Title

Using Classroom Space: From Traditional Rows to Musical Chairs.

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CATESOL EXCHANGE

One frequently ignored component of the language lesson is the physical utilization of space—how students will be positioned in the classroom and how they will be grouped within that space. This Where factor may be ignored because of our own culturally delineated notions of conventional class management. Placement of groupings depends on teacher flexibility. Can we vary our role in a particular lesson, the role of our students, or the role the environment serves in the learning process? Varied space arrangements and well organized student configurations are conducive to different kinds of language tasks and can provide rich educational rewards. This is as true of adult level instruction as elementary, where groupings and space variations have always been the norm.

Some of us may have fond memories of rest time on the rug, sharing-circles in front of the room and reading groups in the corner. And, of course, simultaneous educational stations are an important part of the day in primary classrooms throughout California today. Why, then, have desks traditionally been arranged in rows in intermediate and secondary language learning situations? Cultural attitudes regarding the roles of teacher and student provide the answer. Where the teacher acts as a disciplinarian and truth giver, it is best to have all eyes forward and all mouths shut. However, since language is the vehicle for communication and communication is interactive and involves the negotiation of meaning, how can the student successfully practice oral language skills while facing the back of someone's head? Obviously, a row-on-row design may not always be the best for language instruction. The development of fluency, for example, depends on interactive experiences (Brown & Yule, 1983).

There are, of course, instances where students must function as individual learners working independently. When the teacher acts as overseer—questioning, modeling, lecturing, and doing what we traditionally call "teaching"—the students may be seated in horizontal or vertical rows, in a U-shaped arrangement of desks or tables, or in a semicircle. In the latter two designs, students have fewer opportunities to tune out because of proximity factors; no one can hide. Students as singles may be involved in listen-and-repeat activities, communica-

tion drills between teacher and student, individual reading or writing assignments, listening tasks, or tests. They may be repeating, responding, forming questions and answers, doing written seatwork, or taking notes.

In pair work, on the other hand, the focus is on collaboration. Students pair with a neighbor, or select a partner, or the teacher may choose who works with whom. The teacher acts as a manager, assigning a task to be carried out between pairs of students and then monitoring performance. Possible tasks include two-person dialogs, role plays, information gap tasks where students must elicit each others' data, peer editing and evaluation, or problem solving. Tasks may be precommunicative, offering opportunities for practicing specific forms and functions, or communicative and open ended, where meanings are primary (Littlewood, 1981). Students may work with an adjacent person at a table, arrange moveable chairs about the room side by side in an apparently helter skelter fashion, or butt desks end on end to promote face-to-face conversations.

Group work provides a larger interactive design, with several students together reaching a common understanding or goal. The teacher may not only facilitate the learning process through careful preparation and class management, but also participate within the group itself as one of the gang. As with pairs, the students' role is interactive. Small group discussions, role plays and dialogs, games, editing groups, problem solving activities, brainstorming tasks—all easily fit this format. Here we are looking for the beneficial aspects of pooling background information, grammatical competence, and personalities. This may not always be positive, and each task must be properly assessed as to how students will best learn what needs to be taught. Will the group experience enhance or interfere (Reid, 1987)?

Groupings and placements always require prior consideration. For example, who should be grouped with whom? Groups can be homogeneous or heterogeneous according to sex, culture, degree of intimacy and compatibility, or ability level. They can be student or teacher determined. Random groupings can be created by ingenious devices such as birth month, sock color, or first initials. Varying grouping methods forces students to upgrade listening comprehension skills and encourages following directions.

Once groups have been delineated, they can be positioned. Should student groups move to the corners of the classroom? Should one or two groups move outside to the hall in order to encourage concentration and privacy? Perhaps this is the occasion for groups to leave the classroom altogether to perform cultural observations or broader communication among native speakers.

Sometimes group work becomes a kind of team experience. Here the teacher is director. Students participate as a class split in half, not as independent learners, partners, or group members, but as team players arranged on opposite sides of the room. Some possible activities which match such an arrangement include jazz chants, spelling bees,

and other games. One side of the room may vie against the other, recite song verses or lines in turn, raise questions or provide answers, take parts in chants, readings, and dialogs.

In whole class activities, the focus is on building contexts for language learning and sharing experiences which maximize language use. These kinds of lessons are at the opposite end of a continuum from row-on-row individual learners completing seatwork. The teacher will oversee, participate, and, it is hoped, enjoy the activity along with the students. Such tasks may include (a) whole class discussions where students remain in seats but participate as a class, (b) concentric circle formations where students exchange partners several times during the lesson as they practice a function or perform a task (Wong, 1987), (c) move-around games requiring simultaneous participation by all class members such as finding the other half of a proverb or the answer to a question, (d) excursions and study trips beyond the classroom, and (e) culminating activities which justify a thematic unit or provide closure (e.g., shared potluck meals, organized sports events, or content based "academic olympics"). Such physical arrangements may be ordered or random, circles or lines, clusterings or wanderings, but will involve everyone. They are lifelike and are often noisy. They may even appear chaotic. The teacher cannot always predict what language will occur. These activities offer time for risks and unknown outcomes.

In "I like people who...," a whole-class grammar activity, students sit in a circle on chairs, and, as in musical chairs, there is one less seat than participants. The teacher is initially *It* in order to explain and model the game. It makes a *like*-statement which is relevant to only some of the students: "I like people who wear sandals;" "I like people who intend to study engineering;" "I like people who think that one should never eat pickles with ice cream." The complexity of the statement will depend on the desired structural practice and student proficiency. The students must decide if the statement applies to them; if so, they must change seats. During the seat changing It tries to find a seat and if successful, there is now a new It (the student without a seat). An important rule is that players may not change to adjacent seats. Another is that all *like*-statements must pertain to more than one player.

This game, an adaptation of a popular native speaker party game, is an excellent listening comprehension activity. It is also a superb source of group coherence, interaction, sentence formation, and structural practice. It engenders much oral language, laughter, and even exercise. Low-level students can be highly successful and advanced students can be self-reflective and clever, using very creative, and intellectually and structurally complex language. The teacher has stepped down from the podium. The entire group is involved in a circular arrangement with students and teacher coparticipating. It's an occasion for much spontaneous oral language; it's noisy and playful and linguistically rich.

In the oral language class we are always engineering social occasions

for talk (Richards, 1983). How can we optimize interactions? Sometimes we choose formats which are highly successful devices for language learning although initially awkward for the students due to their educational expectations. One such format is the game described above. Within the classroom setting unconventional formats involving the Where factor are pedagogically appropriate, however, and our students profit from them. As we develop lessons, we must examine our own attitudes toward control and disruption, politeness and privacy, silence and noise, interaction and confusion, education and innovation, expectations and evaluation. When designing our lessons to suit individual teaching and learning styles and specific instructional goals, how can space utilization become a significant asset to learning? A language teacher can find many ways to take advantage of this often neglected educational component. ■

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