Online Breakout Rooms: Jigsaw Discussions and Presentation Practice

by TERENCE McLEAN

LEVEL: Lower Intermediate and above

TIME REQUIRED: Approximately 60 minutes (Time can be determined by the teacher, depending on class size, student level, and student comfort with online platforms.)

GOALS: To practice discussing a specified topic with classmates in online breakout rooms; to collaborate with classmates; to practice summarizing and reporting key details from a group discussion

MATERIALS: An online platform that supports live interaction in breakout rooms (Zoom, Moodle, Blackboard, Skype, etc.); note-taking materials in the students' physical locations (optional)

OVERVIEW: As a result of the switch to virtual and blended learning caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, many language teachers around the world are working to establish welcoming, communicative, online language-learning environments. Most of us have experienced the unwelcome silence associated with trying to get all students involved in an online session. Yes, some students thrive online, but others tend to hesitate, sit back and listen, or tune out completely.

Even though we are teaching online, we can still give students a gentle virtual push—and

breakout rooms, if your online platform has this function, are an excellent tool for increasing student talk time during virtual instruction. This activity, a jigsaw that uses breakout rooms, can be used as stand-alone speaking practice or as preparation for a future speaking assignment in which students give an online presentation for the whole class.

Small-group discussions are commonplace in most language-learning classrooms. I often use jigsaw activities in which students become "experts" on a topic in one group, and then they disperse, form new groups, and share what they talked about in the first group to the members of the new group. In the jigsaw-group learning experience, students must collaborate with peers to achieve individual goals.

This cooperative learning activity requires and motivates students to speak. Jigsaw speaking activities also allow students to communicate with many classmates in a low-stress environment, creating an inclusive place for language and social development. Why not extend this opportunity to the online classroom?

PREPARATION:

1. Learn how to make and monitor breakout rooms in your preferred online meeting platform. You will need to know how to create and monitor breakout rooms and

how to reconvene students back into the main meeting room. You may be able to locate platform-specific assistance through your organization's technical support staff or information technology website; there are also free "how to" guides and videos available online for most platforms. The university where I work uses Blackboard Collaborate Ultra; however, teachers can use breakout rooms in Zoom, Moodle, and other online platforms.

Note that teachers can try this introduction to breakout rooms amongst themselves in a class simulation so that they can learn how to manage the rooms; technologically savvy teachers can help others who have difficulty and possibly create a screencast instructional video.

2. In the first few classes of the term, in a large group, I show students how I can separate them into rooms, and then we do basic icebreaker group discussions. Do a few speaking activities in breakout rooms so that students get used to talking with classmates in the breakout format. For example, groups of four can give self-introductions, talk about hobbies, and ask each other informal questions in a friendly interview. Visit each room and make sure that all students are able to function online and that the group is staying on task. I suggest stopping the breakout rooms after 10 or 15 minutes—before conversations begin to lag—and talk together in a large group about how the activity went. This initial experience helps get students ready for more breakout discussions and the rest of this activity.

3. Choose a topic for groups to discuss or a task for them to complete. Here are a few suggestions, although you can come up with your own:

- Explain how to prepare a dish or meal (e.g., a pizza, a sandwich, chicken curry and rice). Each group chooses a dish and works together to come up with ingredients and instructions for preparing it, to be shared with the new group.

- Do research on a ceremony or cultural tradition (e.g., a wedding) and prepare a mini-presentation for the new group.

- Do research on a famous person and prepare a mini-presentation for the new group.

- Choose a class trip destination and convince others—students in the new group—to agree to the place (a city, country, resort, park, etc.). Each group should have a different destination.

PROCEDURE:

1. Explain to students that they are going to be talking in breakout rooms, but this time there will be two parts to the activity, and they will change groups during the activity. Tell them that they will become "experts" on a topic while discussing it and working with their first group (Part 1). They will then move to a new breakout room and, as an expert representative of their first group, they will share the results of the first discussion with the new group (Part 2). The time for each discussion can depend on the task. I recommend that in Part 1, students should be given 20 to 30 minutes; in Part 2, when students are sharing information, each student should have at least five to seven minutes. However, the time limit for each part is up to the teacher.

2. Explain that *all* students need to take notes as they talk in Part 1 because they will need the notes in Part 2. Emphasize that they will join a different group, in which they will talk about the discussion by the first group in Part 1. In other words, in Part 2, they will be experts who join a new group to share the results of Part 1.

3. Teachers may have their own techniques for making groups, but I prefer letting Blackboard make random groups of four. Or, as monitor, I can create groups, so I can tell the students who will be in their new group and then drag and drop names

into groups of four. (Prepare group lists beforehand to avoid wasting time in class.) I have found that using teacher-made groups takes less time than changing students' status and letting them move around.

4. Once the students understand what they have to do (you can ask questions to verify, or have them repeat the procedure back to you), create the Part 1 breakout rooms with groups of four students; note that you may want to create bigger groups if you have a large class. Give groups the task and the time limit so that they can manage their time, then let them get started.

5. Join each room throughout the process to see how things are going, to make sure that every student has the opportunity to talk, and to monitor time and progress.

6. Five minutes before time is up, visit the rooms again; groups may need more time. Whether to give more time is up to you and may depend on class time constraints. (The activity can be done over a few days, if necessary.)

7. When time is up, end the Part 1 breakout rooms and bring the students back to the main room. Ask if they are ready for Part 2—expert sharing time. Explain that they will now be moved to new breakout rooms to begin Part 2, with a new group. They should introduce themselves to the new group, if necessary, and decide on the order of speaking (this can be done easily with an online lottery site, https://wheelofnames.com/).

8. Begin Part 2: move students to their new breakout rooms and remind them of the time limit. Monitor the new groups in their breakout rooms, observing as students take turns talking about what they had discussed in the original group. Provide assistance as needed.

9. In the new groups, students take turns talking about—or reporting on—what they discussed in the original group. Each student is an expert sharing information and/or providing a summary of the first discussion. Depending on the topic and ability levels, each student should talk for at least five minutes and be willing to answer questions.

For lower-level classes, the teacher can prepare students before the activity by teaching how to describe a process. A lesson on topic sentences, imperatives, and transitions, along with useful vocabulary, can be great preparation for this activity. Other topics and tasks could require different language preparation.

10. After time is up, or after all students have had a chance to talk, bring everyone back to the main room. As a class, talk about how the activity went. The teacher could ask students specific questions:

• Did you like talking in the breakout rooms? Did you have any trouble speaking with your classmates or hearing them?

• Did everybody have a chance to speak?

• What about the time limits for each part? Did you have enough time? Too much?

• Did anybody ask you a question about your presentation?

• Did you use transition words in your presentation?

• What was difficult to do in your talk?

• Which presentation piqued your interest the most? Why?

• How could we make this activity more interactive?

• What topics would you like to use next time?

Ideally, the students will have developed confidence in speaking in an online group—not

just as a conversation participant, but also as someone with specialized knowledge who gets to explain something to others.

VARIATIONS

There really is no end to the possible variations of this activity—it all depends on the online learning platform, the students, the teacher, the learning objectives, and the time available. Here are a few suggestions:

1. *Pair-based sharing*: Complete this activity in pairs instead of small groups. The first pairs complete a task, and the new mixed pairs share the results of the task.

2. *Follow-up writing*: Ask students to write a paragraph in the online Discussion area. For example, they write about the meal that they planned with their original groups in Part 1, or they can share another recipe. Some of my students have included photos of food they love.

3. *Summarizing and reporting opinions*: Provide each group with a series of questions that they must discuss and take notes on for use in Part 2. Tailor the questions to target areas you want to have the students practice. Here are possible questions:

   Learning English questions:

   — Why do you want to improve your English skills?

   — What do you want to accomplish this year?

   — What is the most difficult aspect of learning English?

   — What is the best part about learning English?

   — What advice would you give to a friend who wants develop fluency in English?

   Personal questions:

   — What is something that you would like others to know about you?

   — What is the best movie that you have ever seen?

   — Do you believe in ghosts? Why or why not?

   — Have you ever … ? (e.g., eaten an insect, seen a ghost, ridden a horse, been on TV)

   Have students answer the questions and discuss responses, take notes, prepare a summary, and get ready to share the information with the new group. This way, they get to talk about the opinions of their classmates as well as their own. This can help their oral-grammar skills development (*I think … / Ali thinks …*).

4. *Preparing for future presentations*: Let the students know that in the future they will be doing a short virtual presentation for the whole class, so this activity allows them to practice talking, without too much pressure, to a smaller group.

FINAL THOUGHTS

My students have told me that they enjoy breakout rooms because they want to talk to their classmates and get more practice before they have to do presentations or interviews, either online or in person. I realized that my usual emphasis on promoting student talk time in my face-to-face classroom had not carried over to my online teaching. I reflected, made adjustments with the help of online breakout rooms, and we all benefited. In closing, I recommend this activity because it helps to create a more inclusive and communicative online classroom, which is essential in supporting our students on their path to language proficiency and academic success.

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