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GROUPING STRATEGIES DEVELOPED IN A 9TH GRADE CLASS

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RESUMO

Primeiro, como um estudante da graduação em Letras-Inglês que fez parte do programa Residência Pedagógica, me pediram para desenvolver um projeto a ser aplicado nas turmas de Ensino Fundamental II. Durante o desenvolvimento do projeto, surgiu uma pergunta: Como agrupar os alunos? Dadas as circunstâncias, duas opções foram discutidas em relação a esse assunto, então, como estagiários, poderíamos nomear os participantes dos grupos ou permitir que os alunos decidissem com quem trabalhariam. Assim, este estudo analisa dois tipos de estratégias de agrupamento: a selecionada pelo aluno e a designada aleatoriamente. Além disso, visa encontrar evidência de que uma pode ser mais eficaz que a outra. Seguindo as diretrizes de Chapman (2006), as perguntas a serem respondidas são: Os grupos selecionados pelos alunos realizam melhor as atividades? Até que ponto um grupo tem um desempenho melhor que o outro? Quanto às questões de pesquisa propostas, havia dois grupos de estudantes: o grupo selecionado pelos alunos e grupo designado aleatoriamente. No grupo selecionado pelos alunos, os alunos escolheram seus colegas, enquanto no grupo designado aleatoriamente, os alunos foram designados aos pares aleatoriamente. Em seguida, os dois grupos realizaram uma atividade para testar seu desempenho. Como consequência, este estudo sugere que, ao usar a estratégia de agrupamento selecionada pelo aluno, os alunos tenham melhor desempenho.

Palavras-chave: Desenvolvimento de professores. Estratégias de agrupamento. Desempenho dos alunos.

ABSTRACT

First, as a language arts undergraduate student taking part of the *Residência Pedagógica* program, it was asked from me to develop a project to be applied with Brazilian middle school grades. During the development of the project a question arose: How to group the students? Given the circumstances two options were discussed regarding that matter, so, as pre-service teachers, we could either appoint the participants of the groups or let the students decide who they were going to be working with. Thus, this study is looking at two types of grouping strategies: the student-selected and the randomly-assigned. Also, it aims at finding proof to which one may be more effective than the other. Following Chapman's (2006) guidelines the questions to be answered are: Does student-selected groups perform activities better? To what extent does one group perform better than the other? As to answer the research questions proposed, there were two groups of students: student-selected group and randomly-assigned group. In the student-selected group, students chose their peer, while in the randomly-assigned group, students were assigned to peers randomly. Then, both groups performed an activity as to test their performance. As a consequence, this study suggests that when using the student-selected grouping strategy students perform better.

Keywords: pre-service teacher's development, grouping strategies, students' performance

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Introduction

First, as a language arts undergraduate student taking part of the *Residência Pedagógica* program, it was asked from me to develop a project to be applied with Brazilian middle school grades. The project created had to provide an alternative to the English teaching system of the school following three main lines of thought: Integrated lexical approach, Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge or TPACK, and Critical literacy.

According to Michael Lewis (1993, apud Sethi and Agarwal, 2013) the integrated lexical approach is a method for teaching foreign languages based on making the students understand lexical phrases and use them as chunks. Also, Lewis not only points out the shift from grammar to vocabulary, but also highlights the importance of teaching collocations, fixed and semi-fixed expressions and idioms. In this perspective, students would perceive grammar patterns of the language while having vocabulary at their disposal for speech production.

The Second theoretical line, TPACK emerged from Shulman's PCK (1986, apud Koehler and Mishra, 2009) described as the awareness of the teachers not only to understand the content of their classes but also adapt it to the specific context of their classrooms. In this respect, allying that concept to teaching with technologies, the model TPACK came into being. Thus, for teaching with technologies to be effective, teachers are required to understand the concepts of using technologies, the pedagogical rationale that relates technology to the content of the class and how the use of technology help students to build from their existing knowledge.

Third, according to Anderson and Irvine (1982, apud Shor, 1999) critical literacy can be understood as the process of creating the conscious of self, historically and in the context of power relations, through learning how to read and write.

Regarding the project applied with the middle school grades, it was called Recreation in English. Also, it was developed by me and one peer. Additionally, we proposed the idea of having students compete, in groups, in small games and activities where the use of English was rewarded with points with the objective of consolidating the content learned in their classroom.

The project was applied in the lab classes of English in order to make use of the technological tools the school had to offer. Also, the activities were made taking in

consideration the vocabulary the students had already learned together with the vocabulary they needed for the regular classes. All games and activities proposed were presented by means of collocations instead of isolated words. However, during the development of the project a question arose: How to group the students?

Given the circumstances two options were discussed regarding that matter, so, as pre-service teachers, we could either appoint the participants of the groups or let the students decide who they were going to be working with. In this respect, there were arguments in favor and against both options. Regarding the first option, the teachers would have more control of the class and a more organized pattern of choosing once the goal was to group the students according to their attendance list number. However, we were thought that the students could get discouraged participating in a group they did not feel comfortable with.

Regarding the second grouping option, we could let students choose who their peer would be. This would imply that, by choosing, students would end up overly motivated creating additional problems, making classes become disruptive.

One important aspect considered was prioritizing classroom management, and the student-teachers preferred to choose the participants of the group. As expected, in the beginning of the project there were several students who did not want to interact or participate in the activities alongside with their respective groups. Yet, by the end of the project some of those students tried their best to cooperate with each other.

Still, the decision on how to group the students was never based off empirical evidence. In this perspective, it is natural that student-teachers would still make an effort to put their hypothesis to test once it is relevant for pre-service teachers to know how to group their students efficiently for when they start teaching on their own.

Thus, this study is looking at two types of grouping strategies: the student-selected and the randomly-assigned. Also, it aims at finding proof to which one may be more effective than the other. In this respect, the questions to be answered are: Does student-selected groups perform activities better? To what extent does one group perform better than the other?

Review of Literature

Taking in consideration the types of group formation mentioned previously, it is important to mention what has been studied about them.

In the purest form, using random assignment for group composition means that each student in the class has an equal likelihood of being selected into a group. The instructor decides how many groups to have in the class and then randomly assigns students to each group. [...]The self-selection method of group assignment allows students to choose their own group members. Students appear to first select friends to work with and then, if necessary, make additions to the group based on someone's seating proximity or by adding students who are known as "good" group members. (CHAPMAN, 2006, p.559,560)

In this respect, there are findings in favor and against each grouping strategy. On one hand, according to Chapman (2006) the randomly-assigned group is fair in the sense that each student has the same number of chances of being in a particular group. However, once the composition is decided by chance, the group may not be put together well. On the other hand, Chapman (2006) points out that while the self-selection composition may lead to a positive group dynamics, it still can make the participants that were chosen last feel left out making them cooperate less with the group. In this context, Chapman writes:

The research to date has not rigorously or adequately addressed if method of group assignment makes a difference in the nature or valence of group dynamics and outcomes. In particular, an experiment needs to be conducted that tests the two most commonly used methods of group assignment: self-selection and random assignment. (CHAPMAN, 2006, p.561)

With that in mind, this research tries to find evidence that different grouping strategies lead to different outcomes.

Methodology

As to answer the research questions proposed, there were two groups of students: student-selected group and randomly-assigned group. In the student-selected group, students chose their peer, while in the randomly-assigned group, students were assigned to peers randomly. Then, both groups performed an activity as to test their performance.

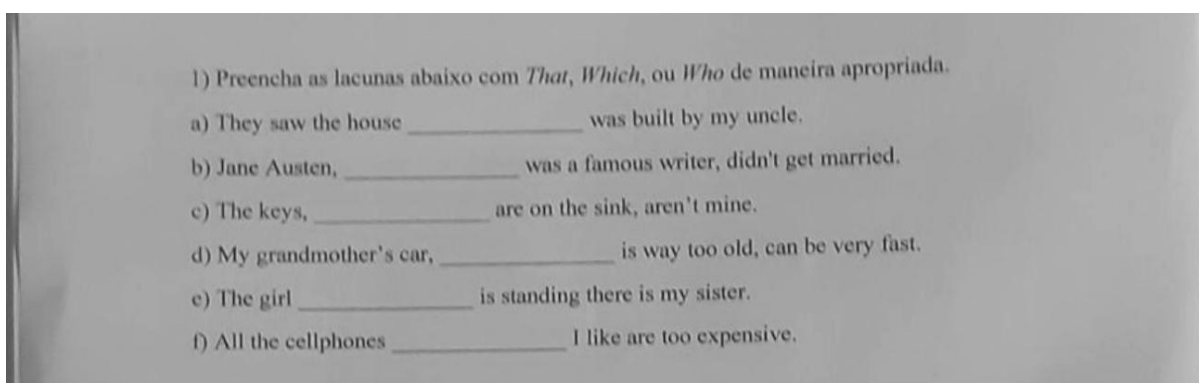
The activity was composed of three exercises and it was applied in two different classes of 9th graders. The exercises were aimed at grammar, vocabulary, and production, according to what is required from 9th graders students from the Brazilian public education system. In one of the classes, the students were divided in random 14 pairs and they were considered the randomly-assigned group. In the other class, the students

chose their partners and formed 14 pairs to solve the activity and they were considered the student-selected group.

Focusing on the exercises, they worked as a review of the content that would be in the 9th graders following test. In this context, both classes were learning about relative clauses with *who*, *that*, and *which*, word formation, and noun phrases. Also, the teacher followed the guidelines of the workbook. Regarding those guidelines, for relative clauses with *who*, *that*, and *which* the students have to fill in the blanks with the correct relative pronoun. Second, for word formation it requires the students to add suffixes to existent words in order to form new words. Finally, for noun phrases the students have to create noun phrases from given nouns, adverbs, and adjectives. Then, the activity applied on the students followed the same guidelines and were structured as it follows.

In the first exercise there were 6 relative clauses that had to be completed with the right relative pronoun, so the students had to fill in the blanks either with *who*, *that*, and *which*.

Figure 1: Exercise 1



Source: Elaborated by the author

The second exercise required the students to connect 7 words to 3 types of suffixes to the translation of the word formed.

Figure 2: Exercise 2

2) Ligue os radicais aos sufixos para formar as suas respectivas traduções.

Exemplo		
Radical	Sufixo	Tradução
1 - Fellow	A - er	(2 C) Perfeitamente
2 - Perfect	B - ship	(1 B) Sociedade
3 - Work	C - ly	(3 A) Trabalhador

Radical	Sufixo	Tradução
1 - Bank	A - er	() Bolsa de estudos
2 - Complete		() Banqueiro
3 - Fight		() Completamente
4 - Legal	B - ship	() Editor
5 - Publish		() Legalmente
6 - Relation	C - ly	() Lutador
7 - Scholar		() Relacionamento

Source: Elaborated by the author

The third exercise showed 14 new words, among them nouns, adverbs, and adjectives, so the students could create 7 noun phrases relating the words formed in the second exercise with the new words.

Figure 3: Exercise 3

3) Crie *noun phrases* relacionando duas das palavras abaixo com uma das palavras da questão 2. As palavras não serão usadas mais de uma vez.

Exemplo		<i>Noun phrases</i>
_____ + _____ + worker		very strong worker
_____ + _____ + fellowship		unfair college fellowship
perfectly + _____ + _____		perfectly correct decision

Abusive (abusivo(a))	Athletic (atletico(a))	College (faculdade)
Correct (correto(a))	Decision (decisão)	Divorce (divórcio)
Famous (famoso(a))	Full (completo(a))	Incredibly (incrivelmente)
Intelligent (inteligente)	Rich (rico(a))	Strong (forte)
Unfair (inusto(a))	Very (muito)	

a) _____

b) _____

c) _____

d) _____

e) _____

f) _____

g) _____

h) _____

Source: Elaborated by the author

Focusing on the application of the activity, it took course during two of the regular English classes. This type of class takes 50 minutes to be finished. In this context, the first minutes of the class was destined to the arrangement of the students; for randomly-assigned group students to find and sit with their assigned partners and for student-selected group students to choose their partners and sit with them. Thus, the students would have around 30 minutes to solve the first two exercises of the activity once there had to be some time for the correction of these exercises before going into the last one. Moreover, the students would have the second class to answer the third exercise. However, on the day of the application of the activity, the class of the student-selected group did not start at the expected time, instead, the application of the activity was 30 minutes delayed. In this context, the student-selected group had only 20 minutes to finish the third exercise. Finally, after the class was over the pre-service teacher took any remaining activity being solved at the moment.

Furthermore, to answer the research questions proposed, the pre-service teacher categorized the students' performances as it follows: accuracy, time, and production. In relation to accuracy, the first two exercises were designed to have 13 items. Regarding the percentage of correctness, students who scored between 9-13 were perceived as if they had an above average performance, students who scored exactly 9 were perceived as average performance and students who scored less than 9 were perceived as if they had a below average performance. In relation to time, as mentioned before, the students would have the second class for the completion of the third exercise but the student-selected group had less time to finish it. In particular, the performance was evaluated as positive, if students completed the exercise within 20 minutes, and as negative, if students did not finish the exercise within that time. Regarding to production, it was taken in consideration the amount of noun phrases produced and out of these phrases how many of them could be considered coherent. In this respect, if more than half of the noun phrases produced were considered coherent, the performance was considered as above average, if half of the noun phrases produced were considered coherent, the performance was considered as average, and if less than half of the phrases were considered coherent, the performance was considered below average.

Afterwards, the pre-service teacher compared the total of students in each category and found out if the students from the student-selected group performed better than the students from the randomly-assigned group. Also, the result and discussion from the

answers of the exercises provided the information about to what extent which group was superior to the other.

Results and Discussion

The results are going to be presented following the chronological order that the exercises occurred. The first two exercises relating to accuracy are going to be presented before the last exercise that relates to time and production. With that in mind, the analysis of each exercise will provide sufficient information for the classification of the performance of the students. When it comes to accuracy and production, the classification will be as below average, average, and above average. In relation to time, the classification will be as within 20 minutes or more than 20 minutes.

Regarding the first exercise, most pairs from the student-selected groups were able to complete the sentences with the correct relative pronoun. However, some of the pairs had trouble doing it. Looking at the mistakes those pairs made, it is possible to draw some assumptions.

Table 1 – First Exercise – Student-selected

ITEMS	Correct Answer	Incorrect Answer
Item A	11	03
Item B	13	01
Item C	11	03
Item D	06	08
Item E	13	01
Item F	10	04

Source: Elaborated by the author

First, on items A and F the right relative pronoun to be used is ‘that’, the pairs that got them wrong completed the sentences with ‘which’. Second, on items C and D the right answer is ‘which’ but most pairs that got them wrong completed the items with ‘that’. In this perspective, those students show a difficulty to differentiate both pronouns from each other. Also, on items B and E which most of the students did not have trouble getting it right, there were two pairs that completed the sentence, respectively, with ‘that’ and ‘which’, indicating that the same difficulty to differentiate the pronouns from each other also exists in relation to ‘who’ but in a smaller scale. On a different note, on item

D there were three pairs that completed the item with ‘who’ but it is possible that the pairs had trouble differing the subject ‘grandmother’s car’ from ‘grandmother’.

Still on the first exercise, most pairs from the randomly-assigned groups were also able to complete the sentences with the correct relative pronoun. Moreover, there were less mistakes comparing to the student-selected group. However, it is still possible to analyze the mistakes those pairs made.

Table 2 – First Exercise – Randomly-assigned

ITEMS	Correct Answer	Incorrect Answer
Item A	09	05
Item B	14	00
Item C	14	00
Item D	11	03
Item E	13	01
Item F	10	04

Source: Elaborated by the author

In resemblance to student-selected group, the pairs from the randomly-assigned group that got the items A and F wrong also completed the items with ‘which’. In addition to that, even though there was no mistake on item C, the pairs that got item D wrong also misplaced ‘which’ for ‘that’. Also, on item E there was a misplacement of ‘who’ for ‘that’. Thus, the similar occurrences in both groups endorse the idea that some 9th graders still have trouble with the use of those three relative pronouns.

Going into the second exercise, there was a larger difference between the two groups. In this respect, while the rate of mistakes from the pairs of student-selected group slightly went up, the opposite happened to the pairs of randomly-assigned group. Still, both groups had most of the pairs responding to the exercise in a positive way. In this context, the pairs had to combine one number, representing a word, with a letter, representing a suffix, in order to form a new word and then assign that combination to the translation of the new word.

Table 3 – Second Exercise – Student-selected

ITEMS	Correct Answer	Incorrect Answer
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Item A	05	09
Item B	13	01
Item C	12	02
Item D	09	05
Item E	13	01
Item F	11	03
Item G	10	04

Source: Elaborated by the author

From the analysis of the mistakes from the pairs of student-selected group, most students were able to guess, from the initial word, the translation of the word. However, most of them were not able to tell which suffix led them to the correct answer. Also, there was a pair that, on items A and D, only misplaced the initial word. In contrast, there were two pairs that misplaced, on item A, not only the initial word, but also the number.

Table 4 – Second Exercise – Randomly-assigned

ITEMS	Correct Answer	Incorrect Answer
Item A	12	02
Item B	13	01
Item C	13	01
Item D	14	00
Item E	14	00
Item F	14	00
Item G	13	01

Source: Elaborated by the author

Similarly to the pairs of the student-selected group, the pairs from the randomly-assigned group that got the answers wrong were not able to identify the correct suffix to form the right combination. Moreover, there was one pair that preferred not to answer item A.

Hence, most pairs from both groups responded to the first two exercises positively. Although, the mistakes some pairs made were critical for the classification of the group. While in exercise one the error rate from both groups was somewhat similar, in the second exercise the randomly-assigned group lessened that rate while the student-

selected group increased it. Thus, data shows that, regarding accuracy, the randomly-assigned group outperformed the student-selected group, as portrayed in the following table.

Table 5 - Accuracy

Grouping Strategy	Below average	Average	Above average
Student-selected	4	1	9
Randomly-assigned	0	1	13

Source: Elaborated by the author

Moving into the last exercise, due to the aforementioned delay problem, the classification of the groups, regarding time, had to be made taking in consideration the amount of time the student-selected group had to finish the task. In this context, the student-selected group slightly outperformed the randomly-assigned group regarding time.

Table 6 - Time

Grouping Strategy	Within 20 minutes	More than 20 minutes
Student-selected	5	9
Randomly-assigned	4	10

Source: Elaborated by the author

Still in the last exercise, there is another form of analysis for it; production. First, it is possible to organize the groups' productions by quantifying all of them according to what was considered adequate for the task: a noun phrase with three words; two new words presented in the current exercise combined with one formed in exercise two. As a result, the following table is presented.

Table 7 – Third Exercise

Number of Noun Phrases	Student-selected	Randomly-assigned
1	0	0
2	1	0
3	2	0
4	0	2
5	3	0
6	1	4
7	7	8

Source: Elaborated by the author

First, all the pairs were able to write at least two adequate noun phrases for the exercise. Second, half pairs from both groups were able to write the seven noun phrases required from them. However, for the group's production to be better analyzed it is necessary to measure how many of those noun phrases make sense. Thus, analyzing how many noun phrases, out of the ones produced, can be considered coherent gives us a better perspective on those productions.

Table 8 - Production

Grouping Strategy	Below average	Average	Above average
Student-selected	9	0	5
Randomly-assigned	9	1	4

Source: Elaborated by the author

Analyzing the 'Above average' section, it is possible to say that most pairs in it, from both groups, were pairs that produced seven adequate noun phrases. However, out of those, the commonest result was that they only wrote four coherent phrases each. Moreover, there were two pairs in the student-selected group, one that produced two noun phrases and one that produced three noun phrases, which all of it was considered coherent phrases. Also, there was a pair in the randomly-assigned group that even though only wrote six noun phrases, they were able to produce five coherent phrases, making them the pair out of all the groups with more coherent phrases written.

On the 'Average' section, one pair from the randomly-assigned group was able to produce four noun phrases but only made sense in two of them. It is important to point out that the pair was able to create three perfect coherent noun phrases with only two of the words from the task but unfortunately those noun phrases did not meet the command of the exercise and could not be accounted for the analysis.

Now, analyzing the 'Below average' section, it was a diverse set of productions that diverged from the original number of noun phrases produced. First, there were two pairs from each group that did not write any coherent noun phrase. On one hand, from those pairs, the ones from student-selected group wrote originally seven noun phrases. On the other hand, the pairs from randomly-assigned group, one wrote originally six noun phrases while the other wrote four of them. Also, there were three pairs in the student-selected group that wrote at least one coherent noun phrase while in the randomly-

assigned group there was one pair in the same situation. Moreover, in both groups there were three pairs that wrote at least two coherent noun phrases. Finally, four pairs wrote three coherent noun phrases; one pair from the student-selected group and three others from the randomly-assigned group.

Thus, when we look solely at the numbers of coherent noun phrases produced, the randomly-assigned group outperformed the student-selected group. However, once the analysis is looking at the progress the pairs made within their groups, it is possible to say that, in fact, the student selected group, regarding production, outperformed the randomly-assigned group.

Conclusion

As a conclusion, this study was made with the intention to find evidence as to what is the most effective way of grouping students in a classroom. In this respect, two groupings strategies were put to test: the student-selected and the randomly-assigned. The analysis of those strategies was based off the performance of two grades of 9th graders, each grade grouped according to the strategies mentioned, in an activity composed of three exercises. Also, that performance was categorized in the terms of accuracy, time, and production. Thus, in relation to accuracy the randomly-assigned group performed better than the student-selected one. However, in relation to time and production, the student-selected group slightly outperformed the randomly-assigned one. As a consequence, this study suggests that when using the student-selected grouping strategy students perform better.

Nevertheless, it is vital to point out that the study analyzed the students' performance of one review activity. With that in mind, it is not possible to confirm that one strategy is more effective than the other. In this context, there are more possible ways to look at that topic. For instance, the type of activity applied and the continuous use of the same grouping strategy. Does the student-selected grouping strategy outperform the randomly-assigned one when the performance analyzed is of a practice type activity instead of a review type? Or does the performance of student-selected groups is still consistent when used multiple times during a semester or school year? Those are questions worth looking into before being assertive as to which grouping strategy is more effective.

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