Action Research: Group Interaction in an ESP Class for Nursing Students

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Abstract

This study examines the effects of different grouping techniques, regardless of the level of proficiency, in true beginners' oral ability in the target language. Statistical analysis revealed that the students benefit from low-proficiency subjects versus low-proficiency groups more than the other grouping techniques. Thus, this kind of group-work offers a powerful tool for the attainment of both English and basic skills and refutes the idea that mixed-language proficiency groups are expected to help students use the target language, as pointed out in some of the studies previously reviewed.

Key words: group work, peer work, English for specific purposes, true beginners, oral proficiency

Resumen

Este estudio examina los efectos de diferentes técnicas de agrupación, independientemente del nivel de competencia, en la habilidad oral de estudiantes principiantes de inglés. El análisis estadístico reveló que los estudiantes principiantes se benefician de agrupaciones con estudiantes de igual nivel de competencia en inglés más que de agrupaciones con estudiantes con un mayor nivel de competencia o en agrupaciones con el profesor. Por lo tanto, este tipo de técnica de agrupación ofrece una herramienta poderosa para el logro de habilidades, tanto del idioma inglés como de estrategias de aprendizaje y rechaza la idea de que los grupos mixtos de competencia lingüística ayudan a estudiantes principiantes a utilizar el idioma, tal y como se señala en algunos de los estudios anteriormente revisados.

Palabras claves: trabajo en equipo, trabajo en parejas, inglés con fines específicos, verdaderos principiantes, dominio oral

Initial Reflection

An environment conducive to learning should be one where the teacher expects students to succeed in the application of four skills to be communicative competent: listening, speaking, reading and writing. The learning environment should minimize, tolerate errors, tolerated, and encourage students to improve their proficiency levels by experimenting with language.

I did an action research to find out how to deal with a large group of students from the School of Nursing at the University of Costa Rica who needed to improve their English in four months regardless of the different proficiency levels they had. After some observation, I found that students with low-proficiency levels were having difficulties during class activities. My main concern was that these students would become discouraged and leave the course. Therefore, I observed how students with low-proficiency levels interacted during the different pair- and group-work exercises done in class in order to see how they responded and performed during these activities. Initially, students seemed to work well when they worked alongside a high-proficiency student, but they worked just as effectively with a peer whose proficiency level was similar to their own. Therefore, I decided to find out if different grouping techniques, regardless of the level of proficiency, helped true beginners to improve their oral ability in the target language.

The participants were twenty students, ten from fourth year and ten students from fifth year, all of whom were students of the Nursing School at the University of Costa Rica. The group consisted of sixteen female students and four male students enrolled in a mixed-level, 52-week ESP (English for Specific Purposes) class.

In terms of the level of proficiency in the target language, a proficiency test was applied to determine the level of proficiency that the students had in reading, listening, and speaking skills. The test showed that most of them had an intermediate level of proficiency in reading, whereas in listening and speaking, the majority was beginners. However, there were three students whose level of proficiency was high compared to the rest.

Classes took place on Mondays and Wednesdays from 5:00 p.m. to 6:45 p.m. Because of the limited facilities in the Nursing School, the Monday class was mostly held in different auditoriums at the University of Costa Rica. But the Wednesday class was taught at the Nursing School. As to the classroom dynamics, three teachers from the graduate program in TESOL at the University of Costa Rica were in charge of the group. The group was team-taught: one teacher was in charge of giving the class, while the other two teachers assisted both the teacher and the students. Therefore, the participants dealt directly with the teachers and received individualized instruction and assistance.

Review of Literature

Given the importance of oral production of all of the students in an English class, scholars have done different studies to determine if different group-work arrangements offer pedagogical tools for the improvement of English oral proficiency skills. After a thorough review of literature that I undertook on how students acquire a second language working in small groups, and how teachers assess this process, I found that group activities provide opportunities for students to practice important interactive skills such as the distribution of, and competition for speaking opportunities, the negotiation of meaning, and the comprehension of the language (Nunn, 2000). However, Nunn's study also points out

that small-group conversations may exclude good students from participation. According to Nunn, students need more than a high-proficiency level in the target language to be successful. Students use other abilities to keep a conversation going, such as turn-taking and the negotiation of meaning. Furthermore, students in Nunn's study used peer and self-assessment rubrics, which indicated to the students the different skills that were being used in the group-work and gave them the opportunity to evaluate their participation within the group. At the same time, the possession of the rubrics encouraged all of them to participate as much as possible.

Spratt and Leung (2000) argue that group-work increases opportunities for the negotiation of meaning. They found that students did not feel threatened by their peers whose proficiency levels were higher than theirs. On the contrary, students with low-proficiency levels quickly perceived that they could learn more from their classmates. However, Spratt and Leung did emphasize that the teacher mostly provided limited input, helping the students to understand or translate words and phrases. The subjects in this study mentioned that they felt more comfortable interacting with peers than with teachers, who represented in their minds a threat. In this regard, it is important to note that Krashen's theory supports this finding of Spratt and Leung and that the second language learner must experience "comprehensible input," which implies language slightly beyond the learners' current level of proficiency (Mitchell & Myles, 1998). Therefore, Spratt and Lung (2000) suggest that students feel that this English input may come from peers whose level of proficiency is higher than their own teachers, since these students often feel more at ease to ask for repetition, clarification, or translation from their peers. With the teacher, students face a challenge beyond their abilities and feel threatened.

Group composition and communication skills are fundamental for the effective working of pupils in any grouping (no matter what size the group may be). In Galton's (cited in Kutnick et al., 2005) descriptive analysis of classrooms, he notes that not all pupils will like working in groups, and a number of "threats" to group-work have been identified, including the status and dominance of group members and the over-reliance on the presence of the teacher. There are some similarities between Galton's findings and research by Blatchford (2003). The latter noted that discussions with teachers concerning classroom conditions that help to promote collaborative group-work found teachers assuming that the nature of the task is the key element for successful interaction between teachers and students. However, some other evidence also suggests that if not planned, teachers may affect the way pupils interact in groups of mixed ability (Younger et al., 1999). That is, the interaction between the teacher and the group has to be planned and done carefully so that the students feel at ease during the task.

There are controversies regarding the effectiveness or the benefits group-work tasks have. Even though some of the evidence shows that mixed-language-ability groups are preferable because the students with low-proficiency level benefit from hearing peers with high English proficiency, Freeman (1999) and Rogers (2002) both noted that pupils identified as "highly-proficient in English"

were most often reported to benefit from specific grouping arrangements that bring them together in the same group with low-proficiency students. However, they also point out that students who were exceptionally proficient in the language may sometimes try to hide their talents in mixed-ability groups (e.g., Butler-Por, 1993, cited in Freeman, 1999). Freeman noted that at least one large scale study in the US suggested that, while gifted pupils appeared to benefit from groups of mixed ability, they did not help lower-ability learners much. Other studies have shown that in group discussions, pupils identified as "highly competent" or "gifted" in terms of language proficiency were not always as willing as others to share their ideas and thoughts. Some studies suggest that learners teaching one another can be beneficial in groups of mixed ability that include some who are gifted and talented, depending on the content and structure of the tasks (Cohen, 1994).

The characteristics of students may be another factor to consider in the complex interaction between the following: group size, learning task, knowledge and social relationships and working interactions. If the task is rich in context and enough input is given, I believe it is possible to place students who share no common language in the same group. Kutnick, P. (2005) study shows that students need to be taught each of them is a valuable bridge in the group. Moreover, students with low-English-proficiency levels have to learn to take advantage of the different interactions within a group, either with students with high English proficiency or with the teacher.

Plan of Action

By the time I selected my research topic, I had already recorded on video a good number students during different classroom activities at the beginning of the course. Therefore, I also specifically decided to observe and record on video the less proficient students during their pair or group activities and take notes on their oral production (the amount of time they speak, and how much they say things in English).

With this purpose in mind, I designed two different observation instruments to help me record the observations in three different grouping arrangements: low-proficiency students performing with a high-proficiency student, low-proficiency student with a low-proficiency student, and low-proficiency student with the teacher. First, I created a "Teacher Observation Questionnaire" to serve as a guide for the different aspects I wanted to focus my attention on (See appendix 1). Along with this instrument, I constructed a "Participation Scoring Sheet" with the objective of counting the number of times the low- proficiency students used English in the different group interactions (See appendix 2).

I recorded students on ten different occasions beginning on August 10 and ending on October 19. During these classes, I designated the type of group or pair-work students were going to engage in. I varied them from class to class, giving the students opportunities to interact with peers with similar

proficiency, higher proficiency, or with the teacher. This was done with the objective of recording the observations by using the instruments and finding out in which of the grouping arrangements students speak English the most. For instance, in the observation questionnaire, I paid attention to aspects such as willingness to speak, activities that seemed to encourage them to use English and grouping arrangements that trigger the use of the target language. In addition, I used the "Participation Scoring Rubric" (see appendix 2) to obtain a rough estimate of the rates of participation of the low proficient students (LPS) in the different pair/group-work. I spent some time (about 1 or 2 minutes) observing the performance of students. First, I selected the target students. Next, I wrote the names of the members of the different pairs/ groups. Then, I simply made a slash mark (/) inside the box for every speech in English a student made, and an X mark for every speech in Spanish a student made. That speech could be as a short "OK," or several phrases or sentences. The speech ended when the person stopped talking or was interrupted by another speaker. An advantage that I had to observe and record the date that I needed was the fact that I could rewind the videotape as many times as needed. Also, I administered a questionnaire to low-proficiency students to gather information about the grouping techniques they prefer as well as the ones that seem to work better for them, among other things (See appendix 3).

Results of Action Plan and Analysis

Results

Figure 1
Teacher vs. Low Proficiency Student
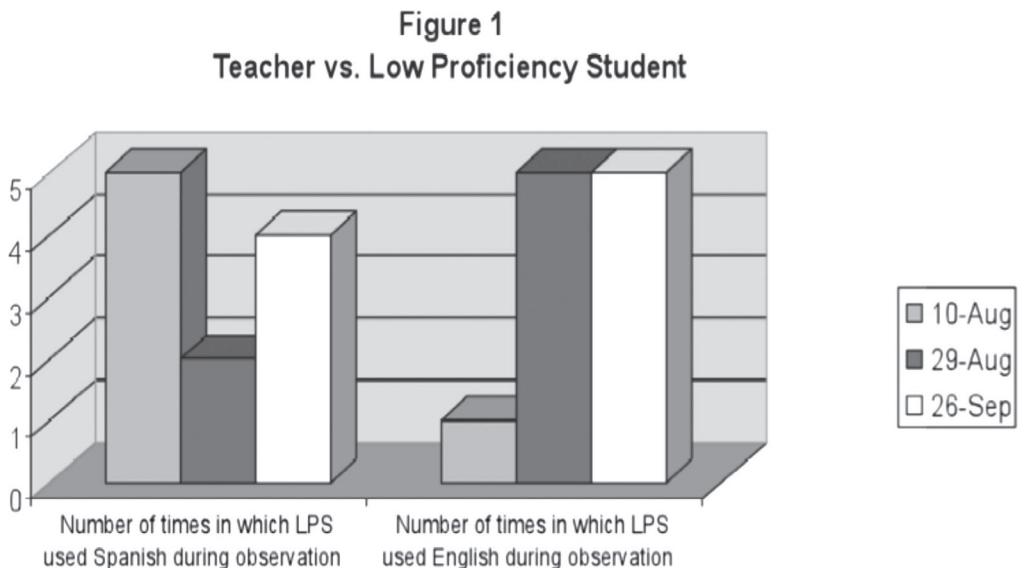
A total of 13 students with a low-proficiency level were observed on ten different occasions in terms of the way they interact within the different kinds

of grouping arrangements: with another low-proficiency level student, with the teacher or with a high-proficiency level student. Figures 1, 2, and 3 show the average of all the low-proficiency students participating in the different scenarios. Figure 1 shows the frequency in which students used English to communicate with the teacher during the task on three different dates. It is important to note that the frequency was determined according to the number of times during a period of 1 or 2 minutes low-proficiency students used English or Spanish to communicate. As seen in Figure 1, students used more Spanish the first time that they were engaged in this kind of pair interaction. As the students moved on in the course, they were more able to speak English most of the time. However, when the questionnaire was applied, ten students were present. When those students were asked how they felt their performance was when working with the teacher, four out of ten students said that it was difficult for them to interact in the target language when the teacher was in the group. Moreover, six out of ten students said that it was easier to work with a classmate than with the teacher. Only one of the ten students who answered the questionnaire thought it was better to work with the teacher. The other nine students expressed that they felt afraid of making mistakes and usually tended to ask a lot of questions due to their insecurity. However with their classmates, especially the ones with similar level of proficiency, students said that they had to struggle to find the right words to give opinions, which forced them to speak English most of the time and avoid the use of Spanish.

Figure 2
Low Proficiency Student vs. High Proficiency Student
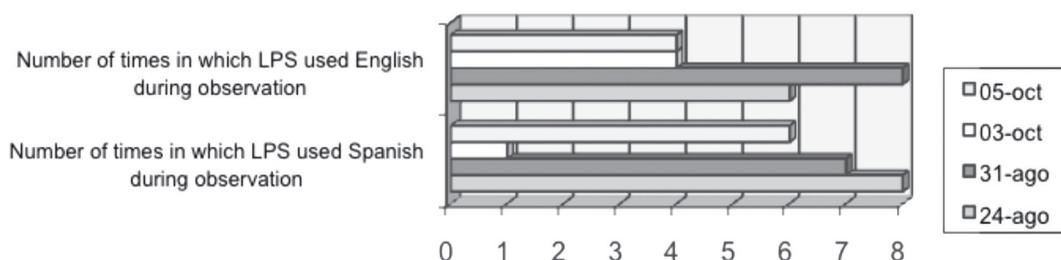
Figure 2 shows the number of times low-proficiency students used the target language in four different occasions in which they paired up with a high-proficiency student. As shown, students continue to use Spanish during the task assigned. Even though students showed improvement with time, most of them used the L1 as a way to deal with the task and interact with high-proficiency students. In regards to this issue, the questionnaire also reinforces the fact that most students think their performance is affected when they pair up or get into groups with higher proficiency students. For instance, when ten students were

administered the questionnaire, eight out of ten students expressed that high-proficiency students do not let them participate in the activities and that they felt threaten by their knowledge. They also agreed with the idea that most of the time, high-proficiency students seemed impatient when working with them. Furthermore, most of them believed that the only advantage of working with high-proficiency students was the fact that they learned vocabulary or improved their pronunciation.

Figure 3
Low Proficiency Student vs. Low Proficiency Student
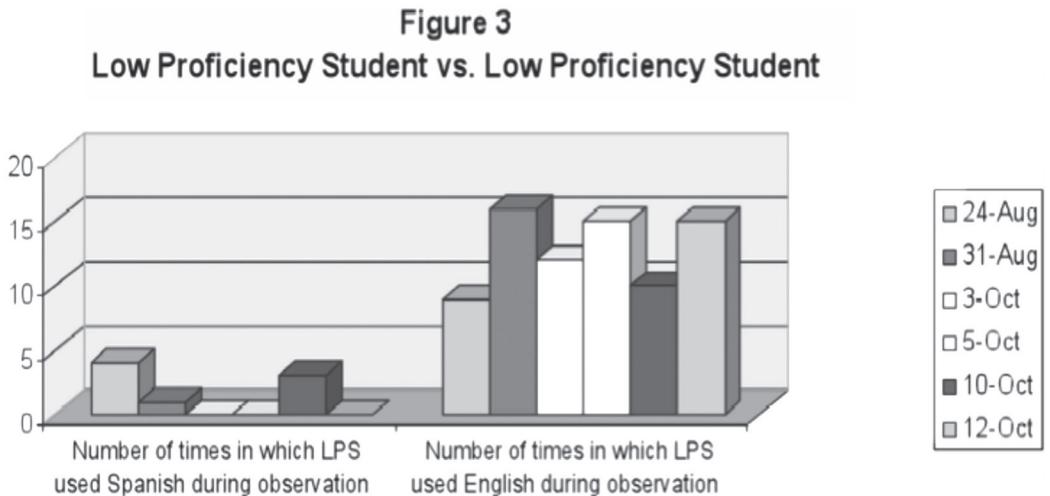

Figure 3 shows the results of the interaction between students with similar level of proficiency in English. As depicted in Figure 3, it is evident the decrease of use of the L1 when interacting in a group or pair-work where the level of proficiency is similar. The ten students who answered the questionnaire agreed with the idea that they feel more comfortable working with a classmate whose level of proficiency is similar. Moreover, they expressed that their level of anxiety decreased, which let them speak in English most of the time. Also, they tended to share knowledge, expressions, used their notes or clarification strategies to deal with the task in English since they did not feel threatened or uncomfortable.

Lastly, tables 1, 2, and 3 portray the overall results of the observations made by the teacher with the use of the "Teacher Observation Questionnaire." The tables show the results among the different grouping arrangements and the interactions observed. As seen in Table 1, low-proficiency students do not feel comfortable or at ease with the grouping arrangement. In this type of arrangement, students are engaged in the task; however, their performance is not the one expected by the teacher. In Table 2, on the contrary, the performance of students seems to improve when they are dealing with a classmate rather than with the teacher. Nevertheless, less able students still show some difficulties in performing the task and negotiating meaning or interacting in the target language. Finally, in Table 3, it is evident that most of the students perform as expected by the teachers. Students are not only engaged in the task, but they are using the language to communicate. The findings indicate that most of the times students

in the groups with a similar level of proficiency perform the task well, negotiate meaning, practice the target language, do not show difficulty, feel comfortable with the task and speak more.

Table 1
Overall Results of Teacher Observation Teacher
vs. Low Proficient Student Interaction

Date and type of interaction observed	10/8	29/8	26/9
	T vs. LPS	T vs. LPS	T vs.LPS
1. Groups are engaged in the task	Y	Y	Y
2. There are some students working individually rather than as part of the group	N	N	N
3. All/most of the groups speak in English	NOT	NOT	NOT
4. There are some students dominating a group	Y	Y	N
5. Most of the beginner students are saying very little	Y	Y	N
6. Most of the weaker students are performing the task well	NOT	NOT	NOT
7. Most of the weaker students speak only English all/most of the time	NOT	NOT	NOT
8. Weaker students seem comfortable in the group	NOT	NOT	NOT
9. Limited-English speakers show some difficulty when interacting with group mates	Y	Y	Y

Y= yes   N= no   NOT= Not all the time

Table 2
Overall Results of Teacher Observation:
Low Proficient Student vs. High-proficiency Student Interaction

Date and type of interaction observed	24/8	31/8	3/10	5/10
	LPS vs. HPS	LPS vs. HPS	LPS vs. HPS	LPS vs. HPS
10. Groups are engaged in the task	Y	Y	Y	Y
11. There are some students working individually rather than as part of the group	Y	N	Y	Y
12. All/most of the groups speak in English	MOT	NOT	NOT	MOT

13. There are some students dominating a group	Y	Y	Y	Y
14. Most of the beginner students are saying very little	Y	Y	Y	Y
15. Most of the weaker students are performing the task well	N	MOT	NOT	N
16. Most of the weaker students speak only English all/most of the time	N	N	N	N
17. Weaker students seem comfortable in the group	N	N	N	N
18. Limited-English speakers show some difficulty when interacting with group mates	Y	Y	Y	Y

Y= yes   N= no   MOT= Most of the time   NOT= Not all the time

Table 3
Overall Results of Teacher Observation:
Low Proficient Student vs. Low-proficiency Student Interaction

Date and type of interaction observed	24/8 LPS vs. LPS	31/8 LPS vs. LPS	3/10 LPS vs. LPS	5/10 LPS vs. LPS	10/10 LPS vs. LPS	12/10 LPS vs. LPS
19. Groups are engaged in the task	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
20. There are some students working individually rather than as part of the group	N	N	N	N	N	N
21. All/most of the groups speak in English	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
22. There are some students dominating a group	N	N	N	N	N	N
23. Most of the beginner students are saying very little	N	N	N	N	N	N
24. Most of the weaker students are performing the task well	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
25. Most of the weaker students speak only English all/most of the time	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
26. Weaker students seem comfortable in the group	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
27. Limited-English speakers show some difficulty when interacting with group mates	N	N	N	N	N	N

Y= Yes   N= No

Analysis of Results

The central premise of this study was to determine whether grouping arrangements give students the opportunity to improve their oral proficiency in

English through practice and exposure. Results indicate that most of the low-proficiency subjects versus low-proficiency groups use English in their learning process. One possible conclusion is that even though students engaged in this kind of grouping arrangement do not have a high-proficiency in the language, they are able to communicate in English most of the time and use strategies such as negotiation of meaning that enhance their learning process and give them a chance to use the language more. Thus, this kind of group-work offers a powerful tool for the attainment of both English and basic skills and refutes the idea that mixed-language proficiency groups are expected to help students use the target language, as pointed out in some of the studies previously reviewed.

One interesting finding is that there were clear differences among the groups in terms of performance. In the teacher versus low-proficiency student arrangement, for instance, most of the students agreed that the teacher is a source of vocabulary or correct pronunciation, but that they do not feel at ease to produce much in the language when the teacher is present. In this case, it can be assumed that students often find ways to fill in the knowledge gaps that they have between peers with their own proficiency level. Furthermore, in the LPS versus HPS group-work interaction, low-proficiency students do not feel they are valuable bridges within the group. On the contrary, their contributions are limited; therefore their opportunities to practice are less. However, in can also be concluded that students who are more advanced should learn to assist those who are less advanced so that the latter can have the advantage of learning from peers with high English proficiency.

Final Reflection and Conclusions

The main objective of this study was to determine the grouping arrangement that gives students an opportunity to improve their oral proficiency in English through practice and exposure. In this regard, I consider that it has been achieved. The findings of this study give a very clear view of the types of grouping arrangements that provide more exposure to the weakest students. However, because this study only includes a very small sample, the findings do not refer to less capable learners coming from different teaching scenarios. Additional studies should include a comparison between students coming from different contexts to be able to draw further distinctions.

During this investigation I learned a great deal about the way students perform in a group and how sometimes they may feel threatened by different variables such as level of proficiency or lack of patience on the part of high English proficiency students. Moreover, I also learned that through close observation of pupils, the teacher can learn not only to read the way students may improve in the language but also how. I also reinforced the argument that group or pair-work is, indeed, a way for students to improve their performance in English. Through observation, the teacher can determine the kind of interaction needed in a group of students with mixed levels of proficiency, giving him or her not only

a way to deal with this kind of groups but also an opportunity for students to lower anxiety levels and avoid frustration.

Recommendations

Based on the analysis and discussion of the data obtained, the following recommendations can be made:

- All learners benefit in one way or another from different grouping arrangements.
- To increase the frequency of English use, students need to be trained in strategies, such as those presented by cooperative learning activities.
- Student's performance in a class is closely related to the kind of exposure received, therefore, enough exposure should be encouraged in order to obtain the desired outcome.
- In this specific case, the exposure should be more focused on the grouping arrangements that involve students with similar levels of proficiency.
- The type of grouping arrangement is closely related to the performance of students in speaking tasks.
- Heterogeneous groups may work only when high English proficiency students have an attitude of helping students with low English proficiency to improve, participate, and practice in a similar basis.

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Appendix 1

Teacher Observation Questionnaire

Instructions for the observer: *Write in the space provided the type of pair/group interaction observed, the teacher in charge, the date and the type of activity observed. Then answer the questions given. You may add any comment you consider necessary.*

Type of pair/group interaction observed: <u>Teacher vs. beginner student, high-intermediate student vs. beginner student, beginner student vs. beginner student</u> [1]

Teacher in charge: <u>Roxana Chevez</u> Date: <u>August 10th</u> Activity: <u>Role-play: Taking vital signs</u>

1. Are groups engaged in the task? Explain briefly.
_____

2. Are there some students working individually rather than as part of the group? Explain briefly.
_____

3. Do all/most of the groups speak in English? Note any important observation.
_____

4. Is any student dominating a group? Who?
_____

5. Are there most beginner students saying very little?
_____

6. Are most of the weakest students performing the task well or do they seem intimidated? Explain briefly,
_____
_____

7. Are most of the weakest students speaking only English all/most of the time?
_____
_____

8. Do weakest students seem comfortable in the group?
_____
_____

9. Do limited-English speakers show any difficulty when interacting with group mates? Note what they do to overcome the difficulties.
_____
_____

10. Further observations: _____
_____

Appendix 2

Participation Scoring Sheet

The following is an instrument intended to obtain a rough estimate of the rates of participation beginner students have in the different pair/group activities.

Instructions for the observer: *In the boxes provided, write the names of the students participating in the activity observed. Make a hatch mark (/) inside the appropriate box for every speech in English a beginner student makes. Make an X mark for every speech in Spanish a beginner student makes.*

Group A Example:	Group B
Group C	**Group D**

Adapted from Cohen, E. (1994). Designing Groupwork: Strategies for the Heterogeneous Classroom. New York: Teachers College Press

Appendix 3

Cuestionario del estudiante

El siguiente cuestionario tiene como objetivo recopilar información importante acerca de su desempeño en las actividades en parejas y/o en grupo hechas en clase. Conteste claramente lo que se le solicita. Gracias por su colaboración.

Sección A
Instrucciones: Marque con una X la línea que corresponde a la respuesta que mejor describa su desenvolvimiento en el trabajo de grupo/parejas durante el tiempo en que ha estado en el curso. Explique brevemente su respuesta en los casos que se le soliciten. Recuerde que esto no es un examen, por lo tanto no hay respuestas incorrectas.

1. ¿Le parecieron interesantes/atractivas las actividades realizadas?
_____ a. muy interesante
_____ b. interesante
_____ c. poco interesante
_____ d. para nada interesante
Explique: _____
_____

2. ¿Cómo fue su desenvolvimiento en Ingles en las actividades de grupo/pareja realizadas durante el curso?
_____ a. fue muy difícil para mí
_____ b. fue difícil
_____ c. fue regular
_____ d. fue fácil
_____ e. fue muy fácil
Explique: _____
_____

3. ¿Sintió que pudo trabajar con comodidad y exponer sus ideas en Ingles con grupos cuyos compañeros tienen nivel mas alto nivel de Ingles que el que usted posee?
_____ a. mucho
_____ b. poco
_____ c. nada
Explique: _____
_____

4. ¿Qué aspectos piensa usted que son importantes para un buen desempeño en el idioma Ingles en la actividades de grupo/pareja realizadas? Puede marcar más de una opción.

_____ a. un buen manejo del idioma
_____ b. una buena actitud hacia el idioma
_____ c. mi personalidad
_____ d. el no tener temor a cometer errores
_____ e. el aprender de mis compañeros
_____ f. el compartir conocimientos con mis compañeros
_____ Otro: Explique: _____
_____

5. ¿Existe algún aspecto que usted considera le ayudo a tener un buen desempeño en los grupos/parejas que trabajo?
_____ a. Si   Cuál: _____
_____ b. No
Explique su respuesta: _____
_____

6. ¿Cuántas veces aproximadamente participaba <u>usando Inglés</u> en las actividades de pareja/grupo de las clases?
_____ a. Ninguna
_____ b. una o dos veces
_____ c. tres o cuatro veces
_____ d. cuatro o mas veces
Explique de que dependía su participación: _____
_____

7. ¿Si usted considera que usualmente hablaba menos de lo que usted hubiera querido, cual fue la razón principal?
_____ a. sentí temor de expresarme
_____ b. alguien más me interrumpía
_____ c. no tuve oportunidad de participar
_____ d. hable todo lo que pude
_____ e. no sentí deseos de participar
_____ f. el grupo no lleno mis expectativas
Explique: _____
_____

8. ¿Considera que tiene una buena relación con los miembros del grupo
_____ a. Muy buena
_____ b. Buena
_____ c. Regular
_____ d. mala
Explique: _____
_____

9. ¿Considera lo anterior un aspecto determinante en su desempeño de grupo?

_____ a. si
_____ b. No
Explique: _____
_____

Sección B
Responda a las siguientes preguntas que se le presentan.

1. ¿Quién hablaba generalmente mas en el grupo/pareja?

_____

2. ¿Quién hablaba generalmente menos en el grupo/pareja?

_____

3. ¿En cuál tipo de grupo/pareja prefiere trabajar: 1. con estudiantes con nivel de ingles similar al mió, 2. con estudiantes con nivel de ingles mejor que el mió, 3. con la (s) profesora (s)? Porque?

_____
_____

Note

1   The underlined information has been provided as an example of one of the possibilities the teacher may write.