

Northwest Practitioner Knowledge Institute

Practitioner Knowledge Documentation

Pair Work

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What the Research Said

The research shows that pair work helps students assist each other. It helps students negotiate with each other to lead them to clarify meaning.

Why I Decided to Use This Particular Research

English-as-a-second-language (ESL) teachers and students tend to be familiar with each other's English. ESL teachers are often good at predicting the students' accents or mistakes. Once the students go outside of the ESL classroom, however, they need to be exposed to English with no help from teachers and classmates.

I decided to do pair work to help the students recognize that they need to ask and react to questions and initiate conversations.

How I Applied These Findings

The class was offered through the Adult Basic Education Division at a two-year college. Most of the students spoke Spanish as their first language; approximately one or two students out of 15 spoke a language other than Spanish. The class was a beginning level class. It was held two evenings a week, Mondays and Wednesdays, and the pair work was tried for 10 to 15 minutes during each 90 minute class.

I gave the students surveys to see what kind of pair work they liked. Every time I tried pair work, I kept notes on who used English, how they used it, and what they said.

Since my classroom is an almost entirely homogeneous language classroom, it was very hard for me to get them to use English during pair work and for the students to continue using English throughout the class. When they were working with their partners, the students started using their first language. All I could do was, in front of the class, praise the students who used English as they did pair work.

How I Knew How Well This New Strategy or Approach Worked

I gave the students a questionnaire to see what kind of pair work (or whole class work) they liked. The answers varied. Some students answered that they liked pair work, some liked individual work, and some liked whole class work.

I often told them to ask me questions since I do not speak Spanish. This encouraged the students to use English with me, instead of with classmates whose Spanish accents they were used to. It

was hard to get students to volunteer to work with me spontaneously, but if I called on a student, he could carry on a dialogue most of the time. Telling the students to ask me questions seemed to work, especially when all of the students happened to speak the same native language.

What I Learned About This Strategy or Approach

When 99 percent of the students have the same first language, it is very hard to have them use only English during pair work. The teacher needs to act as one of the partners to have the students use English. The students who needed to work with the teacher seemed to become nervous and stopped asking questions and/or clarifying meaning.

I gave the students a questionnaire to know what kind of activity would work well. (Please see the attached questionnaire.)

Fifty-three percent of the students (10 out of 19) said that they liked to do whole class work, probably because they knew that they were expected to use English and did not become too isolated from the group. Another 53 percent also liked pair work. Only one student out of 19 answered that he did not like pair work. About 15 percent of the students neither liked nor disliked pair work, group work, or whole class work.

The problem with whole class work is that the same active students keep asking or answering questions and other students tend to rely on those active students. When they do not have confidence in their English, they tend to look at other classmates and the stronger students end up being translators. Even though I, as a teacher, know that it is not an optimal situation, I do not want to force the shy students to use English every time since it might create an uncomfortable environment for them. The purpose of trying pair work activities would disappear if this happened.

All of the students at least used English by repeating what I told them to. Only non-Spanish speakers kept using English since the others spoke a different first language. The same students were always active. They asked questions of other classmates when they were done with their own partners.

Generally, I do not think that the pair work approach works as well in a homogeneous language classroom as it does in a heterogeneous one. This is because most of the students speak the same first language, so once they start working with their partners, they use their first language. In this class, students spent approximately 95 percent of pair work time speaking in their first language and the other five percent was spent speaking English just to finish the dialogue I had given to them.

Supports and Challenges I Faced When I Used This Research

I praised the advanced students in front of the class when they used English. I also received support from the NCSALL Professional Developer.

Since nearly all of the students in the class spoke the same language, it was very hard for me to have the students use English all of the time. There also seemed to be a hierarchy in the classroom, so the students did not like to be paired randomly. This hierarchy was based on age, experience in the classroom, and the experienced students' perceptions of their own English skills.

Though the class was a beginning level class, there were different levels of ability from true beginner (with no English at all) to false beginner to high beginner. Some students used Spanish because that is all they could use; others with more developed English skills used Spanish to help those who had no English skills.

What I Recommend to Other Teachers

Act as one of the students if the class is a homogeneous language classroom. Plan well so that the students can have a clear picture of what to practice.

For example, to practice English that might be used in a doctor's office, I gave the students a basic grammar structure and examples or items with pictures written in both English and their first language so that the students could substitute the names of sicknesses (underlined) and practice. For example:

- A: "What's the matter/ wrong?"
B: "I have a fever and a headache."
A: "Do you have a sore throat?"
B: "Yes, I do. / No, I don't."

What I Plan to Do Next

I would like to know how I can encourage the students to use English even when they all speak the same first language. Even though the students prefer to choose their own partners, I will try to have them work with a different partner as often as possible so that all of the students can use English as they practice pair work dialogues. Also, I would like to keep a record of which students tend to use English in their pair work and then see whether, upon post-testing, those students make more progress than other students who tend to slip into using their native language during pair work.

5. I like to study with everybody. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
(as a class)