

PEERS' ROLES IN THE EFL TERTIARY CLASSROOM: STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS AND EXPECTATIONS

Le Ha To Quyen^{*1}, Bui Thi Thuc Quyen², and Dang Tan Tin³

¹*Graduate School, Ho Chi Minh City Open University, Ho Chi Minh City*

²*Faculty of Foreign Languages, Ho Chi Minh City Open University, Ho Chi Minh City*

³*Faculty of Foreign Languages, Ho Chi Minh City University of Technology and Education, Ho Chi Minh City*

Abstract. While teacher-student relationships tend to fade out, students spend more time working with their peers when learning at the tertiary level. In the classroom, peers have different roles, which can be assigned officially by the teacher or emerge when students start working together. Despite the tremendous benefits that peers can bring to learning results, research about peer learning comparatively scatters in the Vietnamese context. The current research combined quantitative and qualitative data to understand EFL students' perceptions and expectations of peers' roles in the language classroom to contribute to the knowledge of peer learning in a language classroom. 709 answers from a questionnaire revealed the model of peers' roles in the classroom. From those findings, semi-structured in-depth group interviews were conducted with 35 students to understand their expectations for their peers in the classroom. Results show that peers play the role of a co-learner, an encourager, an explorer, and an assessor in the classroom, in which the role of a co-learner is the most prominent, stressing the recognition of peer contribution and peer sharing on learning resources and strategies. They expect their peers to bring positive emotions when working together, as well as trigger the interdependence and responsibilities that they have with each other. They are also concerned with keeping face value for their friends so that they could not lose their motivation to learn.

Keywords: peers' roles, language classroom, tertiary education.

1. Introduction

As teaching and learning move towards learner-centeredness, the whole process focuses on helping learners improve. Therefore, much time in class is spent on opportunities for students to practice. However, teachers can only work with each student sometimes, so students usually work with their peers. Peers can take different actions to support their friends, such as raising each other's learning awareness [1], helping each other maintain an appropriate working pace, and effectively implementing and evaluating learning outcomes [2]. Peers' explanations may often be easier to understand than those of teachers, supporting each other to gain better grades and tackle public examinations, increasing their instrumental motivation. Through the discussion with friends, students can negotiate present and future self-identity to obtain peer recognition and group memberships [3]. However, to support each other effectively, peers must know how to work together to guarantee positive interdependence, individual accountability, and social skills [4]. In the Vietnamese context, peer interaction was reported to assist the enhancement of learners'

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Contact Le Ha To Quyen, e-mail address: quyenlht.18at@ou.edu.vn

use of language and co-construction of knowledge, as well as the practice of such skills as communication, collaboration, and negotiation [5]. [6] detailed how EFL Vietnamese learners engaged cognitively, socially, and effectively with the English language during oral classroom peer interaction. Vietnamese students were also reported to have highly positive perceptions of using written peer feedback in the classroom because it allowed them to learn from each other and improve their writing outcomes [7]. These studies have explored the potential of peers working together for a specific task in the classroom, but the daily routines of peers in the classroom have not been described. The current research looks at how students perceive peers' roles in the classroom and their expectations of them so that these roles can be fully exploited.

2. Content

2.1. Overview of Peers' roles in the language classroom

[8] described students' roles in the classroom to achieve the class dynamic. The roles of peers can be divided into task roles and group maintenance roles. Task roles include the roles of an initiator/contributor, an information seeker/provider, an opinion seeker/giver, an elaborator/clarifier, a coordinator, an evaluator/critic, an energizer, and a secretary/recorder. Group maintenance roles consist of an encourager/supporter, a harmonizer, a compromiser, a feeling expresser, and an equalizer. When they are not assigned group tasks, they also study together and play the roles of a facilitator, an encourager, a harmonizer, a checker, and a resource person. [9] also listed peers' roles in the classroom: a helper, a facilitator, an advisor, an instructor, an aider, an assistant, and a leader. In the research about students' perception of peer tutor roles in small group discussions, peers can be facilitators and assessors [10].

In the current research, students' perception of peers' roles in the classroom is defined as how they understand or interpret different patterns of their peers' behaviors. Also, in the students' perception, peers are argued to have the roles of a co-learner, a supporter, an encourager, and an assessor. The details of each role are discussed in detail below.

2.1.1. A co-learner

Peers are usually the same age and have similar training backgrounds, so it is easy for them to work together. They are better positioned to identify and understand the other student's situation [11], so learners feel more comfortable asking simple questions when learning together. Working with peers provides more learning choices, offers better opportunities for negotiation, and increases the use of metalanguage, which triggers more reflections on learning [1]. They can share ideas, collaborate, interact in the target language [12], and improve their language competence. The learning results can be better when they can learn comfortably and share ideas to complete the tasks. In this research, the role of a co-learner is described as a peer who works with the learner to do class assignments in a comfortable learning atmosphere. Working together, a co-learner shares his/ her ideas for the task and raises new ideas to explore. A co-learner also needs to finish his/her part well because it motivates the other friends to try harder and fulfill the task as them. When learning together, peers ask each other for help when needed. This interaction can make students more engaged in the learning process. Not only support each other as a co-learner who spends time working together comfortably, but peers can also provide proper support for each other.

2.1.2. A supporter

Peers can be supportive of each other. They share the in-class materials and other sources of materials [8]. They are also reported to improve students' learning strategy use [13], develop students' critical thinking, and increase students' use of learning resources [14]. These factors lead to achieving higher self-efficacy. When teachers use technology in class, students can support each other's digital literacy skills and increase interaction in online settings [15]. The current research defines a supporter as a friend who can instantly support their friends, especially by

sharing learning resources and skills. As a supporter, peers give help when their friends are in need, and the assistance is more instant than when they may need to wait for their teachers, who must deal with many students. Peers share their materials; it can be from the sources that teachers have given to the class or their resources to solve the tasks that teachers have given. Not only the learning resources but peers can also show or recommend the learning strategies that they find adequate for their learning during the process of working together. Students can look at their peers' learning behaviors and suggest they try the ones they think might work for them. Besides support, peers also give the courage to motivate their friends to learn.

2.1.3. An encourager

Peers offer praise and agreement and support the ideas of shy class members. Acting as an encourager, peers can encourage each other to talk about their problems and never allow giving up. From that, they can solicit contributions from other members. In this way, peers are reported to boost learning motivation [16], the most critical factor in sustaining learning. Peers' hard work also can boost students' eagerness to learn because they do not want to be behind their friends. Through working together, peers can show each other the learning ways that work out for them, encouraging them to try new ways of learning. In this research, an encourager is a friend who gives spiritual encouragement while they study together in the classroom. The actions of an encourager can be summarized as peers encouraging learners to keep trying and not allow 'put-downs', soothing out the problems the learners are facing, soliciting their contributions, and encouraging them to try new ways of doing the task to see if they can get better results. Peers' hard work also inspires other learners to study harder. During the process of learning, peers also can provide feedback. Even though peers' comments cannot be compared to those of teachers, the role of an assessor should not be overlooked.

2.1.4. An assessor

Peer assessment can help students recognize their weaknesses through peer checks and peer feedback [12]. Many people may criticize that peer assessment or feedback is not valuable because students need more experience and knowledge about the subject than teachers. However, peers can appraise a friend's contributions, point out the problem his/her friend is facing, and give valuable comments based on their understanding and experience. Peers have undergone a similar learning process, so they can clearly understand their friends' problems and how to deal with them most effectively. However, it can be challenging for peers to give comments beneficially and constructively. As an assessor, peers first acknowledge their friends' efforts and then give feedback about their work. They then point out if there are any problems and give suggestions. Peers also listen to the learners' feedback with respect. Giving and receiving feedback is a two-way process which can benefit all learners.

To conclude, peers can play different roles in the classroom. In the current research, the roles of peers that students have perceived can be: (1) a co-learner who learns comfortably and shares ideas to complete the tasks; (2) a supporter who provides instant assistance and shares effective learning ways and resources; (3) an encourager who encourages their friends to keep trying, never allows put-downs and soothes out the problems their friends are facing; and (4) an assessor who appraises the suggestions their friend has given, points out the problem that they might have, and gives valuable comments.

2.2. Research methodology

2.2.1. Research Questions

The research aims to describe the roles that peers have in the language classroom and the students' expectations of them. There are two research questions:

- (a) What are the students' perceptions of peers' roles in the language classroom?

(b) What are their expectations about peers' roles in the language classroom?

2.2.2. Participants

In the pilot phases of the research, 50 students of a class answered the questionnaire and noted all the problems they had doing it. This class was selected randomly and was excluded from the primary data collection. 743 English majors in different school years of three universities in Ho Chi Minh City participated in the quantitative phase. 709 answers were valid after data screening, and 35 students from this group volunteered to participate in the qualitative phase of the research.

2.2.3. Instruments

(a). *Questionnaire*

The questionnaire includes three parts: (1) demographic information, (2) peers' roles scale (PRS), and (3) participation in the qualitative phase. Part 1 includes four items to ask about the participants' gender, school year, institutions, and study results. Part 2 has 24 items describing four roles of peers in the classroom: a co-learner, a supporter, an encourager, and an assessor, from which 17 items were adapted from [8]'s detailed descriptions of peers' roles in the classroom and seven self-developed ones. All items are on a Likert scale from 1 – strongly disagree to 5 – strongly agree. Part 3 is an open-ended question to ask for their voluntary participation in the group interview by giving their consent and email address.

(b). *In-depth semi-structured group interview questions*

Based on the results of the quantitative phase, four questions were asked to understand the students' expectations of their peers' roles as a co-learner, a supporter, an encourager, and an assessor.

2.2.4. Data collection

Quantitative data was collected first. The scales were reviewed before being translated into Vietnamese. Two language teachers with more than ten years of teaching experience and two students with high study results were invited to comment on the items and the questions for the interview. At the discussion, they were asked to categorize 24 items of the scale into four roles. They did it on their own first, and once finished, the group discussed until each item was allocated in only one role, ensuring no overlapping among items. The wording of some items was also clarified so that the readers could easily understand and evaluate them. For the pilot phase, the first researcher distributed the scale to a randomly chosen class of hers. The quantitative data was then entered into SPSS 26.0 and analyzed to test its internal consistency. Cronbach's α coefficient values were all greater than 0.70, the acceptable values for social science [17]. The students also had no difficulties understanding and doing the survey on Google Forms, so the scales were suitable for the study. The researchers collected data in August 2022. The researchers randomly chose three institutions in the city with English training programs to send the invitation for participation to collect around 250 samples from each institution. To make sure students spent time answering the questionnaire carefully, the first researcher directly went to the institutions to collect data. The purpose of the study was first explained to the participants to ensure that their participation was entirely voluntary, and that the data would be used for research purposes only. The researchers gave the participants a collection of e-books as a gift. 743 answers were collected, of which 709 were suitable for data analysis. The data was entered into the software packages of SPSS 26 for further analysis.

Once having finished analyzing the quantitative data, the first researcher started collecting qualitative data. Thirty-six students were randomly selected from 320 participants who volunteered to participate in the second phase, forming six groups of six participants, two from one institution. On the interview day, one student could not come because of a family issue, so the final number of students who participated in the qualitative phase was thirty-five. The first

researcher conducted in-depth semi-structured group interviews in Vietnamese in the coffee shops near the participants' institutions. All interviews were recorded, and each lasted for about thirty minutes. The recordings were transcribed right after the interview and translated into English. Saturation was reached after the sixth interview, ending the qualitative data collection. Both deductive and inductive thematic analysis approaches were adopted to analyze the data.

2.2.5. Results

2.2.5.1. Quantitative results

(a). Exploratory Factor Analysis of Peers' roles scale

Exploratory factor analysis was conducted with the data collected from 24 questionnaire items to extract possible clusters of peers' actions in the classroom, from which roles would be named. The strong partial correlations (Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin=.975) and statistically significant correlations (Bartlett's Test $p=.000 < 0.1$) among the 24 items suggested the possibility that the data could be factored [18]. A scree plot test with Eigenvalues is more significant than one used to estimate the sample's number of factors. According to [19], the number of factors to be selected depends upon the number of eigenvalues (EV) on the curve to the left of the scree plot, which could either include or exclude the breakpoint. Thus, the data suggested the possibility of four factors for the data sample, explaining 76.744% of the variance of the items.

In this initial EFA, item 13 - "*My friend listens to my feedback*" and item 18 - "*My friend explains the matters for me when I ask*," were cross-loaded on both co-learner and supporter roles, so the researcher decided to remove them. EFA was repeated with 22 items. The results of this new analysis confirmed a four-dimensional structure as theoretically defined in the literature. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy (MSA) was .974. The four factors explained 76.936 % of the variance among the items in the study. Bartlett's sphericity test proved significant, and all commonalities exceeded the required value of 0.500. Factor 1 includes six items referring to the role of a co-learner. Factor 2 gathers six items, which represent the role of an encourager. Factor 3 includes five items, which represent the role of an assessor. Factor 4 consists of five items, referring to the supporter role of peers.

The Cronbach Alpha coefficient was computed with four constructs to check how well the items on the scale measure the same construct. Ranging from .926 to .972, the values of the Cronbach Alpha coefficient for the constructs were good. Each item was then examined using the if item deleted method, indicating that these scales produced the highest possible alphas for their respective factors. The results are shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Cronbach's Alpha values of Peers' roles scales

Factors	Number of indicators	Cronbach Alpha
Co-learner	6	.927
Encourager	6	.935
Assessor	5	.972
Supporter	5	.926

(b.) Descriptive statistics of Peers' roles

The descriptive statistic of each role is described briefly one by one below. The following interpretation of means was used to guide the analysis: 1.00 – 1.50 = Very low; 1.51 – 2.50 = Low; 2.51 – 3.50 = Moderate; 3.51 – 4.50 = High; and 4.51 – 5.00 = Very high) [20].

As a co-learner, the actions that got the most agreement reported were that peers raised ideas to explore together and shared ideas to do the task ($M=4.13$ and 4.10). They agreed that the help would be mutual, and peers also asked for help when working together ($M=4.09$). Finishing one's part well was agreed as the motivation for their friends to study ($M=4.05$). Peers were also

expected to study comfortably and work together to do class assignments also agreed highly ($M=3.95$ and 4.01). The deviations were from $.819$ to $.898$.

As an encourager, the hard work of their peers was considered an inspiration for them to study harder ($M=4.0$). Peers encouraged each other to keep trying, attempting new ways of learning, and not allowing 'put-downs' ($M=3.96$, 3.91 , and 3.71). Peers also smoothed out the problem one was facing and solicited their friends' contributions ($M=3.93$ and 3.88). The deviations were higher, from $.921$ to 1.028 .

For the assessor role, the most agreed action was peers appraising their friends' various suggestions ($M=4.13$). Peers gave comments straightforwardly and pointed out their friends' problems ($M=4.02$ and 4.00). The actions of giving them the solutions for solving the problem and stating the achievement of their friends got slightly less agreement, even though they were still at a high level ($M=3.95$ and 3.98). The deviations were from $.799$ to $.909$.

The essential characteristic of a supporter was sharing the in-class materials ($M=4.14$). Students also expected their peers to share how they could find suitable materials and the learning ways that they found effective ($M=4.04$ and 4.03). The supporter was also expected to share the outside resources that they had and be able to provide instant assistance ($M=3.94$ and 3.90). The deviations were from $.826$ to $.931$.

2.2.5.2. Qualitative results

The four themes that emerged from the data about the participants' expectations of four peers' roles in the classroom were positive emotions, interdependence, responsibilities, and face value.

(a). Positive emotions

The participants reported that they expected positive emotions when learning with their friends, such as comfort, relaxation, energy, and caring. For example, S7, S9, S11, S18 and S29 said that:

I hope my friends listen to me and understand my emotions. I want to be able to share my concerns with them. Even if we have not had enough time to find the solutions, I feel relieved and have more energy to keep trying. (S7)

I want to feel relaxed when learning with friends. I am not afraid of saying nonsense to them. They do not judge me. (S9)

My friends' hard work inspired me to learn. She gave me the positive energy to be more confident and to keep trying. (S11)

They keep encouraging me to try new ways of learning. I feel more confident, and I try. (S18)

I appreciate the care my friends have for me. It could be something as simple as tapping my shoulder when they see me fall asleep in class. If I have a bigger problem, they could listen to me and discuss it together to find the best solution. (S29)

(b). Interdependence

When working with friends, along with receiving help and support from their friends, they also need to give back their contributions, forming interdependence among class members. Once the students have felt the interdependence among them, they know that they are working together towards the final purpose, being the condition for learning to happen. The interdependence motivates them to learn, which can be seen from the sharing of S1, S14, S19, S20, S32, and S35:

I cannot understand some parts of the lesson well, but my friends do. Other parts I could understand more clearly. So, we explain them to each other. (S1)

I try to help my friends as soon as possible, and my friends do the same for me. We give each other instant help to solve our problems, which we could not expect from teachers because they are overloaded. (S14)

My friends know what I am strong at and what I am weak at. I also understand theirs. We tell each other immediately when we see something that could work well for us. (S19)

Everyone is responsible for finishing the task well. I explore a lot to do my part well. When my friends ask me, I also read more to support them. Then the whole group can get a high score. (S20)

When I study alone, I can be easily distracted by my devices. When working with my friends, I must focus more so that friends do not feel annoyed. I want to use our time effectively. (S32)

Peers can share the results they have found and discuss if there were any different ideas. Everyone can benefit from that. (S35)

(c). Responsibilities

The participants reported that they wanted to have a division of responsibilities they have to fulfill. Their purpose of learning is to complete their responsibilities. Many students are familiar with the dictation of the teachers, so they expect to have clear directions from teachers. For example, S4, S8, S16, and S20 said that:

I want us to have a clear responsibility to fulfill. For example, if I am the group leader, I will be motivated to guide the group. Any responsibilities are OK, but we need to set them up or have the teachers assign them for us. If not, we just wait for one another. (S4)

We are usually in charge of different parts, depending on our strengths. We get our parts, and I try to fulfill my part as required as much as I can. I want to keep the group up. (S8)

I am busy at my part-time job, so I only do as I am required, but I also try so my friends do not complain about my contributions. (S16)

Friends should meet, forming a group with clear requirements of responsibilities to exchange ideas about learning. (S20)

(d). Face value

Face relates to social expectations and how one is viewed in the eyes of others. Vietnam has been labeled a "face culture" where the face and the fear of losing face are important cultural features [21]. Students are reluctant to interact because they are afraid of making mistakes. They do not want their friends to think that they are less competent and look down on them; therefore, their effort must be considered first. The participants reported they tried harder when their friends appreciate their contributions. The extractions below can illustrate this point:

I want to have a voice when working with my friends, so I try to learn hard and read more materials. After exploring things, I have more to share with my friends, and my position in the group has improved a lot. (S3)

First, I only listened and received support from my friends. Then I want to be like them, to have my ideas and give support to my friends about the aspects I know. Thus, I want my group to respect the contributions of everyone and encourage everyone to do that. (S5)

Working with a friend who studies very well will form pressure and competition to try harder to stay caught up with my friends. It would help me to improve myself. However, that friend should avoid dominating the whole group. (S34)

2.2.6. Discussion

In the language classroom, peers hold four roles: a co-learner, a supporter, an assessor, and an encourager.

As a co-learner, it is promising because what students appreciated the most was exploring things together. They could learn more doing that compared to sharing the solutions with each other. The descriptions of the role of co-learner align with previous research, describing the actions of working together to consolidate some knowledge they already developed, practice the

target language they learn from their partners, experiment with current linguistic knowledge, and co-constructing new knowledge [5].

As an encourager, the participants expected the most that their friends would encourage them to keep trying and be able to smooth out the problems they were facing. Because of class size, teachers may need more energy to care for the problems or praise the efforts of each learner regularly. Therefore, the companionship of friends would be the source of motivation for learners to keep going on their learning journey. The role of an encourager in the current research focuses on the affective factors; in comparison, previous research focused more on encouraging output, reflection on the language, and noticing gaps [22].

As an assessor, peers most appraised the various suggestions the participants had given and listened to their feedback with respect. Even though peers do not have expert knowledge and pedagogical ways to give feedback, friends still expect to receive constructive comments from their friends on their performance, stressing the respect they should have for each other. [23] stated that when teachers require students to assess their peers' assignments, they start taking more charge of their learning. The descriptions of an assessor did not focus on correcting and suggesting the proper use of the target language, which aligns with previous research because the ability to correct language required more significant support from the teacher [24]. Students need to be trained to do the role of an assessor well. For example, they can learn to provide helpful feedback in the form of questions that help to improve communication, such as clarification requests ("Can you say that again?") and confirmation checks ("Do you mean...?"). These may benefit both the providers of feedback and those who observe it, as much as the receiver, leading learners to focus on form and meaning as they notice problematic utterances [25].

In the last role of peers in the classroom - a supporter, the participants expected the most support from their peers. The guidance from teachers could be delayed, so students tend to expect it from their peers to overcome the difficulties they are facing. The assistance was mainly with the learning resources: sharing their outside resources and finding suitable materials. Previous research also depicts the focus on increasing students' use of learning resources [14], but also on students' learning strategy use and critical thinking [13].

These peers' actions in the classroom expressed students' expectations to have a companion who can study comfortably together, explore new ideas, give constructive comments, and respect each other's contributions. Learning with peers would help students improve their results and the ability to regulate their learning.

Furthermore, students appreciated the positive emotions they got from their friends in the learning process. It aligns with previous research stating that quality tutor-student and student-student communications lead students to experience positive emotions such as excitement, satisfaction, and relief, which can help them insist on learning to achieve their learning goals [26]. Learning with peers can reduce anxiety, assistance, and the development of a non-judgmental attitude to mistakes [27]. They also expected peers to have interdependence and fulfill their responsibilities to help everyone improve. There is a range of ways in which this can be set up, including goal interdependence (learners share a common goal for the activity); resource interdependence (learners have partial resources such that they cannot complete the activity without combining resources); identity interdependence (learners collectively choose a team name or slogan for their group); and even outside enemy interdependence, whereby the teacher sets up competition ('negative interdependence') between groups. It is essential for the approach's success that the learners in a group are aware of and embrace these conditions. A culture of 'promotive interaction' (mutual help and support) should be fostered when the students are working together [28]. Finally, it is emphasized that friends should have respect for each other to keep their face value when studying together. Face value is considered a key barrier in education for Confucian heritage culture students, challenging the introduction of interactive learning

among Vietnamese students and contributing to students' unwillingness to participate in university classroom activities [21]. Face strategies can be introduced for students, so they acknowledge the importance of keeping face for their friends in peer learning.

3. Conclusion

This research contributes to the knowledge of peers' roles in tertiary language classrooms and provides empirical data on this research matter in the Vietnamese context. Combining the quantitative method (a survey with a large number of participants) and the qualitative method (in-depth semi-structured group interviews) helped to collect richer data for the study. Besides validating a scale to quantitatively measure the roles of peers in the classroom, the findings described in detail the four roles that peers play: a co-learner, an encourager, an assessor, and a supporter, and the students' expectations for each role. From these results, pedagogical implications should be considered to help students form positive emotions and interdependence with their peers in the classroom. Students must also understand that they must fulfill their responsibilities and keep face value for each other when working together. Finally, peers are believed to affect students' learning tremendously; however, they must go through specific training activities to take the utmost advantage. Future research might investigate these peer training activities in the language classroom or focus on peer interaction, peer feedback, and peer assessment in each skill training to maximize the benefits that peers can bring to each other.

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