

Peer Interaction in the EFL Classroom: Catalyst for Motivation Building and Noticing

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1. Introduction

The English education system in Japan seems to neither encourage independence nor assign creative or imaginative tasks. At both secondary and tertiary levels traditional methods and materials tend to predominate, classes are teacher-centered, students tend to be passive and do not actively engage with their peers in class in the L2. Methods often involve *yakudoku*, or translational-reading type activities characterized by ‘the explicit teaching of grammar rules and the use of translation exercises’ (Lightbown and Spada, 2013: 218) involving the use of a reading text in English whereby students translate those texts into Japanese (Widdows & Voller, 1991). While it has its merits in terms of helping students understand the intricacies of a language's structure and vocabulary, it is often seen as insufficient for developing practical communication skills.

In addition, much of the instruction is likely to be in Japanese and focused on imparting facts about the language (Ellis, 1991; Kobayashi & Rinnert, 1992)

involving memorization and rote learning. There is neither expectation for students to actively interact spontaneously in English nor to produce the output essential to the processing of language required to enable an environment conducive to language learning which is an interactive, dynamic, and socially situated process.

As noted, learning a foreign language is a multifaceted process that encompasses a variety of contexts and ideally should embrace the use of different methods and tools. Among these, peer interaction has increasingly been recognized as a potent force in the field of language learning, playing a vital role in the development of linguistic competence. Empirical evidence strongly suggests that peer interaction is beneficial for second language learning, fostering linguistic competence, critical thinking skills, cultural understanding, and heightened motivation among learners (Swain, 1995; Vygotsky, 1978; van Lier, 2004).

However, having students move away from what they have grown accustomed to and, as a result, may not feel comfortable doing, can be challenging. Japanese students tend to construct their identities around competence (Morita, 2004) and many may be concerned about how their peers might view them. This can inhibit students from speaking out in the language classroom for fear of making mistakes.

The present study was undertaken with a twofold goal in mind. The first, to organize the classroom in such a way as to provide students with increased opportunities for output, interaction, and communication to encourage the negotiation of meaning using dictogloss and cloze passage activities. The second, and focus of the study, to gather information on student attitudes, opinions and learning preferences in connection to peer interaction to better inform future classroom instruction and organization. Using a variety of dynamic and active pair and group work activities throughout a fifteen-week semester in a business reading course, the author observed student actions and attitudes while working with their peers.

Dictogloss, popularized as a language teaching technique by Wajnryb (1990), is a lively and engaging exercise that emphasizes listening and grammatical skills. Students listen to a passage and then reconstruct it collaboratively. It allows for in-class opportunities for output and interaction to be maximized.

The cloze procedure is a language learning tool initially developed by Taylor (1953) as a means of measuring readability and text comprehension. Certain words are omitted from a text and students fill in the blanks, often relying on context clues to make educated guesses. This activity can help learners improve vocabulary and understand sentence structure and when completed with peers, to increase opportunities for output and interaction.

Japanese students, especially those lacking experience using the target language in class, and thus, lacking confidence in their abilities, may hesitate to use a second or foreign language (L2) with their peers. The author suggests that when students are placed in an environment that promotes peer interaction and requires collaboration, students are more likely to negotiate meaning. In this setting, they produce understandable language while guiding each other toward a shared objective of completing the task collaboratively. This, in turn can both stimulate and motivate them to further use the L2 and act as a catalyst for learning by noticing gaps in their own interlanguage.

(1) Zone of Proximal Development

Central to the argument for peer interaction is Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, which posits that cognitive development and learning, including language acquisition, is fundamentally rooted in social interaction. This theory argues that interaction with others provides a platform for the exchange and negotiation of knowledge, fostering internal cognitive growth.

The interplay during peer interaction creates a context for learners to negotiate meaning, thereby facilitating the production and comprehension of the target language. Vygotsky's concept of the "zone of proximal development" (ZPD), refers to the difference between what a learner can do independently and what they can do with guidance from peers or more competent individuals.

In an EFL context, peer interaction can bring students into their ZPD, facilitating language development by practicing their language skills in a relatively low-stress environment. For instance, one student might be skilled at grammar, while another has a large vocabulary. By working together, they can aid each other in improving their weaknesses and enhancing their strengths.

(2) Interaction Hypothesis

Another theory about second language acquisition which emphasizes the importance of communication in learning a new language is Long's Interaction Hypothesis. According to Long (1996), interaction and communication in the classroom facilitates language learning because it promotes negotiation of meaning such as clarification requests, confirmation checks, self-corrections as well as the resolution of communication issues.

When learners engage in discussions, they must adjust their language according to the context, clarify, ask questions, and provide feedback, which all contribute to understanding and learning the language better. Learners need to pay closer attention to their language use, and to notice the gap between their interlanguage and the target language. This noticing of the gap can

promote internalization of the correct language forms. The Interaction Hypothesis states that learning is most effective when learners engage in interactions that push them to produce comprehensible output.

(3) Output Hypothesis

The Comprehensible Output Hypothesis was first proposed by Swain (1985) basing it on her observations of French immersion students in Canada. In contrast to Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1982), which argues that understanding language input that is slightly beyond one's current competence is the key to language acquisition, Output Hypothesis maintains that comprehensible output is also crucial for successful language learning.

Swain noticed that, despite receiving a significant amount of comprehensible input, immersion students often struggled with accuracy and fluency in their French output. She suggested that this might be due to a lack of focus on output in the immersion environment. Swain (2000) proposed that the process of speaking or writing - producing output - promotes language learning because it forces learners to process language more deeply triggering cognitive processes that facilitate language learning. More specifically, when learners are pushed to produce language that is not only meaningful but also correct and precise, it helps them to notice gaps in their interlanguage leading to enhanced fluency and complexity.

(4) Ecology of Language Learning

Leo van Lier (2004) significantly contributed to the field of second language acquisition, particularly with his conceptualization of the "ecology of language learning." His work on language ecology is largely influenced by ecological and sociocultural theories and argues for a holistic approach to language learning. He argues that learning a language is not merely an individual cognitive activity; instead, it is an interactive activity, deeply situated and influenced by the learner's physical environment, social and cultural context, and the cognitive processes of the learner.

The three key principles within van Lier's ecological approach are:

- **Affordance:** learners perceive and interact with opportunities in their environment that can aid their learning. These opportunities are not static but depend on the learner's abilities, experiences, and motivations.
- **Agency:** emphasizes the active role of the learner in interacting with their environment and engaging with the available affordances. Learners have the capacity to make choices, take control, and impact their learning journey.

- **Autonomy:** is the learner's ability to take charge of their learning, with the instructor serving as a guide or facilitator rather than a director.

By linking these elements together, van Lier encourages educators to view language classrooms as an interconnected ecosystem, wherein various elements interact and influence one another, thereby affecting the learning outcomes. This study seeks to explore motivation and noticing in language learning within a broader social, cultural, and environmental context that emphasizes the active role of the learner. It will focus on van Lier's ecological approach and its three key principles of affordance, agency and autonomy.

2. Procedure

Ninety-five students (51 males and 44 females) from in the faculty of business administration at Toyo University participated in this study. The group included 28 first year and 67 second year students. All were enrolled in a required Business Reading Course during the 2023 spring semester and met once a week for 90 minutes over 15 weeks in a room with computer access. Every student had the use of their own computer with monitor and a separate smaller monitor that displayed the instructor's screen.

This study followed a mixed methods approach with a four-point Likert scale questionnaire distributed at the end of the semester. The questions posed hoped to gather information on student attitudes towards and perceptions of the tasks and peer interaction. Questions were formulated with van Lier's (2004) three key principles of affordance, agency, and autonomy from his Ecology of Language Learning Approach in mind. In addition, students were asked to respond and to and comment in detail in either English or Japanese to the following open-ended question: *Did you enjoy working together in pairs and small groups to complete the classroom tasks in Business Reading class?*

The course was organized to feature a variety of content related business texts, thematically organized into five units. The author aimed to achieve an even exposure to all four skills along with vocabulary instruction. The classroom activities utilized included modified dictogloss activity and cloze passage and will be elaborated on later in the paper.

The first two weeks of class served as an introduction to the course where students previewed the activities and tasks they would be required to complete throughout the course. The instructor modelled the procedure for the dictogloss activities and cloze passages that would be completed in class in pairs and small groups.

In addition, metalanguage was introduced to students as it was used through the semester. A good grasp of this vocabulary would be essential for students to keep up with the lively class pace. Classes were conducted mostly in English (90-95%) with some explanations given in Japanese to facilitate the flow. Examples of the metalanguage included words connected to parts of speech such as noun, verb, adjective, adverb, pronoun, preposition, article, conjunction, sentence, paragraph, content word, function word, etc.

Each unit required two lessons to complete a variety of vocabulary, reading, writing, listening, and speaking activities connected to the unit topic. The first lesson of the unit included an introduction to the unit's vocabulary and was assigned and completed prior to class. In the first class of each unit, students completed a modified dictogloss activity in pairs and small groups. Next, they read a short text of around 250-300 words which served to introduce the unit theme in more detail. Choral repetition was done in class focusing on different prosodic features (word stress, stretch, intonation, liaison, etc.). This text was accompanied by an audio recording so that students could listen at home and practice reading aloud. In addition, students were required to record a portion of the text on their phone and submit it online to ToyoNet-ACE, the university Learning Management System (LMS). The first week of each unit ended with a review quiz that was submitted online prior to the following class.

The second lesson of each unit included a review of the previous week's vocabulary, then students self-corrected their dictogloss activity and completed a cloze passage reading activity in pairs or small groups. The cloze activity was also accompanied by an oral recording that students could use to check their answers after submission and to practice oral reading of the text. Students submitted a written reflection task to the university's LMS two days prior to the next class. The reflection paragraph could be on any topic of their choice in connection to the unit's contents, the classwork, or other insights. The unit ended with a test which was submitted on the LMS prior to beginning the next unit. In total, five units were introduced over the semester (see table1).

Table 1. *Unit number, week number and unit theme*

Unit	Week	Theme
1	3-4	Cross-cultural business communication
2	5-6	Cause-related marketing
3	7-8	Corporate governance
4	9-10	Acquisitions
5	11-12	Globalization and branding

In week 3, the first dictogloss activity for the unit *Cross-Cultural Business Communication* was introduced. As a simplified version of the activity had

been modelled in the previous orientation weeks, students understood how to proceed with the activity. First, students listened to a series of four sentences that had been pre-recorded and were read out without pause. The first listening was done with pens down, students focusing on the gist and key words and not taking notes. After the recording finished, they had one minute to write down all keywords they could remember and share the information they recalled with a partner sitting nearby, adding to their notes.

Following the first listening, students listened to the text again. However, this time the recording was read sentence by sentence with a pause between each one. Student wrote what they heard as each sentence was being read. In between each sentence there was a 60 second pause during which students could confer with a partner or in a small group and add to their answer. At the end of the second reading, students had one-minute to share and add to what they had heard in the four sentences and add new information to their answer.

Finally, the entire text was played again without pause. This time, students filled in any missing information while listening. After the third and final listening, students were free to work with their group members or roam the classroom for 2-3 minutes to share and gather any new or missing information. Their task was to make their notes as close as possible to the original text. The dictogloss activity culminated with students inputting their final answer, written in paragraph form, to the university's LMS. Students were required to submit their work before the end of class for it to be counted as a part of their in-class participation score.

In week 4, students reviewed the dictogloss activity they had completed the previous week checking it against the original, taking note of their errors and omissions. Afterwards, they moved on to completing a cloze passage connected to the unit's theme. Since students were familiar with this type of activity, they could choose how to work on it, either alone, with a partner or in small groups.

In week 5 the second of five dictogloss activities, this one on *Cause-Related Marketing* was completed in class following the same procedure as noted above for week 3. Then, in the following lesson in week 6, students reviewed and self-corrected their dictogloss activity and completed a cloze passage in class. This pattern repeated through to week 11 culminating with unit 5 *Globalization and Branding*.

3. Results

(1) Peer Interaction and Affordance

Peer interaction can significantly enhance the affordances present in a

language learning environment. As van Lier (2004) emphasizes, affordances are learning opportunities that arise from learners' interactions with their environment and peers. Studies by Long (1996), Ohta (2001) and Storch (2002) all highlighted the importance of learners asking for clarification, confirmation, or reformulation during their interactions.

We see in figure 1 that students responded very favorably to the three questions posed in connection to affordances. The first question *Q1: Working with classmates helped me better understand how to complete activities* received a very favorable response. Of 95 student responses, 97% either agreed or strongly agreed that their peers helped them better understand classroom activities. In a similar vein, 96% responded in agreement or strong agreement to *Q2: Working with classmates helped me better understand each unit's business theme*. Finally, students responded in an equally positive manner to *Q3: Working with classmates helped me better understand the material in English than if I study alone* with 97% responding in agreement or strong agreement to the statement.

Student responses towards working with peers make it clear to see that peer interactions in a second language classroom provide opportunities for learners to observe, engage with, and respond to language use in a way that is not always possible in teacher-led instruction. They reported being able to better understand how to go about undertaking the activities and understanding both the materials and the overarching theme of each unit.

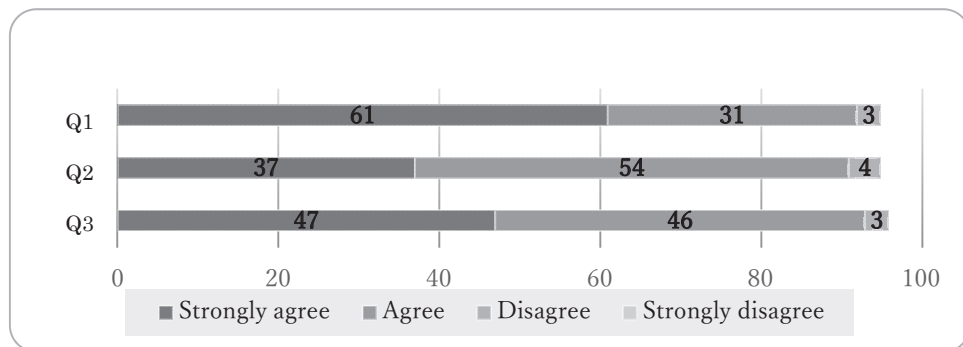


Figure 1. Student responses in connection to affordance (n=95)

(2) Peer Interaction and Agency

Peer interaction is known to foster learner agency, that is, the capacity of learners to take control of their own learning process. According to van Lier (2004), agency involves active engagement with the learning environment, including interactions with peers. Peer feedback, an integral part of peer

interaction, also plays a crucial role in fostering agency. Hyland and Hyland (2006), explain that peer feedback not only helps learners understand their mistakes and areas for improvement, but it also encourages them to reflect on their own language use, promoting self-regulation. A study by Hu and Lam (2010) also reported that peer feedback in an ESL writing classroom increased students' confidence and encouraged them to take a more active role in their learning, thus enhancing their sense of agency.

Three survey questions in connection to agency were presented to the students. The following questions asked students about their preferences for working in pairs and groups. The first question related to agency, Q4: *I prefer working with the same classmates for group work activities and not working with new people* had 55 of the 95 students (figure 2) or 58% either agree or strongly agree while 42% disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement. Question 5 *I feel more motivated to complete the assignments when working in a group compared to working alone* received a very positive response with only 5% of the surveyed students disagreeing or strongly disagreeing implying that the vast majority prefer working with their peers. The next question connected to agency asked students about being active members of the class: *Q6 I want to participate more in class when I work with classmates* received disagreement from only 3% of students. Students overwhelmingly responded that they become more active learners when collaborating on tasks with their peers.

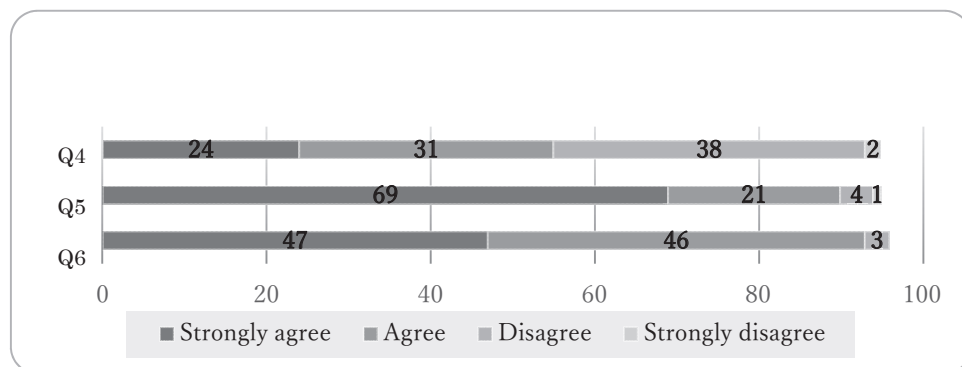


Figure 2. Student responses in connection to agency (n=95)

(3) Peer Interaction and Autonomy

Peer interaction and feedback plays a critical role in fostering learner autonomy, which involves learners taking responsibility for their own learning. This sense of ownership and control is crucial for successful language learning. According to van Lier (2004), learner autonomy is nurtured through

interaction, as it provides opportunities for learners to make choices, solve problems, and reflect on their own learning process. Similarly, Dam (1995) and Hyland and Hyland (2006) reported that learner autonomy was significantly enhanced in classrooms where students had regular opportunities for peer interaction, and feedback compared to traditional teacher-led classrooms as it enhances students' cognitive skills and fosters self-regulation and independence in learning. Students are encouraged to critically reflect on their own and others' work, contributing to the development of their autonomous learning skills.

Nearly 80% of the students responded in disagreement or strong disagreement to question 7 *Working with my classmates often resulted in us talking about things not related to the materials* (figure 3) signaling that they were able to stay on task right through to the end of the activities. This finding was pleasantly surprising. Students remained focused and on task for anywhere between 45 to 60 minutes, depending on which activity and unit they were doing, signaling a high degree of self-regulation and independence.

The next question, *Q8: Working with many different classmates helps me develop my way of thinking and learning* received an overwhelmingly positive response with 97% responding in agreement or strong agreement. The final question in the autonomy section, *Q9: Working with classmates made me more confident to read / write / speak English* had 13% of students in strong agreement and 73% in agreement with the statement while 14% disagreed.

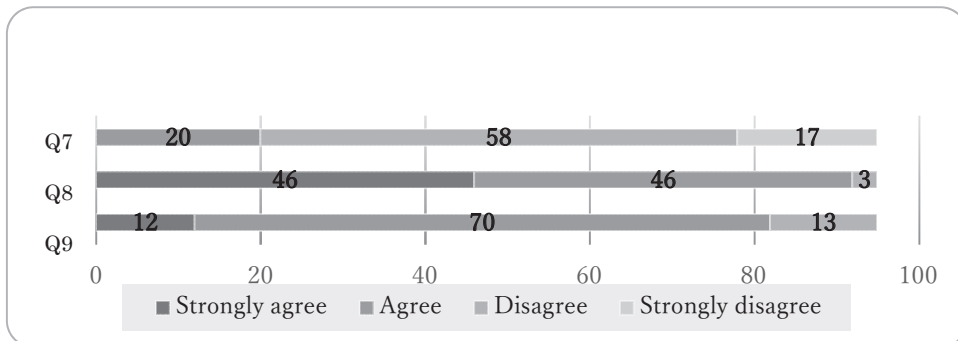


Figure 3. Student responses in connection to autonomy (n=95)

4. Discussion

(1) Peer Interaction and Affordances

Survey results revealed that, in connection to affordance, more than 95% of students either agreed or highly agreed that the dictogloss done in small groups provided them with advantages connected to understanding how to complete classroom activities, to better understand materials as well as

increased understanding of each unit's theme. The author suspects that the very small number of students who answered in disagreement to the questions connected to affordance may have been the more competent members of the class who could easily grasp the materials and methods on their own. They may even have felt that their peers slowed them down. This will be a topic to address in the coming semester.

While engaged in the dictogloss activity, students negotiated meaning, asked for clarification, and gave feedback to their peers. These interactions allowed students to become exposed to a wider range of language uses increasing opportunities for meaningful language practice. Although students had the choice of how to complete the cloze passage, the majority discussed with partners, some moving to talk with peers not seated nearby. Willingness to interact during the cloze may have been a positive knock-on effect of the dictogloss which required high levels of interaction with peers to complete.

Student responses to the open-ended question on the affordances that peer interaction offered provided a range of insights. Comments included benefits such as increased problem solving, deeper understanding of course material, increased confidence, and the ability to craft more sophisticated answers when working with classmates than when working alone (see table 2).

Table 2. *Student comments in connection to affordances*

ID	Survey response
NS	I was able to help my friends, and when my opinion was accepted, I gained a little confidence in my English skills, and I think it helped me grow. It was more fun than studying alone because I got along with the other.
SO	When studying alone, encountering unfamiliar problems can lead to confusion and hinder progress. However, in groups or pairs, I had the opportunity to encounter new knowledge and perspectives that I wasn't aware of, which allowed me to find new approaches to problem-solving. Initially, transcribing English audio into written text was challenging, but gradually, I became better at understanding and summarizing English, which made me feel the growth in my language skills. Comparing my abilities with those of my friends helped me gauge my listening comprehension level, which was beneficial. Overall, the experience of learning through group activities and comparing myself with others was positive and contributed to my language development.

(2) Peer Interaction and Agency

In addition, students responded very favorably to two of the questions connected to agency in that they felt more motivated to complete activities and

participate actively in class resulting from the peer interaction during the dictogloss tasks. One interesting finding was that 43% of the students (n=41) responded that they disagreed or strongly disagreed with wanting to work with the same partners each week. In fact, some students commented that they wished there could have been more opportunities for working with a more diverse range of students, especially the international students in the class. Further thought will be put into pair and group organization in the classroom so that students who might be shy to form groups on their own with peers they do not know can have the opportunity to work with a larger variety of students.

Students reported that working in pairs and groups helped them to increase their motivation and that “*studying in groups allowed me to hear a variety of opinions that differed from my own.*” One student noted that during the listening activities, people in the group taught each other what individual students were not able to hear or understand. As a result, the student felt they could broaden their horizons. Many students reported it being their first time learning about business in an English class and that they felt this approach was “*fresh and interesting*” (see table 3 for comments).

Table 3. *Student comments in connection to agency*

ID	Survey response
NA	Since many assignments were challenging to do alone, I felt that working with various people while cooperating was more suitable. Everyone had different English levels and vocabulary, which led to a constant cycle of helping and being helped. The class required more focus than other courses; missing necessary information could easily happen, so I worked with more concentration.
YM	It is beneficial to not only work with close friends but also to form groups randomly and communicate with new people. I learned the importance of teamwork. I remember the lesson materials and contents better when I talk with my classmates than when I study them alone. I am happy to cooperate with my partners because this way, one can enhance their English communication skills further.

(3) Peer Interaction and Autonomy

Finally, in connection to autonomy, students responded favorably to the benefits of peer interaction in relation to both helping them develop new ways of thinking and learning, and in confidence building. Another surprising finding was students self-reporting with regards to staying on-task. The author felt that students might naturally spend time talking about things unconnected to the task at hand when in groups but just 22% of students agreed that pair and group work led to off-task discussion. This leads the

author to believe that students were highly engaged in the tasks and most likely had no time to spare if they wanted to collect as much information connected to the tasks from their peers as possible. The author noticed that students became more and more comfortable engaging with peers over the duration of the course, and not just those sitting nearby. Students would leave their seats and visit other pairs and groups across the classroom to get more information and bring it back to their group. This helped them to produce the most accurate answer as possible, leading to a higher score in the activity.

One student commented that through pairwork, *“I learned how to communicate my opinions more clearly and felt the actual improvement, which was enjoyable. Moreover, I understood how to efficiently approach class assignments both inside and outside the classroom.”* Student RK (table 4) reported increased motivation, a result of making friends through the pair and group work. This, in turn, resulted in increased motivation to participate in class. Student AN (table 4) made a comment that delighted the author. Peer interaction caused this student to become more conscientious of their work, signaling an increase in autonomy and taking charge in their own learning.

Table 4. *Student comments in connection to autonomy*

ID	Survey response
RK	By working with several people instead of just one, I was able to enjoy more accurate answers and different perspectives and ideas, which greatly contributed to my learning. In addition, through the group work in this class, I made friends and my motivation for this class increased, which motivated me to participate in this class in a positive and proactive manner. I especially enjoyed doing the dictation in pairs. It was just fun, but as the number of times increased, my mistakes in listening and spelling disappeared, and I felt that I had grown.
AN	I am not good at vocabulary or reading, so working in pairs or small groups helped me get to more correct answers and learn different ways of thinking. Also, this may sound a little strange, but I sometimes think it's okay if I make a lot of mistakes if I do it by myself, but by doing it with someone else, I take it more seriously because I feel embarrassed if I am seen making a lot of mistakes. I hope that small group learning will continue in the future.

5. Conclusion

The findings in this study illustrate the significant role and substantial benefits that peer interaction can play in the EFL classroom using two activities: dictogloss and cloze passage. The dictogloss activities offer learners

the opportunity to engage with the language actively, negotiate meaning, receive feedback and develop overall language abilities, reading comprehension and critical thinking skills, in a collaborative environment. The cloze passage affords learners chances to improve vocabulary, understand sentence structure and when completed together with peers leads to increased opportunities for output and interaction which can lead to noticing gaps in their own interlanguage.

Integrating activities that foster peer interaction in a second language reading class, educators can provide learners with a rich, dynamic, and collaborative language learning experience ranging from increased engagement and achievement to linguistic development, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills all crucial in the modern interconnected world, where intercultural communication is commonplace.

This experience exemplifies the benefits of using effective tasks to optimize peer interaction and its myriad benefits. In summary, peer interaction in second language learning is a rich, dynamic, and multifaceted process that offers various linguistic and cognitive benefits. It is an essential pillar of the sociocultural framework of learning, offering unique opportunities for learners to actively engage with, and authentically use, their target language.

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