

The Role of Peer Collaborative Interaction in a Small Group Reading Activity on EFL

Reading Comprehension

บทบาทของการทำกิจกรรมการอ่าน แบบกลุ่มอยู่ร่วมกันของนักเรียน ต่อความเข้าใจในการอ่านภาษาอังกฤษ เป็นภาษาต่างประเทศ

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Abstract

Peer collaborative interaction through text discussion activity can facilitate the learners' text comprehension. Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory provides insights into how knowledge is internalised through the use of language as semiotic mediation while the learners are engaged in social interaction. The learners tend to internalise the text and become more self-regulated if they are given opportunities to talk and to discuss the text with other peers who can be either more or less capable. Despite the fact that Vygotsky's zone of proximal development (ZPD) focuses merely on how an expert helps a novice, Neo-Vygotskyan theory argues that not only less skilful but also skilful learners can benefit from

working collaboratively with peers as all the learners are by nature capable in different skills and areas of knowledge. In an EFL intermediate reading classroom context, the teacher should encourage them to use L1 during a text discussion activity as L1 is seen as a mediational tool used to speak to understand. In this sense, the students use L1 to assist them to comprehend the text and to be a tool to direct the group how to cope with their reading. The teacher's role is to scaffold the learners in the areas they cannot perform by themselves by instructing them how to read and by providing reading strategy training.

บทคัดย่อ

การมีปฏิสัมพันธ์ในเชิงให้ความช่วยเหลือซึ่งกันและกันของผู้เรียนในกิจกรรมการอภิปรายเนื้อเรื่องที่อ่านสามารถนำไปสู่ความเข้าใจในตัวเนื้อเรื่อง ทฤษฎีเชิงสังคมและวัฒนธรรมของวายกอตสก์ ได้อธิบายไว้ว่าความสามารถที่จะกล้ายเป็นส่วนหนึ่งของบุคคล บุคคลหนึ่งผ่านกระบวนการใช้ภาษาซึ่งเป็นเสมือนตัวกลางในการถ่ายทอดความรู้ในรูปแบบของสัญลักษณ์ที่มีความหมายชัดเจนที่ผู้เรียนกำลังมีปฏิสัมพันธ์ทางสังคมซึ่งกันและกัน ผู้เรียนมีแนวโน้มที่จะเข้าถึงเนื้อเรื่องที่อ่านและสามารถที่จะควบคุมตัวเองไปในทิศทางที่เหมาะสมตามที่มีโอกาสพูดและอภิปรายเนื้อเรื่องกับผู้เรียนคนอื่น ๆ ที่มีความสามารถมากกว่าหรือน้อยกว่าก็ได้ เมื่อทฤษฎีของวายกอตสก์ในเรื่อง zone of proximal development (ZPD) จะเน้นแต่เพียงการช่วยเหลือของผู้เชี่ยวชาญที่มีต่อผู้อ่อนทักษะ แต่ทฤษฎีของกลุ่มนี้อย่างกอตสก์ ได้ยังว่าไม่เพียงแต่ผู้เรียนที่มีทักษะอ่อนกว่า แต่ผู้เรียนที่มีทักษะดีก็สามารถที่จะได้รับประโยชน์จากการทำงานร่วมกันได้ เพราะในความเป็นจริงแล้วผู้เรียนทุกคนมีความสามารถในทักษะและความรู้ที่แตกต่างกันไป ในห้องเรียนวิชาการอ่านภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาต่างประเทศในระดับ intermediate ผู้สอนสามารถ

การตั้นผู้เรียนให้ใช้ภาษาที่หนึ่งในระหว่างทำกิจกรรมอภิปรายตัวเนื้อเรื่องที่อ่านเนื่องจากภาษาที่หนึ่งเป็นเสมือนเครื่องมือถ่ายทอดความรู้ที่ใช้พูดเพื่อสร้างความเข้าใจ ในขณะนี้ผู้เรียนใช้ภาษาที่หนึ่งเพื่อช่วยสร้างความเข้าใจในตัวเนื้อเรื่องที่อ่าน และเพื่อเป็นเครื่องมือในการกำหนดทิศทางในการจัดการกับการอ่านของสมาชิกในกลุ่ม บทบาทของผู้สอนคือการช่วยประคับประดับของผู้เรียนในเรื่องที่ผู้เรียนไม่สามารถปฏิบัติตัวเองได้ โดยสอนผู้เรียนเกี่ยวกับวิธีการอ่านและให้ผู้เรียนได้มีโอกาสได้ฝึกฝนทักษะการอ่าน

Introduction

In this paper, I want to shed light on how peer collaborative interaction in L1 can facilitate EFL learners' text understanding when they are engaged in a text discussion activity in small group work, which consists of no more than four members. In general, when the teacher thinks of implementing group work in a classroom, he or she usually comes up with the idea that it can increase opportunities for learners to practise using language, which is the obvious benefit of group work (Long and Porter, 1985). Given this, the main purpose of implementing group work activities is probably to attempt to minimize teacher-centredness in classroom contexts to provide more opportunities for EFL learners to practise the new language with their peers as well as the teachers and experience the process of trial and error in the target language by themselves (Richards and Rodgers, 2001). In this context, group work activities did not aim to develop the learners' communicative competence as mentioned in the first place but to mediate their learning and to help them become self-regulated through collaboration with other peers. In this paper, I will highlight Vygotsky's socio-cultural perspective and research in second language learning, which have focused on the importance of second language learning through social

interactions in groups with peers who are by nature capable in different skills and areas of knowledge. I will also focus on studies regarding the use of L1 in text discussion activities and the benefits of its use in facilitating learners' reading comprehension. I will finally provide some suggestions on how to introduce peer collaborative interaction into reading classroom contexts.

Collaborative Learning and a Socio-Cultural Perspective

According to Oxford (1997), collaborative learning has strong connections with socio-cultural theory, which emphasises that an individual's knowledge comes from communication with others. Collaborative learning requires a contribution from all participants who engage in an activity. This process cannot be performed by only one participant but it requires collaboration from all parties jointly and mutually helping each other identify, repeat, and respond to problems. The concept that learning can occur through collaboration with others has been originated from Vygotsky's sociocultural theory. Vygotsky proposed the term *zone of proximal development*, which refers to the distance of one's actual development, achieved by one self and one's potential development in the future through the assistance of the expert or more skilful peers (van Lier, 1996: 46).

Regarding Vygotsky's *zone of proximal development*, the child or learner's actual development, which was previously mentioned, can be in fact measured by the ability to solve a problem independently while the child or learner's potential development can be determined through the ability to solve a problem under adult or a more capable peer's support. Social interactions which can create collaboration

between individuals will become over time part of individuals' independent developmental achievement.

Vygotsky (1978), cited in van Lier (1996: 46), states that "what a child can do with assistance today, she will be able to do by herself tomorrow".

In short, there are some tasks an individual can perform alone with confidence and there are also some skills and knowledge an individual can possess only with help from others. The help from others will eventually become one's self-regulation. In response to this concept, van Lier (1996) points out that teachers should make sure that all kinds of teaching take place in the ZPD through pedagogical scaffolding which consists of three levels in scaffolding: episodes, sequences, and interactions. The first process is to start at the global level stimulating learners to use a variety of the target phrases. The teacher should allow a certain amount of time for learners to practise and repeat using them until they become confident and independent in using the target phrases. With respect to the second level which deals with the activity itself, the teacher should set up an activity with a planned script of the activity in mind so that he or she will know where to stop and encourage students to move on. Finally, the teacher has to provide local interactions to gear students towards a right track. van Lier (1996: 199) contends that "at this level, the teacher decides, from moment to moment, when to prompt, help, pause, correct, and in other ways try to encourage the students' participation". This three-level pedagogical scaffolding is illustrated in an activity asking the whole class to give instructions to Student A to set up the OHP (see a detailed transcript in van Lier, 1996: 197-198). Oxford (1997) adds that the teacher, according to Vygotsky's

perspective, should attempt to provide any kind of help to assist students to develop their target language and culture. However, when they need less help, the teacher should bit by bit remove scaffolding so that learners can become more self-regulated.

In the light of Vygotsky's original proposal that one way the higher form of mental abilities could be mediated is through social interaction with other more capable person(s) (Lantolf, 2000: 17), neo-Vygotskian work has focused on the significance of social interaction particularly between an expert and a novice in learning (Erickson, 1996). In institutional settings, scaffolding can frequently be observed by interactions between the teacher or a so-called expert and a student or a so-called novice. The expert tends to externally help the novice complete and gain insights into a function they are performing. This external mediation later facilitates internal mediation in which the novice appropriates, internalises and self-regulates what he or she has learnt from the expert. The whole process of learning through social interaction is explicitly stated by Lantolf (2000: 17) in this way:

According to Vygotsky, all higher mental abilities appear twice in the life of the individual: first on the intermental plane in which the process is distributed between the individual and some other person(s) and/or cultural artifacts, and later on the intramental plane in which the capacity is carried out by the individual acting via psychological mediation.

In this sense, according to Vygotsky, there is a strong link between

the external and the internal plane in the way that the external plane or social interactions contribute to the key to internal functioning. This link can be completed through the process of internalisation, a process that transforms social phenomena into psychological ones.

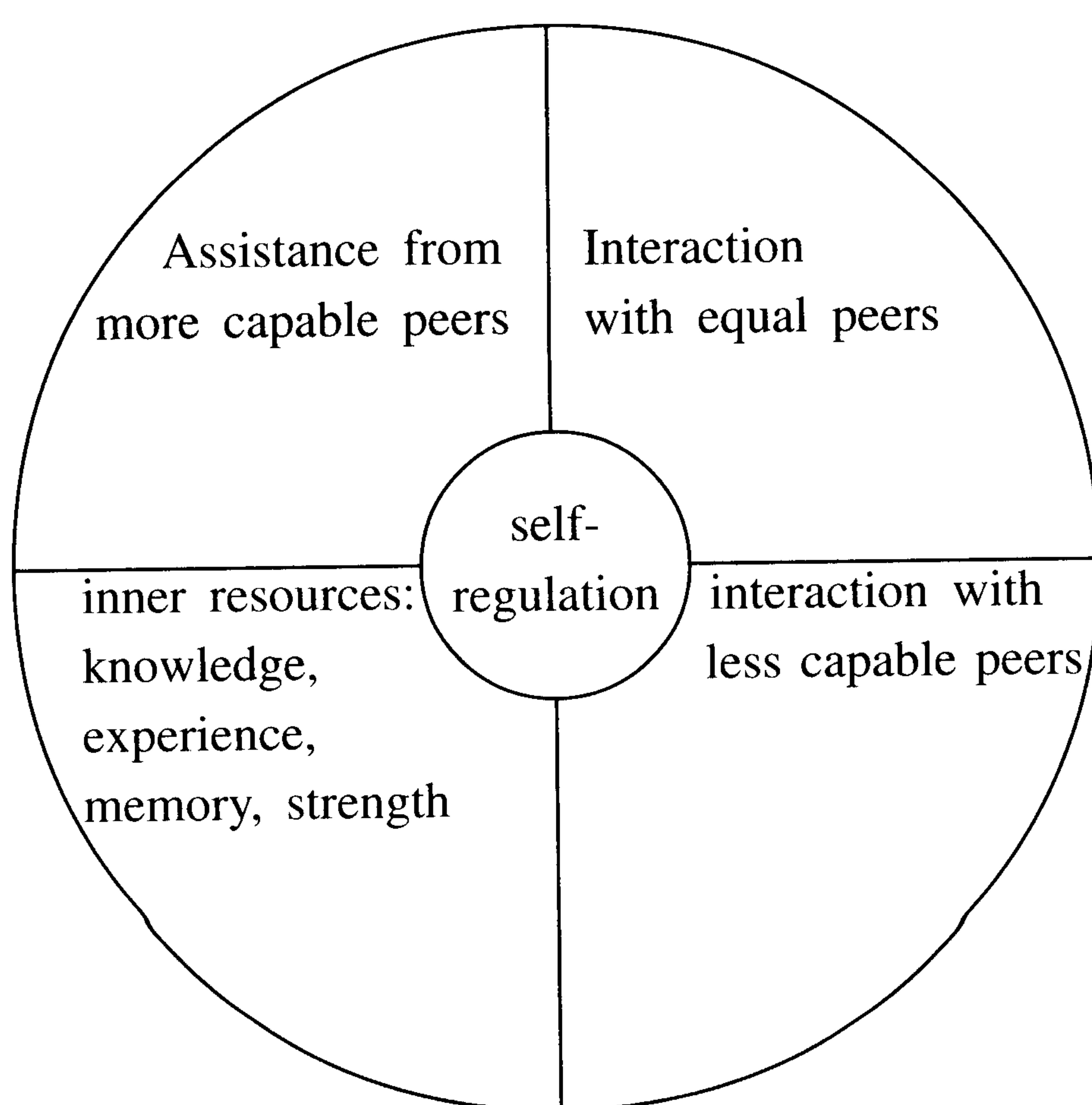
Vygotsky's conception of how knowledge is internalised is regarded as outside-in because once interactions or relationships with others are established, knowledge can be internalised. And this is seen as the process of cognitive development.

However, Vygotsky's internalisation is unlikely to take place if there is no use of semiotic mediation, which in this context refers to language as a tool to communicate between persons, while they are having social interactions. Based on the Vygotskyan perspective, the semiotic systems through social interactions between persons, originally referring to child-adult communication, are likely to make the individual's internalisation process of the new knowledge or activities feasible. This idea has been accepted and adapted to second language teaching and learning. That is, the teacher or an expert should have social interactions with a student or a novice to help him or her internalise the new knowledge in the student's zone of proximal development.

Yet, it is not necessary that the dialogic process take place merely when the novice has social interaction with the teacher as expert, but learners can also scaffold one another (Ellis, 2003). van Lier (1996: 193) emphasises that:

...the notion of a capable adult guiding a learner through the ZPD is most appealing in the case of young children and their caretakers. However, in the case of adolescents or adults learning a second language, this metaphor may be less convincing.

Why is the expert-novice interaction less convincing in the latter case? van Lier (1996) proposes that adolescent and adult learners gain over time what he calls “inner resources” on which they can depend and deploy to assist themselves to work on a function in addition to resorting to the expert’s assistance. Below is a diagramme representing multiple zones of proximal development proposed by van Lier (1996: 194).



Given the multiple zones of proximal development which could effectively expand learners’ self-regulation, pair and small group work are likely to provide all kinds of van Lier’s interactions because

students would have opportunities to work with more capable, less capable as well as equal peers and to rely on their experiences and knowledge during the process of making a contribution to their group. The following studies reveal the link between social interactions among peers and learners' learning development.

Allwright (1984) contends that learning can be developed by peer discussion when learners are discussing their learning and sharing their ideas with each other. According to Allwright, "they may learn directly from each other, or more likely, they will learn from the very act of attempting to articulate their own understanding" (p. 158). Unless there is interaction among learners, learning would not take place because there is no exchange of shared knowledge. In classroom settings, which are considered "socially constructed events," all participants including the teacher and learners need to be equally responsible for advanced learning creating interaction in classrooms. In this sense, learners must be given opportunities to interact and communicate with other learners as well as the teacher, regardless of their differences in the way they interact with one another since "all social behaviour can make a difference to the learning opportunities that become available to all the participants" (p. 163).

Guerrero and Villamil (1994) observed peer interaction or what L2 learners actually did in pair work when they had an opportunity to discuss and revise a piece of writing which one of them wrote. They discovered that learners actively engaged in the task and carried out self-revision throughout the task. They also concluded that learners were equal in their interactions to a certain extent as they took turns

being self-regulated (being able to identify problems in the task by themselves), scaffolding the other, and being scaffolded by their peer. It seems that they took turns playing the roles of expert and novice. Guerrero and Villamil pointed out that the learner role in peer interaction fluctuated according to a variety of task factors, which were “L2 knowledge, awareness of goals, mastery of rhetorical mode, role adopted (whether reader or writer), and presence of a collaborator” (p. 41). Even in the case that both peers were other-regulated or depended on each other’s assistance, they could come up with a “satisfactory” result according to Guerrero and Villamil (1994). Given this, learner-learner interaction seems to be located in the ZPD, where learners occasionally change roles between expert and novice, taking turns assisting each other. This could expand learners’ self-regulation internalising what they have learnt from their peers during social interaction in pair or small group work.

In Ohta (1995)’s study regarding learner-learner collaborative interaction in the ZPD, she revealed that not only did a learner with poor L2 (Japanese) skills benefit by working with a more capable learner, but a more advanced learner of Japanese could also benefit by interacting with a less capable one. To clarify this, Ohta (1995) explained that “peer interaction allows learners to share their strengths through scaffolding as learners explicitly help one another through prompting and error correction” (p. 116). The analysis of collaborative interaction between two learners of Japanese at an intermediate level through video and audio recording during a role play task performance showed that these two learners could employ a variety of Japanese language functions which did not occur in the context

in which the teacher controlled the classroom interaction or activity, which seemed to limit language use and learners' response (p. 116).

Wood (1998) states that social interaction which takes place between children themselves are likely to facilitate children's learning development as they have opportunities to get exposed to different ideas which stimulate them to reconsider what they have thought. Wood calls this form of social interaction "the joint construction of understanding," a process in which a child interacts with another or with the expert in his socio-cultural context.

Similarly, Ohta (2001) emphasises that despite the fact that the ZPD was originally viewed as an interactional space where a child or learner is assisted to learn the new knowledge by an expert or a more capable learner, the ZPD also promotes learning among peers. Ohta argues that the ZPD can be supported by peers in classroom contexts, explaining that "because no two learners have the same complement of strengths and weaknesses, peer learning has the potential of allowing learners to share their strengths with one another, together producing performance that is of a higher level than that of any individual involved" (p. 74). Thus, in language learning settings, support which promotes a learner to increasingly become autonomous, independent, or self-regulated can be provided not only by the teacher and materials but also by peers.

In addition, Ohta (2001) emphasises that peer assistance is in fact mutual in the way peers help each other. Ohta elaborates further that peers, even though none of them is an expert, can help each other

in language learning tasks in that the peer who is assisted in one instance provides assistance to the other peer in the next. By contrast, the help between an expert and a novice seems to be a one-way interaction in which an expert is the only person who provides help to a novice. Ohta summarises that peer interaction tends to be in the form of waiting, prompting, co-construction, and explaining when the peer is facing some difficulties in communication. In addition, when the peer makes an error, the other partners employ the above strategies along with repairing and asking the teacher's help for themselves and for their partner.

Peer Collaborative Interaction in EFL Reading

The above research in fact focuses on how social interaction among peers can contribute to success in language production including speaking and writing skills. The area of second language teaching and learning research, investigating the relationship between peer interaction and reading comprehension, is still rare. However, there are some related research projects which I shall discuss in detail to gain more insights into how scaffolding and interactions among L2 learners lead to better reading performance. In his Ph.D. dissertation, Rodriguez Garcia (2001) attempted to seek for the benefits of peer interaction as a means to improve second language learners' reading comprehension of authentic texts. As children's cognitive development can be activated through social interactions among children or between children and an expert according to Vygotsky's socio-cultural perspectives, Rodriguez contended that social interaction among L2 learners was needed in the same way:

By the same token, the ESL classroom can also be regarded as a small complex community. There are learners with different needs and abilities but with a common bond, which is to succeed in a language different from their mother tongue. Thus, it becomes apparent that one important aspect to take into account in an ESL classroom is the notion of collaboration among the learners (p. 8).

According to Rodriguez, despite the fact that in some classes students were placed according to the scores from the placement test, naturally students in one classroom would have differences in terms of proficiency and knowledge. Learners, as a result, definitely had opportunities to work with the ones with more knowledge in different skills. Students, while working in groups, would be able to scaffold each other, resulting in their L2 language learning.

In his dissertation, Rodriguez analysed reading comprehension scores of three groups of L2 learners from different countries such as Korea, Japan, and Poland who were taking an intensive language program. The first group in his study read unmodified reading texts individually without having peer interaction. The second read modified reading texts with no peer interaction and the last group read unmodified texts with peer interaction. The results from 5 open-ended questions and 15 multiple-choice test items showed that the interactive group had the highest score among the three groups. As Rodriguez (2001) states, “results of the quantitative analysis showed that differences in comprehension between the students who

read the unmodified text and those who read the same text but had the opportunity to interact with each other and discuss the unmodified text with their peers was statistically different ($M=22.59$ and $M=27.80$, respectively)" (p. 116). The group in which the learners had opportunities to interact with one another employed 10 identified reading-related strategies/behaviors—integrating information, interpreting text, monitoring comprehension, paraphrasing, questioning information in text, questioning meaning of clause or sentence, questioning meaning of word, reacting to text, reading aloud from text, and using background knowledge. Each member in most of the groups displayed different roles in helping each other comprehend the text by making use of different reading-related strategies.

Based on results from his questionnaire, the students, in addition, had positive perceptions about the usefulness and helpfulness of peer interaction in all groups. This qualitative support coupled with the quantitative results concluded that social engagement and roles of each member in interaction could facilitate L2 text comprehension, especially if it was concerned with authentic texts. Rodriguez concluded that "findings of the present study provide strong evidence that for students of at least intermediate levels of language proficiency, interacting with their peers over the content of an unmodified text effectively aids comprehension when they have a specific task to perform" (p. x). In addition, one of the instructional implications drawn from Rodriguez's study is that small group work and interaction among peers should be promoted in L2 intermediate-level reading classes. As Rodriguez explicitly concluded:

Learners can definitely learn and benefit from each other and are valuable sources to one another in accomplishing language tasks. Participation with other learners is not linguistically harmful. On the contrary, second language learning is greatly enhanced by students' interaction with other learners, even when grouping students of comparable general language proficiency but mixed-ability skills (p. 135).

This research suggests that there is a relationship between peer interaction and L2 reading comprehension. However, it is unlikely in Thai teaching contexts that a particular group of Thai learners, although they can freely choose the language they prefer to use as a means of their interaction in groups, will interact with each other in L2 as all classes are monolingual not multilingual classes like the ones in Rodriguez's study. Thus, to support the claim that peer interaction in L1 could lead to better reading performance, I shall discuss some research-based studies which focus on using L1 as a tool for learners' interaction in L2 reading classes.

In this section, I shall focus on two research studies concerning the use of L1 in reading activities to show how the use of L1 in reading group activities can associate with the learners' improved reading performance. Mike (2000)'s Ph.D. dissertation attempted to explore the participation and discourse patterns of learners who have studied Spanish as their L2 when they worked on small group post reading activities. Mike's study was mainly based on Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory, which focused on social interaction and language as a means

of mediation. The interesting aspect of these L2 learners' discourse patterns was that more than half of the utterances they expressed were in their L1. Mike (2000) stated that "many groups used L1 as a mediational tool to speak to understand". L1 was used in small group reading activities by the students most of the time to assist them to comprehend the text and to direct the group how to plan their story-telling. Mike, in addition, indicated that L1 was always used when the students discussed grammatical points and when they attempted to answer vocabulary questions while L2 was spoken when the students were engaged in story-telling activities. Given this, L1 is presumably used by L2 learners to help build up their comprehension on the L2 text and orient them how to carry on activities.

The other study was conducted by Helmar-Salasoo (2001), who emphasised the importance of the social context and instructional scaffolding developed by a teacher to improve ESL learners' literacy development. This one-year study showed that not only the social context but also instructional scaffolding was crucial to learners' literacy development. Throughout the year, students were required to work collaboratively daily in groups by using English or their mother tongue as a support while interacting with their peers. In groups, students were scaffolded to help each other read and think deeply about literature. The study showed that students over the year could internalise ways to discuss and to think critically, taking turns to scaffold each other. These L2 learners showed signs of becoming highly literate thinkers and achieving their academic goals at high levels. In brief, the study focused more on the importance of the social

context, interaction and scaffolding among learners in groups, which could result in higher ability to think and discuss as well as literacy development.

Conclusion and Suggestion

In brief, it is important that interactions among learners be taken into account by EFL reading teachers as they can better the learners' reading performance according to the literature review and studies previously mentioned. I propose that for an intermediate reading course, teachers can gradually hand over their role in controlling the text discussion part to the students after they have modelled how to read the text. The scaffolding among peers of different levels, skills and knowledge can create shared knowledge and facilitate the students' self-regulation. The teacher role is to scaffold the students, particularly in the areas they cannot perform by themselves. In the later stages, when the students seem to show signs that they are more confident and proficient in dealing with the text and reading tasks, the teachers should gradually decrease their help and hand over more responsibilities in coping with the text and tasks to the students (Aljaafreh and Lantolf, 1994). Given this, the students can become more self-regulated through time. Peer collaborative interaction can thus be one of the factors—tasks, motivation, teachers' scaffolding—which leads to the learners' internalisation of the text they are engaged in. Yet, some EFL teachers overlook the need to get the students to work in groups when it comes to a reading class as they sometimes underestimate the learners' potential to work on the text on their own and seem to prefer to focus more on a word level, meaning that they normally spend most of the teaching time explaining the text to the

whole class. Based on the literature review and the related studies I mentioned in this paper, I do encourage EFL reading teachers to get the students to work collaboratively with peers. Doing so, the learners will have opportunities to exchange mutual help, taking turns scaffolding one another according to their expertise.

Prior to getting the students to perform a text discussion activity on their own in the form of small group work, I recommend the teacher scaffold them by showing how to read the text to reduce any feasible difficulties that might occur while they work together. The teacher can start the lesson by instructing them how to predict the story from the title, brainstorming before reading, guessing the meaning of unknown words from context, skimming for the main idea, and reading for more detail. Once the learners show signs of being able to read independently, the teacher can reduce the help and give them more opportunities to work collaboratively in the form of either pair or small group work. Allowing the learners to interact with one another in L1 when they have difficulties expressing themselves in L2 will accelerate the ability to scaffold one another, contributing to text understanding.

Reading the text as a whole class activity in the first few lessons can not only help model the learners how to cope with the text by employing various reading strategies but also guide the learners in what they should do when they read the text in their small groups. The learners will automatically learn the role of a good reader as well as a group facilitator from the teacher when the teacher asks questions or directs the class in how to read the text. They will then adopt

those roles in their group while working collaboratively with other participants to help their group come up with the outcomes.

Collaborative interaction among learners in small group reading activities should be promoted in reading classroom contexts as Stuart and Volk (2002: 131) states:

Collaboration just adds more, not just double, but exponentially adds to whatever you're working with. Somehow it is inherent in teaching kids that the more we work together the better we do.

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