

Northwest Practitioner Knowledge Institute Practitioner Knowledge Documentation

Pair Work **Dan Claussen**

What the Research Said

Recent research at the Northwest English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) Lab School indicates that some important learning processes are at work during pair work in beginning English-as-a-second-language (ESL) classes. It appears that pair work provides a much richer learning environment than simply an opportunity to repeat or practice new vocabulary and language forms. As students work on an assigned task, real communication is taking place. Breakdowns in communication occur and students become aware of their learning needs. As beginning students interact with each other to identify and fix the point of breakdown, negotiation occurs to clarify meaning, correct pronunciation, and sometimes to clarify the appropriate language form.

Lab School findings suggest that: (1) adult students already have and use negotiating skills, (2) they benefit from negotiation during pair work whether it's "on task" or "off task," (3) less teacher intervention encourages more student negotiation, (4) students benefit when more time is allowed for negotiation and they use this time effectively, and (5) students use their native language strategically in order to get past a roadblock and then move forward in their task in English.

Why I Decided to Use This Particular Research

The research suggests that pair work, which encourages negotiation, provides more than language practice. Through negotiation, students learn to identify their own learning needs (metacognition), they learn how to get what they need to communicate (self-directed learning), and they learn to apply their natural negotiation skills to language learning in a way that is transferable to real-life communication and learning outside the class (life-long learning).

How I Applied These Findings

The class in which I implemented my plan was a beginning writing and reading course in a community college. This special focus course complements a core integrated skills course for beginning students. The class meets for three hours once a week for a ten-week term. Thirty students are enrolled at the beginning of each term, though attendance typically drops off to twenty to twenty-five students by the end of the term. For the two terms in which I implemented my plan, about three-quarters of the students were Spanish speakers from Latin America (most from Mexico), and the rest were Asians (Korean, Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Japanese). Only one student was a true beginner, with no previous English language instruction. A few of the Asian students had significant academic background in English, though little speaking ability. Some of the Spanish speakers were literacy students, though they had higher level speaking skills.

Based on reflection on Lab School findings, I decided to plan two pair work activities for every class period, using the same two types of pair activities - an interview grid and a dictation - each time. I extended the time I allowed for pair work activities to at least ten minutes so students would have more opportunity for negotiation and practice. I observed students from a distance in order not to stifle or interrupt negotiation and to encourage students to identify and solve their own problems. I applied these changes, described below, for two consecutive terms with the same beginning course.

Interview Grid Activity

This is a semi-controlled activity that provides further practice of newly introduced language in a more personalized context. Students ask personal information questions they have learned in class and answer these questions from a limited set of learned responses, selecting the answer that applies to them. This activity requires students to interview four other students and write their short answers. It provides practice in simple question and answer interaction, speaking, listening, writing, and spelling.

What is your first name?		How do you spell that?
Where do you live?		What's your zip code?
first name	city	zip code
Dan	Portland	97211

Pair Dictation Activity

This is a controlled activity where one student (Student A) reads ten new vocabulary items to a second student (Student B). For the first five words, student B must identify the correct word from a list of four choices and circle it. For the last five words, student B must write the dictated words. Once ten words have been dictated by student A, roles are switched and ten more words are dictated by student B. After both students have finished dictating their lists, students compare their answers with the list their partner was reading to check comprehension, spelling, and letter formation. This activity provides practice in reading, listening, writing and spelling. It motivates students to review new vocabulary at home the night before, and it is a first step toward peer editing.

Beginning Writing & Reading		Dictation
Student 2 Listen and Write		Student 2 Read
1. Listen to student 1. Circle the word you hear. Don't look at your partner's paper.		3. Read the words.
works begins stops closes		stops
goes walks eats lives		lives
drive take likes is		is
morning evening afternoon		evening
home bank bed bus		bank
2. Listen to student 1. Ask, "How do you spell that?" Write the word.		4. Read the words. Spell the words.
_____		take
_____		morning
_____		likes
_____		bus
_____		dinner

How I Knew How Well This New Strategy or Approach Worked

Three measures were used to determine the effectiveness of these activities: (1) quiz and test scores, (2) informal observations by the instructor, and (3) a course evaluation survey which included questions about pair work activities. All three of these measurements indicated positive results. The average score of twenty-seven students on a midterm quiz administered on May 6, 2005 was 84%, indicating students learned the course content. My observations showed that

students learned the format of the two activities and after the second class started each activity with minimal instruction. Most students stayed fully engaged during pair work activities. Good negotiation between students was observed, and less teacher intervention appeared to promote more sustained interaction. Students seemed to enjoy the pair work activities, which was confirmed by the survey. Of seventeen students who completed a survey on May 13, 2005, 82% liked the Interview Grid pair activities and 12% gave a neutral response. 76% liked the Dictation pair activities and 24% gave a neutral response.

Student Survey Results			
	😊	😐	😞
Interview Grid	82%	12%	1%
Dictation	76%	24%	0%

What I Learned About This Strategy or Approach

Using the same two pair work activities in each class was a success. It provided students with a familiar, predictable routine, which made the class comfortable for students. It also facilitated lesson preparation; after the format of the handouts was tweaked a few times, it was a simple task to ‘pour in’ new content for each lesson.

Pair work activities require additional planning to meet the needs of all students. Advanced students need something to do when they finish quickly, and literacy students need extra scaffolding so they can participate.

The *Interview Grid* activity was especially enjoyable for students and always a success. This activity always built upon new content and was introduced by modeling the interview. This scaffolding is probably one reason the activity was always successful. Negotiation was observed for spelling, pronunciation, and comprehension of answers. There were rarely bored students waiting for the others to finish this activity. Even the most basic personal questions sometimes elicited unexpected and interesting answers. More advanced students were able to find ways to extend this activity, or got ‘sidetracked’ with an interesting fact. Even the lowest literacy students could find some measure of success in this activity.

The *Pair Dictation* activity required several classes for students to learn the format and it was not always successful. This activity had good ‘face validity’ for students. They understood the purpose and valued the activity, whether it was easy or difficult for them. This activity was used as an informal quiz (no grades) and as a review of vocabulary and phrases from the last class. It worked best when students had been assigned a specific and clear vocabulary set for homework (such as the alphabet, numbers, time, and prices). When the vocabulary in the dictation was from readings in *Very Easy True Stories* (Heyer, 1998) or a set of topical vocabulary, this activity was more successful when preceded by a quick review of the vocabulary. When more advanced students were paired together, they finished dictation activities quickly and looked for further direction and/or activity. These students were asked to help the literacy students, given a second dictation handout with additional or more difficult vocabulary, or given some other activity related to the topic of the targeted vocabulary. Low literacy students struggled with the reading part of the activity, especially after moving beyond the alphabet and numeracy topics of

the early weeks. Reading and pronouncing new words correctly is much more difficult than simply recognizing them. It might be more effective to pair a higher-level student with a lower-level student and not switch roles. The higher student would do all the reading, getting the higher level practice of reading, pronouncing, spelling, and helping check the other student's work. The lower level student would listen, recognize, and write what the higher student spells.

Observing the pair work activities from a distance worked well. I could sit somewhere on the perimeter of the class and focus my attention on different pairs of students across the room for a short time. By moving to several different positions in the classroom, it was possible to hear everybody except for the quietest students. I was able to assess student performance using distant observation and I noted recurring problems that I needed to address after the pair work was finished or in a later class. Students were also delivered from the temptation to perform for the teacher or to show what they had written so far.

Some students initially wanted teacher approval of everything they did. They waited for me to come over to them so they could perform, or they thought the goal was to produce a product to show me. These expectations seemed to limit full engagement in negotiation with their partner. These students eventually figured out that I wasn't going to meet these expectations, but it would be better to provide more explicit learner training at the beginning of the term in order to help all students better understand the language learning process.

I need to give more attention to recognizing the optimum time for a pair work activity with beginning level students. In the past, I have moved on to a new activity when things seemed to be winding down for a majority of the students. Rather than seeing off task interaction and negotiation as indicators of a confusing or uninteresting activity that is winding down, it's nice to understand that they are indicators of productive interaction in progress.

I see the need to build a multi-level component into beginning level pair work activities. I did some of this during this project, and I want to continue developing it. Pair Dictation is a good example of an activity in which differences in language proficiency can either sabotage the effectiveness of an activity or be used to enrich it.

Supports and Challenges I Faced When I Used This Research

An instructor at the Lab School answered my questions and gave some very helpful direction in planning this project, especially regarding the number and types of pair activities to plan. The state director for professional development also encouraged me in the project and traveled several hours to observe one of the classes. This provided moral support, a sense that this was an important project, and an informal accountability, which contributed to follow through in the project. She also gave some valuable feedback, especially regarding the length of time given to pair activities and native language use by some students.

Questions about practical ways to observe and measure the outcomes of a particular activity were unresolved. In the end, evaluation of the effectiveness of this project focused on whether or not the students and the teacher enjoyed the activity. Research in the area of learning styles indicates

that students are more fully engaged and spend more time on activities that they enjoy, and that learning is more effective when students are relaxed and enjoying themselves.

What I Recommend to Other Teachers

Pair work is a great use of class time for beginning students. Do as much of it as you can. Just remember that pair activities require clear set up and adequate scaffolding to be successful.

Using a limited number of types of pair work activities each class gives more time for focusing on language content and makes the activities themselves more effective throughout the term. Less time has to be given to introducing and teaching a variety of learning activities.

The semi-controlled pair work activity (Interview Grid) effectively serves a broad range of learners. It provides patterns and basic response options that help low level students, while also allowing for a variety of personalized and/or creative responses by higher level students. This was important in my so-called beginning class, which was actually a mix of levels and learning needs.

The implementation of research findings into classroom practice can begin with small steps. Even though I made minimal changes in my classroom and did not do rigorous data collection, what I did was very helpful and encouraging.

Setting the stage for pair work which will be rich in negotiation requires three small changes in the classroom, but these may call for big changes in your thinking: (1) step back and resist the urge to intervene unnecessarily in order to correct, answer questions, or solve problems, (2) allow generous time for pair work tasks, and (3) do not be overly concerned when students resort to their native language during pair work.

What I Plan to Do Next

I am more comfortable with this approach to pair work and I am reasonably convinced that it effectively meets student needs. I want to continue to use and improve these activities.

I want to focus on the length of time I let pair activities continue. That often means allowing more time than is comfortable for me. I need to find ways to gauge the optimum time for different groups of students in my class, letting slower students have all the time they need for success, and finding ways to keep quicker students from getting bored.

I want to experiment more with developing pair activities that engage and benefit every student in class, taking into consideration their different proficiency levels and learning needs. In addition to addressing the issue of the differing amounts of time students need for an activity, this could also address different learning needs and learning styles.

I want to find a practical way to observe and measure the content of pair work interaction. I will work on developing a simple checklist for noting what students do and say during pair work and a systematic approach to observing different pairs in the class.

I'm interested in learning more about the relative effectiveness of different pair activities, especially in terms of how they promote negotiation and communication. Both of the pair activities I used for this project passed the 'grin factor test' for both students and instructor (we liked them), but the next step would be to measure their effectiveness relative to other activities and their overall effectiveness in promoting gains in language proficiency.