Dialog on Language Instruction

Quick Tips

Purposeful Pairing Design (PPD): Pairing for More than Sharing

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While many agree on the benefits of pair work, how to pair students for language learning remains uncertain (Storch & Aldosari, 2013). As such, this article offers Purposeful Pairing Design (PPD) to upgrade Think Pair Share from a collaborative discussion strategy to an invaluable teaching tool. PPD is a pairing technique created by the author, where the teacher designs interactive activities that result in students figuring out who their partner will be for the rest of class. Students' curiosity during PPD activities can boost their engagement, focus, and overall motivation for language learning. Additionally, PPD can be a useful teaching tool to activate students' background schemata, formal schemata, and mostly, critical thinking skills. Students appreciate PPD activities, as they are collaborative and promote community-based learning amongst the students.

Keywords: *Think Pair Share, Purposeful Pairing Design (PPD), Collaborative Discussion Strategy, Student Engagement, Background Schemata, Formal Schemata, Critical Thinking Skills*

INTRODUCTION

Over forty years have passed since the creation of Think Pair Share by Dr. Frank Lyman (1981) and today this collaborative discussion strategy is an important part of many language classes. In this three-stage strategy, students individually reflect on an activity, pair up to share their understanding, and then compare responses and complete the task.

Think Pair Share is one of the most commonly used techniques of the communicative approach. It can enhance students' critical thinking skills and active participation (Bukit, 2021), as well as verbal communication skills (Ardhy, 2018; Bukit, 2021; Mustikawati, et al., 2018). Moreover, pair work can boost students' engagement as they enjoy learning from each other through the

exchange of thoughts, ideas, and experiences (Almanafi & Alghatani, 2020). Pairing and grouping allow teachers to monitor student performance more freely and provide ongoing feedback.

While many agree on the benefits of pair work, how to optimally pair students for language learning remains uncertain (Storch, & Aldosari, 2013). This article suggests that Purposeful Pairing Design (PPD) can guide how students should be paired during Think Pair Share activities. It will outline how a teacher can use PPD to indicate to students who their partner will be. This article will not go into detail on the types of activities the partners can do *after* they are paired up; instead, it will focus on how to pair up students in an interesting way. First, I will give background on different pairing options.

Random Pairing and Criterion-Based Pairing: Benefits and Limitations

Random pairing is the most used strategy since it is quick and requires no preparation. Random pairing is preferred especially in online environments like MS Teams, where creating break-out rooms can take too much time. One common way of random pairing is for students in a class of 6 to sound off 1–3; then students with the same numbers pair up (1 with 1, 2 with 2, 3 with 3). In in-person settings, instructors usually pair students who sit next to each other since it requires the least rearrangement and saves time. However, if used routinely, this pairing technique can lead to stagnant ideas and boredom as students often sit in the same seats throughout the course.

Criterion-based pairing, on the other hand, relies on student variables that can affect the quality of student interaction and as a result, is more advantageous than random pairing. These variables range from student age, gender, L1 background, proficiency level, sensory preferences, personality traits, cognitive preferences, collaborative attitudes, interpersonal dynamics, as well as the goal of the activity. There is abundant literature on the effect of these variables on student achievement. For instance, Storch and Aldosari (2013) posit that in fluency-focused activities, pairing two low-proficiency students would lead to more collaboration and scaffolded learning which in turn helps them develop fluency. Pastushenkov et al. (2021) also suggest that peer familiarity could result in more language production during pair work.

Purposeful Pairing Design was created by the author to address the limitations of random and criterion-based pairings, and to increase student collaboration and creative problem-solving.

Purposeful Pairing Design

In Purposeful Pairing Design, the teacher uses the lesson content in addition to student variables that impact learning affordances to provide more opportunities for engaging L2 gains. The idea is that the teacher decides whom to pair up by considering student variables. But instead of directly assigning students to dyads or groups, the instructor creates activities that provide hints derived from the lesson content and lets the students figure out the pair composition based on the clues. The students must refer to the lesson content to determine the pair composition.

Purposeful Pairing Design can be used as an occasional alternative to criterion-based paring and grouping in any language class. It can activate background and formal schemata, support the review of concepts introduced (particularly grammar and vocabulary), and promote critical thinking skills. The examples below clarify how PPD can be planned and implemented. English is used for the examples, but in a classroom, they would be in the Target Language. Note that all names listed are pseudonyms.

Example 1—Topic: Word Collocations

1. Students study a topic in class, in this case *word collocations*.
2. The teacher considers which students to pair.
    a. In this example, the teacher wants to pair up students according to the "global-particular" cognitive preference concept by Ehrman and Leaver (2003). Global learners prioritize meaning, while others focus on form. So, using the results of the Ehrman and Leaver Learning Style Questionnaire v. 2.0, the teacher can identify more global students and those who are more particular in their cognitive preferences (see Figure 1).
    b. Students are assigned an activity to complete to uncover their partner while also reviewing collocations (see Figure 2). Students need to form four pairs based on matching terms: "ceasefire agreement," "round of applause," "positive impression," and "financially strong." The goal is to land students in the pairs as shown in Fig. 1. The matching process itself becomes a learning experience. Note that in this example, a moment of confusion might arise when students decide between "positive impression" or "strong impression." However, considering "financially strong" as the only logical pairing in this context, students will ultimately need to agree on "positive" and "impression."
    c. Once students have their partners, the teacher can assign other pair-based, in-class activities, keeping in mind that students will work in global-particular pairs.

Figure 1
The Partner Assignments Planned by the Instructor (a global with a particular learner)

Figure 2
Purposeful Pairing Design Activity for Students to Engage In: Word Collocations

Ready for a collocation challenge?

Directions: Dear students—working as a group, identify matching components of the words listed under your names and create four collocations. Pair up accordingly.

Olivia Agreement	Hana Applause	Ellen Financially	Tara Ceasefire
Mason Round of	Jackson Impression	Natacha Strong	Ruby Positive

This activity is both fun and engaging, fostering internalization of the concepts through discussions in the target language. Besides forming pairs based on pre-defined cognitive preferences (particular-global), students actively review the lesson, promoting their critical thinking.

Example 2—Topic: Parts of Speech

1. Students study a topic in class, in this case *parts of speech*.
2. The teacher considers which students to pair.
    a. In this example, the teacher wants to pair up students based on their language proficiency levels (high proficiency with low proficiency). So, the teacher identifies the high and low-proficiency level students, as shown in Figure 3.
    b. Instead of directing students to form four pairs - “Olivia-Tara,” “Hana-Mason-Sara,” “Jackson-Oceana,” and “Ellen-Natacha” - the teacher adds a twist.
    c. Students are assigned an activity that reveals partners while also practicing parts of speech (nouns, verbs, adverbs, and adjectives). The teacher presents Figure 4 on the Smartboard, encouraging students to decipher the grouping structures. This approach compels students to rely on their comprehension and analysis of the lesson content (parts of speech).
    d. If the students encounter difficulty identifying patterns and determining pair and group compositions, the teacher can provide further guidance by displaying Figure 5. This visual aid helps students decode the patterns and form pairs based on the select categories of parts of speech.
    e. If some students might still be confused, the teacher can write the partner names on the board to dispel any lingering confusion.
    f. With students partnered up in high proficiency with low proficiency pairs, the teacher can introduce other in-class activities designed for pair work.

Figure 3

The Partner Assignments Planned by the Instructor (a high with a low-proficiency learner)

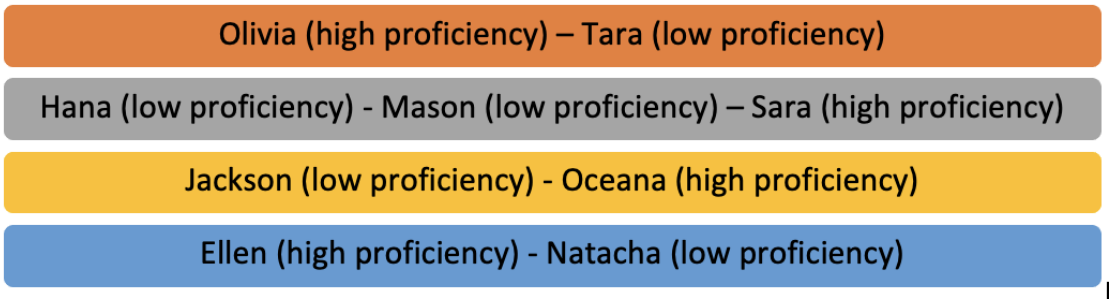


Figure 4

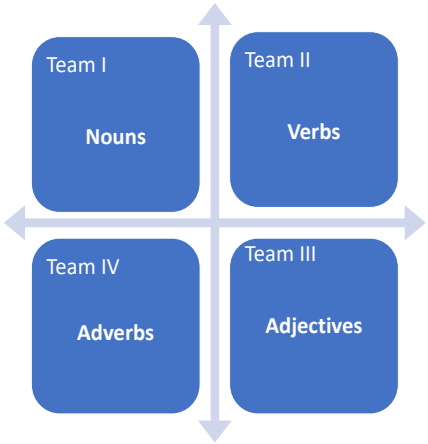
Purposeful Pairing Design Activity for Students to Engage In: Parts of Speech

Directions: Dear students—please identify commonalities among words listed under each of your names and form four pairs accordingly.

Olivia Happiness	Hana Create	Ellen Delightfulc	Tara Generosity	Mason Evaluate
Jackson Elegantly	Natacha Intelligent	Sara Analyze	Oceana Bravely	

Figure 5

Visual Aid if Students Need More Support: Part of Speech Categories Specified



While the students try to identify the pairing and grouping composition by understanding the logic behind the design and later applying their understanding of this grammar concept to create teams, they activate their linguistic schemata in a fun and engaging way that can boost their overall L2 gains.

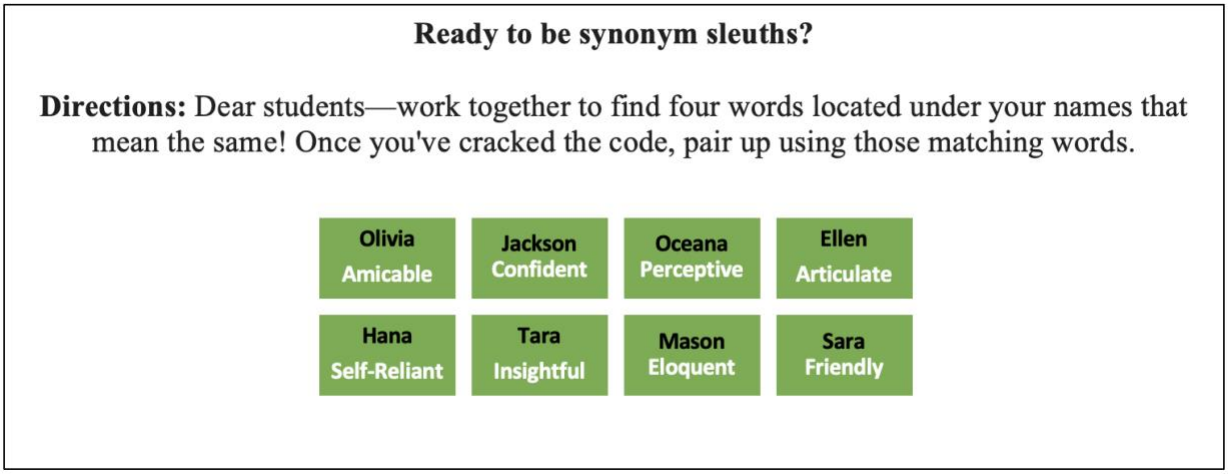
Example 3—Topic: Synonyms

1. Students study a topic in class, in this case *synonyms*.
2. The teacher considers which students to pair.
    a. In this example, the teacher wants to pair up students based on their personality traits (introverts with extroverts). So, using the results of the Myers–Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), the teacher can identify who is more introverted or extroverted, as shown in Figure 6.
    b. Instead of directly instructing students to pair up as "Olivia-Sara," "Hana-Jackson," Tara-Oceana," and "Ellen-Mason," the teacher offers a twist.
    c. Students are assigned an activity to find their partner/s while practicing synonyms. The teacher uses synonymous pairs from the lesson content (shown on the Smartboard) as hints, guiding students in forming pairs, as displayed in Figure 7.
    d. The students become word detectives, searching for word pairs with similar meanings ("amicable-friendly", "confident-self-reliant", "receptive-insightful," and "articulate-eloquent").
    e. Once they have cracked the code, they'll form four dyads as originally planned by the teacher.
    f. With student pairs formed, the teacher can introduce other in-class activities designed for collaboration.

Figure 6

The Partner Assignments Planned by the Instructor (an introverted with an extroverted learner)

Figure 7
Purposeful Pairing Design Activity for Student Engagement: Synonyms



Identifying antonyms can be another scheme for purposefully pairing students. The curiosity the students feel while trying to decode the synonymous or antonymous patterns can put them in a state of flow which can enhance their learning. The Purposeful Pairing Design can boost student engagement with the content and increase motivation for language learning.

CONCLUSION

Purposeful Pairing Design can be a useful addition to any language instructor's toolbox. The key to the success of these activities is to explain clearly to students what the purpose of an activity is and how it relates to their learning and the overall lesson. Even though PPD can take some preparation time, its advantages in upgrading pairing and grouping from a routine to a fun and engaging collaboration strategy make it worthwhile. The curiosity that students feel while trying to understand the rationale behind the design and while decoding the patterns can boost student engagement, focus, and overall motivation for language learning. PPD can be a valuable teaching tool that activates students' schemata and critical thinking skills, and functions as an interactive content review system. Additionally, the process of deciphering a pair composition is collaborative, which further promotes community-based learning among students. Finally, the discussions among students while figuring out pair compositions are being conducted in the target language, thereby maximizing L2 gains.

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