Is There a Role for Tutor in Group Work: Peer Interaction in a Hong Kong EFL Classroom

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Abstract

This paper emphasizes the dialogic processes that arise in collaborative task performance and how these shape language use and learning of the target form in a Hong Kong EFL classroom. It investigates the features of scaffolding in a group discussion among first-year university students and examines how the scaffolding categories affect the learners’ production of appropriate grammatical forms. The paper also advocates the presence of teacher (or tutor) to direct learners’ attention to important form-meaning connections in L2 pedagogical group activities due to the limitations of peer interaction.

1. Introduction

Since the 1990s, the concept of scaffolding has become an important focus for classroom research with the influence of sociocultural theory, originating from the Soviet developmental psychologist Lev S Vygotsky (1978). Second language learning research has not been immune to this changing perspective research. Scaffolding is a term to describe the temporary but essential nature of supportive interaction through which novices (e.g., apprentice learners) are assisted by experts (e.g., teachers or parents) or other peers to develop new skills, concepts or higher levels of understanding (Maybin, Mercer & Stierer, 1992). In Vygotskian thought, self-regulation is regarded as a goal in the Zone of proximal Development
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(hereafter ZPD), which refers to the distance between the learner’s actual level and potential level of development (Lantolf & Appel, 1994). Accordingly, scaffolding is analogous to a temporary bridge within the learner’s ZPD during the interaction. It is through scaffolding that the learner constructs the ZPD and thereby foster learning (Ellis, 2003). Researchers have shown how targeted features which learners produce with the help of scaffolding may be incorporated into their independent discourse (Lantolf, 2000). The study is an attempt to examine features of scaffolding in peer interaction in a Hong Kong EFL classroom at the tertiary level. It investigates how the students interact with each other in the process of learning the target form in group work. The following questions are addressed:

- What are the features of scaffolding in peer-peer interaction?
- How do peer scaffolding affect the students’ ability to produce the correct form?

2. Research on Peer Interaction in Second Language Classrooms

To date there has been growing interest in the impact of peer-peer scaffolding in the trend of sociocultural research as it is very important for second language learning and use. Some researchers have explored the impact of peer-peer scaffolding on language learning in the process of noticing form and meaning. Peer-peer dialogue is found to be helpful in learning linguistic features and recognizing vocabulary in various tasks. However, these studies have mixed results. Peer scaffolding alone may not always and necessarily lead to correct target forms due to the students’ limited mastery of linguistic knowledge and ability to use the scaffolding functions. The following studies focus on the positive effects of peer scaffolding only, without revealing the weakness of peer interactions.
Donato (1994) examined three adult English first language learners in learning the past compound tense of reflective verbs in French in an oral activity. The study used six features of scaffolding developed by Wood, Bruner and Ross (1976) as guidelines to portray the microgenesis of learners’ language development in collaboration. The significance of the study lies in the re-evaluation of the role of interaction and negotiation of meaning. Nevertheless, the study does not explain whether learners know the way to best support their peers in the feedback. Even adult second language learners who may be mature in world knowledge and communication skills are not necessarily skillful at thinking critically and facilitating their peers to elaborate in the same way as the teacher. In that case, the results might have hidden the weaknesses of peer interactions.

Later, Swain and Lapkin (1998, 2001, 2003) investigated how French immersion students scaffold each other in collaborative writing tasks, focusing on form from an output perspective. The students co-constructed their written story by generating and assessing alternatives, correcting each other’s second language productions, and also using the first language as a tool to regulate their behaviour. Swain and Lapkin acknowledge that this cognitive activity led to microgenesis for both vocabulary and grammar. Similarly, Guerrero and Villamil (1994, 2000) point put that there is evidence of learning development as students moved from the other-regulation stage to self-regulation stage during the activity; and self-regulated partners offered assistance to other-regulated members to prompt further revisions and self-revisions in collaborative writing tasks.

Moreover, DiCamilla and Anton (1997) found that in peer-peer interaction, repetition emerges as one of the devices used by adult L2 Spanish learners to mediate the collective construction
of scaffolding. Storch (1999) explored the impact of peer assistance on students’ language learning by comparing individual work to collaborative work. Storch found that collaboration and its generated meta-talk had a positive effect on overall grammatical accuracy. He examined tertiary ESL students in completing a series of grammar-focused exercises. Storch noted that students in collaboration spent more time on the task as they discussed the changes of the language forms than those working individually, which clearly resulted in more accurate performance. Therefore, peer scaffolding results in evidence of co-construction and language development, i.e., grammatical accuracy and new lexical knowledge.

In addition, the longitudinal studies of Ohta (2000, 2001) support previous research (e.g., Kowal & Swain, 1997) that even less proficient peers are able to provide assistance to more proficient peers in a predictable and sensitive manner within the ZPD. Ohta notes that scaffolding between students of different proficiency levels can enhance fluency, and the more proficient partners become more aware of the status of their own knowledge. She further claims that labels such as ‘more’ or ‘less proficient peer’ cannot be categorically applied to specific students, as all students have strengths and weaknesses in peer collaboration. However, the studies neglect the limitations of peer scaffolding that learners may feel difficult to stretch their peers’ ZPD as they have more or less the same actual level of development.

To sum up, recent research has revealed the positive role of peer scaffolding in the second language classroom. Nevertheless, these studies fail to provide explanations for negative effects of peer interaction, e.g., students’ lack of confidence in knowing how to provide useful feedback (Swain, Brooks & Tocalli-Beller, 2002). Moreover, previous research has not studied whether peer scaffolding could push the learner’s
ZPD in second language learning. There is not enough discourse analysis to show how learners interact, negotiate and collaboratively co-construct scaffolding. Second and foreign language studies that document the process would contribute to an understanding of the effects of scaffolding on individual development, related to pedagogical activities. Besides, there is not enough research on adult language learners in Chinese foreign language classrooms. How scaffolding takes place in tertiary Hong Kong EFL classrooms is a worthwhile area of investigation.

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

Fifteen Chinese EFL learners, all first-year students from the Faculty of Arts in a university in Hong Kong participated in the study. They were chosen randomly in classroom group work from an English Enhancement course in the university. They have all been studying previously in the Hong Kong school system, and have been studying English in school for around 13 to 16 years. In universities of Hong Kong most of the classroom interaction time is in English due to the English-speaking environment in class and the English Medium policy in most subjects. All the students had passed the Hong Kong Advanced Level Examination and the Use of English exam.

3.2 The Task

The task of the study was a writing activity which required the students to rewrite an essay by using relative clauses (See Appendix B). The essay was an argumentative piece about people’s attitudes towards life styles in the modern society. Some of the underlined sentences involved inappropriate
relative clauses. The students were asked to try to improve the
underlined sentences by using appropriate relative clauses
without any alteration of the content and correct the errors if
any. They were required to complete the task within 30
minutes’ discussion in a group of three or four.

3.3. Data Collection and Analysis

Classroom interactive data were collected during one complete
unit of discussion on the writing activity. The students finished
rewriting the relevant parts that need to be polished according
to the requirement of the task. The discussion part was
videotaped. The researcher started videotaping as soon as the
students began the activities. Videotaping was done with the
camcorder placed as far as possible from the students in order
to reduce their affective responses to being videotaped. The
researcher was waiting outside the videotaping room, instead
of interfering in the discussion. So the study focused on the
analysis of classroom discourse and the accuracy of the target
form in students’ revised work.

The transcribed data were analyzed in two steps: Firstly, the
researcher identified all instances of scaffolding episodes. What
was classified as a scaffolding episode was a conversational
sequence where a student may not be able to participate
without interactive assistance in the writing activity. The
student either received help on noticing the target form, or
clarifying the meaning from the peer in order to become a
competent participant, or was able to self-regulate competent
participation through applying an appropriate strategy (e.g.,
Silliman, Bahr, Beasman & Wilkinson, 2000).
For instance, Student A helped Student B to notice ‘which’ and
‘comma’ in the relative clause.
Student A: ‘Which’, I think we have to add a comma here.
Student B: You mean the relative clause?

Secondly, the scaffolding episodes were coded and quantified with reference to the specific scaffolding categories, subjected to microgenetic analysis, in which moment-to-moment changes in the participants’ behavior were noted and examined. Through microgenesis, it is possible, as Vygotsky (1978) puts it, to trace the thorough, minute development of the psychological process. To help identify and understand scaffolding mechanisms in the data, the researcher drew from previously established categories and features of assistance in the literature (see Donato, 1994; Gallimore & Tharp, 1990; Wood, Bruner & Ross, 1976). Seven possible kinds of scaffolding functions were catalogued from the transcriptions as Coding Categories: Recruitment (R); Simplifying the task (S); Direction Maintenance (DM); Marking Critical Features (MCF); Frustration Control (FC); Demonstration (D); and Feedback (F). These scaffolding functions could occur singly or be embedded in others, and be initiated either by the peer. The definition and elaboration of each coding category is listed with examples from transcriptions of classroom discourse as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
<th>Example from transcriptions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Recruitment (R)</td>
<td>Recruiting interest in the task, i.e., drawing the learners’ attention to, and engaging their interest in the task.</td>
<td>Is there any part that seems unclear to you… of that sentence?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simplifying the task (S)</td>
<td>Simplifying the demands of the task by reducing the number of constituent acts required</td>
<td>What would be solitude? Do you know solitude?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Direction Maintenance (DM)</td>
<td>Maintaining pursuit of the goal.</td>
<td>We just need to revise, looking at relative clauses.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marking Critical Features (MCF)</td>
<td>Marking critical features and discrepancies between what has been produced and the ideal solution.</td>
<td>I guess we should not use while. We should use when instead of while for most sentences.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frustration Control (FC)</td>
<td>Controlling frustration during problem solving.</td>
<td>Do you want to say something?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demonstration (D)</td>
<td>Demonstrating an idealized version of the act to be performed.</td>
<td>For example, so many people admire living alone and put more time on self-recognition.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feedback (F)</td>
<td>Giving evaluation or comments on the learner’s performance.</td>
<td>Yeah. Right.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Intra-rater consistency was checked that the coding and quantification were verified through the researcher’s reviewing the videotapes and audio recordings for three times. Inter-rater consistency was conducted for four of the twelve videotaped sessions. The researcher and an additional rater reached 90% agreement across all scaffolding functions within the three protocols. Disagreements were resolved by reviewing the operational definitions of each scaffolding function and discussion.
4. Findings

4.1 Negotiation for Meaning in Peer Interaction

In peer interaction, the students facilitate each other to discuss the meaning when they attend to the content particularly in sorting out the meaning of the sentence or the main idea of the paragraph. While they are negotiating the content, they are clarifying the form and thinking about ways to achieve the task. Initially one student may notice the problem in understanding the content. Then other students are encouraged to clarify the meaning through scaffolding to reach consensus on comprehending the content.

Example 1 (Clarifying meaning at sentence level)
41 Catherine:  But, like, after the sentence of self-recognition, there’s
42 something in the second part of the sentence… is also something… (DM)
43 Yuki: Need to be continued. (F)
44 Catherine: Yes. That’s why we can’t use therefore, so, before put more time on self-recognition. I guess. (F)
45 Eva: After that, does the sentence explain self-recognition? (DM)
47 Catherine: Yeah, yeah. (F)
48 Eva: Just now I heard that Maggie said that: so many people admire living alone to put more time on self-recognition
50 in which they know clearly what they want and what their values of life are. Can we put the sentence in this way? (DM)
52 Maggie: Or using and. (F)
For example, so many people admire living alone and put more time on self-recognition. So they know clearly what they want and their values of life are. (D)

In this collaborative dialogue, the students (Catherine, Yuki, Eva and Maggie) tried to reach a consensus in negotiating meaning at the sentence level. They discussed the meaning of the sentence containing the word ‘self-recognition’ as they thought this was the problem that hindered their understanding of the content. At first, Catherine was not clear about the meaning of the second part of the sentence. Yuki compensated with ‘Need to be continued’ (Line 43) in her feedback. In Lines 44-45, Catherine raised a hypothesis that they could not use the conjunction words such as ‘therefore’ or ‘so’ as the two sentences actually illustrated the same idea about ‘self-recognition’. Then Eva continued in clarifying the meaning by overtly asking ‘does the sentence explain self-recognition?’ Her question received positive feedback from Catherine. Next, Eva tried to arouse the other students’ attention on the target form and invited others to voice their opinion. Though Maggie did not participate in the discussion, she was helped to understand the sentence. So she self-regulated her utterance by suggesting ‘and’ to link the first two sentence and still use the word ‘so’ to link the sentence with the word ‘self-recognition’ and the sentence after that. But obviously Maggie did not use the relative clause. Consequently, the students continued to clarify the meaning at the paragraph level in order to maintain the pursuit of the task, as shown in Example 2.
Example 2 (Clarifying meaning at paragraph level)

57 Yuki: Actually I’m a little bit confused about this paragraph. I can’t find the topic sentence that’s the content focus of this paragraph.

58 Is (does) it want to talk about advantages or benefits of living alone? (DM)

59 Maggie: Well, actually we’re talking about the relative rather than the content. We are not correcting the content. (F)

60 Yuki: I know, but it makes me a little bit confused. So I would like to clear… (DM)

61 Maggie: But if you want to correct the topic sentence, will you correct the whole page of the essay? (F)

62 Yuki: No, I don’t want to correct any sentence or any content. (F)

63 Maggie: I just want to make myself clear about what topics it wants to talk about since it’s a little bit mixed. Self-recognition and living alone. I can’t see any linkage between them. (DM)

64 Catherine: So I guess the relationship would be people like to live alone.

65 Why? Because they want to put more time on self-recognition. So what?

66 So they can know clearly what they want and what their values of life are. (DM)

67 Yuki: Ha. O--Key. (F)

68 Catherine: So maybe it might be corrected as: so many people admire living alone, um… (D)

69 Yuki: Or maybe we put a full stop. (F)
In Example 2, the students worked out the main idea of the paragraph and then discussed the relationship between the sentences. Yuki acted as a facilitator by pointing out her need to clarify the main idea of the paragraph. But Maggie regarded Yuki’s question irrelevant to her own problem and rejected indirectly in Lines 60-61. Then in Lines 65-68, Yuki tried her best to focus others’ attention on the content when they encountered difficulty in grasping the target syntax in the paragraph. Catherine was helped to notice the main idea of the paragraph and described the cause-and-effect relationship of the three sentences in Lines 69-71 (“So I guess the relationship
would be people like to live alone.’). Yuki gave positive feedback towards Catherine’s understanding. Then, their discussion of the main idea of the paragraph helped them to make self-regulation on their rewritten sentences collaboratively. In Lines 73-77, Catherine, Yuki and Eva put ‘in which’ to form a relative clause to link the sentence with ‘self-recognition’ and the last sentence. But Maggie gave negative feedback ‘In which probably won’t use in this way.’ Then Catherine noticed the gap between the correct form and her own performance. So she made self-regulation on her production (Lines 79-82). When Eva gave corrective feedback by asking a general question with the modal verb ‘can’, Catherine other-regulated her solution by suggesting the words ‘so that’ to replace ‘therefore’ or ‘thus’ (Line 84). Eventually, Yuki, Eva and even Maggie gave positive feedback towards Catherine’s production and reached agreement on rewriting these three sentences.

4.2 Noticing the Form in Peer Interaction

Although some learners did some very independent work on clarification of meaning and attention to the form, inappropriate support seems to produce unexpected negative effects: learners did not always produce accurate forms in their talk. Some learners tried very hard to promote accuracy by taking the tutor’s role; both the more proficient and the less proficient learners provided assistance to one another in noticing the form.

Example 3
25   Eva: Can we follow your sentence and then we said: in which they
26   can put more time on self-recognition … to link up these three sentences?  (D)
27  Catherine: **In which they can put more time on self-recognition.** Full stop.  (F)
28  Yuki:  OK. I would like to repeat the sentence once more. You said,
29  Maggie: **Many people admire living alone…?**  (F)
30  Maggie:  Yes. **So many people admire living alone will, um, can,**
31  Eva:  **In which they can put more time on self-recognition.**  (D)
32  Maggie:  I’m sorry, I beg your pardon.  (F)
33  Yuki:  You mean **many people admire living alone, comma, in which they…**  (F)
34  Maggie:  Yes. I think it would be better: **so many people admire living alone, comma, in which they can put more time on self-recognition.** (F)
35  Eva:  OK, that’s right. We can do it.  (F)

In Example 3, the students worked collaboratively on using the structure of ‘preposition + relative pronoun’ (in which) to rewrite the sentences through feedback. Eva, who might be more knowledgeable in grammar, acted as a tutor to facilitate other students to negotiate the form. Initially Eva marked on the form ‘in which’ through a general question with the modal verb ‘can’. Then in Line 27, Catherine made comprehension check by adding punctuation (‘Full stop’). Yuki made confirmation check in Lines 28-29 by repeating Eva’s utterance. When Maggie produced an incorrect sentence, Eva self-regulated her utterance (‘in which they can put more time on self-recognition’). When she noticed the gap in her knowledge, Maggie made a clarification request. In Line 34, Yuki prompted Maggie to use the correct form with the relative clause (‘You mean many people admire living alone, comma, in which they…’). This is to promote self-regulation in the other.
In response, Maggie self-regulated her own output by using the adverbial phrase ‘so that’ to link the two sentences. In the end, Eva, acted like a teacher, gave positive feedback to praise Maggie’s answer and efforts of all the students (‘OK, that’s right. We can do it.’).

There is another example of noticing the form in student-student interaction presented below.

Example 4
217 Catherine: I guess we should not use while. We should use when instead of while for most sentences. (MCF)
218 Like: We can get comfort when we feel sad. We can get help from others when we are in troubles. (D)
219 Yuki: But the sentence is too messy. Not complicated, it’s simple English. Too messy. (DM)
220 We are, we are, we are; we can, we can, we can… It’s not comfortable to use that. (F)
221 Maggie: Ok, we can get comfort, help and love from others when we are in troubles. (D)
222 Yuki: I agree with you. It’s better to make it this way. (F)
223 Catherine: And what about we can get experiences from others which make us get success easier? Do we have to copy that? (DM)
224 Maggie: We can get experiences, comfort, help from others when we are in troubles which make us get success easier. (D)
225 Yuki: All right. (F)
226 Catherine: Um hum. (F)
231 Maggie: And love. Oh, too many... (MCF)
232 Ss: [Laughter]
233 Maggie: I’m just, I’m just careless. [Laughter]
234 Catherine: So, we can experiences from others, no, no, no. We can get experiences, comfort, help and love from others when we are in need. (D)
236 Eva: That we can get success easier. (D)
237 Yuki: How about which can purify our hearts and lesson our burden and so on? It’s another idea developing... (DM)
239 Maggie: Vice versa. Because in the last sentence when other people are in trouble, we can do exactly the same thing. So using the word vice versa instead of this long sentence. (D)
242 Yuki: OK. (F)
243 Catherine: So... (F)
244 Yuki: Catherine, it’s your time. (R)
245 Catherine: OK, will you repeat it again? (F)
246 Ss: [Laughter]
247 Yuki: We can get experience, comfort, help and love from others when we are in troubles which make us succeed easier, comma, vice versa. (D)
249 Ss: [Laughter]

In Example 4, the students worked together to solve a syntactic problem to avoid redundancy by using their existing language knowledge. In Lines 217-220, Catherine marked the critical feature of the adverbial ‘while’ and proposed to use ‘when’ to rewrite it. Then Maggie accepted Catherine and Yuki’s advice and demonstrated her rewritten sentence. Yuki expressed her positive evaluation to support Maggie. But Catherine noticed
the sentence with the target feature which was neglected by them. Then Maggie self-regulated her previous output in Lines 227-228. Her presentation was followed by positive feedback from Yuki and Catherine. Next, Maggie made another self-regulation to add the word ‘love’ in the sentence ironically. This aroused the laughter from other students. Maggie also laughed and blamed herself. It can be interpreted as frustration control during the process of problem solving. In Lines 234-235, Catherine was helped by Maggie’s utterances and self-regulated her output. However, the syntactic problem had not been solved completely as Yuki noticed the meaning of the next sentence with the target feature. Maggie suggested the words ‘vice versa’ to replace the target sentence. She also explained the reason for that. Yuki immediately gave positive feedback. Catherine requested Maggie to repeat the rewritten sentence again. But this aroused the laughter from other students. At last, Yuki demonstrated her rewritten sentence according to Maggie’s advice in Lines 247-248. The students took it as the correct answer and ended their exchange in laughter.

But from the context of the essay, there is no indication related to Maggie’s reason ‘when other people are in trouble, we can do exactly the same thing’ (Lines 239-241). It says in the last sentence of the paragraph: We can get love from others while we can love others which can purify our hearts and lesson our burden and so on (in original). So she mistook the words ‘vice versa’ to replace the adverbial clause ‘while we can love others’ and the which-clause. There is no need to use ‘vice versa’ here. The appropriate form should be reserving the adverbial clause and the relative clause by inserting a comma between the word ‘others’ and the relative pronoun ‘which’ to form a non-finite relative clause. Therefore, the students worked collaboratively to apply rules to new contexts, albeit incorrectly. In some sense, they achieved consensus on understanding the use of the
5. Discussion

5.1 Individual Learners Acting as Facilitator

We can see that individual learners (e.g., Eva) appear to show great interest and encouragement in providing mutual scaffolding in collaboration in clarifying the meaning, noticing the relative clause and taking the tutor’s role, to generate appropriate understanding or produce the correct form through self-regulation. Then these learners mediate others through other-regulation to work out a solution on the relative clause so as to reach a consensus on the form they regarded as appropriate. There are a few opportunities for other learners to self-regulate their utterances. In fact, these few learners are working as facilitators like a teacher. The student facilitators’ performance displayed willingness to influence other peer students’ actions, to keep the interaction going, and to accomplish task goals. They tried to make the task manageable and induce solutions to target forms. Although they were highly involved in rewriting the essay and very directive at times, they stopped in the way of appropriating the task and allowed the other peers to express their views.

5.2 Learners Producing Inappropriate Forms

In spite of the independent work, the microgenetic analysis has revealed evidence that the students sometimes generated inappropriate forms because they were unsure or unaware of standard forms or uses of the second language and settled on their own creative alternatives. In some cases, the learners produced incorrect forms that they reached consensus on as correct solutions. Although the number of incorrect target forms was small, the outcomes were consequential. For
instance, in Example 4, through heated discussion, the students agreed to mistakenly use the words ‘vice versa’ to replace the sentence instead of inserting a comma to form a non-finite relative clause. Although the learners considered they had solved their linguistic problem, they reached an inappropriate answer regarding the use of the relative clause. From a language learning perspective, the students sometimes exchanged correct knowledge, sometimes incorrect; sometimes they made good decisions, sometimes bad.

5.3 Quality of Some Prominent Scaffolding Categories

The quantification of scaffolding episodes show that Feedback (34.5%) occupied the highest percentage among the total scaffolding episodes (n=142) in peer interaction, with Demonstration (24.7%), Direction Maintenance (16.9%), Marking Critical Features (12.7%), Simplifying the task (4.9%), Recruitment (3.5%), and Frustration Control (2.8%) following in the descending order. This reveals that Feedback, Demonstration and Direction Maintenance may be the three most frequent scaffolding categories among peer scaffolding when the learners were heading their attention to the target form in collaboration.

5.3.1 Feedback (F)

The most significant feature in peer-peer scaffolding is Feedback (49, 34.5%). The students provide feedback to monitor one another’s performance and compensate for their existing knowledge of the target form to coin a new linguistic term. They offered positive feedback to evaluate their peers’ production. Moreover, they tried to promote understanding by eliciting clarification through comprehension check and clarification request. Some examples are presented as follows:
5.3.1.1 Positive feedback
For instance, Catherine agreed with Eva on the comprehension of the content.

46 Eva: After that, does the sentence explain self-recognition? (DM)
47 Catherine: Yeah, yeah. (F)

5.3.1.2 Comprehension check
For instance, Catherine repeated the relative clause from Eva’s utterance.

25 Eva: Can we follow your sentence and then we said: in which they can put more time on self-recognition… to link up these three sentences? (D)
26 Catherine: In which they can put more time on self-recognition. Full stop. (F)

5.3.1.3 Clarification request
For instance, Maggie checked information with Eva.

33 Eva: In which they can put more time on self-recognition. (D)
34 Maggie: I’m sorry, I beg your pardon. (F)

Nevertheless, the quality of dialogic discourse through Feedback is quite low. The students only repeated and accepted (e.g., ‘Yes, yes.’) information from preceding utterances by their peers in the feedback. Their feedback is simply regurgitating, repeating, and checking information, little involving corrective feedback. These behaviours may be caused by many factors. One reason might be that some students may be less proficient in the mastery of the target form (e.g., Yuki in Example 3). On the other hand, regardless of proficiency level, a more important reason would be that the students lack the practice or opportunities to handle discourse and stimulate other peers’ thinking by asking questions as the teacher does. This in turn
affects their ability to provide insightful comments to encourage their peers to expand or elaborate the discourse in a second language. The students’ previous learning experience can also account for these behaviours. In Chinese EFL classrooms, many students are accustomed to accept the explanations and examples of grammatical rules from the teacher. Therefore, the teacher is, comparatively speaking, the best person to follow up and handle the discourse through effective feedback to help students develop critical thinking.

5.3.2 Demonstration (D)

Demonstration is the second most frequently used scaffolding category in peer interaction (24, 24.7%). The students actively demonstrate solutions in negotiation of the form and the meaning. There are various ways for learners to demonstrate their performance:

5.3.2.1 Demonstrating to construct the knowledge
For instance, students discussed to replace the adverbial ‘while’ with when-clause to avoid redundancy in the sentence.
219 Catherine: Like: We can get comfort when we feel sad. We can get help from others when we are in troubles. (D)

5.3.2.2 Demonstrating to complete the task
For instance, students clarified the meaning of the sentence and then demonstrated their rewritten sentences.
53 Maggie: For example, so many people admire living alone and put more time on self-recognition. So they
54 know clearly what they want and their values of life are. (D)

However, sometimes they demonstrated a solution for the form
inappropriately (see Example 4). In a word, Demonstration is not always effective in peer scaffolding as sometimes students generated inappropriate forms, even though they reached consensus on the solution.

5.3.3 Direction Maintenance (DM)

Direction Maintenance is the third significant mechanism in peer scaffolding (51, 16.9%). Although there are few instances of the positive effects of DM, the majority of DM utterances generate negative effects. This is partly because of the students’ limited capacity for classroom management. Although the students tried to arouse other peers to attend to the meaning or the form through DM, their peers’ responses were restricted. They simply said yes or no, or digressed from the discussion. Some examples are presented as follows:

5.3.3.1 Restricted response in the student’s reply
For instance, Eva wanted to clarify the meaning, but Catherine’s reply was limited.

46 Eva: After that, does the sentence explain self-recognition? (DM)
47 Catherine: Yeah, yeah. (F)

5.3.3.2 Digression in the discussion
For instance, Yuki clarified the content, but Maggie digressed from the discussion.

57 Yuki: Actually I’m a little bit confused about this paragraph. I can’t find the topic sentence that’s the content focus of this paragraph.
58 Is (does) it want to talk about advantages or benefits of living alone? (DM)
59 Maggie: Well, actually we’re talking about the relative rather than the
content. We are not correcting the content. (F)

The low quality of Direction Maintenance may due to the lack of the teacher’s awareness of the students’ knowledge gaps and the impact of the implicit open-ended questions. The teacher could notice, identify and fill the gap in the students’ knowledge of the target form, but the students could not. The questions raised by students in peer interaction merely addressed their own personal needs, not intending to solve others’ problems, as they were not as knowledgeable as the teacher, nor having the authority of the teacher, nor knowing how to focus appropriately in DM. Moreover, when they were asked questions irrelevant to their own needs or gaps, they gave short responses and some even digressed in the discussion, even though the students asked polar questions (e.g., ‘Does it... ?’) or open-ended questions (e.g., ‘What about... ?’). In short, the students lacked awareness of their peers’ knowledge gaps, and the skill to avoid digression and inefficiency in their collaborative work.

6. Conclusion

The individual snapshots seem to suggest that in student-student interaction, the learners jointly construct a scaffold that allows them to successfully complete the activity and co-construct their own system of making meaning through words in a second language (see Guerrero & Villamil, 2000). However, they could not ensure the accuracy of the form. Peer scaffolding alone does not necessarily lead to successful learning of the appropriate form. The development of the target form in peer interaction is not a smooth, linear process of development toward second language norms. It is an irregular but dynamic movement entailing not only regression, but also creative solutions, though these solutions do not always
generate correct forms. Students could not always maintain the goal of the task and ensure the accuracy of the form owing to their limited language proficiency and capacity of group management. In this view, there appears to be the necessity to monitor the students’ production and ensure accuracy in the output of collaborative learning.

The three most prominent scaffolding mechanisms, Feedback, Demonstration and Direction Maintenance, have fulfilled the function of assisting learners’ performance, however still within the learners’ ZPD. Without tutoring from the teacher, the learners do not always produce accurate forms, and cannot avoid digression and maintain efficiency successfully in collaboration. This may be owing to many reasons, among which the peer interaction without expertise or authority figure (e.g., a teacher or a more capable peer) is one important factor to influence how the learners behave in the discourse. Therefore, the learners have difficulty extending the ZPD as the quality of the three main scaffolding functions is restricted by peer interaction.

Since support in peer scaffolding may confine the development of ZPD, there appears to be a necessary role for an expert (e.g., the teacher) or a more capable peer who can manage the interaction well, model appropriate forms and monitor the learners’ production in a proper way. As peer mediation is not always effective, expert mediation is required on occasions when peers find it difficult to push their ZPD. Most Chinese learners seek help from experts such as teachers or native speakers when they encounter difficulties in learning English grammar. Lantolf (2000) also comments that while peer assistance is effective for learning everyday functional language, peers may not be a useful resource for the development of a second language. Therefore, there is a strong necessity for the presence of teachers to direct the learners’
attention to language form and task goals during the activity, or to emphasize important form-meaning connections (see Lynch, 1997; Samuda, 2001; Ge & Land, 2003). However, excessive or inappropriate mediation may impede independent learning. Social interaction can contribute to language learning and the extension of ZPD only when there are opportunities for students to offer assistance or digest prompts, under meticulous, proper use of scaffolding strategies and appropriate feedback from the teacher or peers.
Appendix A – Transcription Conventions

Italics  Italics are employed to cite a word, phrase or sentence originally from the underlined parts of the essay which need to be rewritten.
...
Sequence of dots indicates a short pause less than 10 seconds
( ) Parentheses indicate the time of a long pause more than 10 seconds

boldface  Sentences in boldface were parts of essay being rewritten

underline  Words underlined were linguistic choice being focused

[ ] Brackets enclose description of relevant behaviour

{} This symbol encloses actual Chinese words said by the participant

* This symbol indicates that the utterance is nonstandard; it is only used when the nature of the utterance cannot be communicated through glossing

Appendix B – The Task

Improve the underlined sentences by using appropriate relative clauses and correct the errors if any. You have 30 minutes to discuss and rewrite them.

Solitude or Not

(1) As technology is developing more and more advanced, people’s privacy is easily to be accessed. So many people would rather choose living alone. They admire this life style very much. Through solitude they can put more time on self-recognition, thus they know clearly what they want and what their values of life are.

(2) Furthermore, solitude can produce inspiration. Many poets get inspiration in solitude, in which they can free their thoughts without any disturbance. But living with others cannot make this. Another reason makes people choose solitude is that as any society has its good and bad sides. If other people’s requests go against his own principle, a person would rather choose solitude.

(3) Even so, some people prefer living with others. In their eyes, it is terrible to live alone without any one to talk to. As the competition in their work or study has been keen, it is necessary to relieve their stress by telling it to their friends. And also many problems confronted everyday are very hard to resolve, so cooperation in daily life is indispensable.

(4) The two groups separately have their own reasons. Each group seems to be reasonable. In my opinion, I think living with others may be more beneficial for us to demonstrate our talents. We can get experiences from others which make us get success easier. We can get comfort from others while we feel sad. We can get help from others while we in troubles. We can get love from others while we can love others which can purify our hearts and lessen our burden and so on. Meanwhile, taking some time to live alone, stretching out your soul absolutely, probing into your deep heart, you will feel fresh air in your routine life. I suppose there would be no better things than this in the world.
Notes

1 Microgenesis is the local, contextualized learning process that can be traced visibly in the course of talk between the participants (Mitchell & Myles, 2004). In second language learning, microgenesis allows the researcher to observe directly the individual learner’s language development at the very moment it is thought to occur (Guerrero & Villamil, 2000).

2 Through the ZPD, other-regulation is regarded as a developmental stage where the learner relies on assistance from others to accomplish a task; self-regulation is seen as a stage where the learner is capable of accomplishing the task without help from others (see Tharp and Gallimore, 1988).

References


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