

There are a number of questions for the reader throughout this article. These are marked with a ♣ and are designed to make you stop and think if you want to. They are especially useful if you are reading the article together with colleagues. If you would like to do them, get a pencil and paper before you start.

Making it work

Working in pairs is a skill. We would like our children to collaborate, co-operate, respect their classmates, speak only in English and be responsible for their work. However, we cannot expect them to be able to do all these things unless we help them acquire the necessary skills.

Steps to pairwork for young learners

Many teachers have reservations about doing pairwork with young children. **Sarah Phillips** looks at the arguments and provides a step-by-step approach.

To pair or not to pair

Many textbooks, training courses, Ministry guidelines and so on promote the use of pair and groupwork nowadays. It goes hand in hand with phrases like ‘the communicative approach’, ‘learner training’, and ‘child-centred’. However, while agreeing that it is valuable in theory for children to work in pairs, many teachers have reservations about actually doing it in their classrooms.

♣ Before you read on, note down some reasons for doing pairwork or groupwork and some reasons against it. Doing this may help you clarify your own ideas about pairwork. Then compare your ideas with those in the table below. You may well have reasons which are not on the lists since different teaching circumstances affect teachers’ views of pairwork. (In the article I usually refer to pairwork, as it is easier to organise, but the ideas refer to work in small groups, too.)

However long the list of reasons against pairwork is, I would argue that those on the ‘for’ side make it worth incorporating in the range of activities that you do in class.

Pairwork is often quite outside children’s experience of school and so we need to train them in the routines of working together, guide them towards acceptable behaviour, give them the opportunity to practise the necessary skills, and make sure they know what we expect of them.

There are many kinds of groupings possible in a classroom. They range from the class where the teacher stands at the front talking to children sitting in rows at their desks, to a classroom where the children work in groups at tables on different tasks, monitored by the teacher, and there are many possibilities in between. The diagrams on page 29 show some of the groupings that are commonly found in classrooms.

♣ Look at the diagrams and answer these questions. Which of the groupings do you use in your classroom? Can you add any others?

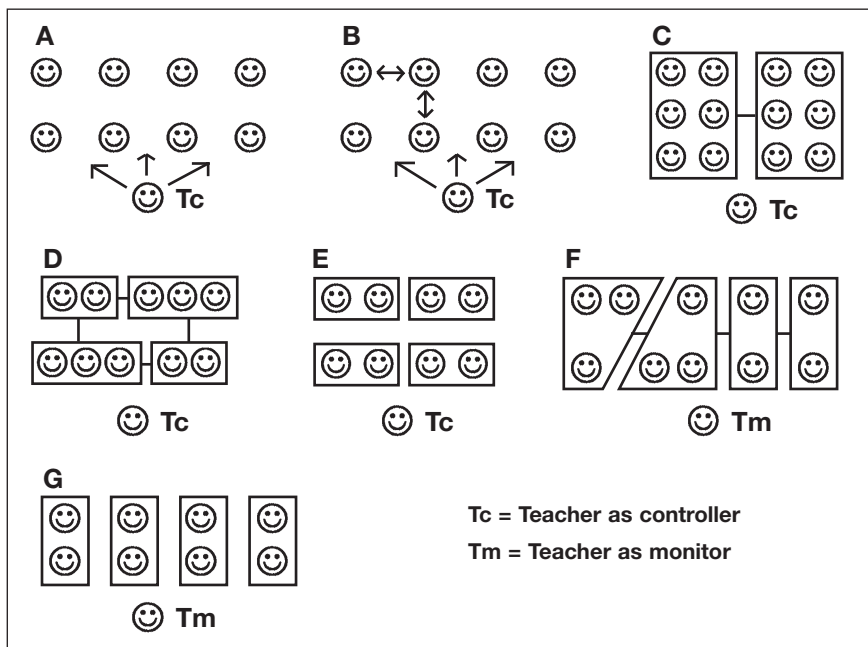
- A** The teacher teaches the whole class: there is little or no interaction between the children and the teacher.
- B** The teacher teaches the whole class: there is interaction between the teacher and the children, and between the children themselves.

Reasons for doing pairwork

children do more speaking and listening
children are working more of the time
more individual attention given by the teacher
children have more control over the class
it develops other skills
it permits communication
‘life’s like that’

Reasons against doing pairwork

it is noisy
it is difficult to control
some children don’t work
preparation can be time-consuming
physically difficult in small classrooms
children speak their first language
children are self-conscious and don’t speak at all



- C** The children are divided into two groups. The teacher controls what each group does.
- D** The children work in pairs or small groups, and the work of each group, contributes to a final product shared by all the class. The teacher controls the work of each group.
- E** The children work in pairs or small groups, each working independently of the others. The teacher controls what each pair does.
- F** The children work in pairs or small groups towards a final product that is shared by all the class or within the larger group of the class itself. The teacher guides and monitors the groups.
- G** The children work in pairs or small groups independently of each other. The teacher guides and monitors the groups.

The roles of both teacher and children change according to what kind of grouping they are in. In the traditional lecture-style group the teacher controls both the content and the language that is used, s/he is active, taking the lead in the classroom and controls the behaviour of the children. The children are receptive, following the teacher's lead and receiving the content of the message, possibly without really thinking about it.

In contrast, when the class is working in independent groups the teacher's role is that of organiser as the groups are set up, and guide and monitor as the children get on with the task: s/he also gives feedback once the task is finished. The children are responsible for their

behaviour, for organising the work in hand, they choose the language that is used, and have to collaborate with the others in the group in order to achieve the task. In many educational situations, the first situation is the norm and the second is beyond the children's experience.

If we accept that language is a vehicle for communication in class and not simply the content of the class, then we need to put the children in situations where they need to communicate. Pair

work can provide such situations. We need to introduce pairwork slowly and gently into our classes, allowing the children to get used to the idea of working more independently, and to develop the necessary skills.

Some tasks demand considerably more of the children than others, both linguistically and in terms of organisation. It is more demanding to take part in a role play than to take part in a dialogue that the teacher has built up with the class. It is easier to take turns in a game like 'Hangman' than to work together to produce some written work. So tasks can be graded.

Grading tasks

There are variable factors. We can alter the amount of control the teacher has, how responsible we expect the children to be, how controlled the language in the activity is. Start with activities controlled according to these factors and then introduce less control.

Activities

In the next section you will find examples of activities that match with the class groupings described earlier.

♣ Match the activity with the descriptions. Sometimes a very simple change in the activity will change its type.

A round: Walking, Walking

Walking walking, walking walking
Hop hop hop, hop hop hop
Running running running
Running running running
Now let's stop
Now let's stop

1. Teach the children this song with actions, sung to the tune of *Frère Jacques*.
2. Divide the children into two groups and sing it as a round.
3. Further divide the children into four groups and sing it in four parts.

A rhyme: Two Fat Daddies

1. Teach the children this rhyme, with actions.
2. Divide the class into three groups: A, B, and C. They say the rhyme together, each group taking a different part, like this:

Two fat Daddies* walking down the lane
Waved to each other and then they
waved again
How are you?
How are you?
How are you again?

*two thin Mummies; two best friends; two noisy sisters; two little brothers.

Steps to pairwork for young learners

A Guessing Game

1. The children work in pairs.
2. One child of each pair hides something (a pencil, a rubber, a sharpener, and so on) in their hand.
3. The class chants:
Can you guess?
No or yes?
4. The children try to guess what their partner is hiding.

The Sticky Game (thanks to Manuela Antelo and Irene Barros)

1. The children and the teacher stand in a circle. The teacher gives an instruction like this to the child on her left:
José, touch Irene's head.
2. José then gives a similar instruction to Irene and so on round the circle until all the children are 'stuck' to each other.

Mime a Monster

1. The children stand beside their desks in pairs.
2. The teacher tells them:
Make a monster with four legs, two arms, and two heads.
3. They make the monster between them.

Criss-Cross Vocabulary (based on an idea in *Early Bird*)

1. The children stand in a circle.
2. The teacher gives a picture card of some recent vocabulary to one child, saying the word.
3. The child crosses the circle and gives the picture to another child, saying
4. Meanwhile the teacher gives out more pictures until half the children have a picture and they are all crossing the circle forming and re-forming pairs as they hand over their words.

the word. The child with the picture crosses the circle again and so on.

KEY Walking, Walking: D
Two Fat Daddies: C
A Guessing Game: E
The Sticky Game: modified A
Mime a Monster: E
Criss-Cross Vocabulary: B
The Tropical Jungle: G

The Tropical Jungle (based on the game 'Battleships')

1. The children work in pairs. Each child has a copy of the grid. They use *red* for their own animals and *blue* for their partner's animals.
2. The first child draws five animals in their grid. Each animal occupies several squares: (mouse one square, snake five squares, a frog two, a monkey three, a black widow one). The second child tries to find them. Then they swap.

	A	B	C	D	E	F
1						
2						
3						
4						
5						
6						

The basic dialogue is:
A: Is there anything in (A3)?
B: Yes, there is.
or B: No, there isn't.
A: What is it?
B: It's a (frog).


If A has guessed correctly, s/he goes on guessing. If A does not guess correctly, it is B's turn to guess.

3. If any child 'hits' the black widow s/he automatically loses.

Clearly, by making minor changes to any of these activities the children take responsibility for their language and behaviour to a greater or lesser extent. This means that the first time you do an activity you can retain control of both language and organisation, but that as children get used to doing it, or similar activities, you can make minor modifications that hand the control over to them.

♣ What could you do to make the more controlled activities less controlled?

Finally, it is important to get the children to reflect on how they have handled an activity. You can do this by simply talking to them as a class, asking them if the activity went well, if they enjoyed it, if they learned or practised anything, and how they could do it better another time. Remind them of their answers the next time you do a similar activity. You will find that if you encourage the children to think about the way they do pairwork, and give them pointers towards the way you would like them to work, they become aware of their behaviour.

Throwing children into the deep end saying, 'Do this in pairs' usually ends in chaos: the aims of the task are not achieved and you may well decide that pairwork is not for you, or your classes. If you take it step by step, training the children as you go, you may find that it is after all possible to some useful degree. 



Sarah Phillips lives and works in Galicia, Spain. She has worked with children of all ages and collaborates with the Autonomous Government of Galicia on training courses and primary materials for schools. She has published *Young Learners* with OUP.