

Together or alone?

An experiment with groupwork writing

Rationale

Experimenting with different ways of teaching helps you to understand what works best for you and your students. Students enjoy participating in ‘experiments’, which provide variety and give them the opportunity to reflect on and discuss how they learn best. Incorporating activities like this into your teaching shows them that you take their learning seriously.

Activity

Your students compare working alone with working in a group on a writing task.

Step One

Before class, choose an e-mail/letter-writing task from your coursebook or other source with two parts. For example, the task could be writing to complain about something and then writing a reply to the complaint, or writing an e-mail to a friend and then writing a reply.

Step Two

Divide the class in half, and set the first part of the task.

Group A: Ask them to complete the first part of the writing task individually.

Group B: They complete the first part of the task in groups of three, with one person acting as scribe.

Step Three

Collect the scripts from the Group A students and distribute them to each Group B student. Do the same for Group B, distributing their scripts to Group A, who should now be put in threes.

Step Four

Tell the students to write the replies to the letters/e-mails they have been given. Group A are now working in threes and Group B individually.

Step Five

After the writing tasks are completed, get the students to discuss in their groups (or new groups) the differences between the two ways of working, and which they preferred.

Step Six

Round off with a plenary feedback session. What do the students have to say? Will the experiment cause you to change the way you teach writing?

To pre-teach ... or not?

An experiment with vocabulary in reading

Rationale

The issue explored here – whether to pre-teach vocabulary or have the students work out meaning from context – is one which is very often debated by teachers and which provides an ideal activity for both research and innovation.

Activity

You test and evaluate two different ways of reading and learning vocabulary in class.

Step One

Before class, choose a text from your coursebook or other source. Decide on a set of ten words or phrases you want your students to learn from it.

Step Two

Divide the class into two halves and tell them that both groups are going to read a text and learn some vocabulary, but in different ways. Tell them they have 20 minutes, at the end of which time they will have a short test on the text and the vocabulary.

Group A: Give them the vocabulary list and some dictionaries. After ten minutes, give them the text to read, with the words underlined. The students work in pairs.

Group B: Give them the text with the words underlined but no dictionaries. After ten minutes, give them the dictionaries. The students work in pairs.

Step Three

Give all the students a copy of the text with comprehension questions (as in the coursebook, or your own if you prefer) and the ten underlined words taken out. (You will need to have prepared this.) Tell them to fill the blanks with the correct word, and answer the questions. Give them five minutes to complete the test on their own.

Step Four

Put the answers to the test on the board or OHP, for the students to check. Which group got the best results on the test?

Step Five

Put the students in groups of four, with two As and two Bs in each group. They discuss the differences between the two approaches, and which they preferred.

Step Six

Round off with whole-class feedback. What do the students have to say? Will the experiment cause you to change the way you teach vocabulary with reading texts?