Collaborative activities

What are collaborative activities?
Collaborative activities are any activities where learners are working co-operatively in pairs or groups. For example:
- Pair or group discussions
- Completing shared tasks in a pair or group, e.g. matching, sorting, ranking
- Activities or games with a competitive element, e.g. bingo
- Drama and role play
- Information exchange activities, including barrier games and jigsaw activities

Examples of activities
Collaborative activities can be used for any age-range and in any subject. EAL learners at any stage of language development can take part, particularly if those who are New to English are grouped with supportive peers. Here are some examples:

1. Group or pair discussion
There are a range of types of pair or group discussions, for example:

Listening triangles: learners work together in groups of three: a speaker, a questioner and a note-taker.
  - The speaker explains the topic (or expresses their opinion on an issue) as directed by the teacher
  - The questioner listens carefully and asks for clarification or further detail
  - The note-taker observes this process and provides feedback to both speaker and questioner

Talk partners: Learners are paired for short discussion activities. Pairs can be selected, chosen randomly or regularly switched. It may be useful to establish ground rules and model some appropriate question types and responses.

Think-Pair-Share: Learners prepare a response to a text or prepare a piece of work and then explain their ideas to a partner. After the pairs have discussed the
issue, they join with another pair, share views and emerge with a group conclusion or perspective.

**Snowballing:** Learners discuss something or investigate an issue in pairs. The pairs then join another pair to form a group and share their findings. The small groups then join together to make a larger group: 2 → 4 → 8 → 16 → whole-class.

2. **Working on shared tasks, e.g. matching, sorting, ranking**

Working collaboratively on a task encourages use of the vocabulary of the curriculum area, and at the same time encourages use of the language of making suggestions, justifying opinions, agreeing and disagreeing, etc. It also gives practice in listening. Many of the resources on EAL Nexus have images that can be made into flashcards which can be used for matching, sorting or ranking. For example in *A balanced diet* learners are asked to sort cards with different foods on into groups according to their nutrient content.

3. **Games and activities with a competitive element**

Games can be very effective in motivating learners, and in revising or consolidating curriculum content. They also practise the language of turn-taking and negotiating. Bingo is a popular game included in several of our resources, e.g. Food bingo. A quick noughts and crosses game can be produced for any topic on a whiteboard, i.e. a 3x3 grid with answers in each square. Split the class into two teams, and teams discuss possible questions to match the answers. There are likely to be a range of possible correct questions. In this example a question to which the correct answer is ‘protein’ could be ‘What do you find in fish, nuts and meat?’ or ‘What do we need to build and repair tissue?’

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>protein</th>
<th>meat and fish</th>
<th>fat</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>rice</td>
<td>carbohydrates</td>
<td>fibre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vegetables</td>
<td>sugar</td>
<td>vitamins</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4. **Drama and role play**

Drama and role play can be fun and used successfully in any area of the curriculum. Drama is a very valuable tool for exploring issues, making learning memorable, encouraging co-operation and empathy. The use of drama and role play can create an opportunity for the learner to hear and rehearse language in a meaningful context, so as to be able to use it confidently in speech or writing.

5. **Information exchange activities**

Information exchange (or information gap) activities are communicative activities for two or more learners. They include barrier games and jigsaw activities, or any
activity that involves learners having different pieces of information that they then have to convey to each other orally. Here are two examples:

- **Barrier games**: In a [barrier game](#) Learner A and Learner B sit with a barrier between them and are required to convey information to each other, for example while looking at different text or images. A book or file propped on its side can be used as a barrier. E.g. Charles Dickens barrier game.

- **Rainbowing**: This is a form of [jigsaw activity](#) where each member of a working group is given a different colour. When the group task is complete the learners form new groups according to their colours. Within the colour groups, they compare findings, discuss what they have achieved, or carry out another task that they all need to contribute to, e.g. completing a grid. An example of this is the activity in [Propaganda posters of World War 1](#), where learners work in groups to look at a poster and discuss what its underlying message is.

### How collaborative activities work

Many tasks can be made into collaborative activities by asking learners to complete them in pairs or groups rather than individually. For collaborative activities to work effectively it is important to:

- consider the grouping of learners carefully, for example placing early stage bilingual learners with peers who can provide good models of English, and / or share the same first language
- establish the type of behaviour that will be expected from learners for them to benefit most from these types of activities and ensure that everyone is clear what their role is, e.g. asking questions, answering questions, observing, collaborating on the set task.
- bear in mind that group discussions can take place in English or in the learners’ first language. Think about what you want them to get from the discussion and decide which language or languages you want them to use.
- encourage other members of the group to include EAL learners who may need support to take part in a discussion or activity. Make sure the EAL learner has a role in the discussion. [Speaking frames](#) can be useful to scaffold the language used, e.g. in the Charles Dickens barrier game cards with sentence starters on are provided to support learners who are at the [New to English, Early acquisition or Developing competence](#) levels.
For a range of free teaching resources that promote collaborative activities see the Collaborative Learning Project website

**Top tip:** Ensure the tasks are sufficiently challenging and will provide a genuine need for discussion, problem-solving and working together

**Why are collaborative activities a Great Idea for EAL learners?**

Collaborative activities are great for EAL learners because they encourage speaking and listening, and particularly exploratory talk as defined by Barnes. The idea that exploratory talk is really important for language development was adopted by socio-cultural researchers like Mercer and Wells and also links to Halliday’s theories on the importance of interaction and the negotiation of meaning to language development.

Working with a partner or in a small group allows learners to feel more confident, and the language is being used for a meaningful purpose rather than out of context, as recommended by Swain and Lapkin (1995). Gardner (2012) argues that collaborative learning is a feature of inclusive classrooms, and the benefits of group work are also supported by Cordon (2000). Kotler et al (2001) and Wong Fillmore and Snow (2005) also highlight the importance of social interaction and active participation in language acquisition.

**References**


