



Creative Grouping

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I often work with student teachers who are excited about having the students they teach carry out communicative activities in pairs or small groups. Yet when the time comes to set up the activity, they often ask, "How should I pair up the students?"

In my classes, the students do not have assigned seats, so they often sit next to their friends. For this reason, I advise student teachers not to pair students with their neighbors unless there is not enough time left in the class to move them around before doing the activity. Below are some additional tips that I give student teachers about forming effective pairs and groups.

General Tips for Pairing and Grouping Students

1. Just as it is better to avoid having good friends work together, it is also better not to assign students who obviously do not get along to work together often.
2. Having students make their own groups often does not work well for several reasons. Students regularly choose to work with their friends. In addition, students who are not immediately asked to join a group may find themselves in an awkward position. Johnson, Johnson, and Holubec (1990) suggest letting students make a list of classmates they would like to work with, and then the teacher can choose one of those students to be in the same group.
3. If a group will be working together over a period of time on a project, teachers should consider forming groups with students of different levels of proficiency, for example one high proficiency student, one low, and two of intermediate proficiency. It is also wise to consider students' attendance records when grouping for long-term projects (Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec, 1990).
4. It is good to group students with similar ability for certain activities such as proofreading written assignments together.
5. Personality should be taken into consideration when forming groups for activities like debates where a balance of outgoing and quiet personalities on each team can result in a more successful activity.
6. When neither skill nor personality needs to be considered in matching students, grouping can be done randomly by having the students count off. Determine how many students you have in the class that day and how many students you want in a

group. For example, if you have 30 students and want three students in a group, you need ten groups. Students should count off to ten. All the students who said “one” form a group and so on.

Additional Activities for Forming Random Pairs/Groups

Using Names

This way of grouping works especially well in the beginning of the term when students do not know one another well. Have students line up in alphabetical order according to their first or given names. They should do this by asking one another *What is your first name?* Once the line is formed, have the students introduce themselves to the whole class to see if they are indeed in alphabetical order. Pairs or groups are formed with neighbors in the line.

Using Birthdays

Have students line up according to the month and day of their birthdays. They should ask one another, “When’s your birthday?” To check if the line is in order, ask the students to name their birthdays. Pairs or groups are formed with neighbors in the line.

Using Personal Information

Ask the students to line up according to their answer to a specific question that calls for numeric information, for example: What time did you go to bed last night? This technique can be used to review previously taught expressions or structures. Again, students form pairs or groups with their neighbors in the line.

Using Vocabulary

Make cards with recently studied vocabulary. Put the word(s) on one card and a definition or synonym on another one. Distribute these randomly. Ask the students to mingle and say, “I have _____. Do you have a definition/synonym that matches?” When they find the person who has the match, they have found their partner.

Using Playing Cards.

To pair or group students, pass out playing cards. Students can be paired or grouped based on the numbers or suits on their cards. For example, all the students who have cards with the number 4 work together, or all the students with hearts work together. Students enjoy this activity, but in order to ensure everyone has a partner or that groups are the same size, the teacher must carefully choose the right subset of playing cards before passing them out.

Using Pictures

Find a number of magazine pictures equal to the number of groups you want. Then cut up each picture into the number of members you want in each group. Randomly pass out all of the pieces. Have students form groups by finding the people who have the other

pieces of their picture puzzles. More advanced students can be asked to find each other by describing what is on their piece of the puzzle without showing it.

Using Candy

Buy as many kinds of candy as the number of groups you want. For example, if you want five groups with four people in each group, put four pieces of five different kinds of candy in a bag. Students choose a piece of candy without looking. Those with the same kind of candy work in a group.

Using Strings

To randomly pair students, cut 45 centimeter lengths of string—half as many pieces as the number of students you have. Grasp the stings in the middle and ask students to gather around you. Each student should take the end of a string. Tell them not to let go of their string as you open your fist. Students holding opposite ends of the same string are partners.

Extension Activities

Depending on your curriculum and the goals of your lesson, you may want to use random pairing/grouping activities as a lead in for additional other communicative activities. Each of the following activities extends one of the pairing/grouping activities described above.

- *Using names.* Ask the students to discuss the following questions: Why did your parents give you this name? Do you like your name? Why or why not? Do you have nicknames that your family or friends call you? How did you get your nickname? Do you remember peoples' names easily? How do you feel when someone has forgotten your name?
- *Using birthdays.* Have students tell or write a story about the best birthday they or a family member has ever had.
- *Using personal information.* Ask your students to discuss the following questions: Do you usually go to bed at the time you said today? What time do you usually get up? Do you snore? Talk in your sleep? Sleep walk? Do you work better in the morning, the afternoon, or the evening? What would you like to change about your typical day?
- *Using vocabulary.* When students find their partner, they should try to make several sentences that exemplify uses of the new vocabulary word. Then the members of the class can take turns sharing their model sentences while classmates listen for and identify the new vocabulary.
- *Using playing cards.* Introduce vocabulary for playing a card game including the names of the suits and phrases like *a deck of cards, a suit, to shuffle, to deal, to draw a card from the pile, to discard a card, to turn a card over, and It's your turn.*

Next, teach the students a simple card game. Finally, have them use the key vocabulary while playing the game.

- *Using pictures.* Once students find their group members by matching picture pieces, they can work together to create an oral or written story based on the picture.
- *Using candy.* Brainstorm a list of questions related to candy with your students or bring a prepared list to class. Some examples are: Do you have a sweet tooth? What is your favorite sweet thing to eat? What kind of candy do you eat most often? Give each pair of students one question and a list of their classmates' names. Then have them survey their classmates asking their question. With their partners, they report their findings to the whole class. Learning to make, use, and explain information in a chart or graph to do this activity works well.
- *Strings.* Show students the differences among string, thread, yarn, twine, and rope. Teach the following idioms: *to string someone along*, *no strings attached*, and *to be at the end of your rope*. Give students a chance to try using these idioms in sentences.

Conclusion

One of the first steps in setting up a classroom task is determining who will work together. Keeping some general guidelines in mind when grouping students can help ensure the success of an activity. Moreover, creative grouping can help build positive group dynamics by enabling your students to work with and to get to know all their classmates. The possibilities for random creative grouping are numerous. Ask yourself what the topic of your next lesson is and how can you use that topic to generate a way to group your students. If desirable, think of follow up activities that will give further practice with the topic. Let your imagination guide you in developing your own grouping techniques to complement the lessons you teach.

References

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About the Author

Sally La Luzerne-Oi has taught French, Spanish, and English for over 30 years. Her professional interests include the teaching of speaking and listening, curriculum and materials design, and professional development.

