

Intervention: Flexible Grouping

Flexible Grouping (All Grades; Early Childhood-Grades PK-2; Upper Elementary Grades 3-6; Intermediate Grades 7-8; High School Grades 9-12)

(Adapted from: Flexible Grouping: Nobody Ever Said Teaching Was Easy!
By Dr. Suzanne Irujo, ELL Outlook™ Contributing Writer , March/April 2006)

Planning

Effective use of flexible grouping requires careful planning. You can't "wing it" because the size and makeup of the different grouping configurations have to match the skills being taught. This matching assumes that you know what your objectives are, you know what skills and knowledge are prerequisites for the achievement of those objectives, and you know which of those prerequisite skills and knowledge each of your students has.

These generalizations sound very much like the kind of flexible grouping that is recommended in sheltered instruction, such as whole-class teaching, large and small group instruction, pair activities, and individual work (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2003). Some groups and pairs will be homogeneous by language proficiency or academic ability; others will be heterogeneous. Whatever grouping is chosen, it is done on the basis of the objectives of a particular lesson. These are not always totally separate groupings. For example, a presentation to the whole class or a large group can be followed immediately by pairs sharing what they understood from the presentation. Small groups can share information about a particular problem and then split into pairs to apply the information. Pairs can talk about how to do something and then work individually to do it.

With **ELLs**, you also need to think about language proficiency levels, and what kinds of input and interaction will best facilitate achievement of both language and content objectives.

Implementation

Implementation of flexible grouping can be challenging for some teachers. It is recommended to anybody who has been using only whole-class and individual teaching is to start small! Many teachers find pairs to be the easiest grouping to manage because it doesn't involve a lot of moving around. Once pair work is going smoothly, add large or small groups.

Shortcuts for putting students into groups can cut down tremendously on the amount of time spent grouping and regrouping. Some grouping assignments may be ongoing (but never permanent). For grouping assignments that are not ongoing, you can pass out different colored counters to show students which group they are in. When the makeup of the group is not important, counting off works well.

It's very important to develop routines for grouping to forestall student misbehavior. When going from whole group to small groups or pairs, give the instructions for the group or pair task before students form their groups,

and be sure students understand what they are going to do. If you are using a series of tasks with different groupings, put an outline of the groupings and tasks on the board for students to refer to. Have a "quiet" signal that you know students will respond to so you can start and stop pair and group work efficiently.

The chart below shows sample advantages, disadvantages, and possible uses of each grouping type.

Grouping Type	Advantages	Disadvantages	Possible Uses
Whole class	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Less preparation • Saves time 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Boring for some students; not understandable for others 	Presenting the same information to the whole class at one time
Large groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Greater flexibility to meet individual needs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Less teacher time for each group 	Matching ability levels with a particular skill being taught
Small groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emphasis on peer learning • Learning through interaction • Targeted to instruction of a very specific skill 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Takes time and may create confusion • Some students may monopolize the group 	Sharing knowledge and skills
Pairs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pairs work independently; teacher monitors • Forces all students to participate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students may not stay on task • Some pairs may not work well together 	Ensuring that all students participate
Individual	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher knows who did the work 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students needing help don't get it 	Producing a product for individual evaluation

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