Effective Pair and Group Work

Pair and group work can dramatically increase learning in many classrooms. It provides students with opportunities to talk about what they're learning, ask questions, and apply concepts to new situations. However, these types of activities must be thoughtfully engineered and appropriately used in order to be effective.

Issues in Choosing Group Size and Composition

If…	Then You Need…
You want to ensure that each student is engaged in discussion.	Pairs
You have some very vocal students who intimidate the others.	Pairs or triads, putting the vocal students together
Your students are at various levels in their understanding, and you need the ones who are struggling to be able to listen a lot.	Mixed-ability groups
Your students are at various levels in their understanding, and you need all students to be able to contribute at their own level of understanding.	Same-ability groups
You want to encourage good turn-taking and conversational ability.	Triads doing pair work with one functioning as listener or recorder
You want to give students a chance to think about an issue or answer on their own first, before sharing it.	Think–pair–share (Thinking alone, then sharing with a partner, then sharing with a small group)

Implementing Group and Pair Work

1. Introduce the activity. Be sure to state the goal.

2. Model what students will need to do.

3. Provide any vocabulary or information that students will need.

4. Give detailed instructions, possibly in writing. Check for clarification by having students restate the instructions or model the activity.

5. Divide into pairs or groups and begin the activity.

6. Monitor the activity by walking around the room. Stay available, but not intrusive.

Types of Pair Work

Activity	Comments	Examples
Dialogues	Communicative language teaching advocates reading dialogues a number of times, then saying them, using whatever students can remember (without memorization), and changing if desired.	Most language textbooks have dialogues. Common topics include introductions, requests, and exchanges in stores and other public places.
Correction	Correction in pairs is less intimidating than sharing with the whole class. When answers or opinions are different, partners seek the teacher and both learn.	• Checking grammar exercises. • Peer editing of a writing assignment. • Comparing vocabulary sheets and sharing new words.
Interview	Provides needed practice at the basic level. Questions and answers may come from a textbook or may be generated by the teacher or students.	• Personal information (How old are you? Where do you live?) • Giving characteristics (Is it big? Is it red? Is it round?) • Telling about an event (What happened? Who was there?)
Transformation	Substitution, or transformation, activities, in which students change specific content in a text, help students begin generating their own language, with guidance and support.	Students change • a dialogue set in a grocery store to one set in a clothing store. • a passage in present tense to one in past tense.
Role-Play	The goal must be clear. Students need time to prepare both for both roles.	• Students role-play an employer and job seeker in a job interview. • Students role-play a policeman asking questions of an eyewitness to an accident.
Information Gap	Students focus on information, not language. Communication must take place to reach the objective.	One student has a card with a shape or drawing. They must explain what they see, so the other student can reproduce it.
Quick List	Students create a list. This is like brainstorming in a group, but used when time is short, and students can't move into groups.	Students answer a question: What are food staples that you always have in your house? (Could be used to precede a unit on food in different cultures.)
Games	Many language games can be played either in pairs or in a group.	Matching, tic-tac-toe, board games, sentence or letter scramble.
Pairs to Groups	Students may work out a small piece of information in pairs, then join together in a larger group to share all their information.	Students are given words and pictures to match: *bus, store, train, post office,* etc. When the student with the word pairs up with the student who had the appropriate picture, they first learn the word, then students form larger groups based on classes of words (e.g., *transportation*, *buildings*).

Types of Group Work

Activity	Comments	Examples
Games	Games are good for groups of 3–5. Focus on the game, not on language.	• Board games • Matching • Puzzles • Sentence, letter scramble • 20 questions
Role-Play in Small Groups	Role-play in groups of 3–4.	The group pretends to be a family, with each having an assigned role, and role-plays a discussion on how to spend vacation time.
Role-Play in Large Groups	Role play in larger groups of 5–10. Very clear instructions must be given about the goal, or final product, of the activity.	Students all take on the role of a city council. People in the city have gotten sick, and some are saying it's because of the water. The city council has to talk through the problem (using information provided by the teacher), and come up with a plan to address the problem.
Drama	Drama activities tend to be more formal, with a storyline and script. Group size varies with the need for actors/roles.	Following a unit on giving commands, students create a drama of a landlord who is taken to court for placing unfair demands on renters. They write a script (including command sentence forms used by the landlord talking to renters, and the judge addressing the landlord), then act it out, possibly for other classes as well.

Projects	Projects work well with groups of 3–5. Each group can do the same project, or groups can have different projects that go together.	• *Same project*: All groups create posters that tell about interesting places to visit in Indonesia.
		• *Different projects*: The class prepares a presentation for visitors to Indonesia, with each group having a different focus:
		  o Group 1: Indonesian food
		  o Group 2: Indonesian culture
		  o Group 3: Places to visit in Indonesia

Discussion	Discussion is effective in beginning a new unit or preparing for writing activities.	Students think about a situation that requires change. They discuss: Have you ever had to change the way that you did something? Why is change hard? (This could preface a writing assignment asking students to explain how they react to change.)
Jigsaw	This is a group information-gap activity; it is sometimes like role-play but with pertinent information given to each student.	• Students must choose a new curriculum. Different students have information about cost, content, family opinions, and availability. They pool their knowledge to make a decision. • Strip story: Students are each given a sentence in a story; they must put them together correctly.