

Northwest Practitioner Knowledge Institute

Practitioner Knowledge Documentation

Pair Work

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What the Research Said

Pair work provides for meaning negotiation, even through highly scripted activities, and it facilitates student interaction. Conversational modifications increase language comprehension and help learners pay attention to communicative difficulties. These modifications encourage students to clarify, confirm, and reformulate what they have heard, leading them to deviate from the script (on task/off task), which is where learning may occur most.

Why I Decided to Use This Particular Research

The research showed that pair work is beneficial to low level students and that highly scripted activities, as well as other activities, can be useful. It said that the teacher should not interrupt when students are negotiating for meaning and should rather “step back.” The teacher should learn to just listen and not be so quick to provide an answer whenever students stumble over a word or question. Rather, the teacher should let students ask each other to solve the problem.

Before doing this project, I used pair work with the intention of boosting confidence in speaking and helping to learn vocabulary, but I did not realize its many other benefits. Changing my approach and becoming more aware of the students’ reactions to my instructions and the pair work activities has made me more observant as a teacher. There are fewer ambiguities for the students because of my developing proficiency in the approach; therefore, there are more opportunities for them to learn.

How I Applied These Findings

I teach English-as-a-second language (ESL) in a university setting. The class started in September 2004 and new students were added in January 2005, while some of the original students had dropped out. My class began as a low beginning level in the fall and then went up to high beginning in January. The different languages spoken were Yugoslavian, Spanish, Chinese, Bosnian, Farsi and Arabic. The class was held Tuesdays and Thursdays from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m. We did at least one pair work activity each class period for 10 to 15 minutes. There were about 6 to 14 regular students, and I observed different ones each class period.

I did my best to stand back and not interfere with the process. First, I tried to improve how I introduced pair work activities so that students were not confused before they started. I did this by writing the information on the whiteboard and explaining it, practicing with a student, and then sometimes had two students demonstrate before the class. This made the directions clearer so that there were fewer questions when the pairs began. The activities varied from scripted to open-ended interview questions.

I also wanted to see if different student combinations affected the outcome of the activity. Some days I chose the groups and other days I let the students choose. I rearranged students of different ability levels and those of the same native language, gender or family. Another factor was the number of students in a group. Most of the semester we did pair work, but in April I looked at the dynamics of small groups in comparison with pairs.

Example lesson plans:

1/25/05

Create sentences using present tense. I made sentences and put one word on an index card for each word in the sentence. For the different parts of speech I used a different color. I put three sentences into each envelope then mixed up the cards. Each pair of students received an envelope, and they were then required to create three sentences. There were 14 students with four groups of two and two groups of three.

2/3/05

Money terms. Create role play for interaction at a checkout. I gave each pair a few items to sell. Before starting we priced the items as a class.

Example dialogue:

Student A: Hi. How are you?

Student B: Fine, thanks. How much is the _____? How much does it cost?

Student A: It costs _____.

(Student B gives cashier fake money for over the amount.)

Student A: Here's your change.

Student B: Thank you

How I Knew How Well This New Strategy or Approach Worked

I observed the students, talked to some individually and quizzed them orally. In addition, I gave them a form which asked them to rate which activities in class they thought helped them the most in learning English.

At first they were not accustomed to me standing back and avoiding questions, but as the semester progressed they asked fewer questions during the pair work. Eventually, students only asked me as a last resort or if I was near them. It seemed that sometimes they became very engaged in the conversation and forgot my presence.

The individuals that I talked to were the higher students in the class and they did not prefer pair work because they would rather speak with a native speaker for the pronunciation. About half of the class thought pair work was very good and the other half thought it was good to okay. By quizzing the students orally, it did not seem that pair work helped them to learn more or faster than other methods.

What I Learned About This Strategy or Approach

In general, students wanted to ask me questions to “clarify, confirm, and reformulate” what they had heard, but through my stepping back, they learned to rely on their peers more. From what I could see, students seemed to enjoy it. It offered the most opportunity for “off task” conversation and led them into broader topics. It gave them problem-solving opportunities with their peers because I was not interfering. Students helped each other with pronunciation, word meaning, and questions for clarification. It gave them active listening practice.

Another thing I learned was that it was better for me to arrange the pairs. I had one couple from Iran, and the husband berated his wife whenever she gave a wrong answer or didn’t seem to understand. It was better for me to separate them so the woman would have more freedom to talk. Pairs were more productive when they were in mixed levels. When the lowest students, who were also low-literacy, were together, they did not make any progress. Putting the highest students with the lowest was good, except that the higher student had the tendency to excessively dominate. So it seemed best to have intermediate/low, intermediate/high and high/high combinations, although high/low did work well sometimes.

Supports and Challenges I Faced When I Used This Research

My supports were the other participating practitioner in Idaho, the professional developer, and higher level students. The supports were increased by email and conference calls. Some challenges that I faced were that I had a small classroom and the noise and commotion made it difficult to observe student conversations without being too close. Changing my approach midway through the semester was difficult because students were accustomed to me roaming the room and answering their questions during pair work. During the fall semester I used my usual approach to pair work where I would wander around the room to answer any questions or listen in on the conversations and help if they were stumbling upon a word or phrase. But in January, I began using the new approach and did not offer students my input, walk by their desks, or try to make eye contact. This was an awkward adjustment because they were accustomed to me acting a certain way. The barrier was reduced by me holding an object in my hand to appear to be concentrating so that students were less likely to ask me questions if I was standing nearby. I tried to focus on one pair rather than being distracted by other pairs at the same time.

What I Recommend to Other Teachers

I would arrange pairs in mixed abilities (high with intermediate, low with intermediate, low with high). Teachers should hold a book or notebook in hand while observing students. I would vary the types of pair work activities. Students seem to talk more when in groups of two rather than larger groups.

What I Plan to Do Next

I plan to continue using this approach in my class and I would like to look at another technique, such as Sustained Silent Reading, to use in my class. Looking at this research and making close observations has given me a deeper awareness of what is going on in the classroom. It has helped me to be more critical of my teaching practices and how I can make the learning process better for the students.