PAIRWORK AND GROUPWORK
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Whilst pairwork and groupwork are the staple of the 'communicative' classroom, and are the fundamental way in which teachers can give learners the opportunity to practice what they have been exposed to meaningfully, not all pairwork has that function.

Open Pairs

The term 'open pairs' is used to indicate a very common form of classroom interaction, where two people are speaking and everyone else is listening. There are two ways in which this happens:

a) Teacher ↔Student Pairs

There are many situations in which the teacher talks to an individual student. These are some frequently used examples:

• Informal chat, for example, as the class begins (T: *Did you win your football match last night, Mario?* S: *No, unfortunately we lost 2-1.*)
• Talking about and checking understanding of language (T: *So what does that tell us about the regular past simple? Suzanna?* T: *That you write it one way and say it three different ways.*)
• Talking about work done, checking comprehension (T: *Who can tell me what Stephen did next? Yes, Giovanni?* S: *He went back to his house.*)
• Eliciting newly presented language (T: *So that's how it works. OK, now ask me. Maria?* S: *Where did you go last night?*)
• Modelling newly presented language before closed pairwork (T: *So that's what you have to do. Michele, let's try. Have you ever been to London?* S: *Yes, I have.* T: *When did you go?* S: *I went there last year.*)
• Talking about and checking understanding of task (T: *So who can tell me what you have to do? Anita?* S: *We have to tell our partner about the person in the picture.*)
• Student questions (S: *Excuse me, what does 'supine' mean?* T: *Can anyone help him? No? OK, well here it means lying down on your back, lying flat, perhaps on the ground.*)

For reasons of space, in most cases the example exchanges have been truncated to teacher question/student answer (which is, in fact, the commonest form of classroom interaction!), although in many cases at least one teacher response – perhaps of praise – would be likely, and more would be probable.

b) Student↔Student Pairs

This is the situation where two students talk to each other in front of the rest of the class.
• Teacher-instigated, for accuracy/modelling puposes (T: *Suzanna, ask Anita what she did last night.* S1: *What did you do last night?* S2: *I watched TV with my mother.*)
• Spontaneous student exchanges (S1: *And that's why the banks are so bad in our country.* S2: *I don't agree. I think that the problem is not the banks themselves, but the laws which control the banks.* S1: *Well, maybe the laws need changing, too.*)

An interesting variation on the open pair, is the so-called 'melee' or 'mingle' activity, where the whole class operates on an open pair basis with everyone else in the class. At the most basic level, this can consist of the learners walking randomly round the room, and when the teacher claps their hands, they turn to the nearest person and say 'Good morning. How are you?/I'm fine thanks. How are you?'. At a more complicated level, all the students might have information which will lead them to find a partner; they must ask questions of many others until they find the right person.

Closed Pairs

The closed pair is fundamental in current ELT practice. Every modern course book regularly instructs the student to 'Work with a partner' or says things like 'In pairs. Write down your ideas'. This is because we recognise the

advantages that closed pairwork brings to teaching, and these have been well rehearsed in the literature (e.g. Nolasco/Arthur (1988: 42-49); Haines (1995: 55-58); Harmer (2001: 116-7); Rixon (2000: 252-3):

- increasing student talking time
- encouraging learner independence
- allowing for individual differences in learning style
- encouraging co-operation (not competition)
- allowing the teacher time to work with individuals
- decreasing stress by allowing students to interact in the most usual human format

Pairwork is also relatively quick and easy for the teacher to set up, however there is an important caveat here. Because of the physical difficulties found in many teaching situations, teachers frequently set up closed pairwork in ways which do not encourage the kind of interaction they are seeking. The 'information gap' activity (where students have different secret information which they need to exchange to complete a task) requires that students are unable to see each other's information. If pairs are left to sit side-by-side in the standard classroom arrangement, then the point of the task will be nullified. It is crucial that the students sit either face-to-face, or back-to-back to ensure the task is truly purposeful. Successful classroom management is fundamental to a successful communicative classroom. There are, of course, many other kinds of closed pair tasks which require the students to work together whilst looking at the same materials, so the side-by-side arrangement is best.

Closed pairwork does have disadvantages, particularly for teachers working with large classes: the noise factor, pairs use the mother tongue, pairs talk about other things, partners don't like each other, individuals don't like working in pairs in general, teachers fail to think about what happens with early and late finishers. Some of these problems can be reduced through learner training and the discussion (often in the mother tongue) about the reasons behind closed pairwork.

Groupwork is, in some ways, an extension of pairwork and much of what has been said about pairwork applies to it.

Open Groups
Teacher↔Group
This is likely where the teacher is monitoring groups at work, and wants to talk to a particular group about the way they are working (to help or correct) or to call back answers to the task they have been set. The group might also call the teacher over to clarify something they don't understand about the task, or to tell the teacher their results when they have finished.
Group↔Group
This usually occurs as part of the feedback from a group task activity, where the teacher puts two groups together to discuss their results, or where all the groups in the class have an open forum about their answers. In both cases the teacher will operate as a facilitator rather than as a participant.

Closed Groups
As with closed pairs, closed groupwork is considered a normal part of communicative ELT practice. As well as 'information gap' and 'opinion gap' activities, groupwork frequently involves more in the way of cooperative discussions and problem-solving, sometimes including role-playing, for example as a committee making a decision. The advantages that accrue for learners and teachers are similar to those listed for pairwork, although group interaction strategies are different to pair strategies, and these, too, need to be learned in the target language.

The disadvantages, too, are similar to those listed for pairwork, with the particular addition of the problem of 'social loafing' (Woodward, 1995: 8-9) – one of the group deciding they're not going to bother, leaving the others to do all the work.

Many tasks benefit from a mixture of pair and group formats. Here are two examples:

Groups into pairs
It is often a good idea to have students discuss a task and/or the language necessary for a task in groups before they move on to do the task in pairs. For example, with a role-play involving two people: to exemplify, teenage daughter/father having a row about coming home late. The 'daughters' get together in groups of four to talk about what they might say in this specific situation (the necessary general language having been already presented and practised in a controlled way), and the 'fathers' do the same. The learners are then paired as father and daughter to do the role-play. In this way the students feel more confident and already have a repertoire of possible things to say. This is a particularly useful technique in larger classes with a wide range of ability.

Pairs into groups
This is a very generative way of working, particularly in discussions, and in its extended form is know as 'pyramiding'. The students are paired to discuss a problem and its solutions. The pairs are then paired into groups of four to come to a group solution. The fours are then paired into groups of eight to perform the same task. This can end up as two halves of the class discussing their decisions. The strength of the activity comes from constantly defending and having to compromise upon one's earlier decisions.

Changing formats such as these need careful thinking through by the teacher in terms of classroom management: space available, instructions, timing, movement. Without these being pre-planned and revised in situ, the whole activity can break down through no fault of the learners.

It is evident from this brief look at what is involved in pair and groupwork, that successful learning and teaching is likely to involve a range of these kinds of classroom organisation. Some are necessary for checking work in the accuracy and controlled practice phases of lessons, others are important for working on fluency in the freer stages. A conscientious teacher will work out ways of using them appropriately and effectively to benefit their learners.

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See also:
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