
The power of classroom space: How classroom seating arrangements shape young EFL learners' motivation and engagement

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Keywords

Classroom layout, flexible seating, student motivation, academic boredom, young learners

ABSTRACT

The physical layout of elementary classrooms plays a key role in shaping young learners' motivation and communicative engagement in EFL lessons. This study explored how changing desk configurations affected student motivation in a large combined class of 45 fifth-grade students. Using a qualitative descriptive design, data were collected through direct classroom observations, photographic documentation, and researcher field notes from informal conversational interviews with representatives across four student groups (S1–S4). The qualitative findings indicated that traditional forward-facing rows created a quiet and passive atmosphere where students experienced speaking anxiety and disengagement. Conversely, transitioning to a collaborative cluster seating model helped lower speaking hesitation and encouraged student interaction during group activities. This study contributes to primary EFL research by showing how spatial adjustments can serve as a practical classroom management choice for teachers to support young learners' motivation.

1. INTRODUCTION

Classroom seating arrangements are one aspect of the physical learning environment that may influence students' classroom experiences. In fifth-grade elementary school, students engage in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning activities that involve developing vocabulary and practicing communication. Students' motivation and participation in these activities may be influenced by several factors, including the classroom environment, instructional activities, and individual differences. Haya (2025) examined the relationship between classroom seating layouts and elementary students' learning motivation, highlighting the relevance of classroom design to students' learning experiences. In addition, seating arrangements, student engagement, and participation are important components of classroom management in EFL classrooms (Yasin et al., 2022).

Different seating arrangements may support different types of classroom activities. Traditional row seating can be suitable for individual tasks, whereas cluster seating may provide more opportunities for peer interaction and collaborative learning (Wannarka & Ruhl, 2008; Yasin et al., 2022). Rahmawati (2021) also studied the relationship between instructional approaches and students' motivation by examining the Team Games Tournament technique and its effects on students' reading motivation and reading skills. However, Rahmawati's study focused on a teaching technique and did not examine how seating arrangements relate to students' learning experiences. The benefits of seating arrangements may also differ depending on students' characteristics, learning activities, and classroom conditions.

An important aim of English language education is to develop learners' ability to communicate effectively in English. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) emphasizes the use of language for meaningful communication and the development of communicative competence (Richards, 2006). In primary-school EFL classrooms, opportunities to practice speaking, interact with peers, and participate in communicative activities can support this aim. Classroom environments that provide opportunities for interaction may therefore support communicative language learning. Seating arrangements may also help students interact with their classmates and support their motivation during English learning activities.

Classroom management is an important consideration in English for young learners, particularly when learning activities involve interaction and student participation. To support communicative activities, teachers need to organize classroom environments that are conducive to learning and appropriate for their instructional objectives. Classroom management involves organizing physical space, selecting instructional strategies, and facilitating student participation. In young learners' EFL classrooms, teachers may need to adapt their management strategies to students' learning needs and classroom activities (Putra et al., 2022). The arrangement of classroom space may also affect teacher–student interactions and student behavior (Cole et al., 2021). Therefore, seating arrangements are one aspect of classroom management that teachers can adjust to meet the needs of different learning activities.

To support different classroom activities, teachers may adapt seating arrangements to suit specific lesson objectives and learning tasks. Available options include traditional rows, U-shaped seating, and small-group arrangements (Pranena, 2022). U-shaped seating may provide opportunities for classroom discussion and speaking practice (Sipayung & Benarita, 2021), while cluster seating may encourage peer interaction and collaboration (Orhani, 2025). However, the suitability of each arrangement depends on the learning task, group dynamics, and students' individual learning needs. Teachers therefore need to consider these factors when selecting seating arrangements for classroom activities.

Previous studies have examined the relationship between classroom seating arrangements and students' learning motivation (Hardiansyah & Rasia, 2022; Haya, 2025). However, few studies have examined how students respond to changes from traditional row seating to cluster seating in a large EFL classroom. This study addresses this gap by examining the responses of 45 fifth-grade students from Class 5A and Class 5B, who were combined during an English lesson. The study considers students' responses during individual tasks and group discussions. Previous research suggests that the effects of seating arrangements may vary according to individual characteristics and the learning task (Tobia et al., 2022; Wannarka & Ruhl, 2008). This suggests that a seating arrangement that supports one type of learning activity may not be equally suitable for all students or tasks. Therefore, this study explores students' responses to the transition from traditional row seating to collaborative cluster seating and how these responses relate to their learning motivation.

Related research also suggests that classroom seating arrangements may be associated with students' engagement during collaborative learning activities (Yang et al., 2022). In EFL speaking classes, classroom management strategies may also shape the opportunities students have to participate in communication activities (Rokhaniyah et al., 2024). These studies suggest that classroom seating arrangements and classroom management are relevant to student engagement and participation.

Based on previous research on classroom seating arrangements, this study examines students' responses to the transition from traditional row seating to collaborative cluster seating

during English learning activities. It focuses on the learning motivation of 45 fifth-grade students from two classes, Class 5A and Class 5B, who were combined during an English lesson. Accordingly, the study addresses the following research question: How do fifth-grade students respond to the transition from traditional row seating to collaborative cluster seating in relation to their learning motivation?

2. METHOD

2.1 Research Design

This study uses a qualitative descriptive research design to explore classroom space optimization practices. A qualitative approach is selected because it allows for an in-depth, contextual examination of how physical environment modifications influence student motivation within a natural classroom setting. The design describes reported experiences and observed behavior; and its data are limited in scope.

2.2 Setting and Participants

The empirical observation is conducted within a fifth-grade class at a public elementary school in Pekalongan City, Central Java, Indonesia. Two Grade 5 classes were combined for the English lesson, giving 45 students (aged 10–11 years; 26 girls and 19 boys). The study focuses on two classes containing 45 upper-elementary students during a scheduled English as a Foreign Language (EFL) session. The lesson focused on basic vocabulary expansion and sentence construction, which require peer-to-peer interaction (Putra et al., 2022; Yasin et al., 2022).

During the lesson, the students worked in four groups of (11-12) students each. The researcher selected representatives students from each group about their experience, Four of students asked and asked at random during the activity. Participants are identified by group codes to protect their identity.

2.3 Data Collection Procedure and Instruments

2.3.1 Observation

Data collection is structured around a 70-minute direct observation session spanning a total of two hours of English lessons. The first phase, in which participants sit in rows, serves as a baseline. The second phase, in which participants sit in groups and engage in group discussions, serves as a point of comparison. Thus, changes in engagement, attention, and willingness to speak are characterized as the differences between these two phases.

2.3.2 Interview

During the lesson, the researcher spontaneously asked randomly chosen representatives of the four groups how they felt in the current seating arrangement, how they took part in the activity, and how comfortable they were speaking English. The quotations reported below are therefore the researcher's translations of noted statements and not verbatim transcripts.

2.3.3 Documentation

Visual evidence is captured to map the shifting physical architecture of the learning space. Photographic records serve to objectively document the initial traditional layout and the subsequent implementation of cluster seating models. faces were blurred before publication.

2.4 Data Analysis

The collected qualitative data comprising comprehensive field notes, interview, and photographic documentations are analyzed using qualitative thematic analysis. following the systematic framework established by Braun and Clarke (2006).

The thematic analysis process was conducted through six distinct phases:

1. Familiarization with the Data : The researcher carefully read and re-read the observation notes, interview field records, and contextual photographs to build a comprehensive understanding of the classroom dynamics.
2. Generating Initial Codes : Meaningful statements and observed behaviors related to student engagement, speaking anxiety, and peer interaction were systematically assigned qualitative codes.
3. Searching for Themes : The generated codes were collated into candidate themes that illustrated how the transition from traditional row seating to collaborative cluster seating influenced student learning motivation.
4. Reviewing Themes : The candidate themes were verified against the field notes and visual evidence to ensure they accurately reflected the observed reality of the 45 fifth-grade participants.
5. Defining and Naming Themes : Key themes were finalized and explicitly defined to capture the core findings (e.g., Spatial Monotony and Student Passivity in Traditional Rows and Collaborative Synergy and Active Engagement in Cluster Layouts).
6. Producing the Report : Selected interview statements across all student groups (S1–S4) and observational excerpts were woven together with visual evidence to support the synthesized themes.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Results

3.1.1 Spatial Monotony and Student Passivity in Traditional Rows

Based on the classroom observation in the first session, the desks were arranged in traditional forward-facing rows for 45 students from Class 5A and Class 5B (Picture 1). In this layout, the learning environment felt quiet and passive. Because two classes were combined, sitting in long straight rows created distance between students and the teacher.

To check their deep feelings, interviews were conducted with the students after dividing them into four separate groups during the observation process. Representatives from the first two groups stated :

S1 : *"We felt bored because we just looked at the blackboard and the teacher's desk all the time. It did not feel exciting."*

S2 : *"Sitting in long rows made us feel afraid to speak English. With so many students in the room, we felt very nervous when the teacher looked at us."*

The English teacher mentioned in the interview that controlling 45 students in rigid rows was difficult because she could not clearly watch students who stopped paying attention in the back.



Figure 1. Initial Conditions of Traditional Classroom Model

3.1.2 Collaborative Synergy and Active Engagement in Cluster Layouts

To change the classroom energy, the teacher moved the desks into a collaborative cluster seating model where the 45 students sat facing each other in small working groups, which was shown in Picture 2. This layout changed immediately increased the students' excitement and confidence during group discussions. The interviews with the remaining student groups showed how much they liked this new design:

S3 Group : *"We were very happy and active in this group because we could help each other. Learning English felt like playing a fun game with friends."*

S4 Group : *"We become very enthusiastic because we did not feel lonely or bored in this big class. We could practice speaking English words without being shy"*



Figure 2. Implementation of Cluster Seating Model to Increase Motivation

3.2 Discussion

The findings of this study show that changing classroom seating arrangements can reduce boredom and increase learning motivation, even in a large combined class of 45 students. When desks stay in traditional rows, upper-elementary students easily become passive and lose focus. This result supports Haya (2025), who found that static classroom designs lower young learners' interest in studying.

An important context in this study is the large class size of 45 students. Having two combined classes in one room can naturally increase crowding and anxiety. However, moving desks into cluster seating helped solve this problem by breaking the large room into small, friendly working spaces. Sitting close to peers helped students feel safer to speak English without feeling watched by the whole class, which reduces speaking anxiety (Susanti, 2017) and supports group collaboration (Yang et al., 2022).

In addition, elementary school children need comfortable physical space to support their learning process (Tobia et al., 2022). Traditional rows may be fine for quiet individual tests, but group seating is necessary for English lessons that require communication (Wannarka & Ruhl, 2008). Therefore, teachers need to be flexible and adapt classroom seating based on their teaching goals to manage large classes well and keep students motivated (Yasin et al., 2022; Rokhaniyah et al., 2024).

4. CONCLUSION

This study indicates that optimizing the physical classroom layout plays a supportive role in supporting student motivation and reducing boredom in a large combined class of 45 upper-elementary students. The findings suggest that the traditional forward-facing row layout created communication anxiety, and led to a passive atmosphere. In contrast, changing the desk setup into a collaborative cluster model was observed to encourage student enthusiasm and active participation during group tasks. Sitting in small clusters provided a supportive environment that helped lower speaking anxiety and allowed young learners to practice English vocabulary more comfortably with their peers. Overall, these spatial adjustments show that flexible seating arrangements can serve as a practical approach for teachers to manage classes and support student engagement in elementary EFL contexts.

5. LIMITATIONS

Several limitations of this study should be noted. First, this research used a qualitative descriptive design conducted in a single session with one combined class, meaning the results describe specific contextual experiences rather than cause-and-effect relationships. Second, due to the natural classroom setting, informal interview data were documented through researcher field notes rather than verbatim audio recordings. Finally, the study involved a sample of 45 students in one public school, which limits the generalizability of the findings to other educational settings.

6. SUGGESTION

Based on these findings, elementary English teachers may consider adjusting classroom seating arrangements according to the specific communication goals of each lesson. For future research, it is suggested to investigate the long-term effects of flexible seating on student learning outcomes or to explore other seating variations.

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