

The EFL Classroom Structure

The main debate concerning the classroom structure has been on whether learners learn better in *competitive, co-operative, or individualistic* environments.

It has been found that competition is only helpful to those who do well. The success of one person or group must always work to the detriment of the others, a situation, which is exacerbated if rewards are only given for right answers. This inevitably leads to a situation where learners become fearful of making mistakes and fail to see any value in doing so, a state which is not conducive to learning a foreign language, where learners need to feel able to try to communicate in the language. In competitive settings success and failure tend to be attributed to greater or lesser ability and self-esteem becomes dependent upon one's perception of one's own ability.

Within individualized structures where rewards are based on self-improvement the emphasis is not on comparing oneself with others, but instead on comparing one's present level of performance with previous achievements. In such circumstances, success or failure is more likely to be attributed to effort. Another benefit of individualized learning is that it makes it possible to concentrate upon the learning process and to identify personal strategies that are likely to lead to successful learning of the language.

Within co-operative structures the learners become dependent upon each other in order to achieve success. Ways of organizing groupwork in class vary enormously, but are generally based upon the five key principles of *positive interdependence, individual accountability, face-to-face positive interaction*, the development of *social skills*, and regular *group processing*.

Arranging a competitive learning atmosphere is likely to be effective in enabling some English learners to pass examinations and achieve well. However, it will have the opposite effect on other learners and may also have negative long-term consequences for the high achievers. Co-operative groupwork, is likely to produce more positive general achievements across a broad range of learners but will not necessarily produce autonomous, self-directed learners. A classroom, which was run on totally individualized lines, would miss out on important aspects of social interaction and communication. So, no one approach can ever be fully effective on its own in teaching English as a foreign language. The secret must surely be to find ways of providing a flexible structure in the EFL classroom, which effectively incorporates all three forms of organization.