They always say, “Put your learners into small groups,” but how you do that can foster learning or create chaos!

In this webinar, we will:

• explore the art of grouping learners in ways that will build a sense of community, encourage communication, and support classroom management

• discuss different ways to group students

• explore the benefits of a selection of grouping strategies

• make grouping decisions based on real classroom activities for both online and face-to-face instruction
Kim Carroll

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She recently served as a U.S. Department of State English Language Fellow in Paraguay (2019-2020). Kim has worked in the US, Paraguay, Canada, Nicaragua, Mexico, Ecuador, and South Korea.

Kim has a BA in Environmental Studies/Anthropology and an M.Ed in Divergent Learning for adult language learners; she is a certified professional coach and intercultural trainer. She holds a certificate in English Teacher Education, and an advanced TEFL Certificate.
Random or Intentional?
Putting Learners into Groups that Work
True or False?

When I put learners into groups, it’s usually based on where they are sitting (or online, how they are randomly grouped).
True or False?

I don’t usually have students work in small groups because it hasn’t worked well for me in the past.
True or False?

While grouping students, I think about the intention of the activity and group learners accordingly.
In today’s session we will...

• Discuss some benefits of group or pair learning
• Explore how to make group work more effective with intentional grouping
• Examine three categories for grouping
  • Random grouping
  • Like-ability grouping
  • Cross-ability grouping
• Look at some real-life classroom scenarios
What does intentional grouping mean?

With intentional grouping, the teacher considers:

**The Activity:**
- Intentions, goals, and objectives
- Optimal working group size

**The Students:**
- Proficiency levels
- Strengths and weaknesses
- Other factors: personality and dispositions, interests, background knowledge, etc.

http://www.picpedia.org/highway-signs/s/success.html
Let’s think about grouping students to

• Build community
Let’s think about grouping students to

• Build community
• Encourage communication
Let’s think about grouping students to

• Build community
• Encourage communication
• Support classroom management
Reflection Question

What are some benefits of using pair and group work in the English language classroom?
Here are some additional reasons

1. Gives students a chance to practice language functions through authentic interaction and focus on fluency and communication.

(Shank & Terrell)

Listening activity:
Put the song lyrics in order
Here are some additional reasons

2. A lot of practice negotiating meaning

Writing activity: Create a superhero
Here are some additional reasons

3. Diversity of partners, contexts, and tasks; practice with cooperative and collaborative skills.

(New American Horizons)
Now we remember why putting students into small groups and pairs is a good idea.

How to do it effectively
Can we make group work more effective by thinking about how we group learners together?

YES!
Intentional Grouping:

- Random
- Like-ability
- Mixed-ability
Reflection Question

Think about the grouping strategies you use in your classroom.

How could you use grouping strategies to enhance student learning?
Random grouping

Students complete tasks in randomly selected groups and/or pairs.
Reflection Question

Are you familiar with the random grouping strategy?

Please share some examples from your classroom.
Random grouping

When?

• During mixer activities like
  • Find Someone Who
  • Conversation Grids

• For short interactions
  • Turn and Talk
  • Think Pair Share
Random grouping

Why?

• To mix with whole class and build community
• Each student performs at their ability
• Rapid changing of partners builds energy and gives an opportunity for repetition
## Random grouping

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>How does it work?</th>
<th>What does it look like?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Matching Pieces</td>
<td>Students have to find their matches to create group</td>
<td><img src="image1.png" alt="Matching Pieces Image" /> <img src="image2.png" alt="Matching Pieces Image" /> <img src="image3.png" alt="Matching Pieces Image" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counting off</td>
<td>Students count off and find the groups with their same number</td>
<td>1, 2, 3… A, B, C… Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday… January, February, March…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Line-ups</td>
<td>Students line up in order, then work with the person next to them</td>
<td>“Line up by your birthday” “Line up by height, shortest to tallest”</td>
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<tr>
<td>???</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Reflection Question

What other techniques do you use to put students into random groups in your classroom?
Planned Grouping: Like-ability

Students work together in groups or pairs in which all members have a similar level or language ability.
But, not only like-ABILITY...

Similarity in

• Learners’ interests
• Learners’ ages
• Learners knowledge/ability about the topic
• Learners’ dispositions, personality traits, or learning preferences
Reflection Question

What like-ability groupings could you use in your classroom?
Like-ability groups or pairs

When?

- During controlled practice activities
- To work at stations (when I want to work with small groups individually)
- To complete form-focused tasks

Activity:
Create a new student on your team
Like-ability groups or pairs

Why?

• To vary the work of each group
  • Examples: level, topic, amount of work, reading, grammar point, focus, etc.

• To be able to meet the students where they are

• Classroom management, level-appropriate work, team building
Like-ability groups or pairs

How?

• Decide what factor you want to group students by
  • Examples: reading ability, personality, age, and/or interests

• Decide how you will group students
  • Pass out matching pieces with intention
  • Arrange materials with student names or group names

Pass out matching pieces with intention

Arrange materials by group with student names
Reflection Question

What other techniques have you used to put students into like-ability pairs or groups?

Please share some examples from your classroom.
Planned Grouping: Cross-ability

Students work together in groups or pairs in which members have mixed levels or language abilities
Reflection Question

Are you familiar with the cross-ability grouping strategy?

Please share some examples from your classroom.
Cross-ability groups or pairs

When?

• During communicative practice
  • Role plays
  • Dialogs
  • Process writing practice

• For group presentations

• Team competitions

Team Roles:
- Scribe
- Materials (2)
- Timekeeper

Activity:
Vocabulary scavenger hunt
Cross-ability groups or pairs

Why?

• Fairness
• Opportunities
  • for growth/challenge
  • for teaching/mentoring
  • to highlight talents/skills
Cross-ability groups or pairs

How?

• Same techniques for making same-ability groups

• Note: If you use different grouping strategies in one class, consider using two-factor “matching pieces”
Reflection Question

What cross-ability grouping strategies could you use in your classroom?
Let’s put these ideas into action

Case Studies
Scenario 1: Group Presentation (U.S. Holidays)

**Class profile**

- **Age level:** 10-12
- **Proficiency level:** mixed-ability

**Objective 1:** To learn more about a U.S. holiday

**Objective 2:** To create a presentation (slides or poster) about the holiday

**Objective 3:** To give a 20-minute oral presentation about the holiday (with classmates)
Scenario 1: Group Presentation

How will you group your students?

• Random Grouping
• Planned Grouping: Like-ability
• Planned Grouping: Cross-ability

Please share your rationale, as well!
Scenario 1: Grouping Framework

Things to consider...

• Can tasks to complete the activity be divided in a way that everyone can participate at his/her current level?

• What will the outcome of the activity look like with intentional grouping?
Scenario 1: Grouping Framework

I decided intentional mixed-ability groups because...

- I can assign different tasks to different students in the group based on their level and ability.

- The presentations will vary a lot if I group them in like-ability groups (fairness in scoring).

What did you decide?
Scenario 2: Turn and Talk

Class profile
Age level: 18-22
Proficiency level: low-intermediate
Class: 50 minutes, online

Objective 1: To practice and critically think about the new material

Objective 2: To build speaking skills with a partner
Scenario 1: Group Presentation

How do you want the students divided?

• Random Grouping
• Planned Grouping: Like-ability
• Planned Grouping: Cross-ability

Do you want them to work with the same partner each time?

Please share your rationale, as well!
Scenario 2: Grouping Framework

Things to consider...
- Classroom management during breakout room time
- The amount of time needed to (re)arrange groups
- Student rapport
Scenario 2: Grouping Framework

I decided **random groups, meeting with each partner each time** because

• It takes more class time to rearrange groups
• Students can build rapport with one person throughout the class instead of meeting a new person each time
• I can join groups that I think will need my help or management

What did you decide?
Does it still seem complicated to group students intentionally?

Idea for forming groups
An idea for quickly dividing students (intentionally)

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<td>Summer</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Cross-Ability groups

Like-Ability groups
Today’s challenge for you...

Think about how you group students in your classes.

Are there times you can group them more intentionally?

What new idea will you try this week?
References


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Thank you!

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Reflection Questions

1. Discuss some of the challenges you face when having students work in groups. How might you adapt your grouping strategy to overcome these challenges?

2. Discuss how you typically group students. Do you vary your approach? How might you take the ideas shared today to improve group and pair work in your classroom?

3. Do you assign individual student roles during group work? If so, discuss how and why you do so.