Small Group Seating

Rationale: Japanese language is considered to be one of the most difficult languages for American students to learn. I have seen many students being overwhelmed or discouraged in the course of a month or so. I thought that creating the sense of community in the classroom might help students learn the language better without giving it up. For about ten years now, I have been using small group seating in my classroom, and encouraging group study outside of the classroom as well, including doing their homework assignments together and helping one another.

Description:
- Put 2-3 long tables together for the group of 4-6 students.
- Have students introduce themselves to one another and create a network within each group by sharing names, email addresses, contact phone numbers. If a student does not wish to share the info, the instructor is his/her contact person.
- Students contact their group members to find out homework assignments, missed topics while they were absent, and other information.
- Encourage students to have group study before/after class or whenever it is convenient.
- Clearly state in the syllabus that the instructor reserves the right to change group members at any time, if it is believed to be in the best interest of the whole class.

Benefits:
- Students can help one another/work together in class through group work/activities/exercises.
- A group setting with tables together makes it easy for students to do games with cards of Japanese alphabets/characters, and to work on conversation and reading aloud.
- Students who missed a class can find out assignments and class topics from group members. Students know that the instructor is always the back-up source of information.
- Students are ready to study and do homework assignments together, helping one another, outside of the classroom as well.
- The sense of community gives students a welcoming atmosphere and helps them feel more at home in class.
- The sense of community helps struggling students stay in class, rather than dropping out of the class.
Problems and Solutions:

- Friends want to sit in the same group.
  → When I form small groups at the beginning of the semester, I have students stand in two lines (men and women) to make sure all groups will have (almost) the same numbers of men and women. The first student in each line counts “1”, the next one “2”, going up to “5” or “6” (the number of groups being formed). Each student remembers his/her number. Students go to the group for their numbers. This way friends end up being in different groups, because they usually stand next to each other.

- After a while, some students may not want to be in their groups.
  → Keep an eye on how each group is working. If necessary, after the midterm exam or a half way into the semester, I let students have free seating on one of two days (e.g. sit in the home group on Tuesday and free seating on Thursday). It usually takes about two months for students to build a good sense of community within each group. Students are encouraged to sit with different people every free seating day to get to know wide range of classmates. My message for them is “You are learning the way of communication. You want to be able to communicate with different people. Not all Japanese are nice!”

- Advanced students want more challenge for themselves.
  → Advanced students sometimes seem to be tired/get bored with always helping other group members. To avoid that, as needed, I make groups for advanced, intermediate and beginning learners. Students get to choose one of them and move to the group. Each group works on exercises suitable to its own level (e.g. the advanced learners read aloud a story in Japanese as fast as possible, and the beginning learners review basic grammar points, etc.) This is a great opportunity for students to receive more individualized help from the instructor.

Processing: According to the results of the questionnaire at the end of each semester, over 90 percent of the students have said that they liked the sense of community in the classroom and that the group seating helped them a lot with Japanese learning. They also said that they enjoyed getting to know classmates better. I have faced many challenges arising from the small group seating. Each time I came up with some kind of solution. More challenges may be still to come. However, I am delighted to see students help one another, work together in learning the language. Respect and hard work are the two important aspects of the Japanese culture. They are what I would like to see in my Japanese classes. This goal may be reached by using the small group seating “effectively” and building “the sense of community” in the classroom.