

# Northwest Practitioner Knowledge Institute Practitioner Knowledge Documentation

## **Pair Work** **Christy Domman**

### **What the Research Said**

I focused on pair work. The research indicates that students will work with each other in pairs for clarification and word meaning. Students will use their native language to clarify meaning and they will negotiate for a long time toward success. Even though teachers typically think the behavior was “off-task,” first language usage may actually benefit English language acquisition.

### **Why I Decided to Use This Particular Research**

This research seemed relevant and easy to implement. We were already doing some pair and group work, but reading the research helped me to modify how I was utilizing group work. A tutor or I often intervened with corrections, instead of the letting students work it out among themselves. The students were very dependent on the teacher. We were also of the mindset that it was “English only” and that speaking their native language in class was negative and should always be avoided. This research definitely challenges that notion. The opportunity to try pair work with very beginner learners was intriguing to me and I was eager to try it. The opportunity to see from the media clip how pair work could be conducted with beginners was very beneficial.

### **How I Applied These Findings**

My classes are offered through the Adult Basic Education/GED Department of Casper College. The program is funded through grants and is free to the students. They do not get college credit for the classes. At the time of the project, we had approximately 50 students enrolled through an open entry/open exit format. Attendance varied, but generally we had about five or six students attending the daytime class, and approximately ten in the evening class. I believe attendance varied due to work schedules, lack of childcare, and the fact that the program is one hundred percent free so there is no financial buy-in for the students. Class times consisted of three daytime classes from 12:30 to 2:30, and two night classes from 6:00 to 8:00 p.m. I was assisted by two or three volunteers per class each week for a total of 12 volunteers. I planned all of the lessons and the volunteers assisted with the small groups. We usually broke into beginner, intermediate, and advanced groups each night, with a tutor in charge of one group.

Student origins varied with Spanish being the predominant language spoken. The majority were from Mexico, with other Spanish speakers from Columbia, Venezuela, and Cuba. For a short while, I had five students from Brazil, two from Vietnam, three from Thailand, and one from Algeria. Educational levels varied from second grade through college graduates.

I consciously modified different activities from the curriculum to include pair work. Pair work was done approximately twice a week in each day and night class. The activities generally took about 20 minutes. I made a form for my tutors and tried to explain to them briefly what the

research said about pair work. As students worked together, a tutor or I would observe. I stepped back and allowed the students to work without my input and interruptions. On the observation form I made, I marked down when I observed negotiation of meaning, pronunciation, use of native language, and if they seemed to enjoy the activity. I also briefly interviewed them afterwards and jotted down what they thought of the activity, what strategies they used that helped them learn, and if they thought it was a positive and meaningful exercise.

The form included:

Observer Name, Student Name, Date

Type of Activity: question & answer, scripted, information gathering

For the observer:

Did you observe negotiation on pronunciation?

Did you observe negotiation on meaning of a word?

How long did negotiation take place?

Was the native language used?

Did the students seem to enjoy the activity?

The form also included a brief student interview:

Did you enjoy this activity?

While doing this activity, what helped you learn?

Would you like to work with a partner again?

What did you not like?

I kept all of the forms and also videotaped some of the pair work to share in a statewide meeting. The following are some examples of meaning negotiation that I observed:

Example One: Two beginning level Spanish speakers from Mexico

Task: Practice vocabulary describing people and hair from the *Oxford Basic Dictionary*.

Language: "Point to \_\_\_\_\_"

Student A would repeat the English word prompt to clarify meaning and pronunciation. When there was a question as to meaning, the students would speak in Spanish. Since I had a very difficult time with communication, no post-interview was conducted.

Example Two: Two advanced level Spanish speakers from Mexico

Task: Information Gathering: Matching vocabulary with definitions from *News For You*

I had asked them to use as much English as possible. To complete the assignment the students looked back at the article, discussed it, and used electronic translators. They dutifully began the assignment in English, but about halfway through, they switched entirely to Spanish. When I asked them why they switched to all Spanish, one student responded that when he could use English, he used English, but when he could not, he spoke Spanish.

Post Interview Questions: The students had enjoyed the activity and working together. The only negative comment was that they did not like the camera, and that it had made them nervous.

In summary, all of my students had a very positive response to working together. They all seemed to enjoy it and felt that it helped them learn. All of them used a combination of English and Spanish regardless of level, but it appeared that they had a high rate of on-task behavior.

### **How I Knew How Well This New Strategy or Approach Worked**

One way I used to evaluate how well this approach worked was from observation and interviewing the students. The students consistently reported that they enjoyed working together and that talking with each other helped them learn. It was a little hard for them to articulate exactly what helped them, but they all liked pair work and wanted to do more. I had no negative comments except for not liking the video camera. Progress was also documented in pre- and post-testing using the BEST Plus.

### **What I Learned About This Strategy or Approach**

One major thing I learned was to step out of the picture and allow the students a chance to practice and negotiate for understanding. It took a while to wean them from the teacher being there constantly for help, and to get them to work independently. At first they automatically turned to me and even resorted to yelling across the room for help. I also realized that using their native language was not necessarily a no-no, but that it could be very useful in negotiating meaning. After learning about the research on “openings,” I also paid a lot more attention to how students began an activity. I really was amazed at how often they resorted to their native language.

### **Supports and Challenges I Faced When I Used This Research**

One challenge was to remember to conduct a pair work activity. Another was getting the tutors to step back and allow the students to work together. One particular tutor, who could no longer sit patiently by, just had to jump in since he felt that the students were not pronouncing words correctly and they would “learn it wrong” if they continued. None of them liked being videotaped, and said that it made them nervous. I videotaped the pair work for a statewide meeting presentation. Since I was unable to attend and explain the pair work myself, I was hoping a colleague of mine could use the tape and present the information. I also feel it is always more interesting and beneficial to actually *see* rather than just *hear* about something. It is

also a way to look back for further analysis, and for other colleagues to watch and give feedback. Since it made the students nervous, it may not be the best way to observe.

### **What I Recommend to Other Teachers**

I definitely would recommend using pair work. I believe the students enjoy the activity when it is conducted as a part of the overall lesson. It also appears to support second language acquisition and gives students added opportunities for speaking and practicing. It is low stress for the students and can be used with any level, making it ideal for a multi-level classroom. A brief overview of pair work could be incorporated into our tutor training sessions held every year.

I will encourage colleagues and supervisors to read research, and to try something new if it seems feasible and worthwhile. People are very reluctant to change - so support, time, and willingness are all essential. A mentor is definitely helpful, and if some accountability is built in, then I think change is more likely to occur. I think it is also helpful to co-teach, or share challenges, ideas, successes, and questions with other colleagues. Meeting periodically, as we did in this institute, was very beneficial. I know it wasn't feasible with our group, but meeting several times a year would have been even more helpful.

### **What I Plan to Do Next**

I plan to expand and use more pair work. I would like to experiment with different groupings such as advanced–beginner, intermediate–beginner, and so on. I would also like to find a way to better measure learning gains.

I will continue to read other research and consider its relevance and how to implement it in my class. I think this experience has taught me how to read research and to close the gap between just reading it, thinking it is a good idea, and how to actually implement it into the program. It is exciting to see the students enjoy learning, and to explore other ways to do so besides relying so heavily on teacher-directed instruction.

Working as a “cohort” group lent itself to a great support system, culminating in not only a wonderful learning opportunity, but an enjoyable one too. I guess we modeled what we are trying to get our students to do!