

# Using Groupwork for Language Practice in the Primary School

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## 1. Teacher talking time and pupil talking time

Cross out the one that does not apply:—

Who does most of the talking in the English class?

*The teacher/the pupils*

We learn to speak by *speaking/listening*

If you think the *pupils* do most of the talking, you are either an exceptionally good teacher, or a very optimistic one. Try it; get somebody to time you, or time a colleague giving a class. In nine cases out of ten, you will find that the teacher does most of the talking. And if you consider the amount spoken by any one pupil, the proportion becomes even more remarkable: if he is lucky, a pupil may utter one or two sentences by himself during one English lesson. Often he will not utter even one except in chorus.

But of course we learn to speak by speaking, not just by listening. And to speak individually, it is necessary to practise speaking individually, not only in chorus.

Most people will agree with these statements, but most teachers will recognise the problem: how can we give children individual practice when we are teaching a class of 40 or more? It seems impossible: but it isn't.

## 2. How groupwork helps

One child among 40 will have little chance to speak: but one among 5 or 6 will have plenty of opportunity.

We therefore divide the class into groups of 5 or 6 children and plan practice activities which can be done in these groups. *All the groups will be working at the same time.* So instead of only one child is speaking, in a class of 40, 7 or 8 will be speaking at a time.

It is true that this makes more noise than one child speaking at a time; but it makes less than 40 children speaking in chorus. Given good general discipline, there is no reason why groupwork should inconvenience other classes.

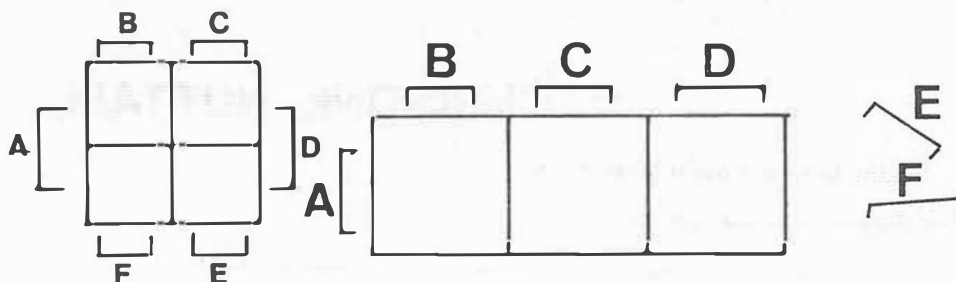
## 3. Forming groups

Children will work better with people they like. If members of a group dislike each other, it will not work well. Keep this in mind when grouping the class.

For most language practice, you will find *mixed ability groups* best. The better pupils will be able to help the weaker ones, provided it is understood that all group members must take part equally.

#### 4. Arranging the classroom

Work out how you want the groups to be arranged. In classes with individual desks, it is usually sufficient for 4 desks to be put together to form one larger group table. 6 children can then sit round it like this (figure 1):—



You may even prefer to have only two desks pushed together; in any case the children should not be separated by a very wide table, and they must sit round in a real group, not in a straggly line as in figure 2.

In figure 2, there is too much of a gap between A and E, while F is hardly in the group at all. The closed circle of figure 1 helps to develop group solidarity as well as making it easier for children to hear one another and pass things from one to another.

Make use of all your classroom area: have the groups positioned as far as possible from each other. This will give you room to walk round and listen to them, and will reduce interference between groups.

#### 5. Training for groupwork

Getting into groups is a nuisance and wastes time unless it is done smoothly and quickly. The first time you try it, the pupils will not know what to do: so your first step must be to train them.

Explain carefully how you want the classroom arranged, perhaps with the help of a plan on a roll-up blackboard. Show the children how the desks are to be put together.

Work out in advance a clear simple procedure (done by numbers, like army drill if you can!) and do it slowly, making sure that everyone gets it right. Practise several times until the class can move into groups quickly and quietly.

#### 6. Taking them into your confidence

Your pupils have probably not worked like this before. It is important to help them to see the point of group work.

In particular, they need to understand that groupwork is *cooperative*. All the members have a part to play. The stronger pupils should try to help the weaker, but the strong must not be bossy and the weak must try — and be given a chance — to do their share.

Group work involves pupils being *responsible* for their own progress. It can be enjoyable and they can learn a lot; it is also possible to waste time and learn nothing. Partly this is a matter of general class discipline, but it is also a matter of individual responsibility. This is a new idea to most pupils and needs to be discussed and prepared for, especially if you are trying it out in a senior primary class.

## 7. Languages

The language you want the children to practise is of course English. But while you are preparing them for group work, giving instructions about group activities or explaining things, use the language which will be most easily understood.

Try, of course, to give instructions in English whenever you can, and try to switch gradually to English for routine instructions. After training, the children should, for example, know what to do when you say, in English, "Right! Get into your groups!" But for initial training you will probably find it much more effective to use Bahasa Malaysia.

The quicker and clearer your instructions, the more time the children will have to practise their English. So in general, use the language that will do the job most quickly and clearly.

## 8. When to use group work

If you try to use group work and it isn't successful, one of two things has probably gone wrong:

1. You have used it too soon
2. You have planned the activity badly.

Group work is unsuitable for practising very new vocabulary and structures. The teacher can only be with one group at once: the others may be making mistakes.

Group work fits into the third or fourth stages in the traditional language teaching sequence:

1	2	3	4
PRESENTATION	IMITATION	PRACTICE	PRODUCTION

That is to say, group work can be used after the pupils have:

1. understood the meaning and use of the new language item;
2. done a lot of repetition work;
3. and a lot of intensive whole-class practice, both chorus and individual.

When you feel that most of the class can use the new item without mistakes, that is the time for group work. Group practice will consolidate what has been learnt and will enable the weaker pupils to master it.

## 9. Practice or production?

The difference between these two stages is not distinct, but stage 3 *practice* may involve more or less mechanical drill, while stage 4 *production* essentially involves meaning and understanding.

Most group work will fall into the production stage, because it generally requires that the pupils understand the language they are using. This final stage is often absent from our language lessons, so group work is a very important means of supplying it.

In group work, the children are not producing language like parrots: they need to think about what they are saying. Moreover, they are speaking to one another not to the teacher; the activity is a little closer to natural communication. They will be asking questions, making requests and using language in other ways that resemble real-life more closely than most language drills do.

## 10. Planning Group work

The teacher can only listen to one group at a time. Therefore it is important to plan the work so that few mistakes are likely. You need to plan in two ways:

- planning the procedures to be followed
- planning the language to be used.

10.1 **Planning the procedures** means planning the way the group activity is organized. It must be clear who does what and in what sequence. For example in elementary language practice, group members must clearly understand who speaks or acts first, who speaks next and so on; they must understand how group members exchange parts (eg. A asks B, then B asks A) so that they all practise the different utterances involved. It must also be clear who the group leader is, if one is needed.

Any failure here can result in one child repeating the same sentence dozens of times, while another never speaks at all.

10.2 **Planning the language** means working out exactly what you want each participant in the activity to say. This does not mean that everyone says the same sentences, of course. Rather, you supply the framework within which each pupil may produce his own utterance. The variety, and the meaning, is supplied by a variety of pictures, objects or other means (as in the examples below). The idea is similar to the idea of a substitution table: you supply the framework, while the substitutions are supplied by the way the activity is organized and by the variety of objects etc. used.

NOTE: The use of pictures and objects is essential for group work with young children; they need to be able to touch and hold the things they talk about, and the sequence of talking, holding etc. governs the sequence of the group activity. Use the children themselves to collect suitable objects – they enjoy it – and build up a good stock of odds and ends for this purpose.

## 11. Instructions and demonstrations

Instructions for group activities can often be very complicated. It is surprising how hard it is to explain even a simple activity in simple language. The best solution is always to have a demonstration of the activity.

11.1 **Whole class.** Usually the teacher will first of all use a similar activity with the whole class participating. For instance, with any of the examples below, the part of A can be taken by the teacher or (as soon as possible) a pupil coming to the front of the class; while B, C, D etc. can be any pupils at random in the class (either volunteering answers, or called on by the teacher).

11.2 **Demonstration group.** After the whole-class activity, the teacher calls up a demonstration group so that the group procedure can be shown. Some teachers like this group to be composed of group leaders, but this could make it too big. This group is required to go through the activity several times with all the other children watching, so that both the procedure and the language are clear to all.

## 12. Timing.

It is much better to do group work for a short time on several days than to do it for a long time on only one day.

With young children (and older people too!) any activity becomes boring if it goes on long. This is fatal in group work, since bored pupils will learn nothing and may become naughty. Group work should not usually last longer than 10 minutes: you will soon discover how long your own pupils remain interested. Always stop before that time is reached!

### EXAMPLES OF GROUP ACTIVITIES

NOTE 1: All these examples are suitable for use with groups of 5–6 children. Most of them can be adapted for pair work or groups of other sizes.

NOTE 2: Many of these activities are like games in that they have some problem-solving element. Although this is not necessary (see Activity One) it increases motivation and, thus, learning.

### ACTIVITY ONE

To practise the use of polite forms for making and responding to requests

**Materials** A collection of small objects (about 20), for each group. There should be several examples of each object e.g. 5 stones, 5 flowers, 3 keys, 5 pins, 4 spoons.

**Procedure** Place all the objects on the table.

A (to B)	Please give me a [stone], B.
B (picks up a stone and hands it to A)	Here you are.
A	Thank you. Now you. (to B)
B (to C)	Please give me a [flower], C.
C (picks up a flower and hands it to B)	Here you are.
B	Thank you. Now you. (to C).
C	Please give me a [key], D.
	ETC.

Continue as above, moving clockwise round the group, until all objects have been taken.

An extension of this activity for slightly more advanced students:

1. First do the activity as described above.  
Each child now has a collection of about 4 objects.  
He keeps these out of sight.
2. The same polite requests are used, but this time A can ask any other pupil, not just B. and the pupil may not have the object asked for. In this way polite refusals can also be practised, as follows:

- A (to D) Please give me a key, D.  
 D I'm sorry, I haven't got a key.  
 A Never mind, thank you. Now you, B.  
 B Please give me a stone, E.  
 E Here you are.  
 B Thank you. Please give me a flower, F.  
 (He has a second turn because he got a positive response to the first one)  
 F Here you are.  
 B Thank you. Now you, C.  
 (Maximum of 2 turns, otherwise some pupils won't get a chance)  
 ETC.

Notice that the questioning proceeds A, B, C as before, even though the pupil may direct his request to anyone he likes.

NOTE: Phrases like *Here you are, Now you, I'm sorry, I haven't got...* are taught as required, according to the needs of the activity. There is no need to wait until they appear in the primary school syllabus.

## ACTIVITY TWO

To practise the use of the present perfect tense

**Materials** At least 15 small objects for each group, with several examples of some of the objects e.g. 3 buttons, 2 flowers. It is not necessary for every group to have an identical set of objects.

**Procedure:** Place all objects on the table. Group studies them briefly. Then all shut their eyes while A removes an object.

1. A OK. Open your eyes. What have I taken?
  2. B You've taken
 

a pencil
a flower
the red button
etc.
  3. A No, I haven't./Yes, I have.  
*If A answers No:*
  4. C (as B)  
 (repeat sequence 2 & 3 as often as necessary with pupils D, E, F until someone correctly identifies the object A has taken)  
 When someone answers correctly:
  5. A Yes, I have, that's right.  
 (Replaces the object taken.)  
 Now it's your turn, B.
- All shut their eyes and repeat the procedure, with B now taking A's part.

NOTE that it is necessary for the activity to have 5 or 6 speakers; as B will be the one to take an object next time, everyone will get a turn to speak even if the object is correctly identified at the first attempt. (If this happens too often, supply more objects.)

### ACTIVITY THREE

To practise the pattern **BE + a/an + name of professional/job**

e.g. I'm a doctor

Are you a mechanic?

**Materials:** picture cards showing professions or jobs (e.g. doctor, farmer, teacher, driver). Each group will need a set of about 10 cards.

**Procedure:** place the cards in a pile face downward on the table. A takes a card and looks at it without showing it to anyone else.

1. A	What am I?					
2. B	Are you a	<table border="1"><tr><td>doctor</td></tr><tr><td>farmer</td></tr><tr><td>mechanic</td></tr><tr><td>etc.</td></tr></table> ?	doctor	farmer	mechanic	etc.
doctor						
farmer						
mechanic						
etc.						
3. A	No, I'm not./Yes, that's right.					
	<i>If A answers NO:</i>					
4. C (as B)	(repeat sequence 2 and 3 as often as necessary with each group member guessing the profession until someone gets it right).					
	When someone answers correctly;					
A	Yes, that's right. Now you, B.					
	(A replaces his card at random and B takes a card. The above procedure is repeated with B taking A's part.					

A more difficult version of this can be used, as follows:

A	What am I?
B	You're a [doctor].
A	No, I'm not.
B (to C)	He isn't a doctor.
C (to A)	You're a [farmer].
A	No, I'm not.
C (to D)	He isn't a doctor and he isn't a farmer.
D (to A)	You're a [policeman].
A	No, I'm not.
D (to E)	He isn't a doctor and he isn't a farmer and he isn't a policeman.
	ETC

(D 'loses a life' if he forgets one, or puts them in the wrong order.)

#### ACTIVITY FOUR

To practise the use of the present simple tense

With more advanced pupils, the procedure outlined in Activity Three can be used to practise the use of the simple present for habitual action, as the following sample illustrates:

A	(takes a card)
B	Do you take care of people in hospital?
A	No, I don't. I'm not a doctor.
C	Do you repair cars?
A	No, I don't. I'm not a mechanic.
D	Do you grow rice?
A	No, I don't. I'm not a farmer.
	ETC

#### ACTIVITY FIVE

To practise possessive 'S

**Materials** Every child draws a picture on a piece of paper. (All the papers should be the same shape and size). This is done before the class breaks into groups.

**Procedure** All children in the group study one another's pictures and then put their pictures face down in a pile on the table and the group leader shuffles them. Each takes a picture at random and does not show it to the others.

A	Whose picture have I got?
B	Have you got (D)'s picture?
A	No, I haven't.
C	Have you got (F)'s picture?
A	No, I haven't.
D	Have you got (C)'s picture?
A	Yes, I have. Now you, B.
B	Whose picture have I got?
	ETC.

If the words MY and YOUR are known, these can also be practised in this activity. A similar procedure can be used to practise many other things, eg. THERE IS/ THERE ARE:—

A	Whose picture have I got?
B	Is there a house in the picture?
A	No, there isn't.
C	Are there any trees in the picture?
A	Yes, there are.
C	(has another question because A answered YES) Is it D's picture?
A	Yes, it is. Now you, B.
	ETC.