

# Random Daily Seating as a Classroom Management Strategy in the Japanese University Language Classroom

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## Abstract

This essay proposes random daily seating assignments as a useful classroom management tool that provides great benefits to both students and teachers in the EFL language classroom. It will explain the advantages, disadvantages, and practicalities of using this system in Japanese universities. The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate to teachers how this system could be a useful tool, as well as discuss why the system may not work for every teacher. Benefits to students include a possible increase in willingness to communicate, as well as an overall positive experience. A short survey of first year students was conducted to assess their opinion of being assigned a random seat every lesson. The results show that students like having randomly assigned seats because it gives them a chance to communicate with other students they otherwise might not otherwise talk to and potentially make friends.

## Keywords

Classroom Management, Affective, Pedagogy, Practical, Willingness to Communicate

## Introduction

Most language teachers also have experience as a language student. Some of my own favorite memories as a student were from my time in the undergraduate program of the Modern Languages department of Ohio University studying German. I loved the feeling of getting my message across in a new medium, but I always hated the dreaded words from the teacher: “find a partner.” Talking to strangers and making friends are social tasks that I’ve never been comfortable with, so finding a partner was an especially difficult prospect. I usually found myself in one of two situations: sitting with like-minded awkward people or having to approach people I had never spoken to. Either way, it was an affective barrier which hindered communication because I wanted to end the group task as soon as possible. I generally felt uncomfortable and unwilling to communicate.

As a language teacher, I have observed the same phenomenon many times among students. When

students choose their own seats and partners for pair work, they tend to sit in the same places, form cliques, or become resistant to communicative tasks due to the awkwardness of having to choose partners on their own. After years of observing these patterns, I have found that randomized seat assignments for every class is an effective classroom management strategy to increase communication in a foreign language class.

In this essay, I propose that Random Daily Seating (RDS) is a beneficial strategy for both students and teachers. For students, it is an effective way to improve student communication. For teachers, there are many practical classroom management benefits. This report will include a discussion of my own thoughts and experiences, as well as an analysis of the results of an informal survey given to students about having assigned seats.

### **RDS Implementation**

Here is a short overview of how I implement the system. Before every class, I make a seating chart with students matched with a random partner. I print out the seating chart, so I have a paper copy that I can write on during the lesson. Before the lesson starts, I put the chart on the classroom's projector. My paper seating chart is from my perspective (i.e. the first row is at the bottom of the page) whereas the chart on the screen shows the students' perspective. I write on the seating chart throughout the lesson and then keep it in my records. I repeat this process in the next class, so that students will ideally be paired with a different partner every class. I use a third-party resource called [seatingplan.com](http://seatingplan.com) which is incredibly useful for making seating charts quickly. The site has a random generation function and has the feature of being able to switch between student and teacher perspectives. There are probably other sites or apps which do the same thing, but this is my preferred resource.

### **Willingness to Communicate**

A conceptual framework to describe why some people communicate and others don't was proposed by McCrosky (1990) and further developed by MacIntyre et al. (1998). This framework is called Willingness to Communicate (WTC). MacIntyre et al. refined McCrosky's WTC model by adding external factors as variables which contribute to WTC in addition to the internal, personality-based traits which were the base of the previous model. MacIntyre conceptualized WTC as a pyramid-shaped framework, with actual communication at the top, and the fundamental factors leading to the communicative act toward the bottom. The model proposes two external factors that directly contribute to WTC. These factors are "desire to communicate with a specific person" and situational self-confidence (MacIntyre et al., 1998). In the next section, I will explain how I think random daily seating can potentially affect both these factors and lead to an improvement in WTC and increase student communication. I will also describe additional benefits which students receive from the system.

### **Benefits to the Students**

From the perspective of the students, there are many benefits to having assigned seats. The first of which is that not having to choose their own seats can help students overcome the affective barriers of having to approach strangers. It's a common aphorism that Japanese students are "shy," and a symptom of this apparent shyness often manifests as an unwillingness to speak in class. Of course, there are many factors which lead to this unwillingness, but one could easily imagine that part of it is due to some kind of general discomfort or fear. Part of this fear could stem from a desire to not appear weak or foolish in front of their peers. Approaching a stranger or even a classmate acquaintance and asking to talk is certainly a situation in which a shy student could potentially appear weak or foolish. By removing this choice from all students, students can avoid this social task entirely. They no longer have to deal with the risk associated with choosing partners for discussions and pair work activities, thus relieving students of fear and allowing them to be more comfortable in the classroom. If students are always assigned a partner in every class, it removes the fear of having to make a choice. By having less fear, they can be more open to communication.

Another communicative benefit is an increase in camaraderie among students. Putting students in the same situation of having to sit in an assigned seat gives them a sense of unity. Even in the situation where particular students who don't get along are seated next to each other, everyone knows that the choice is out of their hands, and this could provide a sense of kinship or bonding among the students. This sense of camaraderie can help students overcome their shyness and be more willing to engage in communication with each other.

The third and possibly most significant communicative benefit to students is the opportunity to talk to new people and make new friends. In discussions and writing assignments, students often cite making friends as a key aspect of their university experience. Friendships made in university can last a lifetime and even lead to marriage and significant life changes. Daily seat assignments are a great way for students to communicate with people they might not otherwise talk to. This creates many opportunities for students to make friends and develop relationships. Talking to new people can pique student interest and lead to great communication. According to MacIntyre (1998), this desire to talk to specific people (in this case, new and potentially interesting people), is an important part of Willingness to Communicate. Therefore, students' WTC can be improved by having randomly assigned partners every lesson.

### **Survey Introduction**

In order to more accurately assess my students' perceptions of having daily assigned seats, I had them take a short, informal survey. The purpose of the survey was to ascertain whether students liked having assigned seats, and what they considered to be the strengths and weaknesses of the system. The survey

was in Japanese and consisted of four Likert scale questions and four open-ended response questions. The Likert Scale questions were on a 5-point scale from 1 (strongly disagree), 3 (can't say either way), to 5 (strongly agree).

	1	2	3	4	5
I liked having an assigned seat every day.	3	6	6	12	24
I was able to talk to people that I would not have talked to otherwise.	7	1	1	6	36
Because of this system, I felt less shy in class.	3	4	13	10	21
This system helped improve my communication skills.	4	4	2	16	25

Figure 1. Quantitative survey results (n=51)

In addition to the Likert scale questions above, there were an additional four qualitative, open-ended questions. Shown below is a list of the questions and some of the most common answer types translated to English.

Q1: How did having an assigned seat affect your communication?	
I could communicate with new people.	37
I could make new friends.	6
Q2: What did you like about having an assigned seat?	
I could communicate with new people.	31
I could make new friends.	7
It was exciting or fun.	4
I liked not having to choose a seat.	2
Q3: What did you dislike about having an assigned seat?	
It was inconvenient or troublesome when my seating partner was absent.	12
I had some problems interacting with my partner.	5
I generally felt awkward or nervous.	4
Q4: Do you have any other general comments?	
It was fun.	3

Figure 2. Qualitative survey questions and common responses

Analysis of the results shows the emergence of some prominent patterns. Overall, 36 of 51 respondents answered either 4 or 5 on the Likert scale about whether they liked being part of the RDS system. They described the biggest communicative benefit as the ability to communicate with new people and make new friends. Going back to MacIntyre's WTC model (1998), excitement to communicate with new people could be interpreted as expressing a desire to communicate with specific people, which was a large factor in determining someone's Willingness to Communicate.

These results clearly show that students benefit from having randomly assigned daily seats. Students are

paired with many different people over the course of the class, so they get a lot of chances to talk to new people, meaningfully communicate, and possibly strike up new friendships. In addition, being given a seat assignment means that students will never have to face the potential stress of having to approach a stranger and ask to be their partner, thus leading to the removal of affective barriers. Fortunately, this system is beneficial to not only students, but teachers too.

### **Benefits to the Teacher**

As we have seen so far, the assigned seats system has many advantages for the students. However, the system also has many benefits for the teacher as well. However, there's an important factor for teachers to consider when adopting this system into their classroom. Generally speaking, the less familiar teachers are with their students, the more advantageous this system is. For example, if you teach many different classes that meet once a week, this system can make classroom management significantly easier. However, if your classes are smaller and/or meet more frequently, many of the advantages conferred by random assigned seats don't necessarily make a teacher's life that much easier. That said, I'll discuss some of the good things I've noticed during my many years of implementing this system.

RDS sets the class up in advance to work in pairs. Instead of having to spend time in class waiting for students to pair up or find a partner, students are already naturally grouped in whatever configuration the teacher decides in advance. Pair work is very important in university language classrooms because it is a cornerstone of Communicative Language Teaching (Richards, 2006), and RDS facilitates it very well. The teacher can just say "talk to your partner," and students should automatically have a fresh conversation partner every lesson. Saving time is a great benefit to the teacher.

Having a list of student names that corresponds to their physical location in the classroom is very helpful during classroom housekeeping tasks, such as checking homework and taking attendance. When checking homework, it's easy to walk among the students and mark homework completion on that day's seating chart. It's much easier than walking around with an alphabetically organized list because you don't have to take extra time and mental effort to find student names that aren't related to physical location.

After class, when you have more time, you can input attendance and homework information into whatever long-term record you want, whether it be digital or on paper. The seating chart records can also be kept as a backup record in the unfortunate event that your main records are misplaced or lost.

Your paper seating charts are also a great way to keep systematic notes about student conduct. For example, you can easily make notes about class performance, such as how often students speak up or how well they are working in pairs. This is particularly useful if you grade students on classroom

participation. Of course, you can also easily take note of problematic behavior.

RDS is also good at managing awkwardly sized classrooms. Many teachers, especially part-time teachers, sometimes find themselves assigned to a classroom that's too big for their class. This situation is far from ideal, but having a daily seating chart can help mitigate this problem. You, the teacher, can smoothly bring students in from the corners of the room and get them ready for pair work all while saving your voice in the process. Seating charts are a great way to manage classrooms that are too big, too wide, or strangely shaped.

In light of the recent global pandemic, it should be noted that being in the habit of making seating charts could prove to be useful in the unfortunate event that you are asked to do some kind of contact tracing among your students. If a student were to contract a contagious virus, you would have an accurate record of who sat where.

One of the biggest advantages of using a seating chart is being able to easily call students by name. Building rapport and trust between teachers and students is critical in the language classroom. As mentioned earlier, students have a lot of affective barriers to overcome when communicating in an English only environment. Any way to make them more comfortable, such as using their names from day one, is beneficial. In addition, by using students' names more often, teachers can learn their students' names more easily.

Overall, there are many advantages to being able to match a name with a face at a glance. If you've ever used a seating chart before, you've probably experienced all of these useful features. The best part about random daily seating is that it has all the benefits of a seating chart with none of the drawbacks of a traditional seating chart: namely the staleness of always sitting next to the same people. Changing the seats keeps interactions fresh for both the students and the teacher.

### **Disadvantages of RDS**

However, there are some disadvantages to this system. Seating charts, no matter how frequently changed, can be inherently burdensome. In addition, preparing seating charts in advance is an additional responsibility for teachers, albeit a small one. In this next section, I will discuss some of the drawbacks of the random daily seating chart system.

The biggest disadvantage of having a random daily seating chart is that it's an extra task that the teacher must do before the lesson. Teachers already have a lot of things to do, so any extra chore, especially if it's unfamiliar, can be onerous. No matter how you approach it, preparing seating charts requires some extra work. Teachers should use a system that works for them, whether it be a third-party

resource or a manual entry. Even for someone who is used to it, creating and printing seating charts takes a few extra minutes and is a potential source of added stress. However, I've found that once you've integrated it into your preparation routine, the added task of making a seating chart before each class isn't overly burdensome.

Another potentially significant downside to adopting this system is that the classroom management benefits to the teacher fall off in value depending on class size and lesson frequency. As alluded to earlier, the system is particularly useful for the teacher if the number of students is large, and classes meet infrequently. In these situations, it's difficult to remember individual student names and keep track of performance and behavior. Using this system, you'd theoretically be able to address students by name in class even if you had thousands of students per week. On the other hand, if you are teaching a seminar class that has only ten students and meets more than once a week, you might not need a seating chart to remember people's names. In other words, depending on your individual teaching situation, you may not need the benefits conferred by using a seating chart. Of course, students might still benefit from getting a new partner every day even in a small class, but teachers might not find the effort to be worth it. For example, in my current position, I teach the same 60 students for three hours a week for a whole year. In this case, I don't need a seating chart to memorize everyone's name. However, I still use one because I think it benefits the students, and I'm comfortable enough with it that preparing a seating chart for every class isn't too much of a hassle.

When implementing assigned seats, teachers should consider whether it's ethically right to tell students where to sit in a university class. In fact, the question of how to manage Japanese students is something I've often thought about in the past eight years of being a university instructor here in Japan. On the one hand, my cultural background as an American tells me that university students are adults, and that they should be treated as such. Students should be responsible for their own education. On the other hand, those same eight years of experience have taught me that this philosophy doesn't accurately describe the reality of university education in Japan. After all, many first- and second-year students still live with their parents, and Japan's Coming of Age ceremony doesn't happen until age 20. Indeed, all three universities I've taught at in Japan have had some kind of mandatory attendance policy, which shows that even though first- and second-year students might not be legally minors, they are not given the responsibility of having complete control over their educational path. Therefore, I conclude that assigning seats (especially to first- and second-year students) is acceptable. In fact, I don't remember ever receiving comments from students saying that they feel condescended to because of being told where to sit. Moreover, the survey results above indicate that students accept or even enjoy having assigned seats.

Other problems with random daily assigned seats are less philosophical in nature and have to do with

the logistics of random seats. For example, students who actively dislike each other may be randomly assigned to be partners. This can easily happen if your implementation method involves computer randomization rather than manual placement. If you have students like this in your class, it's an extra burden on the teacher to make sure that these students don't wind up together. I've actually had students approach me after class and ask me not to be paired with certain other individuals. The situation is practically the same if you have a group of students that, for lack of a better phrase, like each other too much and become disruptive. The burden is still on the teacher to double-check the assignments every time.

Another practical difficulty is the technological requirements. This whole system is predicated on using a computer and projector screen, and while most Japanese university classrooms are equipped with these, it takes some technological expertise to be comfortable using them. In addition, the teacher needs to prepare the classroom before the lesson's starting time. That means arriving at the classroom, turning on the projector, plugging in or logging in to the computer, and projecting the seating chart onto the screen. All of this should be ideally finished with enough time for students to find their seats and get settled. However, the reality of your situation might make this difficult. For example, if you have a short time to walk a long distance between classes, you might find that it's difficult to take the extra time to get the seating chart up before class starts.

Student absences can also cause a problem with RDS. If a student is unexpectedly absent, the teacher has two choices. They could leave the absent student's teammate partnerless for the day, or they could move students around to fill in the gap. Neither solution is ideal; the former leaves students partnerless (which turned out to be one of the main complaints noted by my students in the survey). The latter somewhat defeats the purpose of having a seating chart in the first place. If the actual positioning of the students is different from the chart, the teacher loses some of the inherent benefits, like being able to check a student's name at a glance.

## **Conclusion**

The Random Daily Seating system gives teachers all the benefits of a seating chart and provides students with the opportunity to make friends and communicate. Even though the system has some problems, I have found it to be an extremely useful tool for managing a communicative language classroom. Maximizing students' chances to communicate by reducing their anxiety and giving them the opportunity to make new friends promotes communication and generally improves their experience as a language learner. If you, the teacher, have the resources and time to implement RDS, I strongly recommend that you try it.



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