International Journal of Research in Education Humanities and Commerce

Volume 07, Issue 06 "November - December 2026"

ISSN 2583-0333

ROTATING ASSIGNED SEATING IN A UNIVERSITY ENGLISH CONVERSATION COURSE

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https://doi.org/10.37602/IJREHC.2026.7606

ABSTRACT

Classroom seating has a great effect on learners, particularly in a language classroom where interaction with peers is essential. While research has shown that the location of students in a classroom can affect their performance, the research on assigned seating versus student-chosen seating is lacking. This study investigates the effects of assigned versus free seating on university students' classroom experiences. This research explores student perceptions of rotating assigned seating versus student-chosen seats and how these arrangements affect students' classroom experiences. The findings reveal that students slightly prefer when the seats are assigned by the instructor for various reasons. However, in a course that meets two days a week, the majority of students prefer that one meeting has assigned seating while the other has free seating, while the vast majority of the remaining students prefer that the teacher always chooses the seats. Lastly, through interviews students further explained their preferences.

Keywords: assigned seating, rotating seating, university, ESL, conversation class

1.0 INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of each new semester, university language instructors who are assigned their classrooms walk into the possibly unknown rooms that they will be teaching in for the next few months. Upon seeing the setup and all that it entails, such as the number of desks, how the desks are arranged, the position of the projector, the location of the teacher's desk or podium, etc., experienced language educators are most likely already thinking about how to rearrange the classroom. This is because educators know that the classroom setup is not only a critical component of classroom management, but it also has been "shown to be important for both the academic and social development of students" (Gremmen et al., 2016).

Particularly in a language classroom where students need to feel comfortable, physically and emotionally, in order to work with and communicate with classmates, seating arrangements can be used as a tool to foster a positive atmosphere that allows for better interactions. Assigned seating may not be typically associated with university courses. However, if seats are assigned and regularly rotated in order to allow students to meet all of their classmates and have somewhat iterative discussions to build fluency, could this be an effective strategy for university conversation classes?

2.0 BACKGROUND

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Research has shown that teachers give a variety of reasons to explain why they arrange the classroom in whichever way they choose. Gremmen et al. (2016) found that academic performance was the most important consideration for teachers when choosing seats. Student engagement as well as students' behaviors are also taken into consideration (Emmer & Stough, 2001). How instructors arrange the classroom may then affect how students feel and what they anticipate that day's class will entail. Kennedy (2017) found that the layout of the classroom, specifically putting desks into clusters, signaled to students what the focus of the class would be and the types of activities that would be carried out. When planning activities for EFL university students, "Clusters might be the easiest way to introduce group activities into the classroom" (Kobylinski, 2019). However, due to constraints such as "time, convenience, and classroom limitations," many instructors choose to have students in rows (Kobylinski, 2019). This body of research shows that even when teachers thoughtfully consider the most beneficial seating arrangement for students, there may be limitations on their ability to arrange the classroom as they wish.

2.1 Collaboration and Interactions

Clusters and grouped desks in particular encourage collaboration and may even influence the quality of student output. To promote cooperation, teachers prefer that students sit in small groups (Gremmen et al., 2016). When educators assign these groups before an activity, Treme (2018) found that this "allowed students to communicate with a different set of peers than they would have chosen themselves, thus giving students a chance to improve their understanding of a concept through discussion and explanation as well as challenge both their own and other's assumptions." Students themselves also put a lot of thought into the choice of seat and group mates. Jung-Hsui Lin's (2015) study of English as an Additional Language (EAL) international students found that this group strategically selected their seats "to enable meaningful interactions with peers." In terms of student preferences "findings revealed that the cluster seating was the most preferred… students are already facing each other, making the transition between teacher-focused and student-focused activities more efficient" (Burgess & Kaya, 2007). The fact that students are physically close to one another and can comfortably and easily maneuver to discuss with peers leads to more interaction (Burgess & Kaya, 2007). Wannarka & Ruhl's (2008) meta study also found that clustered seating facilitates "interactions by proximity and position." Therefore, "Because proximity and orientation influence communication, it is possible that desk configuration impacts on the nature and extent of student interaction" (Wannarka & Ruhl, 2008)

2.2 Coincidental Friendships and Social Dynamics

At the university level, when students choose their own seats, they typically sit in the same spot for the rest of the semester (Treme, 2018). Students with similar backgrounds tend to sit together, and groups rarely change; new members are seldom included (Treme, 2018). In Treme's (2018) study, when seats were shuffled with no consideration of the students' choice of seats on the first day, students were forced to communicate with those they may not have interacted with before. This resulted "in a more inclusive atmosphere" (Treme, 2018). In this way, instructors could be seen as scaffolding new relationships, as students have opportunities to meet with classmates they may not otherwise interact with (Gest & Rodkin, 2011). Simply being physically closer to other students "can positively influence their social perceptions on

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each other" (Gremmen et al., 2016). When Back et al. (2008) researched the relationship between students' proximity and friendships, they found that sitting in randomly assigned seats closer to one another, as compared to "sitting in seats with no perceivable physical relation, led to higher ratings of friendship intensity 1 year later." The conclusion to this study was that "coincidentally being near another person or being in the same group with him or her during an initial encounter may promote the development of a friendship with that person. In a nutshell, people may become friends simply because they drew the right random number" (Back et al., 2008).

3.0 METHODOLOGY

Over three semesters, from the 2024 Fall semester through the 2025 Spring and Fall semesters, this research focused on students' opinions of the seating arrangements in class. The students come from a university in Seoul, South Korea, and the class is a required College English course that is overwhelmingly attended by first year students. The class typically has 28 to 30 students per section, and students come from every department on campus, with the exception of the Department of English. Students from different departments take the same class. Therefore, the majority of the students are meeting for the first time.

At the end of each semester, students were asked to fill out a survey with multiple choice questions and open-ended questions about their opinions and experiences with the seating in class. This resulted in a set of quantitative and qualitative data. In the 2024 Fall semester, 105 students took the survey, Spring of 2025 had 107 students, and Fall of 2025 had 96 students. Therefore, a total of 308 student survey responses could be used for this study. Additionally, when students spontaneously commented on the seating on the class evaluation or another feedback form, this was also recorded for the purpose of this study.

This College English course meets two days a week over a fifteen week semester. The goal is to build confidence in students' English abilities and strengthen their fluency. Therefore, the class is mainly focused on students working together with a partner in the warm-up class, and then students practicing sustained discourse throughout the discussion class.

The first class of the week meets for one hour, and this class is used as an introduction to the week's topic. In this class, students have the freedom to sit anywhere. They are strongly encouraged to sit next to a partner, and if they do not have a partner when the class begins, students will move to a nearby seat in order to have someone to work with. During the first week or two of the class, the instructor often tells students seated near each other to move closer to become partners. After this, students begin to sit with someone from the beginning or to move on their own when the partner activities begin as they become more accustomed to how the class is run.

The second class of the week meets for two hours, and this class is focused on discussion. The assigned seating chart is projected onto the screen before class begins (Figure 1), and students find their assigned seats as they come into the room. With a partner or a team of three people in total, students use their homework questions to discuss the week's topic at length. After ten to fifteen minutes, depending on the group size, students switch teams by following the assigned flow (Figure 2). This allows students to discuss the same topic in a variety of ways

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with different students for the duration of the class. This assigned rotating seating allows students to always know where to sit and where to go when the groups change.

Figure 1

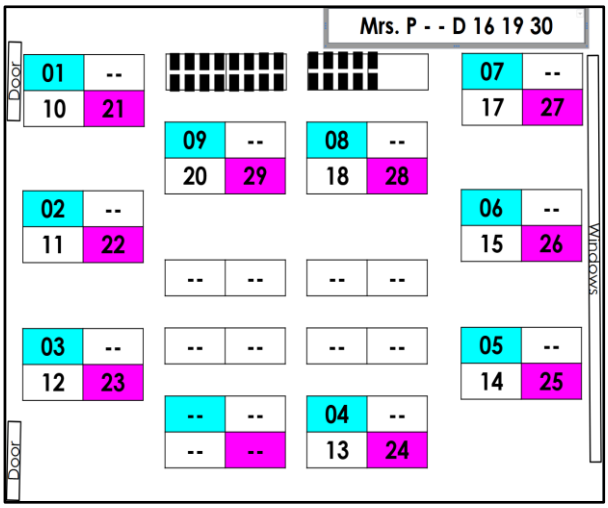
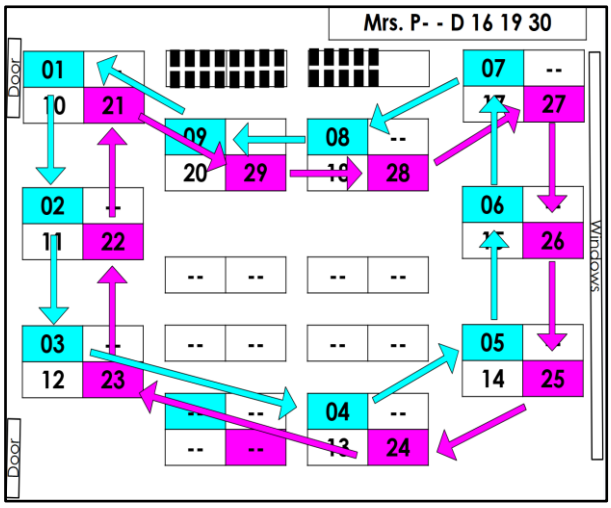


Figure 2



As the groups are always rotating within a given class, and the rotation changes with each class, students have a chance to speak with all of their classmates over the course of the semester. Therefore, there is no need to specifically have friends together or not together. Additionally, as this is a university level course, behavior is not taken into consideration, as this is not an issue.

4.0 RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

At the end of each semester, the students filled out a survey with a series of multiple-choice questions about the seating arrangements along with an open-ended prompt where they could freely write their opinions. The multiple-choice questions resulted in quantitative data that is further elaborated upon from the qualitative data of the students' comments from the open-ended prompt. Among the 308 survey responses, there were a number of non-substantive comments such as "No," "Nothing," etc. The remaining 162 comments were grouped into themes and will be discussed below.

4.1 The Middle Ground: Teacher and Student Chosen Seats

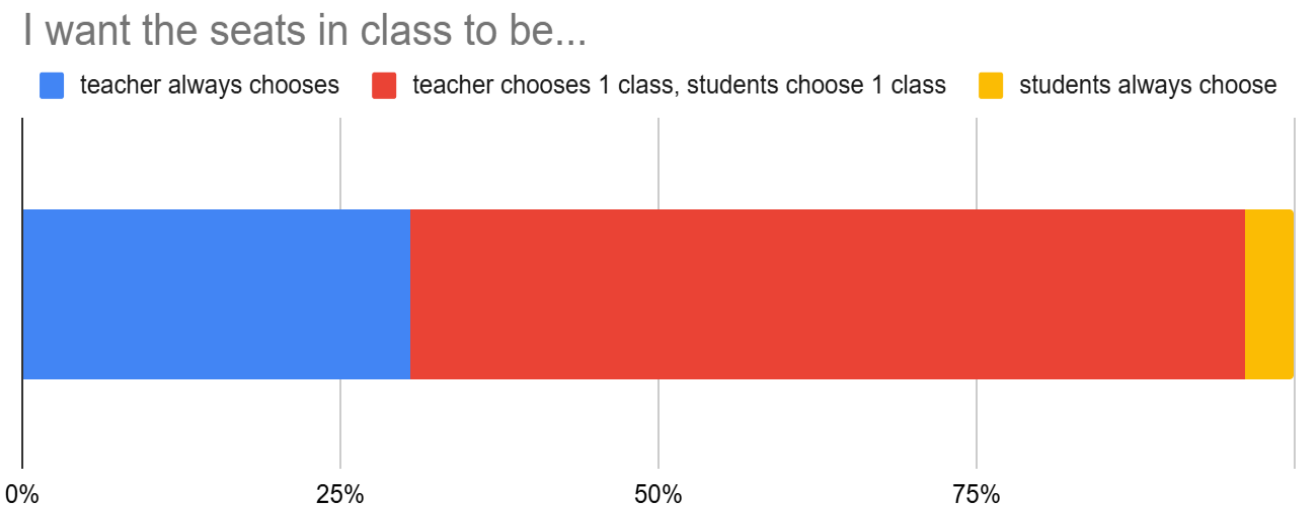
Students were asked to choose their preference for the seating in class with the three options of 1) the teacher always choosing seats, 2) the teacher choosing the seats one class a week and students choosing the seats one class a week, and 3) students always choosing the seats. Figure 3 shows the results that 66% of students chose the current seating system of the teacher and students each choosing seats in one class a week, while 30% of students preferred that the teacher always chooses the seats. Only 4% of students preferred that the students always choose the seats.

Figure 3

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Volume 07, Issue 06 "November - December 2026"

ISSN 2583-0333



Among the grouping of written comments, the most common theme was satisfaction with the hybrid system, which was praised in 38% of the 162 comments. One student wrote that "It's great to be able to sit down and chat with a friend on Monday and meet a new friend on Wednesday." Another student said they were very satisfied with this system and explained that "Because the teacher chooses the seats, I can talk to more people. And because I feel comfortable when I choose the seats myself."

About 11% of open-ended responses expressed their preference for teacher-assigned seating for both sessions of the class. "That system that teacher chooses seats for students is actually one of my favorite parts of this class." The majority of these responses mentioned their lack of friends in the class as their reason for this: "Since I don't have friends in this class, it was hard to choose where to sit."

4.2 Meeting New People: Coincidental Friendships

The second most common theme among the written comments, 29%, was the socialization aspect of the rotating seats and the opportunities that it provided to meet students from different departments. One response related to these opportunities of meeting others was that "I think I was able to make a lot of friends because I changed seats every time." One student said, "I enjoyed the change in partners. I was able to talk to every student in the class and hear many stories." Another comment was, "By the seating arrangement, I could make new friends." An additional comment related to making new friends was that "At first it was a little awkward since we didn't know each other… we became friends so it was comfortable to have a conversation." On a separate feedback form for our class on an entirely different topic, a handful of students mentioned that the rotating seats were their favorite part of our class.

4.3 Teacher Assigned Seats and Comfort

Students were asked to rate their comfort level on a Likert scale for classes that had teacher assigned seating and classes with free seating. Figure 4 below shows the results. 79% of students said they felt very comfortable or comfortable when the teacher chose the seats, and 60% of students said they felt very comfortable or comfortable when students chose the seats.

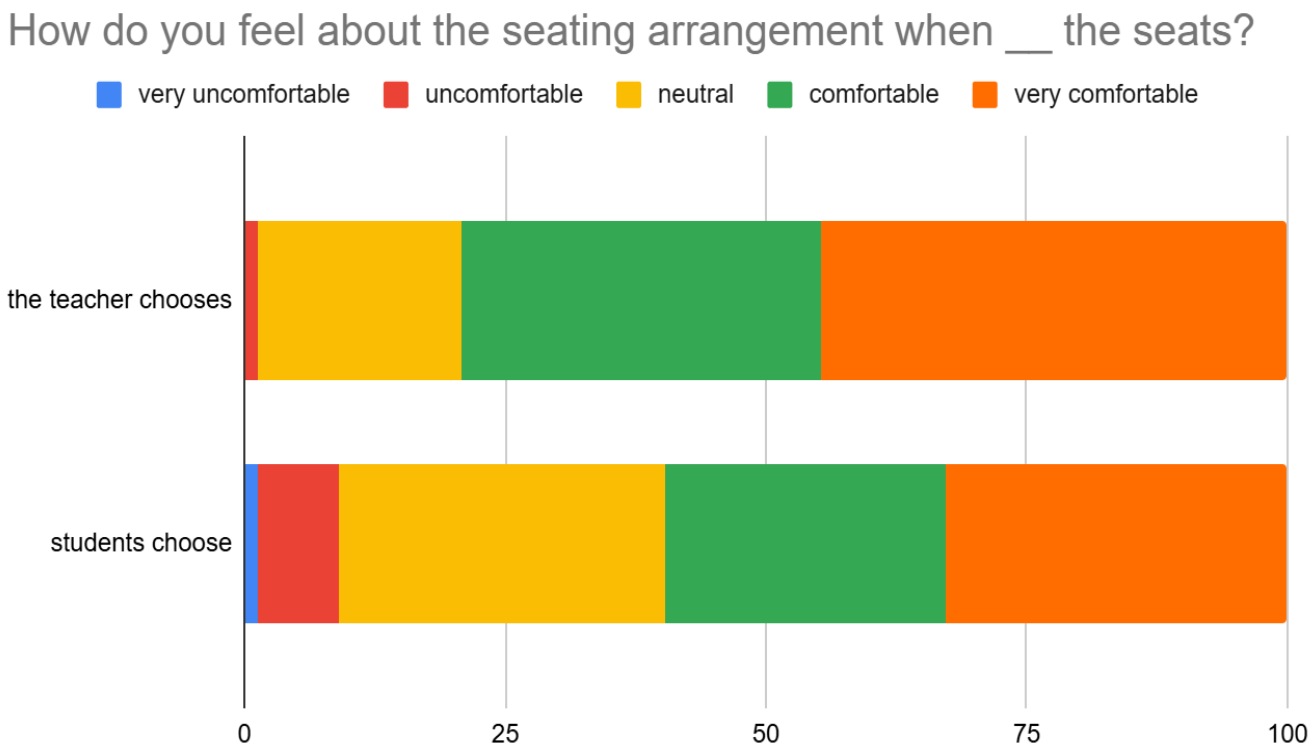
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As for being uncomfortable, only 1% of students said they felt uncomfortable when the teacher chose the seats; there were no 'very uncomfortable' responses. A total of 9% of students said they felt very uncomfortable (1%) or uncomfortable (8%), when the students chose the seats. From this quantitative data, it is clear that more students felt uncomfortable when the students had the freedom to choose their own seats.

Figure 4



About 16% of responses specifically mentioned comfort and free seating, for example "I feel more comfortable when teacher allows me to choose freely… it was kind of hard for me to talk with people that I don't know well." In a similar vein, another student wrote that "When I choose my own seat, I feel more comfortable because I am an introvert person." One student did acknowledge that the comfort however may inhibit their output: "When I sit with a friend, I have a sense of security that it's okay even if I don't speak much or well, but that same comfort seems to reduce my attempts to speak in English."

4.4 Focus During Class

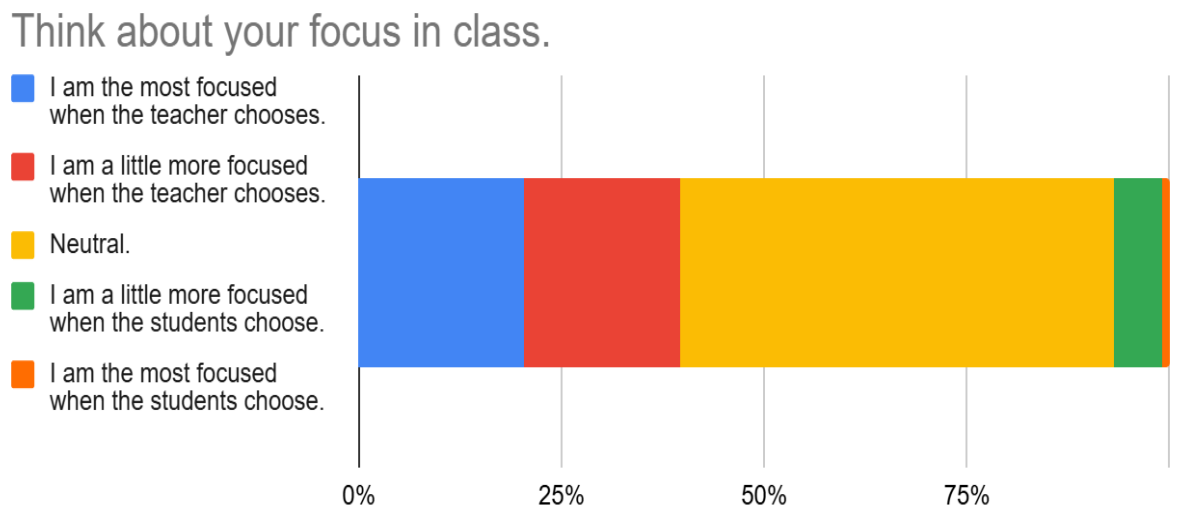
Students were asked about their focus in class depending on who chose the seats. Figure 4 shows that about 54% of students reported the neutral opinion implying that they believed the seating had no effect on their focus in class. 39% of students said they are the most focused or a little more focused when the teacher chooses the seats, and a total of 7% said they are the most focused or a little more focused when students choose the seats.

Figure 5

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Volume 07, Issue 06 "November - December 2026"

ISSN 2583-0333



From the open-ended question, only a handful of students commented on their focus in class. One student said that "If I sit with friends, it is hard to focus." Another student explained that while they prefer sitting with classmates who they work well with, "when teacher chooses the seat, I can focus on class more."

5.0 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study has a few limitations that need to be addressed. First, terms such as comfort and focus can be interpreted in a number of ways by students. Second, the questions refer to the entire semester. Therefore, when answering questions about comfort and focus, students' opinions could have been different not only week to week, but even changing throughout a class as students rotate seats and meet new partners. Third, the data is all self-reported by students, and self-reported data tends to have many issues.

In this research, there were a lot of neutral opinions reported, but even with these large numbers, it is clear that students are comfortable and accepting of assigned seats in university classrooms. Additionally, the added action of rotating seats for students specifically in a language class brings students more opportunities to not only interact with different peers but potentially forge new friendships as well. Even though assigned rotating seats may not be common in university language courses, I believe through this research that it has a number of benefits for these young adults.

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