

Learning in pairs in Language Arts in High School¹

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Abstract

This paper explores the effectiveness of learning in pairs in Language Arts on High school students' achievement and engagement. A research of the literature found that working in pairs enhances the reading, writing and oral skills of the students, in parallel with the cultivation of social skills. The researcher found that the mean score and the engagement of students were increased after learning in pairs. In conclusion a professional development workshop will be constructed and achievement data will be compared².

Keywords: Language, Learning in Pairs.

1. Learning in pairs in Language Arts

In Language Arts there are some educational conditions that require improvement. The students are under motivated and perform low in a teacher-centered classroom. This study looks at the relationship of student-centered learning methods and adolescent performance in language.

The question being explored is how learning in pairs in language improves the academic performance and engagement of students in High School.

2. Literature review

In a teacher-centered school, as many of them still function in several countries around the world with less experience in modern didactic methods, the challenges with under-motivated and low-achiever adolescent students, particularly in "traditional" disciplines such as Language Arts, are even bigger for educators. That's why it is important to provide to the educators, who are not familiar with student-centered practices, easy to follow, cooperative learning methods that will attract the students' attention and contribute to better school performance.

One of the most efficient cooperative learning techniques, especially in "traditional" high schools, is learning in pairs. According to Lange, Costley, and Han (2016: 262) "advantages of Think-Pair-Share include increasing motivation and engagement of students through personal interaction, as well as the participation of students who are generally reluctant to do so". In the same study, it is proven that the students prefer working in pairs, with scaffolded instructions, over other cooperative learning methods, such as Jigsaw or Numbered Heads Together. So, there is a strong preference among adolescents to work in pairs rather than in larger groups.

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A question that arises about learning in pairs is what should be the criteria for pairing the students. There is a controversy in research about the criteria. Some scholars recommend random pairing after simple playful activities (e.g. same color shirt, alphabetical order) (Krantz & Smith, 2020: 63) in order to ensure that everybody has the chance to cooperate with everyone in the class during the school year. Others argue that “self-selected groups exhibited higher degrees of perceived commitment, trust, and relational satisfaction” (Mozaffari, 2016: 499) but the students were less task-oriented than the students of teacher-assigned grouping (Mozaffari, 2016: 507). In this respect, teacher-assigned grouping is recommended based on achievement criteria, because when students are paired with more proficient interlocutors, they produce texts of higher quality and complexity (Mozaffari, 2016: 499).

For successful peer-learning, building relationships and establishing norms among students are of great importance. According to Krantz and Smith (2020: 46) the skills that the students need are active listening, social skills (how to disagree politely, how to be a good team member, empathy) and oral skills (how to engage in productive academic conversations). These skills can be cultivated especially in the beginning of the school year, but they can be practiced throughout the year. There are several sentence stems (see [Appendix A](#)) that can be used for general discussions in class meetings or between peers to help students practice communication skills.

Regarding the discipline of Language Arts, peer-learning among high school students has shown an increase in their writing, reading and oral performance. Recent research has proven that the students produced better quality written texts when they cooperated in pairs and got enthusiastic about this process of writing and revising texts with their peers (Sari, Raja, & Suparman, 2018: 9-10). In the same study it is stated that “70% of students agreed that the implementation of Think-Pair-Share technique in their learning process is interesting. Most of them looked enthusiastic in doing this technique”. Furthermore, Sari & Susiani (2021: 73) conducted a survey that demonstrated a significant increase in students’ writing achievement through Think-Pair-Share technique. According to this survey “the mean of students’ narrative writing achievement is 49.19 but in The Post Test, the mean of students’ narrative writing achievement is 77.05”. So, there is no doubt that peer learning is highly effective for students’ writing skills.

As far as reading skills are concerned, working in pairs improves the adolescents’ reading comprehension, attitude toward language learning, and achievement. According to recent research (Yulianingsih, 2017: 104-106) reading comprehension of the students was increased by 50% through Think-Pair-Share method and their attitude toward the language lesson was significantly improved. Also, Rahmah & Ratmanida (2019: 39) suggest a new reading strategy for Senior High School students, “the Power of Two”, a strategy that makes students more active thinkers and helps them comprehend texts more easily. In general, the reading process for adolescents who encounter difficulties in reading more complicated texts becomes smoother with an immediate effect on their motivation.

Regarding oral skills, research by Raba (2017: 20) supports that students become more fluent and self-confident after implementing the “Think-Pair-Share” method. The students’ motivation was so strengthened that even the shier students became sociable, less stressed while working in pairs and showed progress in their speaking skills. Furthermore, Sharma & Priyamvada (2018: 98) stress on the fact that “this strategy provides an opportunity for all students to share their thinking with at least one other student which, in turn, increases their sense of involvement in the classroom” along with their communication skills.



In addition, according to Lee, Parsons et al. (2016: 113) in a study of student pairs working on a digital educational game “the cooperative groups where the experimental condition encouraged cooperative reciprocity performed better than the cooperative groups operating without this condition”. It seems that the students in pairs cultivated higher cognitive abilities and broader perspectives toward different topics, when they exchanged ideas and knowledge through role-play (Lee et al., 2016: 100).

3. Discussion

The high schools in many countries of the world, especially in Greece, have been applying for decades teacher-centered learning methods, especially in “traditional” disciplines such as Language Arts. In a teacher-centered school it is common to have under-motivated adolescents, who show little cooperation and have low writing, reading and oral skills. Moreover, the teachers in Greece (or in countries with similar educational systems) have either little or no experience in cooperative learning methods, a condition that makes them reluctant to move from “old-fashioned” lecture to cooperative learning methods. So how would the achievement and motivation of students change in Language Arts, if the teachers used an easily applicable cooperative learning method, working in pairs? Learning in pairs can be easily applied, even by less experienced teachers in student-centered methods, and it is being implemented when a student pairs up with a peer to conduct learning activities.

The research overwhelmingly found that High school students prefer to work in pairs with their peers over other cooperative learning methods. They feel safe as they don’t have to be exposed to the whole class and at the same time they are encouraged to contribute to the activity. This “no-risk” for their self-esteem zone combined with mutual exchange of ideas ensures equality and participation for all members. Through this equal interaction, where there is no place for dominant students, students’ motivation in Language Arts increases (Sari, Raja, & Suparman, 2018: 4). Consequently, this stronger motivation leads to better school performance regarding language skills (reading, writing, oral).

Adolescents encounter bigger difficulties with reading demanding texts, as they live in a world, where the image predominates. This comprehension process can be eased by learning in pairs. The researcher found that obscure parts of texts, new vocabulary and basic characteristics of different types of texts may be clarified in an enjoyable and effective (Yulianingsih, 2017: 106) way for the students. Adolescents’ literacy is significantly improved through this reciprocal comprehension process. Also, the writing competence is improved through this exchange in pairs. Usually writing is an individual task but in this case individual work can be combined with feedback from your partner, which leads to a revised text. In terms of content, organization, vocabulary and grammar the quality of texts after working in pairs was higher and the involvement of students was significantly increased (Sari, Raja, & Suparman, 2018: 10). Needless to say, that working in pairs cultivates the oral skills the most as the students have to express their ideas orally, make comments on their partner’s responses and recommend changes, additions, clarifications. Their willingness to help their classmates by providing beneficial ideas or to just express their opinion is astonishing and definitely boosts their motivation to participate in the learning activities.

The researcher found that preparing students before working in pairs is the requirement for a successful cooperative learning activity. Skill builders’ activities about active listening, social interaction (cooperation, team player, support, respect) and oral communication (how to engage in productive academic conversations, polite disagreement) must be implemented before a cooperative activity (Krantz & Smith, 2020: 46). So, the cooperation in pairs will be



smooth and highly productive. Not to mention that the life skills are improved through these activities and students' attitude toward school as well.

Next to the skills, the educator must take into consideration the criteria according to which the pairs will be assigned and if the pairs will be assigned by the teacher or the students. For teachers and students with less experience in cooperative learning the teacher-assigned groups ensure a more controlled learning environment and reduce the risk that the activities might be seen by the students as a play or a social chat (Mozaffari, 2016: 499). Of course, as teachers and students become more familiar with this way of learning, the students may pair up randomly or according to their social preferences. In that way the controversy in the research about teacher-assigned and student-assigned groups can be resolved. Varying the ways of pairing, the teacher can keep the students' interest high and the adolescents experience learning with as many classmates as possible during the school year.

The researcher during his field experience in a high school in the USA observed that the students, who worked in pairs in English language lessons, were more interested and engaged in the activities. They cooperated in pairs to learn new vocabulary, clarify difficult statements in texts, wrote short texts, revised the content before having a test. Furthermore, the students worked in pairs to practice social skills, such as cooperation, mutual support, and communication. The observer saw pairs of adolescents in different classrooms exchange ideas orally, revise their papers, enrich their texts, planning together a plan of action and carrying it out together. The reflective remarks of the students after working in pairs were impressive and some examples are: "I didn't know that my partner was so smart!", "I understood better the difficult parts of the text, when I cooperated with my classmate", "I liked this work in pairs better than working individually", "The work was easier because it was divided". The researcher during the four months observation in the High school discussed with the teachers, who strongly preferred the pair working over the larger groups. According to the teachers, everyday practice confirms that the small groups of two -even formed randomly by the students³- are more effective in learning and contribute to the social cohesion of the classroom. All students are engaged and there are no "free-riders" during the learning activities. Both students and teachers in that particular high school were expressly fond of working in pairs.

4. Conclusion

Based on the research and the gathered information, working in pairs was found to be an effective teaching strategy to engage the students and improve their performance in Language Arts. In order to improve the educational condition of strongly teacher-centered learning in Greece, the researcher will provide a professional development workshop for teachers of Greek language. This 4-hour workshop (see [Appendix B](#)) will include activities in pairs on how to enhance firstly the cooperative skills and then their application in the oral, reading, and writing skills (see [Appendix C](#)). The teachers will experience on their own the value and effectiveness of working in pairs. Their attitude toward this teaching practice will be assessed through a questionnaire right after the workshop. The effectiveness of learning in pairs in the classroom will be measured through pre- and post-tests, where the students' performance in writing and reading will be evaluated prior to and after the delivery of the cooperative learning workshop. In addition, the students' engagement and interest in Greek

³ In an accounting class the teacher paired the students according to their academic achievement to avoid dominant students and huge performance gaps in the pairs. So, she paired high-high, low-medium, medium-high, low-low.



language lessons will be assessed through a Student Interest Survey before and after the learning activities in pairs.

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