

INTRODUCTION: Group Work

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Words that are both italicized and underlined are glossary items. These words can be found in the document named “Glossary: Common Terms.”

What is group work?

Group work is a student-centered way of teaching that emphasizes collaboration, cooperation, and teamwork. Rance-Roney (2010) describes group work as a classroom practice where “students work in teams to construct knowledge and accomplish tasks through collaborative interaction.” Sometimes teachers use groups to work on short activities in an informal way. However, a more formal structure to group work can provide many benefits for the students as well.

Why use group work?

Researchers have found that social support is important for learners to be successful in the classroom (Vygotsky, 1978). Working in groups allows students to be in an interactive environment. This interaction helps them to develop language and social skills. During group work, students are engaging with the task, increasing their confidence, and becoming responsible for their own learning (Sajedi, 2014). Working together is effective because students interact meaningfully in the target language and get helpful feedback from peers. Students develop “positive interdependence.” This means that they encourage and help each other by sharing ideas and knowledge to reach a common goal.

In many cases, group work can help you manage your classroom successfully regardless of class size or content. Group work creates an atmosphere that encourages successful behaviors. Working in groups engages students with others who may have different sets of language and social skills. Using smaller groups to meet classroom goals allows students to develop skills that are valuable in life and work, such as:

- talking about ideas
- justifying opinions
- collaborating with others
- building consensus
- handling conflict
- disagreeing politely

What if groups are noisy or arguing?

Students who are focused, engaged, and working collaboratively can seem noisy at times. Teachers should have clear expectations and assign student roles and responsibilities. There will still be noise, but this will be the positive noise of students completing meaningful learning tasks. In addition, some groups will experience conflict and disagreement with their members. Teachers can show ways to deal with conflict and help students learn to manage themselves. Remember that learning in groups mirrors real-life learning experiences outside of the classroom as well.

Group work takes thought and planning. However, even in large groups, if there is clear instruction, group work can be an extremely successful tool for engaging students in the classroom and helping them to remember key concepts.



How can I use group work in my classroom?

Organization is one of the most important features of effective group work. For group work to run smoothly, the teacher must plan carefully.

First, teachers should structure an early lesson to help students understand the elements of group work. The lesson should have four key components: a respectful and safe community of learners, communication skills for group work, strategies for dealing with conflict, and classroom expectations for working in groups. For group work to be effective, students need to understand the purpose and goals of the group task and the criteria for success.

Teachers should also plan tasks that promote learning and are meaningful and authentic. Small groups might practice for a larger whole class presentation. Each student could create a piece of information for their group that helps complete a learning task. Group members could discuss ideas related to a topic and decide on the top three ideas.

Types of groups

Groups can be made in different ways for different purposes. Sometimes a teacher might assign students to groups based on learner differences (see more about this in Module 3, Differentiating Instruction). At other times, the teacher might allow the students to select their own groups. There are no set rules, but here are some general questions to consider about grouping students:

- **How many students?** The research on this topic varies. Some experts recommend small groups with four to five students. Others say that somewhere between three and seven students is ideal. The number of students depends on the type of content and the learning objectives of the task. In addition, the number of students does not need to be the same in all groups. The teacher may decide that different students would benefit from interacting in different ways (Rance-Roney, 2010). Large or small, groups should provide equal opportunities for success among the members. This means that everyone has the chance to contribute and demonstrate knowledge and abilities.
- **Homogeneous or heterogeneous?** In other words, should the group members be the same in some ways or different? Again, this will be based on the learning setting and on the learners themselves. The choice often depends on the objective of the lesson. Some types of tasks work well when the students have different characteristics – different genders, abilities, skill levels, nationalities, and/or personalities. For example, a problem-solving activity benefits from different viewpoints. Other tasks might be more successful with group members who have similar characteristics. If you are doing a discussion activity, consider putting the quieter students together. They will feel more comfortable and have more opportunities to speak. Random grouping can also be useful sometimes. This can quickly be done by having students count off to the desired number of groups or even by using an online team generator.
- **Fixed or flexible?** Teachers can decide if they want the groups to have the same members over a period of time or change members each class or lesson that uses group work. In fixed groups, the members can develop relationships and trust that can benefit learning. On the other hand, using flexible groups allows students to get to know each other. This builds classroom community. Students also benefit from each other's strengths and see a wide variety of perspectives. Teachers can also choose to use a combination of fixed and flexible grouping in their classes (Rance-Roney, 2010).
- **Should group members have assigned roles?** Some teachers like to have specific roles for members in each group so expectations and student responsibilities are clear. Individual roles are not always necessary. For starting out, though, assigned roles can



provide valuable structure for group work. Roles can be assigned by the teacher or decided by the groups themselves. Roles can be consistent for the whole project or rotated among group members. Here are some ideas to start with for student roles:

- **Leader:** manages interaction in the group and keeps them on task.
- **Scribe/Note-taker:** writes down the important information related to the task (fills in a chart, completes the checklist, or takes notes).
- **Reporter:** gives results to the whole group or shares information as needed.
- **Time-keeper:** makes sure that the work is progressing on time and with enough time to finish.

Specific roles can be based on the type of task and number of students in the groups; for example, having someone monitor vocabulary might also be useful, or assigning someone to create a visual element.

A preparatory checklist for collaborative tasks

Have I determined or clarified...

- where the group experience fits into the overall curriculum?
- what the overall purpose is and what the learning goals are?
- whether the learning goals are sufficiently specific, clear, worthy, realistic, and achievable?
- the group activities and the schedule – are the activities meaningful and is there sufficient time to accomplish the goals?
- the planned group's size and mix of characteristics?
- who the learners are – their interests, strengths, and learning needs?
- what resources are needed for the session?
- the kind of leadership I need to provide?
- the learners' roles and responsibilities?
- how the decisions will be made in the group?
- how the learners will be evaluated?

Adapted from *Fostering Learning in Small Groups: A Practical Guide* by Jane Westberg & Hilliard Jason, Stanford University (1999)

Conclusion

These are just a few of the ideas for using groups in language classes. There are many ways to successfully bring group work into the classroom. While some teachers find the idea of group work intimidating, the benefits of having students work interactively far outweigh the drawbacks.

For more information

Kagan, S. (1995). We can talk: Cooperative learning in the ESL classroom. *ERIC Digest*. Retrieved from <http://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED382035>

This resource covers why group work is essential in a language class if teachers expect their students to develop communicative competence.

Kozar, O. (2010). Towards better group work: Seeing the difference between cooperation and collaboration. *English Teaching Forum*, 48(2), 16-23. Retrieved from http://americanenglish.state.gov/files/ae/resource_files/48_2-etf-towards-better-group-work-seeing-the-difference-between-cooperation-and-collaboration.pdf



This article defines the difference between cooperative and collaborative learning and gives specific examples of how to set up collaborative tasks in the English-language classroom.

Rhoades, G. (2013). Minimizing the chaos through cooperative classroom management. *English Teaching Forum*, 51(4), 28-34. Retrieved from http://americanenglish.state.gov/files/ae/resource_files/51_4_5_rhoades.pdf

This article provides practical tips for how to structure group work in large classes.

References

Rance-Roney, J.A. (2010). Reconceptualizing interactional groups: Grouping schemes for maximizing language learning. *English Teaching Forum*, 48(1), 20-26. Retrieved from http://americanenglish.state.gov/files/ae/resource_files/10-48-1-d.pdf

Sajedi, S.P. (2014). Collaborative summary writing and EFL students' L2 development. *Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 98, 1650-1657.

Stanford University. (1999, Winter). *Speaking of teaching*. Retrieved from <http://web.stanford.edu/dept/CTL/Newsletter/cooperative.pdf>

Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. (M. Cole, V. John-Steiner, S. Scribner, & E. Souberman, Eds. & Trans.). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

