

Northwest Practitioner Knowledge Institute

Practitioner Knowledge Documentation

Pair Work

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What the Research Said

Many kinds of pair activities allow interaction/negotiation to happen between students in beginning English-as-a-second-language (ESL) classes. These activities can leave room for negotiation of pronunciation, word meaning, and form.

Most of the negotiation sequences provide the learners with an increase in comprehension as well as information about their area of communicative or pedagogical difficulty. The negotiation sequence is what pushes the learners to try a new pronunciation or pinpoint a word meaning.

Learning may be occurring most when learners deviate from the script and pursue comprehension through meaning negotiation.

Why I Decided to Use This Particular Research

I always use pair activities regularly in my classes. Until I learned about this research, I hadn't thought about the idea that students benefit most from the negotiation sequence, and not from a short communication breakdown, notification of the problem, and repair. While I have never hovered right over students and interrupted their speech, I did listen in and offer suggestions in a way that could have hindered their ability to negotiate meaning on their own. I also tended to direct them back on task when they got off task, especially when they started speaking in Spanish. I was interested in letting them get off task if they could do it using mostly English.

How I Applied These Findings

I had a class with 15 to 20 true beginning students. Most were native Spanish speakers. I had two Chinese speakers and one Gujarati speaker. The class met for three hours, two nights per week. The students started in September and most continued for the 12-week fall term. Many then continued through 11 weeks of winter term and 10 weeks of spring term. In January and late March I accepted new students who were at a similar level.

I used pair activities two to three times per class period, for 15 to 20 minutes per activity. The materials I used during the pair activities included realia, textbooks, picture dictionaries, picture and word cards, and magazine pictures. I changed several ways in which I did pair activities in my beginning class. I backed off when students were working together. By standing behind or walking by casually, they knew I was available if they needed me but I didn't intervene unless I thought it was necessary. Once I saw that they all understood and were involved, I sometimes appeared to be working on other activities so that they would really work together to negotiate meaning.

I was very interested in how the grouping of the pairs affects student learning and negotiation of meaning. Before the project, students were paired with a partner of their choice. They usually ended up sitting next to someone they felt comfortable with and this person was their partner for pair activities. I experimented with the way in which they were grouped by using two methods. In the first method, students chose their own partners. They usually partnered with the student who was sitting next to them, but there was a group of five to six women who always made sure they were with another woman. In the second method, partners were assigned randomly based on a pre-activity. One example of this was to give each student a card with a word from a list of opposites that the students had previously learned. If a student had a card with the word “hot” on it, that student needed to find the student with the word “cold” on a card. Those two students were partners for the activity.

How I Knew How Well This New Strategy or Approach Worked

I observed students for the rest of fall term as they worked with partners they had chosen for pair activities. When I implemented the new strategy in January, I chose a small focus group of four students. We met informally for approximately ten minutes each week to discuss the different ways of pairing, what they preferred, and what helped them learn better. This meeting was during the break and was conducted in Spanish since the students were not yet able to have conversations of this type in English. I decided to change the students in the group from time to time so that I could get the input of more students. In May, when the students could communicate enough in English, we had whole class discussions about pair work.

At the end of the school year, I distributed written surveys in Spanish asking the students to let me know which type of pairing they preferred, which type contributed more to their learning, and if they thought they learned more with the teacher listening and helping or by working it out on their own with the teacher at a distance. The Chinese students had stopped attending at the end of winter term and I was able to talk to the Indian student in English about the questions on the survey while the others were completing it.

What I Learned About This Strategy or Approach

In this project I decided to experiment with modifications so that students would learn as much as possible during pair work. I started the project with three questions I wanted to answer. First, I wanted to know which method of pairing students contributes most to their learning and also which methods students prefer. Second, I planned to keep a distance as they worked with partners to see if this would help them negotiate meaning without the pressure of having the teacher present. Finally, I wanted to let them get off task during pair work, as long as they did it in English.

The class was a group of total beginners (Student Performance Level SPL 0) in September when we began. I used pair activities where students chose their partners starting the second week of classes. By the time I started experimenting with different pairing methods, they had been studying for about 16 weeks. While most of them did well with random pairing and said they did not mind it, I could sense a feeling of discomfort in some. Since that first time, I sometimes used random pairing and it got easier each time.

I had originally planned to observe pair work only in my true beginning night class. However, I found myself using pair work more in my other classes as a result of this project. I will share some observations from these other classes here as well. I had a group of 10 high beginning students in another class and I had regularly changed their partners since the class started. It was a family literacy class of three men and seven women. In this class they all sat around a big table as this was the only available seating option. I usually designated their partners for them and I often changed their partner when a new activity took place. In this group the students were comfortable with any partner they had. It should be noted that this is a family literacy class that meets 12 hours a week and students did activities together with their children. For this reason, they were very comfortable with each other and many had become friends outside of class. This definitely contributed to their comfort with having any partner and was a different situation than the larger night class where the students didn't know each other as well.

In this same family literacy class, I had a group of six intermediate level students who met in another room. Even in this small class, I used activities that involved pair work. I have the same observations for this level as for the high beginning class. I have concluded from my observations in these three classes that true beginning students benefit most when allowed to choose their own partners. With high beginning students and up, learning is enhanced when the instructor strategically places them with a variety of different partners at the same level as well as slightly higher and lower levels. Occasional random pairing is also fine and students benefit from it as well. I have observed that in all classes certain pairs just work together more easily, negotiate meaning better, and extend the activity more.

I had also planned to back off when students were doing pair work so that they could negotiate meaning on their own rather than relying on the instructor to provide instant feedback. It was in this area that I feel I learned the most. Most of my observations were based on the true beginning class. I kept my distance from students during pair work with two exceptions. The first was when a student raised a hand or called me over to a table to ask a question. The second was when a student had missed a previous class that covered the material used in the pair work. In this case, I would help that pair get started and make sure that they understood.

When I first started keeping my distance, the students were obviously somewhat confused since they weren't used to it. For this reason, I did it slowly so that eventually I was in the front of the room observing from a distance and sometimes I appeared to be working on something of my own. I was always available to answer questions that students had and they sometimes called me to their tables to help them. Once they were used to my distance, they got right into pair work without worrying about where I was in the room. Even though I was far from the students, appearing busy so they could relax, I was able to observe and overhear their conversations. I heard many students struggling and helping each other with pronunciation, and working hard to understand each other. They were often successful, even without teacher interference. I soon realized how valuable this was and that it did not matter if they missed a word or changed the word order a little bit. They were working hard at negotiating meaning just as they needed to do out in the real world.

My final area of experimentation involved letting students get off task in English when they had finished the activity, perhaps asking each other about jobs or families. I felt that this was also

valuable and let them continue as long as they were speaking English. After all, they were learning English for communication and some good conversations took place when they really wanted to learn about their partner. I now use a combination of staying distant during pair work and letting students get off task in English. This creates an atmosphere where the students look forward to doing pair work as a way to practice speaking in a relaxed manner.

In addition to my ideas, I would like to share what the true beginning students told me and what I learned from a survey I used at the end of the project. Of course, by the end of the project they were no longer true beginners. Most of them preferred it when I stayed away from their tables. At the beginning of the project they almost all said that they wanted me to be at their table, but this was before I started regularly keeping a distance. Even at the end of the school year, there were a few who said that they preferred it when I was listening closely. However, I observed that their body language changed when I was standing at their tables. It seemed that they were more focused on performing for me than on communicating with each other. They also often stopped in the middle of the activity to go back to the beginning so that I could hear everything, which interrupted their conversation and didn't simulate a real life conversation at all. Even with the students who said they preferred to have me close by, I observed that they were more relaxed and they learned more when I was not right there with them. By the end of the school year, most students said that they preferred it when the teacher chose their partner for them. All of the students said that they preferred to be paired with a partner who was at the same or a higher level.

In conclusion, I learned that the initially true beginners did better with a partner they chose, but as they advanced in their English, they benefited from having various partners sometimes chosen by the teacher. When I kept a distance during pair work, students worked harder to negotiate meaning and more closely simulated a real life conversation. And when students were allowed to get off task in English and try to learn about each other, they were communicating in a manner that enhanced their learning.

Supports and Challenges I Faced When I Used This Research

The fact that the students were already used to doing pair activities on a regular basis made it easier to implement the changes in how we were doing it. Informing the students about what was happening was helpful because they knew why we were doing pair work differently. I also received support when I started to get feedback from the students.

The fact that the students were used to having me close by presented a small challenge at first, although they eventually got used to the distance I kept. It was a challenge moving students out of their comfort levels by placing them with partners not of their choosing. More specifically, the women in this group had formed a bond and were used to sitting and working together. Throughout the entire school year, they continued to prefer to work with each other.

What I Recommend to Other Teachers

My recommendations are based on what I personally observed in several classes this year. Each class is unique and my first recommendation is to get to know the students and to tailor teaching

and pair work to that individual class. What works wonderfully for one class may not work as well for another. It is necessary to be flexible and creative, and to have good communication with students about their preferences and needs.

Regarding the formation of pairs and how to set students up with partners, I found that in a true beginning class, the students need a very high comfort level. For this reason I think it is a good idea to initially let students choose their own partners. As the class progresses toward high beginning, most students appreciate the opportunity to work with various students in the class. When the teacher chooses the partners, either strategically or randomly, students will not have to disappoint a friend or make a choice that might offend another student. Since each student has different strengths and weaknesses, students learn in different ways when they change partners. It is also true that some students work together more easily with certain partners and this should be taken into consideration.

I would recommend that teachers try to keep a distance during student pair work. While hard to do at first, once the students are used to it, they will notice the benefits. Students work hard to negotiate meaning and this more closely simulates a real life interaction. Even though students may struggle, when they figure things out on their own, they learn in a more realistic way than when they are corrected or prompted with what to say. By having the teacher stay away from their tables, students are noticeably more relaxed and not focused as much on performance as on communication.

When explaining to students how to do a pair work activity, it is crucial for the teacher to model what is expected so that when students get started they understand what to do. While this is always important, it is especially so when the teacher is not right in front of them. It is also important that students realize that the teacher is readily available to answer questions. All they need to do is raise a hand and help is on the way. It is good to encourage students to work it out on their own if they can, but to be available when they do need help. I have found that as I overhear mistakes that occur regularly, it is helpful to make a note of them. Then when the pair activity is finished and I am wrapping up with a review, I can also point out to the whole class the common mistakes that were made and how to correct them. If it is a big mistake that most students are making and it could hinder understanding by a native speaker, I think it is acceptable to interrupt the pair work to go over the correction and then let students continue practicing. I sometimes like to spend a little time during the wrap up to let student pairs volunteer to do what they were just practicing together, in front of the class. There are always some pairs who volunteer and the whole class enjoys it. It also reinforces what they were just working on.

Finally, I would recommend that in some cases students be allowed to get off task in English when working with a partner. When they do this, they are usually talking about topics that really matter to them and they will therefore work hard to understand each other. From my observations, some of the most valuable learning takes places during off task interactions.

What I Plan to Do Next

Because of my discoveries, I plan to continue experimenting with pair work in future classes. Next year I will be able to see how keeping a distance works with true beginners starting the first

or second week, instead of waiting until winter term as I had to do during the project. I suspect there will be a need to intervene when they speak absolutely no English. I am excited about using pair work in even very small classes. As long as I have four students, it is worthwhile for students to sometimes work with a partner while I remain distant but within reach. I will follow my own recommendations above, but be prepared to make changes as I encounter different classes with different students.