

## GETTING STUDENTS INTO PAIRS AND GROUPS FOR COLLABORATIVE LEARNING – PART 1

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Group and pair work provide students frequent opportunities to practice using English with a variety of people in a lower-stakes setting. These collaborative learning situations are an essential part of a communicative EFL classroom.

EFL teachers often pre-establish groups and pairs for either long-term or short-term purposes. Teachers usually consider several factors when assigning students to groups depending on whether they want groups to be homogenous (made up of people with similar characteristics) or heterogeneous (made up of people with different characteristics). Personality type (introverted or extroverted), language proficiency, maturity level, likes and dislikes, life experiences, cultural considerations, and learning styles are just a few of the characteristics teachers might consider when creating groups or pairs. For helpful tips on how to create assigned groups and establish group roles, see [“Minimizing the Chaos through Cooperative Classroom Management”](#) by Gena Rhodes (*English Teaching Forum*, 2013) and [“Reconceptualizing Interactional Groups: Grouping Schemes for Maximizing Language Learning”](#) by Judith Rance-Roney (*English Teaching Forum*, 2010).

In this week’s Teacher’s Corner, we look at ways to make the sometimes tedious task of getting students into groups and pairs fun and language-focused. The techniques shared below offer unique ways to create impromptu (spontaneously made), randomly allocated groups for communicative activities. These approaches may take time to prepare, but their advantages include allowing students to work with different classmates (those who are not their usual neighbors or members of long-term assigned groups), enabling students to enjoy a fun “brain break” that involves language or content learning, and presenting opportunities for students to get up and move around.

Be sure to consider your students’ language level, age, and learning preferences when determining if the techniques below are a good match for your classroom.

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### IDEAS: GETTING STUDENTS INTO IMPROMPTU GROUPS AND PAIRS

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#### 1. Creating groups with “counting off” variations

Most teachers have used the “counting off” method to create impromptu groups (if you want 5 groups, students each say a number aloud in turn: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 1, 2...). You can easily modify this technique to include a language or content focus:

- **Sequenced vocabulary:** To reinforce vocabulary at beginning levels, instead of having numbered groups, assign sequenced vocabulary items as group names. Write the sequenced words on the board for extra visual support, if needed. For example, if you want 5 groups, your sequence could be “weekdays,” and students would count off *Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Monday...* (or your locally defined interpretation of “weekdays”). To create 6 groups, you could use “Spring and Summer months” with students counting off *March, April, May, June, July, August, March...* (or the applicable months in the Southern Hemisphere). To create groups of any size, you can use “multiples of 10” or “multiples of 100” to practice number vocabulary: for 7 groups, students would count off *ten,*

*twenty, thirty, forty, fifty, sixty, seventy, ten, twenty....* You can also use recently studied vocabulary words in alphabetical order for your sequence. For example, for “fruits and vegetables,” students could count off with *apple, banana, cucumber, eggplant, lettuce, orange, apple, banana...* If desired, post pictures or draw the items on the board and point at each as students count off.

- **Letters and vocabulary:** Instead of having numbered groups, assign each group a letter. The letters don’t always have to be sequential (e.g., *A, B, C...*). For instance, you could use *B, C, M, S,* and *T* to create 5 groups. Write the letters on the board and point to each one as students count off so they can stay on track. As students count off, they must say any English word that starts with the letter in the sequence on the board. For example, students could count off *boy, car, map, street, time, baseball, cow....* Each student must use a different word, and the rest of the class should be on the lookout for repeated responses. Students who get stuck after a few seconds can ask a neighbor for help. This sorting technique is great for lower intermediate levels and above because these students have access to a wider range of vocabulary items. Also, teachers can make this vocabulary-focused approach more difficult by choosing both letters and a category, such as “proper names,” “types of food,” etc. For instance, if your letters are *B, C, O,* and *P,* and the category is “food,” count off responses might include *banana, coconut, onion, potato, bagel, cake, orange....*
- **Themes:** Instead of numbered groups, use themed group names, such as *Animals, Sports, Jobs,* and *Things You Read.* Write the themes on the board. As students count off, they must give an example that fits the category. For example, for the categories above, responses might be *camel, football, policeman, magazine, monkey, basketball, doctor, newspaper....* The rest of the class can judge whether or not responses suit each category. You can choose themes related to content in your curriculum or, after you’ve used this technique a few times to create a routine, let students suggest the themes.
- For all variations, your group names are limited only by your imagination and the students’ language level. In all options, after the “count off” phase, you can then direct and instruct groups according to the sorting factor: *Can everyone in the “Monday” group stand up, please? I need five volunteers from the “C” team to pass out these worksheets, please. I’d like all of my “Sports” group members to start working together at Station 1 now.*

## 2. Creating pairs and groups with “Find your Match”

During pair and group work, teachers often ask students to turn and work with their neighbors. In classes with assigned seats or where students usually sit in the same places, this means working with the same partner or group mates on a regular basis. While working in a familiar pair or group can build trust and comfort, students also need opportunities to work with other classmates who may have different perspectives, language skills, and personalities.

The “find your match” technique for setting pairs or groups can be used with students of any level and can be adapted to review and recycle a variety of language and content topics in the curriculum. The premise for all of the variations described below is that students will all receive a card or small piece of paper with information in English on it, and they must move around the room and talk with others as they try to find the partner or group mates whose cards contain related information.

Prepare the cards in advance based on the learning objectives, mix the cards up, and distribute them to students. Here are a just a few of many possible language- and content-focused ways to use this technique; examples with different difficulty levels are included for some items:

- **Language-focused “find your match” cards**
  - **Synonyms:** *big finds huge (pair); happy finds cheerful (pair); permanent finds everlasting, unchanging and immutable (group of 4)*
  - **Antonyms:** *sad/happy; difficult/easy; danger/safety*
  - **Comparatives and superlatives:** *expensive/more expensive; pretty/prettier; comfortable/more comfortable/most comfortable (group of 3)*
  - **Irregular verb forms:** *go/went; swim/swam; sing/sang*
  - **Associated vocabulary items:** *cat/kitten; baseball/bat; (theme: “things in a kitchen”) pot/stove/refrigerator/sink (group of 4); (theme: “things that fly”) duck/airplane/helicopter/pigeon/rocket (group of 5)*
  - **Picture – word (for lower levels):** *vocabulary item/picture of the item; digital time/a drawing of an analog clock with the time displayed on hour and minute hands (students must say the time aloud in English when they find their match); a number in numeric form/the number spelled out (71/seventy-one)*
  
- **Content-focused “find your match” cards**
  - **Reading / literature: book title + character(s)** – *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer/Huck Finn/Aunt Polly/Becky Thatcher (group of 4); The Gift of the Magi/Della (pair)*
  - **Science: parts of a system or process** – *photosynthesis/sun/leaf/chlorophyll (group of 4); lifecycle of a butterfly/egg/caterpillar/pupa/butterfly (group of 5)*
  - **Science: animal + habitat** – *bird/tree; shark/ocean; fox/moose/bear/ owl/forest (group of 5)*
  - **Social studies: current event + country where it occurred or current event and person involved** – *2014 Winter Olympics/Russia; international volunteers respond to recent floods/Bangladesh; promoting a nationwide campaign that encourages kids to exercise/U.S. First Lady Michelle Obama*
  - **History: event + significance or date or person and significance** – *1945/World War II ends; Emancipation Proclamation/freed slaves in the United States during the Civil War; Mahatma Gandhi/promoted non-violent approaches to social change*

**Tip - Managing the Volume:** This type of mingling activity can generate noise. While it is great that students are actively speaking, you don’t want the noise level to become disruptive. Here is a way to create a routine that uses visual signals to encourage students to speak at a classroom-appropriate level:

- **Traffic signal:** The teacher holds up stoplight-colored signs or pieces of paper to indicate the noise level. *Green = Good; Yellow = Becoming too noisy, lower the volume; Red = Stop – it is too noisy! Use your quiet voices or whisper.* The teacher can hold up the sign at the front of the class or walk around with the sign raised while students are working. Train your students to pass along the signal to their partners or group mates when they see it and to remind others to adjust the noise level when yellow or red signs are shown.