

Pair Re-Readings With Mixed and Similar Ability Pairs

Todd Armstrong

Abstract

Paired re-readings have been researched as to possible benefits, but most of the research has been done in an L1 context with the learners being of primary school age. This research presents research done in an L2 context with the conclusion that paired re-readings do facilitate output increases when it comes to speech.

It is amazing how such a simple question can lead a researcher down a very complicated and divergent path. This paper will describe in detail an action research project that attempted to answer the following question: Which students should be paired, mixed-ability or same ability, for paired re-readings in a class? Even though this is a speaking exercise, the learner's reading fluency can explain most of the results, which is to say that those with high reading fluency rates consistently made improvements while those with low fluency rates made little improvement.

Anticipated Outcomes

This action research investigated pair work for a re-reading activity. A number of sub-questions can be postulated from the research question for example, what is the definition of effective? For the purposes of this paper, it will be defined by the increase in the number of words said by the pairs.

As will be demonstrated in the literature review and from many teachers' personal experiences, for certain types of learning activities it is better to have mixed-level ability groups; for others, it is better to group students with relatively similar abilities. This action research project will suggest ways to pair students for re-reading activities.

Description of The Participants

The majority of foreign language classes involve students of varying abilities (Richards, 1998). The participants in this study were 16 low level first year non-English majors at a Japanese university. Most of the students had TOEIC scores of less than 250 and had previous experience in reading aloud but only on an individual basis but not in a paired exercise. The ages ranged from 18-20 years old, with only one student having left Japan on a 3 day trip to California.

Data Collection

The following is an explanation on how the data was collected. Students worked in pairs. Student A read a passage out loud for 60 seconds as accurately and as quickly possible. While student a read the passage, student B followed along and assisted as necessary with pronunciation for example. At the end of the 60 seconds, student A marked the end point as to where student A finished. Roles are reversed with the Student B starting at the beginning of the same passage while student A is in the support role. Then the procedure is repeated with student A starting at the beginning of the text with B in the support role. Then the students switch roles again. Total amount of words on the second reading only were kept. Text selection is the most critical aspect for this kind of study. The consequences of pair work are also interesting in that the results answer the ultimate questions that depending on the type of task which is better; to have mixed ability pairs or same ability pairs. Since the most discernable factor was the reticence level of the learners, this alone explained the result that there was no discernable difference between the similar paired groups and mixed pair groups. What can account for such mixed results is discussed in the explanation of the results.

Literature Review

Part of the literature review that first needs to be acknowledged is the mixed view within the Applied Linguistics field that reading aloud is beneficial to learners. One study that favors reading aloud is Gibson (2008) in which she argues allows “some anxious learners to speak” (27). Perhaps allowing some anxious learners to speak perhaps will create some kind of momentum for them to produce spontaneous speech on their own, however, there is also the idea that previous experiences of learning English might prevail. In the case of these learners, having flashbacks to

the days of junior high school, having to stand up alone and read aloud from the textbook in front of the whole class causing anxiety levels to manifest themselves in the present, hampering progress.

A more promising study was done by Dowhower (1989) where the evidence suggests that “rereading is a valuable study tool, is helpful for both high and low level ability students” (502). The Gibson study also lends credence to the idea of rereading having efficacy in that the subjects that participated in her study were EFL students while all of the other studies were focusing on native English speakers in their home countries. Therefore, the value of the contribution of this small piece of research is that it was done on EFL learners focusing paired re-reading exercises with mixed ability pairs. All of the other studies lack at least one of these elements.

Results

The following are two charts on the number of increased words each time a text was used. SP refers to similar ability pairs while MP refers to mixed ability pairs.

	Number of Words Increased							
Attempt 4	18	16	12	19	22	24	22	9
Attempt 3	16	15	11	16	17	17	23	8
Attempt 2	13	12	10	13	15	16	19	8
Attempt 1	12	13	8	12	13	14	18	7
	SP1	SP2	SP3	SP4	SP5	SP6	SP7	SP8

	Number of Words Increased							
Attempt 4	15	12	16	13	14	20	13	7
Attempt 3	17	11	12	14	14	24	12	5
Attempt 2	12	13	14	15	17	13	14	6
Attempt 1	11	12	13	14	16	12	16	5
	MP1	MP2	MP3	MP4	MP5	MP6	MP7	MP8

Acknowledgment of Weaknesses In This Study

The most obvious weakness of this study is the fact that there was only one observer. The more qualitative the results, the more observers are necessary to insure the validity of the respondents answers and interpretations of students re-actions.

Another weakness of the study is that the re-reading trials were only carried out 4 times. Which explains that the total output from both pairings is about the same. A longer longitudinal study would give more validity as to whether the increases truly reflected the abilities of the participation. There is a trend in both groups that the the students produced a greater amount of output but that is all that can be said for both groups.

Explanation of The Results

The most important factor on this type of exercise was the vocabulary level of the participants. The lower the vocabulary level of the learner, the lower the fluency level due to the fact that while reading, the learners would consistently produce lower results as the vocabulary unfamiliarity increased. In other words, while reading if the learner did not understand the meaning of the word the learner would slow down, and would concentrate for even a fraction of a second on trying to make out the meaning of the word. The more unfamiliar words the reader came across, the lower the output with all of those fractions of a second adding up. Very few, if any of the readers understood all of the words but more importantly, few could not read the word aloud without trying to understand the word. According to Warring he states that understanding at least 90% of the surrounding vocabulary is necessary to guess the meaning of the word.

Another explanation for the results is pronunciation. Since this is a read aloud activity, pronunciation of some of the most difficult syllables for native Japanese speakers, such as l versus r or v versus b, the cumulative effect also can explain the results. As the reader experienced difficulty when trying to pronounce the word, output was reduced. However, those who made no attempt to properly pronounce words had increased overall out put. This then leads to a more interesting point of quality versus quantity, which will be addressed in the implications for teaching section of this paper.

Implications for Teaching

Acknowledging the mixed views of reading aloud does not constitute the automatic dismissal of it as a teaching technique. All a mixed view does is negate statements that a certain teaching technique is 100% pedagogically sound or not. Therefore, paired re-reading can be used for many purposes. Most students had a positive re-action to the exercise

especially used as a warm-up type activity. Framing of the task by the teacher is of critical importance. At the risk of stating the obvious, to view anything in the classroom as busy work or as a time killer with very little pedagogical value by can be perceived through tone of voice or body language.

Another point that a teacher should consider is the type of text that is being used for the re-aloud. One of the best ways is to use the text as the focal point of the lesson. Having the students read the text, again trying to get students to focus on rapid reading and not decoding of every word, will lead students to have a more positive attitude. Texts that were used that were immediately discarded and never again talked about in the lesson, inevitably raised the question of “Why are we doing this?” from the learners which leads to the proverbial teacher answer of “I want to see how fast you can read” a.k.a. “I am testing you”.

Which leads to the other teaching dilemma of teaching to the final examination. Students were more enthusiastic about the trying to really read aloud and understand the text if its re-occurrence on the final test was high. However, some students felt a sense of relief not having to memorize the passage. Again, most of this can be explained by motivation of the learner.

Conclusion

The focus of this paper was not so much on the pedagogical validity of pair re-readings as such, but focusing on whether or not it is a good idea or not to use this kind of activity with mixed ability pairs or with same ability pairs. The best conclusion is that based on this one time action research output increased for both types of pairs but not there was not much significant difference. Therefore, acknowledging the weakness of this action research study along with focusing on what types of texts and motivation of students can influence output will require further research.

Works Cited

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