

Classroom management

Seating arrangement

**materials taken from Sowton
C. (2021) Teaching in
Challenging Circumstances.
Cambridge University Press.
p.94-102**

III Teaching large classes

9 Managing the seating arrangements

A good seating arrangement is one which facilitates specific learning tasks and activities and communicates a teacher's beliefs about learning and teaching.

Hue Ming-Tak and Li Wai-Shing

- 1 Classroom seating arrangement has a big impact on how you teach, and therefore on how learning takes place.
- 2 Many of the assumptions about the advantages of fixed-desk classrooms are untrue.
- 3 In situations where the desks and seating are fixed and cannot be moved, there are still many things which you can do to improve learning experiences and outcomes.
- 4 If you are able to change the seating layout, there are many advantages to doing so. What you can do depends on the size of your class, and the existing infrastructure.
- 5 Remember: even if the desks and benches are not mobile, your students are!

- 1** What are the seating arrangements in the classroom(s) which you teach in? Are you satisfied with the arrangements? Why / why not?
- 2** Do you have a seating plan for your students, or can they sit where they want?
- 3** The names of six possible classrom layouts are given below. Draw a diagram of what you think each would look like.

Double U

Mirror

Inside out
Circle

Islands

Family table

The link between seating arrangement and teaching approach

The seating plan in a classroom says a lot about the pedagogy and methodology which is used. Typically, in a classroom without any furniture (e.g. just mats on the floor), the learning includes more activities and is more learner-centred, and students interact more effectively and with more of their classmates. In fixed-desk classrooms, a 'chalk and talk' or 'sit and listen' approach is commonly used. This leads to students working more by themselves, being less active, and talking to the same people much of the time.

Robert Sommer said that we should not talk about a single 'classroom environment', but rather several 'classroom environments'. Within one room, there can be huge differences in terms of comfort, atmosphere, temperature, lighting and sightlines (i.e. the view of the board). Just one of these factors could negatively impact the students. A combination of these factors would likely be very significant.

Why does the seating arrangement matter?

To maximize the learning experiences and outcomes, children need a comfortable, safe workspace. They should also feel some ownership of that space. This is not the same thing as simply having a desk, or sitting in the same place on the same bench every lesson. Across the world, the most common classroom seating arrangement is one containing fixed desks in rows. Four reasons why fixed-desk classrooms are so common, especially in challenging circumstances, is because they:

- 1** maximize the space which is available;
- 2** enable the teacher to control the students more effectively;
- 3** make it easier for students to write;
- 4** provide an easy mechanism for dividing the class into boys and girls.

These assumptions can, however, be challenged. A lot of research suggests that other seating layouts are better for language learning:

- 1 Whilst true that fixed-desk classrooms are an efficient use of space, most of the alternative layouts (see below) use a similar amount of space.
- 2 This is also a very negative way to look at education – learning should be much more than simply the avoidance of bad behaviour. In any case, students generally behave badly when they are either not interested or not included in the lesson. Therefore, the best way to ‘control’ a class is to make lessons interesting and involve everyone.
- 3 Students would benefit from developing L2 speaking and listening skills, rather than just writing. Writing, however, is often prioritized – with students commonly doing writing tasks without any real understanding of what they are writing. Alternatively, they may be given writing tasks, but are unable to do them because they don’t have a pencil or paper.
- 4 Other layouts can also separate boys and girls, if desired. These other layouts can also provide more opportunities for ‘safe’ interaction (e.g. mingle or doughnut / onion, see ► [4.3](#)), which can help normalize the relationships between boys and girls.

Based on these arguments, one option might be to remove all the classroom furniture and have an ‘empty’ classroom (see ► [Chapter 12](#)). Even if desired, this may be difficult to implement for a variety of reasons. As such, let us consider how you can make the most of a fixed-desk classroom. Although you might not have a choice about which room(s) you teach in, and what furniture is inside, you can choose how you manage this situation. The next part of this chapter looks at some of the specific challenges of fixed-desk classrooms, and how these challenges can be solved.

9.1 Preferred seats next to friends

Challenge: Students often run into the classroom to get their preferred seat, or so they can sit next to their friends. As they rush into the classroom to avoid the broken window, the uncomfortable bench, or the dark corner, the start to your lesson can be chaotic. This can lead to delays and disorder.

Also, knowing that this is what happens can also cause anxiety, leading to the student's affective filter (see ► [Chapter 23](#)) being high, which has a negative effect on the language learning process.

Solution: Allocate students specific places to sit. This can be for a fixed length of time (e.g. a week, a month, a term). At the primary level, you can mark each student's place with an picture they can easily recognize (e.g. an animal).

9.2 Same partners in pair or group work

Challenge: Students often only want to sit next to their friends, and therefore always work with the same people in pair or group activities. This is not an authentic way to develop L2. Much of the time, people use L2 with strangers. Also, when working with friends, students are more risk-averse. This means they are likely to use only language they are already comfortable with, and not push themselves.

Solution: Once a week you can have a ‘working with a new friend’ session. Here, you ask (or plan) for students to sit next to others they know less well. For this to have the biggest impact, explain to your students why you are doing this.

9.3 Partners at a similar language level

Challenge: Students tend to work with people at a similar language level, and consequently won't develop useful and necessary language skills such as ► [accommodating](#), ► [paraphrasing](#), asking for clarification, etc. These skills are all crucial when students use L2 in a real-life situation.

Solution: Create a seating plan in which students sit in heterogeneous rows where there is a range of different abilities side by side (but don't tell them this). As they work together, these language skills will develop naturally.

9.4 The back and the front of the class

Challenge: In many classrooms, weaker students generally sit at the back of the class, and strong ones at the front. Stronger students participate actively but weaker students don't. This lack of equal participation leads to an increase in the gap between their levels. Weaker students may experience frustration and boredom, which results in poor behaviour.

Solution: Use a 'one day front, one day back' system. If students sit in the back half of the class on one day, they must sit in the front half the following day (and vice versa). You will need to monitor this to ensure it is happening. Eventually, this will become natural, and you shouldn't need to manage the process.

9.5 Difficulty accessing seats

Challenge: If students have to climb over other students in order to reach their seats, this causes time delays, and can also lead to discipline and behavioural problems.

Solution: Tell students that when they enter the room, they must fill the rows up from the inside. This stops students having to climb over other students' legs.

9.6 *The teacher is static*

Challenge: When the teacher stays mainly at the front of the classroom (near the board or their desk), students at the back find it harder to understand what they are saying. As a result they can feel less involved in the lesson, which may lead to poor behaviour.

Solution: Teachers need to be more active, and ensure that they move about the whole room. It's something teachers must be conscious of. Teachers should only use the board when necessary.

Why do teachers need to manage seating?

It can be argued that a ‘first come, first served’ seating system disadvantages students who need the most support. This would include students who are shy or who are weak in the L2, as they can hide away at the back of the room. Students who have long or complicated journeys to school (who are unable to arrive early or indeed on time) may also often have to sit in the worst parts of the classroom, and are thus doubly disadvantaged.

The decisions which you make about seating will depend on your own context. There is no reason why your seating plan system has to remain the same throughout the academic year. Indeed, at the start of the academic year, there are good reasons for allowing students to decide themselves where they want to sit. For example, a student might decide to sit with

students they share a first language with, or students they already know or who are in the same family / ethnic / community group as them. This can build their confidence, which is especially important for inexperienced or vulnerable students. However, you may wish to change this as students develop relationships with both you and with other members of the class. When you make this transition, doing a series of mingle or doughnut / onion activities (see ► [4.3](#)) can be a useful bridge.

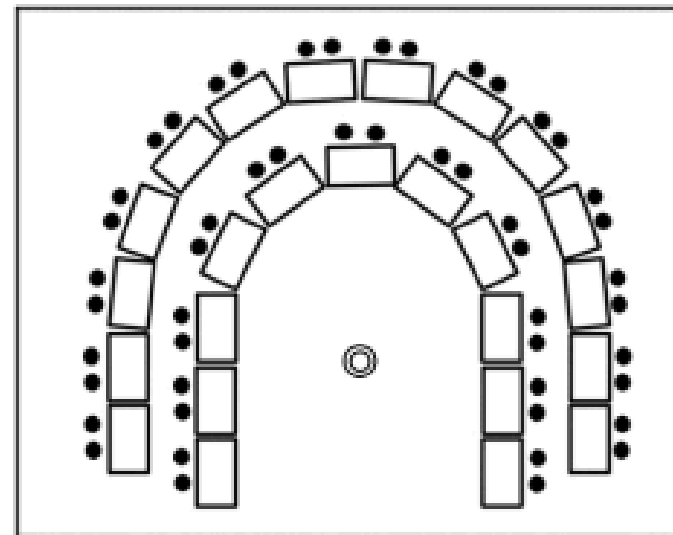
What different seating layouts are possible?

In situations where it is possible to move the classroom furniture, there are several ways you can arrange the classroom seating. Particular layouts which could work well in challenging circumstances are outlined below. Ultimately, whatever layout you choose, it is important to explain your reasons to your students (and also to colleagues) your reasons why, and to consider the issue from the students' perspective. In his book, *Classroom Management Techniques*, Jim Scrivener makes this suggestion:

After the students have all gone home, take a few minutes to view your classroom from their viewpoint. Choose three or four random student desks at different places round the class, and sit in them for a minute or so. Imagine watching yourself up front at the board. Is the view clear? What might cause problems? What makes each place pleasant or uncomfortable? Based on what you experience, reflect on what changes you could make to the room to improve it.

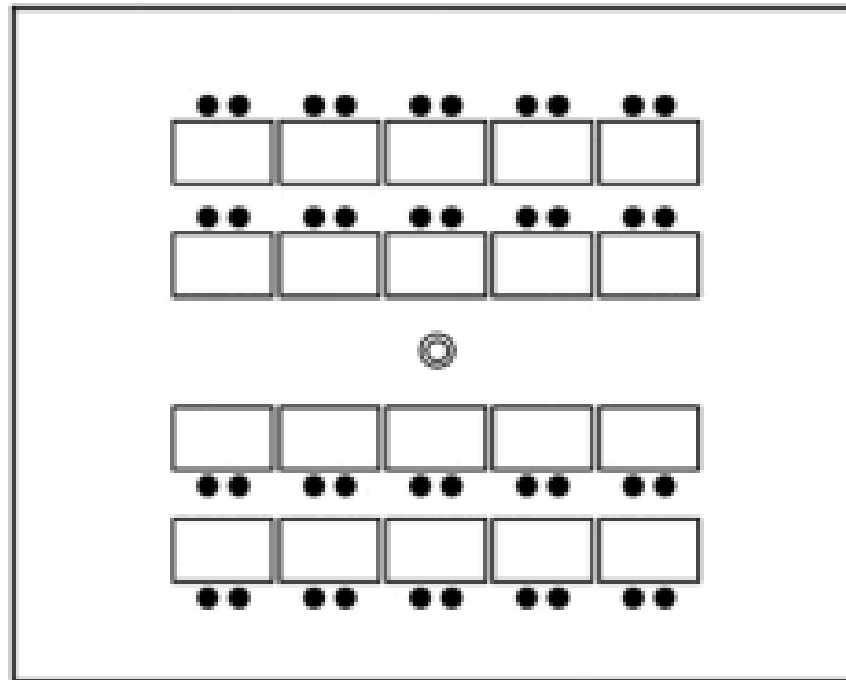
U, or double U-shape

A U-shaped layout allows students to easily work together with many different students. The teacher can also move around, and be close to every student. Nobody can hide at the back of the class. The double U can be used with larger classes.



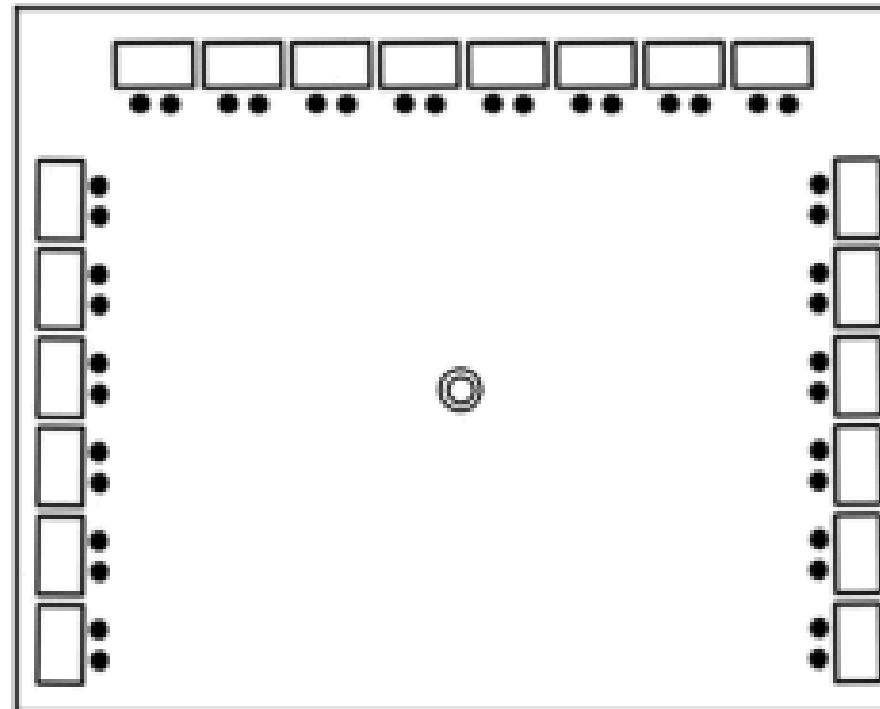
Mirror

Students are seated opposite each other. This encourages discussion, and emphasizes speaking and listening rather than just copying information from the board. It's also easy for the teacher to walk up and down the room.



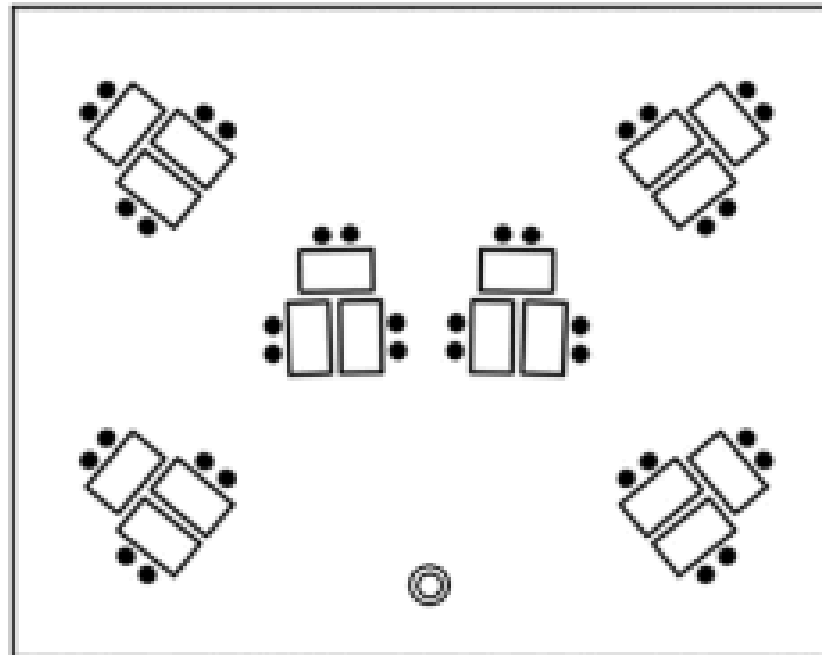
Inside out

Speaking and listening becomes the primary focus with this arrangement. There is no barrier between the teacher and students. The option to write on a desk is there. Students can turn around and do this when necessary.



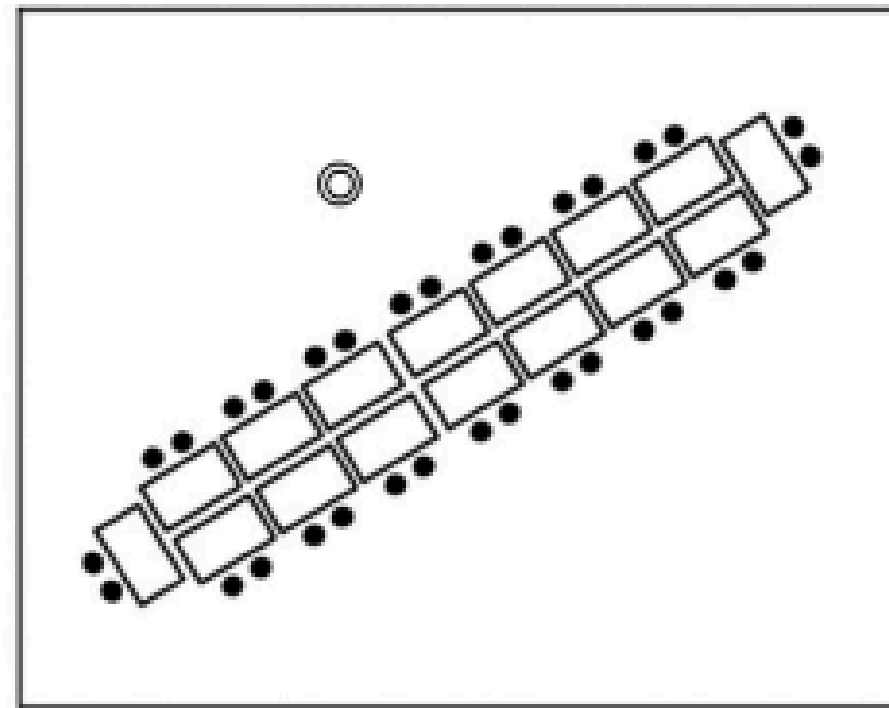
Islands

Students are arranged in groups, making communication easier. They can also work together effectively, reflecting the collaborative nature of language learning. Note how students are not seated at the end of the island – so that they can still see the teacher clearly. When doing tasks together, however, they can work round the whole table.



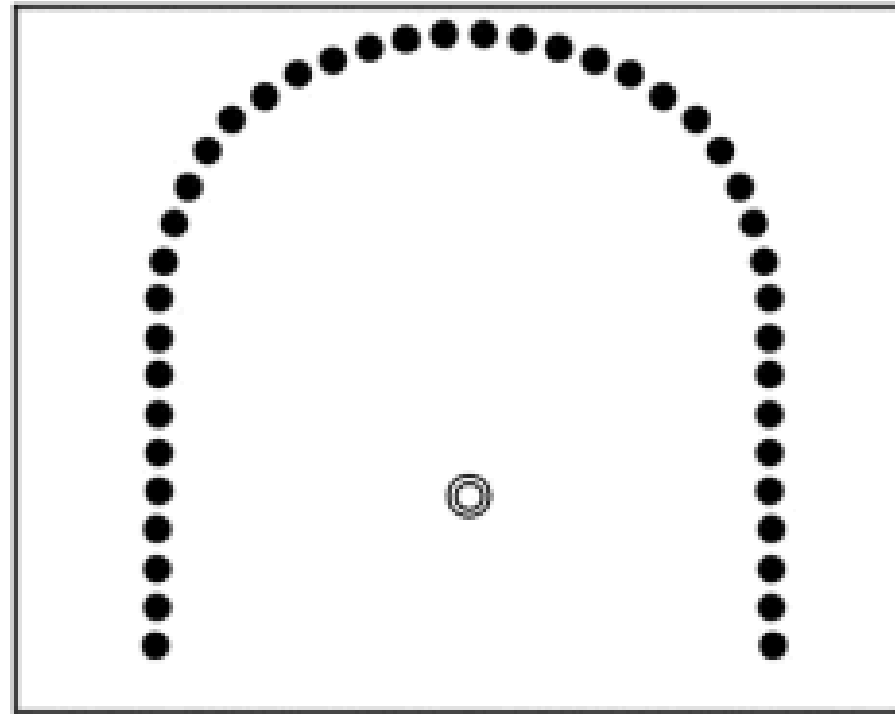
Family table

The whole class works as one. This is a very useful layout if you don't have a large class (e.g. fewer than twenty students). It can also be useful for group project work.



Circle

Remove all the furniture, have students (and you) sit on the floor in a circle.



Many of these changes might be easier at the primary level with younger children. As children get older, their bodies and mindset change. It's therefore crucial that if you want to make these changes, you must be committed and passionate. If you don't have this enthusiasm, your students definitely won't.

Reflection

- What are the advantages and disadvantages of each of the layouts discussed?
- What do you think would be the best seating arrangement for your class(es)? Remember that the best arrangement may differ from class to class.
- Can you implement these changes in your classroom? If this would be difficult, is there anyone you could talk to in order to make this happen?
- What impact do you think changing seating arrangements would have on your teaching, and your students' learning?