THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

Students' Attitudes towards Pair Work in Speaking at a Vietnamese College

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Abstract:
There has been an increased interest to teachers and practitioners in using pair work in language learning and teaching. Several studies have stressed its impact on students' speaking for communicative purposes with regard to the use of English. However, research into students' attitudes of pair work in speaking is limited in the Mekong delta, Vietnam. This paper therefore examines students' attitudes towards this type of productive instruction at a college of tourism in can tho city. Participants in this study were one-hundred twenty-six students. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected from questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and classroom observations. The findings of this study reveal that pair work activities in speaking lessons brought students interest and confidence. Implications for practical applications of pair work are also presented.

Keywords: Attitudes, pair work, speaking, college

1. Introduction

Research into pair work as an effective speaking strategy has addressed its role in helping learners to communicate ideas and interact with others using English (Ellis, 2003; McDonough, 2004). Thus, this strategy needs to be developed as it allows learners to become proficient in English language use and improve their fluency in speaking. This influence has been documented in Asian contexts of teaching and learning English as a foreign language (EFL), including Vietnam (T. Q. Nguyen, 2013; Tomlinson & Dat, 2004). In Vietnam, reforms in higher education have called for the quality of teaching and learning how to use foreign languages, particularly English for communicative competence in academic studies and work in a global integration (Ministry of Education and Training, 2008). However, as teaching English at the tertiary level mainly focuses on traditional lecturing (e.g., Le & Nguyen, 2017; H. B. Nguyen, 2013; Pham, 2010), students at a college of tourism under investigation were not given the opportunity to talk or reluctant to express ideas to other peers in speaking classes. This may be due to their inhibition, lack of vocabulary, and limited time to practice speaking English. In addition, there has not been any research that investigates students' attitudes towards pair work in speaking within the tertiary context of teaching and learning in the Mekong delta, Vietnam. Therefore, it is necessary to gain insights into this topic of interest at a college of tourism in Can Tho City. The research questions that guided the study reported in this paper was, 'What are students' attitudes towards pair work activities in speaking lessons?'

The following section reviews the literature of three concepts: speaking, pair work and attitudes.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Speaking

Speaking, one of the most important components of four language skills in language teaching and learning, is viewed as potential tool for communication success (e.g., Ellis, 2003; Le & Nguyen, 2017). There are several perspectives on speaking. It is viewed as a way to verbally communicate in English(Nunan, 1999), the active use of language to express meanings so that other people can make sense of them(Cameron, 2001), or a skill that can be directly productive and empirically observed(Brown, 2004). These views suggest that speaking embraces interaction, performance and proficiency as learners use English. Others view speaking as a multifaceted construct in terms of fluency and accuracy (Derakhshan, Khalili, & Beheshti, 2016; Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005; Skehan, 2009; Thornbury, 2005).While accuracy consists of using vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation through some activities, fluency focuses the ability to keep conversations going or learners' effective communication (H. B. Nguyen & Do, 2017). Taken all together, this productive language use allows learners to share or communicate ideas with others in interactive and meaningful ways.

2.2. Pair works

Pair work is defined as a strategy that involves learners in exposing themselves to opportunities to communicate or exchange ideas with others (Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005; Gass & Mackey, 2000; McDonough, 2004; Richards, 2006). It is

therefore this learning strategy plays an important role in promoting learners' speaking ability. As pair work initiates learner-learner interaction and provides learners with opportunities to practice English, learners are more likely to use English without much interference from the teacher(Achmad & Yusuf, 2014; T. Q. Nguyen, 2013). Therefore, working in pairs promotes meaningful interaction between learners and as a result, this will increase their language production. In this paper, pair work is defined as an exchange of communicative-based talk between two learners on a given activity.

2.3. Attitudes

There are several definitions of attitudes in the literature (e.g., Ajzen, 2005; Baleghizadeh, Iran, & Farhesh, 2014; Perloff, 2010). Ajzen (2005) defines attitude as disposition to respond to an object, a person, an institution or an event in a favorable or unfavorable way. Perloff (2010) views attitude as "a learned, global evaluation of an object (person, place, or issue) that influences though and action" (p. 43).This perspective is based upon the assumption that it is not born or naturally occurs. Rather, it involves the ways individuals see and evaluate a particular thing through experience and change over time. Thus, this evaluation evolves and influences individuals' actions or decision-making in specific practices. Or in other words, attitudes direct individuals to doing what they believe (Perloff, 2010). In particular, it is thought that favorable or unfavorable responses towards implementing instructional or learning strategies are likely to contribute to understanding of how students participate in their learning process in general and learning speaking in particular. For the purposes of this study, attitudes are viewed as responses and reactions that students have towards learning to speak English as a foreign language.

3. The Study

A descriptive study using quantitative and qualitative approaches was used to gain insights into students' attitudes towards pair work activities in speaking lessons within a Vietnamese university context. This design is seen as appropriate for gaining insights into specific topic under investigation (Creswell, 2014). The study was conducted at a university in Can Tho City, Mekong Delta, Vietnam during the 2017-2018 academic years.

Participants in this study were 126 sophomores (53 males and 73 females) at a college of tourism in Can Tho City. Their age ranges from 18 to 24. The rationale for this selection is that these students had completed 120 periods of general English in their first year studies. Thus, based on the course design, these students were given opportunities to work in pairs. Eighteen students were interviewed individually.

The data collected in the study included questionnaires, classroom observations and interviews. The twenty-item questionnaire was classified into five clusters: interest (items 1-5), pressure (items 6-10), self-confidence (items 11-14), classroom management (items 15-16) and assessment (items 17-18). Items 19 and 20 as open-ended questions sought students' views of the benefits and challenges while working in pairs. The questionnaire was initially designed in both English and Vietnamese in order to ensure that respondents understood all the contents and felt comfortable while answering the questions. The reliability coefficient of the piloted questionnaire was high (α= 0.73), indicating the reliability of the questionnaire for this study.

4. Findings

4.1. Findings from Questionnaire

The following section presents the findings of the study with regard to students' attitudes towards pair work activities in speaking lessons. Analysis of the questionnaire reveals that students had positive attitudes about this type of interactive instruction as a result of their interest, as shown in Table 4.1.

Interest	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Like speaking	126	1.00	5.00	4.17	.96399
Enjoy pair work	126	1.00	5.00	4.07	.94808
Have fun	126	1.00	5.00	4.10	.94513
Prefer to have time for speaking	126	1.00	5.00	3.64	.89857
Feel comfortable	126	1.00	5.00	3.96	.88486

Table 1: Students' Interest towards Pair Work Activities

Table 1shows that the mean scores of five sub-categories of students' interest towards pair work are at a higher level than 3.5, the accepted mean for high level on the five-point scale (Oxford & Burry-Stock, 1995). In particular, they liked speaking with friends(M=4.17, SD=.96), enjoyed pair work (M=4.07, SD=.94), had fun (M=4.10, SD=.94), preferred to have time for speaking (M=3.64, SD=.89) and felt comfortable (M=3.96, SD=.88). A One Sample t-Test was used to evaluate whether the mean score of students' interests was significantly different from the test value (M=3.5) at a high level. The result of the One Sample t-Test reveals that there was a significant difference from the sample mean (t=7.85, df=125, p=.00). Therefore, it can be concluded that students were interested in pair work activities in speaking lessons.

Table 2reveals that the mean scores of students' pressure towards limited time in speakingare at high level (M=3.71, SD=.96), whereas the mean scores of three sub-parts: shyness(M=3.43, SD=1.17), speaking less because of mistakes(M=3.33, SD=1.20), and making mistakes while working in pairs(M=3.07, SD=1.03) are at medium, and that of teachers' anger is at low level (M=2.24, SD=1.13). Therefore, students were unlikely under pressure with regard to teacher's anger while doing their pair work.

Pressure	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Limited time in speaking	126	1.00	5.00	3.71	.96
Shyness	126	1.00	5.00	3.43	1.17
Teachers' anger	126	1.00	5.00	2.24	1.13
Speaking less because of making mistakes	126	1.00	5.00	3.33	1.20
Making mistakes while working in pairs	126	1.00	5.00	3.07	1.03

Table 2: Students' Pressure towards Pair Work Activities

As noted in Table 3, the mean scores of all four sub-parts related to students' confidence towards pair work activities are at high level (M= >3.89). These results reveal that in speaking lessons, students tended to feel confident while speaking.

Confidence	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Opportunities to speak	126	1.00	5.00	4.04	.73
Confidence in pair work	126	1.00	5.00	3.99	.88
Expression ideas	126	1.00	5.00	3.97	.88
Working in pair	126	1.00	5.00	3.89	.86

Table 3: Students' Confidence towards Pair Work Activities

As presented in Table 4, while the mean score of classroom management perceived as being easy is at high level (M= 4.0; SD=.85), that of classroom management as being not easy is at low level (M=2.20; SD= 98). This indicates that students when working in pairs tended to view classroom management as easy.

Classroom Management	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Management is easy	126	1.00	5.00	4.00	.85
Management is not easy	126	1.00	5.00	2.20	.98

Table 4: Students' Attitudes about Classroom Management in Speaking Lessons

Classroom Assessment	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Assessment is easy	126	1.00	5.00	3.70	.96
Assessment is not easy	126	1.00	5.00	2.43	1.03

Table 5: Students' Attitudes about Assessment in Speaking Lessons

As shown in Table 5, pair work was viewed as a tool for assessing students' speaking performance easily(M= 3.70; SD=.96), instead of a challenge (M= 2.43; SD=1.03).

4.2. Findings from Classroom Observations

At the beginning of the lesson, students were asked to watch a short video clip of the check-in a hotel room for about three minutes. Three pairs were then asked to present what the video clip was about. The following scenario illustrates an example of pair practices.

Students were asked to work in pairs to perform their roles about checking in for guests. Student A acted out the role of a walk-in guest asking for a room to stay overnight. Student B played a role of a hotel receptionist, providing information about room type, services, and payment. Then three pairs of students were called to present their ideas in front of the class. The teacher wrote some important notes about their talks on the board and provided comments on how they performed their task. (OB.S1.8:00–8:10 am)

Example:

SA (Receptionist)	Good afternoon, ma'am. What can I do for you?
SB (Guest)	Well, yes. I'd like a room please.
SA	Ok. Have you made your reservation yet?
SB	No, I have not made any. Are there any rooms available?
SA	Definitely. Would you like to have a single or double room?
SB	A single room, please. How much is it for one night?
SA	It's $40.
SB	That will be fine. Does the room rate include breakfast?
SA	Yes, a free breakfast buffet is included in the room rate.
SB	Alright. Thanks a lot.
SA	May I have your passport, please?
SB	Here you are.
SA	Thank you. Here is your key. Enjoy your stay.
SB	Thanks.

Table 6

During presentation time, the teacher introduced new words and structures to students. He elicited meaning of new words, phrases and sample structures on the board and explained which one was suitable or not suitable in terms of hospitality. This activity lasted five minutes. This is illustrated in the following scenario.

The teacher had students to look at the board. He explained the meanings of new words or phrases "walk-in, section, immediately" and sample structures "I want to move to the table near the window, if possible." And,"We'd like separate bills, if it is not an inconvenience." Students listened and took notes. (OB.S1. 8:30–8:35 am)

The video clip was played the second time, focusing on the use of sentence structures. Students were asked to repeat new words, phrases and structures, then to perform their roles. This activity lasted six minutes, as illustrated in the following scenario.

The teacher required student to repeat new words, phrases and sample structures after playing recordings. Students were then assigned to work in pairs to welcome and sit the walk-in guests, as noted in the conversation in textbook. One student performed the role of a host asking for information about reservation, the number of guests, and seating areas. The other acted a role of a walk-in guest to answer the host's questions. After four minutes of practice in pairs, five pairs of students were called to act out the conversation in front of the class. The teacher provided feedback to students (OB.S1.8:35–8:50 am)

For teaching resources, textbook was the main source of material for teaching and learning. Besides, the teacher also used real objects for students to practice as shown in the following extract.

The teacher brought captain orders form to class. He explained items on a captain order and information that a waiter had to complete when taking orders. Each pair of students received two captain orders. The teacher asked students to practice in pairs. Student A acted out the role of a waiter as taking notes of time, table number, and the like. Student B played a role of a guest at a restaurant reading the menu and ordering the food. Then they swapped roles. Time for practice is five minutes. Then students were called to present their roles in front of the class. The teacher moved around the class, checked how students worked out their tasks, and provided feedback on how they performed their task (OB.S1.8:50–9:05am)

The teacher provided students with formal language structures to practice. The following example demonstrates her feedback to students' mistakes.

When Lan (the teacher) heard students' statement like 'Tell me when you are read and want order your drink,'she took a note of this and waited until the pair completed the conversation. Then she asked if any could give appropriate answer. Otherwise, she corrected this mistake by saying the correct one, "Tell me when you are ready to order your drink, please." And had students repeat chorally, sometimes individually (OB.S1. 9:30 –9:40 am)

The extract above shows that the teacher played a role of a facilitator of student learning while students work in pairs. This strategy allows students to practice English in a natural and interactive way.

4.3. Findings from the Interviews

Analyses from the interview data indicate that eighteen participating students understood the importance of pair work activities in speaking lessons. For example, Han and Cong reported that they felt delighted while working in pairs.

I enjoy practicing speaking English in pairs because I find it easy and my speaking skill improved. I have more opportunities to speak with my partner without worry about mistakes. I also feel it like more natural during talks than talking in front of the teacher or the whole class (Han, interview extract)

I think it is useful as I can learn from my partner who is good at English(Cong, interview extract)

These views indicate that pair work was useful as it allowed them to maintain the conversations with others in a natural learning atmosphere, which could enhance their motivation and participation in using English.

Truc revealed that working in pairs could help her increase the feeling of confidence in speaking English. She shared her views:

I am fond of working in pairs just because I can use English in class to communicate with each other. I feel more confident and then I can speak more fluently (Truc, interview extract)

When asked if they were interested in working in pairs, Toan and Dat said:

I prefer working in pairs to working alone because this type of learning creates an interesting atmosphere. (Toan, interview extract)

Working in pairs is exciting activity to me because I can move around the class and share ideas with my partner. (Dat, interview extract)

Yen felt comfortable when she worked in pairs. She illustrated her response.

I feel comfortable when I work in pairs. I can share whatever I know with my friend because he understands me. (Yen, interview extract)

Furthermore, all interviewees stated that working in pairs brought them opportunities to speak English. For example, Xuan indicated:

Working in pair is wonderful to me. I have more time to practice speaking than learning in a traditional class. Pair work helps me improve speaking. (Xuan, interview extract)

Students shared that they could learn more vocabulary in a relaxed learning environment and improve their speaking performance. For example, Hieu and Tien stated:

My speaking skill and vocabulary are improved after talking with my partner (Hieu, interview extract)

My pronunciation becomes better perhaps as a result of talking a lot with my friend. Working in pairs helps me enhance my cooperation skill. I think it is necessary for my future job (Tien, interview extract)

Cong and A showed that pair work helped them improve interactive communication. The following examples illustrate their responses.

> After practicing speaking in pairs, I can express my opinions and get good ideas from my friend on a topic the teacher gave us (Cong, interview extract)
>
> My partner actually helped me correct some pronunciation mistakes whenever I made and I felt like talking more with him, for example knowing how to order foods or drinks at a restaurant (An, interview extract)

Although participants said that pair work activities help them a lot, they encountered some challenges. Xuan and Dieu expressed their opinions.

> While talking to each other, I do not have many words or ideas to express what I want to. Thus, I do not have good scores (Xuan, interview extract)
>
> Well, my friend sometimes does not understand what I say. He is afraid of being laughed at when making mistakes. I learn nothing during discussion. (Dieu, interview extract)

With regard to noise and isolation from pair work activities, Cong and Pham shared their ideas.

> It is very noisy as several friends talk in pairs. (Cong, interview extract)
>
> While playing our roles, lack of vocabulary to express my opinions makes me feel alone. Also, because my partner talks a lot, I feel like lagging behind them (Pham, interview extract)

5. Discussion

The findings of the study indicate that students had positive attitudes towards pair work activities that influence their English speaking ability. This finding supports studies by other researchers (Achmad & Yusuf, 2014; Baleghizadeh et al., 2014; T. Q. Nguyen, 2013) who contend that pair work could allow students to become better in speaking performance. It was worth noting that a natural and relaxed learning environment could increase feeling of confidence among learners(Pasha & William, 2014). These authors indicated that students once given an active role in sharing or expressing information with others they felt that they have an opportunity to use productive skill in their learning process and become responsible for their own learning.

Analysis from interview data suggests that pair work activities could improve student motivation and participation in speaking activities. Besides, pair work could help students improve interaction as a result of a non-threatening learning environment. These concur with the literature that indicates that the nature of interaction could enhance students' learning opportunities that pair work brings to students (Storch, 2002; Storch & Aldosari, 2012; Taylor & Wigglesworth, 2009).

However, students in this study reported that lack of vocabulary was a challengewhile working in pairs and thatsuch challenge also reduced the confidence from low-achieving students. These problems are consistent with a study by Nguyen(2008)who found that lack of vocabulary and confidence were the major reasons that hinder students from speaking. Some were found to be lagged behind their peers. A possible explanation for these challenges is that these students who were low at proficiency in English level were not provided opportunities to practice speaking. Thus, these challenges might be eased through teachers' endeavors to find out ways to get students actively involved in speaking English.

6. Conclusions

This study reveals the value of pair work activities in ESP speaking classes. In particular, students gained increased confidence while working in pairs as a result oftheir interest and greater opportunity to practice speaking English. However, some challenges encountered by students when working in pairs were identified as lack of vocabulary and grammar structures. Several implications are made for school administrators, teachers and learners at a college of tourism in Can Tho city. First, it is necessary for the school administrators to consider some best policies or innovative ways to promote student students' speaking. Once teachers are supported and encouraged to use pair work activities in their speaking classes, financially and emotionally, students will be motivated to learn and practice this active learning strategy that gradually replaces their traditional passive learning. Second, pair work is a collaborative activity creating good conditions for students to work and learn together; so there is a need for teachers to continue the use or integration of pair work into their lessons to get students familiarized themselves with a relaxing, comfortable learning atmosphere and participation. Third, teachers should not put the students in fixed pairs. Swapping students' roles in pairs is a good idea so that students do not get bored with working with the same partner. Teachers can ask good students to work and support the low-achieving. Students are willing to speak out if they are given opportunities to talk or provided support from the teachers. Fourthly, students should participate in pair work activities because they are supported with opportunities to practice. The findings from this study direct further investigation into how pair work can impact on student learning speaking in ESP classes at a college. It is recommended that investigating factors that influence teachers' attitudes towards pair work activities in speaking lessons at different colleges of sciences in Can Tho City may provide multiple views of this type of learning strategy to make best use of student learning outcomes in speaking. Further research with a larger sample size can result in more comprehensive views by teachers and students across the school in particular and other teaching contexts in the community in general.

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