

The Combining Arrangement: Some Techniques

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There are various ways of arranging work in language classes.¹ The most common is the superior-inferior arrangement, in which the teacher or a substitute presents material to the learners. The teacher, in the superior position, controls the pace of presentation, knows what the correct answers should be, and is the focus of attention. (The dictation exercise is a good example of this arrangement.) There are other arrangements, however (see Nation 1976), and one that has received much less attention than it deserves is the *combining arrangement*.

In the combining arrangement the learners are all on an equal footing; each one has information that the others need in order to complete a piece of work. Because of this, each learner must communicate his information to the others so that all the information can be combined to complete the task.

Before considering other important features of the combining arrangement, let us look at several techniques that are based on it.

An example of the combining arrangement

The clearest example of the combining arrangement can be seen when the learners work in pairs. In each pair, one learner (A) has a sheet of paper with fifty simple numbered pictures on it. The other learner in the pair (B) has a similar sheet except that about half of his pictures are the same as learner A's and the other half are not the same as learner A's. Figure 1 shows what part of the two sheets might look like.

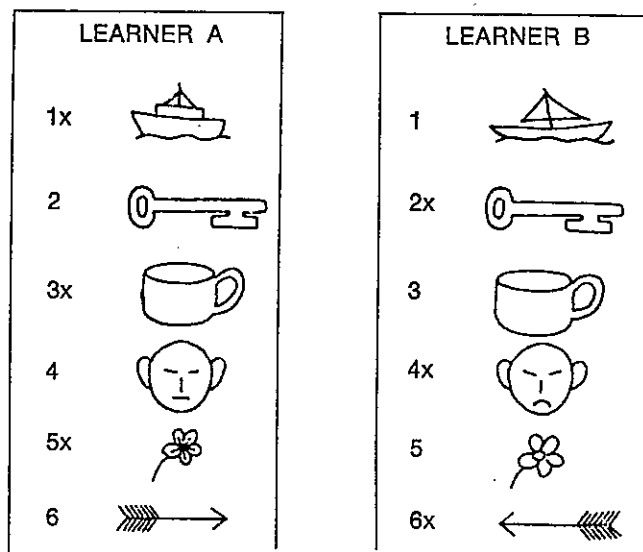


Figure 1

1. Since writing this article I have come across a report, "The Jigsaw Route to Learning and Liking," by Aronson et al., in *Psychology Today*, 8, 9 (February 1975), pp. 43-50. By using combining-arrangement activities with small groups within a larger class, the positive feelings of group members towards each other, including those from different racial groups, increased. The children in the groups had a greater liking for school, and had a more positive view of themselves compared to children in the control groups who did not use the combining arrangement.

Learners A and B sit facing each other. They must not be able to see the information on each other's sheet. Because there is a cross next to item 1 on his sheet, learner A begins by describing the first picture. Learner B listens carefully to this description, asks learner A any questions that he needs to, and looks at the first picture on his sheet to decide whether or not his picture is exactly the same as learner A's. If learner B thinks it is the same, he says "the same" to learner A and they *both* write *S* next to item 1 on their sheets. If, after listening to the description given by learner A, learner B thinks his picture is different, he says "different" and both learners write *D* next to item 1 on their sheets. When the first item has been completed, learner B begins describing item 2 because there is a cross next to item 2 on his sheet. Each pair works through the items in this way. After five or ten items have been completed the learners change partners. When all the items have been completed learners A and B in each pair put their two sheets next to each other and compare the pictures to see if their answers were correct.

In this technique, as in all techniques based on a combining arrangement, each learner has information (a picture) which he must communicate to his partner so that the information each of them has can be combined to complete the activity—in this case to decide whether the two pictures are the same or different. This technique involves the learners in real communication and is excellent for providing a large amount of conversation practice in the foreign language.

The essential feature of the combining arrangement is that only by cooperating in combining their material can the learners find the required answers. A learner cannot find the answer simply by looking at his own material.

The combining arrangement can be used with learners at any level, from beginners to advanced students, if appropriate materials are employed.

If instead of pictures, the learners' sheets contain letters, words, phrases, or sentences, they provide more guidance and give the learners much less freedom. Here are some examples. In all of these examples learners complete the activity by deciding whether two items are the same or different.

Letters of the Alphabet. For this technique (Figure 2), as for the one described previously, the whole class is divided into pairs. The two members of each pair sit facing each other. After a set time or set number of items the learners change partners so that in each pair learner A works with a different learner B.

LEARNER A		LEARNER B	
1x	a	1	e
2	d	2x	d
3x	r	3	r
4	p	4x	b

Figure 2

This technique gives the learners practice in pronouncing the names of the letters of the alphabet. Learner A says "a." Learner B looks at his first item and decides whether it is the same as learner A's. If he thinks it is not, he says "different" and they each write *D* next to item 1. Looking at the second item, learner B says "d" and learner A then says "the same" or "different." They continue on in this manner, afterwards checking their answers as in the previous example.

Minimal Pairs. Instead of letters of the alphabet, minimal pairs can be used (Figure 3).

LEARNER A		LEARNER B	
1x	pin	1	pin
2	four	2x	pour
3x	fan	3	pan
4	pair	4x	fair
5x	pin	5	fin

Figure 3

This technique gives the learners practice in pronouncing and listening to minimal sound contrasts. If one learner is not sure of what he hears, he can ask the other learner to repeat. Thus, in the combining arrangement the learners have more control of the material than they have in the usual superior-inferior arrangement.

Words and Descriptions. In the two preceding examples the learners' attention was on the *form* of the language items. In the following example attention is directed to *meaning* (Figure 4).

LEARNER A		LEARNER B	
1x	It is expensive.	1	a car
2	water	2x	We can cut it.
3x	We carry it in our pocket.	3	an umbrella
4	a pen	4x	We use it to write with.

Figure 4

Here the learners must decide if a word and a short description refer to the same idea or if they refer to different ideas. Instead of words and descriptions, opposites or synonyms can be used.

Sentences and Paraphrases. Sentences can also be compared with each other (Figure 5).

LEARNER A		LEARNER B	
1x	It is expensive.	1	It costs a lot of money.
2	John is my friend.	2x	I hate John.

Figure 5

The learners must decide if one sentence is a reasonable paraphrase of the other (S) or if the two sentences have quite different meanings (D).

Words and Pictures. In the four preceding examples the material consisted solely of letters, words, or sentences. A combination of words or sentences and pictures can also be used. Using pictures gives the learners more freedom in what they say. In the preceding examples the learners just had to repeat what was written on their sheets and reach a decision based on that. But if the item with an "x" next to it contains a picture, the learner who begins that item must provide a suitable name or description of that picture himself. See Figure 6.



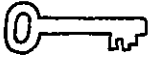
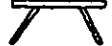
LEARNER A		LEARNER B	
1x		1	a cat
2	a glass	2x	
3x		3	a key
4	a chair	4x	

Figure 6

If, however, the picture occurs in the item without an "x" next to it, the technique makes use of recognition rather than recall. See Figure 7.



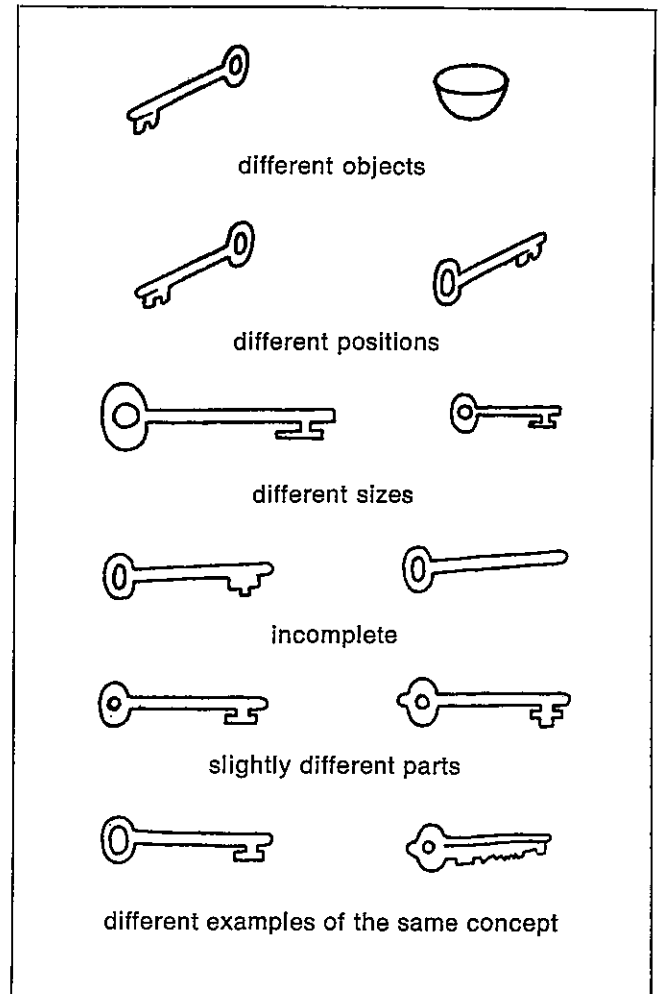
LEARNER A		LEARNER B	
1x	a cat	1	
2		2x	a glass

Figure 7

Instead of words and pictures, short descriptions and pictures, riddles and pictures, or definitions and pictures can be used.

Pictures Alone. When pictures alone are used the learners must provide their own descriptions. In the first example (Figure 1) the learners had to decide whether their pictures were exactly the same or not.

Two pictures can be different from each other in several ways. Here are most of the possibilities:



Abstract Pictures. Instead of pictures of real things, abstract pictures can be used (see Byers 1973). See Figure 8.

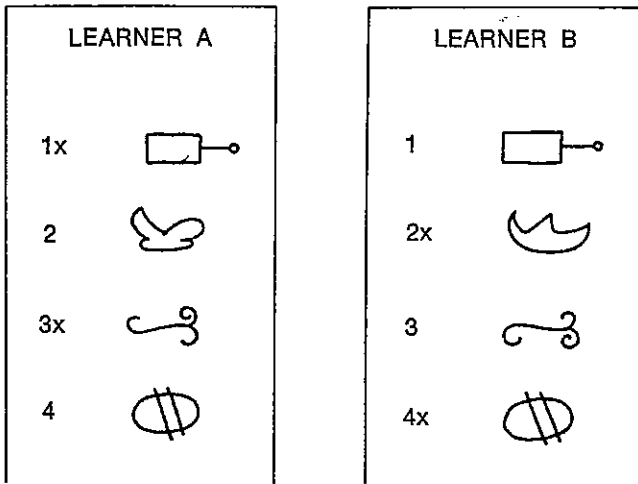


Figure 8

This technique provides opportunity for a lot of creative language work and is the most successful combining technique I have tried.

The examples given above show how the combining arrangement can be used with learners at different levels of mastery of the foreign language. If the items on the sheets are written, less creative use of the foreign language is required than if the items are pictures.

Further applications

All the techniques I have described so far require the learners to decide whether two items are the same or different. There are other possibilities:

Matching Items out of Order. Learners A and B have the same pictures, words, definitions, etc., on their sheets, but the items are in a different order on the two sheets (Figure 9).

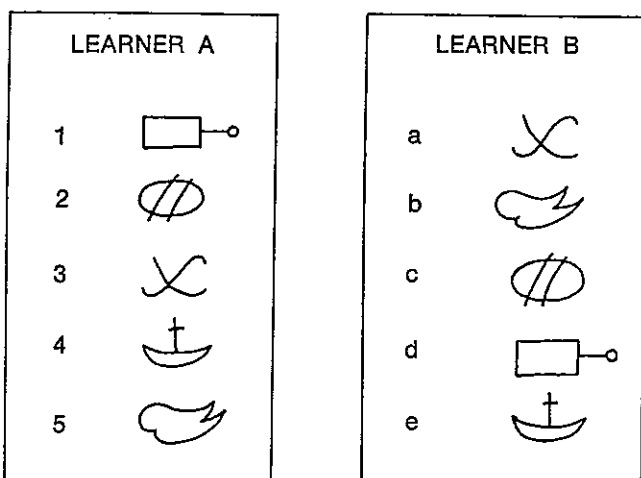


Figure 9

The learners take turns in describing, and they must match their items. So, if learner A describes his item 1, learner B will answer *d*. Learner A writes *d* next to 1 on his sheet and learner B writes *1* next to *d* on his sheet.

Multiple-Choice Items. A multiple-choice approach can be used (Figure 10).

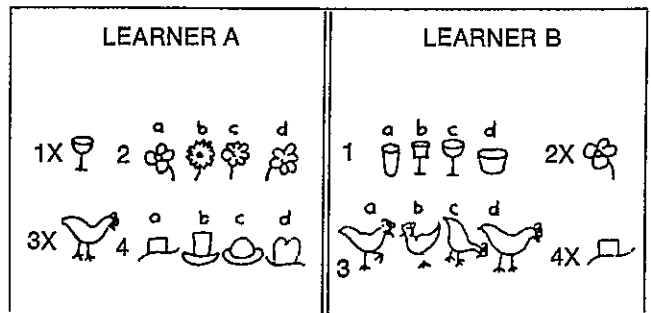


Figure 10

The disadvantage of this technique is that the teacher needs to draw a large number of pictures. However, once the teacher has shown the learners an example of this technique, groups of learners can prepare the sheets for each other.

Split Dictations. A dictation passage is divided up among the two members of each pair. Learner A has the first, third, fifth, etc., sentences, and learner B has the second, fourth, sixth, etc., sentences. The two learners dictate to each other so that finally both have the complete passage.

Picture Stories. A picture story is divided up among the two members of each pair. Learner A has the first, third, and fifth pictures in the story, and learner B has the second, fourth, and sixth pictures in the story. The learners take turns describing their pictures, and they each write a short composition based on the story told by the pictures.

Incomplete Pictures. Both learners have a copy of the same picture except that certain parts of learner A's picture are missing and different parts of learner B's picture are missing. By describing their pictures to each other, each of them can complete his picture. (To prepare for this exercise, the teacher can select a suitable cartoon picture from a book or newspaper and make two photocopies of it. Then he can blank out different parts of each of the photocopies, using typists' white correcting fluid. A stencil can be made from the two photocopies.)

Incomplete Stories. Learner A has a story with words missing from it. Learner B has a list of the missing words (in random order). Learner A reads his story to learner B, and when learner A reaches a blank, he stops and learner B suggests words from his list. They decide together which word is suitable.

Other Completion Techniques. There are many other completion techniques like the one just described. Instead of an incomplete story and a list of words, learner A can have an incomplete description and learner B a picture corresponding to the complete description, learner A can have incomplete sentences and learner B a complete story, and so on.

The learners each have a similar passage. One learner reads the passage while the other listens and checks his own passage for any words or phrases that are different from his partner's version. The learners underline the different points in their passages. Pictures can also be used: the learners compare their pictures by describing them to each other and then either circle or list the differences.

Learner A has half of the sentences in a story and learner B has the rest of the sentences. A and B read their sentences to each other and try to put the sentences in order so that they make a logical story. A series of pictures that tell a story may be used instead of sentences.

Working in groups

The combining arrangement is not limited to work in pairs. Gibson (1975) describes a combining technique that is done with a group of about ten people (or more) working together. For this technique the teacher chooses a story that the learners have not seen before and which has as many sentences as there are learners in the group. He writes each sentence of the story on a different piece of paper and gives each student one of these pieces of paper (containing one sentence of the story.). Each student has to memorize his sentence and then destroy the piece of paper. Then each student tells his sentence to the others in the group, and, without writing anything down, all the students must organize themselves to solve the problem of putting the sentences in the right order to tell the story. The teacher takes no part in the activity.

The most important point about the use of the combining arrangement in groups is that the conversation that arises as a result of trying to do the exercise is more important than the exercise itself. Gibson describes his technique as "a catalyst for communication."

Another way to use the combining arrangement in groups is to give each learner a different word or sentence to memorize. After they have memorized their words the learners must classify them into three different groups. Together the learners must discover the basis of the classification. In a very simple version each learner has one of the following words:

a duck	a horse	a monkey
a hen	a man	a woman
a cat	a turkey	a boy

By telling each other their words and discussing the similarities and differences between them the learners arrange themselves into three groups: a duck, a hen, a turkey; a horse, a monkey, a cat; a man, a woman, a boy. In a more complicated version each learner can be given one of the following sentences:

It is made of paper.	It has many pages.
It grows on a tree.	It contains names and numbers.
It is long and yellow.	It can carry many people.
People eat it.	
It has four wheels.	
It is used for going from one place to another.	

The nine sentences describe three things. The learners try to decide what these three things are and arrange the sentences into three groups. The answers to the above problem are: a telephone book, a bus, and a banana.

The nature of the combining arrangement

In a combining arrangement the material is divided equally between the members of the pair or group. No learner can find the correct answer by studying only his own material. Thus there is a need for each person in the pair or group to communicate with the other(s) so that they can combine their material to reach the correct answer. The combining arrangement contrasts with (1) the superior-inferior arrangement, where one learner possesses all the information, and with (2) the cooperating arrangement, where all learners have exactly the same material in front of them. Because there is a need to communicate, the combining arrangement, particularly when pictures are used, is ideally suited for real conversation practice. The correctness of the answers reached in a combining arrangement is a measure of the learners' ability to communicate with each other. It is not a measure of the phonological or grammatical correctness of the communication. It is probably true to say that when a combining arrangement is used the teacher will hear more errors in thirty minutes than he would hear in a month with any other arrangements. The teacher can console himself with these thoughts:

1. In a combining arrangement the foreign language is being used in a purposeful way.

2. Many of the errors are likely to be errors of surface structure that occur because the learners are not used to communicating in the foreign language. These errors disappear as the learners gain confidence and have more practice.

3. Because the learners are communicating with each other as equals and the teacher is not involved, they are not anxious about speaking as they would be in a superior-inferior arrangement.

4. All learners are actively using the foreign language.

5. Because the combining arrangement requires the learners to cooperate to achieve communication, they help each other improve their ability to communicate. For this reason when groups or pairs are made, it is best to have learners of differing ability in the same group, rather than have all the weaker learners together.

6. The combining arrangement encourages cooperative attitudes among the learners and reduces unwanted competition.

7. Techniques using a combining arrangement are fun.

Because the emphasis is on communication in a combining arrangement, it is important that the following things happen:

1. The learners should communicate in the foreign language without using the mother tongue.

2. The learners should not see each other's sheet containing the material. They should sit facing each other and hold their sheets up rather than laying them on the desk.

3. The learners should ask each other to repeat, ask questions, or ask for extra information to make sure that the communication is successful.

4. There should not be too much concern about phonological or grammatical correction if it does not affect communication.

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