



Scientific and Systematic Approaches to Modeling of EFL Peer Learning in Higher Education

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Abstract

The paper deals with the investigation of theoretical and practical issues on the organization and management of EFL peer learning. Lack of understanding of the mechanism of peer learning as a system of relationships and interactions hinders creating the conditions for effective education. The study aims to identify and systematize the key components of interactive learning of the English language, substantiate their significance in modeling peer learning. The scientific approach to the analysis of the concept "interactive learning" is applied. The systematic approach to the synthesis of the components of interactive peer learning is used as a basis for educational modeling. As a result, the components of interactive learning were identified and systematized in the form of peer learning principles, including student activity; educational material selected in compliance with student's knowledge; cyclical stages of a learning process; teacher's preparatory work; classroom peer tutoring. The principles were integrated into a dynamic model of peer learning whose driving factors are learning objectives, content, participants, design and management, control and assessment. The model ensures maximum student involvement in a learning process, increases motivation, develops language proficiency, manages activities and leads to efficient results.

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INTRODUCTION

Peer learning is a form of interactive learning without direct teacher intervention. In interactive peer learning, the teacher often acts only as an organizer of the learning process who creates conditions for student initiative, supports and manages their interactions. The collaborative activity of students is distinguished by the majority of Russian and foreign researchers as the basis for high efficiency and effectiveness of the educational process (Vasilyeva, 2021; Vanyagina, 2021; Shakirova 2023; Egshatyan & Titova, 2022; Koshkina & Pazenko, 2021; Orekhova, 2021; Fozilova, 2022; Rivero Cruz & Tardo Fernández & Rey Rivas, 2020; Bozkurt & Aydin, 2023; Senthamarai, 2018 etc.). Fozilova (2022) indicates that "with interactive engagement, the processes of development of the cognitive, emotional and behavioral spheres of personality are carried out more intensively, unlike traditional (reproductive) learning. Each student gets the opportunity to compare his experience with the experience of other people, he develops the most effective model of behavior" (p. 693). The concept of interaction is especially relevant for foreign language teaching and learning, since language is directly embodied in speech. And speech represents communication, in other words verbal interactions.

However, there are a number of issues that arise when studying the theoretical background and implementing interactive learning in practice. Firstly, the definitions of interactive learning are quite fragmented, which leads to misunderstanding of the mechanism of its functioning. Pedagogical Encyclopedic Dictionary (Bim-Bud, 2002) defines interactive learning as «learning based on the student's interaction with the educational environment, the learning environment that serves as an area of learning experience". Zhuk (2003) considers interaction as an enhanced activity between someone, and interactive learning as a purposeful strengthening of interaction between a teacher and students to create optimal conditions for development. According to Kashlev (as cited in Krylova, 2016, p.43) "interactive learning is a special form of organizing the cognitive activity of students in comfortable conditions for them, which implies their interaction in the teamwork, when each participant realizes his importance, which makes the learning process as productive as possible for everyone and leads to the achievement of the intended result". Shakirova (2023) emphasizes that interactive learning is learning in communication. Secondly, the concept of interactive learning is either interpreted broadly or focused on separately taken particular components. For example, Vanyagina (2021) postulates a set of fundamental principles of interactive learning, namely the principle of activity, interaction, engagement, programmability, individualization, universality, effectiveness, creativity. While, Wiseman (2019) focuses on motivation as one of the main components of successful student-teacher interactions. Egshatyan & Titova (2022) believe that the main components of interactive lessons are interactive exercises and tasks performed by students. Senthamarai (2018) notes that the key factor of interactive learning is the competence of the teacher, through which the process of interaction is stimulated and supported. "Great teachers are nimble, observant, and responsive, always keeping an open mind about how to best engage their students and get them excited about learning—and that means considering trying out different interactive teaching styles in the classroom" (p.37). Meanwhile, as

Vasilyeva (2021) rightly indicates, there are still research gaps in this area, such important questions remain unanswered as: (1) what exactly ensures active interaction when combining structural components of interactive learning into a system; (2) on the basis of what and how the motivation of students increases; (3) due to what students' joint cognitive activities develop; (4) how to manage such activities in order to obtain the best result in each specific learning situation/environment.

Following Vasilyeva (2021), I believe that the main reason for the problems faced by teachers in organizing interactive learning in general and interactive peer learning, in particular, is the lack of understanding of its mechanism, the way it works and functions. Fragmented views on its components and their interrelations do not contribute to organizing, supporting and managing effective interactive learning with peers. In this work I claim that students, their learning activities and communicative interactions are a system-forming factor. The peripheral components of a learning process in a classroom setting are integrated into the system via interactions among a teachers and/or students.

The study aims to answer the question how to model EFL learning with a continual active engagement of all students during a lesson in classroom setting?

The answer to the question requires studying theoretical data about interactivity and interactive learning, communication and language acquisition, peer learning and tutoring; identifying the key components of EFL interactive peer learning; formulating principles of active collaborative work with peers; creating conditions and designing scenarios of interactions based on the principles of EFL peer learning.

METHOD

In order to identify the key components of the mechanism of interactive learning, a scientific approach is used. Theoretical data include investigations in constructivism (Dagar & Yadav, 2016; Mcleod, 2023), ecolinguistics with a distributed view on linguistic cognition (Steffensen & Cowley 2021; Steffensen & Trasmundi & Høgh & Ventzel 2023; Cowley 2019; Thibault 2021), ecological psychology (McKinney & Steffensen & Chemero 2022), bio-cognitive philosophy of language (Kravchenko 2017; Kravchenko 2021), practice-oriented learning (action oriented learning, integrated skills learning) (Pardede, 2020; Puren, 2021; Acar, 2020; Yu, 2009), peer learning and tutoring (Topping, 2005; Collins, 2021; Hornby & Greaves, 2022; Makarova 2017, 2018).

The interrelations and interconnections among the components are substantiated by utilizing a systematic approach. It consists in synthesizing the obtained theoretical data, integrating the key interactive learning components into a learning system "peer-to-peer", formulating the principles that reveal interrelations and interconnections among the system components. Systematic approach is used as a basis for further modeling of EFL peer learning.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

1. The concept "interactivity" in language learning and its main components

The analysis of the theoretical data show that the key components of interactivity and interactive learning are significant and integral factors forming a system of students learning activities and communicative interactions. One of the key components of a learning process is knowledge. Knowledge is considered to be created by a student not transmitted by a teacher. It serves as the basis on which new knowledge is built. Dagar & Yadav (2016) underline that "there is no such thing as knowledge 'somewhere out there', independent of the knower, but only the knowledge that we create for ourselves as we learn is true knowledge" (p. 2). In the process of knowledge formation, the student himself determines what is significant for him and what is not. By building up the meaning, the student learns new things, better understands what is already known.

Another component is activity. Learning is regarded as an active process. The student's activity and involvement in the educational process are necessary for the formation of motivation, without which it is difficult for students to establish links between their past experience and current training. Both physical and intellectual activities are important. By activity is meant any interaction of a student with his physical and socio-cultural environment in a situation "here and now". Steffensen & Trasmundi & Høgh & Ventzel (2023) define interactivity as a sense-saturated coordination in human organization-environment systems. Doctor of Philology, Professor Alexander V. Kravchenko (2021) argues that communication refers to speakers' activities aimed at orienting themselves and the others in the consensual domain, i.e. in a common, shared physical, social, cultural context in which interactions take place. Researchers admit that communicative action (speech act) is just a means, not a goal, because communication is a part of any social activity. Rather than focus on "the said," one should investigate how "linguaging links bodily coordination with socially derived experience" (Cowley, 2019, p.484). The social action, which is acting with the others, is the basis for social-action-based learning. Akar (2020) indicates that social-action-based learning differs from both the communicative approach and task-based language teaching, both of which also indicate an action but the action referred to is the communicative action (speech action or speech acts) (p. 27).

Learning cannot be provided without learning environment. Learning takes place in a community, through relationships with other participants in the educational process, whose roles may include teachers, students, subject matter experts, friends, relatives, etc. Vygotsky (1978) asserted that knowledge can't be isolated from social and cultural context. He argues that all higher mental functions are social in origin and are embedded in the context of sociocultural setting. Sociocultural environment in which a person finds himself affects him through learning. Various types of interactions with the environment determine his personal experience. According to McKinney & Steffensen & Chemero (2022) "agents are what they are in relation to the environment they experience; the environment as experienced by any particular agent is what it is in relation to that agent's abilities and interest" (p.3). Hence, on the one hand, each student brings his own unique experience to the learning environment, on the other hand, the previous experience and

knowledge of the student affect his ability to understand new things proposed by new environment.

For language learning it is significant for the interactions between students to be meaningful and authentic. Meaning comes neither from within or from without. Meaning is build up as a result of the mutuality between agents and environments (McKinney & Steffensen & Chemero, 2022). Yu (2009) indicates that teachers and students in face-to-face classroom environments, where there is foreign language input abundance, should create more opportunities for meaningful interaction and motivate learners to communicate more. The learning environment is created by the teacher, and therefore, is artificial. The task of the teacher is to make it as close as possible to the natural environment, to the one with which the student is familiar, knows how to interact. The teacher's function is mainly to create conditions, organize and manage interactions based on the experience and knowledge of students. The role of the teacher is to facilitate active discovery by providing the appropriate resources and by guiding learners as they attempt to assimilate new knowledge to old and to modify the old to accommodate the new. Teachers must take into account the knowledge that the learner currently possesses when deciding how to construct the curriculum and to present, sequence, and structure new material.

Another important component of interactive learning is so called obstacles. The most common challenges that teachers of foreign languages face at non-linguistic Russian universities according to Trifonova (2015), Buldina (2016), Makarova (2017) are lack of motivation and emotional discomfort, problems with discipline, different levels of foreign language proficiency of the students in the same academic group, especially among first-year students. Insufficient proficiency of a teacher in modern interactive educational technologies, lack of heuristic elements in conducting classes, not always adequate selection of educational material can also hinder a learning process. Together they put several obstacles in organizing and managing interactive foreign language teaching and learning.

Peer learning and tutoring are regarded as efficient approaches to organize training in such a way as to involve all students in active collaboration and to offset a number problems (Topping, 2005; Collins, 2021; Hornby & Greaves, 2022; Makarova 2017, 2018). The main purpose of planned, organized peer learning interactions is to build up knowledge and skills through active assistance and support among students of equal status. Learning with a peer allows teachers to model an educational environment as close as possible to the natural environment, where students choose, design and implement their own projects collectively. Teachers solve several problems related to educational and social motivation, active involvement in the work of the entire class with different levels of knowledge and abilities, but similar experiences of co-education, at the same time. Peer tutoring focuses on live communication in pairs or small groups, where one student acts as a tutor, provided there is a desire to help the other student. Hornby & Greaves (2022) assert that peer tutoring as a strategy can enable students to benefit from each other's knowledge and skill sets. When students are guided to work in

partnership, helping each other organize and process information, their opportunities for improved learning are increased.

Practitioners admit that the learning process is well supported by the assessment, a vital feature of which is feedback. Teacher's and peer's feedback helps students to gain accurate and deep intuitive understanding about their current position in the learning process. Reyes & Samson & Garcia indicate that students as they receive feedback can obtain the desired learning outcomes. Dagar & Yadav (2016) underline that performance assessment should be authentic, in other words it requires students to complete certain real-life tasks.

The language learning process is characterized by cyclicity like any other human activity. According to Alekseeva (2013) the complex nature of the cycle makes it necessary to identify its components and highlight the procedural features of this phenomenon as a system. Structuring the content based on a cyclical approach allows for the interconnection of all elements of the educational process and ensures constant repetition of what has been mastered, reaching new qualitative levels (p. 199). It is also noted that learning is a continuous, life-long process, not limited to the locations of the educational institution (Sannikova, 2018).

2. Principles of English as a foreign language peer learning

The identified components of interactive learning and revealed connections among them were systematized in order to formulate the principles of effective EFL peer learning. Motivated engagement of each student into a learning process contributes to their achievements thereby makes learning effective. They are the following.

(a) Activity and involvement of each student in the learning process.

The learning situation is built around motivated active communication of students in a foreign language. Everyone is involved through the use of interactive technologies, such as working in pairs, in small groups, brainstorming, playing games, making surveys and discussions. Interactive tasks include a set of various exercises aimed at practicing lexical and grammatical material, training the pronunciation of words, developing reading, speaking, listening, and spelling skills.

(b) Compliance of educational materials and assignments with students' knowledge, skills, experience

The educational model is designed based on the previous experience and knowledge of students. The task of the teacher at the initial stage of acquaintance with the group is to determine the level of language proficiency and the degree of readiness of students to participate in foreign language communicative interactions. With this in mind, didactic material and educational tasks should be chosen.

(c) Cyclicity of the learning process and repeatability of learning activities

The learning environment is an artificially created environment. All situations and interactions are gradually designed and organized with specific objectives. Each lesson is a cycle consisting of embedded speech activities. Each speech activity represents a

cycle including particular learning interactions. Both student's and teacher's activities and interactions are repeated every lesson so as to become familiar.

(d) Competent organizational and preparatory work of the teacher

The functioning of an effective educational system depends on the teacher's preparatory work. A learning model is the result of a teacher's well-planned work. When planning a lesson, it is necessary to take into account all components of the system, including students, didactic materials, equipment and physical facilities in terms of the possibility of organizing interactions with them. The purpose of the teacher's preparatory work is to plan interactions, namely, to choose pairs/ groups for collaboration, to select tasks, didactic material, to assign roles in peer tutoring, to prepare/instruct a tutor, etc.

(e) Integration of peer tutoring elements into the learning process.

Tutoring among students plays an important role supporting the functioning of the educational system. Each student has a unique experience, knowledge and skills that can facilitate interaction. There are often situations when one student, more experienced and proficient, can help another, less proficient. It should be emphasized that successful experience is important not only in subject matter (good knowledge of foreign language), but also in organizing interactions, developing flexible skills. The practice of mutual assistance in completing tasks helps to build and maintain communicative interactions. A tutor is a peer usually proficient in foreign language, sociable and friendly, with more developed organizational skills.

(f) Peer assessment and monitoring of achievements

Student peer assessment, in addition to the control, performs teaching, educating and developing functions. The role of mutual assessment in the learning process is significant. It promotes the expansion, deepening and improvement of each student's own knowledge, develops cognitive interests. Evaluating classmates, students analyze, compare their own achievements with the results of their peers, develop strong-willed efforts, and form a number of personal qualities. Constructive and detailed peer assessment is an additional motivating factor for learning.

3. Model of English as a foreign language peer learning in a classroom setting

Design and creation of a model is based on the principles of interactive peer learning of foreign languages. In terms of the principle *cyclicity of the learning process and repeatability of learning activities* the learning process is divided into three stages. They are preparatory work; peer-to-peer work; control and assessment. Studying each new topic/unit in the textbook students go through the certain learning stages, perform tasks using already familiar interactive forms of communication, as a rule, in already established pairs and groups. *Activity and involvement of each student in the learning process* is achieved via peculiar for each stage way of grouping students. (Table 1).

Table 1. EFL learning stages and ways of grouping

Learning stage	Way of grouping
stage 1. preparatory work	teacher-to-class
stage 2. peer-to-peer work	pairs, mini groups
stage 3. control and assessment	peer-to-peer student-to-teacher

The principle *competent organizational and preparatory work of the teacher* is implemented on the preparatory stage. Peer learning is preceded by the organizational and preparatory work of the teacher, which consists in collaborative work with the students initial analysis and training of new lexical and grammatical material used in pre-selected tasks and texts, explaining the essence of collaborative work with the alternating roles "tutor" - "tutee", the responsibility of each student for the results. The principle *compliance of educational materials and assignments with students' knowledge, skills, experience* is practiced on the second stage. The units in the textbook for the 1-st year students cover a wide range of topics on education and science, business etiquette, working life, modern technologies, for 2-nd and 3-rd year students – topics specific for professional and academic areas. Students use modern educational resources and facilities, mostly telephones with the Internet access. On the second stage *peer tutoring elements are integrated into the learning process*. Students train and practice lexical and grammatical material in all speech activities in pairs or small groups. In each pair or group a teacher appoints a tutor and tutee(-s). They perform various tasks and achieve aims by prompting, correcting and explaining. During peer-to-peer work the teacher monitors the process, manages time, assists students, and gives feedback.

The principle of *peer assessment and monitoring of achievements* is implemented on the third stage of interactive peer learning. Tutors assess tutees. A teacher assesses tutors by tutees achievements.

This model of EFL peer learning is not static. Its dynamism and variability depend on factors of a learning situation/environment. Each of which contributes to its changes, facilitates development (Table 2).

Table 2. Factors of EFL peer learning

Factor	Description
Objectives	Train and practice of lexical and grammatical material in all speech activities
Content	Didactic materials, various interactive exercises, electronic educational resources
Design and management (tutor responsibilities)	Sharing roles and responsibilities, selecting learning materials adopted to knowledge and skills of students, choosing speech activities, creating interaction scenarios, utilizing equipment and physical facilities
Participants	Teacher, students (pairs, groups of 3-4 students)
Control, assessment	Oral peer assessment Written peer assessment according to the criteria and scale Test score Self-assessment Oral and written teacher assessment

Therefore, each learning situation in a classroom setting is constructed by interacting participants (teacher, students) sharing roles "tutor"- "tutee", using appropriate facilities, giving feedback and assessment to achieve a particular objective.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

The obtained results proved the effectiveness of scientific and systematic approaches to the analysis of the mechanism of interactive learning. Due to these approaches there were identified structural components of interactive learning including knowledge, activity, learning environment, meaning, peer interactions, obstacles, feedback, cyclicity. The holistic view on a learning process, as a network of interacting participants reveals its functioning. It shows how structural components of interactive learning are combined into a cohesive educational system due to active interactions among the participants of a learning process with the roles "tutor"- "tutee". These approaches allow formulating principles of effective peer learning and teaching of a foreign language which make the basis for creating a model of EFL peer learning. The designed model is dynamic. It changes under the influence of the factors of a learning situation among which are learning objectives, content, design and management, participants, control and assessment. Objectives ensure activity. Appropriate material develops cognitive activities. Peer work, support and assistance increase motivation. With control and assessment a learning process is successfully managed. To obtain results a well-thought design and management of a learning situation is required. The conclusion suggests that a foreign language teacher should clearly understand that knowledge is not transmitted by the teacher, but is created by students during their active interactions with the learning environment which is carefully created and managed by the teacher and this requires specific competencies. The formulated principles of peer learning can be applied in teaching any discipline, since communicative interactions are a system-forming factor of any educational process.

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