

Same Activity, Different Focus

Pair activities allow students to interact in English, but what they interact about varies depending upon their needs

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Beginning-level ESOL adult students are enrolled in the Lab School, a partnership between Portland Community College (PCC) and Portland State University (PSU), in Oregon. Created to conduct research on lower-level adult ESOL, the National Lab site for Adult ESOL (known locally as the Lab School; <http://www.labschool.pdx.edu>) is supported, in part, by the Institute for Education Science, US Department of Education, to the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL). The classrooms and research facilities are housed at the university while the registration, curriculum, and teachers are from the community college.

In the lab school students are involved in many types of pair activities. Pair interaction is videotaped as part of research into what actually happens during pair activities: classroom activities in which students work together to complete an assigned task. In one example, one learner must produce the target language, the other must show evidence that he or she understands the language by pointing to the correct picture. Although one of the students, Digna, had practiced “is buying” and “is washing” in class, not until she engaged in the pair activity did she realize that she was not using “is washing” correctly.

The Role of Pair Work

Researchers have long believed that student-to-student interaction is important to second language acquisition (e.g., Gass et al., 1998; Long, 1983; Mackey, 1999; Nakahama et al., 2001; Pica, 1994; Swain, 1995). The belief is based on research on children interacting with adults (e.g., Snow, 1986) and language learners interacting with proficient speakers (e.g., Gass & Varonis, 1994; Polio & Gass, 1998). In all of these interactions, speakers use conversational modifications that help both partners participate in the interaction and understand its meaning. Language learners working in pairs also use conversational modifications to help each other understand (e.g., Gass & Varonis, 1985; Hardy & Moore, 2004). (In Digna and Vladilen’s case, when Vladilen modified the phrase “is washing” to “is buying,” Digna understood she had been saying the wrong word and corrected herself. Digna and Vladilen used other conversational modifications: Vladilen requested clarification by asking “what?”, for example, and he requested confirmation of his guess “is buying”.)

As speakers negotiate with their partners, each is pushed to try new forms or to modify existing ones (Swain, 1995), which opens the door for language development. The negotiation is triggered by some indication that the hearer doesn’t understand, such as Vladilen’s “what?” (Gass & Torres, 2005; Varonis & Gass, 1985). After the trigger, student pairs negotiate word meaning, pronunciation, and sentence form (Swartz, 1980). The resulting negotiation helps the speaker to focus on the problem area (Gass & Torres, 2005): in this case, the use of the word “washing” for the word “buying”. This focus increases the likelihood that the target language element will be learned (Long, 1996).

The Research

The Lab School conducted research to understand what happens during pair activities, scrutinizing half of all transcribed pair activities conducted in two 10-week adult beginning ESOL classes. In this case we were looking to see if and how beginning learners negotiate meaning when working in pair activities, in which negotiation is likely to occur. The research team analyzed 40 student pair interactions that were videotaped and recorded on 20 days. The analysis revealed that pair activities do set the stage for negotiation. Regardless of the fact that the students were performing the same

activity, in the same class, at the same time, they negotiated around different aspects of the language. For example, one pair negotiated around the meaning of one set of words, while another negotiated pronunciation. More than just allowing students to practice already-learned forms, pair work opens the way for students to try forms that they are not sure about. Through negotiation, each student discovers what part of the language area needs to be worked on.

Another Example

At the third class meeting during the research, the teacher introduced adjectives of emotion using pictures from *The Basic Oxford Picture Dictionary* (Gramer, 1994). To check understanding, she paired students up, asking one member of the pair to follow her oral model and say, “Show me _____” (angry, happy, sad, nervous, bored, scared, or excited). The listening partners were instructed to respond by pointing to the appropriate picture, indicating the number of the picture or saying the adjective. The transcripts of two pairs illustrate how pairs performing the same activity can focus on different elements. Both pairs spoke approximately the same number of words (262 vs. 293) and both pairs worked for about the same amount of time (six minutes and eight seconds vs. six minutes and 10 seconds). Within the activity, the students in each pair chose different words from the seven on the list, and focused on different things about those words.

These data show us that we as teachers can not predict what students will do in their pair activities, except that it is likely that different student pairs will be working on different aspects of the language in the activity. This is not bad: pair work allows lessons to be individualized automatically to the needs of each learner.

Implications for Teaching

Teachers find that pair work is good for language learning. The results of this research confirm that belief and call for more pair work when possible. This, as well as other research in the field, suggests that negotiation between students is an important part of language acquisition. To this end, teachers can choose pair activities that promote or maximize negotiation between their students. Teachers can try a variety of activities and monitor their own students: do their students negotiate more when the activities are highly scripted? Require an exchange of information? Allow free conversation? With beginning-level students, it is not clear that one type of pair activity generates the most interactivity, so teachers must determine what promotes negotiation for their specific students.

These findings also suggest that students will learn what they need to learn in their pair-work negotiations. This means that teachers can expect to hear students negotiating around different elements of the same pair activity, but these will be the elements of language that students need, when they are ready.

One persistent and unexpected finding in our research that teachers consistently confirm and find useful is that when teachers approach the student pairs, the negotiation almost always stops (Garland, 2002). Students appeal to the teacher for the correct answer, or they go back to a previous item to perform it for the teacher, or they start interacting with the teacher directly.

In Conclusion

The Lab School provides a unique opportunity to learn about language learning and teaching by watching students closely in their classroom experiences. What we have learned is that beginning students do negotiate meaning and form when they have the opportunity to work in pairs. We also

learned that student pairs doing the same activity often work on different pieces of language. The different foci reflect the area of language that prompted negotiation between the students in the first place, suggesting that negotiation in pair work creates the opportunity for student pairs to focus on their particular area of communicative difficulty.

Videos of two of the classroom interactions may be clicked on from the article at <http://www.ncsall.net/?id=988>

Summarized by Bella Hanson. This page is located at: <http://www.ncsall.net/?id=988>

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