Collaborative Learning in TEFL: A Social Constructivist Approach through the Lens of the ZPD

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Abstrak: Penelitian ini menyoroti peran pembelajaran kolaboratif dalam kerangka Pengajaran Bahasa Inggris sebagai Bahasa Asing (TEFL) dalam sudut pandang teori pembelajaran konstruktivis sosial, dengan sorotan khusus pada *Zone of Proximal Development* (ZPD) yang diciptakan oleh Vygotsky. Penelitian ini menerapkan metode kualitatif, mengumpulkan data dari jurnal reflektif dan wawancara lanjutan dengan empat peserta yang terlibat dalam aktivitas berbasis TEFL kolaboratif menulis artikel untuk mengumpulkan wawasan dan pengalaman mereka saat melakukannya. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bagaimana keterlibatan dalam pemikiran kritis, dukungan teman sebaya, dan partisipasi aktif dalam rangkaian kolaboratif, memengaruhi keterampilan bahasa Inggris dan perkembangan akademis peserta dalam konteks TEFL. Penelitian ini berkontribusi pada literatur dengan mengilustrasikan efektivitas penggabungan ZPD dan prinsip-prinsip konstruktivis sosial dalam TEFL, memberikan pengetahuan yang dapat digunakan bagi para pendidik dan pembuat kebijakan untuk menerapkan teknik-teknik kolaboratif ini yang memberikan pemahaman linguistik yang mendalam dan lingkungan belajar yang lebih positif.

Kata kunci: Pembelajaran Kolaboratif, Konstruktivisme Sosial, ZPD, TEFL

Abstract: This research highlighted the role of collaborative learning in the frame of Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) within the lens of a social constructivist learning theory, with a specific highlight on the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) created by Vygotsky. This study applied a qualitative method, collecting data from a reflective journal and follow-up interviews with four participants involved in a collaborative TEFL-based activity writing an article to gather their insights and experiences while doing so. The results indicated how involvement in critical thinking, peer support, and active participation within a collaborative set, influenced the participants' English language skills and academic development within the TEFL context. The research contributes to the literature by illustrating the effectiveness of combining ZPD and social constructivist principles in TEFL, providing usable knowledge for educators and policymakers to implement these collaborative techniques that provide in-depth linguistic understanding and more positive learning environment.

Keywords: Collaborative Learning, Social Constructivism, ZPD, TEFL

INTRODUCTION

In the framework of Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL), collaborative learning has emerged as a crucial teaching approach that fosters active involvement and participation among learners (Rai, 2024). This method allows students to collaborate, share ideas, and encourage each other during their language learning journey, thus improving their overall educational experience (Zhang, 2023). Collaborative learning not just enhances the acquisition of languages but also develops essential social abilities, including communication, teamwork, and problem-solving; each of them are crucial in the current interdependent world (Pujiati, 2023).

This instructional approach is based on social constructivism theory, that holds that knowledge develops during social interaction and collaborative engagement (Amna Saleem, Huma Kausar, & Farah Deeba, 2021; Eslami, Saeidi, & Ahour, 2024). This theory is central to Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which determines the type of the work that students may do with guidance instead of doing it individually. The ZPD highlights the significance of scaffolding—temporary, As learners get their confidence and competence, tailored assistance is gradually phased out. Collaborative educational settings take ZPD concepts into practice through fostering peer support and co-construction of knowledge, encouraging students to build on the strengths of one another to improve their comprehension and retention of language matters (Ahmadian, Amerian, & Tajabadi, 2014).

The significance of this research lies in its potential to address the gaps in understanding how collaborative learning specifically supported by ZPD principles operates within TEFL contexts. English language proficiency is not only an academic skill but also a vital tool for global communication and professional opportunities (Sri Andayani, 2022). By focusing on the interplay between peer collaboration and guided learning, this research offers valuable insights into creating more effective, engaging, and inclusive teaching practices (Alzubi et al., 2024) Additionally, it emphasizes the need to explore innovative pedagogical methods that foster deeper linguistic understanding, enhance student autonomy, and prepare learners for the demands of a rapidly globalizing world (Chowdhury, 2021).

Collaborative learning in TEFL classrooms has been proved to be successful through research. Zhang (2023) discovered that it fosters motivation and critical thinking through promoting group-based activities in which students share thoughts and help one another. Rodphotong (2018) emphasized its usefulness in enhancing English communication abilities, especially with dynamic group assignments that develop confidence and language fluency. Further research conducted by Alghamdi (2021) and Shabani, Khatib, and Ebadi (2010) highlight the significance of social constructivism and ZPD in developing interactive learning settings that encourage guided learning, peer support, and individual development of abilities.

Despite all these findings, few studies explain how ZPD principles exactly occur within collaborative learning in TEFL contexts and the results on language development. Therefore, this study aims to investigate collaborative learning in the field of Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) within the lens of a social constructivist learning perspective, with a particular focus on the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) theory. To highlight how these principles appear in collaborative activities and their influence on language acquisition.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative method, which is concerned with feelings, ideas, or experiences. Finding insights that can result in testable hypotheses is the main goal of the data collection (Ugwu & Eze, 2023). As it investigated four postgraduate students' experiences in collaborative learning in a TEFL context. The Master of English Education program participants from University of Muhammadiyah Surakarta (UMS), where sample

under are purposive selection for their mutual educational experiences, knowledgeable with collaborative learning, and desired with improving their English academic writing skill.

The Data collected was gathered in a 10 days' time frame using reflective journals and follow-up interviews. Where the reflective journal is carried out not solely to revisit the past, but to guide future actions. Practice refers to a person's repertoire of knowledge, attitudes, behaviors, and skills in a particular area of performance (Wicaksono et al., 2020). On the other hand, follow-up interviews are the effective interviews that typically balance main questions with probes and enabling a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). As the participants involved for four hours daily in many collaborative activities such as, group discussions, writing tasks, and feedback sessions, all documented in reflective journals. Where a midpoint review was conducted on day 5, the final review was on the last day summarizing all their experiences. Moreover, follow-up interviews were conducted after to clarify journal entries and provide deeper insights, these interviews lasted 30-40 minutes, in the form of Semi-structured questions, as it ensured consistency while providing participants the opportunity to explain freely (Ruslin et al., 2022). Interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed for analysis and active involvement highlighted their role in discussions, problem-solving, and feedback.

Thematic analysis is a research method used to identify and interpret patterns or themes in a data set; it often leads to new insights and understanding (Naeem, Ozuem, Howell, & Ranfagni, 2023): scaffolding, social interaction, co-construction of knowledge, mutual support, and active engagement. Journals reflected initial perspectives. However, the interviews confirmed and deepened these insights. For example, scaffolding illustrated participants' turning from relying on peer support toward independence.

The validity and reliability were guaranteed by adhering to standardized interview protocols and member checking, where participants reviewed and confirmed their responses and analyzed themes. An interview protocol is a defined set of directions laying out the inquiries and processes used to conduct interviews with the aim to maintain consistency and highlight study goals (Jacob and Furgerson, 2012). Birt, Scott, Cavers, Campbell, and Walter (2016) defined member checking as the practice of providing results from research to participants for validation, thereby improving credibility and trustworthiness. Ethical guidelines were strictly followed: informed consent was obtained, confidentiality was maintained with pseudonyms, and participants could withdraw at any time. These measures ensured participant well-being and the integrity of the research (Guy-Evans, 2024).

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

In this section, the data collected from the participants that were documented in their reflective journals will be presented and analyzed, as those findings will reveal how the key aspects of collaborative learning within ZPD scaffolding, social interaction, co-construction of knowledge, mutual support, and active engagement— embodied throughout the process. Each subsection explains these findings and discusses how they

enhance English language skills and academic improvement among the participants, consistent with the theoretical framework of Vygotsky's social constructivism and the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD).

Scaffolding

From participant's 1 journal: He described how. They started to make a plan for the article by framing the article's framework and offering critical questions about core ideas and the article's purposes. In the interview, *Participant 1 further explained by saying*, *"I am explaining to my friends about what we have to write in our article one by one like the first section is writing an abstract, introduction, theoretical framework, literature review, methodology, finding, discussion, and conclusion respectively." He also said: "when I see my friends start to understand what to do, I slowly decreased my guidance to make them rely on themselves"* This guidance assisted the participants in the group through collaborative learning to enhance the coherent structure of the article. When the participants started to get familiar with the article structure, Participant 1 started to decrease his guidance to allow the other participants to start depending on themselves.

Both Participants 3 and 4 wrote in their journals that they encountered challenges when writing in an academic form. The data from Participant 2 indicated that he simplified how to build research questions and paraphrase sources. Participant 2 said in the interview, *"I saw my friends struggling in terms of academic writing skills, so I started to show them articles then break down those articles into smaller and understandable parts to make it easier for them to understand. Moreover, I guide them to write well-structured and specific research questions, so that they will know how to write accurately. From this step by step, they started writing significant sections by themselves while I reduced my guidance accordingly, showing better proficiency"*.

These findings reveal how scaffolding, in the context of Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development, promotes academic writing development in EFL contexts. Participant 1 provided structured guidance, gradually releasing support, while Participant 2 simplified complex tasks to help peers build proficiency and confidence. That would mean it corresponds with the finding from Chairinkam and Yawiloeng (2024) referring to scaffolding strategies enhancing the students' EFL writing skills, by offering structured support to transfer the learners into independent performers. These instances highlight the need for personalized coaching and collaborative efforts to promote academic achievement and adhere to social constructivist aspects.

Social Interaction

All the participants wrote in their journals that they were actively involved in discussions to choose the article's topic, share thoughts, and align them with the research questions. They negotiated different opinions and thoughts to get to an agreement, making sure that the whole team was invested in the selected purpose. In the interviews all of them confirmed this, they exchanged their ideas together by starting from the topic until the end of what they wrote in their article. For example, one participant suggested an idea for a title, and they were arguing about the correct words to put in the title and they were also brainstorming to choose the subsections of each topic"

The journal's entities showed that the participants shared drafts and gave feedback on each other's contributions. For example, in the interviews, participant 2 said, *"I asked for my friend's (participant 3) guidance about my writing part, and they advised me to provide examples to empower the claim. This helped me to understand how to make my discussion strong and clear.*

Both Participant 1 and Participant 4 mentioned in their journals that they analyzed one of the findings differently. However, they had a fruitful discussion by providing evidence and insights to achieve a joint understanding, providing the article with insightful analysis.

The research demonstrates the significance of social interaction in collaborative learning, as learners participated in discussions to build research topics, exchange feedback on progress, and debate on resolving analytical differences. These interactions mirror Vygotstsky's idea that learning is a socially mediated approach, where group work boosts deeper understanding and generates new ideas. Participants' thoughtful negotiation of topics, like brainstorming titles and subsections, and giving meaningful feedback on each other's work, reflect how collaborative discussions benefit learners and enhance academic outcomes. Moreover, addressing analysis differences using logical evidence approves the co-construction of knowledge, where shared deliberation results in deeper understanding. This aligns with Ghavifer's (2020) findings, stating that collaborative learning promotes learners' group working skills, leading to better team participation and communication in learning environments.

Co-construction of Knowledge

The entries from the journals of Participants 2 and 1 indicated that they provided a thematic organization for the data analysis, while Participant 3 suggested critical analysis rather than a summary. Their integrated work brought a comprehensive literature review giving full understanding.

Participant 1 wrote in their journal "I shared my findings in the article, and I alerted my friends to take a look at patterns and themes that we possibly didn't pay attention to. Participant 2 noted, " I started to identify themes based on our initial analysis and shared them with the team to assure alignment. Participant 3 journal's entry showed that he suggested that all the participants make their own thematic analysis and then combine them to uncover those themes. Same as Participant 4 who suggested summarizing their work to get a full comprehension one.

The integration of data from both journals and the interviews it appeared that the group discussed the use of each methodology type. With collaborative decision-making, they decided to use the qualitative methodology that corresponded with their goals and allowed for an in-depth and detailed exploration of the participants' experiences.

The results indicate the process of co-construction of knowledge, where participants worked together to generate a full understanding through thematic organization, critical analysis, and shared in-depth information. For instance, Participants 1 and 2 worked together to categorize the data thematically, while Participant 3 suggested a more critical method, leading to a strong literature review. Similarly, the participants' collaboration to identify common patterns and themes facilitated coherence and a further

understanding of the work. The group's decision to use a qualitative approach further demonstrates their critical thinking, as their methodologies were in line with the objectives of their study. These findings harmonize with Vogel et al. (2023) findings, which underscored the transitivity in collaborative problem-solving when participants critically interact with and build upon each other's contributions. These activities highlight the importance of group problem-solving and shared experiences in creating meaningful learning outcomes.

Mutual Support

Participant 4 wrote in his reflective journal that he began to feel anxious as the impending deadline of the article. Their peers acknowledged their effort, helped them with some tasks to relieve stress and provided verbal and emotional support. During the interview, participant 4 stated *"My peers kept encouraging me by reminding me of what I had accomplished before, and they helped me to finish the difficult sections of my tasks. I tried to make it happen. This inspiration motivated me to keep on course and it also it made me want to help them back"*

Reflective journal and follow-up interviews have shown that Participant 1 recommended how to organize the references and the citations using reference management software such as "Mendeley". While Participants 2 and 4 suggested the use of AI to find resources in previous studies to help build the literature review section. Moreover, Participant 3 gave access to "Grammarly" to help in writing with correct grammar.

The results showcased the positive role of mutual support between peers in collaborative learning activities. As when participant 4 got emotional support and assistance with tasks, thus reduced his stress and motivated him more thereby building resilience in difficult circumstances. Moreover, the participants' tools and resources exchanging, such as reference management tools, AI for resource gathering, and grammar-checking applications, mirrors a shared participation to enhance efficiency and academic performance. These results harmonize with the findings of Elsayed et al. (2023), which stated that mutual support positively affected academic engagement when collaborating, thus minimizing stress and increasing productivity. Collectively, these examples explain how both emotional and practical mutual support build a shared sense of responsibility and accomplishment in educational environments.

Active Engagement

According to the participants' journal entries they attended all the meetings prepared with their allocated tasks. They actively contributed ideas, asked for clarifications, and suggested ideas. For example, *Participant 1 said in the interview: "I prepared myself by finishing my tasks before the meeting. I came up with ideas and actively shared them, asking questions where I didn't understand something in order to gain improvement in my skills." Similarly, Participant 4 said, "In the meetings, I contributed by suggesting improvements and pointing out problems when necessary.*

The findings illustrate the significance of active engagement in collaborative learning, as participants regularly attended meetings, shared ideas, and sought corrections and opinions on their thoughts. This active engagement not only improved

their understanding but also increased the group's overall progress. For example, participant 1 's organization and urge to ask questions dignify developing a students-oriented approach, while Participant 4's constructive suggestions and problem-solving abilities show active engagement in the learning process. These behaviors are in line with Vega-Abarzua et al (2022) findings, which indicate that collaborative learning promotes classroom engagement to be actively involved in debates and aim toward shared goals. such participation is important in enabling an in-depth understanding and skill development in EFL environments

CONCLUSION

This research illustrates how collaborative learning is anchored with social constructivist principles, particularly Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), to improve English language skills in a TEFL context. By gradually decreasing support for independent learning, participants gained more writing skills and grew their critical thinking through peer feedback, discussion, and shared problem-solving. Consistent interactions and mutual support also allowed for less stress, more motivation, and an extra positive learning atmosphere. Adopting a ZPD-focused, collaborative strategy, not only increases language proficiency but also cultivates teamwork and analytical skills. Further research may investigate how these theories perform in different settings, including the use of technology in maintaining collaborative learning and sustaining student engagement over time.

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