

**EFL classroom seating and anxiety reduction**  
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**Abstract**

*The aim of the article is to consider anxiety as a crucial factor in the success or failure of EFL students. The teacher's and the learners' roles to cope with this obstacle are of vital importance in the reduction of the individual and pedagogical constraints. The study is based on a think-aloud protocol with the participation of six teachers of Oral Expression from four Algerian Universities: Annaba, Oran, Mostaganem and Batna. Six models of seating arrangements have been suggested to the teachers-participants to define the outcomes of each and its impact on anxiety reduction, so that optimal Oral Expression achievements can be maximized.*

**Key words:** *Anxiety, seating arrangement, EFL students, oral expression.*

**Disposition de classe et réduction de l'anxiété dans les classes d'EFL**

**Résumé**

*Cet article vise à examiner l'anxiété comme étant un facteur essentiel d'échec dans l'apprentissage de la langue anglaise, en tant que langue étrangère, par les étudiants. En fonction de ce facteur surgit donc le rôle de l'enseignant afin d'aider le locuteur à maîtriser et surmonter cette barrière, et la transformer en un point de force. On en conclut que le rôle de l'enseignant et du pédagogue est irremplaçable pour la réussite du processus éducatif de l'apprenant. Notre étude est basée sur ce qu'on appelle la réflexion à haute voix, qui est un protocole résultant d'une association de six professeurs spécialisés dans l'expression orale émanant des universités d'Annaba, d'Oran, de Mostaganem et de Batna. L'étude est une proposition de six modèles inhérents à la gestion classique destinée aux participants afin d'évaluer le résultat de chacun, et la diminution de l'anxiété dans leurs efforts conjoints dans le domaine de l'expression orale.*

**Mots-clés:** *Anxiété, gestion de classes, étudiants de l'anglais langue étrangère, expression orale.*

**تنظيم القسم والسيطرة على الخوف في أقسام الانجليزية لغة أجنبية**

**ملخص**

يهدف مقالنا هذا إلى فحص الخوف من الفشل لدى الطلاب الراغبين في تعلم الانجليزية باعتبارها لغة أجنبية. وبحسب درجة هذا الخوف يبرز دور المعلم أو الأستاذ في مساعدة الطالب على التحكم في هذا الشعور والسيطرة عليه وتحويله إلى نقطة قوة. ومن ثم فدور المعلم والبياداغوجي لا بديل له لنجاح المسيرة التعليمية/ التعليمية للطالب. اعتمدت دراستنا على ما يسمى بـ"التفكير بصوت عال"، وهو بروتوكول ناتج عن شراكة بين ستة (06) أستاذة متخصصين في التعبير الشفوي قادمين من عدة جامعات "عنابة، باتنة، وهران، مستغانم". تم اقتراح ستة (06) نماذج من التسبيير الكلاسيكي لأجل تقويم نتيجة كل منها، والتخفيف من قلق المتعلمين في إطار تحصيل جهودهم في مجال التعبير الشفوي.

**الكلمات المفاتيح:** *تخوف، تسبيير كلاسيكي، طلاب الانجليزية لغة أجنبية، تعبير شفوي.*

**Introduction:**

The popularization of teachers' awareness of the issue of their students' anxiety rising from their personal teaching becomes the adequate strategy to better understand some "un-chartered" territories of classroom world. Teachers, researchers and educationists have to focus more on classroom "processes", on students' emotional states, their individual particularities, their personal psychological behaviour as part of their maturation-process and personality factors as well as their motivational ones as crucial variables. Some classroom situational variables are over-multiplied by the presence of an individual variable, namely the anxiety factor.

Educationists' attention is exclusively and continually drawn on curriculum design, teaching methodology and testing tools, only to neglect student's personality traits. Once the individual differences and the internal and external variables are detected and listed, one should raise the question of what strategies learners have to use to overcome their anxiety problems in a classroom situation.

The issue is to know the kind of intervention strategies to be used by teachers to enable high-anxious learners overcome their anxiety. The other related issue is to increase their participation rate and their voluntary hand-raising in the oral classroom.

**Objective of the study:**

One of the major principles of EFL teachers is avoiding boredom and fear in class. Therefore, each lesson needs to be unique in terms of variety, quality, quantity and undertaking. Taking the example of Annaba University, one can say that in EFL Oral Expression sessions, students spend the greatest part of their time listening at the expense of speaking. However, one cannot deny the fact that learners are expected to speak English during the one hour and a half of the Oral Expression session.

Being an EFL teacher, we have observed different anxiety rates manifested in students' low oral participation. Building on the work of previous researchers on FL anxiety, the study to be presented aims to complement the existing literature by providing data derived from EFL teachers' view on the issue of anxiety. In this paper we suggest ideas to develop positive social learning classroom environments in order to reduce anxiety in oral EFL classes and to enhance the learners' will and perseverance towards better learning and more powerful communicative achievements.

**Method:**

The study is based on the think-aloud protocol of six EFL university teachers from different universities of Algeria, two teachers from Oran University, two from Annaba University, one from Batna University, and one from Mostaganem University. All these teachers have taught Oral Expression at different times of their careers. They willingly and eagerly discussed with the researcher all the issues concerning EFL classroom seating arrangement and interaction. However, teachers were not aware that their viewpoints will be used for a think-aloud protocol analysis for this study, which would make the work more objective and realistic.

The participant teachers were asked to identify the types of seating-arrangement they favored in teaching Oral Expression. Furthermore, a suggestion of six different seating-patterns bare of any comment or explanation (see Appendix) has been supplied to the participants to analyze, discuss and identify the types of activities they think are the most appropriate for each pattern. They were asked to clarify the reasons for which

they thought the pattern is most suitable, most importantly used as anxiety-reduction environment. The participants were asked to talk freely about the exhibited figures and were requested to draw the outcomes for each pattern. At the same time, we were taking notes while listening to them. These issues are seemingly non-important, yet of an urgent need if anxiety is to be lowered in the Algerian University EFL classroom.

### **Anxiety Reduction Practices:**

It is very crucial to clarify that some severe anxiety reaction holders cannot find serious help from tutors who happen to be of low level of field experience. However, such help can be provided only by language researchers and therapists. The latter are said to handle such cases successfully relying on solid psychological grounds including behavioral techniques, systematic desensitization, and relaxation activities. These psychological exercises proved to be helpful for a language teacher who is willing to alleviate the level of anxiety of his/her students thereby having students overcome stress to benefit from the Oral Expression classes. (Strevens, 2010)<sup>(1)</sup>.

One may consider that the most important and difficult task for changing the language learning contexts does not depend on the teacher's decisions but rather on the administration or institution ones. However, there is much to be done and to be suggested in terms of classroom management for Oral Expression purposes.

From the above evidence, the impact of FL anxiety may be an enormous factor in students' objections to FL requirements. Today Algerian private language centers and schools reached their peak. However, emphasis is on the English language requirements which will drive the teacher to face a high rate of anxious students who would avoid the study of the required language. This can be explained by the undeniable fact that the learning of the target language provokes a specific type of anxiety related to the language skills, such as speaking, listening, reading and writing (Young, 1994, p.172)<sup>(2)</sup>. Therefore it seems natural, under this claim, "to associate foreign language anxiety almost entirely with the oral aspects of language use" (Horwitz, 2001, p. 120)<sup>(3)</sup>.

Concerning this specific issue we stress the need to have:

- A supportive teacher
- A supportive language teaching group.
- Good pedagogical practices.
- Relaxed atmosphere and environment.
- Anxiety reduction techniques.
- Humanistic education (Mardijono, 2001)<sup>(4)</sup>.

These supportive aspects recognize the importance of students' feelings and emotional variables in order to offer concrete treatments and guidance. Anxiety reduction practice and strategies for attaining English language confidence are significant and of vital importance to students' participation and involvement in the classroom. For example, in terms of classroom seating arrangements and their effect on students' behavior, Cornell (2002)<sup>(5)</sup> claims that thinking of furniture and seating arrangements is important in creating a suitable learning environment for students. He explains "furniture is both tool and environment" (p.33). Similarly, Adams (2009)<sup>(6)</sup> stresses the effect of seating arrangements upon the quality of students' learning.

**Row-column Seating Arrangement:**

In this traditional seating arrangement, the students' attention is directed to the teacher.

The teacher who adopts this setting believes in his role as a gate-keeper guarding the students on regular basis, and by the same token, helping them become putative members of the classroom discourse community. He is an authority, a decision maker and taker with great power over the students. (Kaya & Burgess, 2007)<sup>(7)</sup>.

Teaching in this pattern is authoritarian, and the teacher is the "all-powerful and all-knowing" who decides on what and how to teach it (Lam & Lawrence, 2002, p. 296)<sup>(8)</sup>. The teacher is passive recipient in terms that much receptiveness is encouraged and little production or participation from the part of the learners is expected. There is no chance for students' decision-making or taking, the leadership role being the teacher's most 'ownership'. Like in any army-ranking or hierarchy learners are 'officers', mere decision followers and consumers.

Learners are most of the time teacher dependent. In fact, organizations highly centralized, with decisions made at the top (the teacher). Learners have minimum contact with their teachers or classmates. Interaction is highly structured, formal and governed by classroom as well as teacher's rules. Learners have fewer opportunities which they use to develop new ideas or stimulate freedom of expression. Accordingly, it is important to include every member of the audience, if possible, without favoring any particular area of the room. Eye-contact alone cannot make a speech successful. But a lack of good eye-contact can create a barrier not easily overcome even if all other elements of the speech are excellent. In the *action-zone* students are in a better position to be able to see the teacher's eye movement and so determine when it is appropriate to comment or interact with the teacher.

**High Verbalizers:**

In a study on students' preferences about the place to sit in, Çınar (2010, p.211)<sup>(9)</sup> found that those sitting at front rows care about the lesson more and are more willing to participate, while those sitting at back rows care about the lesson less. Those who position themselves at the back seats with greater distances from the teacher may be expressing anxiety and a negative attitude towards the classroom activities, tend to be more introverted and expressing a preference for work that allows them to be by themselves.

Observed students of the traditional row-column setting are found that low verbalizers chose action-zone seats more frequently than moderate or high anxiety students. He also found that moderates who sat in the action zone participated more than moderates outside the central area. High anxious learners tended to maintain their silence no matter where they sat. The basic reason for putting students and teachers together is the assumption that interaction facilitates learning and reduces anxiety. We also believe that teachers should try to maximize participation because students' responses are a sign of how they are learning and how they are feeling. By participating the students may become involved, develop less anxiety and greater ease in their oral production.

**Row-column Interaction:**

In the row-column pattern there is no face-to-face interaction between students at the front of the room and those who are at the rear, and vice-versa. At any moment of

the lesson, only the teacher or one student can be talking; the rest remains silent, passive listeners or recipients. Interaction with seat neighbors is usually discouraged and discussion between and among students is severely restricted. To avoid chaos and maintain discipline, the teacher must take on the role of an autocrat to decide who may speak, in what order, and for how long. Row-column seating pattern is appropriate for some subject matters including mathematics, chemistry, and physics.

Unquestionably, there are some other patterns that are more suitable and appropriate to the Oral Expression classroom. One of these patterns is about—the face-to-face interaction is an important concern of the language teacher.

### **Designing Anxiety Reduction Seating:**

Since the primary objective inside the oral classroom session is to communicate in the TL without fear, we suggest that Oral Expression teachers should encourage their students to work in pairs and small groups. To this end, we think about changing the pattern of seating as a tool for facilitating teachers' instruction as well as reducing students' worries and hence encouraging them to participate. Examples of possible seating arrangement include *wheels or rings, four-panels, the rectangle, parallels and the horseshoe*.

#### **Wheels or Rings:**

In "wheels" seating-arrangements the teacher is rarely an information-provider, a guide moving from one group to another to gear the discussion and learning towards the target objective(s) of the lesson. Students are active, analyzing, solving problems, making discussions. They have a sense of responsibility and the speaking activity is shared even if paralleled with writing. The leadership may move from the teacher to the students and vice-versa. The teacher acts as a regulator and a modulator of the learning activity. S/he has less power over the students than in the row-column seating because students may move or make some noise. Learners are involved in a give and take process in their speaking activity and the teacher is the major facilitator of learning.

#### **Four-panels:**

This sitting arrangement (see Appendix) is meant for a class group to be divided into subgroups. Each group is making report to other groups about an already established clear and neatly pre-prepared topic or subject matter. Each subgroup has his student reporter to read out the parts that have been dealt with by the subgroup members. Learners have a sense of responsibility and the leadership role while making the presentation. The student develops the strategy of keeping silent and careful listeners observers of others' presentation, about which they may be encouraged to ask some brief questions or utter some comments. They may also take brief notes about each presentation. They develop a self-concept and autonomy which make them teacher-independent. High anxiety or shy learners may develop a sense of involvement and efficiency with all their gaps being covered by the peer-group as positive interdependence is built among students while working on group activities together (Yamarik, 2007)<sup>(10)</sup>. Learning is a shared activity by the classroom speaking community.

#### **The Rectangle:**

The rectangle spaced arrangement is meant for large group discussion. The learner

may be either audience member or speaker while the teacher may be either a discussion leader with great or little involvement, or an audience member.

This setting requires flexibility from both the teacher and the learner. Acceptability from both parts leads to a give-and-take learning process. Learners need to know the rules of interrupting such as politeness structures, and argumentative speech. They also need to learn when to speak and when to remain silent and what type of gestures goes with what required language (Mohr, 2007)<sup>(11)</sup>. Such a discussion setting involves a lot of spontaneity, smoothness and diplomacy from both parts. The teacher is to gear the discussion towards the target objectives and guides students in a step-by-step learning activity. The speaking activity is shared and so is the power. Learners have a lot of receptiveness but also a lot of oral productions. Reactions and discussions or counter-arguments are highly encouraged by the teacher who is rather a facilitator of learning, a “freer” of expression (see Voller, 1997, cited in Benson and Voller, 1997: 99-106)<sup>(12)</sup>.

**Parallels:**

Parallel pattern is appropriate for the use of some electronic devices (T.V, videotapes, overhead-projector, computer, etc). The teacher who uses media is an information provider supplying students with additional comments. Learners may interact with either the teacher or with each other. The teacher may move from the back to the front area of the classroom. The discussion is a fluctuating process between teacher-learner or vice-versa (Slavin, 2003)<sup>(13)</sup>. This pattern may also be used for debate purposes where learners may be divided in two groups: one being the pros (the proponents group) and the other being the cons (the against group) with a student-judge and a student-reporter. Visual elements are used as a departing point for the oral activity.

The teacher acts as a guide, a conflict gearer when necessary with short pauses for highlighting some points, ideas, structures or catch-words or sentences produced by learners. Such pauses may be used conveniently by the teacher as time for relaxing the atmosphere between the two sub-groups.

The student-judge who is the one who stands as a careful listener “bon écouteur” and observer to decide which group has been most powerful, argumentative and convincing. The student-judge acts as a “supporter” for either group giving his own arguments and reasons for his supportive decision (Slavin, 2003).

The student-judge takes notes of all the activity and reads aloud the main arguments, or the comments undertaken in the oral activity. A summary is needed as well as a conclusion and points to remember and suggested areas of talk for future gatherings are to be proposed. Such reports may be the object of publication on the students’ or the department journals.

**The Horse-shoe:**

The horse-shoe or “U” shape and also called the semi-circle setting proved to incorporate the meaning of cooperative problem-solving. In their interaction, participants are more effective with more oral outcomes.

In horse-shoe style, both sides -teacher and learners need a greater sense of participation and responsibility of outcomes than the groups that participate in the more authority-centered interaction possible. In this cooperative interaction setting, both sides may be more satisfied with this type of opportunity. In fact, both the leader

(teacher or learner) and the follower (teacher or learner) expect a cooperative relationship between them. They both get their way towards reaching a joint decision. The teacher's rank is lowered in this organisation in terms of the importance in creating a climate for flexibility and responsiveness to an ongoing and changing learning-teaching process Weaver & Qi (2005)<sup>(14)</sup>.

Organization is highly decentralized, with decisions made at its lower and upper levels. The participants have more eye-contact with either teachers or classmates. The speaking task is much formalized and organized by classroom rules or norms.

Competition is raised, anxiety is reduced and interaction is maximized in terms of quality and quantity. This type of teaching may lead to outside-classroom cooperative learning or peer-teaching. Autonomous learning or "self-teaching" may also be a byproduct of such teaching practices. This is consistent with Weaver & Qi (2005) view that claims that active in-class engagement raises learning quantity and with that of Sivan & al. (2000)<sup>(15)</sup>, which suggests that in addition to those quantitative effects, more interactive teaching styles may have further positive effects on students' development of independent learning skills.

In an article entitled the *Impact of Gender on the Foreign Language Anxiety of the Yemeni University Students*, Nemah (2012)<sup>(16)</sup> reported that to alleviate foreign language students' anxiety a need for a relaxed, free and supportive atmosphere would make learners use whatever opportunities available to them. Teachers can achieve such an atmosphere by dealing with students informally, through employing non-threatening teaching methods. For example, they can make the student aware of anxiety so that they will know that it is a common problem for all the students at all levels and that they are not alone suffering from the negative effects of anxiety. Teachers can also keep a listening ear to the voices of their students who would feel more at ease if their comments, ideas, suggestions are appreciated for further valuable insights, which would necessarily make students confront their fears and insecurities. Furthermore, teachers ought neither insist on error-free communication nor ignore students' errors because making learners over-conscious of all their own language errors would result in the inability to express themselves freely in real communicative situations. Therefore, teachers are recommended to encourage their students to transfer their personal opinions to the classroom situations using the English language, even when they make mistakes.

Nemah (2012) went further to state that according to Worde (2003)<sup>(17)</sup>, having a more "personal relationship" with students makes them less anxious. The teacher who encourages students' participation is said to be the one "who makes the class more animated" with the choice of motivating and creative interesting situations.

As a result of such components, communication is expected to become self-rewarding and two-ways-rewarding. Teacher's feedback to the learner and the act may be reversed also. The classroom physical environment affects, reduces or encourages anxiety as well as learners' willingness to communicate and increases their will to share an oral activity. Learning here is no longer individual but it becomes a social activity in which the students and the teacher are involved. This involvement is enhanced, bettered and maximized according to the physical and social classroom environment factors.

**Results of the study:**

The think-aloud protocols resulted in that positive environmental factors have good effects on social student-student and student-teacher interrelationships.

The study brought out that changing from traditional row-column sitting to other sitting-arrangements such as wheels, two panels, rectangle sittings, and other arrangements have positive effects for the students and the teacher. However, they point out that the U shape, also called horseshoe, or semi-circle shape gives far more reaching results for interactive classrooms. The participants provided some justifications for their preference for horseshoe or semi-circle classroom seating style and its advantages:

**A-For the student:**

- Moving from the logic of passive learning to the logic of apprenticeship.
- Ability to see one another and interact together
- Development of sense of participation, involvement, and sharing.
- Development of sense of autonomy and independence.
- Development of sense of group as well as individual responsibility.
- Possibility of group-work in and outside the classroom.
- Development and exchange of learning strategies.
- Development of sense of leadership and decision-making.
- Development of a “savoir”, “savoir faire” and “savoir être”.

**B-For the teacher:**

- Addressing him/herself to a restricted number of subgroups than to an overcrowded class.
- Monitoring, modulating rather than teaching.
- Attitude of undertaking rather than that of authority.
- More feedback and two-ways feedback.
- A lot of flexibility, adaptability and acceptability.
- A lot of tactics and diplomacy (tactfulness) in conflict gearing.
- The teacher is a facilitator of learning.

**Pedagogical Implications:**

The existence of FL anxiety must first be acknowledged by teachers so that they can deal with anxious learners. In fact, there are some alternatives in the classroom situation to overcome by:

- Detecting and helping anxious learners to cope with the existing anxiety-provoking situation.
- Making the learning environment i.e. seating arrangement and circumstances less stressful and viable.
- Bringing students to engage and participate in classroom activities that they fear most and so defeat their unpreparedness or indifference to the activity.

Teachers have probably noticed negative anxiety effects on learners' outcomes in communicative situations. Extremely anxious students would purposely avoid engaging in classroom communicative activities they fear most. They may seem unprepared, non-interested, or absent-minded. If anxiety and anxiety behaviors are given much consideration, teachers would be careful before attributing poor student performance solely to laziness, lack of ability, inadequate background, or low motivation.

Furthermore, teachers should also rely on the behavioral techniques and methods to provide better learning situations including various activities like interaction, debate and group-work. It is also recommended from the teacher to give positive feedback which is vital for learners' anxiety reduction.

Another anxiety-reduction contracting method is the one experienced by the researcher with the students not approving a specific topic of discussion in the classroom. The learner was asked to write down all his/her reasons for his/her not approving the topic or the method used by the teacher. This technique proved to be very adequate to bring the learner to participate in the English-learning process. Later s/he will have to present his/her work orally to the peers and comment seriously and freely [in English] about a topic and its selection, with teacher's comments about success in expressing one's thoughts.

To make the learning context less stressful is the most difficult task for a language teacher. For, the teaching-learning process inevitably takes place in a formal academic institution where both evaluation and judgement of others are unavoidably related to performance. In this context, unavoidable anxiety is likely to flourish. Before advancing any firm conclusion regarding optimal interventions, teachers should question themselves about their teaching practices and their contributions to the FL anxiety reduction. The increases of FL requirements in conjunction with increased emphasis on spontaneous communication in language sessions render the target language threatening, particularly for anxious students. Teachers can alleviate to a certain extent their learners' anxiety and help them cope with their isolation feelings and hopelessness to attain self-confidence in FLL and its communicative aspects by overcoming FL anxiety in the classroom.

### **Conclusion:**

Our study has focused on defining the types of speaking environments essential for EFL learners and anxiety reduction. The seating arrangements have been dealt with thoroughly and their advantages and drawbacks have been scrutinized. Unless we discuss such seemingly futile teaching/learning elements to optimize the oral output, EFL teachers are condemned to remain in a status-quo condition. Teachers need to make their classroom most rentable in terms of oral expression and less anxiety leading.

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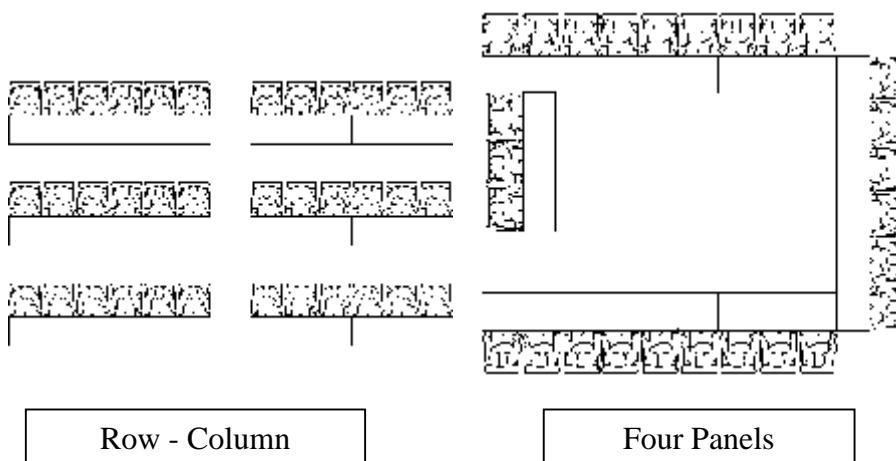
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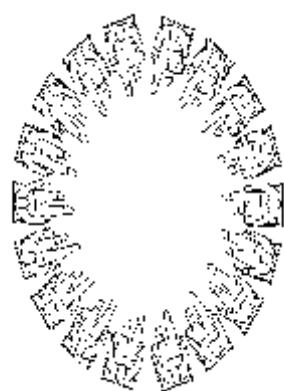
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## Appendix

### Classroom Seating Design

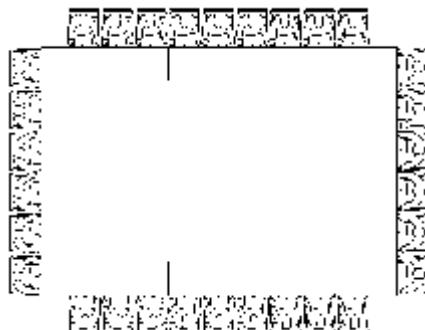




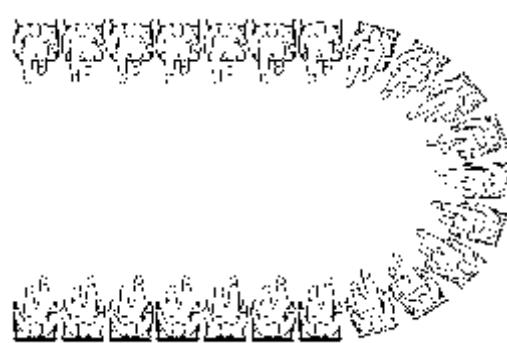
Wheel / Ring



Parallels



Rectangle



U- Shape / Horse Shoe