

EFL STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES TOWARDS PEER TALKS IN LEARNING

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Abstract

In this paper, Vygotsky provides a useful conceptual understanding of ZPD in which students can benefit from having talks with others in increasing their capability of knowing something. This idea of social constructivism underpins the need for opportunities for collaboration and support, and for learning. Individuals are required to construct self-knowledge and develop new perspectives, by engaging in hands-on activities rather than using structured information.

This study will reveal the students' perspective on how they negotiate their problems through conversing with each other. The problem-based conversation will play among students themselves in their initial academic development. This study supports Vygotsky's (1978) theory by highlighting the importance of talk in social interaction as a prerequisite for increasing students' achievement.

The results of this study will show genuine responses from students' point of view on peer talks. The results will also uncover why they enjoy learning by doing peer talks.

Keywords: EFL students, peer talks, perspective, responses

1 INTRODUCTION

Vygotsky (1978) states that the majority of learning is not obtained in isolation, but rather through interaction with others in socially-embedded contexts. However, such interaction needs to occur within the zone of proximal development (ZPD). It is defined as "the distance between the present everyday actions of the individuals and the historically new form of societal activity that can be collectively generated" (Engeström, 1987, p. 74).

According to Vygotsky, the ZPD pivots around three key aspects (Nguyen, 2017). First, it can be seen that learning involves more than an individual person trying to construct it individually, highlighting the dialogic nature of the interaction. This emphasizes the value of providing learners with opportunities to work with other capable peers, teachers, and/or adults. Second, it emphasises the roles of an individual in sharing and constructing knowledge. And third, the

active interaction between participants is viewed as being dynamic and dialectical (Dimitriadis & Kamberelis, 2006).

ZPD provides a useful conceptual understanding of how students can benefit from cooperative learning for those who are considered to be adult learners in the process of learning how to teach. This idea of social constructivism underpins the need for opportunities for collaboration and support, and for learning. Individuals are required to construct self-knowledge and develop new perspectives, by engaging in hands-on activities rather than using structured information (Lubic, 2000). Although Vygotsky's notion of the ZPD posits the role of capable peers/teachers in adult guidance and collaboration, this would not exclude peer talks involving peers of equal status because when two people are working together, one may well be more advanced in his or her thinking and can be considered a more competent peer.

Having peer talk in the process of learning enables students to share information without any boundaries. Kram and Isabella (1985) state “information sharing gives both individuals technical knowledge and perspectives on the organization that better enables them to get their work done” (p. 117). otherwise, McDougall and Beattie (1997) argue that information sharing may be considered a learning behaviour because, by being engaged as utilitarian and holistic peer, individuals can learn from each other through a free exchange of information and ideas, sharing their work issues as a result of mutual work interests while adopting different professional perspectives. Other expertise, Mumford (1993) shares that peer relationship also emphasises that information sharing about organisational changes and difficulties is one type of peer relationship evidenced. It is apparent that within organisational settings, peers can learn from each other through information exchange.

This study will reveal the students’ perspective on how they negotiate their problems through conversing with each other. The problem-based conversation will play among students themselves in their initial academic development.

2. MATERIALS AND METHOD

2.1. STUDENTS’ PERSPECTIVES

The definitions of perspective have been proposed by many experts. One of it states that perspective is the state of one's ideas, the facts known to one, etc., in having a meaningful interrelationship (Dictionary.com). Cambridge Advanced dictionary (2015) states that perspective is a particular way of considering something. Webster (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/perspective>) notes that the definition is a mental view or prospect. From those definitions, it can be inferred that perspective is a way or mental

view of considering something. Students’ perspective, then, is referred to students’ way of considering something.

2.2. PEER TALKS IN LEARNING

Tudge (1992) emphasises that “social interaction between peers who bring different perspectives to bear upon a problem is a highly effective means of inducing cognitive development” (Tudge, 1992 , p. 159 in Nguyen, 2017)). Furthermore, Nguyen (2017) also states that some researches have found that peers offer support that leads to cognitive development. And, that even low levels of support from a peer can assist an individual’s growth. Goos, Gailbraith, and Renshaw (2002) state that when this view is applied to educational settings, “there is learning potential in peer groups where partners have incomplete but relatively equal expertise—each partner possessing some knowledge and skill but requiring the others’ contribution in order to make progress”.

Students tend to negotiate their problems through conversing with each other. Miller (2008) emphasised the role that problem-based conversation played among students themselves in their initial professional development. His study supports Vygotsky’s (1978) theory by highlighting the importance of talk in social interaction as a prerequisite for increasing students’ competence. Miller (2008) claims that conversations among peers created contexts and opportunities to explore overlapping ZPDs that exist in any peer group. The role of each participant is to guide the other to move through their ZPD. Thus, in peer talks, collaborative learning through interaction with others actively engages students as adult learners in the exchange of ideas and experiences, and negotiates meaning from multiple perspectives.

Nguyen (2017) states that peers provide the psychosocial function of emotional support by listening to and counselling each other during periods of

transition and stress. As a result of confronting similar problems or based on their own immediate experiences, peer may more readily offer empathetic emotional support rather than just sympathetic support". Mumford (1993), who supports Kram and Isabella's (1985) descriptions of psychosocial peer functions, adds that peers or colleagues can go to each other for information or work related discussions as well as for emotional support (Mumford, 1993).

Nguyen (2017) also shares that a number of other studies (Bullough et al., 2003 ; Cosh, 1999 ; Forbes, 2004 ;e.g.,Goodnough et al., 2009 ; Kurtts & Levin, 2000 ; Le Cornu, 2007 ; Nokes, Bullough, Egan, Birrell, & Merrell Hansen, 2008 ; Slater & Simmons, 2001 ; Walsh et al., 2002) has confirmed the role of peers in lessening stress, burnouts, intimidation, and isolation. Working in pairs or groups of peers makes them feel supported and committed to shared responsibility for their situation (Campbell-Evans & Maloney, 1997 ; Maloney & Campbell-Evans, 1998 ; Walsh et al., 2002 in Nguyen, 2017).

Kram and Isabella (1985) also found that peers can provide friendship, enabling individuals to become confidants. Psychosocial functions are more personal: they rely on an emotional bond between individuals. other expert, Angelique et al. (2002) emphasise that "because of the relative equality, participants may more readily offer confirmation, emotional support, personal feedback, and friendship than participants in traditional mentoring relationships".

Such evidence indicates that peer relationships at work can reach the level of friendship. Rymer (2002) posits that non-traditional mentoring needs to engage individuals in open-ended dialogue about a wide range of issues, including personal matters.

The peer talk relationship tends to be relatively stress-free and enjoyable because peer collaboration occurs in a non-threatening and non-evaluative environment. Participants in a peer talk process can gain confidence in each other through sharing their beliefs and points of view without fear of losing face or risking exposure to others.

2.3. METHOD

This study is descriptive exploratory. Exploratory research is the researcher's tool to understand an issue more thoroughly, before attempting to quantify mass responses into statistically inferable data. It refers to only one variable that is peer talks seen from the students' perspective. This study also explores the students real response and feelings when they are learning by conversing to others. The subjects of this study are the students in Curriculum and Material Development class. They are 30, consisting of 2 males and 28 females. The data were collected trough questionnaires.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the questionnaires given to these students, the results can be seen as such. In terms of whether the students have ever experienced peer talks before, there are 29 who have ever experienced with peer talks and 1 hasn't. It can be seen in table 1 below.

Table 1. Students' prior experience

	Yes	No
Have you experienced peer talks?	29	1

From the table, it is clear that most students (97%) have prior experience on peer talks. It shows that in conducting lectures, the lecturers have let students have discussion with their friends. They are also asked to have nice conversation with the peer in elaborating topics and solving problems. The only students who hasn't got prior

experience in having peer talks before might have been absent for days so that he does not have any experience in having peer talks in class activities. The chart of this data can be seen in the figure bellow.



Figure 1: Prior experience on peer talks

The second question of the questionnaire is whether the students enjoy learning with their peer or with the lecturer. The result can be seen in the following table.

Table 2. Students' preference in learning

	Peer	Lecturer	Both
Do you enjoy learning with your friends or lecturer?	25	4	1

The data illustrate that 25 students or 83% prefer learning with their peer in various activities inside or outside of the class. 4 students or 13% enjoy learning with the lecturer only. Learning with both lecturer and peer seems to be the preference of only 1 student. When they are asked why they enjoy having peer talks in having classes, they answer that when they are conversing with their peer they feel less threatening. When compared to when they are having lectures with the lecturers, they still own such feeling of threatened. The situation of having lectures with the lecturers is not like in the evaluation environment. on the other hand, when the students are having talks with other students, the situation is not that terrible. Therefore they don't have fear of losing face. The diagram expressing students' preference

in learning can be seen from the figure below.

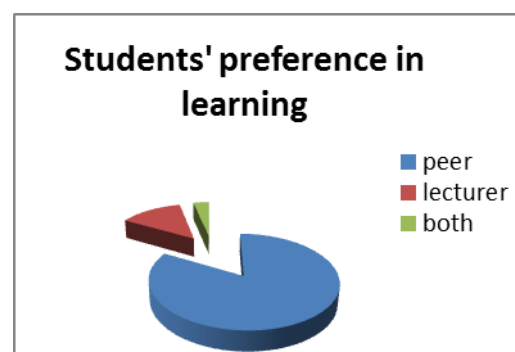


Figure 2: Students preference in learning

The next question is why the students enjoy learning with their peer. The answer can be seen from the table below.

Table 3. Students' reasons of preferring peer talks

	fun	Easy-going	communicative	Easily understood
Why do you prefer learning with your peer?	29	28	20	25

The data depict the reasons of enjoying learning with their peer. 29 students or 97% like having peer talk because it is fun. When having peer talk students seem to feel relaxed and free to share more ideas without worrying of having wrong responses. They also feel free to make jokes while having peer talk on a topic. They don't have fear of losing face or risking exposure of others.

The next reason of being fond of peer talk is that the activity is easy-going. There are 28 students state that it is easy to conduct and easy to maintain nice talk to the peer. They also state that they often need more time to have peer talk. When they start their talk, they seem to be completely engaged with the talk. Such engagement let the students be important parts in the process of the talk and keep on maintaining the talk without having fear of insulting others.

The other reason of enjoying having peer talk is that it is communicative. 20 students share that it is easy to transfer ideas in a peer talk since they have their own codes to make it easy to convey ideas.

The last reason of liking peer talk is that in it the material is easily understood. It has been stated previously that the students feel free to have their own codes to transfer ideas. This allows others to get the information transferred easily with no disturbance of diction.

The reasons of enjoying having peer talk can be illustrated in the following figure.

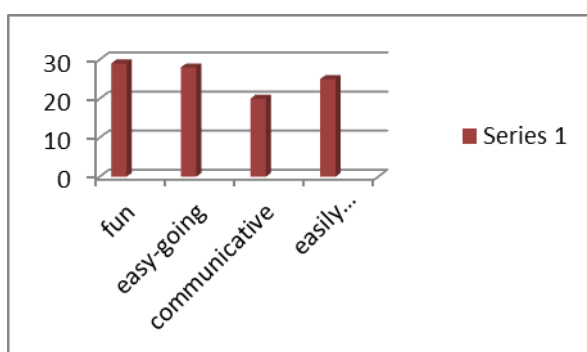


Figure 3: reasons of preferring peer talk

4. CONCLUSIONS

From the data presented in the previous part, it can be concluded that; (1) Actually the students have prior experience in peer talks, (2) Most students enjoy learning by having peer talks, and (3) The students enjoy having peer talk in learning because the activity is fun, easy-going, and communicative. Besides, the material is also easily understood.

Indeed, when the students enjoy doing peer talk, the lecturer can control the talk to be always on the track.

5. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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