

Comparative Analysis of Pairwork and Individual Assignments in two ELT Classes

Olcay Sert

Hacettepe University, Ankara, Turkey

Abstract

The pair work assignments have always been considered to be more beneficial for the language learners when compared to individual assignments in many respects. However, the case is not clear as there are not many studies on the issue; since there are so many variables to control during a research conducted to find out the claimed superiority. In this respect, comprehensive grammatical error analysis and the analysis of discourse which aims to reveal the co-operation and solidarity levels have much to serve in order to compare the success levels of two assignment types. In the present paper, it is found out that the pair-work assignments not only have positive contributions for the production of "good English", but also lead to the development of inter-personal relations as well as co-operation among foreign language learners.

I. Introduction

The effects of pair work assignments have always remained questionable since researches have not focused on this particular area which seems to be a complete fallacy. Although common sense takes us to the belief that pair work (together with group work and co-operation) enhances learning and academic success, there is no satisfactory research on this particular problem which may lead the common sense turn into a hypotheses or a theory. However, it is obvious that a language teacher (as a researcher also) has the opportunity to conduct a research on the weak and strong sides of pair-work assignments as he/she has the experiment group and an infinite number of research tools in the language classroom settings.

According to Shirk (1995), collaboration increases motivation and learning because it provides for experiential problem solving. In order to understand this, concrete findings about the motivation and level of learning should be reflected to assignments and be observed by the

instructor. It should never be neglected that the number of variables itself is the most challenging problem for the researcher; therefore the number of variables should be restricted in this multivariate research. Gibbs (1994) states that the variables for measuring the success level of pair-work assignments are dependent upon the consistency with the purpose of the project, relatedness with the objectives and expectations of the course etc. In relation to this, it should be kept in mind that there must be a checklist in the researchers mind in order to compare the variables with the objectives of the course in general.

The particular purpose of this project (in the light of what is mentioned so far) is to reveal the strong and weak sides of pair-work assignments on the part of the students and course objectives. It should be mentioned that there is no complete hypotheses to test (so the research will be data driven), but the traditional belief about the positive effects of pair-work (like motivation, strengthening the interpersonal relations, high level of success when compared with individual works etc.) will be questioned and logical explanations drawing upon the data will be put forward.

II. The problem

In accordance with the data and methods to be used, the study is directed by particular research questions which will specify and limit the scope of this project as there are a great number of variables that affect the problem. Therefore, the paper will mainly draw upon the research questions given below:

- 1.** Do the pair-work assignments include fewer mistakes when compared with individual assignments?
 - 1. i.** In terms grammaticality
 - 1. ii.** In terms of spelling
 - 1. iii.** In terms of academic writing
- 2.** Is the co-operation among the individuals in the pairs reflected in the papers? (Application of the methods of critical discourse analysis)
- 3.** Does the level of motivation in pairs differ from the students who work individually? (concerning the frequency of students' visits in office hour)

**4. Does the pair-work effect the interpersonal relations among the students positively?
(using interview techniques)**

It is the case that no existing study has the capacity to full-fill the answers of the research questions. The application of various data collection and analysis techniques (text analysis, critical discourse analysis, observation and interview) turns this study to be a multi-problematic one. Yet, in order to reveal the positive effects of pair-work assignments; one technique, one method and a linear data collection procedure can not stand alone.

In various books and articles, it is claimed that pair-work leads to success in academic life as well as in social life. However, there are neglected problems concerning the subject matter. Firstly, a comparative analyses does not exist which reveals the difference of pair-work concerning the first research question of this project. Secondly, the betterment of interpersonal relations and the higher level of motivation in pair-works have not been tested which will be performed in this project as the 2nd , 3rd and 4th research questions suggest. This multi-perspective research, hopefully, will bring insights and suggest ways for betterment in educational contexts (specifically in EFL settings).

III. The participants and the method

In order to reach as much comprehensible information as possible, 91 students (approximately 15% of which are males) have participated in the study. The subjects are the first year students of ELT department at Hacettepe University. The assignment that will be used in the project is titled as "An analysis of grammatical deviations in literary, media, song and movie discourses".

The pairs and individual students to be assigned are selected randomly according to the students' own choices. Yet, two groups are approximately equal in number. When the research questions are considered, the evaluation of the assignments has three steps as: pre-assignment, during assignment and post assignment. After analyzing the data both qualitatively and quantitatively, the data will be evaluated and the findings will be listed in the light of the research questions.

In order to answer the research questions, various methods will be used throughout the project. It is obvious that each research question requires a particular method on its own right. Although this multi-methodical approach makes the project a challenging one with many limitations, various perspectives will be brought to the topic under discussion by making use of differing methods.

In trying to answer the first research question, error analysis techniques will be used. In fulfilling the requirements of the second research question, the terminology of critical discourse analysis and social-psychology (like "us" ideology) will be of use. In dealing with the third and the fourth research questions, observation and interview methods will be used as seen in descriptive and qualitative research designs. The findings will be handled separately but will be concluded holistically in order to reach some suggestions and assumptions about the topic under discussion.

IV. Comparative error analysis

Throughout the comparative analysis of the assignments, significant differences were observed between the pair-work papers and individual papers. The criteria in this part consisted of error analysis in terms of grammaticality of sentences, spelling and academic writing procedures. The statistics will surely enlighten and be evidence to the claim that there exist significant differences between pair-work and individual student assignments.

IV. i. Grammatical errors

It has been found out that individual assignments include more grammar mistakes when compared with pair-work assignments. It should be kept in mind that all the participants in the research are approximately in the same proficiency level, when OSS is accepted as the criterion. Each assignment consisted of 4800 words (an approximate number) and there are a total of 68 assignments (45 individual, 23 pair work). In order to keep the number of assignments equal, a number of 23 assignments were selected randomly out of the individual papers. Keeping this in mind –as a result of careful analysis- individual assignments included a total of 351 ungrammatical structures which makes an average of 15,2 ungrammatical usages per-assignment.

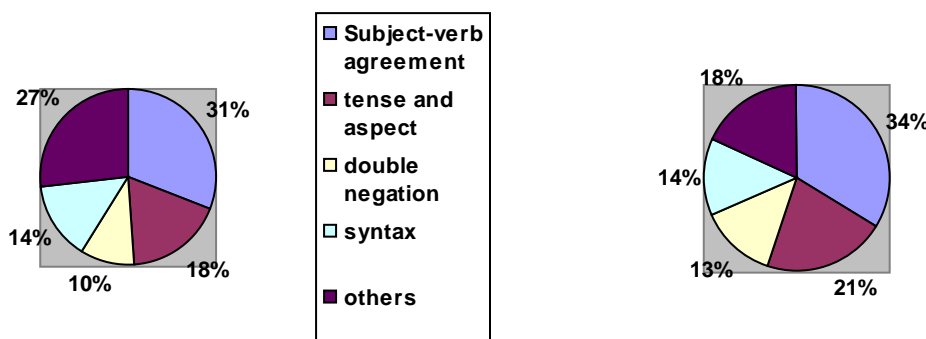
On the other hand, the pair-work assignments included a total number of 188 ill-formed structures which makes 8,17 per paper as table 1 indicates.

Table 1	Individual assignments	Pair-work assignments
The total number of grammatical mistakes	351	188
The average number of grammatical mistakes	15,2	8,17

The analysis goes beyond the selection of ungrammatical usages and categorizes the types of grammatical mistakes made by the learner. In this sense, the ungrammatical usages are grouped as: subject- verb agreement, tense and aspect, double negation, and syntax. It is found out that the violation of subject-verb agreement dominates most of the ungrammatical structures when both the experiment group and the control group are considered. The diagrams below indicate the types of the ungrammatical structures with a comparison of the two groups.

Diagram 1: Pair-work

Diagram 2: Individual assignments



The other problem to deal with concerning grammar is the degree "grammatical awareness". The students were supposed to analyze 30 ungrammatical sentences and this would give some ideas about their "grammatical awareness". Here, I suggest the term "grammatical awareness" which covers both the grammatical competence and performance. According to Chomsky "Competence is the speaker's or hearer's knowledge of his language, while performance is the actual use of language in concrete situations" (cited in Radford:1997). Drawing upon this, the evaluation of the

data can not be considered as solely the reflection of grammatical competence; since the written output should be accepted as an outcome of grammatical performance.

Out of the 690 ungrammatical structures (for each group) analyzed by the students, the individual assignments included 72 grammatical sentences which were attributed as ungrammatical usages. On the other hand, the pair work assignments included a total number of 33 wrongly evaluated sentences (Table 2). This clearly indicates the fact that in pair-work assignments a higher degree of grammatical awareness is observed when compared with individual assignments.

Table 2	Individual assignments	Pair-work assignments
The total number of wrongly evaluated structures	72	33
The average number of wrongly evaluated structures	3,13	1,43

IV. ii. Spelling mistakes

When spelling mistakes are considered, the analysis reveals that the individual assignments include more mistakes than the pair-work assignments. The papers of students who have worked individually have 129 spelling mistakes in total. When compared with individual assignments, pair-work papers are far more successful with a number of 61 mistakes.

The underlying reasons for misspelling may vary. In pair-works, there is much more control on what is written when compared with the individual studies. Of course, differing attitudes of students may have a significant effect on this issue. Yet, all of the variables (like psycholinguistic reasons) can not be considered in this paper, as it is not easy to control all the variables.

Table 3	Individual assignments	Pair-work assignments
The total number of spelling mistakes	129	61
The average number of spelling mistakes	5,6	2,65

IV. iii. Academic writing

Long before the students started to write their assignments, they were all informed about some basic guidelines of academic English. It should be kept in mind that this is the first year of students in the university and they are not fully acquainted with the procedures of writing academically. However, during the semester, the students were equipped with lots articles and sample sentences. Furthermore, I- as the instructor- insistently reminded them some basic features of academic writing not only in class time but also at office hours by editing their sentences. The students were generally told about these important points:

- Avoid using the personal pronouns.
- Use of passive voice
- Use of sophisticated words
- Avoid using simple adjectives like good, bad etc.
- Be careful in referencing procedures etc.

Throughout the analysis, it is found out that individual assignments were far more successful in writing with an academic style. The most significant problem about the pair-work assignments was that the first person plural pronoun "we" was overused like in these sample sentences:

1. **We** tried to cover the data holistically.
2. **Our** aim was to
3. **We** were unable to bring logical explanations for this sentence.

This overuse may have other underlying reasons. The intensive use of the first person plural pronoun and its inflexions may have stemmed from the tendency to reflect that they are "a group". This is somehow related to solidarity and will further be discussed while trying to answer

the second research question. On the other hand, the individually prepared assignments were more successful when academic writing is concerned. The reason for this may be the frequency of asking for the instructor's assistance and expertise before writing the body of the paper. This may be a result of the need to be supported by someone as they did not have anyone else to discuss on their work unlike the pairs. It was also observed that the individuals had more class attendance rates in which necessary information about the style and format of assignments were given, which may be another reason for the success rate of individual assignments.

It should also be stated that the use of sophisticated expressions and avoidance of using simple adjectives were approximately at the same level when the papers of two groups are taken into consideration. Accordingly, the problem about the pair-work papers concerning academic writing seems to be at the level of the reflection of a group identity via the use of "we" at lexical level, and its inflexions at morpho-syntactic level.

V. The reflection of co-operation at discourse level

The reflection of a group identity may be both in lexical level and in underlying structures of syntactic, morphological and morpho-syntactic level (Fairclough:1995). As mentioned before, the overuse of the first person plural pronoun and accordingly "us" and "our" indicates a group identity at lexical level. At this point, it would be appropriate to check the sample sentences and try to reach conclusions with a "critical discourse analysis" perspective:

1. **We** tried to cover the data holistically.
2. The particular aim of **our** study is to... .
3. **We** were **unable** to bring logical explanations for this sentence.
4. The project supplied **us** with

Although the students were instructed many times not to overuse the subject pronouns for the sake of academic writing, these sample sentences indicate an unconscious resistance which is reflected by the written discourse of the learners. When the second sentence is considered, the use of "our" clearly indicates a possession, and is an absolute reflection of a group identity and high intimacy level. In social psychology, "the us-them distinction" is a term used to indicate a group

identity (which is also included in the terminology of critical discourse analysis). Although there are no clear opponents (other groups referring to "them") in this project, the students may have accepted other learners as their rivals and this leads to "us-them distinction" in underlying level.

When the third sentence is taken into consideration, it is observed that the use of "we" is preceded by an indicator of ability "able" which is negated with the prefix un- at morphological level. Drawing upon this, it may be claimed that "the inability" is attributed also to the other peer at both morpho-syntactic and lexical level. Evidence to the claim comes out of this fact: In the individual assignments there is no usage like " I was unable to..." which indicates an inability in doing something about the project. However, it is the case that as well as inabilities and negative attributions, the group members also reflect their success with the use of first person plural pronoun and its forms. Consequently, these lexical and morpho-syntactic findings somehow indicate the existence of a group identity and co-operation in addition to high intimacy level when "solidarity" (in socio-linguistic sense) is considered.

VI. The level of motivation

When motivation is concerned, the criterion for its evaluation will be the frequency of visiting the instructor's office, although it is just one of the determinants for evaluation and indicators of student motivation in this project. When two groups are handled separately, keeping in mind that they are equal in number (23), the peers had more visits to the instructor's office for assistance (Table 4). However, this seems to be a conflicting case, because the students who study individually need more help than the peers.

Table 4	Individual assignments	Pair-work assignments
The frequency of visits for assistance	34 times	49 times
The average frequency of visits for assistance	1,47	2,13

Accordingly, it may be claimed that peers motivate each other for the sake of success and the quality of paper being prepared. Then, this is an absolute indicator of superiority of peer-work assignments to individual assignments when motivation is considered also keeping in mind that the more assistance received, the more successful the assignments become. However, as this can not solely be an indicator of motivation, further variables should be considered in following research, which is a limitation of this paper.

VII. The effect of pair-work on building positive interpersonal relationships

By making use of interview techniques, the students who performed pair-work were asked to decide whether the project had positive contributions to the interpersonal relations with their peers. However, 23 assignment peers can not be drawn upon during this evaluation process; since some of the peers were highly intimate before the project began. So, 12 peers were selected out of 23 drawing upon the pre-interviews. In both interviews, the individuals in the pairs were interviewed separately for the sake of validity and reliability. Some of the questions during the interview process were as follows:

- Did you share more personal information after the project?
- Did the frequency of social activities or meeting increase after the project?
- Do you think that you know more about your peer know?
- Do you think that this project contributed positively to your friendship?
- Would you participate to another project with him/her? etc.

Out of 12 peers, the inter-personal relationships of 9 peers seem to be affected positively drawing upon the interviews (which makes 75%). It should be kept in mind that these 9 peers (so 18 students) were evaluated by via the criterion that the ones who had answered positively to the 80% of the questions asked in the interviews. So the peer-work assignments may also have affected the other 3 peers positively to some extent.

Another contribution of the project and the course in general was that an e-mail group was conducted by the instructor. So the students had the opportunity to heighten their intimacy level

and were able to communicate more frequently via electronic mails. Additionally, it was observed that the materials and ideas about the assignment were shared via this e-mail group.

VIII. Findings

Trying to answer the aforementioned research questions, general ideas were gained about the positive contributions of peer-work assignments both for the sake of academic success and positive inter-personal relationships. The first concern of this project has been to reveal the academic success rate of pair-work assignments over individual assignments with a comparative manner. In this process, error analysis techniques were used to find out the capacity of assignments in terms of grammar (by also indicating a checklist for "grammatical awareness"), spelling and academic writing. Numeric values were used for the first two; which show clear differences between two groups. It is found out that the students who performed peer-work are far more successful in grammar and spelling than the students who studied individually as table 1 (page 4), table 2 (page 5) and table 3 (page 6) suggests.

Additionally, the particular problem about the English grammar was revealed via careful analysis: Subject-verb agreement is not easily performed by Turkish ELT learners. This part may also be considered as a diagnosis analysis, by which certain steps may be taken for decreasing the number of these mistakes in the future. One reason for the extensive violation of subject-verb agreement may be **the mother tongue interference**. In this sense, it may be claimed that the word order in English (SVO) is different from the word order of Turkish (SOV). Here, I suggest the term **syntactic transfer** (which may be accepted as a term like semantic transfer, as cited in Jlang: 2004) for the underlying reason of this particular grammatical mistake.

The case about the spelling mistakes seems to be clearer. As it may be understood by making use of table 3 (page 6), the individual assignments include far more spelling mistakes when compared with the pair-work papers. The significant reason for this is more likely to be the peer control performed by the students, as opposed to self-control performed in individual assignments.

Considering the third part of the first research question, which is a comparison of academic writing, the two groups seem to be identical except the overuse of the first person plural pronoun "we" by the students working in pairs. This case has been analyzed in detail while trying to answer the second research question. It should be kept in mind that, this was the first year of the students at Hacettepe University (except for the ones coming from prep classes); so a high level of academic writing skills can not be expected.

In trying to answer the second research question (the reflection of co-operation in written discourse) mainly the terminology of critical discourse analysis was of use. The analysis included the lexical and morphological, as well as morpho-syntactic choices of students and the data were evaluated with a discourse perspective. It is revealed that the sample sentences indicate an unconscious resistance to academic writing, which is reflected by the written discourse of the learners. Additionally, the use of "our" clearly indicates a possession, and is an absolute reflection of a group identity and high intimacy level. In critical discourse analysis, "the us-them distinction" is a term used to indicate a group identity. Although there are no clear opponents (other groups referring to "them") in this project, the students may have accepted other learners as their rivals and this leads to "us-them distinction" in deep structure. It is also observed that the use of "we" is preceded by an indicator of ability "able" which is negated with the prefix un- at morphological level. Drawing upon this, it may be claimed that "the inability" is attributed also to the other peer at both morpho-syntactic and lexical level. As a consequence, these lexical and morpho-syntactic findings somehow indicate the existence of a group identity and co-operation in addition to high intimacy level when "solidarity" is considered.

As table 4 (page 9) suggests, peers motivate each other for the sake of success and the quality of paper being prepared. Then, this is an absolute indicator of superiority of peer-work assignments to individual assignments when motivation is considered also keeping in mind that the more assistance received, the more successful the assignments become.

When we are to evaluate the outputs of the interviews concerning the fourth research question, the positive contributions of the pair work assignment becomes very clear for building positive inter-

personal relationships. The rate of %75 seems to be very satisfying in this sense. However, all the findings of this paper should also be evaluated considering the limitations of the research:

- ✓ There is no pre-performed study on the level of students
- ✓ There is no pre-performed study on the intelligence types and learning styles.
- ✓ It is not easy to distinguish the student who performs the majority of the labor.
- ✓ No observation can be performed apart from class time and office hours.
- ✓ The variables related to motivation and student attitudes can not be controlled easily.

IX. Conclusion

Concluded from the data analysis, the findings of this project which is designed to test the common-sense knowledge about the superiority of pair-work assignments on individual assignments clearly indicate that pair-work assignments have positive contributions both at academic and social levels in many respects. It should be stated that more comprehensive and applicable researches are required to change the common-sense beliefs to theory. Although the number of subjects and the variables controlled seem to be adequate in this context; expansion in the number of subjects and specification of research questions are required for the sake of both internal and external validity and reliability.

The results seem to be satisfying as the project covers wide ranging research questions. The use of both qualitative and quantitative methods may be questioned, which leads to the inclusion of both subjective and objective interpretation of the data. Yet, it should be mentioned that subjective evaluations which are put forward throughout the paper draw mainly upon specific data most of which can be tested with numerically. To conclude, this project may be one of the steps for furthering the developments in this specific area and will surely have positive contributions for ELT settings.

About the Author

E-mail: sertolcay@yahoo.com or osert@hacettepe.edu.tr

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