

Informal Cooperative Learning Structures*

Numbered heads together

By having students work in a group, this structure ensures each member knows the answer.

Steps

1. Number the students in each group, up to four. If one group is smaller than the others, have number “three” answer for number “four” as well. The teacher can give numbers or students can give numbers themselves.
2. Teacher asks the students a question or sets a problem to solve. It must be stressed that everyone in the group must be able to participate and answer the question. Ensure enough wait time is given for the group to do the task.
3. Teacher calls out a number (e.g., two) and each “two” is asked to give the answer.

Three-step interview

This process activates prior knowledge and encourages peer tutoring. It can also be used to review and reinforce previously learned material.

Steps

1. Seat students in groups of four and further divide into partners.
2. Students interview their partner by asking clarifying questions (What, How, When, Where, Why) about their understanding of a topic, skill or process.
3. During the second step, partners reverse the roles.
4. Students share their partner’s response with team.

Circle the sage

Good way to address group questions.

Steps

1. Teacher asks class who has special knowledge to share; e.g., who was able to solve a difficult math homework question.
2. Those students become “the sages” and spread out in the room.
3. The rest of the class sits in teams.
4. Next, the team members divide themselves equally around different sages.
5. Sage shares knowledge and students return to teams.
6. Students share what they learned with team (each team member has visited a different sage).

Mix-freeze-pair

Gets students up and moving.

Steps

1. Teacher poses a question.
2. Teacher calls “mix” and students walk quietly around the room.
3. Teacher calls “freeze” and all students stop where they are.
4. Teacher calls “pair” and each student pairs with closest student and they share answers to the question.

Classroom Instruction That Works with English Language Learners

Inside-outside circle

This kinesthetic structure facilitates student interaction.

Steps

1. Students face each other in two concentric circles, either sitting or standing. Students in the inside circle face a partner in the outside circle.
2. Students in the inside circle are asked to share something with their partner.
3. Students reverse roles and the outside circle shares with their partner.
4. Inside circle rotates and a new set of partners is formed. Repeat steps 2 through 4.

Four corners

An approach that asks students to form an opinion.

Steps

1. Give students a prompt that requires them to form an opinion about the prompt. Use Likert scale options such as Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, and Strongly Disagree.
2. Post the response options in four corners of the room. Students walk to the area where their Likert scale choice is posted.
3. In their groups, students discuss their reasons for choosing the option they did. Each group then reports out to the class. As a follow-up, the teacher can ask students to go to another corner and argue the prompt from that point of view.

Paraphrase passport

Students earn a “passport” to speak by accurately paraphrasing their partner’s ideas.

Steps

1. Students are paired.
2. Teacher assigns a discussion topic.
3. One student in the pair shares an idea.
4. Before the partner can share, he or she must paraphrase what was last said.
5. The student whose statement was paraphrased indicates whether the speaker has correctly captured their meaning.
6. The discussion continues.

Talking chips

Each student is expected to contribute.

Steps

1. Each student gets 3–4 chips (poker chips work well).
2. The students are divided into groups of 4–5 people.
3. The groups are given discussion points to talk about. Every time a student speaks, they must put a chip in the center of the group. When a student runs out of chips, they are no longer allowed to speak until all other group members have all of their chips in the middle.
4. If there is more to discuss, they go in reverse...every time they speak, they take a chip out of the center until they have all 3–4 chips back.