

# Group Forming Activities for ESL/EFL Students

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This short information gap activity helps to increase discipline, energy and cohesion within a classroom before important group tasks. It is particularly helpful for large monolingual high school or university classrooms.

## Introduction

It is well known that pair work and group work are the best ways to encourage student activity in the language classroom. When a class breaks down into groups, students are given more opportunities to interact than as a whole class. This increased practice is essential in developing oral fluency. Unfortunately this break down can lead to problems with discipline, because the teacher is unable to monitor everyone at once. Students may do the task half-heartedly or not at all or simply fall back on their mother tongue to finish it quickly. In order to avoid these pitfalls, I have started using group forming activities as a build up to group tasks. The effect on discipline and classroom energy is substantial.

## Stage 1: Preparation

Before class, the teacher should prepare a set of cards. One card for each student in the class. Half the cards should have questions. The other half should contain corresponding answers. For example each of the following is its own card:

- What's the time?
- It's 10 to 12.
- Are you going out tonight?
- No, I think I'll stay home and take it easy.
- Where did you buy that?
- I got it at a little store near my house.
- Who else is coming?
- I think Barry and a few of his friends.

This is just an example of the kind of language that can be used in this group forming activity. In my intermediate and advanced classes I have students match phrasal verbs and collocations with words that are common in Japanese dictionaries (eg. told off/scold, muck around/play, enjoy/have fun, ). Other matches might be pictures, half sentences or collocations. Larger groups can be formed by adding more cards. (eg. Are you going out tonight?/No, I think I'll stay home and take it easy./Don't be boring. Come out and have a good time.) Ultimately, the language should be appropriate to the students level. I try to use Krashen's 'i+1' theory, where the language is recognisable but contains something more than their current level. In this way the activity itself involves input and the learners are challenged by it. The most important thing when making the cards is to make sure there is only one match for each card.

## Stage 2: Demonstration

Draw six to eight boxes with the questions and answers on the whiteboard. The teacher then chooses a question and asks the class (or an individual student) to find the answer. When the answer is given, connect the two boxes with a line. Next, the teacher chooses an answer and asks the class (or an individual student) to find the matching question. Join them with a line. This is done until all the boxes on the board are matched.

After demonstrating on the whiteboard, tell the students "I'm going to give you a card. Don't show anyone. It's a secret! You are going to read your card to other students and find your match." Concept check by asking a student "Are you going to show your card to other students?" and "Are you going to read your card?".

Next give three to five students in the front row a card and take a matching card for yourself. Then quickly demonstrate the task by reading your card to each student and having them read theirs back to you. While your doing this ask the class "Is that a match?" until the match is found.

In the beginning, the demonstration stage can be time consuming. However, this activity can be used repeatedly throughout a semester with variations. Once the students understand what is involved they don't need to be told again. In later classes the demonstration can be skipped altogether.

## Stage 3: The Activity

Walk around the class with the cards face down and fanned out so students can pick a random card. This increases students investment in their secret card because they chose it. Once all the cards have been given out, allow students time to read their secret cards and use their dictionaries if they have to. At this point individual students may need some help with pronunciation. When all students are comfortable with their cards ask them to stand up as a class. Then tell them to find their match and when they find the match sit down together at a table.

While students are looking for the match it is a good idea to go around and encourage them to talk with one another. "Have you asked Kenta?" or "Have you spoken to Eri?". It is important that the teacher monitors the students to make sure they are not just showing each other their cards. At such times reinforce your initial instructions, warning individuals out loud, "Don't show your card, Keisuke."

## Stage 4: Feedback

Once students are matched go around and collect the cards. While you are collecting, have the students read them back to you to reaffirm the match and congratulate them. The new pair share their success and are praised by teacher which is a good way to foster cohesion before the main task. Now have the students go on with the main task in their new groups. You should notice a significant increase in student motivation during the main task.

## Conclusion

This exercise once learnt is a very quick and useful tool in managing large class sizes and long lessons. It provides a good opportunity for the class to communicate with one another in the L2 in order to achieve a very clear set goal. It also creates energy and excitement before an important group task by having the students move around the room and rearrange seating themselves. Most importantly it increases the likelihood of students focusing on the main task because students have shaken off some inertia and the main task is now a bridge between students who might not normally associate with each other.

## References

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