

Group Work Tips

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The benefits of group work

Working in small groups of three or four provides a number of benefits for students of all ages and at all levels of English ability. However, there is a danger that unstructured group work activities can be seen by students as a social event. In order to ensure that these activities run smoothly and provide the maximum benefit to students, teachers should bear a few general principles in mind when incorporating group work into their lesson plans.

Quiet Time

It's important not to rush into group work activities and to be realistic about the amount of time they are going to take. If you want students to participate in a five-minute discussion task, then preparation for the task and feedback after the task is likely to require at least ten minutes or more of classroom time. Students should be given clear instructions – with detailed instructions provided verbally and a simplified form of the instructions displayed on the board for all to see during the activity – and should be given the chance to ask any questions they have on the process. They should also be given a short period of quiet time after you have explained the task, during which they are able to consider the topic or task, formulate an opinion if appropriate, and perhaps mentally rehearse any specific language they think they are going to need.

Roles

It's generally a good idea to give students clear roles when you want them to work in groups. This avoids a number of potential problems. It means that all students are engaged throughout the task, rather than allowing their attention to wander when another member of the team is talking. It also helps the group as a whole manage the task successfully and on time. Depending on the nature of the particular activity, you might ask each student in a group to take on one of the following roles:

Monitoring language

This student is responsible for ensuring that everyone conducts the task in the target language, English. You should make clear to this student that this role does not involve correcting or questioning the accuracy of other students' use of English, but is just focused on helping everyone stay in English, perhaps using prompts such as "English, please." or "Can you say that in English?"

Timing

This student is responsible for ensuring that the group works through the task in a timely manner. With tasks that involve a number of stages – for example, where students each express their opinion and are then asked to form a consensus where possible – this student makes sure that no one member of the team speaks for too long, and that they move from stage to stage at the appropriate time using prompts such as "Shall we talk about the next question?" or "Perhaps we need to reach a conclusion."

Note-taking

This student is responsible for making a note of the key points that arise from the activity. You need to be careful exactly when you decide to use this role. It works best when you ask groups to settle on short simple answers, rather than when you ask each member of a group to express their opinion, say. It's unfair and unproductive to expect one member of the group to make extensive notes and in that situation you might ask students to take turns making notes during the activity. You should also make clear that the process of taking notes is separate from the process of providing feedback to the whole class.

Confirming understanding

This student is responsible for checking that each student in the group understands what is required at each stage of the task. At low levels of English ability, this might consist of asking a simple confirmation question, such as 'Do you understand?' If any student answers 'no', then the members of the group explain the task again. At higher levels of English ability, this role can be expanded to a short explanation of the process at the start of the task, with the student saying things such as 'First of all, we need to and then we should ...'. Finally, we have to agree on ...'. Is that clear to everyone? The student then makes sure that the group follows the correct task process.

One way of managing this process of assigning roles is to number students in each group, say, one to four. You might ask students to make a note of their number, or you might hand out cards you have prepared with the numbers 1–4 written on them. You can then display on the board the role you want all students with number 1 to perform, and so on. Another advantage of this system is that when it comes to students providing feedback on the task, you can inform students in advance that you will pick one of the numbers and get feedback from that person, rather than asking for volunteers from each group. This helps to address the issue of some students trying to 'hide' in groups, expecting others in the group to carry out the bulk of the work and to be responsible for providing feedback on the activity. Each student is more likely to engage with the task if they know that there's a chance they may be called on after the task.

The teacher's role during the activity is similar to the kind of monitoring role you would perform when the students are working in pairs. You move from group to group, noting something about the content of the interaction that you can praise the group for, such as innovative ideas or instances of good collaboration. This type of praise demonstrates to students that you are interested in their ideas and opinions, in addition to the language they use to express them. While monitoring, note any language points you want to cover after the task, paying particular attention to areas of difficulty that more than one group face. One difference from the process with pair work is that you should also monitor that all members of the groups are contributing to the task, gently prompting those who seem reticent by inviting their opinion or asking if they agree and then allowing the interaction to continue.

Outcomes

Ideally, there should always be a clear outcome to a group work activity. This may be a statement of a decision that the group has arrived at together, or it may be a presentation to the rest of the class. With relatively simple outcomes, you might quickly ask each group in turn to tell the whole class what conclusion they have arrived at. Another good option here is to mix groups to compare outcomes. Ask one person from each group to stand up (you can use the fact that students are numbered 1–4 at this point and ask all the number threes, say, to stand up) and to move to another group. That person then shares their group's conclusion and compares their ideas with those of the new group.

With anything more complicated, such as asking students to present to the whole class, make sure you allow time after the activity for the group to put their response together, to decide exactly how they're going to do it, and to assign roles themselves within the group. This phase of the lesson should be a little more subdued than the more lively group activity itself, helping to form a transition to a quieter, whole-class phase.

In conclusion

Group work activities develop students' collaboration and cooperation skills when they work together to achieve a common goal. Group work also aids retention of new language as students get to actively use new vocabulary and/or grammar structures in a meaningful context. These benefits lead to students becoming more confident in their use of English both inside and outside the classroom. Group work also usually motivates students to participate in class in ways that other tasks might not because it brings a welcome change of pace, a change of mode of interaction compared to listening and responding to the teacher, and a chance to work and interact with classmates.

Further reading

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

Kagan, Spencer and Miguel Kagan, *Kagan Cooperative Learning*, Revised Edn (Kagan Publishing, 2015)

Kagan, Spencer, Miguel Kagan and Laurie Kagan, *59 Kagan Structures: Proven Engagement Strategies* (Kagan Publishing, 2016)

Lightbown, Patsy M. and Nina Spada, *How Languages are Learned*, 2nd Edn. (Oxford University Press, 1999), Chapters 6 and 7.