

Pairing in EFL Classes

by DO NA CHI

Teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) at a language center for young adults, I want to create interesting activities that can engage my students. Because these students have been learning grammar and vocabulary in mainstream programs, I see learning at the center as a chance for them to practice what they have learned, and I try to integrate communication into every classroom activity. Therefore, I am interested in having students work together.

The problem that concerns me is how to pair my students. From my experience, students usually sit next to classmates they like and then work with those partners all the time. This can be positive for the students because working together for a long time helps them understand each other and often cooperate better. However, the downsides are the lack of interaction with other students and limited opportunities to share information with and learn from others. As the teacher, I need to find ways to make sure my students work with more partners.

Peer allocation should ensure that the students will not work with the same peers over and over again and that each member in the class will have a partner. In this article, I suggest short communicative activities for peer allocation that I have used, with the aim to make students orally interact with others.

I begin by sharing strategies for beginning-level EFL classes—ways to help learners find partners while also reviewing vocabulary:

(1) I give students cards with one word on each card and ask them to find partners who have a synonym of the word they are holding. For example, a student with a card saying *mom* will match up with the student who has the card saying *mother*. Other pairs of words that I have used are *dad—father*, *sad—unhappy*,

great—wonderful, *hi—hello*, *glad—happy*, *start—begin*, *little—small*, and *fall—autumn*. Slightly more advanced examples include *handsome—good-looking*, *important—significant*, *long—lengthy*, and *necessary—essential*.

(2) I use cards of antonyms; students must find partners holding cards that have words with opposite meanings. For example, a student having a *tall* card will look for a partner who has the *short* card. Other examples I have used are *wet—dry*, *good—bad*, *light—dark*, *thin—fat*, *fast—slow*, *old—new*, *night—day*, *active—passive*, *sweet—bitter*, *big—small*, *go—come*, and *lazy—hardworking*.

(3) I make use of cards with words of the same family. For example, a student holding the card marked *beauty* needs to find a partner with the card saying *beautiful*. Using this technique, students learn or review vocabulary and reinforce their knowledge of word families. Other examples are *care—careful*, *wise—wisdom*, *long—length*, *strong—strength*, *able—ability*, *believe—unbelievable*, *free—freedom*, *bake—bakery*, *decide—decision*, and *study—student*.

(4) Another matching strategy is to use symbols or pictures and words. If a student has a card showing the picture of a book, he or she needs to find a partner who has the card with the word *book*. Many words are possible, of course, including *car*, *doll*, *school*, *pen*, *hat*, *shoes*, *gloves*, *tie*, *skirt*, *hospital*, and *restaurant*.

Meanwhile, for classes of more-advanced EFL students, I suggest the use of cards at the sentence level:

(5) Prepare pairs of cards in which one card in the pair has a question, and the other card has an answer to that question. Ask students to find partners who have the answers for their question cards—or questions for their answer

cards. For a class of 20, after dividing the class into two groups, I will have ten cards of questions and ten cards of answers. (Larger classes will require more sets of cards, or there can be more than one copy of each pair of cards.) The students will move around, asking and answering, and decide if the question and answer match. Figure 1 provides examples.

(6) I make use of complex sentences with two clauses. Each card contains one clause, and the students will need to find the missing clause that forms a meaningful complete sentence. For example, “if it rains too heavily” would match “we should not go out.” After a lesson on conditional sentences, I used this activity to help students review. Other examples with “if” clauses include the following:

“if I have any questions” and “I will ask you”

“if you stay up late tonight” and “you might be late for school tomorrow”

“if I have a secret” and “I won’t tell anyone”

“if I had come home earlier yesterday” and “I would not have been punished”

“if you don’t eat breakfast” and “you’ll be hungry all morning”

“if you want to do something well” and “you have to keep practicing”

This technique can also be used to review other grammatical structures:

“because it was raining” and “I stayed inside”

“even though I was tired” and “I played basketball”

“before you eat” and “you should wash your hands”

“when I feel happy” and “I always smile”

Of course, other sentences and other structures are possible.

(7) I use definitions and descriptions. One group holds cards with words, and a second group gets cards of definitions or descriptions. For example, “an action that you can do in a pool” can match “swimming.” Other examples are possible:

“this person designs houses” and “an architect”

Question	Possible Answer
How do you spell the teacher’s name?	M-A-R-G-A-R-E-T
How long does it take to ride a bike from here to the city center?	1 hour
What is the first thing that we do at school on Monday?	sing the national anthem
What class do we have after this?	mathematics
How can people get to school every day?	by bus
What is one thing we can do at the city center?	go shopping
What do many people eat for breakfast?	bread or rice
Where do sharks live?	the ocean
When does our class begin?	9 o’clock
How many moons does Earth have?	one

Figure 1. Sample questions and answers that could be used to pair students

“you can buy cakes at this place” and “a bakery”
 “you need a racket to play this sport” and
 “tennis”

“you can do this in the kitchen” and “cook”

(8) Another pairing activity is to have students fill in the blanks in sentences. I divide the class into two groups. Students in one group hold cards containing incomplete sentences with a missing word or phrase; students in the other group hold cards with words or phrases. Students need to decide which words or phrases fit in which sentences. This activity can help students review both vocabulary and grammar because after matching, the sentences must be meaningful and grammatically correct. Figure 2 gives examples.

After pairing is complete, teachers might want to ask the students to read out loud their complete sentences and, if necessary, provide explanations of the meaning or sentence structure.

When designing the cards, I make sure that there will be no question that can match two answers, no word or phrase that can fill two blanks, and so on. And, although some students may have trouble finding their partners at first, when several students have

already found their matches, those who have not will have a smaller group of remaining students to find their partners more easily.

Students can help create the cards. They can design the cards; for the activity that involves matching words and pictures, the students helped me draw pictures of the objects. Students can also contribute to the contents of the cards by thinking of—for example—synonyms, antonyms, or sentences that can be used on the cards. Teachers could even use a pairing activity to pair students and then ask each pair to create more cards that could be used in that pairing activity in the future.

When pairing is complete, the students will be ready to work together in the upcoming activity or activities. Pairing can be easy, as the teacher can assign matching numbers or letters, or simply ask students to choose their own partners. But pairing can also be a way to review what students have learned, promote their understanding of English, and give them a chance to communicate and converse with a variety of classmates in English.

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Sentence	Word/Phrase
If I ____ my own house, I would have a party.	had
An hour is ____ 60 minutes.	equal to
Susan is ____ swimming.	interested in
My school is ____ the city center.	located in
An essay contains many ____.	paragraphs
I need ____ when it rains.	an umbrella
I don't know ____ the bus stop is.	where
Did you enjoy ____ last night?	dancing
Would you like ____ outside?	to go
A minute has 60 ____.	seconds

Figure 2. Examples of words and phrases that can complete sentences in a pairing activity