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## THE ECLECTIC MINDSET AND THE TRADITIONAL CLASSROOM: EXPLORING WAYS TO IMPROVE LEARNER PARTICIPATION THROUGH CLASSROOM SETTINGS

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### Abstract

There is a common notion which is acknowledged by practitioners of various fields that the environment could be the biggest influence on their growth. It is the same in the case of education. In most cases, classrooms are large and hence the seating arrangements are fixed into traditional rows and columns. Due to the fixed/unchanged seating layouts/arrangements in the large classroom, teachers encounter problems such as they could not: execute their planned procedures, group them as the methodology demands, provide equal opportunities for corrections, interactions, evaluations, performance and to practice all the skills learned in the classroom.

To solve these problems this research paper tries to look at the necessity of different seating arrangements to equidistribute the opportunities to every learner in the large classroom and propose eclectic solutions to increase learner participation and productivity in the classroom.

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*Keywords:* Classroom arrangements, the fixed layout, individual attention, eclectic teacher, the role of an eclectic teacher.

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## **1.1 Introduction**

In most cases, classrooms are large and hence the seating arrangements are fixed into traditional rows and column. Due to the fixed/unchanged seating layouts/arrangements in the large classroom, teachers encounter many problems. To solve these problems this research paper tries to look at the necessity of different seating arrangements to equidistribute the opportunities to every learner in the large classroom and propose eclectic solutions to increase learner participation and productivity in the classroom.

Eclecticism was a philosophy that emerged as a counter approach for all the methods and approaches that favoured the dominance of a single method. It does not devalue the merits of those methods but it enriches all the best practices and underpins them as one single approach for all the issues in the language-teaching context. One of those issues is that the teachers pay the least attention to the seating arrangements of the students. Due to this, sometimes the teachers even skip the textbook activity since it requires a different seating setting which the normal rows and columns of the classroom do not favour the teachers in order to implement change. Due to this unchangeable seating layout, the performance of the students and their productivity is less. It has been established by Pedro, Ulrich and Datondji (2018) that the seating arrangement improves the students' performance to a larger extent. Due to the heterogeneous nature of the classroom, the learning style of the students vary. To balance this trait the researcher has used group learning based seating arrangements to increase the performance and language productivity of the students. The researcher has therefore created a provision in the teaching material by giving the seating arrangement that best suits the particular lesson for the teachers who suffer from such inconveniences.

## **1.2 Research problem**

Invariably, teachers and students feel that the classroom facilities are more a hindrance than a help in assisting language teaching and learning. A predictable and monotonous seating arrangement only favours a traditional lecture mode of teaching whereas the eclectic approach recommends a variety of settings to augment effective teaching and learning. Changing the setting is as challenging as adapting to new teaching-learning methods. One requires extra resources to effect the desired changes. This study takes up the challenge of exploring different possibilities to enhance student participation without using additional resources without compromising the quality of teaching and learning.

### 1.3 Review of Literature

If the traditional rows and column seating arrangements affect learner performance and productivity then the teachers should spend enough time organising it, to promote effective learning. Perhaps, in most of our teaching environments for the seating arrangement, the teachers have no say. The teachers fully stay away from it and leave it to the choice of the students and they fully forget the ripple effects it has on learning. Van den Berg et al. (2012); Gest and Rodkin (2011) and McKeown et al. (2015) say that the classroom seating arrangements have a greater influence and create a climate to build collaborative learning.

Sleeter and Owuor (2011) argue that the present scenario in the teaching context requires a teacher to possess the ability to educate diverse students within complicated and challenging environments. In the process of teaching, a teacher has to make multiple decisions to lead and facilitate students' to learn effectively. In that line, managing classroom is a tough task on the part of teachers across the classrooms. When looking at the plethora of research done by the researchers on classroom management, a conclusion has been made from the following findings.

1. Classroom management gives job dissatisfaction to the teachers (Everston and Weinstein, 2006)
2. On a few occasions it became the influencing factor that made the teachers leave the professions in their first years (Sokal et al., 2003)
3. Managing the social differences in the classroom was a difficult task in diverse classrooms (De Arment et al., 2013; Farmer et al., 2016)
4. Addressing culturally influenced behaviours were problematic (Weinstein et al., 2004)

From the above findings, it is clear that classroom management is not an easy task for a teacher but it is a difficult one. The fact could be that teachers are less aware of the advantages and disadvantages of the different seating positions that are available. For instance, the traditional row seating arrangement is helpful for a teacher-centred classroom such as lectures, seminars and presentations but not useful for group work and working in pairs. The U-shaped layout helps the students to interact more but it can be used only for smaller class size. Circle or the half-circle helps the students to involve themselves whereas, it cannot be used for presentations and use of PPTs. Clusters or groups help the students to work easier but sometimes it will take away the focus from the instructor. It is obvious that there is no one layout that is fit for all learners on all occasions. But it is evident from the studies done in recent times that the rearranging of the seating has produced the following result in the learners:

1. It has minimized the negative social relationships (Van den Berg et al. 2012)
2. Influence students' relationships and development (Blatchford et al. 2005, Wannarka and Ruhl, 2008)
3. The peers influence the individuals when they work in groups. (Burke and Sass, 2013)

By looking at these results it is vivid that the seating arrangements encourage collaborative work among learners. As one of the roles of an eclectic teacher is managing the materials prescribed, the teachers should manage the students in allotting seats according to the aims of the lesson and the learning style of the learner. The seating layouts that favour group learning were used in the classrooms to improve the language productivity of the learners by providing opportunities to learn collaboratively. The data collected will present the details in the following sections.

#### 1.4 Respondents and the setting of the research

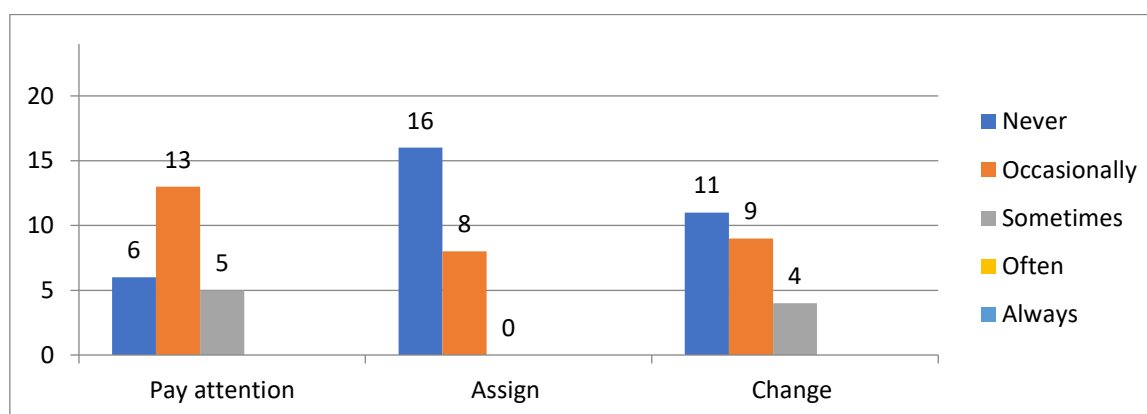
The respondents for this study were MPhil (14), PhD research scholars (9), teaching staff (11) who were handling bridge course and first-year students from Botany (55) and physics (51) departments of St. Joseph's College, Trichy.

#### 1.5 Data analyses

The data was collected through a questionnaire and the observations were used as the data to see how a teacher with an eclectic mind can bring in the atmosphere that will induce the learners to actively perform and participate in every opportunity given to them.

##### 1.5.1 Teachers' perspectives on the seating arrangements

The graph in figure 1.1 shows how teachers pay attention to the seating arrangements of the students. When asked whether they pay attention to the seating arrangements in the class? Out of 24 teachers, 13 of them said they pay occasional attention to the choice of students whereas, 16 teachers agreed that they will not assign the seating arrangements for the students and around 11 teachers agreed that they never change the seating arrangement of the students in the classroom since it consumes a lot of time. hence it is identified that teachers pay least attention to it.



**Figure: 1.1** Teachers' perspectives on seating arrangements

### 1.5.2 The issues faced by teachers with the fixed layouts

The traditional seating arrangements of rows and columns in the large classrooms are subjected to a lot of disadvantages and after close scrutiny the realization was that this seating arrangement does not favour the learner-centre approach. It becomes a hindrance to most of the efforts taken by the teachers. The teachers say the following things become their daily problem as a result of the traditional classroom:

S.No	The fixed seating arrangement (rows and columns) in the class	Teachers
1	affects my choice of teaching methods	13
2	does not promote teacher-student interactions	17
3	it affects students performance	22
4	it lessens the students' language productivity	16
5	becomes an obstacle to reach out to a few students personally	20
6	forces to cling on to a few students for reading, asking feedback, to comprehend students understanding	18
7	creates a relationship gap between them and me and also among student	11
8	becomes an obstacle in volunteering to my call to perform	10
9	develops inferiority complex among students	09
10	develops superiority complex among students	13
11	develops groupism	06
12	makes a few students go unnoticed	17
13	obstructs me to give individual attention	20
14	forces me to skip the activity in the textbook	07
15	doesn't allow me to go ahead with the procedure I planned for a class	07

**Table:1.1** Problems due to the fixed Layouts of classrooms

Out of 24 teachers, 17 of them feel that the unchanged seating has many issues. According to the ripple effects that were identified in the study, the researchers has divided them into three categories as mentioned below. High (if more than 15 teachers opted for it), Average (8-14) and Low (1-7).

**1. High:** A majority of the teachers believe that there are high risks in the fixed seating arrangements. There is no doubt that this seating arrangement aids the teachers to give language input but to practice them the fixed layouts becomes a hindrance. It affects students' performance and their language productivity. It also obstructed them to interact with students, approach students personally and collecting feedback from all. This seating arrangement aids a few students who are unwilling to learn to go and sit in a place where the teachers cannot reach and they go unnoticed by the teachers. On the whole, giving individual attention to the language needs of the learners was difficult.

**2. Average:** Some of the teachers believe that there were average risks in the fixed seating arrangements. It obstructed them in following the choice of methods; created relationship problems among students-students and teacher-students; obstructed students to freely volunteer for the opportunities given; created inferiority complex among students when they did not get an opportunity to perform and superiority complex for sitting in the first bench or last bench.

**3. Low:** A few teachers believe that there were low risks in the fixed seating arrangements. At times it helped to develop groupism among the students, forced them to skip the activities in the textbook and obstructed the teachers in following the procedures that they have planned for a particular lesson.

17 teachers added these points in their note under the questionnaire.

1. The teachers never knew that the seating changes will do these much social and educational changes among the students
2. This process helped teachers to self- introspect our roles as educators
3. It was informative to know the ways to promote learner performance in such a traditional classroom
4. It helped teachers to break the prejudice about the seating positions of the students
5. The teachers started to look into all these notions into their students and made them curious in experimenting with the different seating positions for their students.

### **1.5.3 Seating layouts: The untouched area of the teachers**

Due to the sensitivity it encircles among the students, the teachers find it difficult to intervene in the seating choice of the students. Hamm (2011), Gest and Rodkin (2011) have established a stand that seating arrangements in the classroom are not only contributing to the development of the academic endeavours of the learners but also attributes a lot to the social functioning of the learners. Hence it is sensitive that the teachers have to have an “invisible hand” (Mariola, Van den Berg, Eliane and Antonious, 2016, p. 753) in allotting the seating positions of the students. The teachers have to improve on this aspect of changing the seating of the students by understanding the needs of each individual’s strength and weakness. These seating changes should help the teachers to comfortably achieve the aims of the lesson and improve the performance of the students.

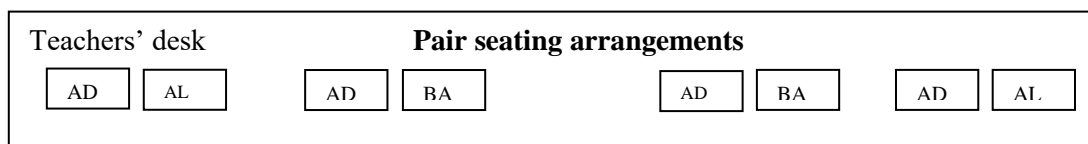
### **1.5.4 Seating arrangements and eclectic teaching material**

Five lessons were prepared by the researcher based on the Eclectic principles to be implemented in the large heterogeneous classrooms. In teaching material, the researcher has provided an option to use a particular seating arrangement that best suits the aim of the lesson and promote the learner

performance. A few grouping seating arrangements were tried out because the seating changes promote more productivity as a reaction to the peer influence among the students. The overall impact showed that scaffolding strategies were used to balance the average and below-average students with the help of advanced learners.

The advanced learners played an important role while practicing the language skills and they provided opportunities to all their group members. This process helped the students to clarify their doubts and also created room for them to share their ideas and views with ease and comfort.

**1. The pair seating arrangements:** This was used while teaching **Self-introduction**. It fostered interaction between the two individual students and had given a larger space for them to practice all the language skills in front of the other learners by balancing their strength and weakness. This seating arrangement paved the way for the teacher to move around the class to correct and help the students who were really in need.



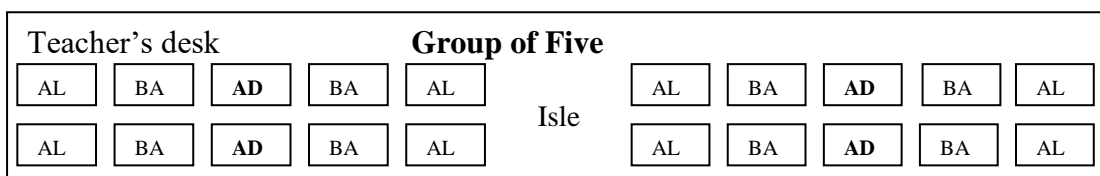
**Image 1.1** Pair seating Arrangements

Note: AD: Advanced Learner; BA: Below Average; AL: Average Learners

This seating arrangement is set in the traditional seating arrangement without altering the furniture. On a bench, there were two pairs of students. In both the group there was an advanced learner to scaffold every attempt of the average and below-average learner. After the input, the teachers moved around the class through the aisle and beside the wall to assist the students. Meanwhile, the students discussed, clarified, and worked in collaborations to prepare them to reproduce what they have learnt in the class.

**2. Group of Five**

This seating was used while teaching **Cause and Effect**. The observation and assistance was equidistributed to all the learners by the teacher and through the advanced learners while conducting quizzes. The balance was kept to scaffold the students when it was necessary.



**Image: 1.2** Group of Five

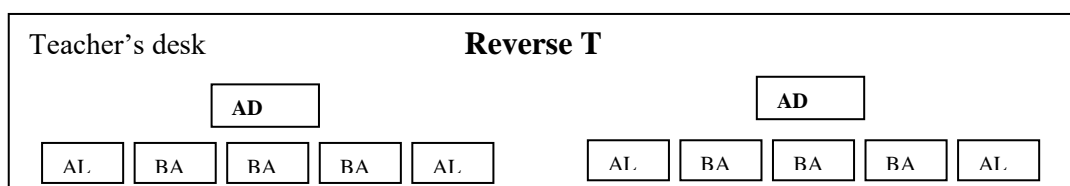
Note: AD: Advanced Learner; BA: Below Average; AL: Average Learners

In this seating arrangement, the students learnt to collaboratively work by balancing the weakness of the others. The AD was placed in the middle and the BAs were placed very next to on either side of

him. The ALs were placed in the inner isle and near to the wall where they could be assisted by the teacher when she/he moves around the class.

### 3. Reverse T

This was used while teaching **My habitual actions**. It helped the students to work in small groups and created a safe environment to convey their ideas while matching the words related to the headword. In this seating arrangement, the AD acts as the facilitator and leader while practising after the input sections. He/she sits turning towards their group members. The AD questions and scaffolds the BAs and the ALs when necessary to bring out the language outcome from them.

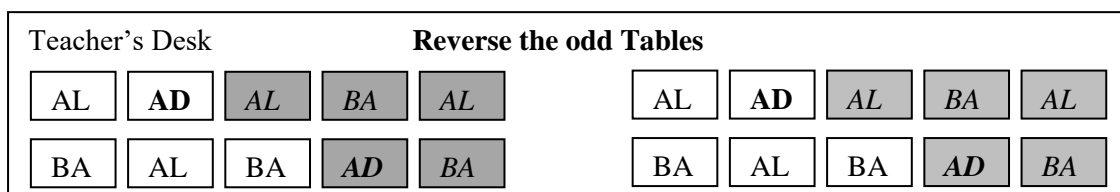


**Image: 1.3** Reverse T

Note: AD: Advanced Learner; BA: Below Average; AL: Average Learners

### 4. Reverse the odd tables:

In this seating setting the students who are sitting in the odd benches that is 1, 3 and 5 have to reverse their seating by just facing the even benches.



**Image: 1.4** Reverse the Odd tables

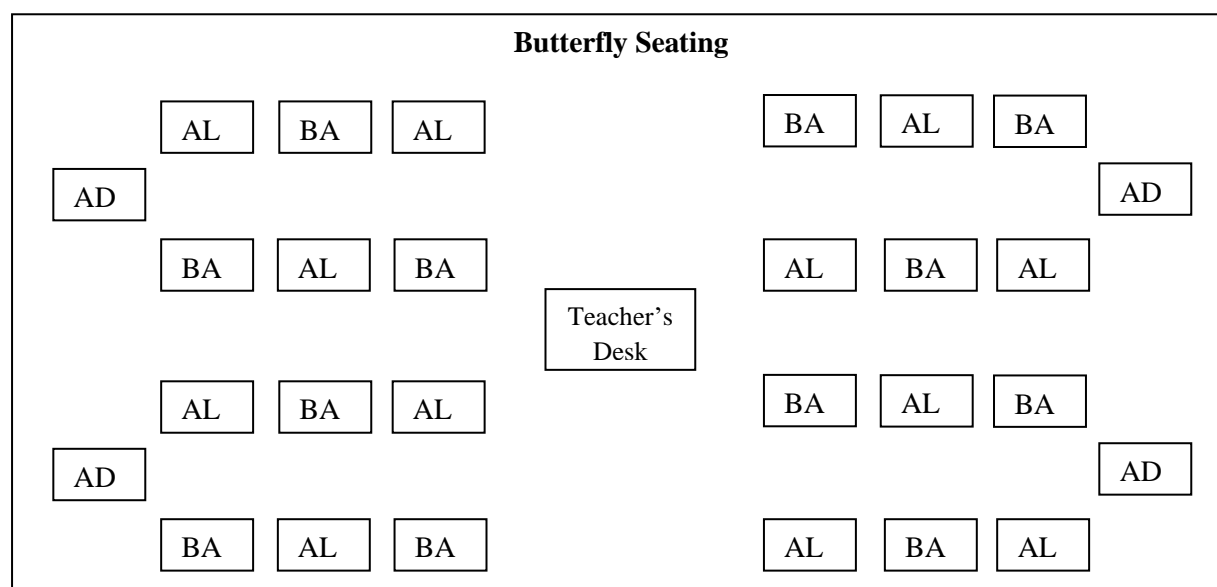
**Note:** AD: Advanced Learner; BA: Below Average; AL: Average Learners

This seating arrangement was used to teach **The best chef and the best dish**. Using this seating arrangement helped students to interact with all the members of the group face to face. It also encouraged group discussion among the group to role-play the recipe.

### 5. Butterfly

It was used while teaching **Word association**. It avoided the unwanted distractions of students based on the reward point for the group. Each team was given a topic to work on. It was informed that on completion the team will be a rewarded. So the participation of the students was active.





**Image: 1.5** Butterfly seating

**Note:** AD: Advanced Learner; BA: Below Average; AL: Average Learners

This seating arrangement was arranged in the butterfly shape. The advanced learner is placed in the outer wing facing the group members. AD helps the students to arrange the list of words and helps them to write the commands and orders using them.

#### **The Overall feedback about the seating changes**

In the first and foremost place, the different seating arrangements made the students enjoy doing what was asked of them by grabbing the opportunities as a fun activity and participated actively in their small groups. This created room for students' and teacher interactions. It also created room for developing inter-personal relationship among the students which in turn helped them to have a mixed learning experience

#### **1.6 Suggestions to improve the seating arrangements of the classroom**

The teacher has to break the prejudice about the seating choice of the students in the first place. They should learn the positive and the negative sides of each seating positions in the classrooms. They should plan and presume about the seating arrangement for every lesson. Moreover, the teacher should take the role of facilitator in managing the classroom and the students.

They should learn the names of each student and address them by name. The teachers should break the presumptions of students about their seating choice. Allow students to work in collaborations. Make the advanced learners to act as tutor for the students who need assistance when they work in groups.

## 1.7 Conclusion

The literature shows that the seating arrangements are not only the concern of the academic roles of the students but it is much more beyond their academic ventures. It has its invisible hand in the social, psychological, cultural, educational and personal development of each student. Seating arrangements should be designed for every lesson keeping the aims of the lesson, the learning style of the students, the heterogeneous nature of students and the nature of the classroom. Since this is a sensitive choice of the students the teachers should put their invisible hand without affecting any of the students' individual or societal identifications. The changes that the teacher make in the seating arrangements should be based on sound theoretical knowledge and it should be within the practicality of the classroom environment. The observations made during the class observations prove that the seating changes according to the aims of the lesson showed positive and effective results in the large heterogeneous classroom and improved the performance and productivity of the students.

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## APPENDIX – 1

## TEACHER QUESTIONNAIRE

Date:

Teaching experience of the teacher: \_\_\_\_\_ year/s

	1. Never	2. Occasionally	3. Sometimes	4. Often	5. Always
1. Do you pay attention to the seating arrangements of your class?	1	2	3	4	5
2. Do you assign the seating position for each student	1	2	3	4	5
3. Do you change the seating arrangement of your students?	1	2	3	4	5
4. Do you think the change of seating arrangement/layouts will promote effective teaching?	1	2	3	4	5
5. Do you think that the fixed/unchanged seating arrangement in the class affects your teaching?	1	2	3	4	5

s.no	Tick – I believe that the fixed seating arrangement in the class
1	affects my choice of teaching methods
2	does not promote teacher-student interactions
3	it affects students performance
4	it lessens the students' language productivity

5	becomes an obstacle to encounter a few students personally	
6	forces to cling on to a few students for reading, asking feedback, to comprehend students understanding	
7	creates a relationship gap between them and me and also among student	
8	becomes an obstacle in volunteering to my call	
9	develops inferiority complex among students	
10	develops superiority complex among students	
11	develops groupism	
12	makes a few students go unnoticed (to follow one's progress)	
13	obstructs me to give individual attention	
14	forces me to skip the activity in the textbook	
15	Doesn't allow me to go ahead with the procedure I planned for a class	

6. State other issues related to the seating arrangements of students

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