

# A review of peer interaction and second language learning for ELL students in academic contexts

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*Abstract: This review explores the relationship between language proficiency and ELL (English Language Learners) students' experiences in higher education contexts, with specific reference to the role of conversational peer interaction. The two major concerns that guide this review are the academic challenges faced by students from an ELL background in relation to conversational interaction, and the impact of conversational language proficiency on their overall academic experience. Findings suggest that insufficient language proficiency results in several challenges for ELL students, most notably the inability to share their expertise and knowledge with their peers, and participate successfully in classroom oral discussions. In addition, however, the literature suggests that language proficiency has a strong impact on the overall experiences of students and on their abilities to navigate the social structures of the academic community and to establish their own identity.*

*Keywords: ELL learners, Higher Education, Peer Interaction, Language Proficiency, Academic Challenges, Classroom Experience*

## Background

The number of international students studying at English-medium Canadian universities is increasing each year (Canadian Bureau for International Education, 2014). Although many of these students have passed an internationally recognised English proficiency exam in order to be accepted into an academic program or have taken formal language lessons in their home countries, they may still lack the necessary proficiency in academic language that would allow them to perform successfully in their academic studies. Academic language proficiency includes oral proficiency which can be developed through socialisation and interactions, but opportunities to develop this proficiency are not always equally available. Learners of English who study abroad in English-speaking environments can enhance their second-language acquisition and oral proficiency by exposure to everyday socialisation contexts, unlike those who experience only formal classroom language instruction in the home country (Kinginger, 2009). These everyday socialisation contexts may include interactions in service encounters, homestays, contact with professors, and within student peer groups (Kinginger, 2009).

Research has predominantly examined the role of classroom *instruction*, in the traditional language classroom in the home country (e.g., Huebner, 1995) and in language classes outside of the home country (e.g., Brecht & Robinson, 1995). As for outside the classroom, studies originating from study-abroad research (research that examines language gains in learning contexts abroad; Freed, 1995), have focused specifically on second-language acquisition through conversational interactions of international students with their homestay family members (e.g., Di Silvio, Donovan, & Malone, 2014; Tan & Kinginger, 2013) and, when inside the classroom, through interactions between students as well as with instructors (e.g., Hernández, 2016).

In contrast, there is less research exploring how peer conversational interaction in the academic classroom contributes to second language development, despite the potential for this environment to support the development of complex academic language. Therefore, it is still unclear what kinds of language development (e.g., idiomatic, socio-cultural, pragmatic, phonological) international students will experience when interacting conversationally with peers within the academic classroom and how this interaction enhances second-language development and the student experience. Since conversational interactions within the academic classroom are dynamic, complex, and collaborative, especially when unstructured, linguistic development may be multifaceted. Yet, the development of complex academic language may be more naturalistic considering the sociocultural and linguistic environment in which these interactions take place.

This review aims to explore how peer conversational interaction plays a role in developing language proficiency. Additionally, it seeks to understand how the diverse experiences of English Language Learners (ELL) students in higher education contexts (e.g., educational, linguistic, social, psychological) are affected by their level of English language proficiency related to conversational interaction. The questions that guide this review are:

1. What are the challenges faced by ELL speakers in peer interaction in academic contexts?
2. How do the outcomes of peer interaction impact ELL students' academic experiences?

Findings suggest that insufficient language proficiency results in several challenges for ELL students, most notably the inability to share their expertise and knowledge with their peers and participate successfully in classroom oral discussions. In addition, however, the literature suggests that language proficiency has a strong impact on the overall experiences of students and on their abilities to navigate the social structures of the academic community and to establish their own identity.

## **Second Language Acquisition through Peer Interaction**

### **Definition and Role of Peer Interaction**

In the research literature concerned with second language acquisition (SLA), peer interaction can be defined as “any communicative activity carried out between learners, where there is minimal or no participation from the teacher” (Philip, Adams, & Iwashita, 2014, p. 3). Peer interaction may involve two or more participants, and when engaged in such activities, participants work collaboratively toward a common goal. The word *peer* may be defined based on the equivalency of one or more factors (e.g., age or skill) pertaining to the participants. In this review, *peer* is based on the factor of participants being university students, and when in *interaction*, at least one participant in the interaction is a student for whom English is an additional language.

Activities which require participants to work together can vary in nature. For instance, in language classrooms, the most common of these are collaborative learning, cooperative learning, and peer tutoring. Philip, Adams and Iwashita (2014) explained that collaborative learning “involves a strong sense of mutuality and joint effort” (p. 3). That is, the task at hand can only be completed if students depend on one another. Cooperative learning is sometimes used interchangeably with collaborative learning. However, Philip and colleagues (2014) explained that cooperative learning “does not always involve mutuality to the same degree” (p. 3). As for peer tutoring, it occurs when one participant—often having more proficiency—assists another of lower proficiency in achieving a desired goal.

Early research on foreign language acquisition has shown that the learning environment must provide opportunities for meaningful social interaction between learners and users of the additional language in order for linguistic and socio-linguistic rules to be properly acquired (Krashen, 1982; Long, 1983, 1996; Swain, 2000). Pica (1987) argues that the type of social interaction most appropriate to the development of language is “that in which learners and their interlocutors share a need and desire to understand each other” (p. 4). In order to comprehend and produce language successfully, learners must re-structure their conversation so that the mutual, intrinsic desire to understand each other can be used to help achieve language acquisition (Pica, Dougherty, & Young, 1986).

In this light, conversational peer interactions are of real linguistic value to students in non-language academic classrooms. The social interactions stemming from structured classroom activities that take place in language learning classes may not always require that learners re-structure their language productions, especially because of the evident unequal power, corrective, and evaluative statuses that instructors and students possess. However, interactions that take place in content classes may be significantly less controlled, and may require participants to exchange more information in order for meaning to be made, instead of engaging in pre-designed activities which only invite students to exchange information and sometimes even have more correct answers that will meet the expectations of the instructor.

### **Benefits of Peer Interaction**

Seminal work in second language acquisition has investigated the linguistic benefits gained from peer interaction specifically in ELL classes. Allwright (1984) argued that learning takes place through peer interactions that involve bringing personal value systems to the surface in the classroom. When learners engage in conversational interactions in which they share ideas that matter to them, learning is more likely to occur because this type of interaction engages learners more meaningfully. Allwright (1984) clarified that depth of learning is not necessarily achieved as a consequence of activities that have communicative interaction as their focus. However, oral communication among peers remains a major element in classroom activities that aim to promote students’ involvement with learning. It is also through oral communication that students engage collaboratively in the co-construction of meaning.

In addition, Allwright (1984) proposed that peer conversations in the classroom are important based on the idea that “learning may be enhanced by peer discussion” (p. 157). When learners discuss their learning and share their

understandings, better comprehension is likely to follow. Peers may learn from one another or learn “from the very act of attempting to articulate their own understanding” (p. 158). In non-language classes, the topic being examined in peer groups is learned more deeply through conversational interactions. In language classes, conversely, this goal may be achieved in addition to the practising of conversational skills by additional language learners.

Kohn and Vajda (1975) explained that group interaction within the ELL classroom is important because it allows students to manipulate and modify language to understand one another. Students can help and learn from one another as group interactions require them to use “greater self-expression, real self-expression” (p. 381) to achieve meaning. Besides linguistic benefits, Kohn and Vajda proposed that group interaction can help create a positive environment for the students where they may overcome their “feelings of inferiority” and develop a “more positive self-image and identity” (p. 381). Therefore, since peer interaction is linked to both linguistic and psychological benefits, students may perform more meaningfully in the classroom when interactions are encouraged.

More recent research has examined how peer interaction in ELL classes helps learners acquire language forms. In a study with Chinese students, Wang and Castro (2010) found that classroom interaction, especially through group work, helped learners to notice the target form in English. Fang (2010) proposed that classroom interaction can have positive effects on the development and facilitation of additional language learning as it allowed form-focused input to become salient and therefore noticed by learners. In addition, Loewen and Basturkmen (2005), from analysing small group interactions in ELL writing activities, concluded that students paid considerable attention to language forms in general and to discourse in particular when engaged in the activity with their peers.

In content-specific classes, other research has focused on the complex relationships between peer interaction and linguistic ability in higher education contexts. More specifically, research has analysed how an international ELL student’s communicative competence in the English language—or the lack thereof—maximises or minimises the possibilities for conversational interactions in academic classrooms and in the overall higher education setting (Hung & Hyun, 2010; Kobayashi, 2016; Lee, 2009; Li, 2004; Morita, 2004; Tatar, 2005; Yang, 2010). Studies of this nature reveal that interacting and participating in classroom oral activities (e.g., in pairs, small-groups, whole-class discussions) tends to be a major challenge faced by students for whom English is an additional language.

### **Academic Language-related Demands in the Classroom**

A number of studies have explored the demands made by the academic context on international ELL students’ language proficiency, from the perspective of the student. Ostler (1980) found that ELL students normally possess English language skills for casual communication; however, in terms of speaking proficiency to effectively conduct conversations with professors and peers in the academic context, students’ abilities were insufficient. From surveying 70 East Asian international ELL graduate students, Kim (2006) reported that the students identified participating in whole-class discussions, raising questions during class, and engaging in small-group discussions as the three most common activities that took place inside the academic classroom. Out of these activities, the students reported being most concerned about leading class discussions as well as participating in whole-class discussions.

Wright and Lander (2003) investigated differences in rates of verbal interaction during a collaborative group activity outside class time between two groups of students. The researchers worked with 72 first-year male undergraduate Engineering students: 36 Australian-born, Anglo-European students, and 36 foreign-born, South East Asian ELL students at an Australian university. The study measured how the students worked in groups in two arrangements: mono- and bi-ethnic groups. Wright and Lander reported that both Australian and South East Asian students produced fewer verbal interactions when working together in bi-ethnic groups in comparison to when working in mono-ethnic groups. However, even though both ethnic groups produced fewer verbal interactions when working with members of the opposite group, South East Asian students’ verbal productions showed a substantial decrease in frequency. The authors argued that in bi-ethnic groups, the Australian students’ mode of operation may have been taken as the standard, thus affecting cross-cultural group dynamics.

Cheng, Myles, and Curtis (2004) examined the perceived linguistic and cultural challenges of 59 international ELL graduate students at a Canadian university using a survey and follow-up interviews. The study revealed that leading class discussions was rated by the international students as the most important skill to have based on their academic experiences. Then, the same students were asked to rate the most difficult skill. Leading class discussions emerged again as the most difficult skill. Since leading class discussions requires students to have proficiency in

academic English and content knowledge, the researchers suggested that inadequate language skills, combined with socio-cultural factors, may directly result in unsatisfactory academic performance for international ELL students.

Wu, Garza, and Guzman (2015) interviewed 10 international ELL students at an American university, both undergraduate and graduate. The researchers sought to gain insight into the academic challenges faced by the students and their adjustment strategies. The students reported that the lack of language proficiency imposed significant barriers to their academic success. One of the students reported that she did not participate in group work because she found it difficult to follow her peers' dynamic conversational exchanges. The researchers emphasised the importance of oral proficiency by reporting that all students faced "a number of difficulties when they had to communicate orally in an academic setting" (p. 7).

## **How do ELL Students Experience Classroom Participation?**

Studies suggest that insufficient language proficiency, unfamiliarity with the education system of the host institution, and cultural differences are the major factors influencing classroom participation for ELL students. Tatar (2005) examined the experiences and perceptions around in-class participation of four Turkish graduate students at a university in the US. The students faced ongoing challenges in relation to oral participation and classroom membership in their seminar-style classes. Conflict arising from educational and cultural differences, along with insufficient academic language proficiency for classroom discussions, contributed in complex ways to students' experiences of being peripheral members of the classroom.

Conflicting cultural expectations around the importance and purpose of classroom participation between instructors and ELL students can directly impact the linguistic dimension of students' experiences. Tatar (2005) argued students who come from teacher-centered educational cultures may not see value in oral participation. However, international ELL graduate students are expected to participate in class as actively as their native-speaker peers. Although ELL students may try to meet this expectation, they "worry about sounding competent and intelligent in a foreign language" (p. 338) while interacting with students who may be "dominant in classroom discussions" (p. 338). Tatar illustrated that classroom participation is complex and influenced by factors beyond the linguistic which are underestimated in the literature (see Ferris & Tagg, 1996).

Even when language can be considered the most visible challenge for classroom participation, it may still often be inextricably connected to other "invisible" factors that also affect classroom participation as a whole. Morita (2004) showed some of the ways by which insufficient language proficiency can lead ELL students to feeling excluded from classroom discussions. In her study with six female international graduate students from Japan at a Canadian university, the students felt as though they were not relevant members of their classroom communities because their insufficient language proficiency prevented them from participating orally as competently as their native-speaker peers did. Additionally, however, the ELL students' beliefs concerning satisfactory classroom participation were informed by their former educational acculturation in Japan, which affected how the students understood their peers' behaviour as well as their own.

Despite the influence of cultural and educational differences, the lack of proficiency in English may still be the most critical factor affecting oral participation in class. In Lee's (2009) study, for example, ELL students had exceeded the minimum score required by the university in both the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and the Graduate Record Examination (GRE). However, the students still faced significant linguistic challenges. Lee argued that passing language proficiency tests may not equate to possessing sufficient academic language proficiency for graduate-level studies, "particularly the ability to organise and share ideas in dynamic classroom situations" (p. 143).

Indeed, the register of language required for effective classroom participation may be more complex than what many ELL students expect. In Li's (2004) study, the ELL students had already obtained their high school diploma in China, but decided to repeat high school in Canada specifically to improve their linguistic proficiency. Though the students had also achieved the minimum TOEFL score required for university admission, they realised shortly after that their level of proficiency was not on par to that of their native-speaker peers. One of the students, Magnolia, explained her difficulty by saying: "it's impossible for me to listen to the lectures effectively because I can't understand the professors at all" (p. 34). Considering their linguistic unpreparedness, Li reported that "the students could not and did not take part in class discussions" (p. 34).

The inability to express oneself in classroom interactions can pose serious threats to an international ELL student's well-being. Seo and Koro-Ljungberg (2005) explored this issue by working with "older" international students from Korea. One of the students, Helen, reported feeling continuously frustrated and uncomfortable talking with Americans because of her limited proficiency in English. As a consequence, Helen reported she did not participate in classroom discussions, which led her professor to doubt her capability to successfully complete the course. Not being able to participate in class discussions made Helen feel pressured, stressed, and nervous, and eventually drop the class. The researchers reported that all ELL students' self-confidence decreased as a product of their communication difficulties.

Contributions made by native-speaker peers in classroom discussions may not be considered helpful or constructive by some ELL students. ELL students in Beykont and Daiute's study (2002) found that some of their peers (typically North Americans) "just talk" (p. 38) during class discussions, often in incomplete ideas or based solely on personal experience, without offering relevant and critical contributions to classroom discussions. Furthermore, the students reported that classroom discussions were dominated by native-speakers, "voicing their opinion too often and at the expense of other students" (p. 38). Finally, the students expressed concern in relation to following the fast-paced discussions in which students often interrupted one another (see also Morita, 2004).

### **Language and Identity in the Classroom**

ELL students' identity-related experiences seem to be influenced by the situated nature of their academic language practices. As Wenger (1998) pointed out, different communities of practice value different situated abilities and constructs. Oftentimes, ELL students must construct their identities around linguistic competence (Morita, 2004). When a lack of appropriate communicative competence in academic English exists, students' identities may become one of less competent members in the classroom when compared to their native-speaker peers. Because this identity is constructed dynamically, it can also oscillate to one of higher or lower competence in response to other contextual factors, such as class dynamics, the task in which international ELL students are involved, or their culturally-informed beliefs about teaching and learning (Tatar, 2005).

Despite the multifaceted process of identity construction in academic contexts, language may still have the most profound influence. Hung and Hyun (2010) argued that expressing oneself in English is already a major challenge for ELL students studying in English-medium universities, and to make matters worse, when students try to negotiate membership into the academic community, they must do so using "appropriate and sophisticated academic English" (p. 343) which is an ability international ELL students often do not possess.

To illustrate, Liu (2011) explored her own experience as an international ELL student at a university in Canada. Prior to her graduate studies at the host university, Liu had passed three language proficiency tests. However, in her first three months of study, Liu reported she could not understand the language used by her professors and peers in graduate-level classroom discussions. Liu explained that even though she had good ideas to share with the class, she could not express herself clearly in English and, in comparison with her native-speaker peers, she considered herself "stupid" (p. 79).

### **Silence in the Classroom**

Studies have identified ELL students' classroom participation as being commonly characterised by silence. Yet, the reasons and factors behind such classroom behaviour are complex and often informed by cultural, social, linguistic, and psychological aspects— though rarely in isolation. For example, Morita (2004) found that most of the Japanese students were "passive" participants in their classes. Though language anxiety was the main cause, the students identified other factors behind their relative silence: their limited knowledge of the content being discussed, preference for quieter participation, learners' goals, identity of less competent members, outsider status, and their imposed role of individuals with limited English. However, Morita argued that even when the students remained quiet or withdrawn, they were still negotiating their identities through resistance.

In Tatar's (2005) study, silence emerged out of a cultural incongruence. The Turkish students reported remaining silent during class discussions every time they felt their contributions were solely based on personal experience rather than on careful thinking and preparation, which to them was the most valuable type of contribution. The students did not believe their opinions were acceptable in academic discussions. Tatar explained the students had come from an educational culture where interaction with peers in the classroom as a form of learning was virtually non-existent.

Similarly, cultural influence was the factor behind Korean ELL students' silence in Lee's (2009) study. Lee reported that none of the Korean students initiated topics in whole-class discussions. The students nodded and made eye contact to signal attentiveness, but rarely spoke. The students' views on oral participation differed due to their upbringing in Korean culture. They valued saying fewer, but more important things than saying too much just for the sake of participation and interaction. For them, an individual that spoke too much was seen as "light" or sometimes uneducated. The Korean students saw the instructor as being more knowledgeable than their peers, and based on their experiences with classroom practices in Korea, they normally waited for the instructor to invite the students to raise questions after the main point had been concluded.

The level of anxiety ELL students experience can become detrimental to their overall academic performance and experience. In Brown's study (2008), ELL students would refrain from participating in classroom oral activities when ashamed of their inability to converse with their peers. The students not only employed silence in response to fear of speaking, but also avoided eye contact with the instructor unless their names were called upon. Whenever invited to answer questions, Brown explained that "the looks that crossed their face included panic and anxiety, and in extreme cases, students sat silently, squirming in their seat" (p. 85).

Support in the form of acknowledging and expanding on a student's comment may motivate international ELL students to participate in university tutorials. Marlina (2009) worked with four Asian undergraduate students at an Australian University to investigate the factors which might influence a student's active participation in class. She found that when tutors skipped, interrupted, or ignored students' comments during a tutorial lecture, the students would choose to not further participate because they considered their oral contribution had been de-valued. On the other hand, when tutors or instructors nodded or used small phrases (e.g., "that's good" or "I see," p. 240) to acknowledge the students' oral contribution, the students felt more willing to participate.

## **Agency and Transformation**

Despite all challenges, ELL students are social agents capable of creatively reinventing their classroom experiences. ELL students have been found to employ numerous strategies to mitigate both participation and membership issues in the classroom. Some frequently-employed strategies include: speaking in earlier stages of a discussion, preparing a few points to say in advance, expressing explicitly the desire to participate to their peers and instructors, preparing questions to ask in class beforehand, taking notes during lectures, maintaining eye contact with the instructor, smiling, nodding, flipping through books or notes, answering trivial questions asked by instructors, asking friends and classmates for help, tape-recording lectures, and seeking help directly from the instructor (Li, 2004; Morita, 2004; Tatar, 2005).

Over time, students may also acquire sufficient academic language to help shift the course of their experiences (Hung & Hyun, 2010). An augmented literacy in academic English may foster the acquisition of more discipline-specific knowledge. Despite any linguistic improvement, classroom interaction is still dynamic and co-constructed. In a study conducted by Zhou, Knoke, and Sakamoto (2005), the Chinese students often reported not having opportunities to speak in classroom discussions because they could not react as quickly as their native English-speaking peers did. Understanding the content of class discussions was no longer a challenge for the students, but responding timely to questions and comments them was difficult and required additional time.

## **Conclusion**

The studies reviewed in this paper suggest that proficiency in academic language plays a critical role in ELL students' experiences. Academic language may help ELL students succeed in higher education by enabling them to interact successfully with their peers and instructors. An international student's competency in the English language can be a predictor of the student's adjustment in the new context abroad, which includes the ability to relate to the local academic community (Poyrazli, Arbona, Nora, McPherson, & Pisecco, 2002). Indeed, much of the literature reviewed herein has positioned language proficiency as the dominant factor which interfered with ELL students' successful adjustment in university and, more specifically, with their active participation in the classroom.

ELL students may encounter significant challenges in their attempts to effectively interact conversationally in academic English. From a perspective of community of practice (Wenger, 2006), second language acquisition, and by extension, academic language proficiency, may occur more successfully if students have regular and constructive

opportunities to engage in peer interactions whose focus is on a task that involves oral communication (Hung & Hyun, 2010). Instructors can contribute to this linguistic development by devising and implementing meaningful and collaborative interactional activities into the curriculum in which ELL students are paired strategically with native-speaker students.

Additionally, language proficiency has an impact on identity development. Since intellectual competence is often constructed around language proficiency, being proficient in (academic) English may be the key factor in allowing students to diverge the course of the academic experiences that negatively affect the enactment of their identities. In this case, effective and continuous language support can contribute to enhancing ELL students' language proficiency. Without the appropriate level of language, ELL students are likely to remain in a disadvantaged, marginalised position (Morita, 2004).

Interaction is the main source for oral language development for ELL students. Although the experiences of ELL students explored in the studies indicate some personal success (e.g., more familiarity with the host education system, socialisation with peers, reinvented identities, greater proficiency), there has been limited reporting on the linguistic gains achieved by ELL students from engaging in peer interactions. One way to interpret the lack of reported linguistic development is through the lens of the Interaction Hypothesis (Krashen, 1985). As reported by the students and sometimes their instructors, ELL students were (and may still be) presented with inadequate opportunities to interact with their peers. When interactions are constructed around a comprehensible, yet slightly higher, level of language linguistic development may be likelier to follow for ELL students.

Classroom dynamics also influence ELL students' participatory experiences. As suggested, interaction can be dominated by native-speaker peers (Tatar, 2005; Zhou et al., 2005). As reported by the researchers, most of the ELL students lacked the ability to respond naturalistically to the oral contributions initiated by their peers. Some of the students even reported being interrupted when they did have the chance to speak up. Therefore, for ELL students in non-language academic classes, interactions may be most beneficial when they are somewhat regulated by the instructor or when native-speaker students are aware of their ELL peers' linguistic needs.

A number of concerns have emerged from this review and merit future research. The literature reviewed herein did not focus on measuring or quantifying gains in language proficiency. In-depth, long-term research focused on linguistic development through peer interaction could help clarify and specify how and which kinds of interactional activities may be most productive for ELL students' development of language proficiency. More research can also explore instructor's beliefs in relation to supporting linguistic development through peer interaction, and how students of higher language proficiency can be more aware of the linguistic needs of their ELL peers. Research can examine what pedagogical (Tavares, 2017) or institutional changes should be implemented so that ELL students' academic experiences may be less challenging (Tavares, 2016).

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