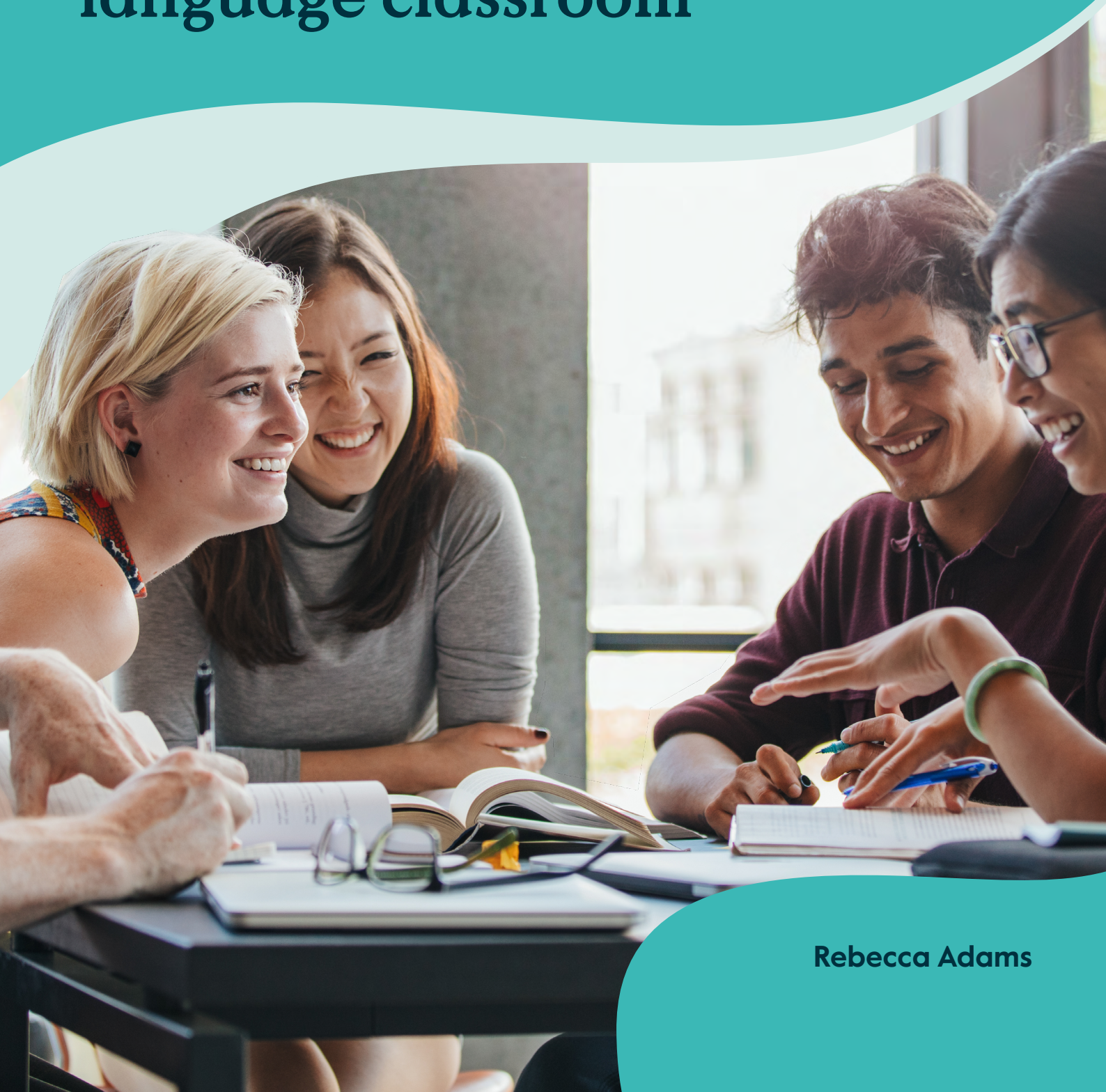
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Enhancing student interaction in the language classroom



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Introduction

As teachers we tend to have an instinctive belief in the importance of the instruction we provide to students as a major component of their language learning. However, teachers may differ in their understanding of the role of speaking in pairs and groups with other learners as a vehicle for language learning (rather than just language practice). Indeed, there are teachers (and students) who dismiss peer interaction as 'play', or as a poor substitute for chances to communicate with the teacher or other competent speakers of the target language. These viewpoints do not capture the vital contribution peer interactions make to the process of learning a language.

The purpose of this paper is to highlight the unique contribution that interaction with peers in a second language classroom makes to language learning and to give suggestions for how teachers can help students get the most out of such interaction. When we discuss peer interaction, we are referring specifically to conversational speaking and listening with a language learning peer, another student who is also learning the target language. As we will see, these interactions provide students with opportunities for language exploration and learning that are less likely to occur in communication with a teacher or other proficient speaker (for example, Sato, 2015).



The benefits of peer interaction

Many teachers follow a communicative approach to language teaching to allow their students to practice what they are learning. However, experts believe that rather than just being a vehicle for practice, student-to-student interaction is integral to the process of language learning itself. In this viewpoint, the main part of learning a second/foreign language is not being explicitly taught vocabulary or grammar but learning these implicitly through making sense of what we hear and read, and putting our ideas into words in what we say and write (Long, 2014). Current theories of language teaching and learning underscore this point. The interactionist approach (Gass & Mackey, 2006), for example, explains that when language learners are engaged in meaningful communication in a second language, they are able to focus on meaning, negotiate to make input comprehensible, and try out new language forms as they produce language. Bringing language skills together in this way connects the language that learners hear and say with their internal cognitive capacities for attending to language, noticing features of the input, and forming hypotheses about language use (Swain, 2005). As such, interaction is a mini-laboratory for language use – allowing learners to make discoveries about their new language as they use it to communicate their ideas. Another important factor to bear in mind is that English has become a lingua franca and the majority of learners in classrooms today will be using English to communicate with other non-native speakers (Seidlhofer, 2005). The back and forth of communication in real-life situations is very different when it involves two or more non-native speakers. Interaction with peers in the classroom can help learners to focus on understanding and responding to the message being communicated, rather than expecting to hear grammatically perfect sentences uttered with native-like pronunciation.

It's clear how interacting with a proficient speaker or teacher can help students learn – they will hear correct models of language use and may also receive reliable feedback on their language use. In interactions with skilled language teachers, they also obtain expert scaffolding (assistance with words or grammar) to help them express meanings they cannot formulate on their own. What is sometimes surprising to teachers and learners is that interaction with another peer in the classroom, who is also in the process of learning the second language, can also be helpful for learning a language. Teachers may worry about the effects of peer interactions, concerned that students provide each other with imperfect language input, or do not provide feedback on crucial language errors. They may also have seen their students get stuck, unable to communicate effectively without help from a more competent speaker, or simply revert to speaking their first language together (particularly in foreign language learning classrooms where most learners share a common language). They may see a limited role for peer interaction as a way of practicing language use, but not as a means of language learning. Their students may also have negative views of peer interaction. They may be reticent to speak and make mistakes in front of their peers or they may not believe that they can learn from their peers, preferring teacher-led instruction.

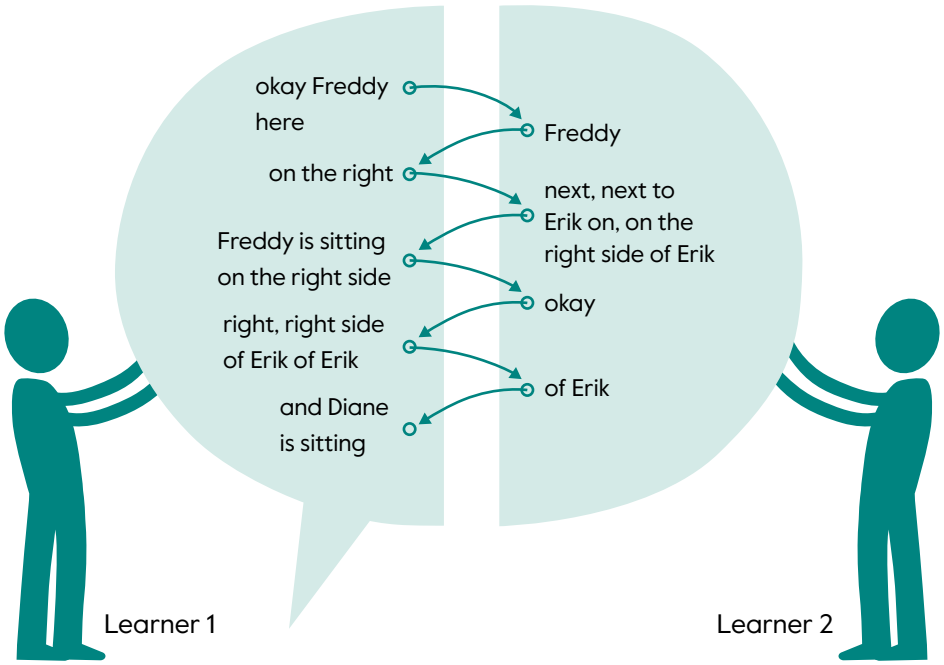
Experts also believe that that communicative practice is integral to language learning.

These teacher and learner viewpoints miss the important contribution that peer interactions can make to language learning. Research on peer interactions in language classrooms does indeed show that they are not the same as interactions with an expert user of the second language (Adams, Nuevo, Egi, 2011; Sato, 2015). Peers, for example, do not provide as much feedback as native speakers (Pica, et al., 1996) and the feedback they provide can be faulty (Adams, 2007). The input learners hear in peer interactions is also simpler and has more errors than native speaker input (Sato, 2015). But learners also get more chances to speak, and they produce substantially more language in peer interactions (Sato, 2015). They also give one another more opportunities to correct their own language errors (McDonough, 2004), and they get chances to figure out how to express their ideas collaboratively (Swain, 2006), rather than simply accepting guidance from a teacher. Research on peer interaction demonstrates that it provides unique language learning opportunities not often found in interaction with native speakers (Philp, Adams & Iwashita, 2014). Let's look at some of the learning opportunities in peer interactions in more detail.

1. Learners get to talk more

When conversing with a more competent speaker, learners tend to play a limited role in interactions. Teacher-student talk, for example, largely consists of students answering questions posed by the teacher. The teacher frequently nominates the topics and generally controls the direction of the conversation, scaffolding participation as a teaching technique. Even in more informal conversational activities with more proficient speakers, learners tend to provide shorter, more fragmented turns, relying on their interlocutor to keep communication going.

In contrast, when working with a language learner peer, learners speak more and produce longer turns (Sato, 2015). They also do more of the work of maintaining the conversation – developing topics, introducing new ideas, making suggestions, asking questions. Learners get to practice using language in a wider range of ways with learner peers, helping them develop the communication strategies they need to be able to use the target language in real-life situations often with speakers whose mother tongue is not English. For an example of this, let's look at Sample Interaction 1. This conversation was recorded between adult high-beginning level ESL learners working on a task that requires them to describe where people are sitting at a dinner party based on a seating chart.



Sample Interaction 1 (Unpublished data, Adams, 2004)

These learners are not at an advanced proficiency level, but as they work together, they maintain the conversation. They build on their own and each other's utterances, offering and evaluating corrections until they create a sentence they are satisfied with, and then they agree to move on. While their turns are quite short, they each take several turns, doing the work of managing the discourse collaboratively. Research on peer interactions has generally shown that students speak more, and in a greater variety of ways, while working as peers than they would if they were conversing with a native speaker (Philp et al., 2014).

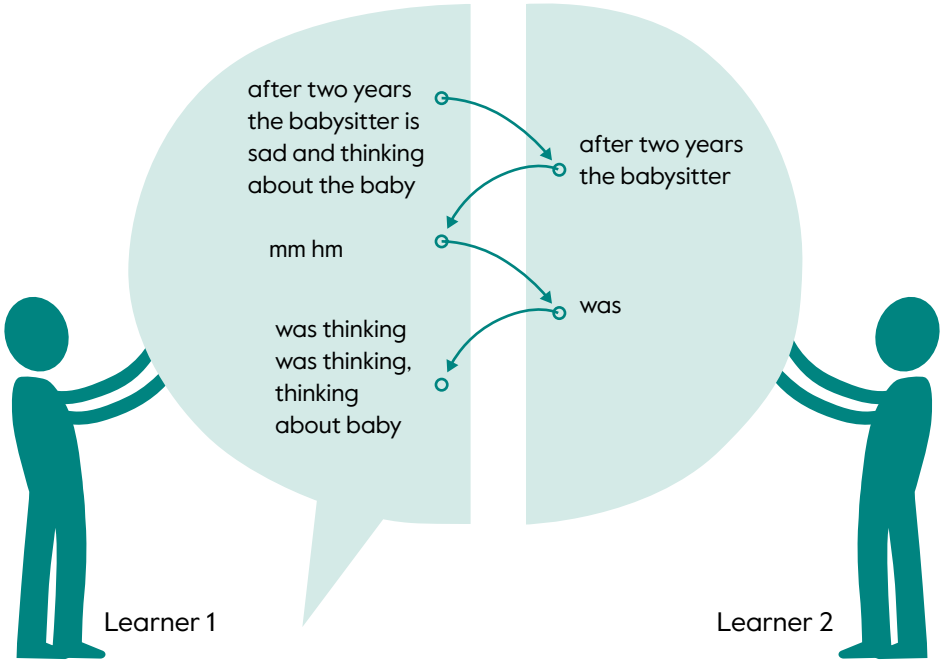
2. Learners get to experiment and learn from their mistakes

Because learners have more control over the interaction when working with a peer, they can create space to question their use of language and to try out new language forms they are learning. When talking with a teacher, learners rely on them to provide the words and structures needed to communicate, and to provide correction when important mistakes are made. When peers work with one another, they don't have this immediate support. Rather, they must work together, testing out new forms to express the meanings they want to express, working together to correct mistakes and find solutions when they get stuck in the communication. One of the unique affordances of peer interactions is that they give learners 'the chance to try out new language, to not be afraid to make mistakes, to puzzle over solutions and to contest ideas in a way that isn't possible in teacher-student interaction' (Philp et al., 2014). In Sample Interaction 1, where the students tried to determine how to describe a location, they did not turn to the teacher for help. Rather, they worked together, making and acknowledging progress, until they successfully communicated. Some teachers may worry that students working together are simply exposing each other to errors. Students may share this concern. But both teacher and students should remember that the goal is not to have learners avoid errors. Making mistakes and doing the work of figuring out how to correct them is what leads to new learning. Not giving students the space to communicate, experiment with language, and make mistakes limits their ability to construct their own understanding of a language system. Remember, as well, that teachers can also give feedback during and after the activity. Peers can be encouraged to give positive feedback about what their partner did well. In addition, learners can benefit from hearing teacher feedback on their peers' language use. (For more about feedback, see 'Giving feedback on speaking', another paper in this series.)

Because learners have more control over the interaction when working with a peer, they can create space to question their use of language and to try out new language forms they are learning.

3. Learners get to consolidate what they have learned

There are very few things that we study just once and then know. One of the issues that language learners struggle with is applying language forms that they have been taught into the language that they use while communicating. Teachers might teach students how to use definite and indefinite articles in English, for example, and students may understand the basics of how and when to use them. But when they are actually speaking, they need to come up with ideas to express, retrieve the words to express them with from long-term memory, pronounce them understandably (even when some sounds may differ from those of their first language), and also remember to apply the grammatical rules they have been taught. This is a tall order. Because peer interactions move slower than interactions with native speakers, and because learners have more control over how they develop, they get chances to stop and reflect



Sample Interaction 2 (Unpublished data, Adams, 2004)

on how they can apply what they have learned in the classroom into actual language use, helping them solidify connections between forms and meanings and strengthening memory cues to retrieve them (Gass & Mackey, 2006). Consider how this plays out in Sample Interaction 2, a short transcript from an interaction between two ESL learners working through a task that required them to tell a story based on a set of pictures. The pictures were dated to help the learners orient themselves to telling the story in the past tense.

At first, the learners are focused on finding words to express what is happening in the picture. But after this, they take a step back and consider how to align their utterance with the grammatical context needed. They get a chance to apply a language rule they had previously learned in class in a real communicative context. When tested later, learners were able to correctly use grammatical forms they had focused on in this way around 60% of the time (Adams, 2007), which is on par with the learning rates from similar exchanges in teacher-led discussion (e.g., Loewen, 2005). Working together with peers allows learners to integrate information about the language they have learned in classes with the actual language they are processing to communicate. In this way, peer interaction complements classroom teaching, adding an important opportunity for students to deepen their understanding of language forms and practice using them meaningfully. Without opportunities for interaction, it is unlikely that language that is taught in the classroom will become language that learners use to communicate. Because many foreign and second language learners have limited access to authentic situations requiring them to use English beyond the classroom, their main opportunity to apply language learning in a meaningful context comes through peer interactions in the classroom.

4. Learners can hone their social skills

Language learning is not simply learning grammar rules and vocabulary. Learners need to come away with an understanding of how to be language users – how to use language appropriately in different settings, how to use language to show others who they are, and how to use language effectively to achieve their interactional goals. Any setting in which we use language is also a social context, with its own rules and expected patterns. Learners need access to social uses of language to build understanding of how to use language beyond the classroom (Bayley & Schecter, 2003). In much the same way that peer interaction can promote the learning of grammar and vocabulary, it is also an important tool in promoting language socialization. In educational settings, through participation in interaction, learners gain access to opportunities for socialization not only to

the cultural norms of the target culture but also to the classroom norms and practices for specific activities (He, 2000). While we generally think of the teacher as the one who models real world language practices for students, students can also model for one another social practices such as initiating conversation topics and taking turns (Cekaite, 2007).

When learners get opportunities to communicate without being directed by a teacher, they are being pushed to work out how to begin or join a conversation, how and when to contribute, how to change topics – skills that translate to social interactions beyond the classroom. Through participation in communication, learners work out how to be part of a community of language learners (Cekaite, 2007). Building competence in social interactions in the classroom, then, can help learners to be more successful, for example, in engaging in small talk with their future business partners, or initiating a conversation with peers during a foreign exchange programme (Hughes, 2015).

Much the same way that peer interaction can promote learning of grammar and vocabulary, it is also an important tool in promoting language socialization.

5. Learners get low anxiety language practice

Foreign language anxiety is a complex phenomenon that varies from activity to activity and can shift in intensity quickly as learners are engaged in a single activity. Learners routinely rate conversational speaking and listening as high anxiety language practice, because it unfolds in real time and does not allow for prior practice (Horowitz, Horowitz & Cope, 1986). In communicative practice, learners may believe that they cannot communicate in a second language, and this belief can undercut their ability to learn from engagement in speaking (Dörnyei & Tseng, 2009). Communicating with a native speaker or teacher can induce anxiety because of the vast difference in language proficiency and (in the case of the teacher) the learner's awareness that their communication is being assessed (Kitano, 2001).

Peer interactions are often more playful and relaxed than teacher-led interactions (Cekaite & Aronsson, 2005). Learners report that interacting with a language user at a similar proficiency level is less stressful than interacting with more proficient language users (Valmori, 2016). Interacting under conditions of greater linguistic equivalence gives learners the chance to speak with someone they can understand with less difficulty and receive feedback and suggestions on language use in a low anxiety setting (Damon, 1984), enhancing the chances of learning language during the interaction.

6. Learners feel energised and can maintain attention and focus

The various modes of peer-to-peer interaction can provide a refreshing change from frontal teaching and can revitalise learners. In our digital age in many parts of the world learners find it harder and harder to maintain attention (Hari, 2022). Linda Stone coined the term continuous partial attention (CPA) to characterise the kind of restless digital flitting that results from the need to stay constantly informed and in touch (Stone, 2007). Paying only partial attention during the teacher's explanation and during other types of whole-class work can greatly diminish the effectiveness of frontal teaching. Interactive work-modes can activate learners and help them to refocus and re-engage (Revell, 2018). For example, during a buzz pair activity learners engage in a quick exchange with a partner which can be energizing and can generate ideas for a whole-class task that follows (Pohl & Szesztay, 2020). Strip stories, information gathering type of tasks, activities based on conversation cards all provide effective ways of structuring peer-to-peer interaction (Cerutti et.al., 2013).

Breaking down barriers to effective peer interactions

Teachers working in different contexts all share common concerns about peer interactions in their classrooms. Many teachers struggle to find time for peer interactions in their classes (for help on this topic, see 'How much time should we give to speaking practice?', another paper in this series) and are frequently concerned about the logistics of peer interactions, especially in large classes or in settings where the students share a common first language. They worry that, given freedom to work in groups, students will not communicate in ways that promote learning, wasting limited classroom time. We will focus now on some of the most common concerns expressed by language teachers about peer interaction and possible solutions.

Problem 1: Students do not want to talk

There are a variety of reasons why students may not want to talk to one another. Some students come from educational cultures where teacher-fronted instruction and individual work are the norm. They have rarely, if ever, experienced peer interactions in other types of courses and are both sceptical of its value for learning and reluctant to engage with peers. In many cases, these concerns are shared by parents and even school administrators, so teachers have little support in promoting peer interaction. Some students are nervous about speaking a language they don't know well in front of one another, concerned about making errors and exposing their lack of knowledge to one another. Other students are simply unmotivated to speak. In cases like these, teachers fear that students simply won't try to interact in the classroom. What can be done if students will not talk?

Help students envision themselves as language users

If students will not try to speak in the classroom, it's important to 'sell' them on the idea of peer interaction and support their efforts to interact. Point out to them that their goal is to be able to use the language they are learning, not just know how to apply the grammar rules. Teachers who have also learned a language in a classroom context can share their experiences, especially pointing out how interacting with others in the language promoted their ability to use it effectively. They can help their students cultivate a vision of themselves as speakers of the target language, not just as students trying to pass an exam or earn some course credits. For students learning the language to pass an exam or fulfil an educational requirement, it can be helpful to get a vision of any future career or recreational benefits of speaking another language. Teachers can also share experiences from their lives where speaking a second language came in handy. There are many successful people from business, politics, and the arts whose careers have been boosted by learning another language. Consider planning an activity where students research these people and share what they've learned in groups.

Explicitly teach and model interactional skills

Keep in mind that even when students understand the value of peer interaction, this will not necessarily motivate them to try. They need support in the interaction to keep going. Show them how to interact. Seeing models of peers completing a similar task can help learners understand how to communicate with one another in a second language (Kim & McDonough, 2011). Teachers can do this by filming students from a higher-level course. They can also have students who work well together do a task in front of the class, having them pause from time to time so you can point out what they do well. They can also explicitly teach them some strategies for interacting, such as phrases to use to start topics, change topics, indicate misunderstanding, and provide feedback to one another (Sato & Lyster, 2012), including phrases like the ones below:

- Narrowing focus: 'I don't understand this word', 'Let's look at . . .'
- Requesting clarification: 'What does X mean?'
- Providing feedback: 'I think we say it like . . . '
- Requesting confirmation: 'Do you mean . . . ?'
- Requesting input: 'What do you think of . . . ?', 'What did you put for . . . ?'

In addition, it can be helpful to establish ground rules for effective interaction. This can be done with any age group and the earlier learners work on helpful routines for collaborative work, the easier they will find it to engage in meaningful interaction as teenagers and young adults. For example, here is a list of ground rules that was worked out with a group of primary school learners (Silver, 2020).

Ground rules for lower primary
We listen to everyone.
We are patient.
We take turns.
We are kind to everyone.
We help other students.
We ask quiet or shy students to join in.
We share.
We speak up so everyone can hear.
We do not shout or speak loudly.
We do not interrupt.
We pay attention.
We ask questions if we don't understand.

Follow students' interests

Teachers should be sure to choose tasks and topics that are of interest to their class – they are more likely to engage with one another if they find the activity interesting. For example, performing a needs analysis at the beginning of a course can give teachers a sense of topics that are of interest to students (Long, 2014). Even if a teacher's content is set by a curriculum plan, there are different types of activities that can be carried out. Teachers should monitor students' participation in different types of activities. Consider, for example, if they engage more readily with competitive games or collaborative activities. Many students will not take short, game-like activities seriously, but will engage when there is a clear connection to their other academic or career goals (Van den Branden, Van Gorp & Verhelst, 2005). Giving students choices (of topics, of materials to reference, of ways to do the activity) can help them personalize the learning experience. For more help on engaging student interest, see 'Motivating learners with immersive speaking activities', another paper in this series.

Prepare students for speaking

Finally, teachers should consider preparing students to engage in speaking. If students have to figure out both what to say and how to say it at the same time, they can feel overwhelmed and decide to simply give up. If a topic is new, students should be allowed to brainstorm or do individual research on the task topic to gather their ideas before they begin to interact. Giving students time to think about the task, make notes about what they are going to say, and rehearse can help them speak more fluently. (See, 'How much time should we give to speaking practice?', another paper in this series, for more about preparing students for speaking tasks.) Task materials can also provide language or ideas that learners can 'mine' to help them express their ideas as the interaction develops.

Introduce interactive tasks gradually

In contexts where learners are not used to working collaboratively or do not see the value of peer-to-peer interaction, it can be a good strategy to start with tasks which do not require a high-level of interactive skills. In addition, it can also enable a smooth transition from frontal mode to interactive mode, if the teacher first tries out activities which can be carried out in traditional classroom settings, without the students having to move around. Boardgames which prompt conversation can be a good option, as learners are likely to be familiar with the general rules and turn-taking is built into the game (Nosova, 2022). For this reason, nobody is going to dominate or remain silent, as can be the case with other types of groupwork.

Problem 2: Students go off task

Every teacher, regardless of the subject and content they teach, shares this concern. When handing over classroom time to students, you want to know that they won't simply go off task, use the time for social talk, or spend it surreptitiously checking social media accounts on their phones. Keeping students on track requires the teacher to carefully consider how to develop and implement peer interaction activities. The goal is to design peer interaction activities in ways that push students to stay on task.

Align activities with academic, career, and real-world needs

Students are motivated when they can see a connection between the work of the classroom and their lives beyond it (Van den Branden, et al., 2005). Activities that clearly relate to other areas of the curriculum may be more likely to be taken seriously. Teachers can, for example, coordinate task topics with other content area teachers so the students understand the relevance of course activities to learning in their other courses (Adams & Nik, 2014). Group presentations on large corporations, for example, can be employed as a means of getting reluctant university business students motivated to work together in English (Weaver, 2012). For adult learners, aligning task activities to career and other real-world interests helps motivate students to stay on track. Immigrant learners, for example, may be motivated by tasks that reflect their real-world language needs: ordering food in a restaurant, registering a child for school, discussing repairs with a landlord (Van Avermaet & Gysen, 2006). For students who will use the second language in their careers, adapting tasks to reflect workplace settings or processes can increase motivation and willingness to engage in talk. Activities can be designed around common workplace language needs, such as participating (with a defined role) in a business meeting (Holmes & Riddiford, 2009).

Use immersive speaking activities

An immersive speaking activity is one with a tangible outcome. Such activities push students to stay on task. If teachers ask students to complete a very free discussion task, it's very likely that some students will lose focus and be unable to resist checking their phones or chatting in their first language – they know that teachers cannot monitor them all at once. However, if students are asked to work together on something with a clear goal, such as solving a problem, making a decision, or creating something (like a picture, model, or presentation) they are more likely to stay on task so that they have something to present to the class or hand in (Adams & Ross-Feldman, 2008). One way to ensure this is to build a 'presentation' phase into the activity (Willis & Willis, 2007), where students share their work with a larger group of students or with the full class. This works particularly well when pairs of students are all working on different parts of a larger project (for example, writing sections of a brochure or newsletter, reading different paragraphs of a text). Knowing that their work will be graded can also help students take collaborative work seriously. (See 'Motivating learners with immersive speaking tasks', another paper in this series, for more about creating immersive speaking tasks.)

Structure the task for engagement

Other practical factors can keep learners going on a task. Setting time limits gives the interaction a sense of urgency. Mixing up working conditions helps too, such as switching up groupings of students or changing the working environment (by moving furniture around, working in different stations in the classroom, or even moving to a different space like a library or a lab). Differentiating the task goals for different learners can keep them on task as well – more advanced pairs will get bored if the activity is too simple, and less advanced pairs can give up if it's too hard. Adapting activities to different levels in the classroom can keep students on task (Blaz, 2006). For example, more advanced students can be asked to work on an activity with no obvious solution – for example, creating a day schedule for someone with too many commitments, leading to a need to prioritize and make choices. They can also be given a task with more elements (for example, creating a seating chart for ten people with different needs as opposed to six). Lower proficiency students may need more guidance during the activity. For example, they could be given pictures in the correct order and asked to create a narrative story line, while advanced students have to first determine the order of events and then narrate the story (Nuevo, 2006).

Problem 3: Students speak their first language

For the many teachers around the world who teach in foreign language settings, the fact that students share a common language can be a barrier to integrating peer interactions in the classroom. Giving students a chance to learn implicitly and socially through striving to communicate with their peers in the target language, can be easily circumvented by students simply speaking their native language. Teachers with large classes in particular may feel that it's impossible to monitor the students closely enough to keep them using the target language.

Allow some first language use

Keep in mind that not all uses of the first language during the task are negative. Much first language use allows students to help their peers understand task instructions, which can get them into the interaction before they lose motivation (teachers may also use the first language briefly to clarify what students are supposed to do). Sometimes learners use their first language to clarify goals and organize their processes, which helps them develop a sense of agency in the task (Tognini, Philp & Oliver, 2010). Sometimes first language use allows learners to explain aspects of the second language to one another, deepening understanding (Swain and Lapkin, 1998). These uses can promote language learning in the task. Too much use of the first language, however, does limit earning opportunities.

Provide support to use the target language

As much as possible, monitor language use. If students are veering into their first language, scaffold their language use for a few conversational turns to help them try using the target language. Teachers can also model the expected performance in a pre-task phase – for example, by interacting with the full class before they are asked to complete a similar task with peers. This shows them how to work through the task and provides examples of language they can use themselves (Long, 2014).

Integrate reading and writing

Another solution is to design peer interactions that integrate reading and writing with speaking and listening. Consider how this plays out in a narrative task. If learners are given a set of pictures and asked to tell each other a story based on them, they may simply do that in their shared first language. If they are asked to collaboratively write the story, they will have to talk in the second language as they figure out together how to write down the story in their second language. The task is not just about communicating content – it also requires learners to create a tangible language product. Adding a reading or writing element also changes the ways that learners engage in the task; students spend more time discussing grammar and vocabulary and work through these discussions until they come to a resolution, rather than simply moving on (Adams, 2006; Adams & Ross-Feldman, 2008).

Problem 4: Some students do not work well together

Peer learning is a social activity, which means that social dynamics play a role in effective peer interactions. Poor group dynamics can cause problems in a number of ways. A shy student can be overpowered by a boisterous partner and contribute little. Two competitive students might turn a cooperative task into a battle. Sometimes boys don't want to work with girls, or vice versa. Students from different cultures may struggle to work together. Students from different social groups may be reluctant to be seen cooperating with one another. On the other hand, positive peer dynamics can promote learning. A more advanced student can scaffold a peer's performance. Peers that work collaboratively can provide each other with valuable language practice opportunities (Storch, 2011).

Pay attention to social dynamics in the classroom

Try to closely monitor how students engage with one another. Are they encouraging, critical or too quiet? Keep in mind that a student who is overly competitive and negative in one group can be genuinely helpful in another (Kim & McDonough, 2008; Watanabe & Swain, 2007).

More than any other aspect of peer interaction in the classroom, teachers simply have to try things out. Keeping some notes jotted down, perhaps with the lesson plans, of pairings that did not work out and any times where students have worked well together can help get a handle on the unique personalities of the classroom.

Vary work-modes and ways of grouping students

Teachers often default to letting students pick groups. When they do this, students tend to choose people that they feel most comfortable with – not necessarily those who will help them learn the most. In addition, a well-functioning group shows a degree of 'fluidity'. This means that there are no cliques and students are open to working with anyone (Szesztay, 2020).

So there are many good reasons to work with a wide variety of work-modes and different ways of grouping students. For example, you can consider proficiency when grouping – sometimes a higher ability peer can scaffold learning in a helpful way (Donato, 1994). But avoid always pairing more proficient students with less proficient students. Lower ability students need opportunities to work out problems rather than just relying on help from others, and higher ability students can push each other to stretch themselves in their conversation. The level of motivation can be another factor to consider when setting up groups. Teachers sometimes default to mixing motivated students with less engaged students, hoping to boost participation. In practice, this is just as likely to deflate a motivated student as it is to motivate a student less willing to interact (Dörnyei & Kormos, 2000). When working in groups, enthusiastic, extroverted students can end up squeezing out a quieter, more reflective student. This makes it important to mix up both the size and make-up of groups frequently.

Changing from groups to pairs, and changing the mix of students, can spread out opportunities to engage. Activities where students change groups frequently can also keep up motivation. Teachers can make this a game – for example, having students draw a number to put them into groups, or grouping all the students wearing the same colour shirts or all the students with birthdays in the same season. Finding their new groups can be an ice-breaking experience as well. For longer activities, it can be helpful to assign roles within groups (e.g., leader, note taker) or assign students to specific roles in a roleplay activity. This can promote participation from more reticent students and limit the ability of any one student to take over the communication. When students work together over time, for example over a unit of instruction, teachers can promote engagement by helping students define a group identity by, for example, choosing a team name or creating a team task-list.

The teacher's role in peer interactions

While the teacher is not front and centre during these classroom segments, there are still important tasks to do. Not all students will know how to do the activity they have been asked to do, and not all will understand how to work together effectively to do it. Most will need support to express their ideas through the target language. Using peer interactions in the classroom pushes teachers into a 'facilitator mode' (Dörnyei, 2007), challenging teachers to adapt their teaching strategies. How can teachers effectively facilitate peer interactions?

Before the Activity

Peer interactions in the classroom are unlikely to go smoothly unless teachers have first worked with the class to create a positive environment for peer interaction (Senior, 2009). It's important to work with students to create an expectation that participants in the course will encourage one another, be patient, and help each other. Teachers should certainly always model these behaviours, and should also engage students in discussions about their role in promoting a collaborative environment. Some teachers find it helpful to work with their students to create guidelines on class participation, negotiating expectations such as critiquing ideas (rather than criticising people), avoiding interruptions, and making sure everyone gets opportunities to participate (Silver, 2020).

As discussed above, students need to understand the value of engaging in an interactive activity to take it seriously. This applies both generally to explaining the value of peer interaction and specifically to the activity they are preparing to work on. Let students know what the goals of the activity are so they can stay focused. This involves understanding both task outcomes (for example, order the pictures so they tell a story and write out the story) and the language and content learning goals around the activity (for example, use specific vocabulary to create a short text explaining the water cycle).

Peer interactions in the classroom are unlikely to go smoothly unless teachers have first worked with the class to create a positive environment for peer interaction.

Remember that modelling effective strategies for discussing language forms and indicating miscomprehension helps students to manage more of the interaction in the target language (Kim & McDonough, 2011). Students can also be taught specific interactional strategies, such as giving feedback in response to errors, which increases their attention to language during an interaction (Sato & Lyster, 2012). Simple phrases such as 'I don't think . . . is right? 'or 'I think . . . is a better word' give students a framework they can use to provide feedback to one another. Teachers may also want to introduce reflective listening strategies, such as checking understanding or summarizing each other's conversational turns, as a way of helping learners take a collaborative stance in interactions.

During the Activity

Not all students will tell the teacher in front of the class that they are confused, so teachers should start off the activity by checking in briefly with each group to make sure they know what they are doing. While the students are working together, be a keen observer of what they are doing. It is not possible to listen to all groups all the time, of course, but teachers should keep track of how everyone is progressing. Be ready to pick up signals of students struggling with the language; if they need help expressing something, they will likely ask the teacher or consult an online translator. Trying to work out language errors for themselves can also lead to valuable learning opportunities. But they will not necessarily know what to do if they can't figure out how to do the activity or how to work with their partner. So, rather than trying to catch every word, take stock of their body language and tone. Do they seem frustrated? Are they struggling to start? Has one student checked out of the conversation, or been blocked out by more enthusiastic participants? Circulate through groups and provide hints, explanations, encouragement, and help to keep them going. Model interactional strategies, like specifically asking for ideas and opinions from a student who is struggling to participate, or clarification questions students can ask when they do not understand one another. Teachers may need to spend more time helping lower proficiency students who might be struggling. At the same time, keep an eye on higher proficiency groups finishing early. You may be able to find ways for them to extend the task, for example, by asking them to write up their decisions or to compare their ideas with another group.

After the Activity

Teachers can extend the learning beyond the interaction by allowing students to present on the activity. This can be as simple as sharing some of their ideas, showing work they have completed, or comparing solutions with another group. Teachers can also pull out examples of good language use from the activity to share with the full class. This highlights an important aspect of peer interaction: benefits of peer learning are amplified when it is complemented by teacher-led instruction. Peer interactions allow students to try out meaning-focused communication with others. Teacher-fronted instruction can be better at calling attention to specific linguistic forms or communication strategies, that can then be practiced in further interactions. Teaching a second language requires teachers to help students attend at times to form and at times to meaning. As they work through a meaning-focused activity, teachers can briefly shift the students' attention to language form by providing feedback and scaffolding, listening to their conversation and picking up cues that they need help (Mackey, 2002). Teacher can also interrupt the task to discuss a vocabulary item or grammatical structure that may be helpful, and then allow them to continue (Samuda & Bygate, 2008). Teachers can listen for common, consequential errors and provide a mini lesson on them during the wrap up of the activity or in the next class session (see more ideas in 'Giving feedback on speaking', another paper in this series). In either way, the peer interaction does not stand alone. Rather, it is an integrated aspect of classroom teaching, which supports and is supported by teacher-fronted discussion.

Conclusion

Integrating peer interactions into the language classroom can be a daunting task, and many teachers have experienced peer interactions that have not gone to plan. But it is also an important source of communication practice that allows students to try out new language, make mistakes, develop autonomy, and receive support in their language learning. Peer interaction can provide valuable language learning opportunities in a variety of classroom settings when teachers carefully consider the needs of their students, instructional goals, and classroom logistics. Positive peer interactions happen when students are prepared for interaction, focused on an engaging activity, grouped effectively, and are given support when needed. Integrating peer interaction into classroom teaching requires teachers to reflect carefully on their own teaching, considering how to adjust their strategies for peer interaction and how to use teacher-centred instruction to complement learning from peer learning.

Recommendations for further reading

A detailed overview of the role peer interactions in language classrooms and associated learning benefits is found in:

Philp, J., Adams, R. & Iwashita, N. (2014). *Peer Interaction and Second Language Learning*. New York, NY: Routledge.

A collection of recent studies on the teaching and learning potential of peer interactions is found in:

Sato, M. & Ballinger, S., (Eds.) (2016). *Peer Interaction and Second Language Learning: Pedagogical Potential and Research Agenda*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

If interested in more information on peer interactions that include writing, the following gives a concise overview:

Storch, N. (2013). *Collaborative Writing in L2 Classrooms*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.

For a teacher-friendly discussion of interaction in the second language classroom, please see:

Oliver, R. & Philp, J. (2014). *Focus on Oral Interaction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

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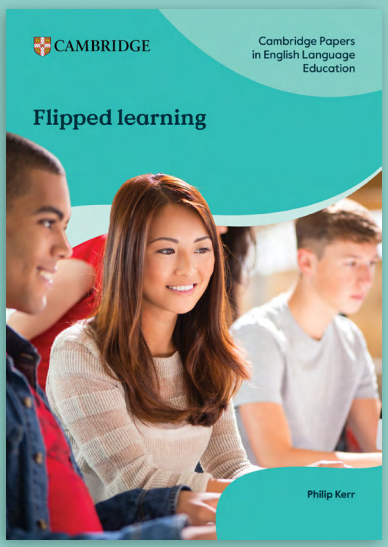
Rebecca Adams is an Assistant Professor of Applied Linguistics at the University of Memphis. She has co-authored a book on peer interaction in language classrooms (Philp, Adams, Iwashita, 2014) and written many academic articles on peer interactions in language classrooms and online. She is the co-author of the book "Teaching through Peer Interaction" (Routledge, 2019), which prepares teachers to use peer communication in the classroom.

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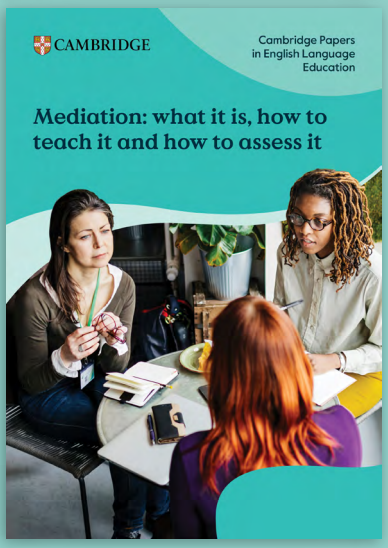
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