

The Role of Peer Relationships in Language Learners' Development: A Constructivist Perspective

Qiuju Dang

Foreign Languages College, Xijing University, Xi'an, Shaanxi, 710123, China

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Abstract: Language is one of the universal social phenomena of the human world. By utilizing language, human beings realize the interpersonal communication and the transmission of cultures from one generation to the next. Achieving the capacity to speak fluently and use language properly is also an important task for every individual's cognitive development. For different levels of language learners, peers play a significant role in the development of their linguistic competence. Therefore, the primary concern of this paper goes to the role of peer relationships in language learning, and then devotes its concern to what teachers should do to enhance learners' all-round growth through utilizing the positive peer relationships in the process language learning.

1. The Nature of Language Learning

Language can be defined as an arbitrary system of symbols (words) that is rule-governed and allows communication about things that are distant in time or space. (Cook, J. & Cook G.) Different schools of scholars have given a variety of definitions about language, and therefore we can appreciate resourceful views on the nature of the language learning process. The following are some of the most widely influential ones:

1.1 The Behaviorist Approach

Behaviorism began as an American psychologist movement aimed at developing a more objective and scientific study of human behaviors. The behaviorist theory of language learning was initiated by B. F. Skinner, who thought that the process of language learning is to shape learners' proper behaviors. For behaviorists, learning a language is seen as helping students forming a series of appropriate mechanical habits, and errors are frowned upon and guarded against as reinforcing "bad habits".

The audiolingual method proposed by the behaviorists put great emphasis on mechanical repetition and drilling activities, ignoring learners active participation and interaction. Despite a lot of criticisms, the audiolingual method is still widely used in the language learning practice in many parts of the world today.

1.2 Social Learning Theory

Social learning theory, developed by Albert Bandura, is a major outgrowth of the behavioral learning theory tradition. Bandura (1986) accepted most of the principles of behavioral theories but focuses more on the influence of external social environment and internal mental processes. Bandura noted that the behaviorists' overemphasis on the consequences of environmental events largely ignored the impact of vicarious experience--learning from others' successes or failures (Slavin, 2011).

Bandura emphasized the importance of observational learning, which involves four phases: the attentional, retention, reproduction, and motivational phases. In practice, imitation and observation play a significant role in the process of language learning and nearly all the students begin their learning by imitating the pronunciation and intonation of others.

1.3 The Information-Processing Theory

The information-processing theory is a cognitive view on human development that focuses on

mental manipulation of coded information, or symbols. Theorists in this tradition often use the computer as a model to describe the learning process of language materials. According to this view, humans have limited capacity in their short-term memory and must take some effective strategies to transform information to the permanent store of long-term memory.

The information-processing theory treats language learning as a static process of decoding and encoding materials, starting from some language input and ending as response output. Between stimulus and response happens a number of mental processes involved in interpreting and restructuring the data. This approach emphasizes the use of learning strategies in the language processing stage, including rehearsal, organization, note-taking, elaboration, and so on.

1.4 Social Constructivist Approaches

Constructivism is a theory which regards language learning as an active process in which learners construct and internalize new concepts, ideas and knowledge based on their existing knowledge and past experience. There are two types of constructivism: cognitive and social constructivism. Vygotsky, a social constructivist, holds that learning is a social, collaborative and interactional activity in which the duty of the teacher lies in creating the proper situation and providing the necessary “scaffolding”.

In general, social constructivist approaches emphasize the social contexts of learning and that knowledge is mutually built and constructed (Bearison & Dorval, 2002). Involvement with others creates opportunities for learners to evaluate and enrich their own understandings during the exposure to others’ views, interpretations, comments, criticisms and the overall evaluations. Actually, experiences in social contacts and interpersonal communications provide an important catalyst for learners’ internalization of their linguistic rules and cultural norms.

2. The Role of Peer Relationships

In the human development literature, the term **peers** refers to people who are about the same age as one another. Healthy peer relationships play an important role in learners’ cognitive, emotional, and socialization processes. In fact, for many language learners, interacting with other fellow students and friends is more beneficial than completing classroom assignments. In completing the learning tasks and handling everyday life events, peer relationships serve a multiple of functions, just a few as follows:

1) *Offering close companionship and face-to-face interactions.* Everyday life events and learning brings many confusing, ambiguous, and troubling moments, and peers help one another get through them more smoothly. The face-to-face interactions enhance the skills of thinking, idea organizing and self-expressing from the language learners, at the same time offer them more opportunities to learn from others.

2) *Developing cognitive schemes and perspective-taking abilities.* By sharing and critiquing one another’s ideas, choices, decisions, attitudes, and values, learners construct increasingly complex cognitive schemes, improving their perspective-taking abilities and achieving better understanding of the world around them.

3) *Providing emotional and social support.* According to Abraham Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, everybody has the intention to fulfill the fundamental need to love and be loved, to belong and be accepted (Maslow, 1970). Peers often provide learners with a familiar partnership, necessary emotional and social support when needed.

4) *Helping the formation of self-identity.* Growing up may bring a lot of uncertainty, confusion, ambiguity, and troubling events, peers can offer a model to learn, sources to get attention, comparisons, praise, and encouragement. All of these help individual language learners clarify the confusion of different ideas and decide who they are and who they want to become in their adult life.

5) *Enhancing the socialization process.* While communicating, collaborating and transacting with other fellows, children and adolescents socialize one another in several ways: They define options for important procedures, norms, social events and legally-accepted behaviors, knowing

what is expected, what is not allowed, and what is encouraged and admirable in their communities; They reinforce one another for acting in ways deemed appropriate for their age, gender, ethnic group, and cultural backgrounds.

3. Basic Principles for Peer Relationships

Good peer relationships can bring a lot of benefits to all the participants involved and favorably enhanced the achievement of learning outcomes. In establishing and maintaining different kinds of peer relationships, the teacher should follow some basic principles:

3.1 The Principle of Self-Initiative

The aim of establishing peer relationships is to enhance learners' overall development, so it must be founded on the individual learner's willingness and initiatives. Only by their own choices and genuine intentions can learners enjoy a comfortable feeling with the existence and companionship of peers. Otherwise, all efforts will bring no value to the learning process and learners themselves.

3.2 The Principle of Practicality

The incorporation and utilization of peer relationships in the language learning process ought to be *practical*--within the means of technical resources, time constraints, ease of management, and the consideration of students' knowledge and abilities. For example, a teacher can now take advantage of the Internet to organize the learners in different places to launch communication activities on some topics, but this was not possible in several decades ago. Another consideration is time limits, too much time spent on tasks assigned to peers' collaboration and cooperation also runs the risk of slowing down the pace of the teaching procedures and wearing out learners' attention and patience.

3.3 The Principle of Scaffolding

The teacher may adopt flexible measures to organize peer relationships in the design and administration of their teaching process. However, the teacher must bear in mind his or her scaffolding role, offering the timely and appropriate help, clues, expected answers and feedback when needed. Lessons and materials should present meaningful frameworks within which the learning should take place. Summary, feedback and evaluation should follow the students' report, presentation, share of their opinions, and performance in classroom interactions. The key is to know when to offer and when to remove the scaffolding. If the scaffolding occurs too early, it will interrupt the learners' thinking and organizing their own answers. If it is maintained too long, it will harm and impact the learners' independence required for creative and autonomous language use.

3.4 The Principle of Development Orientation

The ultimate goal of education is to promote the overall healthy development of learners, involving physical growth, social interactions, the acquisition of language, memory abilities, and virtually the whole process of socialization to be a competent citizen of one's nation. All the teaching and learning activities must contribute to the achievement of the learning objectives and the bigger picture of the national educational purposes. Therefore, the arrangement of peer relationships and other interactions must serve and enhance the all-round growth of learners' cognitive, emotional, and social adaptation in the future career environment.

4. Implications for Language Teachers

Considering the benefits of peer relationships to the development of students' linguistic competence and even their "whole-person" development, teachers can do a lot of things to help establish and maintain positive peer relationships:

4.1 Choosing the Proper Peer Relationship Structure

In the educational practice, peer relationships can take the multiple forms, from in-class pair work, small groups and outside-class interest groups, community activities, field research and project teams. In the environment of the Internet and globalization, peer relationships can happen beyond the physical limitations of classroom as communications in cyberspace. Bearing the learning outcomes and other related considerations in mind, the teacher can integrate the strengths and weaknesses of each structure and decide the proper one to use in completing a specific learning task. For example, pair work is right for practising dialogue pronunciation in the classroom and team work is better for a field research project outside.

4.2 Arranging Appropriate Tasks and/or Assignments

The application of peer relationships should be adaptive according to the characteristics and concrete objectives of the learning tasks and assignments. Therefore, In the different phase of the teaching processes, the teacher should design and prepare specific tasks or assignments for learners. For example, the turn-taking questioning, clarifying, and predicting by different learners is effective while using the reciprocal teaching method to teach reading materials. After all the learners finish the whole text, discussion, reflection, summary writing and critical thinking training can be followed to promote the deeper understanding of the whole passage and transfer of knowledge.

4.3 Managing the Interactional Process

The peer relationship is a kind of group activities. From a sociological perspective, a **group** can be defined as two or more freely interacting individuals who share a common identity and purpose. (R. Kreitner, 2004). Individual learners bring their own beliefs, learning preferences, cultural interpretations to the learning process and classroom interactions, disagreements and conflicts often accompany the routine procedure and communication. It is the teacher, the organizer and facilitator of the teaching context, who should the responsibility to manage the smooth progression of the learning process.

5. Conclusion

From the perspective of Constructivist approach, language learning is a dynamic process in which learners must construct their own understandings and interpretations through active interactions with other fellow learners and environmental events. Peers play a significant role in completing the learning tasks and/or assignments, and can bring benefits to learners' cognitive, emotional, and socializing growth. Considering this, teachers should effectively take advantage of the multiple structures of peer relationships in their design and management of the teaching and learning process, with a view to enhance learners' short-run language learning efficiency and long-run whole-person development.

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