

Northwest Practitioner Knowledge Institute Practitioner Knowledge Documentation

Pair Work **Monique McFadden**

What the Research Said

The research regarding pair work (students working in groups of two) said that students learned several things when working with a partner. Students learned to clarify, confirm, and comprehend information; students learned to assist each other in language learning and pronounce words correctly; and students learned what they needed to work on the most. The research regarding pair work also said that the dominant language, or first language, was not detrimental to language acquisition; in fact, the dominant language was strategically used and was considered a benefit to a second language acquisition. Finally, the research showed that students could learn while “off-task.”

Why I Decided to Use This Particular Research

While I have always used pair work in previous English-as-a-second-language (ESL) classes, I wanted to find out if how students were paired would affect their learning outcomes. For example, if two low-level students were paired together, would that be more successful than a high-low pairing? I believed that students could learn from each other as well as from the instructor. I had a desire to step back and give students more time to negotiate meaning and comprehension, and I wanted to give them that time without teacher interference. I believed that if students had more time to work and practice together, they might increase their confidence in speaking out loud.

How I Applied These Findings

This research project was done at Yakima Valley Community College in Yakima, Washington during Winter Quarter 2005 (January, February, and March). There were approximately 18 students in the class (numbers varied throughout the quarter) who were mostly monolingual Spanish speakers. Most students were ESL Level One, although there were a few Level Two and Three students in the class as well. The class met for 10 weeks every Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday from 9:00 to 11:30 a.m.

The pair work in the ESL class consisted of highly-scripted, question-answer and information-gathering activities. Students worked in pairs for 30 to 60 minutes each day, depending on the activity. For the first three weeks, students were paired according to their levels (low-low, medium-medium, and high-high). For the second three weeks, students were allowed to choose their own partners. Each pairing lasted for the entire week (three days of class). I observed the length of time students worked in pairs and kept an anecdotal record of community feeling in the classroom. I also conducted weekly oral and written comprehension assessments to monitor progress. Students were also asked to complete a weekly survey to indicate if they liked or disliked working with their partners.

How I Knew How Well This New Strategy or Approach Worked

Each week students filled out a survey which asked them how well they worked with their partners. They had to write if they liked working with their partners, disliked working with their partners, or had no feeling one way or the other about their partners. Students were given weekly oral and written comprehension assessments. Scores were kept in a log and compared at the end of the quarter. Students were graded on a scale of 1 to 4 (1 = Beginning, 2 = Developing, 3 = Competent, 4 = Exceptional). Average scores during the first three weeks when I chose the partners were compared to scores during the second three weeks when students chose their own partners. Students were asked whether they preferred to work alone, in pairs, or in groups. They were also asked how they felt about their partners, and whether or not they preferred choosing their own partners.

What I Learned About This Strategy or Approach

Students always liked working with partners when they were able to choose the partner. Most students, but not all, indicated they were happy when a partner of their level was chosen for them, but they preferred to choose their own partners and would often choose the same partner every week. During the three weeks when students were able to choose their own partners, their average oral and written scores at the end of each week were higher than when I chose their partners. Students worked for the same amount of time regardless of the type of pairing, and worked longer without teacher intervention. In other words, being left alone meant longer pair work time. When students had partners chosen for them, they would occasionally leave the partner and seek help from someone else of a higher level. Other factors could have contributed to the higher scores during the second three weeks, such as longer time in the classroom, a clearer understanding of expectations on oral and written assessments, and more camaraderie as a class as a result of the length of time spent together. Students indicated that they preferred working in groups or pairs as opposed to working alone.

Supports and Challenges I Faced When I Used This Research

The biggest challenge of this project was the inconsistent attendance of the students. While the quarter began with about 18 students, it ended with closer to 10 students. Many students began working and could not attend class. Some students switched partners mid-week because their original partner missed class, and others were paired with a student of a higher or lower level during the first three weeks, when pairing was according to student level. This may have affected the outcome of the research. As far as supports, I was contacted a couple of times by one of the faculty members of Portland Community College.

What I Recommend to Other Teachers

I recommend that some type of partner work always be incorporated into second language learning. Students should be allowed an opportunity to engage in a combination or variety of pairings (teacher choosing partners and students choosing partners / partnering by level and mixing partner levels) to achieve the maximum amount of second language acquisition. I found that both types of partner work were successful, but students may feel slightly happier when allowed to choose partners. Students should be allowed to work without teacher intervention

until they have a question or indicate that they are finished working. Students should also be allowed to speak in their first language and to seek help from other pairs, as they may gain even more information from getting different levels of help.

What I Plan to Do Next

I plan to continue to use pair work when teaching ESL classes by using a combination of pairings (teacher chosen and student chosen). I will also continue to allow students plenty of time to work in pairs before walking around the class and checking on students. I plan to share these findings with colleagues and to encourage colleagues to keep notes and compare differences and similarities between different types of pairings.