

Random or Intentional?

Putting Learners in Groups that Work

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



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE



Kim Carroll



Kim is the owner and director of English for Life Academy in South Carolina, which offers TESOL certificates, intercultural coaching, and customized English courses for organizations.

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.



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE



Random or Intentional?

Putting Learners into Groups that Work



© 2020 by Kim Carroll. *Random or Intentional? Putting Learners in Groups that Work* for the American English Live Teacher Professional Development Series, sponsored by the U.S. Department of State with funding provided by the U.S. government and administered by FHI 360. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License, except where noted. To view a copy of the license, visit: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

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



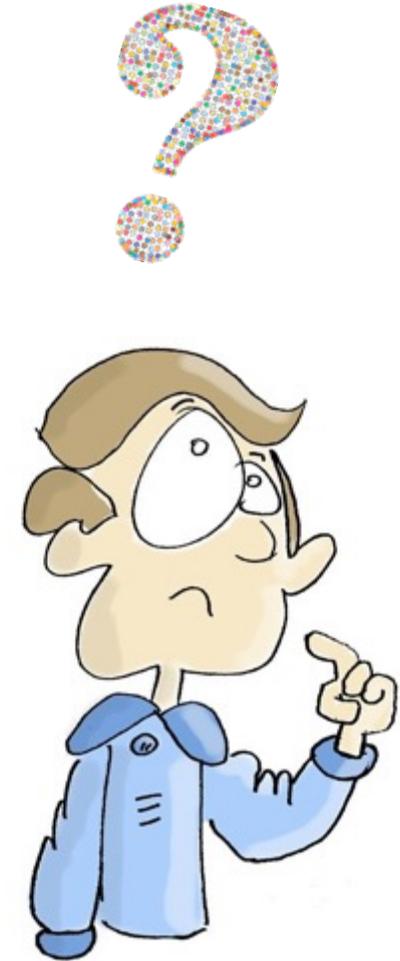
Let's think about grouping students to

- 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.

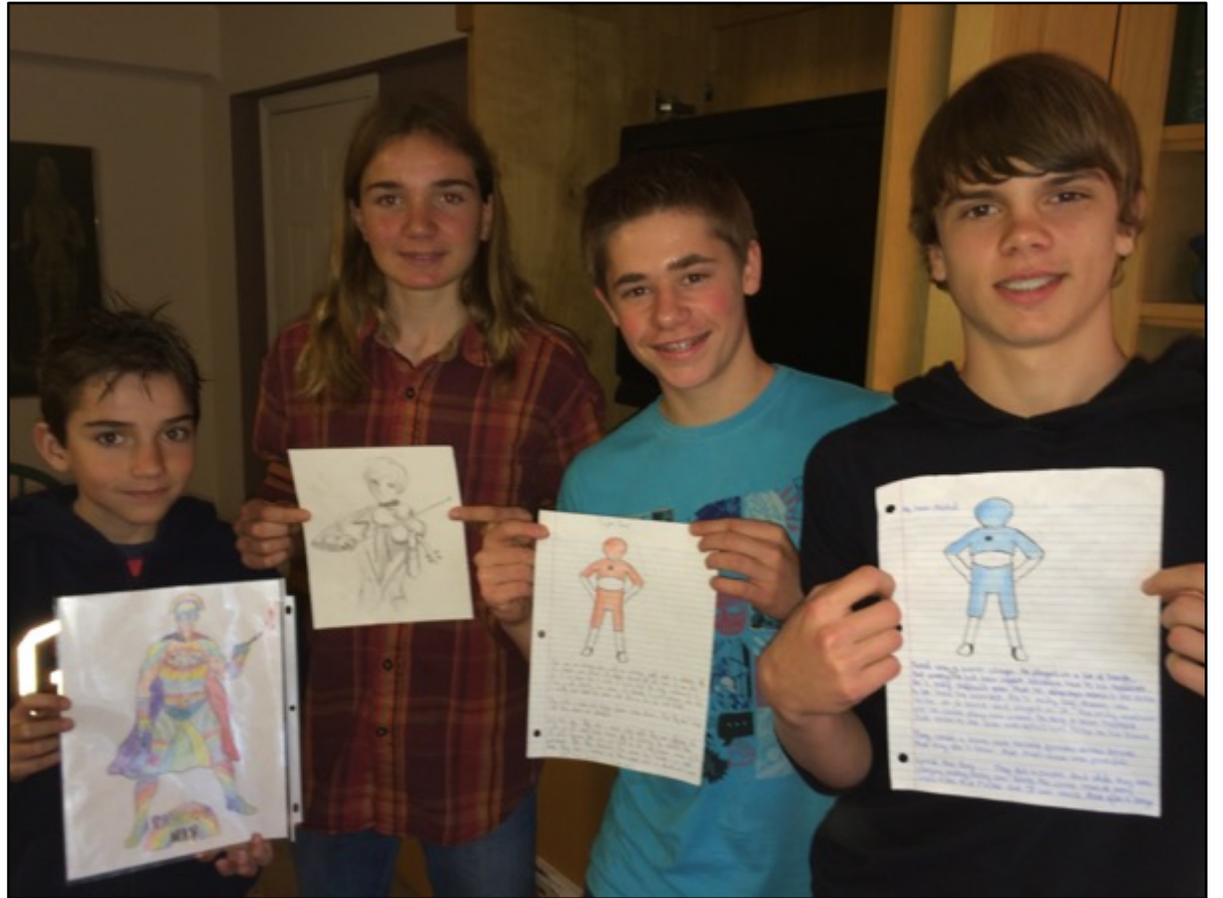
(Shank & Terrell)



Listening activity:
Put the song lyrics
in order

Here are some additional reasons

2. A lot of practice negotiating meaning

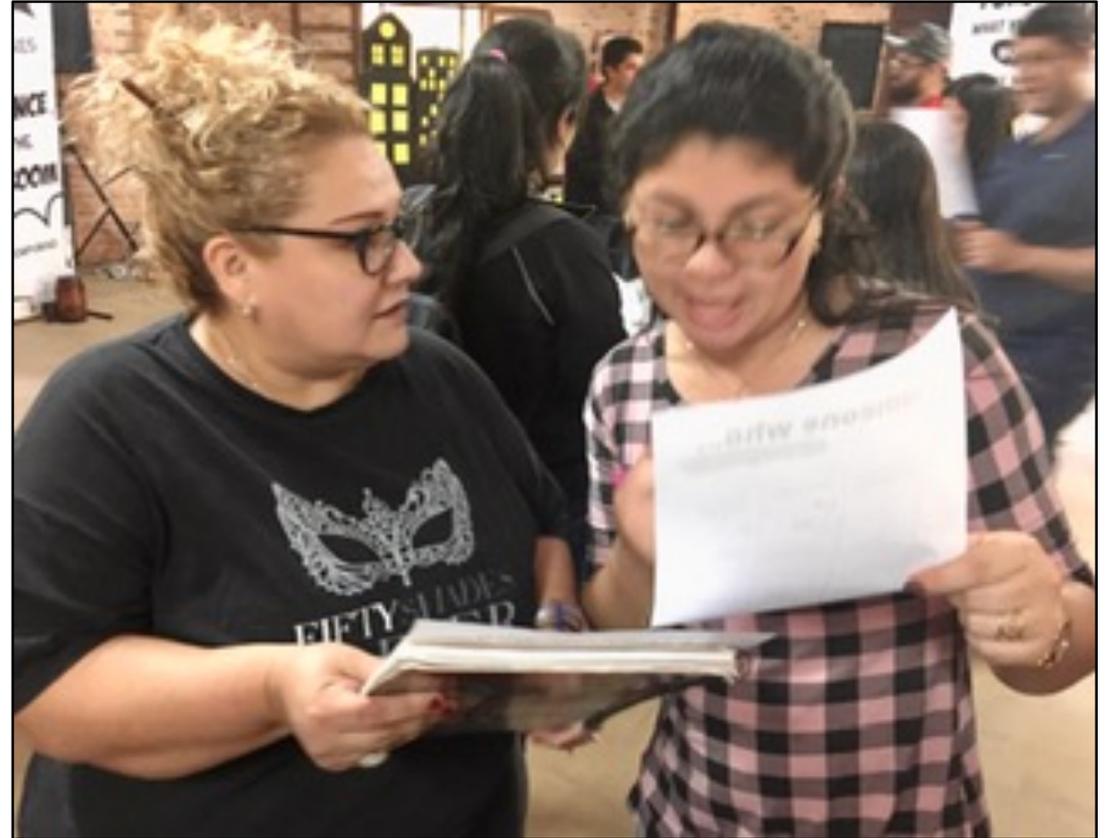


Writing activity:
Create a superhero

Here are some additional reasons

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

(New American Horizons)



Speaking and Listening
activity:
Find someone who

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.



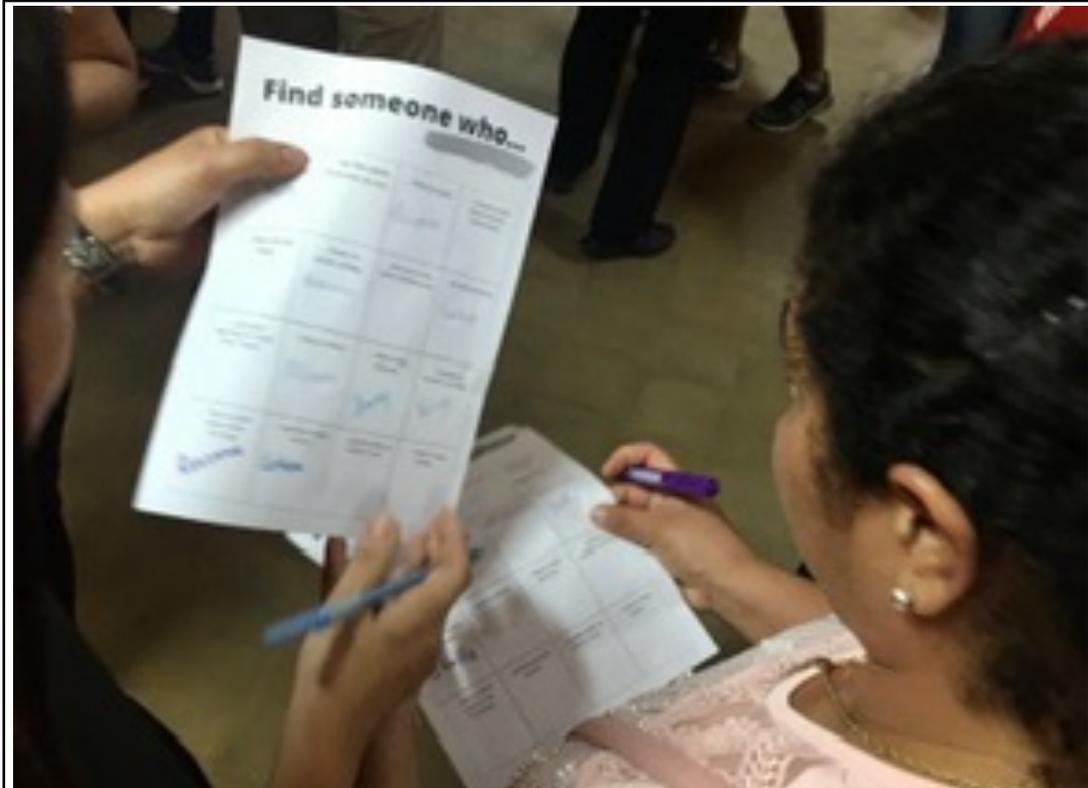
Reflection Question

Are you familiar with the random grouping strategy?

Please share some examples from your classroom.



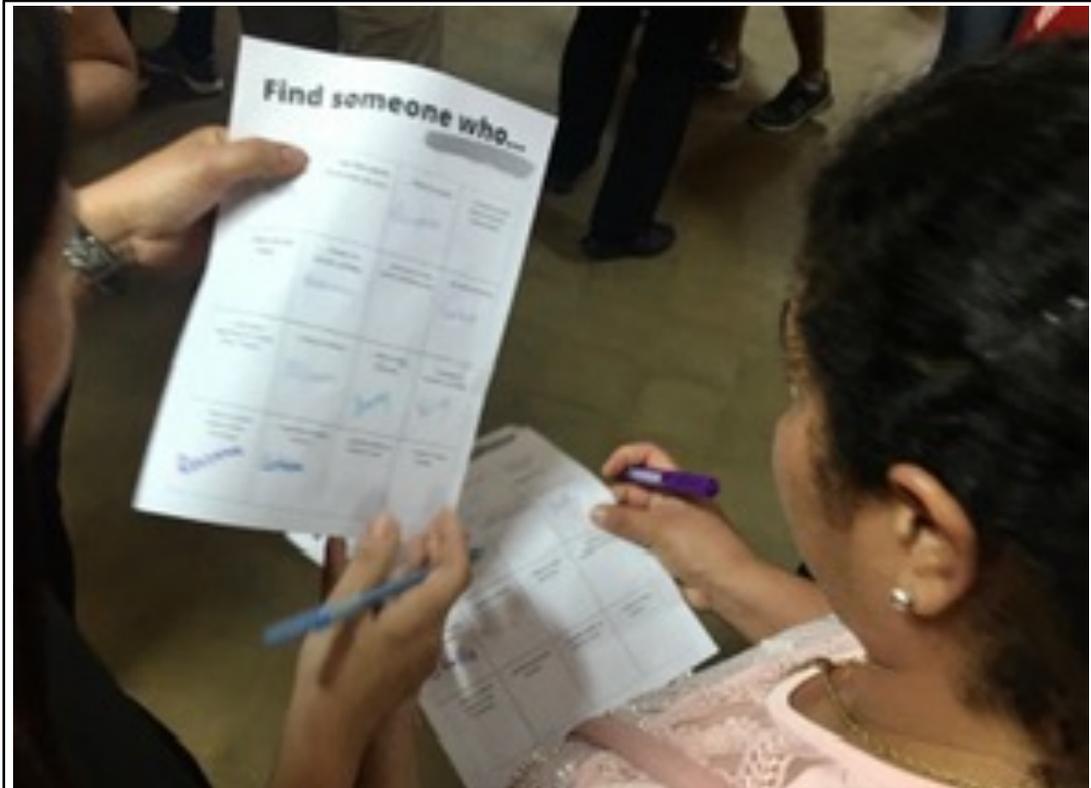
Random grouping



When?

- During mixer activities like
 - Find Someone Who
 - Conversation Grids
- For short interactions
 - Turn and Talk
 - Think Pair Share

Random grouping



Why?

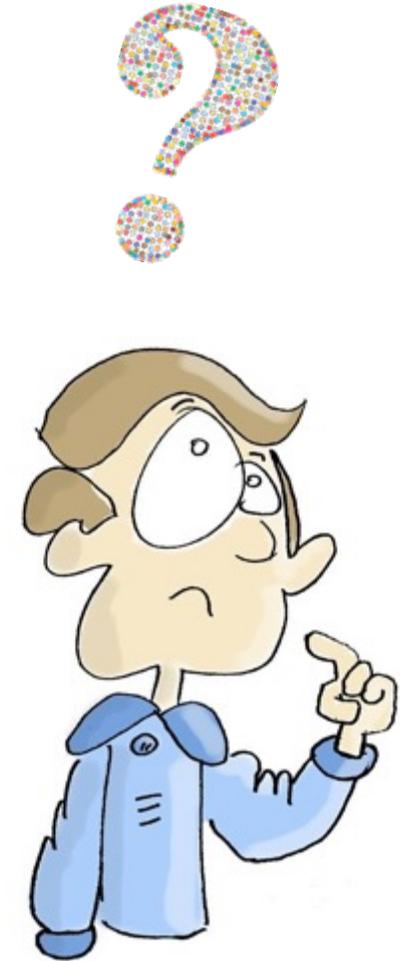
- To mix with whole class and build community
- Each student performs at their ability
- Rapid changing of partners builds energy and gives an opportunity for repetition

Random grouping

Category	How does it work?	What does it look like?
Matching Pieces	Students have to find their matches to create group	  
Counting off	Students count off and find the groups with their same number	1, 2, 3... A, B, C... Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday... January, February, March...
Line-ups	Students line up in order, then work with the person next to them	“Line up by your birthday” “Line up by height, shortest to tallest”
???		

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...

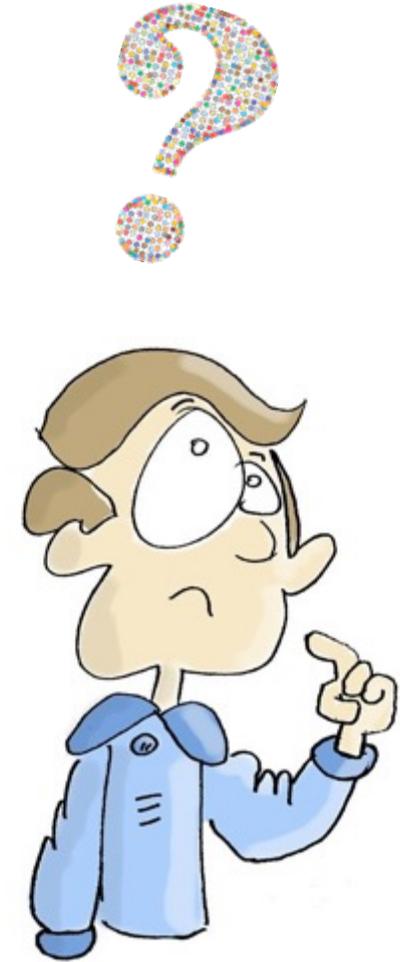
Similarity in

- Learners' interests
- Learners' ages
- Learners knowledge/ability about the topic
- Learners' dispositions, personality traits, or learning preferences

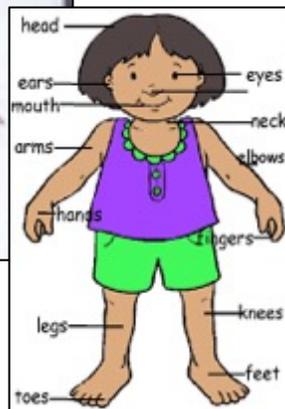


Reflection Question

What like-ability groupings could you use in your classroom?



Like-ability groups or pairs



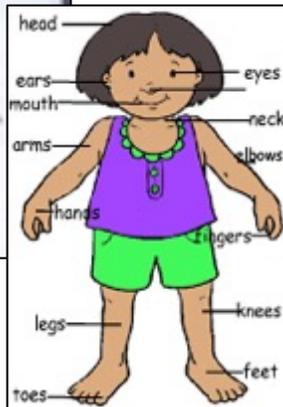
When?

- 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



Pass out
matching pieces
with intention

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

Arrange materials
by group with
student names

Hello cat group!



The cat group is:

- Maria S.
- Juan Carlos
- Soo Rim
- Summer

Cat group:
What do you like about cats?
Write your answer here:

Hello koala group!



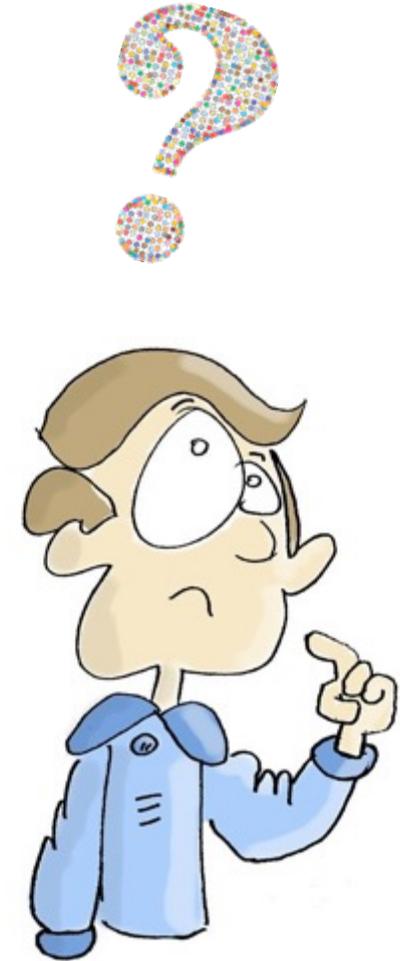
The koala group is:

- Migdelia
- Edwin
- Harim
- Rwaida

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

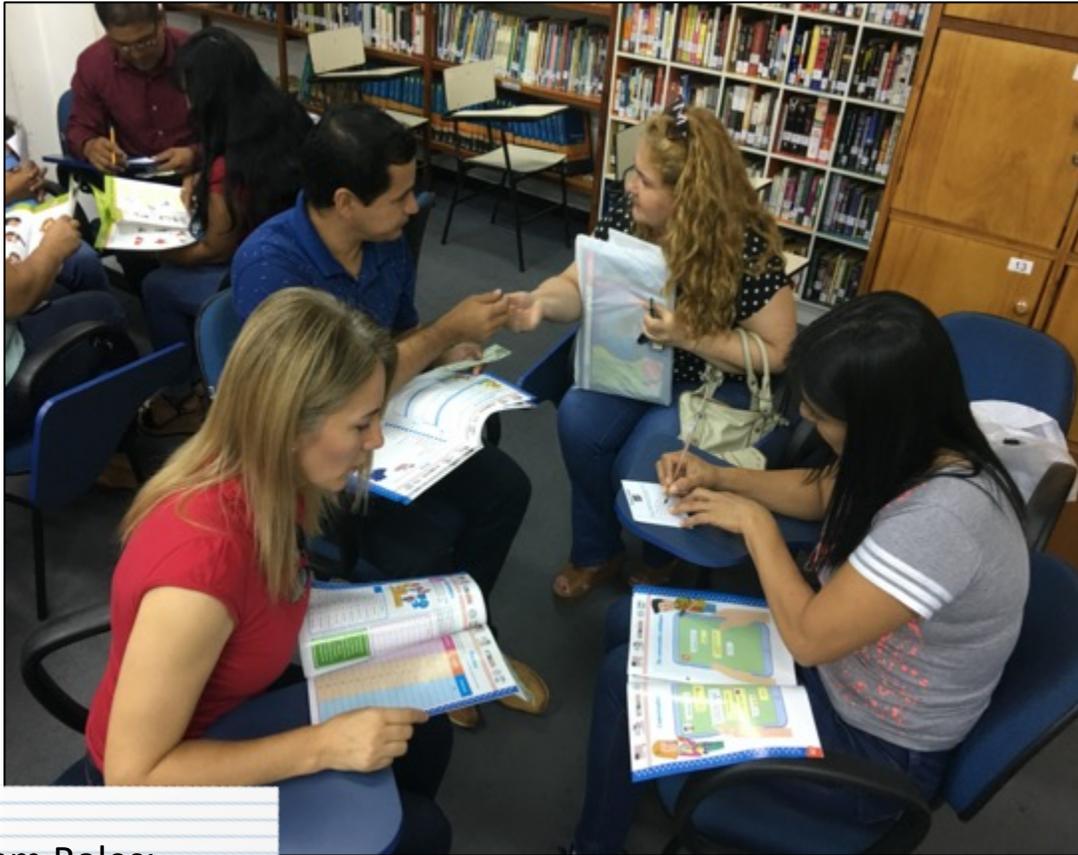
Reflection Question

Are you familiar with the cross-ability grouping strategy?

Please share some examples from your classroom.



Cross-ability groups or pairs



Team Roles:
Scribe
Materials (2)
Timekeeper

When?

- During communicative practice
 - Role plays
 - Dialogs
 - Process writing practice
- For group presentations
- Team competitions

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

practice
practice
practice
practice

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?

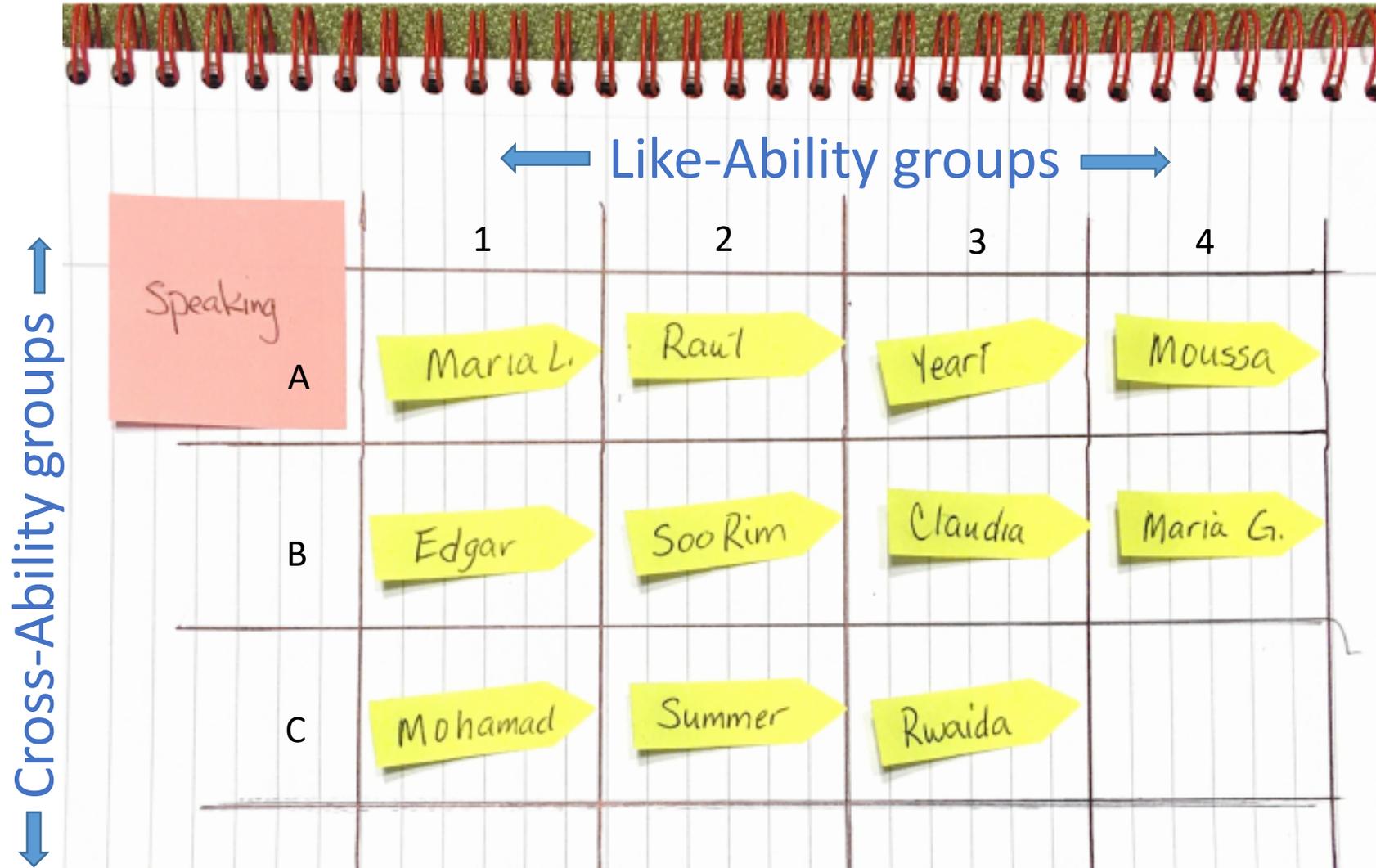


Does it still seem
complicated to
group students
intentionally?

Idea for forming groups



An idea for quickly dividing students (intentionally)



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

Bell, J. S. (2004). *Teaching multilevel classes in ESL*. Toronto: Pippin Pub.

Flores, M. and Parrish, B. (2011). *Effective grouping strategies in the adult ESL classroom*. New American Horizons Foundation.

Shank, C. and Terrill, L. (1995). *Teaching multilevel adult ESL classes*. Arlington Education and Employment Program.

https://www.cal.org/caela/esl_resources/digests/SHANK.html.

Unless otherwise noted, all images in this presentation are the author's own or are "no-attribution required" under the [Pixabay simplified license](#) or the [Unsplash license](#).

Thank you!

Email: americanenglishwebinars@fhi360.org

AE Live - Ning Community of Practice: americanenglishwebinars.com

AE for Educators Facebook page: facebook.com/AmericanEnglishforEducators

AE website: americanenglish.state.gov

AE YouTube channel: youtube.com/StateAmericanEnglish

AE Facebook page: facebook.com/AmericanEnglishatState



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.



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE

