

Group Dynamics: Building a Sense of Belonging in the EFL Classroom

There is no doubt that pair/group work is an integral part of language learning because it not only provides a unique opportunity for students to improve an array of skills such as critical thinking and problem solving, but also enables them to experience a diversity of personalities and perspectives. Frequent exposure to a wide range of individuals through pair/group work plays a crucial role in the overall learning process. Research findings from Taqi and Al-Nouh (2014, 62) show that students in their study felt that group work made them “better listeners and open to criticism” and more willing to accept feedback.

Othman and Murad (2015) suggest that when working in groups, students get the chance to expand their thought processes and simultaneously maximize communication with their peers. However, when trust and acceptance are not established, students feel intimidated working in groups of strangers, consequently giving rise to their withdrawal from pair/group work. In the long run, this issue is threatening, as negative attitudes formed during collaborative learning might undermine students’ motivation and engagement in class activities.

Research on group interaction shows the importance of group dynamics—the way in which members of a group react to one another—and how pair/group work can be improved. Hadfield (1992, 10) believes positive group dynamics “can have a beneficial effect on the morale, motivation, and self-image of its members, and thus significantly affect their learning.” Dundis and Benson (2003, 35) state that “groups perform better when they sense

themselves as a unified team with a shared sense of responsibility, if for no other reason than the task at hand.” Gorse and Sanderson (2007) contend that the sense of belonging to a team is likely to provide students a rewarding learning experience if the members work well together. Nevertheless, creating vibrant student groups is a challenging task that requires careful observation and appropriate intervention from the teacher throughout the course. This article offers guidelines and bonding activities to promote an atmosphere of relaxation and connection among students who participate in group work. These activities also offer the chance to practice a variety of English language structures and occur in three stages: (1) at the start of the course, (2) during the course, and (3) at the end of the course.

BONDING ACTIVITIES AT THE START OF THE COURSE

Tuckman (1965) postulates that during the group-forming stage at the beginning of the

course, individuals experience mixed feelings of anticipation and hesitation about being included in their group. One of the reasons is that participants are unsure of their roles and are evaluating others to see if they really fit in with the group (Zastrow 2008). Group members also tend to avoid revealing personal details in favor of generalities as they “do not have a great deal of shared history to build upon” (Cress, Collier, and Reitenauer 2013, 54). For that reason, Dörnyei and Murphey (2003) stress the importance of learning about one another during the group-formation process, as sharing genuine personal information will ensure a gradual acceptance of new members. Barkley, Major, and Cross (2014) suggest using social icebreakers, interviews, and other techniques to lessen students’ anxiety during their first days in class. When conducted in the first few weeks of class, activities that promote the sharing of goals, habits, and interests allow students to get to know their classmates better. Since some students at this stage may not want to reveal too much of themselves and are still in the process of observing others, it is not advisable to force them to share information they find extremely personal or sensitive. Rather, creating a fun, relaxing, and sharing environment is the key to the success of initial group formation. Following are three suggested activities for this purpose.

Activity 1: Fun Facts About Our Class

Level: Elementary to Advanced

Time: 10–15 minutes

Language practice: Present simple tense and superlative structures

Material: Questionnaire (see the Appendix)

Procedure: Divide the class into groups of four. Have each group answer the questions in the Appendix and ask them to add two questions. Next, have students ask the follow-up questions in the Appendix and determine who in each group sets each record (who has the longest name, who gets up earliest, etc.). Compare students’ responses to identify those

who set the class record for each follow-up question.

The purpose of this activity is to provide students opportunities to reveal their personal information in a genuine way, thereby promoting rapport with their friends. The discovery of interesting facts about their peers fosters interaction. For example, if one member of the group gets up earliest or goes to bed latest, other students would want to know the reason. This curiosity encourages students to ask more questions and get to know their friends better. In addition, students may find their class more interesting when they discover that others have rather strange habits. The activity can be used to practice the present simple tense or superlative structures.

Activity 2: Our Group Identity

Level: Intermediate to Advanced

Time: 15–20 minutes

Language practice: Expressing likes and preferences

Material: A question list

Procedure: Divide the class into groups of four. Give all students a question list—see the sample in Table 1—and ask them to write their answers; then have them ask the same questions to their group members. Tell students that if all the group members give the same answer to one of the questions, they should write that answer in the My Group column. For example, if all members report English as the subject they are interested in, then the group members would write “English” in the My Group column. (There might be some blanks in that column if all group members do not have the same likes.)

Once students find their similar interests, tell them to ask Wh– questions to get a deeper understanding of one another’s interests. Finally, ask students to give their group a name to demonstrate their similar likes (e.g., “Pizza Lovers” or “Cool Bookworms”).

This activity is particularly useful to build a sense of connection within a group when all the team members share several things in common. The idea of a group recognizing similar interests promotes group identity, making students realize that their group is different from others and cultivating a sense of group solidarity. In terms of language development, the activity facilitates expressing likes and preferences through the use of structures such as “be interested in” and “fond of.”

Note: There are cases where student groups have little in common. This issue can be handled in several ways. First, the teacher may increase the number of questions. Based on my experience, the ideal number is from 15 to 18. Second, the activity could be turned into a game where students race to find their group’s similarities. This provides an incentive to create more questions to ask their friends instead of depending solely on the question list. In order to help students come up with their own questions, write common topics on the board, such as clothing, sports, and music, or have students simply note things they like and devise questions based on those things. Another strategy is to group students of the same age or gender together because it is more likely these groups will have something in common. Finally, even when one or two groups do not find any similarities among their team members, it is not a big problem. They can be classified as “special groups.” In this way, students feel even more united because

their group is totally different from others in that no two people on the team are similar.

Extension: Provide students with markers, crayons, and sheets of paper. Ask them to create a group poster where they draw pictures representing things they share and to invent a group slogan. Display students’ products on the wall, and ask the class to read the group posters and guess what things each group shares together. For example, if one group draws a lion in red, then it could be that this group likes lions and the color red.

Activity 3: My Little Secrets

Level: Lower Intermediate to Advanced

Time: 15–20 minutes

Language practice: Making suggestions/
Giving advice

Procedure: Divide the class into groups of four. Ask students to think of their challenges in learning English, such as difficulties with listening or speaking skills, or with vocabulary or grammar. Then, have students share their issues and offer advice to their peers in their own groups within five minutes. While students are discussing their learning challenges, walk around the classroom to facilitate discussion. Next, have students share with the class their obstacles in learning English and ask individuals from different groups to give advice. If the teacher’s first language is not English, he

Questions	My Answer	My Group
1. What subject are you interested in?		
2. What color do you like?		
3. What animal are you fond of?		
4. What season do you like?		
5. What TV program do you enjoy?		

Table 1. Sample questions for Our Group Identity activity

or she can share personal experiences in learning English to provide motivation to study a foreign language.

The ultimate aim of the activity is to create a sense of empathy, as many students encounter similar language-learning challenges. When they share their learning tips, a sense of caring and support is built up through encouraging words and thoughtful suggestions. This, in turn, is important for building a sense of belonging afterward. Moreover, students feel somewhat more confident in themselves when working as part of a team because they know that their friends are still learning English, too, and they all come to this class to improve their skills.

If possible, ask students to note the suggestions they find applicable to their own situation. At the end of the course, ask students whether their language skills have improved thanks to the advice from their classmates. If that is the case, they will feel thankful for their friends. The activity could also be used to practice the second conditional by requiring use of the structure “If I were you, I would ...” when students give advice.

Note: When I conduct this activity, the majority of my students feel that if they know more words they can study the four English skills more effectively. Therefore, they all offer advice on how to learn new words. On the other hand, students may tend to provide general advice, such as “You should listen to English every day” or “You should try harder.” That is not much help. In this case, ask students to express specific issues they have. For example:

- I usually make spelling mistakes.
- I have difficulty inferring the meaning from the context.
- I find listening to different accents really challenging.

Then, when students are sharing tips, require them to offer detailed suggestions, such as the

names of the websites, newspapers, or reality shows that they utilize to sharpen their English skills.

BONDING ACTIVITIES DURING THE COURSE

This is the time when extensive pair/group work may be applied in class to boost student interaction. However, the quality of group work is negatively affected when trust and acceptance are not widespread. Students should, therefore, engage in team bonding activities that encourage cooperation, such as (1) collaborating to solve problems or doing projects together, (2) designing group posters or naming the group to solidify an identity, (3) initiating deep feelings by sharing unforgettable stories, and (4) arranging competitions and games. Following are two suggested activities.

Activity 1: My Unforgettable Stories

Level: Intermediate to Advanced

Time: 15–20 minutes

Language practice: Past tense

Procedure: Have students bring a photo that has a personal connection with their past (e.g., the most exciting/enjoyable moment or biggest achievement in their life). Students work in groups of four and guess the stories behind the photos. Students then sit in a circle to tell their memorable stories. Remind students to use the past tense. While students are sharing their feelings, take notes so that you can give feedback later. If possible, encourage students to ask questions to better understand their friends’ life stories.

Sharing deep feelings is a good way to unite students since they feel their class is a second home where their true feelings can be shared and valued. Sitting in a circle may also make students feel closer to one another, as it reduces the physical distance between the learners.

Note: Prepare sheets of paper and crayons in case students have left their photos at home or do not have any special photos. Then, ask students to quickly draw a memorable moment in their life so they have their own picture to discuss. Another method is to allow students to use their digital photos on their cell phone, or short, memorable videos.

Extension: Divide the class into groups of four. Give each group a sheet of paper and instruct all team members to write their stories on the same page, which creates a deeper sense of belonging than using paper clips to hold four separate stories. Remind students to summarize their stories because of the limited space. Then, have students name their groups and post their stories on the bulletin board. This extension aims to create a group history where students share their past experiences. Also, when students step into the classroom and see their group stories, they feel a connection with a particular group.

Activity 2: We Are a Team!

Level: Intermediate to Advanced

Time: 15–20 minutes

Language practice: Giving directions/
Reviewing vocabulary

Procedure: Organize students into groups of three. Ask them to rearrange tables and chairs to create obstacles in the room. Explain the roles for the three individuals:

- Person 1 is blindfolded and guided by Person 2 to find a vocabulary list hidden in the room. When Person 1 finds the list, he or she removes the blindfold and describes the words to Person 3.
- Person 2 stands at the back of the class and gives directions to Person 1.
- Person 3 stands at the front of the class and guesses the words described by Person 1.

Tell students that only Person 3 is allowed to guess the words. If Person 2 tries to help,

the word will not count. Each correct word is worth one point. The group with the most points is the winner. Give the groups about one minute to discuss and choose the right person for each task.

Then, after Person 1 in each team is blindfolded, the teacher hides the vocabulary list in the classroom and students begin the activity.

This simple yet effective activity develops trust and cooperation among team members because they need to assign responsibility for each role. This activity compels every team member to work collaboratively in order to win the competition, fostering a sense of belonging to a team. If possible, give the winning team a group button to reinforce a sense of team awareness and achievement.

The activity should end with a short discussion of questions such as the following:

- What do you think of this activity?
- Is it a good teamwork activity?
- Why did/didn't your team win the competition?
- What strategies could be taken to win the competition?

This reflection time proves crucial to hone students' realization of the importance of teamwork. As regards language development, this activity allows students to practice giving directions in English and to review previously learned vocabulary.

Note: For large classes, let no more than three teams play at a time so that blindfolded students do not bump into each other—although if that happens, it probably adds fun to the class. A stopwatch should be used to limit the time in order to allow other teams to participate in this game. Give lower-level students about three minutes to review the vocabulary before the competition. The words on the vocabulary list should not be the same

for every group. For instance, the teacher could tell students that the list contains words from Unit Five to Unit Seven. In this way, different sets of words can be included.

BONDING ACTIVITIES AT THE END OF THE COURSE

Group activities at the end of a course often receive insufficient attention from teachers simply because the last few weeks of the course are spent on test preparation and revision. This practice is understandable, especially in countries where written tests are critical. However, some students are disappointed when they do not have a chance to see their friends again, or regret that they did not get to know their friends better. According to Dörnyei and Malderez (1997, 71), a negative ending could “have detrimental effects on future L2 learning experiences.” Tuckman and Jensen (1977) also report that due to the close relationships formed during the learning process, group disbandment has a significant effect on the group. It could be because at the end of the group activity, team members have opened up to express personal feelings and individual opinions with each other (Zastrow 2008). Therefore, the group-conclusion stage is as fundamental as the group-forming stage and should be properly managed. The activities below give students some time to reflect on their learning experience and positive feelings towards the class, providing them with a sense of continuity.

Activity 1: Group Picture Competition

Level: Beginner to Advanced

Time: 20–25 minutes

Language practice: Past tense

Materials: Large sheets of paper; markers and crayons

Procedure: Have students form groups of four or five. Ask students to draw a group picture that contains a short description of each member and his or her most memorable experience during the course. Then, have students come up with a slogan for their group. Allow students to decorate their

pictures with markers and crayons. Next, tell students to present their finished products, and ask the class to vote for the best group drawing based on criteria such as Correct Language Use or Catchy Design.

The objective of the activity is to give students a chance to design something that represents their own group identity. Asking students to note down their unforgettable memories in class is a way to encourage positive feelings and also give them a chance to practice using the past tense.

Extensions: While students are working on their drawing or presenting their finished product, the teacher takes videos or photos of the team members, which are then sent to each group. This allows students to have something to remember their friends by. Another version of this activity is a group competition where students film events that make their group unique. This leaves students with fond memories of the language course and their friends at the same time. In some cases, the teacher could join in students’ videos. Students can also reinforce their group identity and cultivate a sense of continuity by keeping in touch through social media after the course (e.g., setting up a Facebook group).

Activity 2: Class Party

Level: Beginner to Advanced

Time: 10–15 minutes

Language practice: Future tense structure “be going to” and past tense

Procedure: Announce that there will be a small end-of-the-course party. Have students work in groups of four or five to brainstorm ideas for the preparation.

Sample questions:

- What are you going to bring to the class?
- What are you going to do at the party?
- What are we going to eat and drink at the party?

- How are we going to decorate the room?

Personal question: What did you remember most about this course?

Having a small party in class is an excellent way for students to bond with one another. Students have something to discuss together; they share the same feelings of excitement and expectations; they work together to make the party successful; they feel like a big family having a “meal” together, even it is just snacks and soft drinks. If students are willing to exchange gifts, it could turn out to be an even more memorable party. Answering the personal question offers the chance for students to show their strongest feelings towards their friends and the class as a whole. But many teachers are reluctant to hold a real party in class mainly because of time limitations and the course syllabus. However, even a short party that lasts 10 to 15 minutes gives students a sense of “having something” together, which is a great return on a short investment of time. Besides, the review of future tense and past tense is achieved through this activity.

CONCLUSION

Developing good group dynamics is crucial for students’ learning journey, as it not only promotes a sense of confidence in students but also builds trust and acceptance among group members. Unified groups do not occur by chance, but evolve over the course of time as a sense of security and respect and tolerance in the team emerges (Cress, Collier, and Reitenauer 2013; Brown 2000). Therefore, team bonding activities are helpful to reinforce students’ sense of belonging throughout the course. At the beginning of the course, students should feel comfortable and relaxed in sharing personal information with one another. During the course, students participate in activities where they share a sense of joy by revealing their life stories, collaborating to solve problems, and competing in games, which helps develop feelings of understanding, belonging, and trust. At the end of the course, students receive time to reflect on their best memories about the learning experience with

friends. By incorporating bonding activities in all stages of group work, teachers build a cohesive environment that is fundamental in helping students learn English.

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APPENDIX

Questionnaire for Start-of-the-Course Activity 1: Fun Facts About Our Class

Questions	Student 1	Student 2	Student 3	Student 4
1. What is your full name?				
2. What time do you go to bed?				
3. What time do you get up?				
4. Where do you live?				
5. How often do you do exercise?				
6. How many hours a day do you spend on learning English?				
7. How many people are there in your family?				
8.				
9.				

Follow-up Questions	Answers
1. Who has the longest name?	
2. Who goes to bed latest/earliest?	
3. Who gets up latest/earliest?	
4. Who lives farthest from this language center?	
5. Who exercises the most?	
6. Who is the hardest-working student?	
7. Who has the largest family?	