

COLLABORATIVE PAIR-INTERACTION: POSITIVE ROLE OF ZONE OF PROXIMAL DEVELOPMENT THEORY IN ESL CLASSROOMS

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ABSTRACT

Although collaborative pair-interaction has shown as providing positive impacts on students' second language learning, but none of studies has considered the important role of Zone of Proximal Development theory by Vygotsky in forming the pair and its effect during the pair-interaction. Zone of Proximal Development points out that adults and more competent peers can aid students' development (Vygotsky in Tudge, 1990). Thus, in this study, the writer reviewed many literatures which investigated the nature of pair-interaction. Some of the studies showed that when the students were paired with both more and less competent partners, respectively, only students who were paired with more competent students got the benefit of the collaboration. Some of the research also noticed that regardless the students' proficiency, the students will still learn as long as they can create collaborative pattern of interaction. From the above findings, it is suggested that for long-term teaching using collaborative pair-interaction, the theory of Zone of Proximal Development is necessary to be considered as a guideline in forming the students' pair. Pairing intentionally is believed to be more beneficial in giving best environment for students' learning, rather than randomly pairing the students all the time.

Keywords: collaborative pair-interaction, zone of proximal development, ESL class

INTRODUCTION

Methods for second language education across the globe have adapted over time to deepen and broaden a learner's ability to use a new language. Many changes have been derived from learner's needs and interests as well as educators' explorations of better ways to teach. Regarding on the teaching of English as a second language, Grammar Translation Method had been widely used for centuries in many countries. This method focused on grammatical rules as basis for translating from the second to the native language (Brown, 2007). Little or no attention was given to pronunciation practices. Criticism was made by some practitioners as nothing from this method could enhance a student's communicative ability in the language. Direct Method then occurred and became quite widely known and practiced. Grammar was taught inductively and only everyday vocabulary and sentences were taught using this method. Oral communication skills were built up in a carefully traded progression, organized around questions-answer exchanges between teachers and students in small and intensive class (Brown, 2007). The Direct Method enjoyed considerable popularity at the beginning of the twentieth century and then declined by the end of the first quarter of the twentieth century (Brown, 2007). It was revived and redirected into the Audio Lingual Method, a method which focuses on both grammar and oral practices.

Along with the widespread use of Audio Lingual Method, cooperative learning technique emerges in some countries. This method sees language as a communication tool and thus use peer and group works as a space for students to practice their language. The students are encouraged and/or required to work together on a common task and they must coordinate their efforts to complete the task. They are a “team” whose players must work together in order to achieve goals successfully. The motto of this technique is, “to Swim or Sink together”; meaning that when the group is successful, the whole member of the group will also be successful and vice versa.

Peer and group works are chosen in this strategy as a miniature of the actual social interaction outside the class. At many occasion, a person needs to work with other people in order to achieve a certain purpose made by the community. Thus, if they are already well-prepared to work and cooperate with others at class, they will be ready to work collaboratively with other people outside the class. Moreover, according to Vygotsky, learning is social in nature. The students need to construct a new knowledge by interacting with other people in society. He explained in further that a child will learn new things by the aid of more competent peers or adults in his surroundings (Tudge, 1990). Hence, in order to learn new things, a child should actively construct the new knowledge in his mind by analyzing people interaction, get some assistance from adults and then internalize what he learns. By internalizing, he will be able to accomplish the present task alone in the future.

In his study, Vygotsky also presents a famous theory, named Zone of Proximal Development. This is a potential area where a teacher needs to explore in order to help children learning. Other than teachers as adults, this zone can also be developed by the aid of more competent peers through pair or group works. By this idea, peer interaction and group works are widely used in classroom settings.

Numerous studies have shown the advantage of peer interaction and group works on such factors as promoting intrinsic motivation, heightening self-esteem, creating caring and altruistic relationships, and lowering anxiety and prejudice (Brown, 2007). Recently, the attention switches from the effectiveness of peer interaction during the learning process into the investigation of peer interaction nature.

Storch (2002) in his study explained that in second language learning, the point of interest is on its negotiation of meaning, while the negotiation of relationship is seen to be all the same. “The analysis of language used by the learners seems to ignore the fact that in face to face interaction, learners negotiate not only the topic, but also their relationship” (Storch, 2002). From his study he noticed some types of interaction occurred between the pairs. One of them is collaborative pattern.

This present paper tries to linked Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and the pattern of pair interaction, especially on the stage of pair formation. The writer is going to know and explain the role of ZPD in collaborative pair interaction. The writer believes that to consider ZPD theory in pairing the students during the collaborative pair-interaction will be worthwhile for ESL classrooms.

This paper is divided into some parts: the introduction, literature review, discussion and conclusion.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Group and pair work have been widely used in education, including in second language teaching. They are seen as promising ways to help developing students’ outcomes. The

nature of group and pair interaction has been a hot topic of extensive research in social psychology and general education for years. Those studies are trying to find out the implication of pair-group interaction in the classrooms. Previously, the point of interest of second language learning research is on its negotiation of meaning, while the negotiation of relationship seems to be ignored (Storch, 2002). Storch (2002) argues that while students are doing pair group activities, they are not only negotiating meaning, but also their relationship. Thus, Storch (2002) conducted a study to examine the nature of this relationship during the pair work. Along with him, a growing number of studies have begun to investigate more closely the dynamics of group and pair behavior in L2 contexts. These studies have shown that there are differences in the patterns of pair behavior, but more importantly, they suggest that some patterns are more conducive to learning than others (Storch, 2002). In his study, Storch noted four distinct patterns of pair interaction and described in detail characteristics of each pattern based on his data collection.

In 2008, Watanabe and Swain also conducted a study to examine the nature of pair work. They were trying to investigate the role of proficiency differences in the nature of pair activities. Their result shows that it is not the measured but perceived proficiency that affect somebody's attitude during a peer activity. They found that while doing peer tasks, the learners will perceive each other and those perceived proficiency will impact on how they will take a role during the peer task process. In 2007, their research on similar topic also highlighted that to work in peers is beneficial, even if the students should work with less proficient peers. They noted that the role of pair patterns took more importantly during the pair discussion rather than the students' proficiency differences. This finding is in line with Watanabe's (2007) study which noticed that both, the higher and the lower proficiency peers can provide opportunities for learning when they work collaboratively. They shared many ideas, regardless of their proficiency level. These findings suggest that proficiency differences are not the decisive factor affecting the nature of peer assistance. Rather, the pattern of interaction does, which is should be collaborative pattern.

Storch's findings and the other similar studies have successfully captured the nature of peer interaction but have not considered yet the beneficial role of Zone of Proximal Development theory by Vygotsky, during the pair-work interaction. Vygotskian Zone of Proximal Development suggests that more competent peers as well as adults can aid children's development (Vygotsky in Tudge, 1990). More competent peer will help his partner's learning, which simultaneously also train himself to learn by teaching others (Ohta, 1995 in Storch, 2002). For these reasons, it is argued that to consider the students' current ability, in this case, the students' level of proficiency is seen to be important in order to appropriately pair and give them a good environment of learning.

In relation to Zone of Proximal Development by Vygotsky, Tudge (1990) conducted two studies to investigate the extent to which development occurred when children were paired with another child whose level of thinking was at the same level, at a lower level and at a higher level. He provided feedback in his second study to make it more natural as learning exists in the actual classrooms. The first study concluded that only students who were paired with more competent students got the benefit of the collaboration, while the second study noted that after feedback was given, the students who were paired with more competent partners did not improve significantly more than the others. Tudge also noticed that children were likely to regress in their thinking when confronted with less competent partners who were not confident.

DISCUSSION

PATTERNS OF PEER INTERACTION IN ESL CLASSROOM

Storch (2008), in his study, found four different patterns of interaction in ESL adult classroom. Those are Collaborative pattern, Dominant/Dominant pattern, Dominant/Passive pattern, and Expert/Novice pattern. In Collaborative pattern, alternative views are offered and discussed by the two students. They are both actively engaged in the discussion and share ideas to each other. Meanwhile, in Dominant/dominant pattern, both participants contribute to the tasks but there is unwillingness or inability to fully engage with each other's contribution. There is a tendency by both students to share ideas, but keep their own ideas without willingness to accept their partner's opinion. Consequently, consensus or agreement cannot be reach in this pattern.

In Dominant/Passive pattern, the dominant participant takes an authoritarian stance and seems to appropriate the tasks. The other participant seems to adopt and more passive or takes subservient role. There is also little negotiation and few contributions from the passive participant. While in Expert/novice pattern, one participant seems to take more control over the task, he acts as an expert who encourages his partner to participate in the task. He leads the task but do not impose his partner. He provides explanation and seeks to involve the novice to interact. He also gives assistance that helps the novice to learn from the interaction. Meanwhile, the novice is confirming and repeating the suggestion gave.

Among all those patterns, Collaborative and Expert/Novice patterns worked best for second language learning. He recorded that there was more evidence found showing the occurrence of knowledge transfer when the students were working in collaborative and expert/novice patterns rather than in dominant/dominant and dominant/passive patterns. It was also noted that in dominant/passive patterns, greatest number of instances showing missed opportunities, while in the dominant-dominant patterns, greatest number of instances showing no transfer of knowledge (Storch, 2008).

ZONE OF PROXIMAL DEVELOPMENT

Vygotsky places a strong emphasis of his attention on social interactions. He argues that knowledge is not individually constructed, but co-constructed between two people or more. Elementary cognitive functions are transformed into higher mental functions through interactions with more knowledgeable adults or peers. Internalization refers to the process of constructing an internal (cognitive) representation of physical actions or mental operations that first occur in social interactions.

Zone of Proximal Development by Vygotsky refers to the difference between what children can do on their own and with the assistance of others. If an adult or peer carefully provides an appropriate level of support and guidance, children are generally able to perform at a higher level than they can perform on their own. Many research showed that children who are collaborated with an adult (generally a mother) were most likely to complete the task successfully. Those studies suggest that children come to learn adult meanings, behaviors, and technologies in the process of collaboration (Tudge, 1990).

In the context of school-based instruction, Zone of Proximal Development theory reminds the educators to the ways in which instruction can be most useful to children if they are considering the students' Zone of Proximal Development when designing curriculum and

lesson plan. Tudge (1990), in his article, describes the loss that possibly happens if a teacher or parent fails to consider ZPD of their children. He explains that handicapped children should be mainstreamed rather than grouped with the same handicapped children. If they are separated from “normal” children, their development would proceed in totally different, and not beneficial, manner which “would inevitably lead to the creation of special breed of people” (Tudge, 1990). Their potential would not be normally developed because they did not receive normal atmosphere and treatment.

Therefore, in order to determine the nature and path of development, it becomes essential to examine the social environment in which development occurs and the type of instruction provided. If a child is interacting with another person who is less competent, the result of that interaction may be regression. It was supported in Tudge’s (1990) study which showed that when students were paired with more and less competent peers, respectively, only students who were paired with more competent students got the benefit of the collaboration.

Hence, in regard of creating the best environment for ESL students, instead of pairing the students without any consideration, it is recommended to pair the students based on their level of proficiency. Using this pattern, the less proficient students will be able to learn from their more proficient partners. Meanwhile, the more proficient partners will also learn by teaching others. Van Lier (1996 in Storch 2002) argues that students can learn from the act of teaching. In other words, the act of teaching or explaining to others may help L2 learners to construct a more coherent and clearer representation of their own L2 knowledge (Allwright, 1984 in Storch 2002). It would be even better, if the teachers regularly re-design the pair-group so that in different occasion, the less proficient students will become the more proficient partners. By this strategy, the students’ outcomes are supposed to be better.

Although Watanabe and Swain (2008) found that it is not the measured but perceived proficiency that affect somebody’s attitude during a peer activity, yet even the unsupportive perceived proficiency itself can be prevented by initially predict the students’ perception while determining the pair-design. So, a teacher should be able to predict the students’ perceived proficiency towards their partners based on their daily interaction at class. In 2007, Watanabe and Swain, through their research, highlighted that to work in peers is beneficial, even if the students should work with less proficient peers. They noted that the role of pair patterns take more importantly during the pair discussion rather than the students’ proficiency differences. This finding is in line with Watanabe’s (2007) study which noticed that both, the higher and the lower proficiency peers can provide opportunities for learning when they work collaboratively. In response to these studies, it is assumed that if collaborative pair-interaction is going to be applied throughout the semester, a consideration of how to pair the students so that it can give the students the best environment of learning and see their progress should be taken into account. A random pair will maybe beneficial for one-shot occasion but not for a continuous learning. It will probably disadvantage the students who are accidentally always get partners whose level of proficiency are the same (e.g. both still have poor English). They will not necessarily learn.

CONCLUSION

Research has shown the advantage of applying collaborative pair-interaction in ESL classrooms. However, these studies have not considered yet the beneficial role of Zone of

Proximal Development during the interaction. The ZPD theory points out that “adults as well as more competent peers can aid students’ development” (Tudge, 1990). Thus, in order to give the best environment for students’ learning, particularly for long term learning using the pair-interaction, it is recommended to pair the students by considering the theory of Zone of Proximal Development. In this case, a teacher should pair the students based on their level of proficiency and re-design the pair regularly so that they can learn from each other. Zone of Proximal Development theory here is seen as a guideline, so that the teachers are able to pair the students intentionally, rather than randomly assigned the students while working in pairs.

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