Pair activities in beginning adult ESL classes

Kathryn A. Harris
Department of Applied Linguistics
Portland State University
harriska@pdx.edu
The National Labsite for Adult ESOL at Portland State University
Steve Reder, Principal Investigator

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Overview

- The Lab School research context
- The role of pair interaction in second language acquisition
- Three of the types of pair activities in the Lab School beginning (SPL 0-2) classes
- The kinds of student language in the pair activities
- Implications for practice
Description of the Lab School

- Classes are a regular part of Portland Community College (PCC) and their Adult ESOL program

- Two dedicated classrooms appropriate to adult language classes
  - Each classroom has six cameras and five microphones

- Adjoining observation/technology room

- Adjacent research/practitioner office space
Layout of classrooms and observation/recording space

Classroom

Control room

Camera operations

Classroom
The Lab School

- **Paired classes**
  - random assignment of students for an experiment

- **Digital recording of classrooms**
  - detailed coding and analysis

- **Over 3000 hours of classroom interaction**
  - levels A, B, C, D (SPL 0-7)
Students' first languages

Lab School Language Groups

- Spanish
- Chinese
- Other
- Vietnamese
- Russian
- Korean
- Farsi
- Arabic
Two strands of research

- **Dyadic interaction**
  - Relationships between language interaction/use and pedagogical activity
  - Contexts for student language production
    - Class level
    - Student first language groups
    - Gender

- **Longitudinal, microgenetic**
  - Language development over time
  - Focus on process of change in individuals
Why study interaction between students?

- Language learning is more than learning about language—it is learning how to use language

- Lead to an examination of the way that languages are learned and used outside of instruction
  - Child language acquisition
  - Adult second language acquisition outside of instruction
Why study interaction, continued

- These interactions involve an increase in conversational modifications
  - Clarification requests
  - Confirmation checks
  - Comprehension checks (rare in Level A)
  - Reformulations (rare in Level A)
Experimental studies have connected interaction with learning

- Learners have greater comprehension when allowed to interact (Gass & Varonis, 1994)
- Learners acquire more advanced question forms when they engage in interaction (Mackey, 1999)
- New vocabulary items whose meanings were negotiated are learned and retained better in computer-mediated interaction (Smith, 2004)
Pair work is an important part of ESL classes

Pair work provides:
- practice of newly learned forms
- opportunity for speaking
- Reduction in the predominance of teacher talk

Pair work also provides an opportunity for interaction in which:
- students negotiate meaning,
- making language input comprehensible,
- while drawing attention to forms needing changes
Why pair work can be a good thing

Use of these conversational modifications may result in:

- Identification of an area of communicative difficulty
- Mutual assistance toward understanding
- A push toward a new word, form or pronunciation
- The new form is learned OR is now on the learner’s ‘radar screen’ (i.e. is noticed in other contexts) and is likely to be learned soon
What kinds of activities promote interaction?

- Information exchange activities have long been used to facilitate interaction
  - In intermediate/advanced ESL/EFL contexts
  - In foreign language learning contexts

- Unstructured conversation offers interactional benefits
  - But beginning learners do not have the language ability
Three types of activities at the Lab School

- Highly scripted vocabulary practice
- Teacher-provided questions/student answers
- Conversation Matrix
I. A Teacher-provided question: *When do you _____?*

- *When do you get up?*
- *When do you eat lunch?*
- *When do you watch TV?*
- *When do you go to sleep?*

• Students ask each other about their daily routine

• The questions are written on the board

• Students may use a paper clock to illustrate the time that they do the activities
The students in the video clip

- **Digna**
  - Native language is Spanish
  - 14 years of education in first language
  - 29 years old

- **Vladilen**
  - Native language is Russian
  - 5 years of education in first language
  - 72 years old
ClassAction Toolbox clip

Teacher-provided question activity:
Digna and Vladilen
Confirmation check

0:45:09 <Vladilen>: no? just ((positions the clock))

0:45:14 <Digna>: ((cough)) lunch lunch?→confirmation request

0:45:16 <Vladilen>: ((nods)) lunch eh (+) lunch!
These examples illustrate the way in which the negotiation of meaning in pair interaction:

- Provides both students with information about the comprehensibility of their language
- Helps both to move closer to the target
- Helps them have more opportunities for trying out new forms
Findings from Lab School level A (beginning) classrooms:

- Many different kinds of pair activities allow interaction
  - Teacher-provided question activities
    - E.g. Digna and Vladilen
  - Highly scripted activities
    - E.g. Juan and Min
  - Conversation matrix activities
    - E.g. Madra and Romero; Madra and Jorge
Clarification request

- 0:44:38 <Digna>: when do you *cup lunch?

- 0:44:44 <Vladilen>: *cup? → clarification request

- 0:44:45 <Digna>: hap_have lunch have have lunch lunch

II. A highly scripted activity: 
*Show me (adjectives of emotion)*

- Occurred during the 3rd class meeting (week 2)
- Reviewed the question *How are you?* As well as appropriate responses
- After the teacher modeling, the students were instructed to ask each other
- They were provided an oral script *Show me ___*
- The students are to answer by pointing, saying the word, or saying the number
Feelings

1. angry
2. happy
3. sad
4. nervous
5. bored
6. scared
7. excited
Things to notice

- The students negotiate who should go first
- In the beginning, the activity does not have much interaction
  - Starts with the expected: initiation, response and some kind of evaluation
- At 1:28:15 Juan struggles with the pronunciation of *excited*
Things to notice, continued

- The pair activity continues ...
- Trying to figure out some words, there is a side interaction between some other students ...
- Juan asks Min to identify sad, nervous and then angry
- Min uses a clarification request to illustrate that she isn’t sure of the word
Min and Juan negotiate the meaning of *angry*

They switch roles

Min asks Juan several words and then she asks him about *excited*

At 1:32:52 Juan is able to easily say *excited*
ClassAction Toolbox clip

Highly scripted activities:

Juan and Min
III. Conversation Matrix

- It is the second day of class
- The student wearing the microphone (Madra) is new to the class
- The students have made their own conversation matrix in preparation for this activity
- The students are supposed to ask other students two questions and fill in their matrix
Conversation Matrix

Items on the matrix

1. Name
2. When were you born?
3. What was your first day in the USA?
ClassAction Toolbox clip

Conversation Matrix:
Madra and Romero; Madra and Juan
Implications for practice

- Pair work is possible, even in beginning level classes
- Interaction that leaves room for negotiation of pronunciation, meaning and form can happen in many kinds of activities
- Students in our data often negotiate for a long time toward success
- Surprise finding—The presence of the teacher in a pair changes the interaction (Garland, 2002)
- Another surprise finding--L1 use is usually for meaning or form
References


