

## Exploring pair work as a creative activity for English Language learners in terms of engagement and enjoyment

BY

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### Abstract

Several authors have noted that findings from the discipline of neuroscience may inform educators about the process of learning. In particular, they point to the benefit of creative stimulation such as the personalisation of materials and the utilisation of games in pedagogic practice. This paper describes a project focusing specifically on the use of pair work – an activity that can incorporate elements of both of these benefits. Forty-three students studying English as a Foreign Language (intermediate level) were given three pair-work activities. These involved: exchanging factual information, a role-playing scenario and discussing an issue. Unlike much published literature on the subject, the study concentrated on their engagement and enjoyment, and their evaluations of the different elements involved. A questionnaire and in-depth interviews were used to gather data. To keep the former brief, the focus was kept to the specific activities outlined above. The interviews were more wide-ranging, exploring general views and experiences of pair-work. Results overall suggested that role-play was the most popular, being ‘easy’ and did not involve knowing ‘facts’. The ‘Factual exchange’ activity was the least popular, as it required the burden of memory, and was also considered the least interesting. ‘Working with a partner’ and ‘listening to my partner’ scored highly for each task. Thus, the interactive nature of the activity appeared to count for more than the pedagogical content. Interviews revealed that although pair work was generally well-regarded, negative aspects were expressed. These included asymmetric input in terms of linguistic ability mismatch, level of interest, time and differing *modus operandi*. Overall, the evidence suggests that teaching pair work, one of several methods supported by neuroscientific research, can be very appealing for students – particularly when allowing them to role-play or give opinions rather than exchanging facts, and when careful consideration is given to matching people.

**Key words:** Neuroscience, pair-work, attitudes, interactivity, role-play,

## INTRODUCTION

The process of learning is, self-evidently, a cognitive activity. It is therefore not surprising that, as findings from neuroscience research are particularly relevant in education. Howard-Jones (2014), notes, that neuroscientists emphasise how their work could improve educational practices and outcomes, and educationalists are ‘keen to learn what neuroscience has to offer’ (p3). Tham et al

(2019) explored in-depth teachers’ attitudes to neuroscience research. Simplified written article abstracts presented to teachers were ‘too challenging [for them] to comprehend’, although focus group discussions teachers were, indeed, interested in the applications of neuroscience research in classroom pedagogy.

A major finding of neuroscience that has direct relevance to education relates to the so-called 'default mode network' (DMN) of the brain (Raichle, et al, 2001). This is the area where, simply put, thinking oneself and others ('social cognition') occurs (Davey, Pujol, & Harrison, 2016). This has been found to be more activated in social situations (Li, Mai, and Liu, 2014; Yeshurun, Nguyen, and Hasson, 2021), which, in turn, suggests that learning can be improved by making the content and process of education more social. (Davey, Pujol, & Harrison, op.cit.). Similarly, Cozolino, (2013: p24) describes the human brain generally as functioning best in a 'matrix of social relationships', and that 'as a result, close supportive relationships stimulate positive emotions... and learning'. Similarly, as Wright, Betteridge, and Buckby (1984: p1) point out, if students 'are amused, angered, intrigued or surprised the content is clearly meaningful to them ... [it will be] better remembered'. Fink et al (2010) add 'sharing ideas', which neuroscience has shown can boost creative output. Neuroscientific studies also suggest, finally, that offering choice can be beneficial. Flowerday and Schraw (2003) examined the effect of learning choices on cognitive performance and affective engagement, finding that broadly, although it had no positive effect on cognitive engagement it did so on attitude and effort; and Patell, Cooper, and Robinson (2008) claim from a meta-analysis of 41 studies that offering choices to students can have a positive effect on motivation, effort and task performance.

One particularly social pedagogical technique is that of pair work. It is obviously social in that it consists of an activity (or activities) that require social interaction, it is mutually supportive and involves sharing ideas. Many pair work activities also include an element of choice, either in the negotiation of different activities or within activities. Finally, there is great scope for creativity, as ideas can be exchanged and developed between student pairs, and pair group games are also possible (for examples of the latter two aspects see, for example, Watcyn-Jones and Howard-Williams, (2002a,b,c) excellent 'Pair Work' series of games and activities for English Language learners. Howard-Jones, (2014: p33) has noted that 'Games provide rapid schedules of uncertain reward that stimulate the brain's reward system. The brain's reward response can positively influence the rate at which we learn'.

Considering all these aspects of the technique, it is therefore an excellent one to explore in the context of neuroscientific findings. This paper thus describes a small-scale project exploring pair work in terms of student attitudes and experiences as part of an English as a Foreign Language course at Maltepe University ( School of Foreign languages), Istanbul, Turkey.

The body of literature to date on the use of this method has concentrated very much on attainment at the expense of other factors (e.g. Zaswita and Ihsan, 2019, and Storch and Aldosari, 2013 to give two examples). By contrast, the aims of the study reported here was to gauge the level of engagement in pair work activities in terms enjoyment, and which specific elements have the most approval in this regard.

## Prior literature

As mentioned above, most research has tended to concentrate on attainment and efficacy rather than on the qualitative experiences of students. It is worth briefly mentioning some of these to put our own study into a wider perspective. One example is Zaswita and Ihsan, (2019), who compared students' writing scores between an experimental class which practiced a form of learning using pair work activities and a control class 'given conventional learning techniques commonly used by teachers in the school' (p55). Results showed that pair work activities fostered better student writing ability (albeit no evaluation criteria are offered) compared to conventional technique. The authors opine that this may be because 'they share opinions, do assignments and complete assignments together' (p59).

Storch and Aldosari (2013) analysed interactions between student-pairs as they wrote a collaborative essay, to assess language use and, specifically, amount of the target language was spoken. Findings showed that 'some mixed proficiency pairs may form collaborative and expert/novice relationships that are conducive to L2 learning [and] ... pair work can provide learners with opportunities to use the L2 for a range of functions and to receive feedback from their peers' (p47). Zeng and Takatsuka, (2009) and others have also found pair-work approaches greatly foster L2 learning (a comprehensive review of the pedagogical benefits of pair-work and wider peer-to-peer interaction can be found in Loewen and Masatoshi, 2018).

Some studies have looked at both performance and other aspects of the activity, such as interpersonal relationships or attitudes of participants. Sert (2013) compared pair work activities and individual assignments between two classes (totalling 91 students). The assignments were evaluated for grammatical and spelling competence, and 12 pairs of students were interviewed with regard to the experience of undertaking the activity with a companion and, specifically, 'whether the project had positive contributions to the interpersonal relations with their peers', (p247). The results of the latter element show that pair work not only resulted in a positive contribution to learning English but helped develop interpersonal relationships between students in the classroom.

Another study that examined more than performance was that by Zohairy (2014), who investigated Saudi students' and teachers' 'attitudes towards pair work in general and the benefit of various pairing strategies in particular', using semi-structured interviews with teachers and classroom observations. This study was conducted in the English Language Unit of 'a governmental university', and involved two groups of 32 learners, divided according to their speaking abilities (higher level and lower level). One group consisted of mixed ability pairs and another of same/similar ability pairs. Results suggested, from the learners' questionnaire, that almost all students (regardless of their grouping) 'find pair work an effective tool for language learning.' (p56) They also reported being more enthusiastic about pair work than group work - another collaborative learning activity (p59).

Almanafi and Alghatani (2020) examined Libyan learners' attitudes towards pair work activity in their learning process using a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview. Participants (59)

were aged between 18 and 44 years and studying English language in the UK. In addition, interviews were carried out with four learners. In the survey, 74.5% of learners found pair work helpful / very helpful; 79.3%. (p41). Interview participants agreed that pair work classroom have a many advantages, including the interaction and discussion facilitating the exchange of ideas. This practice also helped to overcome 'the fear of speaking in front of the others.' (p43). Reverting to one's native language (it was the same L1 for all) was indicated as a problem, and that of 'character differences', with some students wishing to work alone.

Finally, Baleghizadeh and Farhesh, (2014) investigated the effect of pair-work on EFL learners' motivation, comparing two groups of (advanced level) learners, one in a learning environment where pair-work was 'rarely used' while the other employed 'a good amount' of pair-work. A 'motivation questionnaire', interviews, and observation were all used to gather data. Results from the former suggested that 'learners who did the tasks and activities in pairs were more

motivated than those who did the same tasks individually'. Interviews and observation showed that 'tasks done in pairs created a friendlier atmosphere in the PO group classes' (p7) and that the pair-work class setting seemed to be more dynamic and lively compared with the other group.

In sum, the literature appears to show that pair-work can be effective in terms of task performance (both in writing and orally, in L2 work), as a result of opinion and idea sharing, peer feedback and strong motivation. It can also develop peer relationships and a friendlier atmosphere than in environments of predominantly individual study. Negative aspects of pair work are rare to find in the literature (perhaps because authors are themselves practitioners and proponents). However, overuse of one's native language and personality differences between student pairs have been reported.

## Methods

### Sample

The study took place in a large university in western Turkey. The students were in the English Department's 'Preparatory School' and were aged between 18 and 20. The survey was conducted within the first semester of the 2022/2023 academic year. Forty-three intermediate level students took part, from a total population of 55, spread over two classes.

Of the survey sample, 14 participants also agreed to be informally interviewed, both about the specific experience of the pair-work tasks under examination, and of their views more generally about the practice of pair work.

### Activities

The following activities were undertaken, each one focusing on a different type of dialogic interaction:

- Exchanging factual information (Family Tree)
- Considering a hypothetical situation (Role play)
- Discussing opinions (Opinions about school)

Detailed for each activity are below:

- Family tree instructions: Students each draw their family tree and describe each member to their partner and answer questions about them.
- Role-play instructions: Put students in pairs and ask them to come up with a dialogue based on the situation given below.
- Student A: A child who desperately wants a pet and has to persuade the parents to get one. (List at least 5 reasons/advantages)
- Student B: A parent who doesn't agree to have a pet. (List at least 5 reasons/disadvantages)
- Opinions about school instructions: Put students in pairs and allow them time to discuss various questions such as 'Do you like school? Do you think teachers have easy jobs? Do people ever stop learning? Etc.

### Data gathering

Data was gathered from a survey constructed by the authors, chiefly consisting of questions requiring answers on a five-point semantic differential scale (typically ranging from 'I enjoyed it a lot' to 'Did not enjoy it at all'). The survey was organised into three parts, one for each activity-type (Exchanging factual information, considering a hypothetical situation, and discussing opinion). The first question for each part was to simply ask if students enjoyed the activity 'in general'. This was followed by questions specific to the activity. For example, with regard to discussing an opinion, the questions were as follows:

How much did you enjoy each element? Please rate them on the same 5-point scale again:

- Playing the role I was given
- Thinking of the arguments to make my case
- Listening to my partner and considering that point of view
- Simply doing an activity with someone rather than on your own

For the work involving exchange of facts, one question gauged how much each student told their partner about their family (such as, but not limited to, their job or main activity, hobbies, and personality). For the discussion a question read 'How easy or difficult did you find it to think of and make your arguments?'

A descriptive analysis was undertaken of the survey. In addition to the statistics showing the responses to individual questions, the answers were cross-tabulated to explore the extent to which student answers were consistent across activities (i.e. did the same students tend to like/not like each activity and/or each aspect of them).

As some general aspects of pair work were better explored qualitatively (such as the experience of working with a partner), these were addressed in post-activity (face-to-face) interviews, along with an invitation to interviewees to expand upon their survey responses to provide a richer insight into their experiences. Interviews were informal and conducted by the principal author (Zherebayeva), their English Language lecturer. Questions were broad, asking for in very general terms about the specific tasks and views and experiences of pair work in general. Notes were taken of interviews and the resulting write-up shown to the participant

interviewee who was invited to amend, delete, or add to their account.

### Findings and discussion

This section examines the findings from both the survey and interviews. For each topic, the former results are presented first, with the later contextualising and providing added insight. More general aspects of pair work, examined during participant interviews, are reported here after the issues covered by both data collection instruments have been discussed.

As can be seen in Table 1, the activity with the most positive feedback was that of role-play (hypothetical situation) scoring 13 for the most positive end of the spectrum ('Really enjoyed it a lot'), as opposed to only 8 for the discussion and 6 for the factual exchange. Only a small minority (8) rated it in one of the first two (the dislike) categories (or 'fifths' as each category represents one-fifth of the total range of responses). The most chosen categories for this activity were the most positive one and the middle one, with the second most positive one also accruing more votes than either of the 'dislike' categories.

Participants were asked about their enjoyment of each element of the activities (**Error! Reference source not found.**). For the role-playing activity, 'Playing the role I was given', was the most chosen response, but listening to their partner and doing an activity with someone rather than on their own were also popular.

Table 1: Degree of enjoyment of each activity

	Did not enjoy it at all				Really enjoyed it a lot
Family tree (factual information)	3	7	14	12	6
Role play (a hypothetical situation)	4	4	13	9	13
Discussion (Opinions about school)	2	5	9	12	8

Interviewees felt that the activity was 'easy' – partly because the topic was interesting, and also because it did not involve knowing 'facts'. Two people mentioned that, as one said, "You can say anything!" Another possible reason for the popularity of this activity is because it is also a method widely used at all levels of their language learning and thus familiar territory. Of those who gave the highest score for Role Play, only two did so for all three activities, and only four for either of the other two, suggesting a strong discrimination in favour of the former. By contrast, those who chose the lower two categories for this question tended to do so for all three activities, indicating more a lack of interest in the activity of teamwork in general, rather than in one particular one.

Table 2: Extent to which activities were enjoyed by participants (n=43)

Activity element	Did not enjoy it at all				Really enjoyed it a lot
<b>Family tree (factual information)</b>					
Drawing your family tree	12	14	9	5	1
Discussing your family tree with your partner	1	13	10	15	2
Learning about your partner's family	3	11	11	13	2
Simply doing an activity with someone rather than on your own	6	7	10	11	7
<b>Role play (a hypothetical situation)</b>					
Playing the role I was given	5	2	9	19	8
Thinking of the arguments to make my case	3	2	15	16	4
Listening to my partner and considering that point of view	3	4	9	21	5
Simply doing an activity with someone rather than on your own	4	6	6	19	7
<b>Discussion (Opinions about school)</b>					
Getting the opportunity to give my views about school	2	5	18	8	5
Listening to my partner and considering that point of view	1	3	12	17	5
Looking at and comparing the views of classmates on the whiteboard	-	5	15	12	5

Simply doing an activity with someone rather than on your own	-	5	12	11	9
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As can be seen in **Error! Reference source not found.**, the least popular activity (counting ‘votes’ for the two most positive categories) was the Family Tree (requiring factual information), with 18, despite being about one’s own family and therefore not concerning information that might need to be learned for schoolwork, such as uncontextualised historical dates, which might be expected to draw little interest. Most respondents did not enjoy drawing the tree (26 chose the two categories on the negative end of the scale), but a small majority liked discussing it with a partner and learning about their partner’s family (17 and 15 respectively, including the two positive categories).

Interview findings explored the activity in more detail. Those interviewees who did not like the activity tended to explain that this was because it required the burden of memory (even though it concerned their own family tree), but also was the least interesting to them. Two considered their family ‘ordinary’ or even ‘boring’, and simply did not want to talk about them. Indeed, considering the next survey question (Table 3), which related to how much information they gave to their partners about their relatives, it appears that a number of students barely engaged in the activity. Only their name (forename, surname, nickname, or combination) and ‘Job or main activity’ were revealed by 50% or more of partners. Well under this figure mentioned anything regarding appearances, hobbies, or personalities.

**Table 3: Information sought from partner about their family (n=43)**

Information	No. finding it
Name (forename, surname, nickname or combination)	25
Age (exact or ‘more or less’)	13
Description (such as hair length/colour; clothes, eye colour, physical appearance - thin, tall, etc.)	7
Job or main activity	22
Hobbies	11
Personality	11
Your relationship (get on well, dislike each other, etc.)	9

Regarding the negative reaction to drawing the tree, a minority found it hard to visualise the connections and others found the ran out of space to fit the required branches (only two went back in their diagram to their great grandparents, but even some who began with their grandparents found it difficult to include all their uncles and cousins on the width of the page – and/or were unhappy with the lack of symmetry or neatness. Finally, regarding this element of

the activity, the fact that it had to be undertaken alone was a negative aspect for a minority of interviewees. In fact, this was only necessary as it was a private study preparation for the in-class activity. A future session could be undertaken with each student drawing their diagrams with a running commentary in the presence of their ‘pair’.

The Discussion activity (requiring pairs to discuss their opinions about school) was between the Role Play and Family Tree activities in popularity, with 20 choosing the two most positive categories. In terms of the various elements of this activity, ‘Listening to my partner and considering that point of view’ (22) and ‘Simply doing an activity with someone rather than on your own’ (20) were the most popular, considering accumulated scores for the top two categories. Somewhat surprisingly, ‘Getting the opportunity to give my views about school’ scored least, in terms of positive choices (with 13).

Interviewees generally declared that there was not that much to say about school, or that, as one put it “It’s not really that interesting”. Three students who said they preferred listening to their partner to giving their own views on this topic, were most vociferous here, citing lack of anything to say to justifying listening to their partner rather than contributing to the debate. Other interviewees were more positive, with four declaring it was good to be able to voice opinions (albeit one preferring to do so in L1) and two (from different pairs) joking that it gave them an opportunity to complain about the teaching they received or the performance of different teachers (when their lesson teacher is out of earshot, clarified one).

Turning to the practice generally of undertaking these particular pair work activities, for every task ‘working with a partner’ and ‘listening to my partner’ scored highly, both reflecting findings in prior literature (e.g. Zaswita and Ihsan, 2019 and Sert, 2013). The lowest score was for the only element which required students to work alone – that of drawing their family tree before discussing it in their pair, as discussed above. For brevity, the survey did not explore attitudes to more generally towards engaging in pair work. This was undertaken, however, in the interviews, and revealed several positive and negative aspects of this type of activities. They were variously described as ‘fun’, ‘easier than working alone’ and generally good for learning (although the latter was mentioned less than aspects that made the activities enjoyable, and two interviewees actually said that pair work meant, respectively “less work” and “more chatting about other things [than the task requirements]”. Of course, these opportunities might generally seem to be undesirable from the point of view of educators, but this paper is concerned with the opinions of students themselves about their experiences, and not on performance or other specifically ‘learning’ measures, beyond the participant self-report data.

Negative aspects (as viewed, again, by participants) were more specific. The principle issue was that of linguistic ability mismatch, leading both to more work being undertaken by one partner and to consequent frustration on the part of the other (“when we do this kind of work, I always end up doing most of it, just because I can” and “sometimes my partner just doesn’t understand”). In this regard, too much reliance on L1 was also given by two students as

a negative (a problem outlined by Almanafi and Alghatani, 2020). Asymmetric input was also mentioned in terms of disinterest, time, or other constraints such as difficulties in finding mutual times to collaborate. Finally, working with partners other than friends also created problems such as less comfortable working relationships and difficulties in accommodating differing *modus operandi* (again, as Almanafi and Alghatani, *ibid.*, found. However, in the present study, even those who voiced these barriers reported having had positive experiences too, generally because the problems did not occur all the time.

## Conclusion

This study derived initially from the recognition that the discipline of neuroscience was beginning to inform educators regarding pedagogic best practice. In sum, study of the brain suggests that making classroom activities more social, adding game-type activities such as pair-work that enable the sharing of ideas and information, and giving students more choice or flexibility in their efforts greatly aids influences both learning and attitude towards learning. The research reported here explored these possibilities by studying three pair-work activities which demanded different linguistic and cognitive skills: information exchange, considering a hypothetical situation, and discussing opinions. In conclusion, the evidence from this study suggests that the incorporation of pair work, as supported by neuroscientific research, can be very appealing for students – particularly when allowing them to role-play or give opinions rather than exchanging facts, and when careful consideration is given to matching people. Although less able students may benefit from working with someone from whom they can learn, considering only learner enjoyment and interest, matching those of equal subject and linguistic ability and taking in other factors (friendships, convenience etc.) may be more conducive to a more positive all-round experience.

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