



# Classroom organisation

**Malcolm Hebden and Jo Mason** look at how different arrangements can affect group dynamics.

**A**t first glance, the way in which we organise our classrooms may hardly seem worth thinking about. The arrangement of the desks may depend on a whole range of factors, many of them the wrong ones, such as *this is how the last teacher left them* or *moving them is too much of an effort*. In broad terms, the way in which learning is structured in a particular classroom will reflect the organisational culture of the school, which, in turn, will reflect wider political and national ideologies. School culture will, in part, then, determine classroom organisation, the role of teachers and pupils and the philosophy of learning. Teachers may, therefore, have *limited control over classroom organisation, learning styles and group dynamics*. Rarely, however, are they *completely limited* in what they can do.

## The young learner classroom

It is not uncommon for teachers of young learners to have larger classes than are usual in adult learning establishments. As young learner classes tend to be grouped by age rather than ability, teachers also inevitably face the challenge of teaching large *and* mixed-ability groups. Large, mixed-ability classes demand more detailed planning when it comes to effective classroom management than do smaller and more informal groups. The young learner classroom can be organised in a variety of ways and the dynamics resulting from the organisation will have a fundamental effect on classroom atmosphere. This, in turn, can affect motivation, discipline and teacher authority. Many of even the most experienced teachers have only used a limited variety of ways of organising their classrooms.

## The traditional model

Traditionally, the teacher was seen as a figure of authority who primarily stood at the front of the class from where she addressed individuals or the class as a whole in didactic fashion. The class then worked individually on tasks set by the teacher. This format remains in extensive use around the world, and many pupils view it as the norm. There is, however, a wide variety of alternatives to this traditional classroom layout. Whether or not these can be judged as useful depends on the aim of the lesson or activity the teacher has planned. The diagrams on page 24 demonstrate some of the possible arrangements.

## Benefits

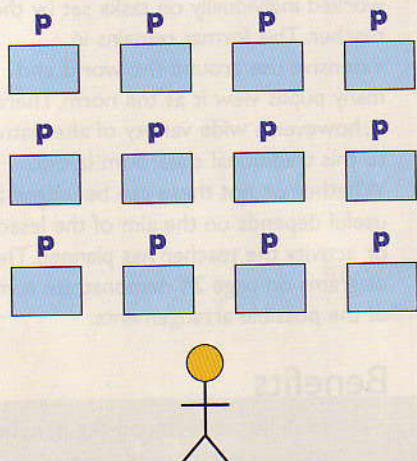
**!** In order to focus on the benefits of using a variety of ways of organising the classroom, try the following task. Look at this list of the advantages of different types of classroom organisation and match them to the diagrams on page 24.

- 1 Useful for storytelling
- 2 Easy to maintain discipline
- 3 Useful for testing
- 4 Useful for games and student participation
- 5 Enables the teacher to get to know individual pupils
- 6 Provides the opportunity for quiet and calm
- 7 Useful for comparing answers to activities
- 8 Increases learner autonomy
- 9 Useful for checking progress of individuals
- 10 Enables the teacher to check understanding of instructions
- 11 Enables all pupils to have the opportunity to speak
- 12 Useful for class discussion
- 13 Useful for choral work
- 14 Enables the teacher to present new work easily
- 15 Useful for pupil-teacher interaction
- 16 Useful for self-access work
- 17 Useful for paired language practice
- 18 Useful for working at the board

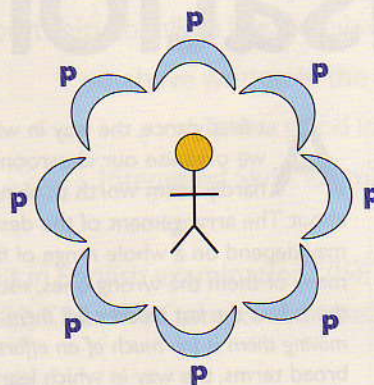


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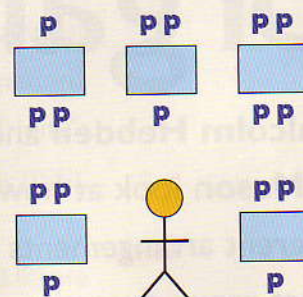
## 1 Teacher to whole group



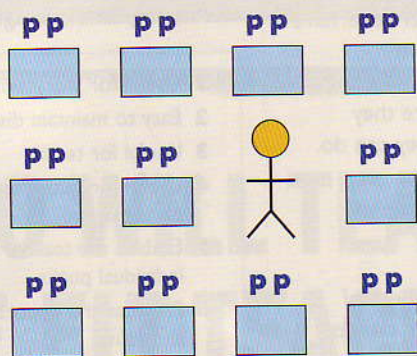
## 2 Closed group



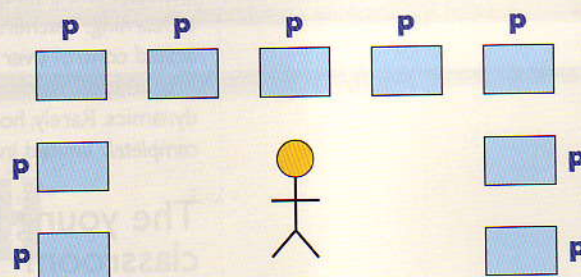
## 3 Small groups



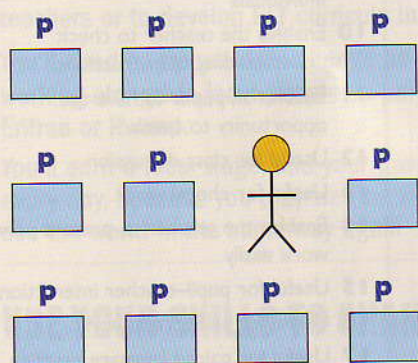
## 4 Pairwork



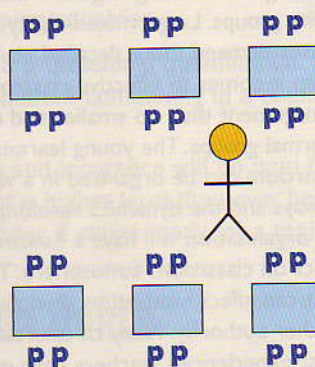
## 5 Horseshoe with desks



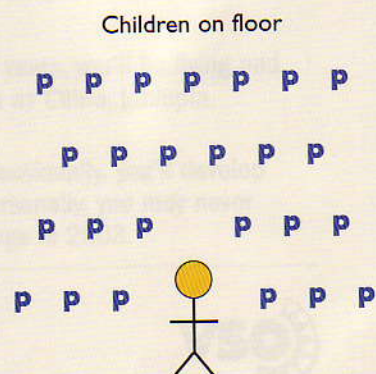
## 6 Individual work



## 7 Pair to pair



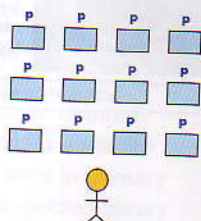
## 8 Informal seating on floor





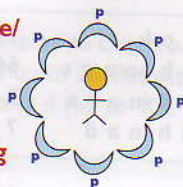
There are other possible ways of organising the classroom and the advantage of these for different activities is potentially wide-ranging. Below are some general advantages of the diagrams shown on page 24.

## 1 Teacher at front to whole group



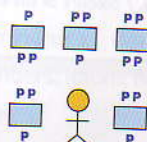
This arrangement provides the teacher with greater control and is therefore easier for discipline. It is best for formal testing or when pupils are doing the same individual task.

## 2 Closed circle/horseshoe with teacher participating



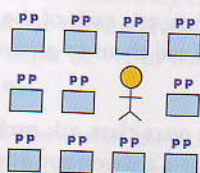
This layout provides an informal atmosphere which is conducive to sharing activities, such as games, discussions or cooperative activities.

## 3 Small groups



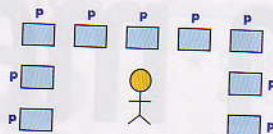
This type of classroom organisation allows a wide variety of activities but generally promotes greater learner autonomy and is suited to communication activities. It also allows pupils to work on different activities at the same time and frees the teacher to work with particular groups at different times to check pupils are on task.

## 4 Pairwork



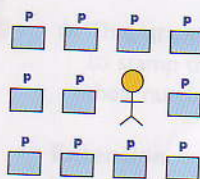
Here, the arrangement has all the benefits of small group work but is particularly useful for providing intensive language practice as all pupils are employed in tasks simultaneously.

## 5 Horseshoe with desks and teacher at front



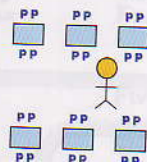
The teacher is the clear focus of attention with this type of classroom organisation. It therefore facilitates the presentation of new material or work on the board. It also provides for pupil-teacher interaction, choral drilling, etc and allows an easy move to pairwork activities.

## 6 Individual work



This arrangement allows pupils to work at their own pace and can provide a useful change of atmosphere from the livelier and noisier groupwork and pairwork. It also enables the teacher to get to know individual pupils or check their progress.

## 7 Pair to pair



Here, the layout has many of the benefits described above for work in small groups, but it is particularly useful for allowing pupils to compare responses to activities, homework, etc.

## 8 Informal seating on floor



This type of classroom layout has many of the benefits of the closed group on chairs, but has greater intimacy, with easier eye contact between teacher and pupils. It is, therefore, an alternative for presentation of new material, particularly where realia, pupil participation and big books are involved, and also for storytelling.

## Drawbacks

These different ways of organising the classroom have been considered in terms of their advantages from the point of view of the individual teacher teaching her class, but they also have implications for the school as a whole and implicit in them may be certain disadvantages. Pairwork and groupwork involve a level of noise, especially with larger classes, which may not be considered acceptable in some schools or cultures. Some arrangements also involve greater learner autonomy, which may lead to discipline problems if not introduced judiciously.

Also implicit in the considerations above is the mobility of classroom furniture, which in many schools may be restricted. This does not necessarily completely restrict the group dynamics as, even with fixed benches, pupils can still do pairwork, for example.



If a teacher is experiencing problems with class dynamics or discipline, a change of classroom organisation may make a considerable difference. The idea of Action Research is becoming increasingly popular in classrooms around the world, and a simple way to start is to trial different ways of organising the classroom related to different tasks or activities.

This article is based on materials originally written for the Young Learner module of the Distance Learning MA TEFL, run by the University of Reading, UK.



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