

“Get into Groups” Made More Efficient and Effective

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### *Introduction*

With pair and group work a staple in ESL/EFL classes, teachers need good ways to get students into groups. This article describes a variety of techniques that are appropriate for different student populations and amounts of time available, that can be integrated with teaching points, and that are both fun and efficient.

When we want students to work in groups, we usually simply say, “Get into groups,” letting students cluster with their friends, or wander around. The purpose of this article is to present group formation techniques that can accomplish the desired grouping efficiently, but also accomplish other pedagogical objectives such as breaking up cliques or first language monopolies, creating variety in activities, waking students up, and giving students additional opportunities to listen to or use language. I have developed these assuming that the instructor has a group activity in mind which students will do once they have found their partner or formed their group. However, they can also be used on their own as stand alone activities.

### *Find your partner*

Many classroom activities involve students working in pairs. Matching cards are a good way to get students working two-by two. Give one of the pairs of cards to each student, and instruct students to walk around, speak, and find the person who belongs with them. Below are examples of possible matching card themes:

- Vocabulary item and picture
- Vocabulary item and definition
- Dates and holidays
- Famous people and what they are known for

- Famous landmarks and their locations
- Newspaper headlines and articles
- Twins: two exact same pictures (perfect way to use duplicate catalogs)
- Question and answer
- Beginning of proverb and ending

Thus, students might walk around saying, “I have U.S. Independence Day. Who has July 4?” or “What is the holiday on the second Monday in May?” If you have a lot of students, create several sets, and put them on different colored cards to keep them separate (20 green, 20 yellow, 20 blue, etc.). Many of these suggestions can be expanded to create groups of more than two. For example, the cards could be vocabulary clusters—three words related to health, three words related to banking, etc., or you could add cards with an item associated with the holiday to the holiday and date cards.

### *Jigsaw puzzle pictures*

A good way to get students into groups of four, to appeal to the visual learners in your class, and to get students using language, is to create jigsaw puzzle pictures. First choose large pictures from magazines, paste them onto cardstock, and cut them into four curvy shaped pieces. In class, give each student a piece. By describing (not showing!) their piece of the picture to their classmates, students find the others who belong with them to make up the whole picture.

As you are choosing the pictures and as you are cutting the lines to divide up the pictures, consider the language proficiency needed to describe them and needed to differentiate pieces belonging to one picture from another. For example, you could

anticipate students saying, “There is a man’s head in my picture. He is wearing a white shirt. Does anyone have a man in a white shirt?” You can create sets of jigsaw pictures related to the themes you are studying, for example families, occupations, or sports. (A variation is assembling cut-up comic strips.)

One challenge with any activity like this is that some groups get together faster than others. Optional activities to occupy the fast students while slower students keep looking for each other include writing a description of what is happening in the picture, preparing to act out what the people in the picture are saying to each other, or using a dictionary to look up vocabulary to describe something in the picture.

*Variety in grouping - regrouping multiple times*

Sometimes teachers want students to get into different groups over the course of a class period. For example, if students are giving a one-minute speech and need to practice several times, it is more authentic to practice with an audience, and more meaningful to have a different audience each time. Students can discuss the same or different questions with different classmates, or they can simply enjoy variety in interaction. Cards that have numbers, letters, and symbols are a way this can be accomplished efficiently. Students are first directed to group with everyone who shares their number. After some minutes tell them move to meet with those who have the same letter. Finally they find those with the same symbol.

To make the cards, put letters in vertical columns, numbers in horizontal rows, and symbols on the diagonal. Figure 1 shows a model for a set of cards to accomplish

this in a class of 16 students. These cards allow for three rounds of four groups of four students. (Additional models are found in the appendix.) Use a set that has the same or slightly fewer cards than the number of students in your class. Students without a card can either join any group or they can act as “English monitors” and go from group to group ensuring instructions are being followed.

*Figure 1. Model cards for 4 groups of 4 students in 3 rounds*

A 1 ●	B 1 △	C 1 ■	D 1 ◆
A 2 ◆	B 2 ●	C 2 △	D 2 ■
A 3 ■	B 3 ◆	C 3 ●	D 3 △
A 4 △	B 4 ■	C 4 ◆	D 4 ●

### *Heterogeneous classes*

Frequently teachers of heterogeneous classes want to either mix up or group students according to their first language or their proficiency. (Other factors to be considered in grouping would be grade level in a K-12 ESL context or future major in an academic IEP.) One way to do this is to create individual cards for each student by writing their name on a 3 x 5 card. Put a colored dot on the card to indicate language background, that is, all Korean speakers get a red dot, all Spanish speakers get a blue dot, etc. Put some other kind of symbol on the card to indicate proficiency, e.g., a star for beginners and a square for intermediates. Students pick up their cards at the beginning of class and return them at the end. During class you can put people into different types of

groups by saying, “Everyone who has a blue dot, find two other people each with a different color to be in your group,” or “Get into pairs of star and square together” or “Get into groups—all the stars together, all the squares together.”

If it is impractical to create name cards in advance, you can do something similar as students are walking into the room. Have stacks of different colored cards and hand students a card for their language background at the beginning of class. A second set of cards for proficiency can also be distributed. If you are too busy to stand by the door greeting students, designate a student do this or just ask students to pick up the right card from the stacks themselves.

(You can use 3 x 5 cards with students’ names on them for random grouping too. Just shuffle the cards, and if you want four in a group, peel off four cards and call out their names; do the same with the next four, and so on. )

*No preparation needed*

For those situations where you are not able to prepare cards or other materials in advance, here are some more ideas. These are especially good if the class needs a little physical activity to wake up and if you have a little time to spare.

Have students line up in order of height. This enables students to practice phrases like “you are taller than I am” or “he is shorter than she is.” Divide students into groups either with the four tallest, the next tallest, and so on, or with the shortest plus the tallest.

Another technique is to divide students according to their birthdays. This is a good listening exercise. Tell the students, “Everyone whose birthday is between

January and June move to this side of the room and those in July through December go on the other side.” You can continue directing January through March to go up front with April through June heading to the back and so on. If there are enough students, each month can form its own cluster.

Students can also be divided according to their clothes, for example, those wearing a uniform and those not; those wearing athletic shoes, flip flops, and so on; and those wearing red, blue, orange, etc.

Finally, for a treat, offer students candy from a basket at the beginning of class. Everyone who chose tootsie rolls are in one group, chocolate kisses in another, butterscotch in a third, and so on. Make sure the number of candies you start with is the total number of students likely to be in class, divided evenly into as many different types of candy as you want groups.

### *Conclusion*

These grouping strategies can enable your following group activity to be more effective because you have thought about whether students should be grouped purposefully or randomly and you have been able to accomplish that. But they can accomplish other objectives as well—from enhancing class with a speaking or listening task to adding an element of fun.

Appendix

<p><b>9 students:</b> 3 groups of 3, 3 rounds</p> <table border="1" data-bbox="289 485 524 705"> <tr><td>A 1</td><td>B 1</td><td>C 1</td></tr> <tr><td>●</td><td>△</td><td>■</td></tr> <tr><td>A 2</td><td>B 2</td><td>C 2</td></tr> <tr><td>■</td><td>●</td><td>△</td></tr> <tr><td>A 3</td><td>B 3</td><td>C 3</td></tr> <tr><td>△</td><td>■</td><td>●</td></tr> </table> <p><b>18 students:</b> use two sets of 9, on different colored paper</p>	A 1	B 1	C 1	●	△	■	A 2	B 2	C 2	■	●	△	A 3	B 3	C 3	△	■	●	<p><b>12 students</b> 3 groups of 4, 2 rounds 4 groups of 3, 1 round</p> <table border="1" data-bbox="849 558 1084 863"> <tr><td>A 1</td><td>B 1</td><td>C 1</td></tr> <tr><td>●</td><td>△</td><td>■</td></tr> <tr><td>A 2</td><td>B 2</td><td>C 2</td></tr> <tr><td>ι</td><td>●</td><td>△</td></tr> <tr><td>A 3</td><td>B 3</td><td>C 3</td></tr> <tr><td>■</td><td>ι</td><td>●</td></tr> <tr><td>A 4</td><td>B 4</td><td>C 4</td></tr> <tr><td>△</td><td>■</td><td>ι</td></tr> </table>	A 1	B 1	C 1	●	△	■	A 2	B 2	C 2	ι	●	△	A 3	B 3	C 3	■	ι	●	A 4	B 4	C 4	△	■	ι																																																																
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