

4 A Comparison of Pair Work and Group Work in a Grade 2 Classroom

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1 INTRODUCTION

As Halliwell (1992) affirms, children have a natural instinct for interaction, and this instinct can be seen as the most powerful motivator for using the language. She adds that children need opportunities to talk and that without these they cannot learn to use the language. Teachers can create such opportunities in the classroom through pair work and group work, and these techniques, learners' views about them and the behaviours they encourage are the focus of this study. This topic is of particular interest to me as the Basic Education curriculum I teach promotes pair and group work widely.

2 PAIR WORK AND GROUP WORK

2.1 Defining Pair Work and Group Work

Pair work is a situation which enables two learners to work independently and interactively without teacher involvement (Doff, 1988; Phipps, 1999; Rimmer, 1999). Group work can be defined in the same way, except that more than two individuals will be involved in the activity. Having said that, as McDonough and Shaw (1993: 227) note, "pair work and group work are not synonymous". They create different social patterns and have different characteristics. Phipps (1999: 1) says that "pair work is a convenient short term for any form of pupil-pupil interaction without the intervention of the teacher".

2.2 Advantages and Disadvantages of Pair Work

Rimmer (1999), Harmer (2001) and Johnson (1995) indicate that one advantage of pair work is that it allows learners to use the L1 in a spontaneous, relaxed and independent manner. Johnson adds that pair work gives the learners the chance to activate prior knowledge and also to develop skills for co-operating with others. Further, Phipps (1999) says that pair work can be easily integrated into any stage of

the learning process and that it promotes communication and social interaction in the classroom. On the other hand, according to Harmer (2001), pair work has some disadvantages. It may be noisy, some learners may not like it since they prefer to interact with the teacher, and learners may use the L1 or talk about matters not related to the task.

2.3 The Advantages and Disadvantages of Group Work

The advantages of pair work outlined above apply to group work too. It provides opportunities for using the language and for learners to participate in lessons. It can create a positive atmosphere in the classroom (McDonough and Shaw, 1993), encourage independent learning and motivate learners to work cooperatively (Johnson, 1995). Benefits of this kind are socio-affective rather than specifically related to language learning. Harmer (2001: 117) adds that “group work promotes learner autonomy by allowing learners to make their own decisions in the group without being told by the teacher”. Group work also allows learners to work with a wider range of individuals than pair work does. In terms of the disadvantages of group work, these are the same as those for pair work mentioned above and relate mainly to issues of noise, use of the L1 by learners, and keeping learners on task.

2.4 Forming Pairs and Groups

In using pair and group work, teachers need to decide how learners should be organised. For example, Optiz (1998) suggests that we can put the learners in equal ability groups since this will be more effective (particularly in pair work) than asking able and less able learners to work together. However, there is an opposite view which says that mixed ability groups are actually preferable as less able learners can learn from their more able classmates. Groups may also be formed randomly (Dunne & Bennett, 1990) and this is useful when groups are formed regularly and the teacher wants the learners to work with different individuals each time. An advantage here is that learners will not get bored of working with same people all the time. In addition, Pollard (2002) suggests that groups can be formed on the basis of age, attainment, interest, and friendship.

3 METHOD

3.1 Research Questions

This study investigated the kinds of behaviours that pair work and group work promote and learners’ views about these activities. Specifically, I addressed the following questions:

1. What are the language learning behaviours that learners display when they work in pairs or in groups?
2. What are the socio-affective behaviours that learners display when they work in pairs or in groups?

3. Are there differences in the kinds of behaviours observed during pair work and group work?
4. Which of these two techniques do my learners prefer?

3.2 Data Collection

The study was conducted in a Grade 2 Basic Education class that I taught. Six learners from this class took part in the study. They were 7-8 years old and consisted of three boys and three girls of mixed abilities. They were in their second year of learning English. Data were collected using observation and interviews and I discuss each of these in turn below.

3.2.1 Observations

As Bell (1999) and Simpson & Tuson (1995) assert, observation has the advantage of providing insight into real events (in this case, into classroom events). To collect observation data I designed an observation sheet which assessed how frequently (i.e. always, often, sometimes, never) certain language, socio-affective and non-verbal behaviours occurred during pair and group work (see results below for the list of issues). Given that I was teaching the learners, I arranged for a colleague to take on the role of the observer and to complete the sheet. I met her in advance and discussed the purpose of the research and the observation sheet. We also piloted it on one lesson before collecting the data for this study. Eight observations took place over one semester – four when I used pair work and four when I used group work. Each observation lasted around 15 minutes, as pair work and group work were not used throughout lessons. During the observations I worked with material from Units 3-7 of the course book English for Me.

3.2.2 Interviews

Blaxter, Hughes & Tight (2001) suggest that interviews are useful for enabling people to talk about themselves and their opinions. Thus I decided to conduct interviews with the learners to find out how they felt about pair and group work. The interviews were structured to facilitate comparisons among the responses of the different learners. With the permission of the headmistress, I interviewed the learners twice during the study (once before the first observation and once after the last one, with the same questions in each case). Given the age and proficiency in English of the learners, the interviews were very brief; they were also conducted in Arabic and then translated into English.

4 FINDINGS

4.1 Analysis of Observations

The 15 behaviours focused on in the observation sheet are listed in Table 1.

Table 1: Behaviours focused on during pair and group work

1. Pupils use single words
2. Pupils use long utterances
3. Pupils pronounce the words correctly
4. Pupils use L1 to complete the task
5. Pupils use incorrect word order for communication
6. Pupils correct each other
7. Pupils are able to communicate fluently
8. Pupils co-operate with each other
9. Everyone gets the opportunity to participate
10. Pupils are active not passive
11. Pupils are familiar with turn taking strategies
12. Pupils interrupt each other
13. Pupils use body language to assist communication
14. Pupils use facial expressions to assist communication
15. Pupils use gestures to assist communication

Figure 1 compares the extent to which these behaviours were observed in the pair and group work activities studied here. Vertical numbers 1-15 represent the behaviours listed above, while the horizontal bars compare on average how frequently each behaviour was observed (averages were calculated by assigning a value of 4, 3, 2 and 1 respectively to always, often, sometimes and never, which were the categories the behaviours were assessed against, adding up the scores on each statement for the four lessons, then dividing the result by four).

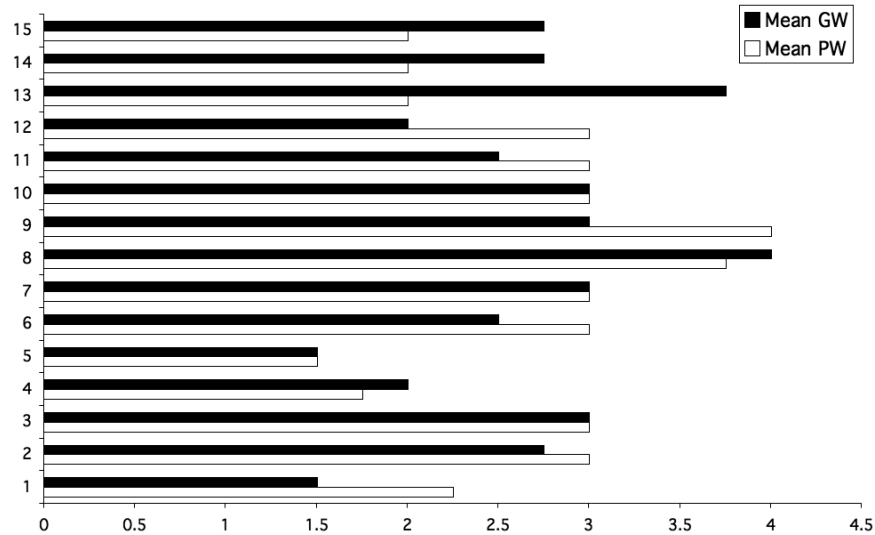


Figure 1: Comparison of behaviours observed in pair and group work

If we consider the behaviours above which relate specifically to language (numbers 1-7), in pair work learners used both single words and longer utterances more than they did in group work (this suggests that in pair work learners generally spoke more). There were no observed differences between pair and group work in the accuracy of pronunciation or word order or in fluency of communication, while more L1 was used in group work than in pair work. Learners corrected one another more often in pair work.

In terms of socio-affective responses (behaviours 8-12), differences were observed in every category except in that relating to how active or passive learners were. Otherwise, behaviours 9, 11 and 12 were more evident in pair work, while 8 was more common in group work. This suggests that pair work promoted these socio-affective behaviours more than group work. Behaviour 9 (everyone gets the opportunity to participate) stands out here; not surprisingly, in pair work all learners had the chance to participate whereas in group work this was not always the case.

Finally, if we consider non-verbal behaviours (13-15), there was clearly more evidence of these in group work than in pair work.

4.2 Analysis of Interviews

When I interviewed learners before the study, they said they like group work and pair work because they feel more relaxed and enjoy working or speaking with their friends; as one learner said, "I like pair work because I like working with my friend Abdullah". The learners also stated that through these two activities they can co-operate and help each other. Two learners were more positive about pair work because in their opinion it gives them more opportunity to use English. On the other hand, three of the learners were more positive about group work. They pointed out that they like group work because they like working with their friends. They also stated that they like it because they can compete in games and win competitions. One of them noted that she likes group work because there is a big chance to learn English vocabulary from the rest of the group. Interestingly, one learner said she prefers whole class work since she does not want to share her answers with her friends.

After the eight observations of group work and pair work activities in the classroom, I decided to interview the learners again. This was to see if there had been any changes in their attitudes toward group work and pair work. Some changes were noted. For example, learners were equally positive about both types of activity, rather than favouring one or the other. Also, the learner who said she preferred whole class work now said she liked pair work and group work too. Overall, though, the generally positive views about pair and group work found in the first interviews were confirmed here.

5 DISCUSSION

Both pair and group work promoted a number of behaviours that are considered desirable in L2 learning. Learners used longer utterances more than shorter utterances, they used the language with a reasonable level of accuracy and fluency,

and also co-operated. Such behaviours may be related to the fact that pair and group work provide less stressful situations for learners to use the language in. Because they were relaxed, and also probably because the activities chosen for them were at an appropriate level, the learners were encouraged to interact (Moon, 2000; Nunan, 1989).

There were, as noted earlier, some differences in the frequency of the behaviours observed in pair work and group work. Pair work seemed to provide more favourable opportunities for learners to participate fully, to interrupt and correct one another, and to take turns. In this sense, pair work may allow learners to interact more naturally by listening, interrupting, responding and correcting (Johnson, 1995; Harmer, 2001). Group work, in contrast, clearly stimulated more non-verbal communication – gesture, facial expressions and body language were much more widely observed in the group activities than in pair work. This may have related in part to the nature of the group activities themselves, as some of these involved, for example, telling stories, an activity which does call for the use of non-linguistic communication. The L1 was also observed being used slightly more in group work than in pair work; this may, again, have been influenced by the more challenging nature of some of the group work tasks.

Considered collectively, interviews with the learners highlighted mostly positive views about pair and group work and learners gave various reasons for these views. Being able to work with friends was a positive point learners noted (this suggests that friendship groups, as suggested by Pollard, 2002, can be a useful strategy in the Omani context). The learners also liked the fact that interactive activities allowed them several opportunities to use English (pair and group work may be the only chance learners have to use the language, especially when there is no exposure to English outside of school). Although initially some learners expressed a particular preference, in the second interview no strong preferences among learners for pair or group work emerged.

5.1 Limitations

The findings of this study provide general support for the use of pair and group work in my teaching. There are, however, some limitations to note in interpreting the findings presented here. Clearly, focusing on six learners does not provide the basis of results which can be generalised with confidence to other settings, and more research of this kind is needed to confirm whether the trends identified here are of more general relevance. The use of observation rating scales also raises issues; observers cannot capture what learners are doing at every moment (and therefore some behaviours may have been missed); observers' judgements, too, may also be subjective and having two observers who could then compare their analyses would have improved the reliability of the results. The interviews with the learners, too, generated limited amounts of data and longer and more open-ended interviews would have produced more detailed insights into how learners feel about pair and group work. Finally, the impact on the behaviours observed of the particular materials used must also be noted. Certain activities may have promoted certain behaviours more than others.

6 CONCLUSION

This study has reassured me that pair and group work can enhance the process of learning English. During both pair and group work activities, learners displayed behaviours which reflect well on their ability to use the language. Also, these behaviours went beyond a focus on language and related to socio-affective and non-verbal aspects of communication. In this sense, pair and group work may contribute to the personal development of language learners more generally. Pair and group work differed in some of the behaviours which were observed, but overall what I have learned here is that both kinds of activity provided opportunities for learners to use English and to develop additional communication skills and strategies in the process. It was also pleasing to find that the small group of learners I studied responded positively to both pair and group work. Collectively, these findings suggest that teachers of English can benefit from experimenting with these techniques in their classrooms, and considering the views that learners have about them.

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