

KEYNOTE SPEECH

Peer interaction and second language learning: What are the possibilities?

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Peer interaction is increasingly a feature of language classrooms, but not all teachers and students view it positively, begrudging time they believe would be better spent under the teacher's instruction. This paper explores some of the potential roles for pair and group work and suggests that peers can make a unique and important contribution to language learning in the classroom, often playing a complimentary role to teacher-fronted interaction.

Introduction : What is peer interaction?

In a discussion of communicative language teaching and task based language teaching in East Asian classrooms, Littlewood (2009) highlights many of the concerns surrounding the use of pair and group work. These concerns include problems of classroom management (noise and discipline issues); minimal or inane use of English; a lack of relevance to formal assessment needs; and a mismatch with the culture of teaching and learning in some settings. In this paper, while acknowledging these difficulties, I hope to provide a picture of “what could be”, by thinking about the strengths and limitations of pair and group work, and the unique ways in which peer interaction can contribute to second language use and development in foreign language settings.

Peer interaction is described as “any communicative activity carried out *between learners*, where there is minimal or no participation from the teacher” (Philp, Adams, Iwashita, 2014, p3). An essential characteristic of peers, whether children or adults, is that they are relatively equivalent in status in contrast to the teacher. Their relationships are more symmetrical than the teacher-student relationship where the teacher is invested with authority, and is recognised as having greater knowledge and experience (Blum-Kulka and Snow, 2009; Philp et al, 2014). This isn't to say that peers don't differ: in some classes they may be of different ages, proficiency level or class groups, but as peers they share a common purpose and identity as students, not experts.

While a teacher's instruction and feedback is usually accepted unconditionally, the equivalence of peers means that they are able to contest each other's ideas, accept or reject feedback, puzzle over how things fit and readjust understandings. Peers may challenge one another, trigger noticing of problems in language use, and weigh up possibilities. This kind of experimentation with language is unlikely with the teacher. Fears that peer interaction is a waste of class time can be quite valid, but may also stem from a lack of recognition of its role within the students' learning experience as a whole. Pair and group work are one of many

other learning contexts in class, and may play a complementary role to everything else that happens in class (Philp et al., 2014; Batstone & Philp, 2012).

It is important to recognise that while teachers' direct participation in-group work is minimal, they nevertheless play a crucial role "behind the scenes" in facilitating successful peer interaction. Teachers identify appropriate tasks, may assign specific roles, and ensure learners have the linguistic resources and relational skills they need to participate successfully. Teachers play a large part in creating a positive and supportive learning environment. This can include both modelling effective interaction and support, and training students in relational skills such as learning to listen receptively, to provide feedback to one another, and engage with one another's ideas (e.g., Dörnyei & Malderez, 1997; Mercer, 1996; O'Donnell, 2006; Sato & Ballinger, 2012).

Peer interaction can take a variety of forms. *Collaborative learning* describes students' dependence on one another in order to complete the task (Damon & Phelps, 1989a). For example, in a reconstructive task such as a dictogloss, learners must work together to complete a jointly written text, based on their collective notes following speeded dictation. *Co-operative learning* involves learners working together to achieve a common goal, but they may work independently to do this (McCafferty, Jacobs, & DaSilva Iddings, 2006). For example, learners compiling an online wiki may each contribute sections to compile the final text. Yet another kind of peer interaction is *Peer tutoring*, in which one person assumes the role of tutor who instructs or assists their peers in some way. The focus of this paper is collaborative learning.

Purposes of peer interaction

Philp, Adams and Iwashita (2014) suggest three key purposes for peer interaction in the language classroom: Experimenting with language, Correcting language, and Polishing language.

Experimenting with language

Experimenting with language is one of the key ways in which peer interaction supports language use and learning in ways that complement whole class instruction. Ellis (2014) identifies 10 principles for instructed language learning, and these include the language learners' need for receiving input, and producing output, that is comprehensible. This can occur through peer interaction. Similarly, peer interaction can foster development of implicit knowledge and its application, as well as their explicit knowledge of the second language (L2), depending on the nature of the task: whether fluency oriented or awareness-raising. In the latter case, learners may be encouraged to pay attention to form and meaning connections.

Trying out how language works is vital for learning: making mistakes and modifying one's production or interpretation of what someone says can be a trigger for learning (for review, see Mackey, Abbuhl & Gass, 2012). When problems arise, learners may learn new vocabulary, resolve misunderstandings, and notice more about how language "works": how form and meaning connect. Whole class interaction can offer few opportunities for individual students to try out using the L2 themselves. Peer interaction holds greater potential, where each group member feels valued, supported and safe from ridicule.

Example 1 is an excerpt from group work of four adult learners of English in New Zealand (data from Cao, 2009). Their task is to create a survey to find out more about other students' experience of plastic surgery. They are finding it difficult to phrase a particular question, and they try out different possibilities for over 25 turns.

S: How how many times did you (..) do (..) a plastic surgery, maybe one time [4 turns later]

S: Did you do did you have did you have maybe have

J: I think have you gone I think have you gone, because it's already finish, surgery

S: How many times did you

J: Have you gone a plastic surgery, I'm not sure but

(Cao, 2009, unpublished data, cited in Philp et al., 2014, p. 35)

Although full of errors, this exchange provided the impetus for this group of learners to think more about how to express their ideas: they noticed the gap between what they needed and what they didn't yet understand, and this prompted them to later ask the teacher for help. The teacher helped them rephrase their question in a more target like way: "have you ever had plastic surgery" (a form they had read in other questions, and that they had heard the teacher say a number of times that day). Crucially, it was by having to struggle to express themselves that they paid attention to form and meaning: a first step forward in their developing use of that form. This is an example of how peer interaction is complemented by interaction with the teacher (and vice versa). It highlights the important role played by the teacher (see Philp et. al 2014 for further discussion). This kind of interaction, with a clear focus on form, and collaboration over how to say something is most evident in reconstructive tasks (e.g. dictogloss) and other such collaborative tasks (creating a role play, a jigsaw task for presentation, constructing a survey).

Offering ideas to a group, and making mistakes can be face threatening even in small groups. The social side to peer interaction is important to its potential to motivate students to engage with language in supportive ways (Oliver & Philp, 2014). Sato and Ballinger (2012), for example, emphasise the need to foster a "collaborative mindset": Where students value one another's contributions and respect each other's linguistic resources, they can be willing to take risks in trying out new language and may also provide one another with feedback. In a study of EFL adult learners in Korea, Choi and Iwashita (in preparation) report one student's comment on peer interaction in the class:

"No matter how well they speak English, if group members create a comfortable atmosphere to communicate with each other, I will share my ideas more actively. If I detect something uncomfortable between group members, I usually remain silent or became very passive. And I think it is very important to see each group member as equal." [Susan (C2)]

Correcting language

One of the limitations of peer interaction concerns correction and accurate use of the target language, requiring greater support from the teacher. Some research in EFL settings suggests a reticence among learners to provide correction during peer interaction, and a tendency to resolve issues in the L1 rather than the target language. In a study by McDonough (2004)

carried out among Thai adult EFL university students, over a unit of work exploring environmental issues. McDonough found that teachers and students alike did not perceive peer interaction as useful. This was in spite of the findings of her quasi-experimental study demonstrating improvement among learners in production of the target forms (unreal conditionals), particularly among those who worked collaboratively and provided one another with interactional feedback. Other studies among adult learners suggest that when working together, peers' interactions tend to lack attention to grammatical form: they tend to mainly focus on lexis, and provide very little feedback (Philp, Walter, Basturkmen, 2010 ; Williams, 1999), particularly among lower proficiency learners. However, while learners may lack confidence or ability to correct one another, they can learn to provide useful feedback in the form of questions that help to improve communication, such as clarification requests (“can you say that again?” ; “what?”) and confirmation checks (“do you mean...?”) . These may benefit both the providers of feedback and those who observe it, as much as the receiver of the feedback, leading learners to focus on form and meaning as they notice problematic utterances (for review, see Mackey, Abbuhl & Gass, 2012). The tasks themselves, the way the teacher frames the task or prepares the students, as well as the relationships between peers can all impact incidence and uptake of feedback during peer interaction (e.g. Philp et.al, 2010).

Polishing Language

Finally, as Philp et al. (2014) note, peer interaction is a valuable context in which learners can reinforce or consolidate their existing knowledge, and increase their fluency forms (DeKeyser, 2007). “Time on task” is vital to developing fluency, yet this is difficult to achieve in oral proficiency within whole class interaction alone. Tasks that inherently involve the chance to repeat oneself several times, such as “carousel tasks” in which individuals explain the same information, or recount the same story to different members of the class, are particularly useful for fluency building. It allows learners to improve on performance.

Overview

In this paper I identify various purposes for peer interaction, each with different outcomes. Working with fellow students who they feel are supportive of their needs and who value their strengths can be greatly motivating for learning, particularly when the experience is both challenging and enjoyable (Baralt, Gurzynski-Weiss& Kim, in preparation). Learners can use peer and group work to experiment with language, to take risks, explore new forms in a less stressful, less public context than whole class interaction. Peer interaction is also useful for correction, where learners are willing to provide feedback. In many settings, peer correction is unlikely to occur however, without training, modelling and practice from the teacher. Finally, peer interaction can provide an important context for building on partially mastered knowledge and developing fluency. In this case, pair and group work can provide the much needed “time on task” to build confidence, accuracy and speed.

Successful peer interaction depends both on the teacher and the students. While learners themselves obviously play their part, in their willingness to collaborate with others, teachers equally have a key role to play in fostering effective peer interaction. Peer interaction can be

positive but it can also be a waste of time, or worse. To be both useful and motivating, tasks should encourage collaboration towards an outcome in require use of the target language (Ellis, 2009). Tasks are just one side of the story. The social relations between participants also impacts collaboration. The teacher is instrumental in building and monitoring the class environment: who works with who, on what tasks, with what roles. Ideally peers work with a “collaborative mindset” (Sato & Ballinger, 2012); learners respect one another and in turn feel valued for their own contributions. There is mutuality between peers (Storch, 2002): that is, there is a balance in participation; learners are able to listen attentively and support one another’s L2 use. In this way, what happens during peer interaction can complement teacher-fronted interactions with the whole class or individual learners.

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