

Pair and group work

**Teaching English as a Foreign
language, Specialist
programme**

Group work, pair work or whole class activities?

There will be a time and a place for whole-class activities in the English language classroom, just as there is a time and a place for group and pair work.

In praise of group work

- Group work reduces TTT
- Group work makes it possible for the teacher to devote more time to the students' oral production
- Instead of being dependent on the teacher, students get used to helping and learning from each other
- Less confident students get the chance to put their knowledge of the new language into practice in a non-threatening environment
- The teacher is left free to discreetly monitor progress and give help, advice and encouragement where and when it is needed.

Teacher talking time

Group work came into the standard EFL teaching repertoire with communicative methodologies in the 1970s. At that time, studies of contemporary foreign language classes revealed that as much as 80% of lesson time consisted of the teacher talking to the students.

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In a class of 30 students, it is evident that the learner hardly got a chance to practice the language.

Teacher Talking Time (TTT) became taboo and ways were devised to stamp it out and train the students to actually perform in the language they were learning.

In praise of whole class discussion

- **welding together of the whole group that comes about when a whole group works together towards a common goal.**
- **the larger the group, the more variety there is in the ideas, opinions and experiences which can contribute to the learning process.**
- **whole class discussion is likely to be content based, rather than form based, encouraging fluency and a more memorable and meaningful exchange among the participants.**
- **more appropriate for the introverted and reflective learner**
- **With classes of 15 students or so, there are likely to be many opportunities of letting the whole class function as a single unit instead of dividing it into groups.**

Group work and whole class work cohesion

- The two techniques can go hand in hand. After a session of group work, a whole-class feedback phase will give cohesion to the learning process.
- Ideally, the group work that has gone before will ensure that everyone has something to say, and also a reason for listening. Having "rehearsed" in a more intimate context beforehand, students may face the whole class with more confidence in their ability to handle the target language.



Group
work as
rehearsal



Whole-class
activity

Most EFL classes are monolingual and monocultural and this has a considerable effect on the use of pair and group activities.

The lack of a need to communicate in English means that any communication between learners in that language will seem artificial and arguably even unnecessary.

- The fact that all the learners in the class share a common culture (and are often all from the same age group) will mean that there will often be a total lack of curiosity about what other class members do or think, thus making questionnaire-based activities superfluous.
- There is the paradox that the more interesting and motivating the activity is (and particularly if it involves a competitive element of some sort), the more likely the learners are to use the mother tongue in order to complete the task successfully or to finish first.
- The very fact that more effort is involved to communicate in a foreign language when the same task may be performed with much less effort in the mother tongue will also tend to ensure that very little English is used.

Is there a good reason for doing this?

So from time to time it is worth putting our group work practice under scrutiny and asking ourselves the same question: Is there a good reason for doing this? Badly handled group work can be as detrimental for the learning process as any other inappropriate technique.

In the meantime...

It might be worth asking your students whether they regard speaking for just 3% of the lesson to be good value and point out that they can increase that percentage substantially if they try to use English in group activities.

At first learners may find it strange to use English when communicating with their peers but **it is a question of habit and it is a gradual process.**

For the teacher to insist that English is used may well be counter-productive and may provoke active resistance.

It may be very little at first but, as with any habit, it should increase noticeably as time goes by. Indeed, it is not unusual to hear more motivated learners in a monolingual situation communicating with each other in English outside the classroom.