

## Pair Work Tips

By Steve Taylore-Knowles

### Introduction

Pair work activities in class create a number of benefits. This is why they are used by teachers in many different situations working with students of all ages and levels of English ability. Pair work activities can be a very efficient use of classroom time. They engage all students in the activity, rather than students passively listening to either the teacher talking or another individual student responding to the teacher's questions. In order to get the most out of pair work activities, though, it's important to plan them well and to keep a few key principles in mind.

### Setting up and managing activities

Students benefit from having a clear process for setting pair work activities and knowing what to expect. There are three key areas to focus on when planning pair work activities: selecting pairs, providing instructions, and starting and stopping activities.

#### Selecting pairs

Just as in real life, students gain something from working and interacting both with friends they know well and with other people who might not be their first choice of partner. Working with friends helps to motivate students to engage in the activity, and working with others helps to encourage their wider social skills. As teachers, we might allow students on occasion to choose the classmate they want to work with. At other times, we might want to control that process and assign students to pairs ourselves. In order to do that quickly and in a way that seems fair to students, you might give each member of the class a card with a number on and ask them to find someone in the class with a matching number. You might also keep a set of small flat wooden sticks (the kind that are used in children's ices and that are called 'lolly sticks' in Britain and 'popsicle sticks' in the US) in a glass with a student's name on each one, allowing you to pull the names out at random. When teaching remotely, and depending on the platform you use, you may be able to assign students to breakout rooms either by selecting them individually or allowing the software to assign them at random.

Once you have selected the pairs, you may want to consider where they are positioned. In some classrooms, the positions of desks and chairs are relatively fixed and there's little flexibility. In those situations, allow students to move to sit next to the person they are going to work with and, to the extent that the furniture allows, encourage them to turn to face each other. In classrooms with more flexibility, space the pairs out as much as possible. This helps to keep the overall noise level down as students don't have to raise their voices to speak over a nearby pair.

#### Providing instructions and monitoring

Once pairs are in position, it's important to provide clear instructions. It's best to provide detailed verbal instructions alongside simplified written instructions on the board. Check the students' understanding of the instructions by hiding or removing the written instructions and asking different students to explain what they have to do in the task. Depending on the precise nature of the activity that you want students to participate in, you should also provide a visual reference on the board of the topic to be discussed. This might include the dialogue to be used as a model or any particular language structures to be practised. Where appropriate, demonstrate the activity with a student, or ask two students to demonstrate part of the activity for the whole class. Make sure that all students can see and refer to the written instructions and any other reference material during the activity.

As part of presenting the instructions, you should make sure that students know how long the activity is going to last. If you can, provide a virtual timer on the board, or a physical clock or timer that everyone can see to help students pace their interaction. If you can't, you might write on the board when students have, for example, one minute remaining, depending on the overall length of the activity.

You also have an important role to play during the activity. You should move between the pairs, monitoring the interaction and making sure that everyone stays on task. As you move from pair to pair, listen to get a sense of the content of the interaction and also to pick up on any particular linguistic difficulties they face or errors they make. At this stage, you shouldn't interrupt the conversation but simply make a note of any points you want to come back to.

Students are often used to relying on the teacher as a resource, and as you come close to a pair, it's not uncommon for a hand to shoot up with a question about what the best word to use. Pair work is a very good opportunity to encourage independence, so it's best to resist the temptation to provide students with language as you move around the classroom. Respond with encouragement such as: 'Try to say it in a different way.' or 'Have a go, and we'll talk about the language later.' If during the activity you realize there is something that perhaps you should have pretaught, such as the word for a particular object in a photograph, simply write the word on the board while the students continue the interaction and point to it when students need the word.

## Starting and stopping activities

Students of all ages need clear signals so they know when to start and, particularly, when to stop the activity. Starting the activity is generally less of an issue since the classroom is quiet and students are focused on you and your instructions. Simply saying 'Please begin now' is usually enough. However, when the students' attention is on the activity and there is noise in the room, it can be more of a challenge to get them to stop and come back together as a class. During the activity, you have probably moved around the classroom, so at the end of the activity, make sure you take your place at the front of the class. Use a simple audible signal, such as clapping your hands once or twice, and then raise your hand above your head. This provides a visual signal that all pairs will eventually see as they realize that the pairs around them are falling silent.

## Feedback and error correction

After the activity, there should be an opportunity for feedback. If the activity has gone well, praise the students for following the instructions. In general, the feedback should focus on the content of the interactions before you focus on any linguistic points in order to encourage students to see English as a means of meaningful communication first and foremost. Ask a volunteer from each pair to comment on what they said during the activity. You might ask them to summarize the points each of them made, or perhaps mention something they learned about their partner or their partner's opinions. You may add any points you heard the pair mention as you monitored the activity.

When all pairs, or as many pairs as time permits, have reported back to the class, go through any linguistic points you noticed during the activity. During this process of delayed error correction, you should be selective and focus on difficulties that more than one pair encountered if possible.

## Troubleshooting

Even well-managed classes can run into difficulties during pair work activities. It's easy for the noise level to creep up, as each pair increases the volume to talk over another pair. It's also possible that some pairs, perhaps those with fewer language resources in English, finish the activity earlier than the rest of the class, leading to them possibly distracting other pairs who are still focused on the activity.

To address the problem of noise level, make it clear from the outset that pair work activities (which students usually welcome as an interesting change of pace in the classroom) can only go ahead if the noise is kept to a reasonable level. Teach students that a particular signal, such as a quiet 'shush' accompanied by you pointing downwards with your hand, means that everyone needs to talk more quietly. In the early days of using these activities with a class who may not be used to this way of working, keep an alternative 'whole class' activity in reserve so that you can change course if you find that on a particular day the students are too excitable and unable to work in pairs quietly.

With early finishers, you might write an extra point on the board for them to discuss that is related to the activity they have done. If it's a matter of filling in thirty seconds or less before the end of the activity for everyone, then you might have an ongoing instruction that it's fine to talk about anything they like *as long as they do it entirely in English!*

## In conclusion

Pair work activities can be a fun, motivating part of your classroom practice. As well as allowing all students to participate at the same time, they provide a safe space which is less exposed than contributing in open class. This helps students feel more comfortable sharing their personal opinions or trying out aspects of English that they have not yet fully mastered. They also provide vital opportunities to develop social skills and to collaborate with other students on activities that demand a range of other skills, such as problem-solving or critical thinking skills.

## Further reading

Harmer, Jeremy, *The Practice of English Language Teaching*, 5<sup>th</sup> Edn (Pearson Longman, 2015), Chapter 10, 'Grouping Students'.