Example activities are:
 - bodybuilding, knitting, listening to jazz
 - cross-country skiing, traveling, collecting stamps
 - keeping a dog, writing poems, hanging out with friends
 - dancing, reading detective stories, cooking
 - watching soap operas, gardening, drawing
 - hitchhiking, listening to folk music, designing clothes

Tip to the teacher: It makes sense to offer some activities that are not very popular among teens to promote a variety of responses and give students practice in talking about things they like as well as things they may not like.

2. Students poll their classmates about their attitude toward the three activities to find out what they think about each of the pastimes and why; then, while mingling, students choose one of the pastimes that a classmate dislikes and persuades him or her to take it up.
3. Students report to the class on which activities appeared to be the most and

- the least popular and why. They point out which activities their classmates agreed to and did not agree to take up.
4. The whole class creates a list of the most and least popular activities.
 5. In groups, students decide on the advantages of the least popular pastimes and the disadvantages of the most popular activities.
 6. Finally, students write an essay about an activity that they have never done but would like to try in the future.

These activities expand the situations and contexts of learning while providing opportunities for students to integrate and recycle their knowledge, skills, and subskills within one topic and cross-topically. Learners deal with a great variety of language contained in the materials they work with and from their fellow students. In addition, students are encouraged to think as well as articulate and negotiate their own ideas in English related to a variety of subject matter. When students mingle and interact, they are expected to spontaneously respond to what they hear. All this inevitably promotes the flexibility and fluency of their English skills. Simultaneously, the students improve their information-processing and social competences. The cumulative outcome of the student interaction is their own well-grounded standpoint about the issue under consideration and the ability to argue for it in English.

What do teaching experiences show?

As a school and university teacher, I have been applying mingles for over 20 years. In my teaching I have learned that collecting materials for mingles takes time. Therefore, teachers must use their time productively. While surfing Internet sites, becoming familiar with various course books, observing lessons or just living our everyday lives, we should always be alert for those tasks, materials, and situations that could be transferred into our classroom.

To support students with the language they will use in the course of independent mingle activities, we should stick to the following scaffolding strategies:

- Offer mingles *after* whole-class preparatory work that may consist of

recycling the grammar, vocabulary, and related experiences that the students will rely on during mingles.

- Provide prompts on the board, on an overhead projector, or on the cards handed out to those students who may really need them.
- Vary tasks and materials according to student proficiency levels. Try to have easier materials as well as more difficult ones.
- Occasionally repeat the same task or text, changing the focus of the activity in the mingle.
- Allow time for students to reflect individually before and after meaning-focused mingles so they can sort out their ideas and find more precise ways to express them in English.
- Provide an outline that guides the students' steps in analyzing a problem as well as graphic organizers to help them see the links among facts.
- Encourage students to store and repeatedly use the graphic organizers that they have developed.

At first, it is easier for students to reflect on two or three opinions or facts where the controversy is on the surface. It is harder when there is only one fact, opinion, or a generally shared stereotype. Students get involved in really heated discussions when the problem is of great interest to them outside the classroom or if they encounter a number of opposing approaches to the problem.

While doing mingles, some students may get off task and switch to their mother tongue. Others may not take notes. To prevent such behaviors from the very start, the teacher should explain that the success of the follow-up activities will completely depend on the outcome of the mingle. The preceding instructions must draw the students' attention to what they will have to do later and how they will use the information in the following course of work (either in the lesson or while doing their home assignment). They need to see for themselves that keeping on task and taking notes will save time and be beneficial afterwards.

My observations show that mingles promote an improvement of grammar and vocabulary competencies because every lan-

guage unit is frequently used by *every* student in varied contexts and activities. The words that students need for self-expression are easily remembered. On the whole, the learners' answers become linguistically more correct and better grounded. Moreover, as my students have remarked, having practiced the critical-thinking approach to problem solving and discussions through mingles, they are able to transfer it outside the classroom when communicating in their mother tongue.

Conclusion

Provided that mingles are thoroughly thought out and properly placed in the lesson plan, they contribute to the degree of the student ownership of English as a personal tool. Including mingles in a chain of tasks on a regular basis in relation to every new topic enhances students' thinking, social and English skills, and language competences. They are learning to act in a more flexible and natural way and to explore the environment through reading, listening, speaking, and negotiating. Mingles allow teachers to create numerous opportunities for students to try out varied activities for themselves, and by doing so they recycle, refine, and expand their personal experiences. Encouraging students to act effectively in the amplified learning environment, teachers lead students beyond what they know, can do well, or are already interested in.

Students gradually become real agents of what they are doing, people who are in charge of the outcome, people who make their own decisions and create their own meanings. It is a personalized asset that is acquired thanks to the "whole person involvement" based on the interaction of thoughts, feelings, language, and behavior. Tasks are not done solely for a grade because learning needs are outweighed by other needs. For example, the need to learn English is replaced by the need to use it while sharing information with an interested listener, building relationships, and shaping and discussing one's own opinions.

The use of mingles is the only class management strategy that allows every student to do a lot of talking in the classroom, increasing the quality of communicative competence in English. In addition, mingle activities in the classroom have the potential to considerably improve the students' relationships in class as

well as outside the classroom. That is why we should be ready to incorporate mingles into our teaching without regret.

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