

GROUP WORK AND PAIR PRACTICE IN
CLASSES OF ANY SIZE

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The most obvious advantage of small groups is that students are able to increase the time in which they communicate in the target language: In only a few minutes of oral practice in a small group, a student gets more time to speak than in a whole hour of the teacher asking questions of students on a one-to-one basis. Small groups allow for adaptation of teaching time and attention to the particular needs of an individual, or a group of three or four individuals, rather than assuming that all students in a class need exactly the same instruction. They provide an opportunity for tutoring, that is, giving each student the opportunity to act as teacher within a small group, thus taking advantage of the basic truth that 'the best way to learn something is to teach it'. Another very important factor is the sense of involvement that students experience: they are less inhibited about making errors and more willing to correct one another.

An advantage for the teacher is that he is freed from his dominant position at the front of the class and can move around the groups giving more personal attention. While one of our objectives is to begin to reduce the amount of teacher intervention, we are still concerned that the students do not make too many mistakes. We should be aiming at guidance rather than control.

Visual aids are a good way of setting up pairwork or groupwork activities because they are non-verbal and therefore to some degree 'open-ended'. They are effective because they are stimulating.

TECHNIQUES FOR DRILLING IN SMALL GROUPS

After new material is presented the students should be told to move their chairs to form small groups.

A portion (preferably 1 to 2 five minute sections) of every class period should be dedicated to small groups.

FORMATION OF THE GROUPS:

Students can be grouped on different bases, under different circumstances. First, it is probably better to let the students form their own groups, since they will be less inhibited with friends; later, for some activities, groups may be formed according to ability, since fast learners will have different problems, and a different learning pace; occasionally the best student should be placed with a group of slower ones, to act as leader; groups may be formed according to age, interests, sex, etc. for specific teaching and learning situations.

SUPERVISION:

To be effective, instruction in small groups requires the constant supervision of the teacher. Do not let any group converse in Spanish. Try to prevent the monopolization of conversation in a group by one or two students. You can avoid this by not making your groups too large. Move around constantly, moving from one group to another, encouraging, answering questions. Problems that apply to the whole class can be pointed out on the chalkboard after you have the class together again.

Small group and individual activities create better communication between teacher and students when the teacher checks their performance, offers corrections and suggestions when necessary. The reverse is true if the teacher instructs the students to form groups and then leaves them to work on their own. In this case students feel abandoned and tend to dislike small-group work.

NOISE LEVEL:

It is to be expected that individualized instruction, with more students participating actively, will result in more noise than the traditional class. Our old-fashioned concept of discipline (especially silence) must also be revised.

Mischief makers do exist but they can usually be converted into effective group leaders if their energies are channelled productively. For teachers who have to work with large classes, small-group work is probably the only way in which the language can be taught. (In a class of thirty, for example, divided into ten groups of three students each, ten students will be speaking at the same time, and each student will speak ten times as much as in the traditional class). The lack of practice in the traditional large class makes it impossible for the student to acquire proficiency in the target language.

PARTICIPATION:

A student should be permitted and encouraged to speak when he wants to speak, to learn when he wants to learn. The teacher centered techniques which are common when the teacher faces the whole class allow the student to speak only when his turn comes, or when the teacher sees fit to call on him. There are times when he has something to communicate but the system requires that he remain silent. These moments of learning are lost forever. Students should be encouraged to grasp such opportunities by speaking up immediately.

SPEAKING THE TARGET LANGUAGE ONLY:

Care must be taken that small-group activities do not become an exchange in the native language. Emphasis must be placed on the rule that the language being learned should be spoken at all times. This, however, does not preclude the occasional use of a few words in the native language, to save time and clarify a concept.

FINISHING A GROUP WORK ACTIVITY:

It's important to terminate small-group activities by having a few students do the exercise for the whole group. This helps wrap up the activity and to make sure they have been practising correctly.

LEARNING FROM YOUR PEERS:

A student learns not only from his teacher, but also from his fellow students, and their problems give him additional insights in the language.