Student Preferences for Group Size in a Language Development Course

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Abstract

Student preferences for group size were investigated. Pre- and post-study surveys, student written comments, and teacher observations were used to record changes in attitude and perception of group work while learning English over an eight-week period. In this study, I observed how arrangement impacted my students' impressions of individual, pair, and group activities. My purpose for focusing on student configuration was twofold: firstly, I wanted to learn more about my students' preferences for group size, and secondly; I wanted to find out whether certain combinations of students affected their perceptions of learning more than others.

Key words: collaboration, interaction, group work, group size

Introduction

Collaborative learning has gained a strong foothold in many educational settings. From foreign language class to science and math, the consensus is that group work is an effective method of teaching and even the most demanding curriculums should feature at least some time devoted to it. Collaborative efforts often include a common goal, a symmetry of structure, and a great deal of negotiation, cooperation, and interdependence on the part of participants (Lai, 2011). Typical collaborative interactions also provide group members with opportunities for detailed explanations and a more nuanced negotiation of meaning, which can be helpful in improving student learning. In the case of foreign language study, pair and group collaboration have additional pedagogical and psycholinguistic benefits for students. For example, collaboration can help to shape and develop students' interlanguage, the type of language produced by second- and foreign-language learners who are in the process of learning a language (Selinker, 1972). Collaboration can also increase students' language production opportunities and improve the quality of their talk, as well as aid in individual instruction, help create a positive affective climate, and spark a motivational boost in learners (Long and Porter, 1985).

Students where I work receive very little in the way of communicative or collaborative language instruction as they travel through the school system (Bouchard & Nicolai, 2014). The result is that many can select the right answer on a test but come up short when it's time to use language in real, meaningful ways. I wanted to prioritize communication and interaction in my classes by making group work and collaboration a bigger part of the curriculum and I was interested to see if different student combinations could influence their feelings toward learning more than others. Many studies have concluded that working in pairs and small groups is beneficial, but very little has been published on the optimal size groupings for second language learners in a university context.

Theoretical Framework

Discussions on group work and collaboration often begin with Lev Vygotsky and his theories on social learning. The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) is perhaps his best-known and most widely cited idea. According to Vygotsky (1978), an individual's learning and mental development depends upon crossing a threshold between what he or she can to do alone and what is only achievable through the help or scaffolding of peers or teachers.

Vygotsky felt that learning is a social process where interaction and engagement are essential for cognitive growth. As such, language serves as a tool central to thought and at least some form of mediation is necessary for learning to occur. I find that students learn best when they are working together noticing and reacting to what they see, hear, and experience around them. Any knowledge they gain by working with one another expands their 'zone' and can later manifest itself when the student is alone, working in the absence of peers and teachers. It is probably fair to say students' ability to perform a task or build their body of knowledge is directly related to working alongside peers and classmates.

Some critics rightly point out that Vygotsky's conceptualization of the ZPD applies to dyads, not groups of mixed ability students working with one another. However, research by

Fernandez, Wegerif, Mercer, and Rojas-Drummond (2002) suggests otherwise. Students in their study worked in threes to solve a problem together without the assistance of a more advanced or experienced peer. Using a technique to promote exploratory talk, the researchers measured a group's ability to solve a problem through communicating critically and constructively with one another. The result was group scaffolding and a collective expanding of the students' ZPD. Work in the English language classroom by Billings and Walqio (2017) and van Lier (2004) reports similar results. Their research demonstrates that in addition to expert-novice interactions, the ZPD can also be augmented through collaboration between equal peers, less capable peers, and even when students work alone.

The growth of a learner's ZPD is not the only advantage of having students work together in groups. A somewhat unheralded, but nevertheless beneficial aspect of group work in the classroom is the divergence away from the teacher as the main source of content and information. The lockstep system – where the teacher controls the pace and the class works on the same material in the same way – almost completely ignores variables such as skill level, motivation, intelligence, interest, age, and gender (Long, 1977). Obviously, there is a time and place for instruction of this kind, but empowering students with the freedom to work toward goals they feel are worthwhile or facilitating ways for them to engage in challenging material while having fun at the same time is probably (at least some of the time) the clearest path toward success. Putting students into groups also encourages them to see their classmates as potential sources of information and decreases the dependence they have on their teacher as the only source of knowledge in the classroom.

As an approach to teaching foreign language, group work can increase productivity dramatically. By dividing learners into pairs, threes, or fours, a teacher can deliver content in a much more efficient and enjoyable way. More students talk and more utterances occur when students are teamed together for tasks. According to one estimate, if the teacher talks

for half the time in a 60-minute lesson with 15 students, each student gets only 2 minutes to speak (Darn, n.d.). Given some sort of problem-solving activity that requires communicative language use, students working in groups can more easily focus on doing something new with the language they are learning rather than simply using it as means to an end. In a detailed discussion on group work, Long and Porter (1985) emphasized the improvement in quality of student talk (e.g., stipulating they use a variety of language functions and correct one another) and offered evidence that in group work interactions second-language learners produce not only more speech, but a greater variety of speech forms and functions than they do in interactions with a teacher.

Yet not everyone wants to work together. Some students have reported they dislike group work because they feel as though they end up doing most of the work while their partners do little. Others claim they work faster or better alone. Wallace (1992) found that students who strongly identified as wanting to work alone did better when they were left to study alone. Not surprisingly, he also found that students who preferred to learn with peers did better when learning with peers. In a similar study, French, Shore, and Walker (2011) concluded that students' general preferences were to work alone, but that it wasn't a strong tendency and even varied based on how the question was posed. Ewald (2004) described several issues she found when her learners worked together in groups: they sometimes failed to locate the correct activity in their books, at times they looked fatigued and uninterested, they feigned comprehension even when it was clear they had misunderstood, and they often digressed off task. To remedy these problems, Ewald videotaped her groups working with one another and then discussed the recordings with her students, inspiring them to reflect on what they had seen. The results she found were stronger group cohesiveness, more and better collaboration among groups, and a greater ability to concentrate and stay on task.

Context

I teach English at a private university in western Japan where I am part of a team of teachers working in the Intensive International Program. Prior to my study, I sat down with the chair of our program to explain the nature of what I had in mind. After securing his permission, I described the project to my students and asked if they would be willing to participate. Students were informed they would receive two grades for the activities they engaged in: one grade for the content they (or their group) produced and one grade for their individual effort within their groups. In this way I hoped to offset any uneasiness or tension they may have had associated with the format. Once I had their confirmation, I began to map out a time during the semester to implement my plan.

At the beginning of the second half of the semester, I introduced three different activities I hoped would help me learn more about my students' preferences for group size and learning: an individual narrative essay; a pair dialog; and two larger, three- and four-person tasks. The first activity was the narrative essay. Students worked alone in class and at home to research, write, and produce a biographical essay on someone famous they admired. Two weeks after the activity was assigned students shared their work with the class.

Even my most confident students struggled at times during this task. Working with their heads down, they fidgeted, twitched, and shifted at their desks. My less confident students did the same, but also spent time buried in their phones or dictionaries seemingly searching for the right word or phrase. I couldn't help but wonder how the presence of another classmate or two might have helped them, if not to stay focused or save time looking for words, than as some relief from the pressure associated with writing an essay in English.

The assigning of pairs and groups for the remaining activities was random; students drew numbers to determine whom they would work with. During this time, class progressed largely as it had during the first semester, although I allotted time daily for groups to meet and work together.

The second activity was a role-play. Students worked in pairs for two weeks to write and then perform a 3-minute dialog in English based on images taken from their textbooks. I encouraged everyone to use props or realia, but no groups complied. Students performed their dialogs for the class during the 4th week of the study.

Unlike the other activities students participated in, the role-play required them to memorize their parts. This led to some animated and lively afternoon rehearsals with virtually everyone in class having a laugh and leaning into the challenge. That said, there were also instances of frustration, too. After the first class of this activity one student approached me out of concern for her assigned partner. I assured her she would be graded individually based on her effort and urged her to carry on. Thankfully she was able to reconcile things and did quite nicely on the final presentation.

The third activity was English discussion circles. Students were divided into groups where each member led one discussion and participated in two or three others. As leaders, students selected a newspaper article and prepared a set of topically related questions to ask their groups. Participants read the same article and prepared content, usage, and grammar questions for their leader and for one another. Discussion circles lasted 45 minutes each and were held weekly during the last 4 weeks of the study.

The final activity was a survey project, which required student groups to canvass the campus. The goal was to give a group presentation based on their findings. Students worked in teams of three and four to select a topic, write and conduct a survey, analyze the responses, and deliver the results. To help them with their language study, I encouraged them to seek out opportunities where they could administer their surveys in English. There are several locations on our campus where large numbers of English speakers typically congregate such as The Village and the Faculty for International Studies Building. Activities like this are manageable for language learners at most levels of proficiency and offer a good platform for

practice and use of previously acquired structures and words (Cohen, 2009). The additional exposure may also have been beneficial for students' language development. For example, during dedicated project time I frequently noted students correcting and helping one another or working in unison to find phrases or expressions.

Throughout the study I listened, observed, and took notes on how students were progressing and working with one another. I tried to stay close enough to monitor them but kept a distance that allowed them the freedom to say and do as they pleased. Based on their body language and their comments during interactions with one another they appeared thoroughly engaged and eager to participate. I used my notes later for assessment purposes, particularly with regard to gauging how much effort and input each member made toward the group finished product.

Purpose

The study reported here was guided by the following two research questions:

1. What are students' preferences for group size in an English language class?
2. How does group size influence students' perceptions of their learning?

Methods

To ascertain answers to the research questions above I had students do a series of activities with different combinations of partners. I also designed a simple Likert-type survey to elicit their thoughts on having participated. (see Appendix A). Three classes totaling 30 beginner-level students took part in the activities and surveys. All were second-year university students majoring in business administration enrolled in a compulsory English course. Participants ages ranged from 19 to 21 with 16 males and 14 females, although neither age nor gender was considered in the study reported here. Classes met twice weekly for 90 minutes over a period of 15 weeks, however the intervention lasted eight weeks. The

pre-study survey was conducted during the 6th week of classes and the post-study survey was conducted at the end of the 15th week.

My data was generated by comparing my students' attitudes and preferences toward individual, pair, and larger group activities at the start of my study and again after it concluded. The open-ended questions were added to the survey to give me more insight into how they felt about having worked with one another and to find out whether they felt group work had helped them to learn English. All of the students provided their opinions in English, although they were not instructed to, and their comments here have only been edited to correct for spelling.

As I monitored my students it became clear early on that they were functioning well and thoroughly enjoying themselves. This was a welcome change from the first activity, where I watched many of them struggle alone. At the same time, I noted the absence of my voice and usual guidance was likely providing everyone with more opportunities to negotiate meaning amongst themselves. Before I undertook the study, lateness was a common distraction, but students were on time or early for nearly every class during the study, seemingly eager to meet with their group or begin the day's lesson.

On several occasions students requested more time to work together. For example, I recall trying to transition away from the role-play we were working on to a textbook-based activity and having students request to let them continue on with their work. And at the end of almost every discussion circle there were always groups that remained engaged and wanted additional time to finish their talk even as the 45-minute alarm bell was sounding. Naturally, I granted them additional time.

Results

All thirty students filled out both the pre- and post-study surveys. The results, illustrated below, show my students' preferences for group size and their impressions of how

much they learned while working in various-sized groups. The first question asked students to select whether they preferred to work alone, with one partner, or with two or more partners when given an assignment (see Table 1). On the pre-study survey, over half of the students responded by circling 'alone' and just over a quarter answered, 'with two or more partners.' On the post-study survey the number of students who responded 'alone' dropped to one-third, while the number of participants who said 'with a partner' nearly doubled. Students selecting 'with two or more partners' also increased.

Table 1   Question 1: When given an assignment I prefer to work:

	Alone	With 1 partner	With 2 or more partners
Q1 Pre	57%	17%	26%
Q1 Post	33%	30%	37%

Next, students were asked to respond to the question, "What size group works best?" Prior to the study, nearly half reported that two-person groups were the optimal size (see Table 2), while a third said three-members was best. On the post-study survey, fewer students chose two- and three-person groups and instead chose groups of four and five.

Table 2   Question 2: What size group works best?

	2 people	3 people	4 people	5 people	More than 5
Q2 Pre	40%	33%	20%	7%	0
Q2 Post	30%	30%	30%	10%	0

The results of Questions 3 through 8 are summarized below in Table three. As indicated in Question 3, there was a rise in the number of students who felt working in pairs was 'difficult' but a decrease in the number of students who found working with one partner was 'very easy.' It is worth noting that no difference in opinion occurred for students who felt

it was 'neither easy nor difficult' to work in pairs and only a slight decrease by those who felt it was 'easy.'

Table 3   Questions 3 – 6

Q3. What are your feelings about working with **one partner**?

Q4. What are your feelings about working with **2 or more partners**?

Q5. How easy or difficult is it for you to share your opinions and ideas working with **one partner**?

Q6. How easy or difficult is it for you to share your opinions and ideas working in a group of **2 or more partners**?

|	Very Difficult	Difficult	Neither	Easy	Very Easy
Question 3 Pre	0%	13%	30%	33%	23%
Question 3 Post	3%	27%	30%	27%	13%
Question 4 Pre	0%	13%	40%	30%	17%
Question 4 Post	0%	3%	33%	43%	20%
Question 5 Pre	10%	10%	17%	40%	23%
Question 5 Post	7%	7%	13%	53%	20%
Question 6 Pre	3%	23%	27%	27%	20%
Question 6 Post	0%	13%	20%	40%	27%

Question 4 (above) saw more noticeable changes among students' perceptions of larger-sized groups. The number of students who replied that working in a group of three or more was 'difficult' slid and there was also a drop in students who felt it was 'neither easy nor difficult.' On the other hand, the number of students who reported it 'easy' to work in groups of two or more rose modestly, while only a small increase was observed among those who said it was 'very easy.'

The next question (5) asked students how easy or difficult it was to share their opinion while working in pairs. The number of students who said it was 'easy' to work with a partner rose dramatically, however all of the other categories dropped slightly.

Question 6 asked students to consider how easy or difficult it was to share their opinions while working in groups of three or more. There was a small gain in the number of students who felt it 'very easy,' but a big jump by those who found it 'easy.' On the other hand, there was a decline in the number of students who found working in groups of three or more 'difficult' and a drop by those who said it was 'neither easy nor difficult.'

The final two questions (Question 7 and 8, below) asked students to consider how their English language skill improved while working with one partner (see Figure 1) and how their English language skill improved while working with two or more people (see Figure 2). Students were instructed to select as many of the choices as they felt applied to them. The results show the percentage of students who selected each box before and after the activity intervention.

Figure 1: Question 7: How does working with one partner help you improve your English?
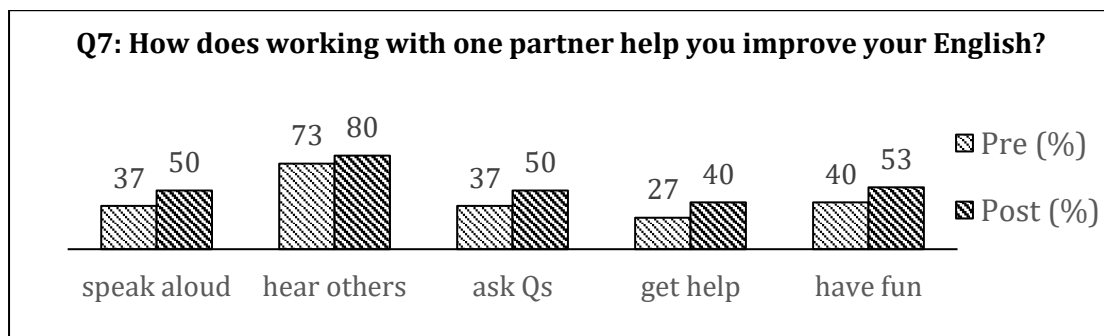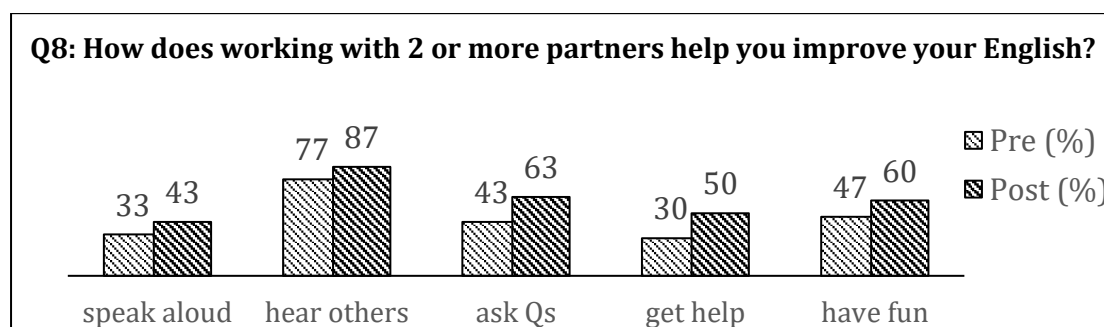

As indicated above (Figure 1), students selected every category more frequently in the post-study survey. This may be due in part to the nature of the activities the students participated in or a heightened awareness on the part of students who felt they improved as a result of having worked together with a partner. Although the category "I can hear others and

that helps my understanding" made the smallest gains overall, it was already the most popular choice based on the pre-survey results.

Question 8 (Figure 2) asked students to reflect on how working together with two or more partners helped their English improve. Like the preceding question, every category increased over the pre-survey, but the greatest gains occurred in two categories: 'asking questions' and the 'ease of getting help.' These two categories jumped by over 40 percent. It is encouraging to know students felt more at ease when they needed help, and this may have contributed to their willingness to seek it out. I was also pleased to find that students rated working in groups more fun on the post-survey too.

Figure 2: How does working with 2 or more partners help you improve your English

Q8: How does working with 2 or more partners help you improve your English?

Pre (%)
Post (%)

speak aloud	hear others	ask Qs	get help	have fun
33 43	77 87	43 63	30 50	47 60

Discussion

As I read over my students' written comments, it was clear that many of them saw the value of having teamed up, particularly when it came to improving their English. One student commented, "More people is easy to work because when I don't know what to say, someone teaches me." Another student commented, "It's good that we can exchange our opinions. It can make opportunity that we have conversation more." Meeting in groups helped one student gain perspective. In their words, "We can share different types of view. Other people say some advice to my ideas."

However, not all students' responses to group work were positive. One student said, "Working in a group of three or more sometimes has trouble when someone is being lazy or

what else in your group." And another student commented, "Quality is more important than a lot of people. So, I don't like to work with a lot of people." Reflecting on the challenges of working in groups one student wrote, "Before I work in a group, I need a couple of time to think by myself." And another student said, "Working with a partner is OK, but if your partner is not good it's tough."

It is difficult to answer the research questions that inspired my study conclusively or with full confidence. A two-tailed *t*-test comparing students' pre and post-surveys failed to reach significance, which means the results reported here might not be replicable. Additionally, a mixed range of beginners took part in this survey and it is possible that higher-level students may not want to work with lower-level students for fear of having to do most of the work. Also, students' desire to work on projects and in groups may have been influenced by their desire not to do things we did in class prior to the study (dictation, grammar practice, etc.,) or even some of the tasks we did during the study (reading, vocabulary practice, etc.,). The order in which I presented the activities may also have influenced their feelings. For example, had students engaged in the survey project first and done the individual work last would their opinions have changed? And what about their survey responses? Both the pre- and post-study surveys were done English, which likely confounded the data I generated. It is very possible that had I translated the surveys into Japanese the students might have given richer, more detailed answers.

In response to my first research question, the biggest shift in direction occurred in the category of 'working with 1 partner,' which changed roughly 44% over the pre- and post-surveys. And yet, when asked to select "what size group works best," working in pairs lost 25% on the post-survey, dropping from twelve down to nine students. Curiously, working in a group of four increased by 50% on the post-survey. One possible interpretation of this kind

of change is that students felt more comfortable working in groups than they had before the study began.

My second research question asked what influence group work had had on students' perceptions of their language learning. Based on the results of the survey, students were more willing to work in groups as every category increased in percentage points over the course of the study. Students also reported that their English had improved after working with a peer, which may mean they saw the benefit of having worked in larger groups. The change in percentage here slightly favored working in groups of three or more, which rose roughly 14% overall, as compared to the 12% change reported by students working with one partner.

Any conclusions drawn from this data must be qualified by the fact that there were only 30 participants and that the study lasted only eight weeks. Although the students enrolled in the classes were low-level, they had volunteered to join the program because of their desire to learn English. An expanded pool of participants in terms of both sample size and varying levels would enrich the results presented here. It may be of interest for future research to compare the results another way or to measure any learning that occurred with some kind of pre- and post-test analysis, such as a language aptitude test. Despite the small the sample size, the results of the post-study survey suggest that students felt their English had improved as a result of working with partners and that more students were willing to collaborate with peers in future endeavors.

Conclusion

Conventional wisdom suggests that students learn more effectively and are more creative when they are interacting with others. Placing students into groups, at least on occasion, whether as pairs, threes, or fours may improve their productivity, increase their creativity, and deepen the learning that occurs in and out of the classroom. Even for those

students who prefer to work alone, group work can prepare them for working environments where groups and teams make up an essential part of professional life.

My findings show a slight difference in the opinions of students when comparing their pre- and post-survey responses. It would be hard to argue the results of this small-scale study are transferable to other classrooms as no baseline measure of students' language acuity was taken before or after the study. The *t*-test I conducted on the results was over the .05% threshold for significance, but as I watched my students interact it was clear that some learning and negotiation of meaning was occurring. The changes in percentage points from pre- to post-study offer insight into students' enthusiasm for collaborating in groups and their impressions of how group work affected their English language learning, but they do not say enough with regard to how much learning may have taken place. My overall takeaway from the study is that group size can influence learning, particularly with regard to language study. My next step is to measure those gains. Knowing that students support the idea of collaboration, I hope that teachers will be inspired to explore a variety of techniques to facilitate the use of collaboration in their classrooms.

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Appendix A

Pre-Post Survey Questions

1. When I am given an assignment or project I prefer to work:
Alone   With a partner   With 2 or more partners in a group

2. What size group works best in your opinion?
2 people   3 people   4 people   5 people   more than 5 people

[Answer the questions using the following 5-point scale:
very difficult – difficult – neither easy nor difficult – easy – very easy]

3. What are your feelings about working with **one partner**?

very difficult – difficult – neither easy nor difficult – easy – very easy

4. What are your feelings about working with **2 or more partners**?

very difficult – difficult – neither easy nor difficult – easy – very easy

5. How easy or difficult is it for you to share your opinions and ideas when you work with **one partner**?

very difficult – difficult – neither easy nor difficult – easy – very easy

6. How easy or difficult is it for you to share your opinions and ideas when you work with **2 or more partners**?

very difficult – difficult – neither easy nor difficult – easy – very easy

7. How does working with **one partner** help you improve your English?

   (Select as many as you like)

   a. I can speak my ideas out loud and that helps me
   b. I get to hear other people's voices and that helps my understanding
   c. I can ask questions in a way that is not scary or embarrassing
   d. I can get help in a way that I feel comfortable
   e. I have more fun and when I have fun I learn more

8. How does working with **two or more partners** help you to improve your English?

   (Select as many as you like)

   a. I can speak my ideas out loud and that helps me
   b. I get to hear other people's voices and that helps my understanding
   c. I can ask questions in a way that is not scary or embarrassing
   d. I can get help in a way that I feel comfortable
   e. I have more fun and when I have fun I learn more

9a. Is there anything you would like to say about working alone?

9b. Is there anything you would like to say about working with one partner?

9c. Is there anything you would like to say about working with 2 or more partners?