



Rationales for Classroom Seating Arrangements: An EFL Teacher's Voice

Sitti Nurfaidah, Abdul Halim, Hildayanti, Riski
IAIN Kendari, Indonesia

Corresponding e-mail: sittinurfaidah@iainkendari.ac.id

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to present a case study of an EFL teacher's rationales in implementing certain seating arrangements in his classrooms. Using thematic analysis, the analyzed transcript of semi-structured interview indicates that the teacher's rationales behind a certain seating arrangement in his class are various. The teacher reveals that traditional seating is considered suitable for explaining the lesson and also catching the students' attention whenever they do not seem to be ready to study. Meanwhile, the U-shape seating is used when he wants to help and engage the students in activities which could foster their active participation. Pair seating becomes the teacher's choice when he wants to encourage the shy students to speak. The teacher believes that group seating is of importance to help building the students' confidence to speak. This study implies that the seating arrangement aspect in EFL classroom management should be well considered.

Keywords: *EFL classroom; group seating; pair seating; seating arrangement; traditional seating; U-shape seating*

INTRODUCTION

Classroom seating arrangements have become the focus of continued research over the last two decades (Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003; Wasnock, 2010; Wright, 2005; Yang, Zhou, & Hu, 2021), especially their impact on learners' behavior (Adedokun, Burgess, Henke, & Parker, 2017;; Halim & Mustar, 2017; Lotfy, 2012). They play important role in the class since it becomes one of the dimensions that can influence teaching and learning process in the classroom (Çinar, 2010; Gremmen, van den Berg, Segers, & Cillessen, 2016; Xi, Yuan, YunQui, & Chiang, 2017; Yang et al., 2021). Regarding that teachers and students spend more time in the pedagogic space (Bordieu & Passeron, 1990) as a classroom learning community (Wright, 2005), the classroom condition, including the arrangement of the students' seat might impact on their engagement and classroom participation (Shernoff, Sannella, Schorr, Sanchez-Wall, Ruzek, Sinha, & Bressler, 2017). Also, seating arrangement is effective and beneficial to foster students' participation (Anggriani & Humaera, 2021; Guermat & Zaidi, 2017).

Yang et al. (2021) argue that seating arrangement can influence the classroom atmosphere to be more positive, both for teacher and students. Such a positive atmosphere might happen due to seating arrangements' role in creating different dynamics in the class (Fernandes, Huang, & Rinaldo, 2011). Furthermore, Gremmen et al. (2016) maintain that the layout of seating



arrangement could stimulate the students to get involved actively in a lesson. Seating layouts within the class allowed students' involvement off-task and on-task in engaging in group works as well as helped shy students (Lotfy, 2012).

A considerable amount of literature has been published on seating arrangement. In Indonesia, study on seating arrangement had been conducted on various focuses (Anggriani & Humaera, 2021; Bugis, 2018; Halim & Mustar, 2017; Utami & Muslim, 2019). Anggriani and Humarea's (2021) study focused on the role of seating arrangements in small groups as the triggering factor of students' willingness to speak English in the classroom. They found that social factors such as grouping students in arranged seating are proven to create a positive atmosphere in the classroom. Another study conducted by Bugis (2018) focused on fostering students' speaking competence through certain instructional design involving seating arrangement so that the students are willing to speak. Meanwhile, Halim and Mustar's (2017) study focused on the implementation of U-shape seating arrangement in foreign language classroom. Their study revealed that the seating arrangement facilitated the teachers' movements, the flow of classroom activities, and the students-teacher communication in the class. Another recent study on seating arrangement focused on EFL teachers' perceptions on class seating arrangement in managing students' disruptive talking behaviour (Utami & Muslim, 2019). The study found that the implementation of various kinds of seating arrangement applied in EFL class, such as row arrangement, the separate table arrangement, the horseshoe arrangement, circle arrangements, and solo work arrangement. In seating arrangements, there are many aspects that teachers considered, namely types of class activity, time allocation, how the students' interaction, students' level, class size, gender, the students' height, kinds of seats, and also the seats' distance. Meanwhile, each seating arrangement gives different impact on classroom interaction.

However, there has been limited study investigating on the physical design of classroom space (Hitchcock & Hughes, 1989; Lambert, 1994), especially seating arrangement (Xi, Yuan, YunQui, & Chiang, 2017) and the teacher's deliberation for certain arrangements (Gremmen et al., 2016). In fact, the teachers encounter a question about how as well as where to arrange their students' seating at the beginning of semester (Gremmen et al., 2016). They argued that teacher's knowledge about managing seat layout arrangement is lacking.

With this motivation, the study about teacher's rationales in deciding a certain seating arrangement in EFL classroom needs to be done because a well-devised seating arrangement plan could influence academic in good way (Guermat & Zaidi, 2017; Hilal, 2014; Muluk, Nasriyanti, Habiburrahim, Zulfikar, Akmal, & Safrul, 2021) because incapacity to attain desirable and arrangement of interactive seating potentially has affect students' learning negatively (Fernandes et al., 2011). Moreover, in managing students' relationship, the teacher needs to use particular strategies (Gremmen et al., 2016) and more knowledge about how to place students in the classroom is needed. Therefore, this study focuses on EFL teacher's rationales in deciding students' seating in EFL classroom. This study is expected to be of use as a reference for teachers in teaching in EFL classroom.



RESEARCH METHOD

This case study involved one participant. The teacher is an EFL lecturer teaching at English education department in one of the institutions in Southeast Sulawesi, Indonesia. The lecturer often applies different seating arrangement in his classrooms. He mainly teaches speaking classes. The lecturer used several types of seating arrangement in one meeting. He is knowledgeable about seating position in terms of how to make or decide a good seating arrangement to achieve his learning goal.

The semi-structure interview was utilized to gather the data to address the research question of this study. The guideline of the interview is adapted from Gremmen et al. (2016) which is closely related to this present study because the items of their interview suit this present study in exploring the teacher's rationales in making a classroom seating arrangement. Interview in this study was done through following the interview guidelines that the researcher provided. Before the interview, the researcher asked the lecturer's permission to record the interview in order to retain the data and help the process of data transcription easier.

To analyze the data of the interview, the recording of interview that had been taken was transcribed (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The researcher needed to code the transcript of lecturer's data as a participant by highlighting the words or the sentences to make it easier to analyze (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The data that had been coded will be categorized based on a number of seating arrangement, the lecturer used in his classroom to recognize the lecturer's concept about deciding a certain seating arrangement of each seating arrangement. The categorizing is intended to more focus on a few key issues (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The analysed data showed that there were four types of seating arrangements that the lecturer often applied in his EFL classroom. In deciding a certain seating arrangement for each activity in his EFL classroom, the lecturer had some reasons based on his goal in teaching.

Rationales for Traditional Seating Arrangement

There were some considerations the lecturer had when applying the traditional seating arrangement in his EFL classroom. He usually used this type of arrangement at the beginning of the class because, at that time, primarily his students were not ready to study, and he mostly applied it for five minutes. He argues:

... if we begin the class, most students are not ready, so I give like a traditional classroom as I talk to them to get their attention.

The use of traditional seating at the beginning of the class is intended to catch his students' attention to focus on the lesson. The same result was also found in Gremmen et al.'s (2016) study that at the beginning of the school, the traditional seating was used to construct students' focus on the lesson. Also, the students in these seats are more interested and stay focused on the material given by the lecturer (Park & Choi, 2014). In traditional seating, students sit individually in each



chair in front of the teacher, while the teacher is the center and the authority (Cinar, 2010; Peng, 2016).

However, the study's dissimilar findings (Park & Choi, 2014) showed that the students were increasingly motivated to study within the traditional setting only with high GPAs. Meanwhile, Peng (2016) argued that this seating arrangement is less satisfying and inappropriate with the teacher's role as a facilitator. It is due to the students in this seating arrangement getting little opportunity to speak or communicate with the other students. As a controller, the teacher is too dominating the class. Nevertheless, Xi et al. (2017) argued that most students like the straight row seating arrangement because it makes them focus on their learning.

Fernandes et al. (2011) also revealed that traditional seating allows a teacher individually to watch students; consequently, distraction and interaction of non-individuals can be identified handily. Those factors might make the students stay focused on the teacher's lesson. Moreover, this seating arrangement made students more attentive to the lecturer if they stayed in a straight row arrangement (Hilal, 2014). On the other hand, this seating arrangement is also used if the lecturer wants his students listen to the information. He explains:

... if I want them to listen to the information, I put them in the traditional seating classroom.

The lecturer considered that this seating is good for explaining the material. Thus, the lecturer used this arrangement of traditional seating in the beginning of the class as commonly in that time, the teacher introduced the material. It is similar to Baxodirovna's (2020) study that traditional seating develops more thought and material preparation. Similar result was also found by Çinar (2010) in his study that traditional seating is usually used in teaching material while the students listen and take the lesson notes. It makes lecturing easier because the teacher is seated in front of a class so that the interaction focuses on the teacher (Harris & Miyake, 2017). In other words, traditional seating might make the interaction between students and the teacher frequent. However, the interaction between student to student is lower because students only focus on the teacher's presentation (Cinar, 2010). Consequently, this seating arrangement obstructs students from interacting with each other because of the lack of visual cues from their classmates and the difficulty of moving in involving other students. It indicated that the arrangement does not foster collaborative work among students (Harris & Miyake, 2017).

Another reason why traditional seating is suitable to use to make students focus on the lesson is that students in this seating arrangement are more likely to be active and motivated students (Park & Choi, 2014). Thus, traditional seating is also used to make students work individually because it can promote their on-task behaviors, and students can work academically (Gremmen et al., 2016). It is also defined in Fernandes et al.'s (2011) study that the traditional seating arrangement greatly emphasizes the role of the individual because it tremendously focuses on individualistic activities with minimal interaction. That is why Harris and Miyake's (2017) study indirectly suggested that if a student only focused on the teacher and listened to the instructions and the teacher's explanation, the teacher should assign students to traditional seating that creates less interaction with their peers. Thus, the lecturer usually used this seating arrangement in the

classroom when his students were not ready to study or when he wanted his students to listen to the information and explain the lesson's material.

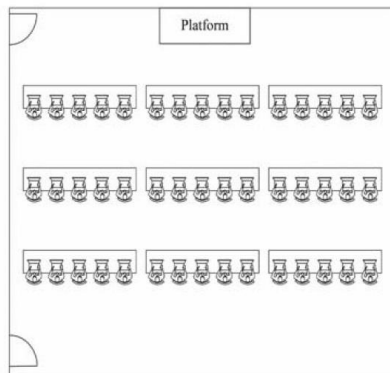


Figure 1. Traditional or rows-and-columns seating arrangement
Source: Yang (2021, p. 7)

Rationales for U-shape Seating Arrangement

The lecturer usually used U-shape seating during half of the teaching and learning process in his EFL classroom. He used this type of arrangement if he wanted his students to understand the lesson's material very quickly. The following vignette illustrates his argument.

R: Why do you choose U-shape seating arrangement in your class?

T: Because I want the students to get the idea of the lesson very quickly...

The lecturer considered that this seating arrangement could facilitate his students to understand the material very quickly. In line with Halim and Mustar's (2017) investigation, U-shape design helped learners to understand the lecturer's explanation and the point of the lesson better. In another study, Fernandes et al. (2011) also suggest that U-shape seating can promote teacher-student and student-student interaction and better understanding and access to learning experiences. Moreover, this seating arrangement offers some benefits since it makes him easier to control his students. He reveals:

U-shape design helps me control the students easier and helps the students sometimes. U-shape design is effortless for me to do that.

Halim and Mustar's (2017) investigation also found that U-shape seating allowed lecturers to get closer to students so that the teacher could control and help the students' activity quickly. In addition, this seating also facilitates his students to see each other. So, although the lecturer uses U-shape seating, his students can work in a pair, group, or even the whole class by using this seating arrangement. He explains:

So, sometimes I fill it in a U-shape design, but they talk to the whole class because they can see each other in a U-shape design.

This finding is also in line with Baxodirovna's (2020) research that U-shape seating is excellent for speaking activities, whether in a group or the whole class because all students can see the teacher and see each other. In Indonesia, the same result was also found by Halim and Mustar's (2017) that U-shape seating facilitates students to see each other by eye contact. It allowed students to cooperate well and establish good communication or relationship. This arrangement has ample space in the middle (Baxodirovna, 2020), and the teacher could walk around to control the class easily (Muluk et al., 2021).

Because this seating arrangement provides students to see each other, this seating arrangement can promote positive student-student and teacher-students' interaction (Fernandes et al., 2011; Hilal, 2014). Hilal's (2014) study also revealed that this seating layout makes the lesson more engaging for the students, and they participate actively when the classroom is arranged in a U-shape. Halim and Mustar (2017) also added that arranging the seating in a U-shape can help students share their opinions because the lecturer allows them to explore their way of thinking.

Not only to facilitate the students to understand the material very quickly, but the lecturer also uses this seating arrangement to make it easy to help his students. He reveals:

... then I assign them to get in a U-shape design because I desire to help them, check their assignment, and get them quickly by U-shape design.

This design shapes the seating into a U letter so that the lecturer can move around to help his students to check their assignments quickly. Not only that, but the design also helped the lecturer to provide feedback to students carefully (Halim & Mustar, 2017). This condition gives an advantage for the lecturer to interact easily with his students. It was also found by Baxodirovna's (2020) study that U-shape seating is a comfortable arrangement that the teacher uses to monitor the students' tasks. Thus, the lecturer believes that if he wants his students to understand the lesson and to be able to help them quickly, he will design his students in a U-shape seating.

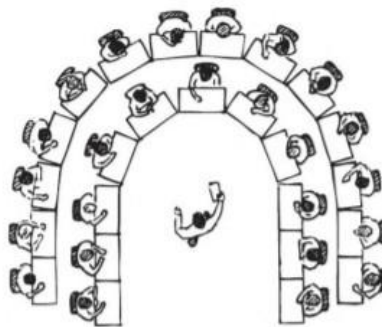




Figure 2. U-shape or semi-circle seating arrangement
Source: Scrivener (2012, p. 8)

Rationales for Pair Seating Arrangement

In speaking practice, the lecturer used a pair seating arrangement when his students were still shy to speak. He reveals:

When it comes to practice, like I want them to be able to practice, I ask them to talk with their pair if they are very shy.

... in one class, I also used pair work because I wanted the students to practice with their pairs. Sometimes they are very shy to talk to me, then I ask, "Can you talk to your friend?"

When the class activity requires his students to practice speaking, but his students were very shy to talk to the whole class or to the lecturer, the lecturer believes that pair seating is suitable to use in this situation. In this kind of seating arrangement, each pair will sit away from the other pairs (Bugis, 2018). Therefore, when students are sitting in pairs, the student will only consist of two students so that the students will talk more freely with their peers. A similar argument was also stated by Achmad and Yusuf (2014) that working in pair provide an opportunity for the students to communicate and practice speaking more willingly.

Further, this seating arrangement was also used when his students did not know what they wanted to talk about. He argues:

When I ask the students to practice speaking, and it seems that they are very shy or do not know what to say to me, I ask them to do that in pair work.

Muluk et al. (2021) argued that when students sit in pair seating, they can share their ideas and help them study cooperatively. By sitting the students in this kind of seating arrangement, they could share what they knew and did not know from the lesson or from the lecturer's command to get the idea or information. Bugis (2018) also argued that using a pair seating arrangement helps the teacher monitor students quickly because the teacher can walk around the whole class. For those reasons, the lecturer used pair seating when his students were very shy to speak in practice or did not know what they should talk about.

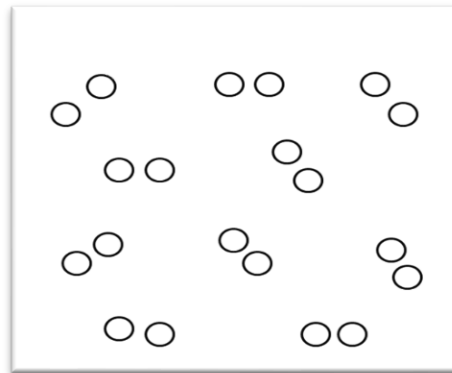


Figure 3. Pair seating arrangement
Source: Scrivener (2012, p. 8)

Rationales for Group Seating Arrangement

The lecturer used a group seating arrangement in his EFL classroom to build his students' confidence in speaking. He states:

And then, I also use group work with three or four students because I want them to be confident to speak because if they always speak, they will be confident.

The lecturer considered that the more his students practice speaking, the more they will be confident to speak. When students sit in group seating, they will consist of three or four students that make them work in a group and discuss together (Muluk et al., 2021) so that the students can have more opportunities to communicate and construct their knowledge. Farrell and Yang's (2019) study also shows that teachers can build students' confidence in speaking by providing them more chances to speak English.

Muluk et al. (2021) suggested that this arrangement is effective for students in collaborative learning as it pushes students' cooperation (Gremmen et al., 2016). Besides being beneficial for the teacher, students also benefit from applying this seating arrangement. Further, group seating arrangements can improve the students' interaction (Gremmen et al., 2016) because of the proximity between peers (Gremmen et al., 2016). On the other hand, group seating also allows teachers and students to interact more often (Fernandes et al., 2011).

This seating is appropriate to increase the students' confidence in speaking. The students will interact more or communicate with the other students and the teacher in this seating arrangement. Baxodirovna (2020) and Muluk et al. (2021) also argued that group seating arrangement produces most talking and the highest rates of disruptive behavior in the class. Nevertheless, at the same time, it can increase students' collaboration in learning activities regardless of their ability level each other (Muluk et al., 2015). The excerpt of the interview above

found that the lecturer used group seating when he wanted to improve his students' confidence in speaking.

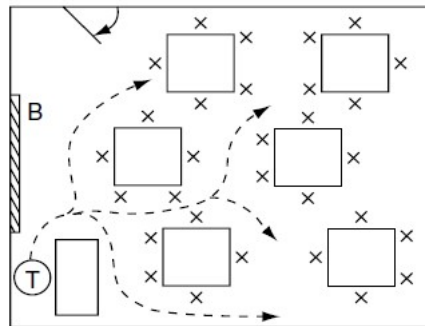


Figure 4. Group seating or restaurant
Source: Wright (2005, p. 58)

In this study, there are many considerations or reasons for the lecturer to decide or make a particular seating arrangements in the EFL classroom. One of them was because every seating arrangement has its purpose in the EFL classroom. The following excerpt of the interview illustrates this.

R: So, those arrangement types have different purposes in your class, right?

T: Yeah. As I told you earlier, the arrangement of seating will help us get the class's aims.

This notion is in line with Guermat and Zaidi's (2017) study that every seating arrangement is beneficial in the classroom. Furthermore, Hilal (2014) argued that no best seating arrangement could be applied in the classroom because each seating arrangement has its own advantage and disadvantage, depending on the teacher's goal of the lesson they want to reach.

As explained above, the reason why the lecturer chose traditional seating is different from when the lecturer chose the U-shape seating and arrangement in pair and group seating. Therefore, in the teaching and learning process, the lecturer might not only use one type of seating arrangement for the whole time in one meeting. It can be at least two or three seating arrangements in one meeting in the classroom.

In this research, the lecturer commonly utilized four types of seating arrangements that can better reach his goals in teaching. He reveals this in the following excerpt of the interview.

R: What is the current seating arrangement you apply in your class?

T: So many. Pair work, group work, and sitting normally.

R: Sitting normally? Is it like traditional one?

T: Yeah.



R: Do you use the horseshoe seating arrangement; I mean U-shape seating arrangement?
Do you use it?
T: Yeah, I use it.

The data shows that the lecturer used traditional, pair, group, and U-shape seating. The other investigations by Hilal (2014) and Harris and Miyake (2017) expose that the teachers' most common seating arrangements in their classroom are traditional seating, U-shape seating, and group seating. Generally, the lecturer decided to use the traditional, U-shape, pair, and group seating in his EFL classroom because he wanted to attain the lesson's objectives, that is, to improve the students' level of understanding and their confidence to speak. He reveals:

... the typical is I want to improve their understanding and confidence to speak by implementing a U-shape design and then pair work and group work....

The lecturer examined that those seating arrangements could help the class reach the lesson's objectives better than the other seating arrangements. Due to the advantages of those seating arrangements mentioned before, it can facilitate the lecturer to reach his goals in teaching. Then, the lecturer continued that those seating arrangements can make the students have an active involvement in communicating in the classroom, such as sharing their ideas to their pair, group, or even to the whole class, which becomes one of the goals of the lecturer in teaching. He argues:

... those of seating arrangements, such as in pair, group, and U-shape, involve the students to share their ideas actively and recount the idea.

A similar argument was also indicated by Muluk et al. (2021) that group seating is appropriate in students' relations effectively, in particular for working collaboratively. Likewise, Baxodirovna (2020) revealed that U-shape seating is excellent for speaking activities like a whole-group discussion.

CONCLUSION

Based on the data analysis on findings, it can be concluded that seating arrangement is important in the EFL classroom to reach the lesson's objectives. In making a particular seating arrangement in the EFL classroom, the teacher should have some considerations because each seating arrangement has positive and negative effects in certain situations in the classroom. When students have to listen to the explanation of the lesson, the teacher could consider implementing traditional seating. The teacher could implement U-shape seating when he or she wishes to help the students understand the lesson's material quickly. When the teacher wants the students to practice speaking but is very shy, the teacher could consider implementing pair seating. When the teacher wants to help raise the students' confidence in speaking, a teacher supposed that group seating is suitable to apply in the EFL classroom.



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