

GETTING STUDENTS INTO PAIRS AND GROUPS FOR COLLABORATIVE LEARNING – PART 2

Last week's Teacher's Corner focused on the importance of communicative group and pair work and looked at creative ways to form these learning partnerships. This week we will explore more ideas for creating impromptu (spontaneously made) groups for collaborative learning activities and projects.

In addition to using teacher-assigned groups, incorporating randomly allocated, impromptu groups or pairs into some activities provides students with opportunities to work with a variety of classmates who may have different perspectives, language skills, and personalities. Being able to communicate effectively with diverse types of people is an important skill for language learners to develop.

As we saw in the previous edition of the Teacher's Corner, the process of creating such groups doesn't have to be boring! Last week, we examined two techniques – “counting off variations” and “find your match” – to get students into groups or pairs while also including elements of language and/or content learning. Be sure to check out those tips if you missed them! The techniques described below provide even more ways to “spice up” the process of creating impromptu groups. Be sure to consider your students' language level, age, and learning preferences when determining if the techniques are a good match for your classroom.

IDEAS: GETTING STUDENTS INTO IMPROMPTU GROUPS

1. Choose your own group (theme basis)

With this approach, students select their own groups based on personal reactions to teacher-provided prompts connected to a theme. Themes can relate to recently learned vocabulary, be drawn from a content-based curriculum topic, or simply be fun or interesting topics that stimulate discussion or strong feelings. Examples include:

- Favorite sport (to play or to watch on TV)
- The job I would like to have
- Favorite endangered animal
- Most influential historical figure in the 20th century
- Favorite food or ice cream flavor
- Favorite subject in school
- The item you would take with you if you were stranded alone on a desert island
- Favorite quotation or character from a book, play, or poem being studied in class

Two variations of this approach are provided: the first gets all students up and out of their seats as they choose groups; the second is more controlled and may be well suited for larger classes or classes in which movement is restricted due to the room's physical layout. Before using this technique, explain that not every student will get her or his first choice in choosing a group due to space considerations. Tell students that it is okay to pick their second or third most-preferred option.

- **Variation A. Move to your group's station:** Post pictures or text-based signs with theme-related prompt options around the room before the activity (for example: *Favorite Summer Olympic*

sport: boxing, football, basketball, track and field, gymnastics, swimming, other). If desired, include an “other” category for students whose preference isn’t represented with the options provided. When you are ready to form groups, ask students to get up, calmly walk around and review the options, and then stand next to the option that best matches their preference. This approach can save transition time since students physically move to their group’s work area while the groups are being formed.

If your activity requires equal numbers of students in each group, try these options:

- Post a piece of paper or have a space on a whiteboard/chalkboard for the first students who reach the station to write down their names and confirm their spot in the group.
 - Create a sheet of paper with numbered strips that can be torn off. Use the desired group size to determine how many strips to make. When students arrive at the station they tear off a numbered strip to confirm their place in the group.
 - If your class is small, as groups are forming, you can verbally encourage volunteers to move from a crowded group to a less populated one.
- **Variation B. Sign-up sheet:** Provide a sign-up sheet with the desired number of group spaces under each themed response option. As students arrive in class, verbally direct them to fill out the sheet or post written instructions on the board asking them to sign up for a group as they walk in. As an alternative, you can pass around the sign-up sheet during other parts of class such as attendance taking or extended silent reading. Again, remind students it is okay to pick their second or third most-preferred option if their first choice is not available.

After groups are formed and before starting the activity, ask groups to hold brief discussions about why the members chose that particular option. If used, students who chose the “other” category can talk about their preferred responses. If students end up in a group that wasn’t their first choice, they can explain why this group was their second or third choice. This brief discussion can “break the ice,” create rapport, and get students primed to work together on the main activity or project.

2. Grab bag

This strategy doesn’t have a language or content focus, but it is a quick and efficient way to create impromptu groups:

- Before class, prepare sets of small objects according the desired number of groups and students per group. You can use any type of small object as long as the sets are visually different from each other, such as different colored marbles, buttons, game pieces, or beans; small, inexpensive plastic toys; or – many students’ favorite option – different types of individually wrapped candy or sweets. For example, to create 8 groups of 5 students, count out 8 sets of 5 types of candy.
- Put the items in a bag and shake it up. Pass the bag around the class. Students reach in the bag and choose an item to determine which group they belong to.
- To make this group-setting process faster in large classes, split your mixed-up sets of objects among 2 to 4 bags that can be passed around at the same time.

3. Deck of cards

Decks of four-suit (clubs, hearts, spades, and diamonds), 52-count playing cards can be a great tool for randomly grouping students. If these cards aren't available, try to adapt the ideas below using the type of playing cards commonly found where you live. Depending on the technique you use, the desired group size, and your class size, you may need to remove some cards from the deck or use more than one deck.

- To create two large groups, have each student draw a card; those with red cards go in one group, those with black cards go in the other. Alternatively, remove the face cards (jack, queen, king) and divide the class by those who draw even-numbered cards and those who draw odd-numbered cards (ace = odd).
- To create three groups, divide the class by whether students draw face cards, even-numbered cards, or odd-numbered cards.
- To create four groups, divide the class by the suits students draw (clubs, hearts, spades, and diamonds).
- To create groups of 4, divide the class by the value of the card they drew (e.g., all 7's work together, all queens work together).
- To create custom-sized groups, use a set of value ranges to sort the students (e.g., everyone with a card between 2 and 4, between 5 and 7, etc.)

Tip – Speeding up the movement process: with the exception of the “move to your group’s station” variation of the first technique, these approaches all involve setting groups while students are in their usual seats. Now you need to get them to move to where you want them to work, which can take time. To speed this process up, try using pre-designated stations and a timer.

- **Pre-designated stations:** If possible, set up and label the areas where you want groups to work before class or while students are engaged in another activity. You can mark the stations with numbers, letters, colors, pictures, or words. In this way, once groups are created, you can easily direct students to a specific spot. For example, *Can the team who likes chocolate ice cream please move to Station 1? I'd like my vanilla ice cream-lovers to work at station 2, please.*
- **Timers:** Challenge students to quickly get into groups by timing them. Start the timer when you say “go,” and stop the timer when the last student is positioned with his or her group and the groups are ready to start working. Encourage students to move safely and courteously. To add an element of competition, keep track of the class time records on the board and challenge students to see if they can beat their previous record each time you move into groups. Once the routine is set to move quickly into groups, you can discontinue timer use if desired. For more ideas on how to use timers and create efficient and fun student movement routines, see Kevin McCaughey's 2012 webinar “**The Moveable Class,**” part of the *Shaping the Way We Teach English* webinar series (slides are available under the “Downloads” section of this week's Teachers Corner).