

Students' Perceptions Toward Dyads and Triads in the English Classroom

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Abstract

Collaborative learning such as pair work and group work, has been widely discussed and proven to be an effective tool for teaching English. This study exclusively focuses on a dyad (a pair) and a triad (a group of three), and the students' perceptions toward these collaborative interactions because few studies have investigated the difference between students' perceptions toward dyads and triads. Those psychological aspects could play an important role in promoting a student's learning English and motivation. Furthermore, triads are considered as a basic unit of a group which creates a sense of being public. This could have a unique effect on students' feelings. 57 Japanese university students introduced themselves in dyads and triads. The questionnaires were administered to collect the data. The characteristics found in each interaction are categorized respectively in accordance with the findings of research in clinical psychology. The research results indicated that how they experienced both dyads and triads differed, although they had a positive attitude toward both of them. While participating in dyads is the preferred format for conversational practice as the students could converse quite easily and contribute to the conversation, adopting triad interactions in English lessons may provide a double advantage to students: learning English, and learning communication skills and social skills. This could have some implication when teachers use pair work and group work in English lessons.

Keywords: Pair Work, Group Work, Interaction, Students' Perceptions

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Introduction

Pair work and group work have been frequently adopted in class as a collaborative way of activating lessons and facilitating English language learning. Previous studies have shown the effectiveness of pair work and group work (Fernandez, 2012; Sajedi, 2014; Moradan & Ahmadian, 2016). The present study exclusively focused on a dyad (a pair) and a triad (a group of three), and psychological aspects because few studies have compared pair work and group work consisting of three people. Furthermore, triads are thought as a basic unit of a group. Having three people in a group creates a sense of being public and could affect students' reactions because in transitioning from dyad to triad interactions, students may recognize that they need to adapt according to the situation. In clinical psychology some researchers focused more on the students' feelings in an ordinary interpersonal setting and characterized some obvious tendencies in dyads and triads (Nagayama, 2018). This study investigates the students' preference for dyad and triad interactions and analyzes their perceptions and attitudes toward such in an English classroom setting. It proposes that an understanding of the students' psychological characteristics towards dyad and triad interactions, could enable teachers to better gauge students' perceptions when they are working collaboratively in the English classroom.

Literature Review

Group Work, Pair Work and Individual Work in An English Classroom Setting

A number of previous studies have reported the effectiveness of pair work and group work. In Tsumura (2013), university students with a low level of English who disliked English and initially had a negative view of pair work, were given the opportunity to work in pairs and consequently changed their opinion, stating that they enjoyed pair work and that they could learn collaboration from pair work. However, they also stated that they felt unease when partnered with a student who had a higher English ability. Sakamoto (2016) observed what happened between junior high school students when they worked on a writing task in pairs. During their discussions, affective factors such as a familiar relationship between the pair and feeling at ease with their partner, had an important impact on pair work. Fernandez (2012) compared group work, pair work and individual work. This research showed that texts written by pairs and groups were overall more accurate than those written individually and concluded that the effect of collaboration on accuracy may be related to the number of participants in the activity. In Fernandez (2013), the same collaborative writing task was used and learners' reactions were analyzed qualitatively. 55 university students were given a writing task in Spanish in both pairs and groups and subsequently answered a questionnaire about collaborative learning. 51 students expressed a positive attitude toward pair work and group work. The students who participated in the group work stated that they preferred group work to pair work because they received more knowledge from group members and had more opportunities to develop their target language. Furthermore, if partners and group members had the same level of language proficiency, there was limited opportunity to develop their language skills. A few studies have been done comparing the effectiveness of using dyads, triads and individual work in the language classroom. In Moradan & Ahmadian (2016), 61 Iranian English language students ranging in age from 10 to 13 were divided into three groups - two experimental groups (dyads and triads) and one control group (individual). All groups had storytelling sessions while the two experimental groups were also taught interaction and group work strategies. Pre- and post-tests were carried out by interview and the results showed that both dyadic and triadic interactions had positive effects on the

learners' oral proficiency, and that triadic interactions in particular, were the most effective. Sajedi (2014) also investigated the effect of dyads and triads on English language composition. 86 Iranian university students had collaborative summary writing in dyads, triads and individually. The results indicated that the number of participants affected the quality of their writing and pre- and post-tests revealed that dyads brought out greater scores on content, organization and vocabulary. Sajedi's study concluded that students in dyads did better than those who worked individually and in triads.

Group Work, Pair Work and Individual Work in Clinical Psychology and Computer Programmin

The idea of collaboration has been used in many fields. In clinical psychology, Nagayama (2018) examined how university students perceived dyad-triad interactions in ordinal face to face communication scenes. 140 students were asked to write their reactions when they talked in dyads and triads and their answers were analyzed by the Semantic Differential Method. The research revealed that while students tended to be more comfortable and at ease in dyads, they also felt challenged to keep the conversation going. Conversely in triads, the conversation tended to become more superficial and objective, as there is a sense of being in a more public setting when talking in triads. Yet they also felt at ease and the situation less intense, because the focus was not solely on them. Nagayama (2009) also compared the difference when a student engaged in a dyad situation and directly after, engaged in a triad situation. The students drew pictures to describe the subjective feelings in each case. The research illustrated that the subjective feelings were dynamically influenced by the number of people in interactions and the status of their relationship.

In computer programming, collaborative work has been used in pair programming. In Williams (2001), 41 university students in a Software Engineering class performed computer programming with their partner and also individually. 92 percent of the students said that they were more confident in their project when working with a partner and 96 percent of them said that they enjoyed the class work more when working with a partner. The results showed that pair programming also improved quality and reduced cycle time. Interestingly, programmers took pair pressure as a facilitator as they were highly motivated and did not want to let their partner down.

The effectiveness of pair work and group work has been verified by these previous studies in interdisciplinary fields. However, in order to derive the most advantage from collaborative work, it would be better to pinpoint affective factors which have a big impact on learning in an English classroom setting. Therefore, the present study addresses the following two research questions:

- 1) Which of the two interactions, a dyad or a triad, do the students prefer?
- 2) What views do the students have of dyad and triad interactions?

Method

Participants

This study was conducted in regular English classes. 57 second year students were enrolled in a lesson, English for Engineering, at an engineering university in Japan. The students were divided into two classes; one consisted of 21 students and the other 36 students. Their TOEIC score ranged from 265 to 990 ($M = 438.6$, $SD = 122.2$). 14 of the students had the experience

of living in a foreign country for a period ranging from two days to two months and two of the students lived in foreign countries when they were children for five to six years. Four overseas students from China and Indonesia were included.

Dyad and triad interactions

The classes were elective and consisted of students from several departments of the university. Therefore, some students met each other for the first time in class. Moreover, dyad and triad members were decided automatically by computer in each lesson, so generally the students had a different partner or group member. However, sometimes students had the same partners and group members due to absences which limited the class numbers. Based on these conditions, dyad and triad interactions were designed as an icebreaker at the beginning of each lesson, in order for the students to get to know one another and facilitate a smooth introduction to the lesson. The students introduced themselves to their partner or group members according to an interview sheet prepared by the researcher. It included 13 questions related to private matters, and one question about a topic in their engineering textbook. They were instructed to tell their partner and group members about themselves as though they were participating in a job interview in English. There was an added importance to this oral activity because it provided preparation for a possible real interview in the following year. They were given an interview sheet and were required to write a brief note about their partner or group members while talking with one another. They were also permitted to ask follow up questions if needed. Although the questions were set, how they asked and answered the questions and kept the conversation going, was decided by each individual.

Questionnaires

At the commencement of the course, a questionnaire was given to the students, asking general information such as their interest in learning English, their experience of pair work and group work, their extra-curricular study habits of English and any experience of staying in foreign countries. In order to collect their views on dyad and triad interactions in a qualitative way, the second questionnaire was conducted in the last lesson (Lesson 14), asking about their preference for dyad and triad interactions, and positive and negative points.

Procedure

At the beginning of each lesson, the students were given a seat allocation and had a new partner or new group members. The lesson commenced with a warm up conversation as an icebreaker. Using the interview sheet, each pair or group had a chance to get to know one another by introducing themselves and asking some follow up questions. When they had a dyad interaction, it took 5 to 10 minutes to complete the conversations and when they had a triad interaction, it took 10 to 15 minutes. During the conversations, they recorded some notes about their partner and group members on the sheet and after the conversations, they had a one-minute of reflection time to write their reflective comments on the sheet. From lesson 1 to 6, they had dyad interactions and from lesson 8 to 11, they had triad interactions. In lesson 12 which was the last chance for them to do this activity, they again had a dyad interaction. Their interview sheet was submitted to the researcher in lesson 12.

	Very much	Yes	Neutral	Not very much	No	No answer	Total
I like learning English.	3	11	25	14	3	1	57
I like pair work.	4	15	25	13	0	0	57
Pair work is helpful for learning English.	6	38	11	2	0	0	57
I like group work.	2	16	26	12	1	0	57
Group work is helpful for learning English.	5	30	18	3	0	1	57

Table 1 The first questionnaire

Results and Discussion

The first questionnaire

In the first questionnaire (distributed in lesson 1) the students were asked about their general attitudes toward learning English, pair work, group work and whether pair and group work were helpful for learning English. As evidenced in Table 1, 14 out of 57 students enjoyed learning English while 17 of them disliked it. 25 of them answered “Neutral”. This means that out of 57 students, 42 (17+25) stated no particular interest in learning English. Regarding pair work, 19 of them liked pair work while 13 of them disliked it. On the other hand, 44 of them thought pair work was helpful for learning English and only two of them thought it not helpful. In terms of group work, 18 of them liked group work and 13 of them disliked it. 35 of them also thought group work was helpful for learning English while only three thought it not helpful. It appears that they did not have a particular liking for pair work nor group work but they knew that both could improve their language learning. This may indicate that they may not have had enough opportunity to work in pairs or groups and that they might come to appreciate the collaborative work if appropriate pair work and group work were given to them.

The second questionnaire

Research Question 1

The second questionnaire was conducted in the last lesson (lesson 14). Firstly, as seen in Table 2, when they were asked whether they felt working in dyads was enjoyable, 28 of the 57 students stated that they enjoyed working in dyads while five stated that they didn't enjoy it. Regarding working in triads, 25 of them stated that they enjoyed working in triads while seven of them stated that they didn't enjoy it.

	Very enjoyable	enjoyable	Neutral	Not so enjoyable	Not enjoyable at all	Total
Working in dyads was enjoyable	3	25	24	4	1	57
Working in triads was enjoyable	3	22	25	6	1	57

Table 2 Students' preference for working in dyads and triads

	Dyads	Triads	Both	Neither	Total
Which was more enjoyable, working in dyads or triads?	26	25	5	1	57
Which do you prefer, working in dyads or triads from now on?	28	20	9	0	57

Table 3 Comparison between working in dyads and in triads

In comparison with the first questionnaire, the number of the students who had a positive image of dyad interactions increased from 19 to 28 and that of triad interactions increased from 18 to 25. After they had the conversational opportunities in dyads and triads in every lesson, they appear to have become accustomed to the collaborative work and felt more at ease in conversation.

Secondly, when dyad and triad interactions were compared, the numbers of students who had fun working in dyads (26) and triads (25) were almost the same. Five of them stated they enjoyed both (See Table 3). Overall, the students found working in both dyads and triads enjoyable. The reasons why the students chose dyad interactions were mainly concerned with their relationship to their partner. For instance, one stated that as there were only two of them, it forced them to focus on their partner and thus they were able to get to know their partner better. Another stated, "It was easier to know who was the speaker and who was the listener". In contrast, students who had a preference for triad interactions stated that it was mainly to do with the content of their conversations. For instance, some students pointed out that if there were more people, their conversation became lively and the content richer, which in turn made it easier to contribute more.

Next, in response to the question about whether they would prefer to work in dyads or triads in future classes, 28 out of 57 students expressed they would like to work in dyads, whereas 20 expressed they would like to work in triads. (See Table 3). Chi-square goodness-of-fit test with four categories was conducted to test the null hypothesis that the population proportions in each category are equal (i.e., the proportion is 1/4 in each group). The result found a significant difference ($p < .05$). As a post hoc analysis, pairwise comparison was also conducted between dyads and triads to test whether they are significantly different and no significant results were found ($p = .248$). This indicates that there is not a definite difference in preference between dyads and triads. Nine comments on why they now preferred dyad interactions were related to English. For instance, one student stated, "Dyads could improve my English ability and give me confidence". Another commented on the frequency of taking turns, which was not commented on in triad interactions. A unique comment on

working in dyads was that they “felt nervous in a good way”, which had a positive impact on their conversation, leading to a sense of responsibility for actively taking part in the interaction. These comments imply that dyads might be the best format for conversational practice. In dyads, they could converse quite easily and at the same time they could contribute to the conversation. On the other hand, 20 students expressed a preference for working in triads in future classes. Eight students stated that communication became easier if there were more people. For instance, one student wrote that “even if one person was not willing to talk, they could keep the conversation going”. They also stated it was easier for them to think of more follow up questions and receive more feedback because they could share more information and knowledge. Thus, they felt as if they were engaged in “real conversations”. Some students pointed out that if in future lessons they have more opportunities to have group work, these triad interactions may help them feel more confident when they have a collaborative job in their future workplace. In addition, nine students stated that they would like to have both dyad and triad interactions in future. They pointed out that dyad and triad interactions had both good and bad points and that they would like to have dyads first, followed by triads or have them in turns.

To sum up, in relation to the first research question, “Which of the two interactions, a dyad or a triad, do the students prefer?”, the numbers of students who preferred dyads and triads were almost the same and no significant difference was found between them. Most of the students enjoyed the conversation in dyads and triads. For future lessons, they expressed a preference for dyad interactions to triad interactions because some felt they could improve their English more in a one-on-one conversation and also there is a greater frequency in taking turns. However, the difference is minimal as they thought that in triads they could communicate with more people as they would in a real situation.

Research Question 2

As mentioned in Literature review, Nagayama (2018) investigated how university students felt toward dyad and triad interactions in everyday face to face communication scenes and categorized the characteristics into groups based on the students’ comments respectively. This research applied Nagayama’s (2018) categories since he focused on psychological aspects which could play a crucial role in interactions and outcomes. In comparing dyad and triad interactions in an everyday setting as Nagayama did, and an English classroom setting, as is the case with this research, some distinctive characteristics of the English classroom setting might emerge.

Firstly, in Nagayama’s study (2018), students’ perceptions toward dyad interactions were categorized into 7 groups; 1) concentrated, 2) straight and direct, 3) close and intense, 4) enjoyable, 5) secure and relaxed, 6) tired, 7) open. In an English classroom setting, most of these perceptions were also experienced. Many students mentioned the first three categories. They stated that in dyads they could concentrate on the conversation because it was a one-on-one conversation and they could have good eye contact between them. Limiting it to two people forced them to talk, resulting in taking more turns and close conversations. As the conversations became deeper, they appear to have got to know one another better, which is related to the next category. While Category No 4 is enjoyable in Nagayama, in an English classroom setting, some students stated they made a new friend by talking with their partner. This suggests that dyads interactions are not just “enjoyable” but they go beyond this with students likely to make friends with their partners. This may be partly because they are in the same department and their interests might be similar. Therefore, Category No 4 is referred

to as 'bonded' instead of 'enjoyable'. In Category No 5, secure and relaxed in Nagayama, similar comments are observed in this study, such as "It was easy to talk and ask each other questions", and "I felt at ease with my partner." On the other hand, they felt some pressure to say something to keep the conversation flowing. This could be partly because they felt anxious in speaking English. Interestingly, one student commented that this pressure was not a bad thing as it pushed her out of her comfort zone and she was challenged in a positive way. Therefore, Category No 5 includes mixed feelings such as secure and relaxed vs nervous and pressured. In terms of Category No 6, tired, in this study there were no comments regarding tiredness. Instead, some mentioned time limitations. Because they had limited time to complete the questions, some stated that they felt pressured and did not have enough time to ask follow-up questions. Others stated in comparison with triad interactions, they felt they had sufficient time to talk. Thus, in category No 6, in terms of time, there are opposing responses, some felt rushed and others felt satisfied with the time limit. In Category No 7, open, they also stated they could talk more positively and deeply because of only two members in the group. Other comments stated that there was repetition and their conversations became monotonous. This could be because having just two people, they could not expand their conversation easily. Such comments are not seen in triad interactions. To sum up, in relation to the second research question, "What views do the students have of dyad interactions?", the perceptions towards dyad interactions in an English classroom setting are categorized as follows; 1) concentrated, 2) straight and direct, 3) close and intense, 4) bonded, 5) secure and relaxed vs nervous and pressured, 6) time – rushed vs satisfied, 7) open, 8) repetitive and monotonous.

Secondly, in Nagayama (2018), when the participants had triad interactions, their perceptions were categorized in 9 groups; 1) easy, 2) spread and complicated, 3) unstable and uncomfortable, 4) caring and considerate, 5) adapting to the situation, 6) being public, 7) superficial, 8) objective, 9) unintentionally focused on one member only. Most of these elements were also observed in this research. In Category No1, easy, many students stated that they felt easy because there were three people in a group and they did not need to talk all the time and therefore did not feel anxious. Category No 2, spread and complicated, is characteristic in triad interactions. The students pointed out the difficulty of having a conversation with three people. They commented that topics got mixed up and sometimes went off topic, taking turns was not clear, and it was difficult to find a common interest. Category No 3, unstable and uncomfortable, is also only seen in triad interactions. Some students stated they were confused about when they should start the conversations, also that they did not know who should ask whom and who should answer the questions. This made the conversations difficult to progress and consequently members avoided eye contact. No 2 and No 3 are closely related and overlapped. Moreover, they stated that if one person only gave limited answers such as, "Me, too." or "Me, neither.", the conversation did not flow smoothly. Another student mentioned that if one person did not take the exercise seriously, then it was not easy for the other members to treat the task seriously. These comments as well as the ones related to Category No 2, reveal unstableness in having a group number of 3 which affected both the conversational flow and the relationship amongst members. Category No 4, caring and considerate, No 5, adapting to the situation, and No 6, being public, all reflected their feeling that they wanted to get along well with the other two members for the purpose of social harmony. For example, they commented that it was not easy to ask for help when they did not understand something that the others did. In triads they started to consider their relationship in a group, which made them adjust themselves to the other two members and the situation. In terms of Category No 7, superficial, the students also felt the same way as in an everyday conversational setting. They stated they felt some distance amongst the

group members and conversations became superficial. Category No 8, objective, is related to No 7 (superficial) in that the mental distance among them made them objective, too. Being objective, they tended to think about the power balance in a group of three, which leads to the last Category No 9. In Nagayama, the students paid attention to only one other member, but in this study, they paid attention to the other two members. They stated that when the others knew each other or had a very close conversation, they felt isolated and became passive and they found it difficult to join the conversation. Therefore, in triads, Category No 9 is paying attention to not only one but also two other members. Furthermore, regarding the characteristic “enjoyable”, which is seen in dyad interactions in an everyday conversational setting, in this study many students stated it was fun talking in triads. Triads do not mean just the increased number of people, but rather as the saying goes, “Two heads are better than one”. They were able to get more information and have more opportunities to learn new things including English language knowledge, which led to enjoyable and satisfying conversations. They may not have had many chances to work in triads before and thus the situation could have presented as quite challenging for them, because they had to consider their relationship to the other two people and the group dynamic. On the other hand, they might have felt free and more at ease because they were relieved of some of the pressure to keep the conversation going. Overall, in relation to the second research question, “What views do the students have of triad interactions?”, the perceptions toward triad interactions in an English classroom setting are categorized in 10 aspects. 1) easy, 2) spread and complicated, 3) unstable and uncomfortable, 4) caring and considerate, 5) adapting to the situation, 6) being public, 7) superficial, 8) objective, 9) paying attention to the other members, 10) enjoyable.

Conclusions

In this study, dyad interactions and triad interactions were compared in a classroom setting. The students who were majoring in Engineering had a 10 to 15-minute conversation introducing themselves at the beginning of each lesson. Their interlocutor or group members were randomly selected by computer, which means each time dyad and triad members were different. Overall, they had a very positive attitude toward dyads and triads but they had a slight preference toward dyad interactions. In order to understand the students’ perceptions towards dyads and triads, they were categorized into several aspects according to Nagayama’s findings (2018). Dyad interactions having only two people, makes the students feel more at ease and they can directly concentrate on their interlocutors, leading to a close relationship. In contrast, triad interactions are more complicated for the students, although more conversation and information can be exchanged. Because triads have more members, one must take care to be inclusive of all participants. This can result in feeling uncomfortable and confused. At the same time this negative aspect gives them an opportunity to learn a sense of being public and develop social skills. One student mentioned triad interactions could provide practical preparation for their future career. Therefore, adopting triad interactions in English lessons may provide a double advantage to students: learning English, and learning communication skills and social skills. This could have some implication when teachers use pair work and group work in English lessons

In closing, this study has several limitations. Firstly, how to make dyads and triads. In this study, a computer generated the pairings and groupings, so the students’ intention or preference is not reflected. If they were permitted to freely choose their interlocutors and group members, they might have different perceptions toward dyad and triad interactions. Another option can be having the same interlocutors or group members all the time. Secondly,

since this study was implemented as part of a lesson, the number of the participants was small. A greater number of participants should be included to collect more qualitative data. Thirdly, with regard to the categorization of the students' perceptions, this was decided by one researcher only. In order to improve the reliability, more researchers' judgments should be included. Furthermore, this study shows only qualitative and subjective aspects of the students' perceptions but quantitative data should be also included. Finally, self-introduction was used in this study, but some other classroom tasks can cause different reactions from the students.

To sum up, dyad and triad interactions can be an effective tool to help those students in particular whose major is not English, as most of the students enjoyed dyads and triads and were able to improve their English learning, communication skills and social skills by conversing with their classmates. Hiromori (2018) said that motivation can be greatly affected by others both in a good way and a bad way and that when groups have a good relationship, motivation can be transmitted to others in a positive way. In order for students to get involved in English lessons actively, teachers should keep the students' psychological factors in mind and use dyad and triad interactions more.

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