Letting students decide whether to work in pairs or individually in class

Juan Carlos Araujo Portugal*, Official School of Languages of Burgos, Burgos, Spain

Abstract

Communicative approaches to language teaching have advocated for the benefits of pair and group work when learning foreign languages. This paper reports an example of classroom research that has been carried out with intermediate students of English, level B1+, focusing on how they prefer to work in class as regards grammar and vocabulary exercises when given the chance to choose. In order to obtain the results for this classroom research study, the students' teacher becomes a participant observer who records the data throughout the course and collects the data on observation worksheets. Contrary to what it might be expected, the outcomes show that many of the younger students prefer working on their own and then compare and justify their answers with their partners, rather than working in pairs from the very beginning. This is recommended to establish whether this is just specific of these students, or it is something common with other students and teachers have been unaware of it.

Keywords: Classroom research, individual work, learning gains, learning preferences, pair work, personal decision.

---

* ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE: **Juan Carlos Araujo Portugal,** Official School of Languages of Burgos, Burgos, Spain.
E-mail address: jcaraujo@educa.jcyl.es

1. Introduction

Foreign language teachers are always eager to do whatever they can so as to help their students' progress and succeed in their learning process, so that they can become effective users of the target language. This has also interested many researchers throughout history and, particularly, over the last few decades. This is the reason why different theories have been put forward so as to explain second language acquisition: the monitor model, interlanguage theories, universal grammar theories, cognitive theories, the multidimensional model and the acculturation/pidginisation theory (Gitsaki, 1998). Besides, many methodologies and approaches have been developed so as to promote language competence in a foreign language. However, in order to do so, quite often what actually happens in foreign language classrooms is ignored or not given as much attention as deserved so as to arrive at the most effective ways of achieving the ultimate goal of foreign language teaching. So as to remedy this situation, many researchers recommend employing other research methods that take into account what goes on in language classrooms, namely classroom research. Within these methods the following ones may be mentioned: psychometric research, experimental research, ethnographic approach, action research, classroom observation, research on students' and teachers' beliefs etc. This seems even more important at present when communicative language teaching is the most widely used methodology in foreign language classrooms worldwide, and, particularly, in English language teaching contexts. This is so because learners use the target language for communicative purposes from the very beginning while they are learning it.

1.1. Classroom research

As Madrid and Bueno (2005, p. 642) point out, teaching situations vary considerably, which means several factors need to be taken into consideration if one wants to analyse each teaching context. This is what classroom research is about. It is research focused on the classroom, which attempts 'to explain what actually happens inside the classroom, the direct and indirect influence of internal and external factors related to the student, the teacher, and the ELT curriculum' (Madrid & Bueno, 2005, p. 643). Related to this, Nunan (1991a) highlights that classroom research may be a good way to unveil the variables that are operative in each teaching context. Besides, this author draws attention to the fact that what works in a specific context, may not in another one.

Kemmis and Henry (1989, p. 2) define classroom research as 'a form of self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations or educational practices, as well as their understanding of these practices and the situations in which these situations are carried out'.

As these authors highlight, this kind of research is mainly carried out by teachers in their classrooms in different contexts and with specific students. According to Kemmis and McTaggart (1988), this research has three main distinguishing characteristics. First of all, teachers rather than researchers are the ones who conduct it. Besides, it is collaborative and its ultimate goal is to change something within the teaching process. As well as this, Madrid and Bueno (2005, p. 673) see classroom research as a useful way for teacher professional development, as it can help improve teachers' instruction and their students' learning process. Nunan (1991a) also encourages teachers to become involved in this kind of research.

Zabalza and Beraza (2004) describes classroom research as an organised process that teachers use so as to try to understand and improve their work through reflecting on both theory and practice critically. Cardenas (2006) states that instructors are the ones who decide to start this research trying to improve their teaching practice, as well as that of their colleagues. This research will typically yield hypotheses and will show how effective the theory is when implemented. Among other authors, Darling-Hammond and Brandsford (2005), as well as Cochran-Smith and Zeichner (2005), highlight that classroom research is a key aspect in curricula and teachers' professional development.

As for the main methods used in this kind of research, Nunan (1991a) mentions observation, transcript, diary, elicitation, interview, introspection, questionnaire and case study. According to Madrid and Bueno (2005, p. 673), observation is one of the most important methods in classroom research. Nunan (1991b) states that observation may be focused or unfocused. In the former, the researcher looks for specific aspects of language and behaviour. Besides, this observation may be carried out by a participant observer, i.e., by one of the agents involved in the teaching–learning process (Nunan, 1991a, 1991b).

Nunan (1991b) points out that this kind of research tends to be more interpretative than others and relies less on statistics. This means that it is usually more qualitative than quantitative. As Nunan (1991b) argues, classroom research endeavours to identify those factors or variables that may enhance or hinder the acquisition of the foreign language.

Despite the usefulness of this kind of research, it seems that it is not as commonly used as it would be desirable. There is not much empiric evidence on it either, as it seems to be in its early stages. However, some studies have already been carried out to delve into its development. For instance, Nunan (1991a) revised 50 research studies on classroom-oriented research focusing on the following 5 aspects:

- The environment where the data were compiled.
- The justification for each research.
- The methodology and tools employed.
- The kind of data obtained.
- The sort of analysis carried out.

1.2. Factors affecting learning

Researchers have been interested in those factors that have a pivotal role in language learning, either in a positive or a negative way. One of them is motivation, which has been delved into by several research studies (Henter, 2014, p. 374). As a matter of fact, Oroujlou and Vahedi (2011) present the results of some research studies that prove that high motivation can have such a positive effect on language learning that even if students are not particularly gifted at language learning, they can become better language learners than more talented ones.

Another remarkable variable is attitude, which Allport (1935) regards as one of the most important elements that determine behaviour. Some research studies have focused on how students can be successfully trained to change their attitude, so that it becomes an aid for language learning. According to Henter (2014), positive attitude is required for students to be efficient in foreign language learning, and it is closely related to motivation. Another important factor that affects learning is language anxiety, which 'has a devastating effect on performance in oral communication' (Henter, 2014, p. 375). As this author points out, in a learning context there may be several elements that may contribute to increasing students' level of anxiety. Therefore, it is the teacher's duty to create a friendly learning environment where students feel confident, and hardly anxious. In a similar vein, Oroujlou and Vahedi (2011, p. 998) add that, if students feel comfortable in class, their motivation and attitude will also benefit and increase. This is why these authors encourage instructors to create this safe environment from the very beginning.

1.3. Pair work

Pair work and small group work activities have been the most common types of activities that have been carried out in foreign language classes over the last few decades, as they are supposed to promote communication in the target language. Thus, students are allowed more chances to practise the foreign language for communicative purposes and, therefore, improve their communicative competence (Storch, 2007; Zohairy, 2014).

Despite its importance, there is no clear definition that explains what pair work is. For instance, just to mention a few examples, Phipps (1999, p. 1) defines it as 'any form of pupil-pupil interaction without the teacher'. According to this author, these kinds of activities may be used at any time throughout the language learning process, regardless of the students' level of competence or proficiency in the foreign language. Richards and Schmidt (2002, p. 7) see it as any learning activity where students work together in pairs. For Moon (2000, p. 53), pair work is to organise students 'in ways that will maximise opportunities for learning'. Storch (2001, p. 29) views it as the 'classroom organisation that promotes speaking practice and negotiations of meaning'.

Some authors such as Abadikhah and Harsini (2014), Fernandez Dobao (2012), McDonough (2004) and Storch (2007) highlight that the use of these kinds of activities is supported by the psycholinguistic theory of interaction, which are mainly based on Long (1983, 1996) and sociocultural theories of learning (Forman & McPhail, 1993; Forman, Minick & Stone, 1993; John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996; Moll, 2000; Wertsch, 1985a, 1985b). The former focuses on interaction, whereas the latter centres on the key role of collaboration (Donato, 2004). Taking Krashen's (1981) idea of comprehensible input as a basis, Long's (1983) theory of interaction emphasises the importance of confirmation checks, clarification requests etc. in order to facilitate second language (L2) learning as a way to provide students with comprehensible input. A few years later, Long (1996) revised his interaction hypothesis by stressing on the relevance of negative feedback and modified output. As Storch (2007, p. 144) highlights, negative feedback can either be explicit, e.g., explicit corrections, or implicit through clarifications requests, recasts etc. This author also adds that the aim of this kind of feedback is to make students aware of any salient problematic aspects of their utterances.

Apart from this, Achmad and Yusuf (2014), as well as Baleghizadeh and Farhesh (2014), believe that these kinds of activities increase students' motivation, possibly because they are typically associated with learner-centred rather than teacher-centred approaches to teaching. Moreover, Zhou (2010, p. 4) refers to a number of researchers who support these arguments, as well as to the improvement of the quality of students' speaking and the creation of a positive learning environment, thanks to the implementation of these sorts of activities in a foreign language class. Besides, Storch (2007, p. 144) highlights how research studies have demonstrated that once the types of tasks used, as well as the grouping of students, are considered 'in terms of gender, familiarity and L2 proficiency, small group work provides learners with opportunities to give and receive feedback'.

Apart from this, some research studies have shown that, while working in pairs or small groups, students 'pool their linguistic resources in order to reach resolutions to language-related problems they encounter' (Storch, 2007, p. 144). This is what is called 'collective scaffolding' (Donato, 1988, 1994). This is in vein with what Lightbown and Spada (1999) maintain about how pair work can help develop students' language competence, while performing better in a collaborative environment as opposed to working on their own.

Besides, it seems that many research studies have demonstrated that students are more willing to interact with one another than with their teacher, and that their responses are also more elaborate and complex (Tsui, 1995, cited in Achmad & Yusuf, 2014, p. 151). Similarly, Zohairy (2014) believes that pair work leads to meaningful interaction between students, increasing their production, while giving their own opinion and contributing their ideas to the foreign language. Apart from this, Nunan (2003, p. 55) highlights how pair work is a useful way to make sure that students speak for a longer time in the target language. Furthermore, Zhou (2010, p. 6) adds that both pair work and small group work can also reduce students' anxiety, while increasing their self-confidence and self-esteem.

It has been concluded that it is through collaborative dialogue that students can co-construct 'new knowledge of and about language. It also provides learners with opportunities to consolidate existing knowledge' (Swain & Lapkin, 1998, cited in Storch, 2007, p. 144). Collaborative dialogue is that 'in which speakers are engaged in problem solving and knowledge building' (Swain, 2000, p. 102). According to Fernandez Dobao (2012, p. 40), this kind of dialogue 'mediates L2 learning'. This author also states that the reason for this benefit is that students have different strengths and weaknesses,

which means that by working together 'they can provide scaffolded assistance to each other and, by pooling their different resources, achieve a level of performance that is beyond their individual level of competence' (Fernandez Dobao, 2012, p. 41). This author also highlights the fact that it seems that some research studies have come to the conclusion that students are more likely to retain this kind of knowledge more easily.

Harmer (2001, p. 116, cited in Baleghizadeh, 2009, p. 405) points out that the following are some of the main benefits of pair work:

– It increases each student's speaking time in class. Besides, it affords students more opportunities to discuss language and reflect on it (Baleghizadeh, 2009, p. 410).
– It fosters students' autonomy as they can work and interact independently without the constant guidance and supervision of the teacher.
– While the teacher is helping or supervising one pair, the rest may continue working independently.
– It can be organised fairly quickly and easily.

Apart from these benefits, Achmad and Yusuf (2014, p. 155) also add the following:

– Quiet and shy students are more likely to speak.
– Students can learn from and teach each other, for example, by correcting their partners' mistakes and helping them with the vocabulary they may lack in order to get their message across etc. Apart from this, Baleghizadeh (2009, p. 410) believes that 'the more students provide each other with elaborate explanations through collaborative dialogues (...), the more likely they are to learn from each other'.
– It helps develop social skills such as politeness, turn-taking and respect towards their partners' ideas and opinions (Phipps, 1999).

Despite these advantages, Harmer (2001) also highlights some difficulties as regards implementing pair work, which cannot be ignored. He points out the following ones:

– It can be difficult to manage it with a large class, particularly if the students are children.
– In monolingual classes, some students tend to use their mother tongue rather than L2 while they are working in pairs and the teacher is not supervising them. This is more likely to happen when students do not have a good command of L2 (Eguchi & Eguchi, 2006, p. 221).
– The best way to pair students is still unknown.

Although pair work is employed so much in language classes, some students are not very willing to work in pairs and prefer doing it individually, especially if they are working on grammar exercises (Storch, 2007, p. 143). Mishra and Oliver (1998) confirm this, even though the students in their research study showed a positive attitude towards working in pairs or in small groups. These authors specifically refer to students from Asian countries and once again when working on grammar activities. According to these authors, the students considered that working on their own afforded them more opportunities to further practise their grammar. Another reason for this objection to pair or small group work versus individual work was that students were afraid of learning grammatical items and structures wrongly from their partners (Kinsella, 1996; McDonough, 2004).

Another reason for this opposition to pair work and small group work may be attributed to students having different learning preferences. A learning style was defined as 'a preferred way of using one's abilities. It is not in itself an ability, but rather a preference' (Sternberg, 1994, p. 36). As Hatami (2012, p. 488) states, people have different learning preferences which vary as regards their 'natural, habitual, and preferred way(s) of absorbing, processing and retaining new information and skills' (Reid, 1995, p. viii). Hatami (2012) also points out that, even though students may tend to prefer a

particular way of learning, they are not fixed, but can be modified depending on the context or activity in hand. However, not everybody is equally likely to adapt or modify their learning preference (Ehrman, 1996). In order to account for different learning preferences, several theories and taxonomies have been proposed, according to which students have been classified into different groups (Hatami, 2012, p. 488). This author also points out that, in spite of the studies on the relationship between different learning preferences and L2 acquisition, no conclusive findings have been reported so far.

In spite of the strong pedagogical and theoretical support for the use of pair work and small group work activities, some authors such as Abadikhah and Harsini (2014) and Storch (2007) believe that not enough real evidence supporting the benefits of these activities over individual work has been provided, especially as regards some linguistic aspects. Having said that, some researchers such as Baleghizadeh (2009, 2010), Nassaji and Tian (2010), Storch (1999, 2005, 2007) and Storch and Wigglesworth (2007) report that, when working in pairs, the students seemed to be more grammatically accurate than their partners who worked individually. However, it is still not clear whether all this results in better acquisition of the structures they had worked on in the long term.

Nowadays, doing grammar or vocabulary exercises in pairs is a common practice in many foreign language classes. As mentioned above, it is supported by communicative approaches to teaching, whereby students should take advantage of any possibility granted to them in order to practise the target language for communicative purposes. This increases their speaking time in class, while it makes the class more dynamic and student-centred, by obliging students to adopt an active role (Ellis, 2003; Long & Porter, 1985; McDonough, 2004; Storch, 2007). As a result, this will help them acquire the necessary skills to become effective autonomous lifelong learners.

However, even though this practice has generally been well accepted by most students, any teacher can easily notice a small group of them who prefer working on their own rather than in pairs, and do so whenever they have the opportunity. This fact may make one wonder whether, given the chance to choose, students would naturally opt for pair work or would prefer to do these kinds of activities individually, and then compare their answers with their partners once they have completed the exercises.

This paper reports an instance of classroom research project which tries to answer the following research questions:

1. When they can choose, how do students prefer to work – individually and then compare their answers in pairs or in pairs from the very beginning?
2. Can any differences be perceived in this sense as regards students' age?

2. Methods and materials

This paper reports an instance of classroom research that has been carried out at the *Escuela Oficial de Idiomas* of Burgos, Spain. This teaching centre is a state language school which belongs to a network of schools which are the officially authorised institutions in Spain for the teaching of foreign languages. There is at least one *Escuela Oficial de Idiomas* in the capital city of each Spanish province as well as in the most important towns and villages of each province.

The languages that can be learned in each of these schools vary depending mainly on the socio-economic and cultural characteristics of the place where they are based. However, English can be learned in all of them, and French in most of them. Apart from these two languages, German and Italian are quite common as well. As far as the different levels that are offered in each of these institutions are concerned, they depend on how many students attend them. In those schools based in the capital city of each province, there are courses from elementary levels (Basic Level A1) to the most advanced ones (Advanced Level C2), according to the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*. The number of years needed to attain the certificate of Advanced Level C2 differs between

regions, as the intermediate levels B1 and B2, as well as the advanced levels C1 and C2, are offered in a minimum of 3 years and a maximum of 4 years each. More specifically, at the *Escuela Oficial de Idiomas* of Burgos, the intermediate and advanced levels have been divided into 3 years each – one for the intermediate level B1 and the advanced level C1 and two for the intermediate level B2 and the advanced level C2.

To obtain the certificate accrediting that student have reached a specific level of the CEFRL, they have to take and pass a reading paper, a listening paper, a writing paper, a speaking paper and a mediation paper (in the case of the intermediate and advanced levels).

As for the students who attend these institutions, they are young adults and adults. The minimum age to enrol in one of them is 16, except when the language learned at them is different from the one studied at secondary school, in which case the minimum age is 14. However, there is no age limit, which means that when many people retire, they decide to start attending these schools. Thus, the groups are really heterogeneous as regards students' age, occupations, interests, command of the language, educational background etc. As a result, the time that students can devote to learning the foreign language differs considerably, as most of them have to combine different duties and commitments.

Students have lessons twice a week in 2-hour sessions each day they come to class. Besides, they have another 2-hour session on a Friday once a month, which amounts to overall 4.5 teaching hours per week. The lessons are in the morning, in the late afternoon and in the early evening. When they enrol, students choose the time slot that suits them best, which means the characteristics of the students from each time slot are quite different.

2.1. Participants

This paper reports an instance of classroom research which has been carried out at the *Escuela Oficial de Idiomas* of Burgos, with two groups of students of English of the first year of the Intermediate Level B2, according to the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*. Even though it has been conducted with two different groups of students, there is no control and experimental group. In each group there are 14 students enrolled, even though the attendance rate has developed quite differently in each of them. In the first group, there has progressively been a lower average attendance, whereas in the second group the students have attended classes more regularly throughout the year.

As this is not compulsory education, some students never come to class or stop doing so when they find a job, begin a course, have to do their placement etc. This has been particularly significant in the case of Group A, where five students have stopped coming to class because they have experienced one of the above-mentioned situations. In the case of Group B, this has only happened to one person. In both groups, there are some students who have not stopped coming, but do not do it very frequently. Moreover, in both groups there is also one student in each group who attended lessons for a few days at the beginning of the course, but did not return afterwards. Finally, in Group B, there is one student that has never come to class. As regards their sex and age group, this information may be found in Tables 1 and 2. In order to establish the students' age, 31st December has been taken as reference for this purpose.

Table 1. Make-up of both groups of students as regards their gender

	Males	Females
Group A	2	12
Group B	4	10

Table 2. Make-up of both groups of students as regards their age groups

	Group A	Group B
In their 20s	5	3
In their 30s	3	6
In their 40s	6	2
In their 50s	0	2
In their 60s	0	1

It is worth mentioning that if the students from one group cannot come to class on one of the days they enrolled for, they can do so on the corresponding day for the other group, and in this way they do not miss a lesson. This has become particularly common with two students from Group A.

Regarding their occupation, the students from both groups are university students; unemployed housewives who are looking for a job and who stop coming to class when they find one, or are required to do a training or retraining course by the National Employment Department; and working professionals who work in the afternoon and/or evening rather than in the morning and early afternoon.

It is also important to highlight that the researcher, who is their teacher, noticed that the students tend to sit in the same place whenever they come to class, which means they usually work with the same partner(s) when it comes to pair work or small group work. This entails that they normally develop a good relationship, which helps create a good atmosphere and favourable learning environment which might be conducive to taking risks when using the target language without being afraid of making mistakes before their partners. However, if they go to class with the other group, they might feel a bit uneasy as they do not know their partner(s) very well and, therefore, feel a bit intimidated and afraid of making mistakes, and also a bit more reluctant to take risks when using the target language.

2.2. Research tools

For this research, observation has been the method employed, and more specifically, participant observation, as it was carried out by the teacher. He recorded how the students worked – in either in pairs or individually – on observation worksheets while the students were doing the exercises in class, or at the end of the class. This classroom research is an example of focused observation, as it just centred on the way the students preferred to work while doing grammar and vocabulary exercises in class.

So as to record the data for this classroom research, a classroom observation sheet (see the Appendix for details) was created by the teacher. As the students carry out either grammar or vocabulary activities almost every day of class, or some days both of them, either while the students are doing them or at the end of the class, the teacher completed the observation sheet that was later analysed and quantified by him. Obviously the teacher researcher had a rough idea of the way that students preferred to work while doing these kinds of activities, but they were just rough assumptions through his observation. To confirm or refute them, his impressions had to be compared with the data gathered by means of the observation sheets so that they became statistical data. Thus, the outcomes would be more reliable and objective, and not just general perceptions by the teacher, which could be considered subjective, unreliable and probably false.

To complete the observation sheets, apart from recording the names of the students of each pair or small group, as well as the activities or exercises they are working on. Then, depending on how they

have decided to work on them, either the column 'work in pairs' or 'work individually and then compare answers' is ticked.

A questionnaire provided to the students for them to complete so as to find out their preferred way of doing these activities and the reasons for this decision could have been interesting to use. However, this was not the initial intention of the teacher. His aim was to examine how the students would typically tend to work while doing these kinds of activities, without being encouraged to work in a particular way. Having said that, in future research studies, it might be interesting to explore their preferred way of working on these activities and the reasons for it, and a questionnaire seems a suitable tool to obtain this information.

2.3. Procedures

For research purposes, only those students who have completed the course or attended it regularly have been taken into consideration. In order to carry out this classroom research, the grammar and vocabulary activities and exercises that come in the students' coursebook have been considered, as in the case of Storch (2007) who also focused on grammar and vocabulary exercises. The textbook used by the students is made up of 12 units, each of which contains 5 sections. The first and the second section of each unit include the grammatical aspects dealt within the unit and the grammar reference section, which contains more detailed explanations as well as practice exercises (about two or three), comes at the end of the book. The first and the second section also include further grammar exercises to consolidate and/or practise the grammatical aspect in hand. These sections may also contain some vocabulary exercises, which are typically to be found in the third section called vocabulary and skills development.

The oral or communicative activities have not been considered for this research as they are always carried out in pairs or small groups, and sometimes as a whole group, either because there are not many students in class or as a way to round off the activity once they have finished doing it in pairs or small groups

As already stated, this classroom research aims to find out which choice students would normally make if they were allowed to choose by themselves instead of being told how to do grammar and vocabulary exercises, i.e., individually, and then compare their answers in pairs or work in pairs from the very beginning. Besides, it also attempts to ascertain whether any difference could be perceived in this sense as regards the students' age. This might indirectly reflect different schooling experiences, having been exposed to more traditional or innovative teaching approaches or methodologies. And most importantly, it would respect different learning preferences which students will have acquired as a result of the previous two factors.

In order to find out how the students that take part in this research would choose to work on grammar and vocabulary exercises in class if they were given the chance to decide for themselves, since the beginning of the academic year, they have been allowed to decide whether to work in pairs or individually when doing these kinds of exercises in class. The idea was to make them become more responsible for their learning process, while respecting their learning preferences.

Therefore, whenever working on grammar or vocabulary, the teacher has told the students that they could either do the exercises in pairs or in small groups, or do them individually, but, in this case, they have to compare their answers with their partners and, most importantly, justify their answers when they have completed the exercises. It has always been made clear to them that they are the ones who will decide the way they prefer to do these kinds of activities. They are by no means forced to carry them out in pairs, as opposed to other courses where they are strongly encouraged to work in pairs or in small groups.

However, when deemed more appropriate, the students have been told that working in pairs will probably be more beneficial for them, but this is only carried out in those cases where the exercises

deal with a specific aspect that students tend to find particularly difficult or complicated to grasp. Despite this, the students' choice to do the activity on their own has been respected if they freely decide to carry out the exercises individually rather than with their partners. In this way, it has been possible to discern whether any differences are to be perceived when they have been encouraged to work in pairs, as opposed to those occasions when they could choose freely.

3. Results

After implementing the classroom research throughout the year, it has been become evident that most of the students tend to work on these activities in the same way, i.e., either always in pairs or individually. If they opt for the latter, then they always compare their answers with their partners justifying them. Sometimes, before starting to do the exercises, some students ask their partner(s) whether they prefer to work in pairs or individually. If their partners prefer working on their own, the students have respected their choice, without trying to persuade them to do the exercise in pairs. However, if the students have opted for individual work, after finishing the exercises, they have immediately compared their answers with their partners without having to remind them that they are supposed to do so. It must be mentioned that they do this in the target language, in this case in English. If their answers are different, they justify them by referring to the reference section in their coursebook that had previously been seen, or by providing further examples that support their arguments. In some cases, their partners are convinced and change their answers, but when they continue having different opinions on a particular item, they do not modify their answers to see who is right when the exercises are corrected as a whole group. Sometimes, when they both agree on their answers, they think of further examples that support their answer or go through the reason(s) behind their answer in what seems to be a way to be reassured that they are both right.

It is worth mentioning that many learners in their 20s or early 30s have generally chosen to work individually rather than in pairs, whereas some older students have almost always opted for pair work. As mentioned above, as they normally sit next to the same person, which means working with the same partner, most students have tended to always work either in pairs or individually throughout the year.

4. Conclusion

Many teachers believe that working in pairs allows students to come to more sensible or better informed decisions, as they discuss the reasons why they consider one answer to be correct as opposed to the rest of alternatives. However, after introducing the change described in this classroom research in the lessons, one may not be so certain about it. While they are comparing their answers after doing the exercises individually in class, the students try to justify their answers with arguments. Then, their partners either agree with them or prove them wrong, while providing them with arguments or evidence that support their reasoning and explanations which refute their partners' arguments.

It has been really surprising to find out that many younger students opt for individual work, whereas some of their older classmates unexpectedly prefer pair work. One may have imagined just the opposite due to the schooling the students have received. One would expect younger students to be more familiar with teaching methodologies and approaches that centre on collaborative learning to achieve a common goal, as opposed to older students. The latter normally adopted a more passive role which was characteristic of traditional teaching contexts and methodologies, particularly when it came to foreign language learning. Therefore, it would be really useful to research into what students think of being able to choose the way they can carry out these kinds of exercises, and the reasons why they opt for individual work or pair work. Furthermore, it would be worth looking into whether this choice is just something accidental or whether it really reflects a particular preference to work in one way or another, i.e., different learning preferences; and also whether it is, therefore, more effective

for their learning process and why. As a matter of fact, it would be interesting to research into whether the students would do the same in the case of other subjects and languages.

Even though this is beyond the scope of this research, it would be interesting to delve into which way of doing these kinds of activities is most effective in terms of acquiring and retaining knowledge in the long term. As a matter of fact, it should be investigated whether by working individually in class as opposed to doing it in pairs, students' performance in English is better and whether they are more likely to speak in English than when they work in pairs in class from the very beginning. Besides, it would be useful to examine students' utterances and establish whether they are more elaborate and show deeper knowledge because they have previously reflected on the reasons for their specific answer, as they feel more confident when they have to justify their answers by providing insightful arguments that support them.

Finally, in this research some unexpected differences have been noticed between students as regards their age group. As it has been carried out with a small number of students, it would be necessary to repeat it with other groups to establish whether similar results are obtained. Apart from this, it would also be interesting to research into whether any differences are perceived between male and female students, i.e., whether any differences are to be expected as regards gender as well as age. This has not been feasible in this research study, as most of the students are females.

References

Abadikhah, S. & Harsini, B. (2014). Comparing the effects of collaborative and individual output tasks on the acquisition of English articles. *International Journal of English Language and Translation Studies, 2*(3), 23–34.

Achmad, D. & Yusuf, Y. Q. (2014). Observing pair-work task in an English-speaking class. *International Journal of Instruction, 7*(1), 151–164.

Allport, G. W. (1935). Attitudes. In C. Murchison (Ed.), *Handbook of social psychology* (pp. 798–844). Worcester, MA: Clark University Press.

Baleghizadeh, S. (2009). The effect of pair work on a word-building task. *ELT Journal, 64*(4), 405–413.

Baleghizadeh, S. (2010). The impact of peer interaction on an editing activity in EFL classes. *Journal of Language Teaching & Research, 1*(5), 721–727.

Baleghizadeh, S. & Farhesh, S. (2014). The impact of pair work on EFL learners' motivation. *MEXTESOL Journal, 38*(3), 1–11.

Cardenas, M. L. (2006). Orientaciones metodologicas para la investigacion-accion en el aula. *Lenguaje, 34*, 187–216.

Cochran-Smith, M. & Zeichner, K. M. (Eds.). (2005). *Studying teacher education: the report of the AERA panel on research and teacher education*. Mahwah, NJ and London, UK: Lawrence ErlbaumAssociates, Publishers.

Darling-Hammond, L. & Bransford, J. (Eds.). (2005). *Preparing teachers for a changing world: what teachers should learn and be able to do*. San Francisco, CA: John Wiley & Sons.

Donato, R. (1988). *Beyond group: a psycholinguistic rationale for collective activity in second-language learning* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Newark, NJ: University of Delaware.

Donato, R. (1994). Collective scaffolding in second language learning. In J. P. Lantolf & G. Appel (Eds.), *Vygotskian approaches to second language research* (pp. 33–56). Norwood, NJ: Ablex.

Donato, R. (2004). Aspects of collaboration in pedagogical discourse. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics, 24*, 284–302.

Eguchi, M. & Eguchi, K. (2006). The limited effect of PBL on EFL learners: a case study of English magazine projects. *Asian EFL Journal, 8*(3), 207–225.

Ehrman, M. E. (1996). *Understanding second language learning difficulties*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Ellis, R. (2003). *Task-based language learning and teaching*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Fernandez Dobao, A. (2012). Collaborative writing tasks in the L2 classroom: comparing group, pair, and individual work. *Journal of Second Language Writing, 21*(1), 40–58.

Forman, E. A. & McPhail, J. (1993). Vygotskian perspective on children's collaborative problem-solving activities. In E. A. Forman, N. Minick & C. A. Stone (Eds.), *Contexts for learning: sociocultural dynamics in children's development* (pp. 213–229). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Forman, E. A., Minick, N. & Stone, C. A. (1993). *Contexts for learning: sociocultural dynamics in children's development*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Gitsaki, C. (1998). Second language acquisition theories: overview and evaluation. *Journal of Communication and International Studies, 4*(2), 89–98.

Harmer, J. (2001). *The practice of English language teaching* (3rd ed.). Harlow, UK: Longman.

Hatami, S. (2012). Learning styles. *ELT Journal, 67*(4), 488–490.

Henter, R. (2014). Affective factors involved in learning a foreign language. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences, 127*, 373–378.

John-Steiner, V. & Mahn, H. (1996). Sociocultural approaches to learning and development: a Vygotskian framework. *Educational Psychologist, 31*(3–4), 191–206.

Kemmis, S. & Henry, J. (1989). *Reflective teaching in second language classroom*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Kemmis, S. & McTaggart, R. (1988). *The action research planner*. Geelong, Australia: Deakin University Press.

Kinsella, K. (1996). Designing group work that supports and enhances diverse classroom work styles. *TESOL Journal, 6*(1), 24–30.

Krashen, S. D. (1981). *Second language acquisition and second language learning*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Lightbown, P. M. & Spada, N. (1999). *How languages are learned*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Long, M. H. (1983). Native speaker/non-native speaker conversation and the negotiation of comprehensible input. *Applied Linguistics, 4*(2), 126–141.

Long, M. H. (1996). The role of the linguistic environment in second language acquisition. *Handbook of second language acquisition*. In W. C. Ritchie & T. K. Bhatia (Eds.), *Handbook of language acquisition: second language acquisition* (vol. 2, pp. 413–468). New York, NY: Academic Press.

Long, M. H. & Porter, P. A. (1985). Group work, interlanguage talk, and second language acquisition. *TESOL Quarterly, 19*(2), 207–228.

Madrid, D. & Bueno, A. (2005). Classroom research. In D. Madrid, N. McLaren & A. Bueno (Eds.), *TEFL in secondary education* (pp. 641–677). Granada, Spain: Editorial Universidad de Granada.

McDonough, K. (2004). Learner-learner interaction during pair and small group activities in a Thai EFL context. *System, 32*(2), 207–224.

Mishra, S. & Oliver, R. (1998). Secondary school ESL learners' perceptions of pair work in Australian classrooms. *TESOL in Context, 8*(2), 19–23.

Moll, L. (2000). Inspired by Vygotsky: ethnographic experiments in education. In C. Lee & P. Smagorinsky (Eds.), *Vygotskian perspectives on literacy research: constructing meaning through collaborative inquiry* (pp. 256–268). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Moon, J. (2000). *Children learning English*. Oxford, UK: Macmillan Heinemann English Language Teaching.

Nassaji, H. & Tian, J. (2010). Collaborative and individual output tasks and their effects on learning English phrasal verbs. *Language Teaching Research, 14*(4), 397–419.

Nunan, D. (1991a). Second language acquisition research in the language classroom. In E. Sadtono (Ed.), *Language acquisition and the second/foreign language classroom* (pp. 1–16). Singapore: SEAMO Regional English Language Centre.

Nunan, D. (1991b). Methods in second language classroom-oriented research: a critical review. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition, 13*, 249–274.

Nunan, D. (2003). *Practical English language teaching.* New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.

Ohta, A. S. (2001). *Second language acquisition processes in the classroom: learning Japanese*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Oroujlou, N. & Vahedi, M. (2011). Motivation, attitude, and language learning. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences, 29*, 994–1000.

Phipps, W. (1999). *Pair work: interaction in the modern languages classroom.* London, UK: Centre for Information on Language Teaching and Research.

Reid, J. M. (1995). *Learning styles in the ESL/EFL classroom*. Boston, MA: Heinle & Heinle.

Richards, J. C. & Schmidt, R. (2002). *Longman dictionary of applied linguistics and language teaching*. Harlow, UK: Longman.

Sternberg, R. J. (1994). Allowing for thinking styles. *Educational Leadership, 52*(3), 36–40.

Storch, N. (1999). Are two heads better than one? Pair work and grammatical accuracy. *System, 27*(3), 363–374.

Storch, N. (2001). How collaborative is pair work? ESL tertiary students composing in pairs. *Language Teaching Research, 5*(1), 29–53.

Storch, N. (2005). Collaborative writing: product, process, and students' reflections. *Journal of Second Language Writing, 14*(3), 153–173.

Storch, N. (2007). Investigating the merits of pair work on a text editing task in ESL classes. *Language Teaching Research, 11*(2), 143–159.

Storch, N. & Wigglesworth, G. (2007). Writing tasks: the effects of collaboration. In M. P. Garcia-Mayo (Ed.), *Investigating tasks in formal language settings* (pp. 157–177). London, UK: Multilingual Matters.

Swain, M. (2000). The output hypothesis and beyond: mediating acquisition through collaborative dialogue. In J. P. Lantolf (Ed.), *Sociocultural theory and second language learning* (pp.97-114)*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Swain, M. & Lapkin, S. (1998). Interaction and second language learning: two adolescent French immersion students working together. *The Modern Language Journal, 82*(3), 320–337.

Tsui, A. B. M. (1995). *Introducing classroom interaction.* London, UK: Penguin.

Wertsch, J. V. (1985a). Introduction. In J. V. Wertsch (Ed.), *Culture, communication and cognition* (pp. 1–20)*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Wertsch, J. V. (1985b). *Vygotsky and the social formation of the mind.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Wood, D., Bruner, J. S. & Ross, G. (1976). The role of tutoring in problem solving. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry, 17*(2), 89–100.

Zabalza, M. A. & Beraza, M. A. (2004). *Diarios de Clase: un instrumento de investigación y desarrollo profesional.* Madrid, Spain: Narcea.

Zhou, L. (2010). *Implementing pair and small group work in EFL a Chinese first year class* (Unpublished Terminal Project). Eugene, OR: University of Oregon.

Zohairy, S. (2014). Effective pair work strategies to enhance saudi pre-intermediate college students' language production in speaking activities. *European Scientific Journal, 10*(2), 50–63.

Appendix

Group: Date:

Pairs/groups Student's name	Activity	Work in pairs	Work individually