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# Using Small Group Work in the English Language Classroom\*

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Small group work, which we take to include pair work, is often a misunderstood, misused, and mismanaged form of interaction in the language classroom. Though many language teachers may have tried using this technique, many of them may have also given it up altogether due to practical problems. Or, perhaps, because the small group work activities they tried before never really took off. On the other hand, there are some teachers who do use small group work without really knowing why, except that it makes them appear up-to-date with "new" trends in English language teaching. Who would want to be called "out-of-date"?

## The Voices of Experience

What story does your experience of small group work tell you? See if your experience is similar to any of those expressed in the statements listed below (adapted from Buckley, 1982).

1. I have to teach my students the language, i.e. grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation. They can't learn that in groups!
2. I found pair work and group work too complicated to use with large classes (e.g., 50 or more students).
3. Small group work is too time-consuming.
4. I need to be able to correct my students. I won't be able to do that if the students are in groups!
5. When I tried out group work, the students made so much noise the teacher next door complained.
6. The students couldn't understand what they were supposed to do.
7. The students just didn't want to work with each other.

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8. The students simply spent time talking just about anything other than working on the group task.
9. The group activity went on too long and the students dried up.
10. The students kept on talking in the vernacular while doing group work in their English class.

If you resonate with many of the statements above, welcome to the club! But this is no reason to despair! The good news is, although there are many practical problems in the use of small group work, most of these problems can be overcome. In addition, the advantages of small group work in the language classroom far outweigh the practical difficulties it presents.

### **Our Bias**

This paper will argue for the use of small group work as a means of maximising learning in the English language classroom. It can be used with the majority of areas and skills involved in English teaching. More importantly, small group work is an ideal way of providing the freedom students need in learning and of helping students help themselves to learn.

To be able to maximize the use of small group work, it is important to understand the "why" of small group work. Why do we use small group work in particular activities in our class? What principles will help us decide when to use pair or small group work and not whole class activity? Is there a framework which can guide teachers in choosing a particular form of classroom interaction? If the "why" is clear to us, the practical problems become easier to solve. In this paper we will also look at the "how" of small group work. How do we overcome the logistical difficulties in using small group work? How do we manage pair work or small group work?

### **The "Why" of Small Group Work**

When we advocate the use of small group work, we do not mean that we are asking for anyone to do away with whole class work. It would be asking for the impossible! But to help us understand the "why" of small group work, it would be good to recognize the advantages and disadvantages of whole class work. Let us look at a list of uses and limitations of whole class interaction drawn up by a group of teachers in one of our seminars:

#### **Advantages**

Time saving

Achieves immediate results

#### **Disadvantages**

Less student participation

A few students dominate discussion

Easier to manage class	“Slow” students are neglected
Students receive uniform instruction	Teacher dominates
Less effort in preparation	The set-up is less personal
Classroom logistics is easier to handle	Difficult to differentiate students’ abilities
Expected by students	Less affective
Preparatory step before group work	Mistake correction becomes a teacher’s ordeal
	Reduced quantity and quality of learning
	Less freedom for learning

As we can see from the list, there are many benefits in using whole class work. In **such** type of interaction, the teacher can make sure that everybody in class gets the same **information** he or she wants to get across. Hence, learning is more controlled. There **are** certain activities in which whole class work is indispensable (e.g., giving **instructions** before group work). In other situations, a teacher often resorts to whole class work **when** things have to be finished within a limited amount of time.

While control is the main strength of this mode of classroom interaction, it is also **its** main limitation. It limits students’ freedom and creativity. If whole class work is **used** always in the classroom, or if it is the only mode of interaction used, it will **seriously** stunt the language learning of students. At the early stages of the lesson, control **is** important (e.g., to make sure students are getting uniform instruction), but the teacher **should** learn to slowly relinquish the responsibilities of learning to whom they really **belong; the learners**.

### Making the Right Choice

What we need, therefore, is a judicious choice of form of classroom set-up or organization. When do we use whole class interaction or small group work? What principle can **guide** us in deciding on the appropriate class interaction for specific activities in our lesson?

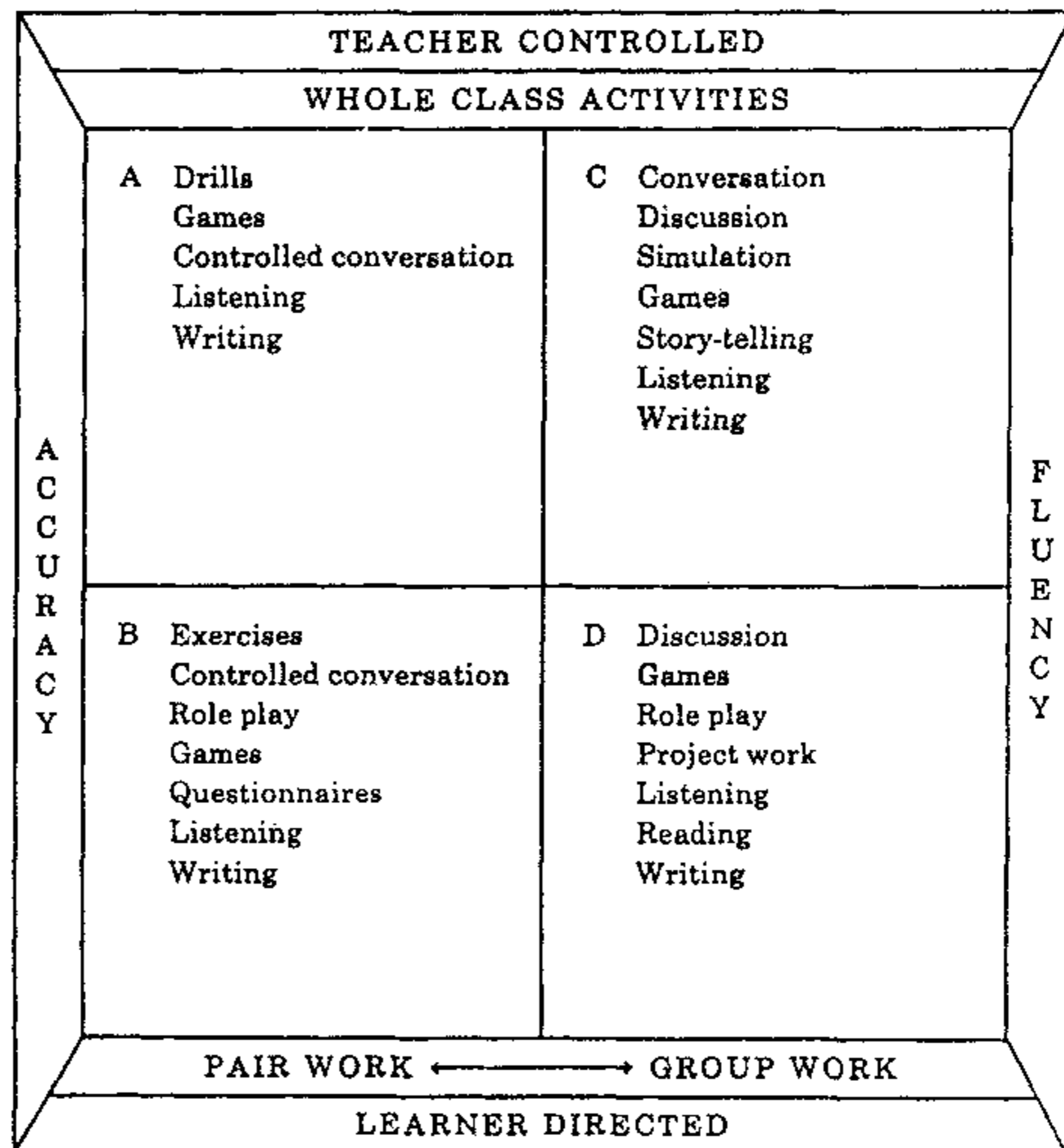
Byrne (1995) offers a framework which can help us, teachers, in deciding on the **appropriate** kind of classroom interaction (whole class or pair and group work) or on the **appropriate** combination of these kinds of interaction, depending on our main activity **objective**. The key here is *the main objective of the phase of the language lesson*. What **is** our goal? Accuracy or fluency?

Accuracy activities are meant to make sure that students get enough practice in a particular grammar point or vocabulary or pronunciation. The objective is to get students to practice a certain language point accurately. This comprises the “practice” stage of a lesson. Fluency activities, on the other hand, are meant to give students opportunity to *use* the language points they have learned. The objective of these activities is for students to use the language freely, even if they make mistakes. These activities comprise what we call the “production” part of the lesson.

In actual teaching situations, we will need to provide opportunities for both accuracy and fluency work. It is our responsibility as language teachers to determine the appropriate class organization (whole class, pair work, and group work) to be able to achieve the goal of the lesson phase (accuracy or fluency) in such a way that students will be cognitively challenged and affectively involved. Let us look at Byrne’s (1995) framework (see Fig. 1).

**Figure 1**

Byrne’s Framework (Summary of Activities)



There are four areas of interaction in this model:

A. *Accuracy activities* - controlled by the teacher and done with the whole class. Drills and most traditional language games are examples of activities of this kind. They are easy to do with the whole class (perhaps divided into teams, though) and they are usually intended to practice specific bits of language other activities can take the form of controlled conversation, listening, and writing.

B. *Accuracy activities* - directed by the learners and done in pairs (or occasionally in groups). Mini-dialogue practice is one form of this activity. The students work in pairs, using a model provided by the teacher. The dialogue is intended to provide practice in grammar and vocabulary. The students can vary the dialogue or even go on to change it altogether. Other activities in this form of interaction are: role play, games, questionnaires, listening, writing.

C. *Fluency activities* - controlled by the teacher and done with the whole class. One form of this is a class discussion where the teacher does only *some* of the talking and students do most of it, expressing their own ideas, interacting with one another. If this student participation doesn't take place, it would be better for the teacher to allow the students to do this activity in groups. Other activities of this type can take the form of story-telling, simulation, games, listening, writing.

D. *Fluency activities* - directed by the learners and done in groups (or occasionally in pairs). These are activities which encourage students to use the target language freely (e.g., discussion, games, role-play, project work, listening, reading and writing).

The overall point, thus, is that the classroom format should be varied to suit the stage in the learning process which is at hand. Sometimes whole class work will be the most appropriate form, but there will also be numerous other occasions when students will need the greater freedom and responsibility that can only be achieved through pair or small group work.

### Sampling the Choices

To understand more concretely what we have discussed so far, let us take a look at a segment of a lesson on the topic of "leadership." The main objective of this phase of the lesson is *fluency*, production using the language points taught in the lesson: asking WH-questions and responding to such questions.

In Stage 1 of the lesson, the teacher is preparing the class for the small group work that will follow by reviewing both the information and the language structures the students will need in their production. In the second half of Stage 1, there is a bit of lan-

guage practice. (This type of activity belongs to Byrne's Quadrant A: accuracy activities controlled by the teacher and done with the whole class). This whole class activity is also for the purpose of giving the students uniform instructions for their group work

### Stage 1 Whole Class Work

*Remember yesterday's lesson on leadership:*

- *what kind of seminars have you attended?*
- *what happens during a seminar?*
- *look at Activity 10. Read through the schedule*

#### **Activity 10**

*Here is a schedule of the first day of the leadership seminar.*

#### Friday, September 19

<i>8:00-9:00a.m.</i>	<i>Registration of Delegates</i>
<i>9:00-10:00</i>	<i>Opening Session</i>
<i>1. Welcome</i>	<i>Dr. Maximiano Pulan</i> <i>Mayor of Tagaytay City</i>
<i>2. Objectives &amp; Procedures:</i>	<i>Dr. Jossie Lacson</i> <i>Seminar Director</i>
<i>10:00-10:30</i>	<i>Break</i>
<i>10:30-12:00</i>	<i>Lecture: "What is a Good Teacher"</i> <i>Dr. Vicky Calderon</i> <i>Open Forum</i>
<i>12:00-1:00p.m.</i>	<i>Lunch</i>
<i>1:00-2:30pm</i>	<i>Lecture: "The Need for Good Leaders"</i> <i>Dr. Tess Catamora</i> <i>Open Forum</i>
<i>2:30-3:00</i>	<i>Break</i>
<i>3:00-5:00</i>	<i>Workshop</i>

*Teacher:* Last week, we studied WH-Questions and short responses.

- *Ask a WH-Q. to get info. Look at examples on p. 91: When did the seminar start? What time did you register?*
- *Other questions (and answers) e.g. Who will give opening remarks? etc. → answer*
- *Anything in the schedule you don't understand → e.g. "workshop"?*
- *Anything else → "where? → Tagaytay (have clue)*

The use of small group work in Stage 2 allows room for students' creativity. Designing their own seminars can be fun—cognitively and affectively involving—for the students. The use of pair work in Stage 3 further devolves "ownership" of the learning activity to the learner. Each student has the responsibility to gather information from, as well as disseminate information to, his/her partner. These types of activities belong to quadrant D (fluency activities directed by the learners and done in groups [or occasionally in pairs]) in Byrne's model of classroom interaction.

## **Stage 2 Small Group Work (groups of 5 or 6)**

*What does a seminar schedule contain?*

- *times*
- *activity/topics*
- *dates/day*
- *speakers/persons*
- *place*

*Each group will make their own schedule for a one (or half) day seminary → 10 minutes to make own schedule. Write names and schedule on sheet of note-paper. Teacher asks students to make the topic something their classmates are likely to be interested in. Each member of the group is instructed to make a copy of the group's schedule.*

## **Stage 3 Pair Work**

*Work in pairs with members of another group to exchange information about each others' schedules. But do not show your partner yours. He/she should find it out, by asking Qs. Decide which member of the pair will ask first. Write down the partner's schedule. Have 2-3 mins. each way → swap over.*

*Then form into your groups again and re-construct the other group's schedule together.*

Stage 4 of the lesson ends with whole class discussion to synthesize the learning from the “free communication activity.” Here the teacher directs the discussion to encourage the students to freely express their opinion on and evaluation of the seminars designed by the different groups (Quadrant C).

#### **Stage 4 Small Group Work → Whole Class Work**

- *Write other group's schedule on manila paper and own schedule on piece of paper*
- *Post the other group's schedule and put your group's piece of paper with your own schedule on beside the copy of it done by the other group.*
- *Mill around to view the posters etc.*

*Which groups got it right? → analysis/diagnosis. etc.*

*Which seminar would you attend and why?*

In summary, we can see that the teacher in this phase of the lesson on leadership chose to use mainly small group work because it would allow the students the freedom and sense of responsibility for their own learning. The main objective of this part of the lesson is production; the “ownership” by the students of the information and language processed in the lesson.

### **The “How” of Small Group Work**

After choosing small group work as an appropriate form of interaction for a certain activity, the next big question that the teacher faces is: How do I deal with the logistics of setting it up?

The following guidelines might be helpful in considering answers to this question (cf. Nolasco and Arthur, 1995):

#### **Stage instructions for the learners**

We know from our own experience that vaguely worded or unfocused instructions are a major source of chaos in the classroom. This problem is more palpably felt in large classes, which is more the rule than the exception in the secondary and tertiary level institutions around the world. Appropriate instructions play a vital role in setting up the learners to accomplish the given task. Staging instructions has to do with giving them



piecemeal, or in stages, as it were, so that the learners are not confused about what they need to carry out.

### **Demonstrate the task when necessary**

Learners sometimes do not fully grasp all instructions, especially if their minds are racing ahead wondering how to accomplish what for them may be a potentially complex task. The teacher can then demonstrate part of the instructions (e.g. doing the first few tasks either with the learners or for the learners), to offset their anxiety.

### **Speak Clearly**

It's a rule of thumb in theater to project oneself to the farthest person in the hall. The same holds true in the classroom. Our audience are our students, so we must ensure that our voice and pronunciation are clear. (As a guiding principle, we can project our voice by pushing in our diaphragm; this requires muscle work). The secret here is not volume of the voice but intensity.

### **Put instructions in a logical order**

From a cognitive standpoint, a teacher can stage the instructions for the learners so that they progress from simple to complex. In other words, the level of difficulty progresses with the instructions and activities.

### **Use simple, direct statements**

We want our students to go from point A to B in the simplest way. We surely hope we would not want to sound like this: "Consider the ramifications of the nuclear issue and congregate in groups to ruminate on this matter - you have 15 minutes to do this!" If we do, we will be answerable to the confusion that is bound to follow. Compare it with the following, however. "First, form into groups of five. Second, share your opinions on the advantages and disadvantages of nuclear energy. Third, make a graphic presentation on a poster paper of what your group has finally concluded to be the number one advantage and the number one disadvantage of nuclear energy. Fourth, be ready to report about your work in class."

### **Write legibly on the board**

In order to help our students remember our instructions, it is not enough for us to give them orally. Writing them legibly on the board will also help them visualize the process better. While they are doing their tasks in the small groups, they can always check against the written instructions to see if they are following the recommended steps in the process.

### **Use language suited to the level of knowledge of the learners**

Each discipline has its own jargon. The jargon that we learn in graduate school will definitely not be understood by our high school students. Our challenge is to explain the same idea using a language that is suited to the level of knowledge of the learners.

In managing group work itself, there is also a need to train students to get used to:

- *starting at the teacher's signal*

In the same way that motorists are alert to the changing signals of a traffic light, so our students should also be alert to our signals (e.g., raising our hands to indicate that a task is about to begin, or saying "begin!").

- *stopping when told to stop*

Many teachers tend to be "hyper" in class, employing much body language and theatrical poses. We need not lose our voices trying to shout over the din; we can exude a firmness that will be unconsciously picked up by the students. There's no need to holler, "Stop! Attention! Attention!" Without losing our composure and temper, we can say in a normal tone of voice, "Let's go back to our seats now."

- *working with each other with the noise level down*

Before the start of an activity, we can tell the learners to speak in a normal, conversational tone, or one that does not exceed the sound level of the person next to them. The teacher can demonstrate the ideal and appropriate volume level to be used in the group discussions. Or the teacher can write a sound gauge on the board and direct the students to look at the board once in a while to check if they are still within the acceptable decibel level for that activity.

- *listening carefully to instructions*

Here is where teacher support comes in. As we give them the instructions, we can have the students echo the instructions back to us to check for understanding of the tasks.

- *moving into and out of groups quickly*

Again, this requires much time to develop. But if we are consistent throughout the year in reminding the students to be snappy and alert in the classroom, by year's end, we will see a very efficient set of students moving quickly and quietly around the room! These practical tips, we hope, are helpful reminders to us teachers to minimize our anxiety about making sure that our small group activities work to the great advantage of our learners and ourselves.

## Conclusion

There are two important points that we need to stress from the preceding discussion. First, that using small group work is more than just a matter of dividing the class into groups of either two, three, or five, as the case may be. Secondly, that although small group work is desirable, it can be a deterrent to learning if not used appropriately. Is it whole class activity or small group work? The choice lies in our hands but the evaluation of that choice will rest on how well we have empowered our students to own their learning.

## References

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