

# Northwest Practitioner Knowledge Institute Practitioner Knowledge Documentation

## **Pair Work** **Bonnita Solberg**

### **What the Research Said**

Pair work is an important aspect of the English-as-a-second-language (ESL) class because it provides an opportunity for the learner to practice newly acquired English language forms by speaking with another student. Just as importantly, pair work reduces the predominance of teacher models, allowing for negotiations by the learners. In addition, pair work exercises provide an opportunity for students to interact and negotiate meaning, make English comprehensible, and emphasize the forms that need change. The learner is challenged to answer the question, “Why didn’t my partner understand me?” Second language learners negotiate, often to resolution, the answer to this question. During the course of negotiations, a pattern develops in which the learner makes clarification requests, performs confirmation and comprehension checks, and reformulates his/her understanding.

Kathryn A. Harris presented results of a study she performed on Pair Work Interaction in Beginning Adult English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes in the NCSALL Adult ESOL Lab School at Portland State University, in Portland, Oregon. This study indicates that important learning opportunities occur when students deviate from the script of the task. For example, learning occurs not only when students practice the script, but also during a sequence of student negotiations. In addition, the research suggests that when the teacher enters the pair work, one of two adjustments takes place: the learners revert to the part of the task they have learned well, perhaps in an attempt to show the teacher what they have learned, or the learners interrupt the task to ask the teacher for assistance with clarification, confirmation, comprehension, or reformulation.

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

These findings suggest to me, a practitioner, that I may be able to improve my teaching stance in the classroom by providing learners a broad opportunity to negotiate and self reflect. I use pair work and Small Learning Groups (SLG), with four to ten learners in a group, at least daily which allows me to use the research findings without a big change in my teaching routine. However, my experience prior to the observations reported here was that reverting to that part of the task students have learned well or interrupting the task to ask for assistance are not the only two outcomes of teacher intervention. Learners often continue with the assigned exercise when I approach the pair or SLG if I listen without comment. I decided to use this particular research to check my professional wisdom against the findings obtained in the Portland Lab School. Additionally, the Professional Developer who mentored me during this project, Erik Jacobson, recommended periodic reflection as a tool to reveal aspects of the process not caught on an observation form. It was a valuable contribution, one that enhanced my experience by bringing the process back to the other half of the equation, the observer.

## How I Applied These Findings

The setting for this class is Neighborhood Centers Adult School, Oakland Unified School District (K-12 District). The classes are based in Oakland's Chinatown. They are scheduled for 16 weeks. One class is scheduled for three hours in the morning, the other for three hours in the afternoon. In this particular class, there were between 25 and 32 students in the morning class and between 18 and 25 students in the afternoon class. The classes were composed of Asian learners, ninety-eight percent Chinese and two percent Vietnamese, at a beginning low level of proficiency. They ranged in age from 18 to 84 years old. Many had repeated this level several times.

I devised a form to record my observations, then observed the response of students to my presence during pair work and small learning group work. I approached and observed students for varying lengths of time for a total of thirty-two sessions. Concurrently, I made time for self-reflection during half of the observations.

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

I recorded my observations in three areas to chart the course of events in three different venues. First, I observed and made notations during small learning groups by sitting in the center of the room and not entering the groups. The goal was to observe negotiations in the groups from outside and to note any questions students had of the teacher. Second, I observed student reaction to my presence at the fringe of the group or when entering it and noted the course of student negotiations. The goal was to record the frequency and nature of questions students asked me, how often students stopped what they were doing to go to the easiest part of the task, and to note the form and frequency of negotiations within the pair or group. Finally, I tried to be introspective throughout the process of observing sessions-especially as I approached the pairs. My intention was to stop when I wanted to make an intervention, observe what prompted my decision to intervene, and note my reaction to entering the pairs, particularly if I changed the dynamic by interrupting the ongoing task.

## What I Learned About This Strategy or Approach

I intervened less frequently over the course of the project and became more accustomed to observing only. Concurrently, the students became more comfortable with negotiating in their first language and asked fewer questions from the first session to the last. Following are some observations:

- ◆ First and most importantly, a culture of student negotiations based on students requesting intervention can be created in the ESOL classroom if the teacher remains apart from the pair or SLG, slowly approaching the group over a period of time. I have termed this strategy “intervention by invitation.”
- ◆ Just as importantly, students understand negotiating. Negotiating is a learner strategy that students bring to the classroom setting. In this sense, it is a student-, rather than teacher-

directed strategy. This student-directed strategy can be enhanced if the teacher waits to be invited to make an intervention rather than directing the course of a task.

- ◆ Teacher intervention without student initiation may halt creative exploration of the rest of the task so students are arrested in their progress at the point the teacher intervenes.
- ◆ Uninvited intervention may detract from negotiations that are more valuable than the correction made by the teacher. The intervention may be inordinately explicit and narrow, centering on one facet of the task rather than opening the task to other possibilities.
- ◆ Clarification requests, confirmation and comprehension checks, and reformulating understanding may be best served by making interventions with the whole class at the close of the task rather than with individual students during pair work.
- ◆ The more the teacher enters the group and intervenes, the more the students expect he/she will do so.
- ◆ There are circumstances in which the teacher should intervene to assist students and move them to success. For example, when students miss practice and instructions at the beginning of the exercise, they may not be able to complete the task without special prompts. Or, if a student is unable to participate in the task for one reason or another, corrective measures must be taken to insure success.
- ◆ Building practice time for questions and answers that are useful in negotiating before splitting into smaller groups is essential. Students tend to fall back on the easiest way to get to agreement/understanding, which for many is their first language. A review before the small learning group exercise will perhaps reinforce the use of questions and answers in English during task negotiations.
- ◆ When students are free to explore through negotiations, it is important to have a debriefing session after the task is completed to provide space for them to check their reformulated concepts, forms, and structures.

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

The most challenging aspect for me, the teacher, was to replace the strategy of offering assistance without being asked to do so with a strategy of waiting to be asked for assistance by the students. I also had to devise a form for recording my observations and make recording them a habitual part of my teaching routine. I had the full support of my principal and ESL specialist.

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

This series of observations of pairs and small learning groups (SLGs) in ESOL classes in large part confirm the research findings. Pair work and SLGs provide an opportunity for the learner to negotiate, often to resolution, processes and information essential to the acquisition of a new language while practicing newly learned English forms by speaking with other students. Pairs

and SLGs reduce the predominance of teacher models, allowing for learner negotiations. They provide an opportunity for students to interact and negotiate meaning, make English comprehensible, and emphasize the forms that need change. During the course of negotiations, students deviate from the script but replace it with a student-directed pattern of making clarification requests, performing confirmation and comprehension checks, and reformulating their understanding. While teacher intervention may disrupt negotiation, I did not find the same degree of students reverting to easy parts of the task or asking questions when I entered the pair or SLGs as was reported by the researchers. This indicates to me that there are unidentified factors at work which could be explored by further research.

My findings suggest that an adjustment from a strategy of intervention without invitation to a strategy of non-intervention (intervention by invitation) enhances the student-directed strategy of negotiations and reflection. If these findings are replicated by other researchers, the implication for training and practice is that teachers can acquire a strategy of being present during small learning group interaction, but not intrusive to the task in general and to negotiations in particular. Recommendations for teachers based on this study are five-fold:

1. First, develop a strategy of non-intervention in which the teacher makes observations of pairs and SLGs.
2. Second, employ both a data collection process for observations of student negotiations and personal introspection technique.
3. Third, use lessons that provide an opportunity for students to negotiate with a partner and sufficient practice to strengthen negotiations in English.
4. Fourth, scheduling debriefing sessions at the end of pair work and small learning group tasks give students an opportunity to verify newly acquired information, thus reinforcing the value of negotiations.
5. Finally, giving students direct information on the nature of the non-intervention strategy (intervention by invitation) assists them in understanding the teacher's intent of being non-intrusive and supports both negotiations and student-directed learning.

### What I Plan to Do Next

A personal challenge for me is to incorporate what I learned from this experience into my daily teaching routine, and to continue exploring the benefits of negotiations in pairs and SLGs while meeting the challenge of fulfilling all aspects of my teaching role. Further, I intend to explore as yet unrecognized factors that impact negotiations in pair work. I plan to check the assumptions I have drawn here by sharing the process and results of my observations with colleagues, seeking their feedback and practitioner wisdom for balance.