

GROUPING FOR English Learners

Thoughtful, teacher-created groups can maximize the participation of English learners (ELs), which enhances their learning of both math content and language.

The Importance of Interaction for ELs

Learning mathematics is a social process that requires trying out and using the language of math while learning the concepts of math. Interaction is key for oral language development, and it is especially critical for English learners (ELs). (Zwiers et al, 2017)

Intentional and thoughtful use of partners or small groups gives English learners more opportunities for interaction than in a whole group setting. As ELs speak and are responded to, they learn both language and mathematics.

Grouping Guidelines

1 Form groups strategically.

Teacher-created groups are more effective in achieving instructional goals than student-selected groups, as they tend to be more task-oriented and productive. They also allow teachers to support language development, community-building, and critical or creative thinking. (Mozaffari, 2017)

2 Consider the instructional purpose of an activity or task as well as the language demands.

Make and change groups based on the type of activity and children's strengths and needs. Flexible grouping allows English learners to talk and bond with different classmates and ensures that they do not get isolated in EL-only groups

3 Give children choice when the activity purpose is mostly fun.

Build in time for children to choose their own partners or small groups. Monitor to ensure children stay on task.

4 Consider children's sense of comfort, acceptance, and ease of communication when planning seating.

Children's feelings affect their motivation and ability to learn language. Change seating or table groups regularly, for example, every few months or every unit.

Four Ways to Form Groups

Once the instructional purpose is clear, consider how these four ways of forming groups can benefit the language development of ELs. (ELSF, 2023)

Same Home Language

- **Increases comfort and risk-taking.** Good for pre-work, drafting, or practice before whole-class sharing.
- **Facilitates processing of information** provided in English. Children can paraphrase, ask questions, and dig deeper into ideas using their home language.
- **Allows instruction and scaffolding in the home language** by the teacher or paraprofessional.

Mixed Languages

- **Supports community-building.** Children get to know peers and share background knowledge.
- **Builds language skills** as English learners listen to and use English in academic contexts. A bilingual child in the group can help bridge languages for emerging ELs.

Similar English Language Proficiency (ELP) Levels

- **Levels the language playing field.** There aren't more fluent children to dominate, so everyone can speak and contribute.
- **Puts the instructional focus on language.** Teacher support, practice, or enrichment can target specific language goals.

Different English Language Proficiency (ELP) Levels

- **Enables all children to learn about language** as they listen to one another and adjust language choices to communicate and share their understanding of content.
- **Provides opportunities to reinforce classroom norms** of kindness, respect, and support of one another's learning. Take care not to pair or group children at opposite ends of language proficiency.
- **Place newcomers in groups of three** rather than in pairs, as many go through "silent periods" until they feel comfortable with English.

Grouping Guidance for Classroom Mathematics California Activities

Teachers decide whether to conduct key *Classroom Mathematics California* activities using whole class, small group, partner, or individual formats based on knowledge of their students. The table below suggests options for thoughtfully forming pairs and small groups in key activities to support language development.

Activity	Pair & Small Group Options	Rationale for Grouping Options
Vocabulary Activities • Build Your Vocabulary (Unit level) • Build Concepts	• Mixed languages • Different ELP levels, but avoid grouping children at opposite ends of the proficiency range	• Children with different language experiences bring their own prior knowledge to the activity. • English learners can share their language assets, such as cognates, with each other.
Discuss It: Partner Discussion	• Same home language • Different ELP levels	• Children can process new content presented in English, paraphrase, and rehearse initial ideas prior to whole-class discussion.
Connect It	• Same home language • Different ELP levels	• Children may benefit from using their home language to talk through possible connections. • Children with higher ELP levels model language and support children with lower ELP levels.
Centers	• Mixed languages • Different ELP Levels OR • Student choice	• Children will have heard and practiced language needed for centers during Apply It. Centers games can motivate them to interact and use language with a wider range of peers.
Differentiation RETEACH REINFORCE	• Same home language • Similar ELP levels • Mixed languages • Different ELP levels	• Children can process/rethink concepts in their home language to clear up misunderstandings. • Teacher can focus on language objectives. • Children can reinforce language associated with concepts by interacting with native English speakers with higher ELP levels.
Math in Action (with Data Activities)	• Mixed languages • Mixed ELP levels	• For project-like activities, children benefit from sharing many perspectives in small groups. Try to have at least one bilingual child in each group.