

## **Maximizing the Use of Partner-Pairs in the World Language Classroom**

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### **Introduction**

For two decades world language teachers have been seeking effective ways to manage their classrooms in order to promote growth in their students' communicative abilities. One instructional management tool is the use of partner-pairs. When used effectively, partner-pairs can be a highly successful teaching strategy. Below are five essential features necessary for the effective use of partner-pairs, combined with a discussion about some common questions and pitfalls that, if not overcome, can undo all of the intended benefits of this strategy.

### **Getting Started**

Smooth transitions between classroom activities are key to making the most effective use of the instructional time at our disposal. Therefore, how we get students into and out of partner activities must be considered. I have observed classrooms where the teacher asks students to “find a partner” for the next activity. Students might then move about the classroom, walking sometimes to the furthest point from their current seats and asking several different classmates to work with them. After negotiating what seems to be a multinational peace treaty, they are reseated. Often the shy or unknown student with whom no one wants to work is left alone, partnerless. Further time and effort is expended just getting students into place.

Instead, I recommend that teachers devise a method for having assigned partners for a given period of time. Partners should be seated in close proximity for easy access and quick transitions into and out of paired activities, because there could (and should) be multiple activity changes during any given class period. For example, I keep a paper copy of my classroom configuration on which each of the student seats is numbered. I make multiple copies of the blank, numbered chart to use with each class and to make monthly changes to students' seat assignments. On the first of each month, students draw from an envelope a numbered card that corresponds to the numbered seats on my grid. Students then sit for a month in those seats. Of course, I always reserve the right to make seat changes if the luck of the draw results in a cluster of students who distract

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each other. And, with visually or hearing impaired students who may need to sit closer to the board or to the teacher, I place those students as needed without drawing public attention to their challenges. Private conversations with such students prior to the monthly seating lottery are helpful. I simply assign special-needs students to a seat on the grid and remove the numbered card corresponding to the occupied seat(s) from the envelope. This particular seating assignment method takes the onus off the teacher, who is not assigning seats. Rather, seats are assigned by the luck of the draw. By moving seats and assigning new partners monthly, students get to know one another better. Students may complain about getting a seat in the front of the class or having to work with a partner they do not care for, but knowing that they must endure it for only one month gives them hope. And in my experience, the teacher's positive and encouraging attitude about this will, in the long run, create a classroom atmosphere of mutual respect and cooperation.

Once students have their assigned seats, carefully and quickly creating the pairings is one of the most important decisions the teacher can make to insure the successful use of partner-pairs. Pairings can be created with two students seated next to each other, one sitting behind the other and even seated diagonally from each other. The key is to assign two students of dissimilar abilities. If the teacher pairs up the two strongest students in the class, they will likely finish all of the paired activities far sooner than the rest. Pairing two very weak students can result in ability challenges that can prevent pairs from accomplishing enough work to be effective. Pairing the strongest student in the class with the weakest is also likely to cause too much frustration for the stronger student or allow the weaker student to rely on the stronger partner to accomplish the task. So the trick is to pair students with classmates of somewhat different abilities, but to avoid weak-weak, stellar-stellar, and weak-stellar pairings as much as possible. I also recommend against pairing two heritage learners together in a combined classroom of heritage and standard students.

The importance of the dissimilar ability pairings is tied to the concept of "scaffolding." Scaffolding occurs when two or more students with dissimilar abilities work together to construct their knowledge. The stronger student of the pair benefits from explaining concepts to the weaker partner. These benefits include developing the ability to organize thoughts in a logical and articulate manner and reinforcing long-term concept retention. The weaker student benefits from observing how other students make sense of their learning and from hearing an explanation of a difficult concept that may be helpfully different from the teacher's explanation. Of course, the stronger student's responsibility is not the primary teaching of new material. That responsibility belongs to the teacher. However, this sort of cooperative assistance in the negotiating of sense-

making can greatly enhance students' understanding and retention. And we must never underestimate the weaker learners. They often offer greater creativity and perhaps even a learning strategy or sense-making tip to the stronger student. Weaker students often work harder to learn and may have developed a beneficial skill that stronger students have never had to consider. There is much to be gained from sharing.

The description above is intended as an example of how to organize the classroom for effective learning. Teachers can devise a similar or different system. The important elements are: (1) close proximity of partners for quick and smooth transitions and (2) carefully paired sets of partners with the goal of effective scaffolding. Once students are paired up, teachers can then consider the five elements described below for successfully orchestrating the partner activity.

### The Steps for Effective Partner-Pair Activities

1. Give a clear explanation of the task that students will accomplish. Most of the time, if a partner task fails to hit the intended target, it is because of a misunderstanding about what students are supposed to accomplish during the given time. Be clear about the required task, the steps involved, and possible pitfalls.
2. Model a sample for the whole class. Explanations alone are not enough. Sometimes students think they understand what the teacher is asking but falter when they attempt to do the assignment. By modeling a sample or getting a volunteer<sup>6</sup> to model a sample, teachers not only tell what they expect but show it as well.
3. Check for comprehension. As you begin to turn the activity over to the partners, keep the reins just a moment longer, directing students in pairs to complete the first item or step. Ask for a sample answer from a volunteer to check one last time that everyone is clear about what to do. Ask if you have explained the activity clearly enough<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> Just a word about “volunteerism.” Rarely do I call on students who have not raised their hands. When we are doing a whole-class activity, I tell students that I expect to hear from everyone once, and I recommend that they volunteer when they are comfortable to do so. Generally, a stronger student will volunteer early on, providing a model for weaker students who may still be trying to understand the task. This is a tremendous way to avoid the deadly silence that can occur when the teacher calls on students at will without regard for volunteers. Calling on a student who is confused or unsure only serves to slow the pace of the classroom while the teacher patiently waits for the desired answer and also causes great public humiliation for the student who cannot answer. Plus, there are other, better ways to get students to pay attention in class without calling on them to answer. Of course, when an activity is nearing closure and a few students have still not volunteered, I remind the class that I need to hear from everyone and that some students still need their turn. At this point, I encourage those students who have not yet volunteered to do so. I beg them to not make me call on them. This sets up a true environment of kind support for students rather than setting up the teacher as the bad guy who is perceived by students as lying in wait, hoping to catch a student off guard. Volunteerism eliminates the deathly pauses and silence guaranteed to bore the class while they wait for someone to produce an impossible answer. When eager, enthusiastic students try to dominate the volunteerism, I remind them that we must share the wealth, and I make an extra effort to call on a wide variety of students. If a teacher is making frequent, effective use of paired activities, they can be certain that all students are getting sufficient talk time during the foreign language class in an atmosphere that is emotionally safe and comfortable—free from public humiliation.

<sup>7</sup> By asking, “Is this clear?” or “Did I explain that clearly enough?” any blame for noncomprehension resides with the teacher. By asking students, “Do you understand?” or “Are there questions?” the teacher is asking students to publicly admit ignorance—again, potentially uncomfortable for some students.

4. Engage in the activity (redirecting as necessary). The teacher's role during this time is to circulate around the room, listen to students' interactions, answer questions from individual pairs, redirect off-task behavior, and make private error corrections as necessary. If the teacher notices that most students are generally confused or making the same common errors, it is appropriate to briefly interrupt the whole class, reexplain the problematic aspect of the activity, and allow the pairs to return to their task. Following are several common concerns about this stage of the process:
- a. *What if students make errors that go uncorrected?* Some studies have shown that error correction is only minimally effective in students' second language acquisition. What is more effective is the opportunity to produce language, because in this production stage students notice the gaps in their own learning. While working in pairs, encourage partners to politely and respectfully correct each other if an error is noticed. Students will generally make note of their errors, and in the partner setting, they will take the opportunity to recast the phrase correctly. As teachers, we will correct their errors on plenty of other occasions, and if our genuine goal is communication, then we need to allow students to negotiate their communication and worry primarily about errors that impede it, especially in beginning and intermediate courses.
  - b. *How do I get all students to stay on task during partner-pair work?* Generally, if the activity is engaging and short enough in duration to hold students' attention, students will remain on task. Many world language teachers make class participation part of students' grades; pair work can be considered an integral part of class participation. On-task behavior during partner activities should be clearly identified to students and parents as a vital and necessary part of their second language learning. Most students recognize that the alternative to being actively engaged through partner activities is sitting quietly, listening to the teacher for extended periods of time, so the opportunity to interact in an active and positive way appeals to even the most recalcitrant student. Teachers should use their own physical proximity, private gentle reminders, and positive encouragement to students who stray off-task.
  - c. *How do I keep my classroom from breaking down (i.e., everyone getting off task) during an activity?* Usually, the best rule of thumb is to end an activity as soon as ONE pair of students has finished it. From the onset, ask students to let you know as soon as they have finished. While this may seem odd to both students and the teacher, becoming accustomed to this practice is essential. First,

classroom minutes are precious. If teachers wait until every pair finishes every activity, the majority of students will frequently be sitting idle, waiting for the rest to finish. This is when off-task behavior begins to erode away the positive classroom atmosphere that the teacher has worked hard to create. Some students will be frustrated by not being able to finish. But the goal of these activities is generally communication, and by keeping each activity moving along during the class period, teachers will be pleasantly surprised at how many more activities they can plan and accomplish during a period. In this way, all students are actively engaged the majority of the time, and learning is enhanced. Concepts are frequently recycled throughout the course of a well-planned unit of instruction over a period of several days. If one or two pairs of students are unable to finish a particular activity on a particular day, they will have another opportunity to revisit the same concept on subsequent days.

There will be times when the teacher needs all pairs to complete an entire activity. For example, partners may be writing and rehearsing a dialogue for class presentation, or one partner may be describing a picture for the other partner to draw. In these instances, the teacher must be prepared with a filler or sponge activity for those students who finish before their peers. One of the easiest activities is to ask one partner to quiz the other on the current chapter's vocabulary list or to go back and quiz each other over vocabulary from earlier in the academic year. The teacher might alternatively have additional tasks for these students to complete. If the partners are working on a sentence-completion/comprehension exercise, those who finish first can write the correct answers on the board or on a transparency. Keeping all students actively engaged in second language acquisition activities will enhance learning and permit the teacher to spend more time helping on-task students with questions rather than redirecting the behaviors of off-task students.

5. Check for accountability. Typically, the teacher will stop the activity as soon as one pair has finished the assigned task. Before moving along to the next planned activity, teachers should choose one to three items from the exercises that the students completed in pairs and ask for a pair of volunteers to demonstrate the correct answers, sample appropriate responses, and so on. Teachers can pick items that were especially tricky or items later in the activity that perhaps not everyone had time to answer. This allows some of those slower pairs to see how the final items would have been answered. Not only does this accountability check allow all students to double-check their comprehension, it also provides a safe opportunity for weaker students to volunteer to model answers that they were able to rehearse during the activity.

Teachers should not review each and every item covered. This becomes a tedious repetition of the entire exercise, and students will not likely be attentive. Uncorrected errors may have occurred, but keep the overarching goal of communication and active learning foremost. Students, given time and lots of practice, will overcome many of their own errors, with the help of their partner and by noticing their classmates' speech. If students were engaged with a partner in some sort of writing activity that needs to be checked for such things as spelling and usage, a quick LCD or overhead projection of the correct answers on a screen can culminate the activity quickly and effectively. Remember to allow a moment to answer students' questions about anything that is unclear.

### **Additional Considerations**

*What if my classroom has an odd number of students? How do I manage the student who has no partner?* Ask one of your middle-ability, cooperative students to be the “floater” for the month when the class has an odd number of students. This student changes seats for an entire period to fill in for an absent peer. The floater should be assigned to a group of three for days when all students are present. As soon as the teacher has given directions to the entire class at the onset of a paired activity, the floater should approach the group of three with any additional necessary instructions for the successful completion of the task at hand. In classes that generally have an even number of students, there can certainly be lone students created by a classmate's absence. The teacher can request a neighboring pair of students to “adopt” the extra student for the duration of the class period.

*What sorts of activities are the most appropriate for partner-pair activities?* The answer is that anything is appropriate, keeping variety in mind. If all students ever do in partners is “Complete out loud activities A and B on p. 134,” they will become quite bored and unenthusiastic about working with a partner. However, if their partner tasks are focused, clear, and short in duration, they will usually enjoy class time more and remain engaged in the tasks presented. Below is a sample list of activities that partners can perform. However, this list is by no means finite.

- Complete one or two brief textbook exercises aloud.
- Complete a fill-in workbook exercise.
- Read a passage aloud.
- Write true/false sentences, questions, or summaries about a reading.
- Quiz each other.
- Describe and draw.

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- Work as a team to race against other pairs to complete a crossword puzzle or other activity. Be sure to recognize the first three or four sets of winners and ask them to provide correct answers to the rest of the class.
- Create dialogues, PowerPoint presentations, radio or TV broadcasts, review activities for the whole class to enjoy, a review game, etc.
- Complete a practice quiz or test.

### Summary

Partner activities can provide an active and safe atmosphere for second language learning and a great deal of talk time for all students. By giving attention to management issues related to the activity, such as quick transitions and on-task behavior, teachers can improve their use of class time and students' long-term skill retention. Creativity and variety will help to hold all learners' attention and create a classroom where students are eager to learn.