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PEER MEDIATION AS A TEACHING STRATEGY FOR DIVERSE PROFICIENCY EFL CLASS

Abstract. The article highlights the shift from a teacher-centered to a learner-centered approach in foreign language teaching, which presupposes learner autonomy and led to a shared responsibility between teachers and learners. The study focuses on the diverse proficiency EFL class, where more proficient students can assist the teacher if remaining unbiased and tolerant.

The provided analysis of recent research and publications contributes to understanding the importance of facilitating student autonomy and teaching them to appreciate and understand other participants in the educational process. The existing strategies to promote learner-centered teaching, creating a positive atmosphere of cooperation, and possible ways of language lesson arrangement are considered in this paper. As for the latter, the main focus in this study is made on group work, with particular grouping strategies taken into account, as far as it is crucial to plan and consider the specific classroom environment and the composition of the students when assigning group work to achieve desired outcomes.

This paper suggests peer mediation as a potentially beneficial teaching strategy for overcoming specific challenges associated with instructing EFL to heterogeneous groups, namely consisting of learners with different language proficiency levels. The article defines the notion of peer mediation, as a common practice in US educational institutions, initially aimed at resolving conflicts and reducing student alienation. The study shares the existing opinion, that due to building cooperative relationships within the class community, peer mediation is also capable of enhancing the classroom climate, which refers to the emotional
aspect of the classroom, including how students feel about the lesson, teacher, and classmates, as well as the overall learning environment.

The suggested idea of assigning a peer mediator role in group activities is justified, given the importance together with the potential of foreign language lessons to develop critical thinking abilities by overcoming prejudice and egocentricity, teaching students to remain open to alternative interpretations, and accepting new ideas and explanations. The stages of the mediation process, that can be role-played within the groups, and seven essential skills and practices that students must learn in order to become effective mediators are put forward as possible peer mediation activities for EFL class.

**Keywords:** learner-centered class, heterogeneous group, proficiency level, peer mediation, critical thinking skills

**Introduction.** Recently, language methodology has shifted the focus to the learner's active involvement in the teaching-learning process. This shift in learning from a behaviorist to a cognitive approach, described by Üstünlüoğlu [1], has contributed significantly to the concept of learner autonomy [2], leading to a dramatic shift from a teacher-centered to a learner-centered approach in foreign language teaching. According to Boyadzhieva [2], learner autonomy allows individuals to plan and control their own learning by choosing what, when, and how to learn according to their interests and abilities. Modern studies in the field highlight that the teacher's role has changed from being a mere supplier of knowledge to a facilitator, highlighting the learner's actions and information processing during lessons. Now, learners are expected to actively participate in the learning process, both inside and outside the language classroom, leading to a shared responsibility between teachers and learners. The teacher is not the sole educator, and in the diverse proficiency EFL classes, more proficient students can assist lower-level ones. Still, for group activities to be effective, students should be taught to respect their peers, acknowledge different viewpoints and assumptions, and avoid being egocentric [1].

**Analysis of recent research and publications.** According to recent findings, including Üstünlüoğlu’s paper “Language Teaching Through Critical Thinking and Self Awareness”, the cognitive approach has influenced language teaching, prompting discussions about the connection between language and thought. Boyadzhieva [2], who studies teacher-student interactions across various educational stages, emphasizes the importance of foreign language teachers understanding their own culture and being willing to change their approach to education to move away from the traditional teacher-centered model prevalent in certain countries. Additionally, they should teach students to appreciate and understand other participants in the educational process. In this study, we consider

This paper aims to offer solutions to the challenges faced in teaching English as a foreign language to a class with varying levels of proficiency. Encouraging learner autonomy and fostering a positive educational environment of mutual respect are key objectives. To achieve these goals, peer mediation is suggested as a potentially beneficial teaching strategy.

Main results and discussion. The importance of mutual effort and interaction of all the participants in the educational process, including learners, autonomously acquiring a foreign language, and the teacher, facilitating this process, made the learner-centered classroom the “standard for effective instruction” [4]. Boyadzhieva [2] shares Holec’s definition of learner autonomy [6], which states that learners should be able to take control of their own learning. Effective teacher instruction, aiming at developing student autonomy and promoting cooperative learning, is believed to be the foundation of a learner-centered class [4]. The successful lesson usually depends on the types of interactions, which the teacher offers during the lesson, including the teacher-learner and the learner-learner types of interaction. Richards, J.C. & Bolhke define the following four ways to organize a class: whole class, individual work, group work, and pair work [3]. As far as each of the mentioned ways offer different learning potential, this article focuses on group learning only. It is the most widespread and conducive to learner-learner cooperation in acquiring new knowledge. It also increases students’ speaking time and motivation[3], which is essential for foreign language classes.

Learner autonomy intends to help students develop a positive perception of themselves and understand diverse groups, at the same time [2]. Usually, based on age, gender, personality, or proficiency level, the composition of a class can be differentiated as heterogeneous or homogeneous, respectively. In this research, the heterogeneous group, comprising learners with different language proficiency levels, is in focus.

Heterogeneous grouping is commonly utilized in order to provide the lower-level students with support from the higher proficiency students [4]. Such teaching strategy is intrinsic to large classes, where it can be sometimes impossible for the teacher to attend to every individual, so the learners develop strategies for helping themselves and their classmates through cooperation and peer teaching [5]. Still, sometimes low proficiency students may feel uncomfortable or even stressed working with more proficient students [3]. Therefore, teacher facilitation, careful planning of conversational workload [4], together with group formation and
monitoring the group performance [5] are fundamental strategies for mixed proficiency level groups.

Classroom management can be made easier by forming groups of four, as suggested by Richards and Bolhke [3]. This size is ideal for teacher-learners as it allows for effective communication and participation. To encourage speaking opportunities for all students, a group of three may be formed, while a larger group of six can provide valuable practice in turn-taking [4]. It is crucial to create a diverse group that promotes peer teaching and keeps everyone engaged in the task [3]. Additionally, higher-level students can be utilized as assistants to support their lower-level peers, as recommended by Renaud et al. [5].

The positive atmosphere of cooperation and respect. However, for some students, group-based learning can be challenging. They may feel disconnected and unimportant if they believe their teacher is unaware of their presence or uninterested in their academic progress, which can lead to a lack of engagement in the learning process [5]. Additionally, every student has a unique learning style, which can be influenced by their personality traits. According to Richards and Bolhke [3], the following six different types of students may be found in class: task-oriented students, social students, dependent students, phantom students, and isolated students. Understanding the different learning dispositions of students can help create a more inclusive and effective learning environment.

At beginner and elementary levels, learners often experience uncertainty and require support and motivation. The level of autonomy is inversely related to the degree of uncertainty, meaning that as uncertainty increases, autonomy decreases and vice versa [2]. Effective learner-centered teaching involves recognizing each learner's unique needs and differences and tailoring instruction accordingly.

A language class is often viewed as a community of learners who share common goals, needs, and concerns [3]. By fostering collaboration and cooperation among the members, the class can work together towards achieving their objectives. In US educational institutions, peer mediation is a frequently used method to reduce student alienation. It offers students the opportunity to acquire conflict resolution skills and strategies, improve communication and decision-making abilities, and gain a different perspective. Through building cooperative relationships within the class community, peer mediation also enhances the classroom climate, which refers to the emotional aspect of the classroom, including how students feel about the lesson, teacher, and classmates, as well as the overall learning environment [7; 3].

The development of critical thinking skills requires teachers to take a leading role in initiating and guiding the process. Language classes are an ideal setting for teaching critical thinking due to the abundance of materials available and the interactive teaching methods used [1]. And peer mediation programs play a crucial role in promoting critical thinking together with enhancing decision-making skills.
and fostering healthy relationships within the class community [7]. Language teachers can aid their students in honing their critical thinking skills by helping them identify their assumptions, which are ideas often taken for granted. By examining whether such assumptions are justifiable, students can gain a deeper understanding of how their personal beliefs shape their points of view [1]. Another fundamental ability is to perceive, which allows us to analyze, interpret, and draw conclusions from the information we receive. It involves constructing our own version of reality through a process of making inferences. To raise awareness of individual perceptions and potential differences among individuals, Üstünlüoğlu advises educators to use optical illusions in the classroom. And a major obstacle to critical thinking, according to Üstünlüoğlu [1] is prejudice. Our prejudices (ideas about what is right, or wrong) have a significant impact on our thoughts and decisions. As language educators, it is important to analyze the data, information, and evidence presented in our classes to challenge our biases and become critical thinkers [1]. Trying to understand a different point of view (as opposed to egocentricity) is another important strategy [1].

Assigning specific roles to each group member is crucial for effective group work. A helpful strategy is to create mixed-level groups, where students with higher proficiency can take on more challenging roles so that learners of different proficiency levels can assist each other with various tasks [Richards]. Stressing that the teacher may either choose the leader or allow the groups to choose their own, Rance-Roney [4] also outlines several potential roles, including scribe, reporter, vocabulary monitor, and time monitor. This study proposes that students with higher proficiency levels take mediation roles in heterogeneous groups, in order to create a learning environment conducive to developing critical thinking skills and providing equal and respectful relationships. A peer mediator is one or more students, assisting fellow students in resolving conflicts by facilitating clear communication, promoting mutual understanding, and encouraging mutually agreed-upon solutions [7]. According to Block and Blazej [7], peer mediation is an effective tool for teaching conflict resolution skills, including comprehension of conflict, effective communication, and intentional listening.

As an educator, it is crucial to plan and consider the specific classroom environment and the composition of the students when assigning group work to achieve desired outcomes [4]. It is essential to recognize that in a formal educational setting, the concept of learner autonomy can only be implemented with careful guidance and support from the teacher [2]. Thereby, the teacher, as peer mediation coordinator, recruits and trains student mediators, maintains a list of mediators, oversees their progress, and conducts debriefs after each mediation session [7].

Among possible peer mediation activities, the following stages of the mediation process, proposed by Maureen F. Block and Barbara Blazej (2005), that
can be role-played within the groups: introduction, sharing perspectives, getting more information, defining the problem, brainstorming solutions, choosing solutions, closing [7]. To begin, mediators introduce themselves and ensure confidentiality. Next, each disputant shares their story and interpretation of what happened, including how the conflict made them feel, while the mediators clarify and verify the information. They then paraphrase and restate each disputant's account to help define the problem. Together, they brainstorm solutions and discuss how each option will affect their relationship. Finally, the mediators thank the disputants for participating and offer future mediation if needed.

When it comes to grouping by three, the teacher cannot simply assign students to act as mediators and disputants, but must also provide the context of the dispute. To find helpful mediator questions for role-playing the mediation process, please consult "Resolving Conflict with a Peer Mediation Program" by Maureen F. Block and Barbara Blazej (2005) [7]. This manual also includes a reproducible handout for training seven essential skills and practices that students must learn in order to become effective mediators. As part of their training, mediators participate in various exercises to enhance their skills. These practices include feelings charades, listening and paraphrasing, the beginning says it all, the tip of the iceberg, asking the right questions, getting your buttons pushed, and perspective [7]. In feelings charades, mediators practice identifying emotions expressed through body language and verbal cues during mediation. They also practice active listening and paraphrasing, reflecting back on what they have heard. Mediators also learn to set the tone at the beginning of the mediation process, which is crucial. In addition, they practice identifying underlying issues and needs that drive conflicts, asking open-ended questions to gather information, dealing with their own emotions during mediation, and recognizing multiple perspectives.

Conclusions. The learner-centered classes, if properly arranged, contribute to learner autonomy in gaining new knowledge. In heterogeneous classes, comprising students of different language proficiency levels, learners can assist the teacher in facilitating fruitful interaction of students, resulting in high learning outcomes. The main condition of effective cooperation in heterogeneous groups is that all the members feel valued and comfortable expressing their viewpoints. For reaching this very purpose, applying a peer mediator role in group work was suggested. Active listening, underlying peer mediation activities, is a key component in improving understanding and establishing a strong foundation for students' cooperation. It also encourages them to respect and value diverse perspectives and consider alternative viewpoints and interpretations.

References: