


How should you sit and group students for the best learning results? This lesson will describe different ways of arranging students in your learning space and what roles the teacher plays within these different arrangements.

Task 1 – Seating arrangements



Look at the different seating arrangements a) to d) below. Which ones have you used as a teacher (or perhaps as a second language student)? Rank them in order from 1 = most preferred to 4 = least preferred. Then read the feedback on Task 1 below. 



a) Rows



b) Circle



c) Horseshoe



d) Islands

Task 1 Feedback



Your answers to this task will depend on past experience and personal choice. In many private English language learning contexts with smaller classes, 'the horseshoe' is a favourite seating arrangement. However, with larger groups 'islands' might be more manageable. Sometimes the institution you work for dictates the seating because the desks are permanently fixed to the floor. However, the key issue is more to do with how the students are grouped during specific activities, rather than how the furniture is arranged.

Key Skill

It is important for a teacher to think about how a room is arranged and how students will interact for different activities. It is useful if a teacher thinks through these arrangements when they are planning their lessons.

Task 2 – Patterns and activities



Numbers 1 to 7 below show pictures of different interaction patterns. Letters a to g give the names of the patterns. Numbers i to vii describe typical activities associated with one of the patterns. Match the pictures to the names and activities.

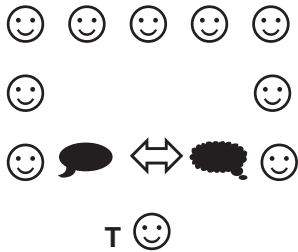
1.



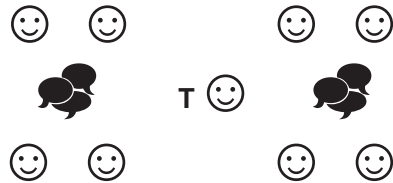
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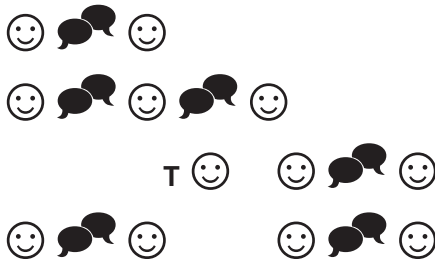
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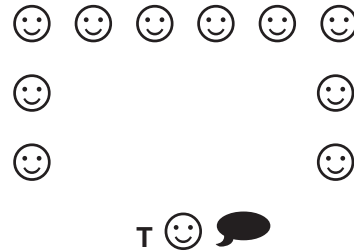
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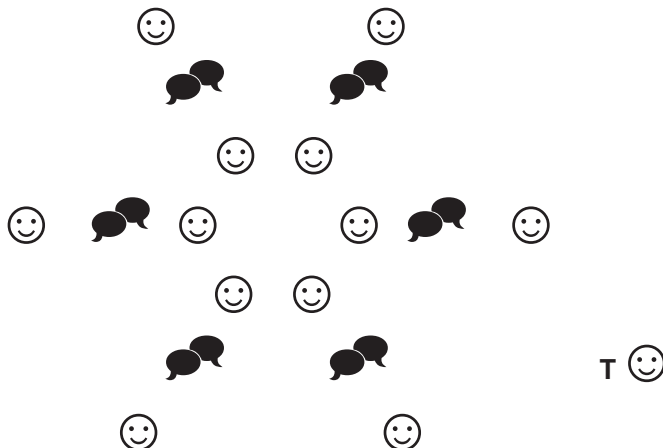
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6.



7.



Names of patterns	
a. open pair	b. teacher-fronted plenary
c. group work	d. student working alone
e. closed pair	f. onion ring
g. mingle	

Activities

- i. controlled oral practice of a four-line dialogue.
- ii. discussion on a news topic – different students present their point of view.
- iii. multiple role play – students assume different roles with different students.
- iv. survey on free time activity – students find out information from others.
- v. written grammar practice task.
- vi. students check their answers to a listening task with each other.
- vii. teacher conducts feedback on a reading task.

Check your ideas in the answer key. 

Key Skill

In task 2 there are lots of examples of student-centred interaction. These are only examples and some activities could use different interaction patterns. For example, the discussion could be done by closed pairs and the multiple role play could use a mingle interaction.

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Student interaction and teacher roles: Unit 1 b)

Task 3 – What’s the teacher doing?



Using the same interaction patterns from task 2, decide on which two roles a teacher has for each activity from the list a to d below. Then match the teacher activity i to vii to the interaction patterns and teacher roles.

Teacher roles

- | | |
|---------------|----------------|
| a. controller | b. evaluator |
| c. informer | d. facilitator |

Teacher activity

- i. Monitor closely and help students with language.
- ii. Keep students moving around so that everyone has a partner.
- iii. Nominate who should answer a question.
- iv. Time interaction and tell students when to change partner.
- v. Monitor at a distance and make a note of errors.
- vi. Nominate who should speak.
- vii. Monitor closely and point out mistakes.

Interaction patterns	Teacher roles	Teacher activity
open pairs		
teacher-fronted plenary		
group work		
student working alone		
closed pairs		
onion ring		
mingle		
open pairs		

Check your ideas in the answer key.

Key Skill

During student-centred interaction, the teacher plays two key roles: facilitator (making sure the students are able to speak) and evaluator (assessing students' progress with the task and also assessing the language they are producing). How closely you monitor depends on the nature of the activity and the strengths and weaknesses of your students.

Task 4 – What are the issues?



Numbers 1 to 10 below describe criticisms that teachers can have of student-centred interaction (pairs, groups, mingles). Letters a to j are replies to these criticism. Match the criticism to the replies.

Criticisms	Replies
1. Students make too much noise when they are all speaking at once.	
2. The desks in my room are screwed to the floor, so it is difficult for students to form pairs and groups.	
3. Often when students work in pairs, they don't like the person they have to work with.	
4. Students aren't used to working in this way. They will find it strange.	
5. I worry that students don't really learn any grammar or vocabulary when they are just chatting in pairs.	
6. Some pairs finish before others and just sit there.	
7. I feel like I am losing control of the class when students are in pairs or groups.	
8. Weak students often find pair work hard because they are not sure what they are meant to be doing.	
9. I can't hear everything students are saying so that I can correct them.	
10. Students will revert back to using their first language when I put them together.	

Replies

- a. Sometimes it is a good idea just to let students speak and not worry about mistakes. This will help them develop some degree of fluency.
- b. Students also need to develop speaking skills and this kind of interaction can help them to learn to speak.
- c. This means you need to help those students first when you are monitoring.
- d. Even if you can't move the furniture, you can always move the students.
- e. This may happen so you will need to reinforce the importance of using English and check that students are doing so when you monitor.
- f. That's true to some extent, but at least this means they are producing language.
- g. This doesn't need to happen if you monitor pair and group work actively and attentively.
- h. If that's the case, you should keep students moving around so they work with different students for each activity.
- i. If this often happens, you should plan an extra activity that will keep these students occupied until the others have finished.
- j. In this case, you should introduce new kinds of interaction patterns gradually. Also let your students know why you are doing this and what benefit they can gain from it.

Check your ideas in the answer key. 

Thinking about your teaching ...

Do you feel your classroom is student-centred enough? Over a period of about five lessons, try keeping a record of how much time is spent on teacher-fronted interaction and how much time is spent on student-centred interaction. If you feel the percentage of teacher-centred interaction is too high, think about which activities could include a greater amount student-centred focus.

Keep a record of your findings in your *Teaching log*.

Taking it to the classroom ...

Are you familiar with all the interaction patterns in task 2? Try experimenting with some of them. For example, role plays are traditionally done in pairs. However, for variation, it might be interesting to try an onion ring role play exercise. Students could perform their role with three or four other students as they move around the onion ring. You will need to set a time limit for each interaction.

Want to find out more ... ?

On pages 108 - 111 of *The Practice of English Language Teaching (4th edition)* by Jeremy Harmer (Pearson 2007), there is further reading on different teacher roles.

On pages 84 - 90 of *Learning Teaching (2nd edition)* by Jim Scrivener (Macmillan 2005), there is further reading on classroom interaction and seating options.

See also section 1 of *Language Teaching Classroom Practice DVD & Workbook* by Heather Richards and Karen Wise (AUT University 2007).

Related TaskBook lessons...

You may be interested in the following lessons in the ESOL Teaching Skills TaskBook series, relating to this topic:

- **Unit 1 a) Classroom dynamics:** Includes discussion and tasks on how the physical classroom environment can have a positive effect on classroom dynamics.

Answer Key



Task 2 – Feedback

1. d and v
2. a and vi
3. e and i
4. c and ii
5. g and iv
6. b and vii
7. f and iii

Task 3 – Feedback

Interaction	Teacher roles	Teacher activity
open pairs	controller, evaluator	vi. Nominate who should speak.
teacher-fronted plenary	informer, evaluator	iii. Nominate who should answer a question.
group work	facilitator, evaluator	v. Monitor at a distance and make a note of errors
student working alone	informer, evaluator	vii. Monitor closely and point out mistakes
closed pairs	facilitator, evaluator	i. Monitor closely and help students with language
onion ring	facilitator, evaluator	iv. Time interaction and tell students when to change.
mingle	facilitator, evaluator	ii. Keep students moving around so that everyone has a partner.

Task 4 – Feedback

1. f
2. d
3. h
4. j
5. b
6. i
7. g
8. c
9. a
10. e

ESOL Teaching Skills TaskBook

Student interaction and teacher roles: Unit 1 b)
