

Exploring Pair Work in a Communicative Classroom

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Abstract

This study set out to duplicate a previous survey on student perceptions of pair work, then compare and contrast the two sets of results. There are strong pedagogical reasons as to why ESL/EFL textbooks focus on pair work. It builds fluency skills, creates collaborative learning, and assists in using and re-using key vocabulary. However, what are students' perceptions of pair work? A previous study, (Maher, 2011) attempted to address this question with respect to university students who are enrolled in conversational English classes. This research reviewed existing literature on pair work and its strengths, then attempted the same survey with a different set of students at a different university, to see if similar results would be obtained.

Key words: Pair work, dyadic interaction, synaptic states, collaborative learning, communicative approach, linguistic space.

1. REVIEW OF EXISTING LITERATURE

Every ESL/EFL conversational textbook includes activities with directions for students to work with a partner or within a small group. This paper examines the reasons for this, why this is a successful model, and what students think about it.

This is based on a previous research study which gathered feedback from university students in Japan on their perceptions of pair work in the classroom (Maher, 2011). Following that study, this researcher has asked the same set of questions to a different set of students at a different university in Japan to see if their feedback differs or is similar to the original responses.

Initially, existing literature on linguistic space and teacher talk will be examined in relation to the communicative language-learning classroom. Then dyadic pair work and its details will be addressed. From there, neuroplasticity and how it applies to language acquisition. Ultimately, pedagogical reasons will be discussed in regards to why teachers

should change pair work groups frequently for fluency building purposes.

1.1 Teacher Talk and Linguistic Space

In a language classroom, linguistic space refers to the amount of time spent practicing the target language, and who is using that linguistic space. If a classroom has too much teacher talk, where the teacher is talking more than the students, then it is said that the teacher is taking up much of the linguistic space of the classroom. Allyson (2000), states that the average teacher uses 80% of the talking time, in a typical language classroom.

Long and Porter (1985) state that if a lesson involving 30 students is 50-minutes long, and a teacher talks for half of that time, then each student is only allowed 30 seconds of practice time with the target language, if only one speaks at a time in front of the class. This calculation takes into account administration matters, teacher time and teacher-oriented activities. However, if the students are put into pairs even for just five minutes, each student gets more talking time during those five minutes than the rest of the lesson (Bryne, 1988, 31). Imagine how much linguistic space can be given to students if allocating even more time.

1.2 The Communicative Classroom

By using pair work exercises, students are engaged in the “communicative approach,” a way to learn languages that focuses on practicing the language by communicating in that language with each other (Lewis & Hill, 1997).

Additionally, Long and Porter (1985) advocate group work for five reasons. First, group work increases language opportunities for students. Secondly, group work improves the quality of teacher talk, in that the teacher is free to walk around and examine individual students and their abilities. Third, group work helps individualize instruction. Students can work on their own respective language needs as opposed to the teacher dominating the entire lesson. Fourth, group work promotes a positive affective climate. As students

familiarize themselves with each other, they are involved with collaborative learning, and it enhances classroom dynamics. Lastly, group work motivates learners. They feel less inhibited to make mistakes in small groups than they do in teacher-led instruction.

1.3 Dyadic Interaction (Pair Work)

Storch (2001) categorized classifications of pair work groups into four observable patterns of dyadic interaction. They were collaborative, dominant/dominant, dominant/passive, and expert/novice.

Collaborative is the ideal type of partner interaction. This is when students are functioning well together and eager to exchange ideas (Underwood and Underwood, 1999). Storch (2001) also observed more negotiations over language choices, more provision of feedback, and more confirmation checks, when collaborative pair work took place.

Expert-novice was another positive classification within pair work groups. The transfer of knowledge took place from expert to novice. One was in the role of teaching, while the other actively learning. Students in both kinds of role benefitted from this type of pair work interaction.

One negatively regarded pattern was dominant/dominant. In this situation, learning was not occurring. Both students might be talking past each other, and not learning from each other. Another negative was dominant/passive, where one student was not learning due to not being actively involved with the partner.

1.4 Synaptic States and Fluency Building

Communication requires participation. Fluency building tasks can help students feel better about their ability to speak. Fluency in speaking can only be developed through practice (Nation & Newton, 2008). To internalize a foreign language for students, we must implement it into our teaching for them to practice. It is one thing for a student to be

capable of making a “well-formed sentence”, but it is meaningless if they cannot convey their message by using that perfect sentence. It is more important for a student to be able to communicate his message effectively in the target language, even if the sentence structure is not accurate (Santa Rita & Misick, 1996).

Additionally, fluency-building exercises and using language can strengthen important synapses within a learner’s brain, which is instrumental to learning. Recent research by Montgomery and Madison (2004) identified five states that synapses move between. They are active, silent, recently-silent, potentiated, and depressed. Silent synapses can become active, and active synapses can be potentiated or depressed. However, synapses that have just become recently active cannot be depressed or silenced. This type of theory demonstrates how a person can have a strong memory or a weak memory, by strengthening their synapses through language use.

In short, by practicing the target language, synapses can be strengthened and can increase recall ability of the vocabulary and grammar. By actively using partners and practicing languages, students can enhance synapses that involved language communication in their brain. Through practicing language, recall will improve, therefore increasing ability.

1.5 Theory Underpinning Frequent Partner Changing

Lastly, an effective way to have various dyadic interactions, build classroom unity and friendships is through regular changing of partners in the classroom. According to Dörnyei and Murphey (2004), it makes good pedagogical sense to change partners. They say 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 after doing stuffed-in-a-chair seatwork for most of their classes” (Dörnyei & Murphey, 2004 p. 32). Additionally they conclude that changing partners is a great way for students to

make friends.

Additionally, Maher (2011) surveyed students about changing and moving partners to see what they thought of it. Several commented on the tension they felt with new partners, as opposed to people they knew and talked to all the time. They also liked the chance to hear and share different opinions with a variety of different people. There was a belief that their English improves when using and practicing with different people.

1.6 Previous Student Survey on Pair Work

Maher (2011) conducted research on students of their opinion on pair work. That study surveyed 102 students at a small college in Niigata Prefecture, Japan based on the teaching style of four different teachers. The survey consisted of six questions, and was given to students currently enrolled in a speaking/listening or oral communication type of class. Students were given the questionnaire in both English and Japanese¹. The results of Maher's (2011) survey were as follows:

Table 1: Results from Maher, 2011

1. In English conversational classes, how do you feel about changing conversational partners frequently?	
A) Positive	77
B) Indifferent	23
C) Negative	3
2. Do you prefer partners (2 people discussing) or groups (2 or 3) in speaking activities?	
A) Partners (2 people)	32
B) Small groups (3+ people)	31
C) Both are okay	38

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?	
A) Prefer talking to same group of people each class.	14
B) Prefer talking to many different people in the classroom.	59
C) Both are okay.	29
4. During a one-hour conversational English speaking class, what is the ideal number of times to change partners?	
A) I don't like changing partners.	16
B) Two different speaking partners per class.	30
C) Three different speaking partners per one hour class.	26
D) As many as possible.	28
5. Do you feel that changing partners often makes your English conversational ability better than if you didn't often change partners?	
A) Yes	94
B) No	8

The conclusion of this study (Maher, 2011) was that students do prefer pair work for language learning, and that they do have a preference for changing partners often. Additionally, there was a question six where students could write additional information

Table 2: Results from Maher, 2011

6. Anything else you would like to say about changing conversational speaking partners in the classroom? (You can write it in Japanese):	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 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).
- ひんばんにかえると、じこしょうかいでおわるかのうせいがたかいし、ふかくし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、ひんばん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 (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、泣きたくになります。(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.

In this study, most students wrote about making new friends, comments about gender preferences, with various opinions. Next we will look at the same survey given to different students, and their respective results.

2. METHOD

2.1 Population and Setting

Based on the previous study, the same six questions were posed to a different set of college Japanese language students based in Osaka, Japan. These were second-year students, who could compare different teacher styles and learning styles from their first year courses. This survey was done to see if results would be similar to the Niigata study. In this study, 85 students were surveyed. All of the students were actively enrolled in conversational English language classes, and all of them were Japanese.

Additionally, this survey was conducted on a group of students who had the same teacher, the researcher. They were asked not to write their names on the questionnaires, and were not aware that the survey was for the researcher/teacher who administered it.

One interesting thing to note is that nearly 90% of the students were female. This particular university has a high female to male student ratio. The first study recommended that questions about pair work and gender be addressed in further research. This study could not address that question, due to the fact that 90% of the students were of the same gender.

A potential flaw of this study was that all of the students had the same teacher, and might have been influenced by that particular teacher's teaching style.

2.2 Method of Changing Partners

In this study, the way to change partners involved assigning half of the students as ‘static’ partner students, implying that they will stay in their original seat throughout the activities. The other half are ‘constantly changing’ partners in that whenever it was time to change partners, they will move to the next person in a set routine pattern. For example, every one of the ‘constantly changing’ patterns will move one row back, with the one in the last row moving to the front, but one column over.

Additionally, due to the fact that many students have preferences to sit in the same seats for each class, it was a common event to number students off and start them with random seats and random partners before static partners and constantly changing partners were decided. In this way, it would be assured that students would mix with as many students as possible, without any set particular people each class.

2.3 Instruments

This was a six-question survey, the same that was administered to the students in Niigata, Japan. It was bilingual, with questions in both Japanese and English. Five questions were multiple-choice, and one was an open-ended question. The students were encouraged to respond in either English or Japanese, as they felt comfortable. The students were given approximately five minutes to fill out the survey at the beginning of class. There were four classes of students involved in this study.

2.4 Results

The following is a list of each question asked in English. The original survey was conducted in both English and Japanese, and attached as an Appendix at the end of this study. The tallied answers are to the right.

Table 3: Survey Results

1. In English conversational classes, how do you feel about changing conversational partners frequently?	
A) Positive	65
B) Indifferent	19
C) Negative	1
2. Do you prefer partners (2 people discussing) or groups (2 or 3) in speaking activities?	
A) Partners (2 people)	13
B) Small groups (3+ people)	29
C) Both are okay	42
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?	
A) Prefer talking to same group of people each class.	2
B) Prefer talking to many different people in the classroom.	65
C) Both are okay.	18
4. During a one-hour conversational English speaking class, what is the ideal number of times to change partners?	
A) I don't like changing partners.	2
B) Two different speaking partners per class.	15
C) Three different speaking partners per one hour class.	40
D) As many as possible.	28
5. Do you feel that changing partners often makes your English conversational ability better than if you didn't often change partners?	
A) Yes	83

Additionally a sixth question was an open-ended one. This was to see what other evidence we could draw from their answers.

Table 4: Open-Ended Question Results:

6. Anything else you would like to say about changing conversational speaking partners in the classroom?

- If I change partners, I hear different ideas.
- I think that how many times we would change partners doesn't matter, but that the partner would express themselves in English is very important. We want to talk about deep deeply. If partner wouldn't talk so much, we can't enjoy talking.
- Changing conversational partners makes us speak various topics and gets rid of shyness.
- I chose that it is better to change partners. But I think it depends on the person. Some people speak Japanese a lot of times, so it depends on the partner if we can improve English or not.
- It is good for me because I think changing speaking partners is good practice.
- We can know various things from each person, so it is useful.
- It's busy to change partners too many times, but we need to change partners a few times.
- I think it's not good to change partners many times because it wastes time.
- By changing partners, I may get a new opinion, but through a half year, I thought it depended on each person because some of students didn't try to say their opinion. I knew it was kind of Japanese culture. However, most students in my class want to study abroad, so this situation is not good for us. I think teachers

should be more strict.

- I like to change conversational speaking partners.
- I think changing partners many times is useful better than the same partners because we can know a lot of expressions in English which each student have. Moreover, we can get a various information in a class.
- I think changing partners is good, but a little time to talk with one person.
- I'm a little tired of turning our desk.
- Speaking in English is not so easy for me, so I have not many vocabulary. I want to speak to many partners.
- I think it is good to change conversational speaking partner. I enjoy talking.
- We can get a lot of information and get another idea from people.
- I think it's good to change partners because we can have opportunities which my friends or teacher experienced and tell me something that I don't know.
- I think changing partners is good because everyone has their own styles and good points. Also, we can tell partners what are wrong and so on.
- I think it's a good idea, but I sometimes want to play some games for study.
- I think it's good to change conversational partners with many speaking partners because we can exchange our own opinions with many people.
- I think it's a good chance to train our English.
- I think sometimes this class changes partners so many times. Changing partners is a good thing, but if it is too many times, we can't conversation enough.

2.5 Discussion

In the first question, 75% in both surveys saw it as positive about changing partners. Most of the rest were indifferent, and only one person saw it as negative, down from three in the previous study.

Question #2 asked about preferences towards the numbers of members in conversational groups, either partners or small groups of three. In this latest survey, a higher number of respondents wrote that both were okay. Additionally, only about one in seven said they preferred partners. This had a much different set of responses than the original survey, where all three answers were nearly even at one out of three each.

Question #3 asked if talking to new classmates was preferred or talking to the same people every class was preferred. For the current results, it was overwhelmingly to speak to many different many people in the classroom. Only two wanted to speak to the same students. The results varied significantly from the previous survey where nearly 20% preferred the same conversational partners without changing partners.

Question #4 inquired about how often, if at all, that they preferred changing partners. The highest selected response was three different partners per hour. The second highest response was “as many as possible”.

Question #5 asked if changing partners helped increase their English skills, and an overwhelming 83 out of 85 circled “yes”. This was consistent with the first survey, which similarly had a high number of “yes” respondents.

Questions #6 allowed the student to add whatever else they wanted to say. While answers varied, the overwhelming response was that students felt that speaking with more partners helped their English improve.

Ultimately this study yielded similar results to the previous one, but revealed slightly higher numbers favoring changing conversational partners in general. More respondents also recorded getting more out of changing partners that improved their English, than the original survey recorded.

2.6 Recommendations for Further Study

This research study does have the potential to be flawed due to individual teacher style

regarding the changing of partners. It would be interesting if a similar study were to be conducted by other teachers who were strongly resistant to changing partners frequently in their classroom. Perhaps students would give drastically different answers based on what kind of teacher they had.

Additionally, another recommended study could include gender issues and how students felt about being paired up with someone of the opposite gender. This study was unable to address that issue, as the gender of these students was 90% female. If another study were carried out, I would highly recommend a question about which gender a student preferred for a partner; same gender, opposite gender, or indifferent.

NOTES

- 1 Translated into Japanese by Ayako Ooiwa-Yoshizawa in Niigata, Japan.

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APPENDIX¹

- 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)
- 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)
- 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)

- 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)

- 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おもいますか？

- A) Yes (はい)
- B) No (いいえ)

- 6) Anything else you would like to say about changing conversational speaking partners in the classroom?

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。