

Structuring group-work in the classroom

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Chinese learners: The stereotype

- They are reticent and quiet in class.
- They are reluctant to participate in classroom activities and seldom answer questions
- Even if they answer, they give brief replies
- They seldom initiate questions
- They seldom speak up about their opinions

(summarised by Xie, 2010)

But students' express attitudes which contradict this stereotype

In a survey, Mainland Chinese students agreed strongly with these statements:

- I like activities where there is a lot of discussion with classmates in small groups (of between 3 and 5 students) (**3.75, max. 5**)
- I like activities where I am part of a group in which we are all working towards common goals (**3.91**)

Students' views of factors that encourage participation

- Create an informal atmosphere in the classroom
- Give a lot of encouraging responses when students speak and participate
- Ask questions on topics in which students have some knowledge / interest
- Make explicit that students are encouraged to speak in class.
- Allow students to form groups with friends.
- Give questions for students to discuss in groups for a group answer

Strategies for encouraging participation

- Pay special attention to creating an informal and supportive atmosphere
- Give a lot of positive feedback
- Consider carefully the students' interests
- Allow time for students to formulate answers in class
- Exercise less control over the content of the interaction in class discussion
- Incorporate small-group discussion into classes e.g. as preparation for whole-class discussion
- Use 'collaborative learning' techniques for structuring classroom interaction

Principles of collaborative learning

- Tasks are structured so that they can be done better through cooperation than independently
- Each member depends on every other member for some aspect of the task
- Completing the task depends on the sharing of information and ideas
- Students learn and practise the skills required for cooperation
- Students learn through purposeful communication

Jigsaw and Expert Jigsaw

- A task has interlocking subtasks A, B, C, (perhaps D) (e.g. reading different texts, or the same texts to find different information, or different kinds of input or task on a topic).
- The members of each 'jigsaw group' (Student A, student B, student C, perhaps student D) work on the subtasks.
- The students contribute their ideas and information as pieces of the 'jigsaw'.
- The task outcome is produced together, e.g. presentation, poster, report.
- (In **Expert Jigsaw**, there is an initial stage when 'Expert Groups' with the same subtask work together, e.g. groups of 'Students A' help each other before separating into their jigsaw groups).

Jigsaw in a Shenzhen Middle School class (designed by Zou Yanping)

- After an earthquake, a team of three rescue workers is faced with dealing with four types of injury: burns, neck injury, broken leg, unconsciousness.
 - They have already studied burns. Now each member researches one of the other three injuries on the internet.
 - They share results and together decide who needs help first and how s/he can be helped.
 - They present their decisions and reasons to the rest of the class.

Group Investigation

- The class decides on (or is assigned) a topic and organizes itself into research groups to investigate separate subtopics.
- Groups plan their investigations and divide up the work among group members.
- Members of each group collect, organize and analyze the information on their subtopic.
- Members come together in their groups to share and discuss their information. They plan their report and presentation.
- Presentations are made to the entire class in a variety of forms.

Forward Snowball

- Each student is given a set period of time (e.g. three minutes) in which to list four facts related to a theme.
- Students form pairs and expand their ideas into a list of eight.
- Pairs form groups of four, who produce a combined list, deleting ideas which are repeated but attempting to add more to produce sixteen.
- The snowball may finish there or continue to groups of eight, who produce a further combined list.

Reverse Snowball

- Each student is given three or four minutes to write down three or four ideas or characteristics on the topic.
- Students in pairs then attempt to reduce their combined list by agreeing on the four (or five) most essential points.
- Pairs form groups of four, who should again reduce their combined list to produce an agreed list of most essential points.
- The snowball may proceed to groups of eight, or the whole class may be asked to agree on a list of essential points, or students may produce group or individual tasks (e.g. essays on the topic).

Think/Pair/Share

- A topic for discussion (which may be simple or complex) is given to the class.
- Each student has a short period of time to think about it and jot down notes.
- Pairs of learners share ideas with each other for a further period.
- Pairs share their ideas within a larger group or the whole class.
- (The initial period of sharing may be carried out in groups of three or more.)

Three-step Interview

- Students form groups of four, in which they choose or are assigned a controversial topic for discussion.
- Each group of four divides immediately into two pairs (A+B, C+D).
- A interviews B about the topic but does not express his or her own opinions. B then interviews A. At the same time, C and D follow the same procedure.
- (Optional: A and C interview each other, also B and D)
- The students re-form into a group of four, in which they share ideas and opinions, enter into free discussion, and attempt to reach an agreement on the issue.
- Their conclusion may be reported to the class or form the basis of written report, etc.

Constructive Controversy

- Students form groups of four and are assigned (or choose) a controversial topic for debate.
- Each group divides into two pairs.
- Each pair is asked to support one side of the issue.
- Pairs research the issue and review the arguments on both sides.
- Groups of four are re-formed and a debate takes place, as each pair tries to convince the other pair of their own side of the issue.
- After a time, they step out of the 'formal' debating structure and engage in free discussion.

Rotating Circles

- A group of 4 (or 5, or 6) sits in a circle facing outwards.
- A second group sits in a circle around them facing inwards towards them.
- Each member of the inner circle has a different question card (asking for facts or opinions, etc.) or they are asked to make up their own questions.
- For about three minutes, the inner and outer circle members discuss the question in pairs.
- At a signal, the outer circle rotates one place, to discuss in new pairs.
- (If students are sitting in pairs in fixed seats, one row may move one seat back at each signal, the student at the back moving to the front.)

Numbered Heads

- This technique is a useful way of organizing feedback so that all students have a chance to report and have to follow the discussion.
- In each group of (e.g.) four, the students are asked to assign numbers from 1 to 4 to each member.
- At the feedback or reporting stage, the teacher indicates a group and a number.
- All students have an equal chance of being nominated and must be ready to speak on behalf of the group.

Now, please:

- Form groups of three or four.
- Agree on a group of students that you plan to teach e.g. their age, level of proficiency, etc.
- Use one of the collaborative techniques to design a suitable interactive group activity.
- Analyze the learning that you expect to take place, in whatever terms you like, e.g. language items, skills, functions, personal development.
- Write down your ideas – we will share some of them.

Selected Reading

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