

Intricacies of Pair Work – Surveys and Research

Kevin M. Maher

Introduction

A key ingredient to success in every language classroom is practicing the target language with partners. After examining the pedagogical reasons for pair work, the purpose and reasoning behind it, and how various teachers and students view it, we can begin to understanding the dynamics and intricacies of pair work. Two separate surveys on the topic of pair work were conducted, one for teachers and one for students. Feedback was received from both participants and instructors in a survey format, stating the patterns from the results, and of what types of pair work was preferred or not preferred. This study was divided into three sections: Part I – Background Research, Part II – Teacher Survey on Pair Work, and Part III – Student Survey on Pair Work.

The first section will discuss pair work and group work within the language classroom from a theoretical viewpoint.

Part I – Background Research

Linguistic Space and Teacher Talk

In a language learning classroom, one of our greatest dangers as teachers is that of lockstep teaching. Basically, lockstep teaching is when the teacher sets the pace of the class through lecturing, leading drill work, or asking questions of the entire class, while the class listens collectively for the answers (Fanselow, 1977). Teachers spend most of the lesson talking and explaining things, allowing very little time for students to actually practice the language themselves.

Various researchers have done studies on just how much teacher talk is done in a typical ESL/EFL classroom; Allyson noted, “The teacher uses 80% on average of the linguistic space” (Allyson, 2001). Long and

Porter claim that if an average EFL classroom is 50-minutes long, and if a teacher talks for half of that time to a classroom of 30 students, than each student only receives 30 seconds of speaking time. This calculation takes into account time used for administration matters, teacher time, and teacher-oriented activities consistent with the lockstep style of teaching (Long & Porter, 1985). Because of these reasons, we can see why another approach rather than the lockstep style would be better. If we allow forty students in the class to concentrate on pair work and partner exercises, twenty students will be actively speaking instead of just one, as would be common in the lockstep approach (Harmer, 2001 p. 206).

Vygotsky, Krashen, and i+1

The fact that students should be actively using the target language is strongly supported by well-known researchers in the field. Krashen populized the input hypothesis, which states that “a necessary condition to move from stage i to stage $i + 1$ is that the acquirer must understand input that contains $i + 1$, where ‘understand’ means that the acquirer is focused on the meaning and not the form of the utterance” (Krashen, 1980 p. 170). Through conversational practice with other partners, students can often practice a target language and hear slightly different ways to say the same thing in a variety of ways from different conversational partners with varying levels of English proficiency. This is an example of Krashen’s theory being applied in the language classroom.

Vygotsky speaks about the importance of interaction in second language acquisition. Cognitive processes take place as a result of human interaction between pairs such as novice and expert, or collaborative pairs (Vygotsky, 1978). Students learn better when they join forces with other people. Purposeful interaction allows for “comprehensible input” that is slightly above the learner’s current level of understanding, and understanding the meaning of what one says is negotiated through conversational modification (Long, 1983). For these reasons, interaction and conversation are essential for students learning a foreign language.

Interaction in the ESL/EFL Classroom

Nearly every conversational textbook for ESL/EFL students has directions for students to work with a partner or in small groups. One of the primary reasons is that learners have greater comprehension when allowed to interact (Gass & Varonis, 1994). To increase interaction, it is important for the teacher to take the role of a facilitator rather than an authoritarian (Brown, 2007). The teacher as a facilitator focuses on the principle of intrinsic motivation by allowing students to discover language through using it in context rather than telling them about language (Rivers, 1987). Although, the context may still be within the classroom, to contribute towards pair work, they have to ask partners for clarification and mentally prepare what they want to say. Pair work gives learners exposure to a range of language items and language functions. Through pair work exercises, students are engaged in the 'communication approach', a way to learn languages that focuses on practicing the language by communicating with each other in that language (Lewis & Hill, 1997).

Long and Porter (1983) advocated group work for five reasons. First, group work increases language practice opportunities. Perhaps one of the strongest reasons why many second-language learners have low achievement is that they may not have adequate classroom time to practice the new language. Secondly, group work improves the quality of teacher talk, in that the teacher can focus more on student's communication skills than engaging in lockstep teaching. Additionally, outside of the classroom, communication is more important than accuracy. Students practicing the language with each other, often focus more on communication and clarification, than they would during teacher drills. Thirdly, group work helps individualize instruction. Small groups can work on various aspects of the language closer to their own needs, as opposed to the teacher taking up the entire classroom time explaining aspects that many students may already know. Fourth, group work promotes a positive affective climate. As students work together, they get to know each other, creating a stronger social fabric weaved into learning. Lastly, group work motivates learners. Learners feel less

inhibited and free to make mistakes in small groups, than in a teacher-led class. This combined with communicating with classmates, can lead to higher motivation.

The Dynamics of Dyads

Dyadic interaction is simply another word for pair work. Storch (2001) studied the patterns of dyadic interaction, and assessed four different patterns. They were collaborative, dominant/dominant, dominant/passive, and expert/novice. The predominant pattern was collaborative, defined by Underwood and Underwood (1999), to be when the students in the pair work are functioning well together and eager to offer and connect with each other's ideas. Storch (2001) also observed more confirmation checks, more provision of feedback, and negotiations over language choices when collaborative pair work takes place.

According to Storch, collaborative and expert/notice pairs scored higher than dominant/dominant or passive/dominant dyads. Transfer of knowledge was key to successful pair work. The relationship between people in teaching/learning situations cannot be overlooked (Goodnow, 2003). The more pairs interact, the more they learn about language. In many ways, classrooms are essentially 'social events' (Black, 1996). In short, not only is pair work critical for language students to practice the language, but it is also important for the teacher to observe the interaction of partners. Based on the patterns observed from researchers, teachers can assign specific students to work together.

Conversation as a Skill

Communication requires participation. 'Free conversation' as a class activity often fails due to the fact that only a minority of students are actively speaking or listening. Even when one partner is speaking, the other may not be listening, which may cause the conversational activity to fail. Because of this, it may make conversation so demoralizing that the teacher learns to avoid it and substitute drill for conversation (Santa Rita & Mismick, 1996).

Why do many students hesitate to participate in class? One reason might be a perceived lack of fluency; and therefore, students are insecure about their ability to use English (Lee, 1999). According to an eleven-year nationwide report in Japan, a survey was conducted to Japanese students including perceived weaknesses, and the results of the survey indicated that 74.5% of all respondents felt they were weak at speaking (Koike & Tanaka, 1995). Not only did students in Japan feel insecure about speaking, but so did teachers. During the roundtable discussions at an 'All Private Teacher Union' research conference, Japanese teachers felt insecure about their English, especially when a native speaker was in the room (Yoshino, 1998).

Fluency building tasks can help students feel more confident about their speaking. The ability to use language smoothly and easily is a skill, and this skill can only be developed through practice (Shmidt, 1992; Nation, 1995; Nation & Newton, 2008). In order to make communication an intrinsic part of an ESL/EFL program, we must find a way to integrate conversation into ESL/EFL teaching practices. It is one thing for students to be able to make a 'well-formed sentence', but it is meaningless if they cannot convey their message when communicating. More important is the ability of a student to communicate his message to others in the target language, even if the sentence structure is not absolutely correct. A methodology must be developed which induces the student to employ his or her newly learned language structures with others. The ability to use language can only be acquired by the act of using the language (Santa Rita & Mismick, 1996).

Structure of Pair Work Activities

Before pairs begin their activities, it is important for the teacher to utilize the blackboard and make an outline of exactly what the pairs should be doing. This will involve key words and phrases that they will practice (Hadfield, 1992). It is equally important to state clearly what they are supposed to do, as well as demonstrating the activity with the class. This can be done either by the teacher demonstrating with a chosen student or by having two students go through the activity in front of the class

(Watcyn-Jones, 2002).

Once the activity is fully-explained, pair work begins. It is equally important to have students demonstrate again in front of the class. At this stage, the teacher can add comments, such as corrections or mistakes or alternative suggestions for saying things more naturally. Students should then practice the activity again with the added instruction and information (Hadfield, 1992).

It is also recommended to give time limits to activities, and write the time limits on the board so that everyone can see them. Additionally, according to Watcyn-Jones (2002), it is best psychologically to stop them while they are still enjoying themselves rather than letting the activity drag on until everyone is finished. Lastly, each session should end with checking their progress and giving feedback in front of the class. For example, teachers should ask students if there were any difficult aspects of the task, and address those concerns.

Moving Students Around

Many teachers want their students to change partners often as a way for students to learn more from a wider variety of people, and they want students to re-use the language often in a short span of time. Additionally, Tim Murphey (Dornyei & Murphey, 2004 p. 31), assigns 'Action Logs'. Students report after every class about the activities and how things went. One of his students commented, 'I think changing partners every time is a really good idea because we can make friends' (p. 31). Dornyei and Murphey conclude that changing partners is a great way for students to make friends and enjoy the class. They also point to the important pedagogical implications of pair work.

Lastly, the authors state that "the mixing of students also reduces the power of cliques and integrates loners more quickly. Having an unknown partner provides a bit of facilitative anxiety and makes students pay attention in class. Changing partners in the middle of class can stimulate them physically also after doing stuffed-in-a-chair seatwork for most of

their classes” (Dornyei & Murphey, 200 p. 32).

In addition to research on pair work, surveys on pair work were also conducted. There were two separate surveys conducted, one for students addressing how they felt about changing pair work partners; the other was for teachers and how they organized and conducted pair work in their respective classrooms. The following are the results of those two separate surveys:

Part II – Teacher Survey on Pair Work

Introduction

The first survey was to see how university teachers were organizing their own classes in regard to pair work. Attendees of the Northeast Asia Regional (N.E.A.R.) Conference in Niigata City, Niigata Prefecture, were asked to respond to this survey. It was an international conference which consisted of mainly English teachers who taught English as a Foreign Language at the university level; however, anyone could attend.

The survey consisted of five questions: 1) Where do you teach? 2) What type of English classes do you teach that you might use partners? 3) How often do you change conversational partners in the type of classroom? 4) Do you think changing partners is effective? 5) Check the numbers you like to work with for your partners or group sizes: 2 people, 3 people, 4 people, large groups. 6) What are creative ways you use to change partners? 7) How do you handle students who don't work well with others?

The conference was not large in attendance and not everyone responded or felt qualified to respond; however, sixteen of the attendees completed the surveys. Their answers were as follows:

1. Where do you teach?

Out of sixteen respondents, fourteen of them taught English at a university, one at a high school, and one at a private language institute.

2. What types of English classes do you teach that you might use partners?

As this question elicited write-in responses, answers varied significantly. Respondents listed the following types of classes: communication classes, oral communication, academic English (writing/reading), writing, reading, speaking, listening, conversation, content-based EFL classes, adult group lessons, critical thinking, and speaking/listening.

3. How often do you change conversational partners in this type of classroom?

They had had several choices for this answer: a) never, b) once a month, c) once a week, d) every class, e) multiples times per class. How many times roughly? and f) Other: _____.

Of the sixteen respondents, six of them circled 'every class'. Another six of them circled 'multiple times per class' and they wrote in numbers ranging between 2-5 times per class to signify how often. Altogether, twelve out of sixteen preferred to change speaking partners often in every class.

Of the four remaining, two circled 'once a week'. One of those teachers indicated that he or she taught graduate school, focusing on academic English (reading/writing). Another teacher circled 'once a month' and indicated he taught at a private language institute. Lastly, a teacher circled both 'never' and 'once a month' with a note, 'depends'. Furthermore in this particular respondent's survey, they also wrote that all of their students were engineers, and that because of that, pair work was problematic.

Overall, from this question, it appeared that most teachers did change conversational partners every class, and half of those same teachers changed their speaking partner often within the same class as well.

4. Do you think changing partners is effective?

They had a choice among, yes, somewhat, and no. Additionally, they

could elaborate more on their answer. Twelve responded, 'yes', three responded, 'somewhat', and one left it blank.

Overwhelmingly, when asked to elaborate, even the teachers who said it was somewhat effective still listed positives to pair work. The respondent who left it blank explained pair work was ineffective with his engineering students. The other negative response to this question was the answer of a teacher who thought that when a student was paired with a bad partner, their pair work task fell apart.

The positives were a longer list. The answers were as follows:

- Gives learners a chance to practice the same structures repeatedly, yet not boring if you are talking to different partners. Develops fluency while keeping authentic communication.
- Moves students out of their comfort zone and expands horizons.
- Allows students to hear different pronunciations. Encourages group dynamics. Allows an escape from partners who may be less skillfully communicative. Refreshes student who might be jaded from the same partner. It enables teacher to foster gender-mixing, age-mixing.
- Allows students to practice with students at different levels of motivation and skills.
- Different partners elicit different conversations.
- Motivation changes with each partner, as opposed to just speaking with friends only.
- Exposure to other models than the native speaker, and exposes to new peer role models.
- Different skills, different output, and more of a "real life" situation of negotiating meaning with people other than good friends.
- Allows for a positive classroom atmosphere and allows for collaborative learning.
- Pedagogically, I am not certain, but it improves social atmosphere of the class, and prevents little cliques from forming.

Despite two negatives to pair work, most of the teachers thought pair work was effective, and had positive explanations as to why they thought

it was effective.

5. Check which numbers you like to work with for your partners or group sizes?

The choices that they could check included: 2, 3, 4, and large groups, and multiple answers were acceptable. Of the sixteen respondents, twelve checked '2', nine checked '3', fourteen checked '4', and two checked 'large groups'.

Of the respondents, four people didn't select the '2' option as something that they did. However, those same four had all selected '4'. Two of them wrote that it was a program requirement, and three of them responded that '4' worked best, as they could choose smaller groups within that group. So, while they didn't choose the '2' option, they should have, because within their groups of four, they were breaking them into two sets for pair work.

When asked what numbers were avoided. Most teachers said that any number was acceptable, except for large numbers, which simply did not work for them. Two respondents also mentioned that they preferred 'even numbers' for conversational partners..

6. What are some creative ways you use to change partners?

Respondents could write-in their ideas or suggestions. The suggestions were as follows:

- Shuffle name cards and pair them randomly.
- Number off students and they go their selective tables.
- Order they enter the classroom.
- Students pick a number as they enter the classroom.
- Cuisenaire Rods and a bag. Students take a rod and match it with their others.
- Clothing – match people who are wearing similar clothing that day.
- Numbers on paper in a bag.
- Used information from student profiles. Those who equally liked basketball, shopping, etc.

- Pairs 'Janken' (meaning "rock, scissors, paper") and the winners get to choose their partners.
- Students placed in rows, and designate students to move to the next row at designated times.
- Matching type of games determine new partners.
- Uno Cards or flipping coins.
- Assign each student a number, and roll dice or pick numbers from envelopes.

7. How do you handle students that don't work well with others?

Respondents could write-in their ideas or suggestions. Their ideas were as follows:

- I talk to them individually.
- Never had this situation.
- If there is a Teacher's Assistant (T.A.), I have them work with that student.
- I work with that student.
- I try to find a classmate that will help with that student.
- Keep changing partners.
- Explain their responsibility to their partner.
- Remind them that they will be tested on their pair conversation at the end of the course.
- I let them work alone.
- I pair with that student.
- Give positive reinforcement.
- Have them work in a group of three.

Part III – Student Survey of Pair Work

Introduction

In addition to teacher surveys, student surveys were conducted in regards to pairwork. Special thanks to Ayako Yoshizawa, who assisted the survey by translating the surveys from English into Japanese and the student responses from Japanese back into English.

There were 102 students who responded to the six questions. The questionnaires were given in both English and Japanese to 100 Japanese students, 1 Russian student, and 1 Italian student. All of the students were currently enrolled at a small college in Niigata Prefecture, Japan. All of the questionnaires were given to students currently taking speaking/listening or oral communication types of classes. One classroom of students consisted of twelve in a 'Current Events' evening class open to the public, seven of which were older community members of the town. Of the other 90 students, approximately half of them were first-year speaking/listening classes, and the other half were in second-year speaking/listening classes. Four teachers were involved in this research project and assisted by handing out the surveys to their respective students.

- 1) In English conversation classes, how do you feel about changing conversational English speaking partners frequently?

英語の会話のクラスで頻繁に会話パートナーを変えることについて、あなたはどのように思いますか？

- A) Positive (良いと思う)
- B) Indifferent (良くも悪くもない)
- C) Negative (悪い)

For question #1, out of 102 surveys, 77 respondents circled positive, 21 were indifferent, and 3 thought it was negative to change conversational partners frequently. Results were overwhelmingly positive for changing partners frequently in the language classroom.

- 2) Do you prefer partners (2 people discussing) or groups (3 or more) in speaking activities?

2人のパートナーで行う会話の練習と3人以上でのグループの会話の練習、どちらが好ましいですか？

- A) Partners (2 people) (2人のパートナー)
- B) Small groups (3+ groups) (3人以上のパートナー)
- C) Both are okay (どちらでもよい)

For question #2, out of 102 surveys, 32 preferred partners, 31 preferred small groups, and 38 circled that both were okay. Generally the students were very split with their preferences to this question.

- 3) Would you prefer talking to the same people each class (regular group you talk to most classes), or frequently talking to many different people in your class throughout the semester?
- 一学期を通していつも同じ人達 (同じグループの人) と会話練習をするのと、毎回違う人と会話練習をするのでは、どちらが好ましいですか?
- A) Prefer talking to the same group of people each class.
(いつも同じグループ)
 - B) Prefer talking to many different people in the classroom.
(いつも違う、大勢の人)
 - C) Both are okay. (どちらでもよい)

For question #3, out of 102 surveyed students, only 14 said that prefer the same partner. Fifty-nine preferred different partners, and 29 were okay with both. Overall, slightly more than half had a preference for changing partners often.

- 4) During a one-hour conversational English speaking class, what is the ideal number of times to change partners?
- 一時間の授業で、何回会話パートナーを変えるのが適当ですか?
- A) I don't like changing partners.
(パートナーは変えたくない)
 - B) Two different speaking partners per one hour class.
(一時間で2人のパートナー)
 - C) Three different speaking partners per one hour class.
(一時間で3人のパートナー)
 - D) As many as possible. (できるだけ多くのパートナー)

For question #4, there were also 102 responses. In a one-hour speaking class, which is typical at the university where the survey was conducted, we had numerous responses. Sixteen said that they do not like changing partners, 30 said that they prefer two different speaking partners per

class, 26 said three different speaking partners per class, and 28 said as many as possible. Results were varied. Nothing was conclusive.

- 5) Do you feel that changing partners often makes your English conversational ability better than if you didn't often change partners?

パートナーを変えて練習することで、英語の会話は上達すると思いませんか？

- A) Yes (はい)
B) No (いいえ)

For question #5, out of 102 respondents, 94 of them said that it does make their English conversational ability better, and 8 said that it did not.

- 6) Anything else you would like to say about changing conversational speaking partners in the classroom? (You can write it in Japanese):

会話パートナーを変えることについて、何か意見があったらお書きください。日本語で書いても構いません。

In some of the classes, depending on the teacher, they were asked to include feelings on gender in the written-in response, some of the answers are reflected in here. All of their responses are below:

- 男子学生なら男子学生、女子学生なら女子学生とパートナーになったほうがいいと思う。(It is better for male students to be partner with male students, and female students to work with female students.)
- 同性でも異性でも良い。(Both same gender and different gender are fine.)
- 同性がいいです。(Same gender is better.)
- 頻繁に変えると、自己紹介で終わる可能性が高いし、深く知ることができないと思うから。(If we change partners too often, there is a chance to spend the time just introducing each other, and we cannot get to know each other well.)
- 特にありません。(Nothing special.)

- いつも同じパートナーだとなまけて (slack) しまうかもしれないから、できれば異性のほうが、緊張 (tension) できて、いいと思う。
(We may slack off if we stay with the same partner all the time, so if possible, it is better to be a partner with the student with different gender so that we feel more tension.)
- I think I can focus better conversation by communication with my own sex.
- 絶対に同じ人、ということはあまりよくないと思うけれど、頻繁に変えるのも良くないと思う。(It is not really good to have a totally fixed partner, but it is also not good to change the partner too often.)
- 同じレベルの人とパートナーになりたい。(I want to be a partner with someone with the same level.)
- 仲が良いほうが話しやすい！(It's easier to talk to a close friend!)
- We can learn many questions with this.
- とくになし。(Nothing special.)
- いろいろなコミュニケーションの取り方を経験できるので良いと思う。(It is good because we can experience different ways of communication.)
- 多くの人と会話することで多くの英語力が身につくと思います。
(We can learn English by having conversation with many people.)
- I like changing partners and talking to different people, but it would be nice to do something else too.
- No problem so far.
- Changing partners gives me a lot of chances to know many different opinions and ways of thinking.
- I really enjoyed getting to talk to many different people. Sometimes I wish we could have talked as a whole class though, because I like to hear everyone's opinion!
- 名札スタンドは有効だったが、Family Name も併記してはどうか。
(Name cards were effective, but how about writing our family names as well?)
- パートナーを変えるのが良い場合は変えたら良いと思います。
(I think we should change partners when it is better to do so.)
- Positive, but if we could have more time with a certain partner.

- Sometimes I want to speak in groups more! Then I'll get more information!
- 2人パートナーなら、レベルを同じぐらいにしないと、つらい。たまに、泣きたくなります。(If we are working in the two people partners, it is painful when our levels are different. I feel like crying sometimes.)
- 会話の上達。コミュニケーションUP! (Improvement of conversation. Communication improvement!)
- 特にはないです。(Nothing special.)
- 特になし。(Nothing special.)
- 同じ人達とやっているよりもパートナーを変えた方が、盛り上がるし仲も良くなれると思います。(It's more exciting and we get to know each other by changing partners rather than staying with the same people.)
- 仲のいい人同士でやっているとう英語力が上がらない。色々な人と会話できるのはいいことだと思う。(English doesn't improve if we just practice with the people we are close to. It is a good thing that we can communicate with different people.)
- とても良いことであると思う。To change partner is good idea (It is a good thing.)
- I can make many friends.

Conclusion

Many ESL/EFL course book suggests that we should divide our classes into pairs or groups to practice the language. The research and surveys were used to discover the preferences that teachers had in conducting pair work, as well as what students thought about it. The overall data does show that students do prefer pair work for language learning, and that the students' general preference is that the more we change partners in the language classroom, the more opportunities they get to use, re-use, and practice the target language of the lesson.

The research could be expanded upon by having larger numbers of respondents to both surveys, by focusing on elements such as gender preferences, and by studying what students think about being with either

much weaker or much stronger language learners than themselves.

In conclusion, there are many reasons to use pair work in the classroom, as well as to change partners often. Through studying the intricacies of pair work, we can develop ourselves as better teachers and language instructors.

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