EFFECTIVE PAIRWORK STRATEGIES TO ENHANCE SAUDI PRE-INTERMEDIATE COLLEGE STUDENTS' LANGUAGE PRODUCTION IN SPEAKING ACTIVITIES

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Abstract
	Classroom dynamics remained one of the most critical areas in the field of English language teaching and methodology. Pairwork and pairing strategies have been the focus of this study in regards with increasing language production in speaking activities for Saudi pre-intermediate college students. Participants in this study are university-preparatory-year students (60 students) and EFL/ESL teachers (15 teachers) in the same program. Data collection included an attitudinal questionnaire to investigate students' attitude towards various strategies of pairing up students for speaking activities. In addition, a semi-constructed interview was used to examine teachers' perception of the importance of pairwork in classrooms and the effectiveness of various strategies. Moreover, the researcher acted as an overt observer to measure students' production during various pairing strategies in an overt-focused observation. Researcher's findings showed some discrepancies between teachers' and students' perception of pairwork strategies. Saudi students prefer to pair up with a higher-level student (L-H) as they tend to rely on colleagues to complete tasks rather than asking teacher to help. On the contrary, teachers prefer same-level pairing to provide equal learning opportunities for all students.

Keywords: Pairwork, speaking, activities, same-level, mixed ability, language production

Introduction
	In a conversation about teachers' professional development in one of the Saudi governmental universities, preparatory-year-program director reported that very few teachers in the university use pair work in their classrooms. Therefore, this study focuses on pairwork as a vital element in language learning in general. In order to narrow the scope of this study, the

researcher focuses on effective strategies of pairwork to enhance Saudi prep-year students' language production in speaking activities. Moreover, this study attempts to investigate the attitudes of Saudi pre-intermediate college students towards pairwork in general and towards pairing strategies in particular. In addition, this study examines the effect of pairing strategies (e.g. pairs of the same level or pairs of mixed abilities) on students' output during speaking activities. Participants are enrolled in a governmental university in a preparatory year program. Since, the need of school reform was raised by the Saudi government in the late 1990s (Prokop; 2003), the preparatory year program was proposed as part of this educational reform. This program provides necessary academic skills to high school graduates to meet the common academic admittance requirements of Saudi universities.

What is pairwork?

Many theories and language teaching approaches highlight the importance of pairwork (e.g. communicative approach, task based learning) as a form of collaborative learning. Furthermore, Lightbown and Spada (1999) state that students are able to develop their language competence and achieve a better performance in a collaborative environment than they would be capable of independently. According to Richards and Schmidt (2002, P. 381) pairwork is a learning activity which involves learners to work together in pairs. Longman dictionary of language teaching defines pairwork as putting students in small groups of twos or threes to do an activity together. These two definitions introduce the term form a mechanical point of view. Another definition that ties pairwork to learning is by Moon (2000) who defines pair work as a strategy "to organize them (students) in ways that will maximize opportunities for learning" (p.53). The last definition seems more convenient to the purpose of this research as the researcher aims to focus more on the strategy rather than the formation of students during pairwork activities. Therefore, working in pairs enriches and promotes meaningful interaction between the learners and as a result will increase their language production. Hence, introducing pair work as an effective strategy increases students' language production in terms of speaking tasks.

Advantages and disadvantages of pairwork

Although, it is quite clear that pair work is a valuable method to implement in EFL classrooms, there could be some disadvantages of pairwork implementation. Hadfield (1992, P.110) argued that "In many ways pairwork or small group work can be a destructive activity". On the one hand, one advantage of pair work is that it increases learners' opportunities to use the language. Pairwork provides an effective method to use language as it is used in normal life. This matches Moon's claims that pairwork is

"valuable in providing more opportunities for more language exposure" (2000, p.54); this enables students of expressing themselves and express their own ideas in English.

On the other hand, there are some possible problems with pair work tasks. According to the researcher's experience classroom management might be negatively affected during pairwork. Harmer (2001) argued that students might deviate from the main topic and talk about something else during pairwork (p.116). The same issue was raised by Moon (2000) claiming that pair work could lead to misbehaviour and may distract students from effective learning. In addition, research proved that students tend to use their first language during pairwork activities. Moreover, according to the researcher experience pairwork might help one student rather than the other. Consequently, as argued by Hadfield (1992) that we need to understand that though "pairwork is in essence divisive in that it fragments the class ..... I am not, of course, suggesting that we abandon pairwork". Therefore, pairwork has a vital function in language learning so we can't ignore it, but at the same time we should be careful not to lead to "a sense of fragmentation, conflict, or purposelessness." (Hadfield 1992:p.110)

Pairwork current status in university prep-year classrooms

According to the researcher six-year-teaching experience in the preparatory year in Saudi Arabia, teachers have different views and various strategies in regards to pairwork. During a teacher discussion about pairwork, some teachers claimed that pairwork is not convenient for the Saudi classes as it raises the chances of students' misbehaviours. This notion was supported by (Moon 2000) claims about the correlation between pairwork and less classroom management. In addition, the preparatory-year supervisor informed me that almost half of his teachers didn't use pairwork during their observed lessons. Moreover, some teachers in the same preparatory-year program answered my question about the strategy they follow to pair up their students by "haphazardly"; every student works with the student sitting next to him. On the other hand, some other teachers showed a lot of enthusiasm for pairwork and said that they are using different pairwork strategies.

Literature review

Although a lot of research highlighted collaborative learning such as group work and pairwork, a very few number of these studies investigate the nature of group or pair interactions (Storch, 2001). Pair work as an essential element in EFL/ESL classes, has a very clear effect on students performance during speaking activities; Storch accepted pair work as a "classroom organization that promotes speaking practice and negotiations of meaning"

(2001 P.29). In addition, Nunan (2003) claimed that pairwork can be used to increase the amount of time that learners get to speak in the target language during lessons which reflects more language production (p. 55).

A relevant study done by Storch conducted in a large Australian university, investigated the performance of three pairs of adult ESL students on a writing task assigned in class. Storch looked at the nature of pair interaction in a tertiary ESL classroom. This study examined the pattern of pair interaction in its totality, noting the traits that characterize the way the pairs worked. Also, since the task used in this study was one which required learners to produce a written text, the second aim of the study was to examine whether there were links between the way the pairs interact and the quality of their written product (language production). The researcher relied on audio recording and took observation notes as data collection methods. This study proved that collaboration between pairs is essential to learning success. In addition, this study gave preference to the mixed ability pairs as the mixed ability pair achieved the best language production. Storch formed this mixed ability pair as a lower-level student with a higher level-student. Therefore, these findings confirm the importance of the nature of pair interaction for the learning opportunities available to the students.

On the other hand, Harmer (2001) claimed that working in pairs can be problematic when some students interact with peers who are linguistically weaker than them. This contradicts with Storch findings which confirmed that a pair of mixed ability (L-H) students produced the longest text, but not the most complex; this reflects the usefulness of mixed-ability pairing strategy.

Another relevant study done by Abdulla (2007) carried out in a government primary school for girls, in the United Arab Emirates. The participants in this study are four female grade-five students. The researcher tried to investigate the following questions; can oral communication skills be enhanced by using pair work in the EFL classroom in the UAE? What effect does the use of oral tasks during pair work have on students' interest and attitude? This is a small-scale, classroom-based action research project which focuses on investigating a classroom situation and trying to improve it by engaging in a continuous action-reflection-action cycle. For data collection, two types of observation were used, participant observer and non-participant observer. The research results proved that students are interested in, and motivated by, working with their friends so there are several advantages in using pairwork to enhance young learners' oral communication skills. It provides chances for students to learn the language in a meaningful way.

Thus, research approved that pairwork is essential. At the same time, there is a need to investigate various strategies of pairing up students in productive language activities like speaking and writing. Consequently, this

study discusses the pre-intermediate learners' attitudes towards being paired up with the same level student, being paired with a higher level student (L-H), being paired with a lower level student (H-L) in Saudi Arabia hypothesizing that:

1. Saudi students have a more positive attitude towards pairwork rather than working individually.
2. Saudi students feel more comfortable to work in pairs of the same level.
3. Teachers prefer to put their students in same-level pairs during speaking activities.
4. Saudi students produce more language when they are paired with a higher-level student.

Method
Study context

This study was conducted in the English Language Unit, Deanery of Academic Services in a governmental university. For the purpose of this study and in order to choose a representative sample of students, the researcher randomly chose two groups out of more than 25 groups belonging to the preparatory-year program in this university. This preparatory-year program aims to develop students' English language competency to be able to join different colleges afterwards.

Data collection

This study was conducted using both qualitative and quantitative method. The quantitative part was based on an attitudinal (5-Likert scale) questionnaire which investigated Saudi students' attitude towards pairwork in general and the benefit of various pairing strategies in particular. The qualitative part was consisted of teachers' semi-structured interviews and classroom observations. These interviews investigated the effectiveness of pairing strategies from teachers' point of view.

Students' questionnaire (appendix 1)

The first data collecting tool in this study was a sixteen-item questionnaire; ten items were a (5-Likert scale). The questionnaire was designed to investigate Saudi-university students' attitude towards pairwork in general and pairwork strategies in particular. The questionnaire was divided into two sections; the first section investigates students' personal information, language level and language background. The second part investigated students' attitude towards pairwork and the effectiveness of various pairwork strategies. The second section included 10 statements divided into four constructs. Statements (1, 3, 4 and 9) investigated learners'

attitude towards participating in pairwork activities in general (hypothesis 1). The second construct (statements 2, 6 and 8) measured learners' comfortability while participating in different pairwork strategies (the same level pairing or mixed ability pairing) (hypothesis 2). The third construct measured (Statements 5, 7 & 10) measured students' preference of various pairing strategies with regards to language production (hypothesis 3).

Teachers' interviews (see appendix 2)

The second data collection tool was a semi-constructed interview. Semi-structured interview was used because it provides a very flexible technique for small-scale research (Drever, 1995). The participants in this study were students as well as teachers. However, since he interviewed only 15 teachers, it was considered best to use semi-structured interviews in the case of teachers, as it allows thematic analysis of the qualitative data (See Alvarez & Urla, 2002). In addition, they are used when more useful information can be obtained from focused yet conversational two-way communication with the participants. Because of this approach the interviewee had flexibility and freedom in deciding what needed to be described/ argued, how much explanation to offer, and how much detail to be used. This interview targeted fifteen teachers and included two main topics; the use of pairwork in classes (hypothesis3) and the effectiveness of various pairing strategies during speaking activities (hypothesis 4).

Classroom Observation

The third data collecting tool in this study was classroom observation. The researcher used overt-focused observation. This focused observation concentrated on one aspect of the research field (students' production during various pairwork strategies); the researcher tended to write down notes in order to collect accurate data and not to forget it. The researcher observed two of his classes and one class for another teacher.

Participants

Students targeted by this study belonged to the preparatory-year program in a governmental university. These students studied general English and English for academic purposes. The preparatory year program included more than 25 groups; the researcher randomly chose two groups of students (32 participants) for the purpose of the study. All the groups participated in pairwork activities during this one-year program. In this study, the researcher had access only to the male students section due to social factors of the Saudi society.

Procedures

A speaking placement test was done in order to divide participants according to their speaking abilities (e.g. higher level and lower level). In addition, a questionnaire that investigated pre-intermediate Saudi students' attitude towards pairwork was conducted. 32 students participated in this questionnaire (two were excluded); these participants have participated in many pairwork activities through the preparatory-year course. The researcher distributed the questionnaire and gave clear instructions to the students to make sure they understand its purpose. Some questions were asked by the researcher to double check participants understanding. All the selected groups completed the questionnaire under the supervision of the researcher. Finally, data was collected from the questionnaire and analyzed. In addition, fifteen teachers were interviewed; a semi-constructed interview style was chosen for the purpose of this research. Qualitative data was collected and analyzed. The student questionnaire and the teacher interview revealed a different ways of pairwork perception.

Therefore, In order to support or negate the questionnaire results, the researcher taught two separate classes for the same group of participants in which the students practiced pairwork in two different strategies; in one class the students were asked to work in pairs of the same level while in the second class students were paired in mixed ability pairs. Moreover, the researcher observed another teacher and took notes about various pairwork strategies. The researcher observed the students' language production in these three classes; researcher's findings are analyzed.

Results

SPSS software was used as a data analysis tool, and the participants' responses were analyzed in terms of themes related to the study objectives. The questionnaire was divided into two sections. The first section examines current status of pairwork and students' personal information. The second part investigates learners' attitude towards pairwork in regards to comfortability and language production.

Students' questionnaire

Section Two: Pre-intermediate general attitude towards pairwork.

Table 1: The percentage of students' responses to statements (1, 3, 4 &9) which represents the first construct in this section (Learners' attitude towards working in pairs and pairwork in general)

		Statement 1	Statement 3	Statement 4	Statement 9
RESPONCES	SD	0.00	4.1	0	45.8
	D	0.00	4.1	13.9	37.5
	N	0.00	0.00	27.8	8.3
	A	41.66	54.1	38.9	4.2
	SA	58.33	37.5	19.4	4.2

Table 1 reflects students' attitude towards pairwork in general. Statement one reveals that 99.99% of participants agree that working on pairs increases their learning chances. Also 91.6% of students feel enthusiastic about participation in pairwork activities (statement 3). 58.3 % of students prefer to work in pairs rather than working in groups (statement 4). In addition, 83.3% disagrees that they feel bored during pairwork (statement 9).

Table 2: The percentage of students' responses to statements (2, 6 & 8) which mirrors the second construct in this section (the effect of various pairwork strategies on learners' comfortability)

		Statement 2	Statement 6	Statement 8
RESPONCES	SD	0.00	4.1	20.8
	D	8.3	16.6	41.6
	N	4.1	12.5	16.6
	A	54.1	50.0	16.6
	SA	33.3	16.6	4.2

Table 2 illustrates the effect of various pairwork strategies on learners' comfortability. 87.4 % of participants feel more comfortable to be paired with a higher-level student (statement 2). 66.6 % of students feel more comfortable to be paired up with the-same-level student (statement 6). Statement 8 reflects that 20.8% of students prefer to work with a lower-level student.

Figure 1: Students' comfortability: Students feel more comfortable when they are paired with.........
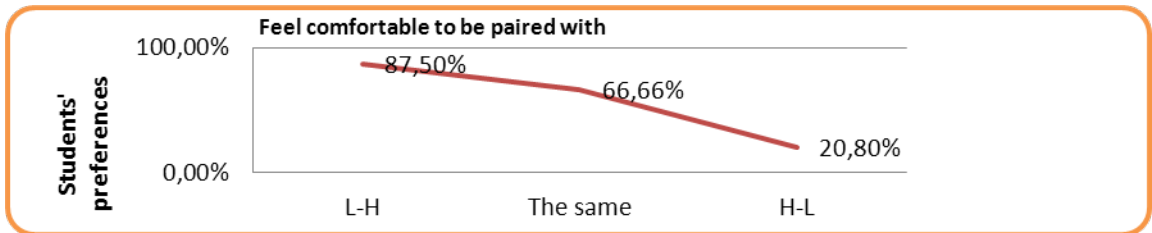
Figure one summarizes students' preference of various pairing strategies in regards to comfortability.

Table 3: The percentage of students' responses to statements (5, 7 & 10) which mirrors the third construct in this section (the effect of various pairwork strategies on language production)

		Statement 5	Statement 7	Statement 10
RESPONCES	SD	0.00	8.3	0.00
	D	25.00	4.2	8.3
	N	37.5	12.5	8.3
	A	29.2	58.33	41.6
	SA	8.3	16.6	41.6

Table 3 reveals the effect of various pairwork strategies on language production. 37.5 % of participants produce more language when they work with a lower level student while 37.5% remain neutral about this statement (statement 2). If they are paired with a same-level student, 74.9 % of students believe that they produce more language (statement 6). Statement 10 reveals that 83.2% of students produce more language when they work with a higher-level student.

Figure 2: Students' language production: Students achieve better language production when they are paired with.................

Figure two reveals the students' language production during various pairwork strategies (students' view).

Teachers' Interview

Figure 3: Teachers' preference in regards to pairing strategies (the same level or mixed ability).

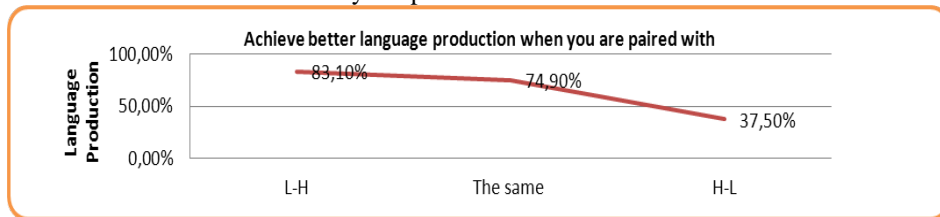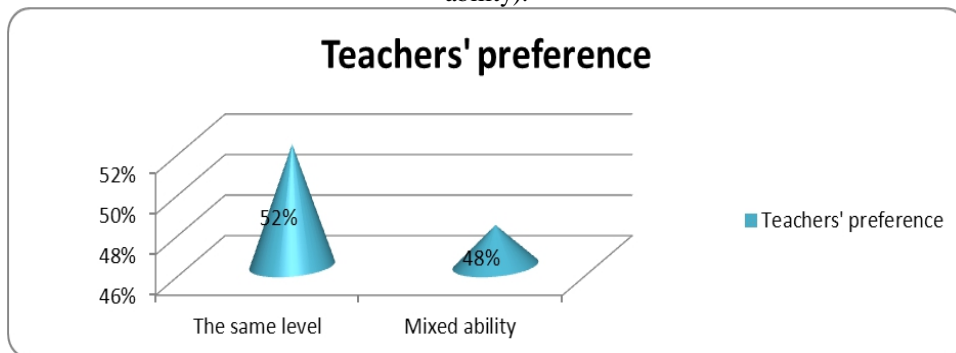Figure three reflects that 52% of teachers prefer same-level pairing which contradicts with students' preference that gives priority to the mixed-ability pairing; especially when paired with a higher-level student.

Classroom Observation
Table 4: Classroom observation results:

Table four, classroom observations, illustrates that students make more sentences when they are paired in same-level pairs. In addition, they produce less number of sentences when they are paired with a higher or a lower-level student.

	The same level	**Mixed abilities**
Language production	Better language production (more sentences)	Less language production (less number of sentences)
Task fulfilment	Complete the task in a short time	Task take longer time

Discussion
Hypothesis and study findings
Data analysis driven from the first construct (table 1) reveals that hypothesis one "Saudi students have a more positive attitude towards pairwork rather than working individually" seems to be true as results of learners' questionnaire revealed that almost all students find pairwork an effective tool for language learning. In addition, Saudi students feel more enthusiastic about pairwork than group work (another collaborative learning activity). This concurs with both Storch (2001) and Abdulla's (2007) findings. In addition, data analysis driven from the second construct (table2) proves that hypothesis two "Saudi students feel more comfortable to work in pairs of the same level" seems to be not true.

In L2 research, a number of researchers (e.g. Donato, 1989, 1994; Ahmed, 1994) have drawn attention to the nature of learners' interactions and its relationship to language learning. Therefore, the second and third constructs of students' questionnaire target the effect of various pairwork strategies on learners' comfortability and language production. These Results shown in table2 and figure one give superiority to mixed ability pairing over same-level pairing. Particularly, Saudi students feel more comfortable to be paired with a higher-level student which concurs with Storch (2001) findings and contradicts with Harmers (2001) believes. According to researcher's experience and classroom observations, Saudi students feel more comfortable to work with higher-level students as this secures a learning resource for them. Moreover, they might feel shy about asking the teacher while they can easily ask their colleagues.

On the contrary, the data analysis driven from teachers' interviews (figure 3) revealed that the third hypothesis "Teachers prefer to put their students in same-level pairs during speaking activities" seems to be true as

52% of teachers prefer to use same-level pairing strategy. This contradicts with students beliefs presented in the second hypothesis. Teachers believe that same-level pairs encourage competitiveness between students and ensure the quality of language production. In addition, some teachers claimed that in mixed-ability pairs students might learn each others' mistakes.

Therefore, classroom observations was planned to investigate the issue of (L-H, H-L or same -level) pairing strategies that suite Saudi classes and achieve better language production. Class observation (table 4) revealed that the fourth hypothesis "Saudi students produce more language when they are paired with a higher-level student" seems to be not true as mixed-ability pairs in general achieved a less number of sentences and required longer time to fulfil the task. At the same time, in same-level pairs, students achieve more language production (more sentences) and they finished the task quickly.

Conclusion

To sum up, the research illustrated some discrepancies between teachers' and students' perception of pairwork strategies. Saudi students prefer to pair up with a higher-level student (L-H) as they tend to rely on colleagues to complete tasks rather than asking teacher to help. On the contrary, teachers prefer same-level pairing to provide equal learning opportunities for all students. For classroom-based results, the researcher observed students performance that gave priority to same-level pairing. However, (H-H) pairs work effectively, (L-L) pairs seems vulnerable in this situation. Therefore, the researcher believes that low level pairs should have graded tasks which reflect their level and serve their development. Therefore, the researcher believes that teachers can organize the pairs in a balanced way so each student will get the benefit, and through monitoring, pairwork strategies could be effectively applied.

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Appendixes
Appendix One: Students' questionnaire English Version Student Questionnaire Cover Letter
Dear Student,

You are invited to participate in this research study. The goal of this questionnaire is to collect information about your experiences with learning English and your views about pairwork. You are asked to participate in this study because you are currently studying English as a foreign language in the English Language Center.

If you agree to participate in the study, you will respond to the enclosed questionnaire that will ask English learning experience and statements that will investigate your attitudes toward pairwork. It may take you up to 20 minutes to complete the questionnaire. The results of this research study will be given only in summary form. If you choose to participate in this study, all information obtained will be maintained in strict confidence by me and no information about your identity will be disclosed.

Participation in this research study is voluntary. You have the full right to decide not to participate in the study at all, or to withdraw at any time without penalty. Participation or non-participation will not affect your

grades or status at the institute. By completing the survey you indicate that you agree to participate in this research study. If you have any concerns or questions about this study, please feel free to contact me.

<div align="center">
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Key definitions:
Individual work: When all the students in the class work individually.
Pairwork: When students work in twos or threes.
Group work: When students work in fours or more as a group.
Same-level student: a student who has the same speaking abilities or level.
H-L: When you work with a student who is a lower-level student.
L-H: When you are paired up with a student who is a higher level student.
First Section:

1. **Age:**
   a. **18-21**   b)**22-24**   c)**25-28**
2. **In which level you are you studying?**
   a. **Beginner**
   b. **Pre-intermediate**
   c. **Intermediate**
   d. **Pre-advanced**
   e. **Advanced**
3. **How do you evaluate your ability to speak English?**
   a. **Beginner**
   b. **Pre-intermediate**
   c. **Intermediate**
   d. **Pre-advanced**
   e. **Advanced**
4. **For how many years, you have been studying English?**
5. **Do you communicate in English outside the classroom? Yes/ No**
   If your answer is "Yes", where? (Mention a maximum of 3 places)
   ....
6. **During English classes, students are given a chance to practice...................**
   a. **Individual work only**
   b. **Pairwork only**
   c. **Group work only**
   d. **All**

Item No	Statement	SD	D	N	A	SA
1	Speaking to a colleague increases my learning opportunities	1	2	3	4	5
2	During pairwork, I feel more comfortable to be paired up with a higher-level student (L-H)	1	2	3	4	5
3	Speaking to a colleague in the class supports my confidence	1	2	3	4	5
4	I prefer to work in pairs more than working in groups.	1	2	3	4	5
5	During pairwork, my language production is better when I am paired up with a lower-level student (H-L).	1	2	3	4	5
6	To be paired up with a same-level student makes me feel more comfortable during speaking.	1	2	3	4	5
7	During pairwork, my language production is better when I talk to a same-level student.	1	2	3	4	5
8	I prefer to work with a lower-level student when it comes to pair work (H-L).	1	2	3	4	5
9	I easily get board while listening to a colleague speaking English	1	2	3	4	5
10	During pairwork, my language production is better, if my partner is a higher-level student (L-H).	1	2	3	4	5

Thank you for your time

Appendix Two: Teachers' semi-constructed interview.

Teachers' Interview
Dear colleagues,
Your participation in this interview is highly appreciated. This interview is designed to serve a research entitled Effective pairwork strategies to enhance Saudi pre-intermediate college Students' Language production in Speaking Activities.
Pairwork strategies are: A) The same level   B) Mixed ability (High-low or low-high)
First Topic: the use of pairwork in classes:
1. Do you use pairwork in your speaking lessons?
2. Do you find pairwork effective in language learning?

Second Topic: Various pairing strategies in regards to students' production:
3. How do you pair up your students for speaking activities?
4. For language production, which pairing strategy do you prefer? Why?
5. For language production, what are the disadvantages of other pairing strategies?
6. If you choose mixed ability pairs, which one do you prefer High-low or low-high? And why?
7. What are advantages and disadvantages of both strategies when it comes to language production?

Thanks for your time
Jolanta Mackowicz Ph. D.
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