# 'Completing the jigsaw': ESL and EFL undergraduate views on interactive peer-based learning

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*English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students often face incongruence with Western teaching methods and learning expectations. The aim of this paper is to explore the potential for interactive peer-based learning to engage ESL and EFL language learners provide authentic communication experiences and accelerate learning through two case studies in different contexts. A study was undertaken to investigate student 'voice' (Rudduck, 1999, 2005; Rudduck & Flutter, 2004) during an intervention of communicative language teaching using peer-based learning strategies. This article describes unique similarities and subtle differences between ESL and EFL undergraduate learning in two different cultural contexts, using a 'stages of learning matrix' teaching tool to encourage civic skills and self-efficacy. It also suggests ways for teachers to improve on inconsistencies in group-based learning in order to promote more inclusive and congruent learning experiences for English language learners.*

## Introduction

English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students often face incongruence with Western teaching methods and learning expectations. Active participation, teamwork, and collaboration do not readily follow educational traditions steeped in passive learning, power distance relationships (Hofstede, 1980) and de-emphasised individual expression. With university education in English for international students growing at an unparalleled rate, many overseas students are seeking faster learning experiences with authentic communication skills (Lane, 2009). At the same time, recent tertiary educational reviews in Australia question the ability of large lecture theatres to efficiently convey information (McWilliam & Jackson, 2008) and call for more active, hands-on participation and group-based learning (Norton, 2008) with the advent of the "Age of Peer Production" (Moxley, 2008). Educators are challenged to develop integrated pedagogical practices that improve learning, reflective and critical thinking and to provide inclusive education for increasingly diverse learners (Keeffe & Carrington, 2007). Although the differences between ESL and EFL are not frequently noted (Hiep, 2005; Li, 2001), the challenges faced by language learners are not new. The dilemma remains concerning how to best engage English language students, encourage communicative competence (Hymes, 1971, 1972) and provide a more congruent cross-cultural educational experience.

The aim of this paper is to explore the potential for interactive peer-based learning to engage ESL and EFL language learners, provide authentic communication experiences and accelerate learning through two case studies in different contexts. A study was undertaken to investigate student voice (Rudduck, 1999, 2005; Rudduck & Flutter, 2004) from the centre of research during an intervention of communicative language teaching using peer-based learning strategies. Qualitative data was gathered in two language learning contexts from undergraduate reflective logs, focus group discussions and researcher field notes in order to investigate the question: What do students gain through interactive, peer-based learning? After experiencing peer-based learning, some students claimed that disparate aspects of academic English and tertiary education converged, as in 'completing a jigsaw'. Four main themes will be discussed here: learning dispositions; enhanced speaking skills; increased diagnostics; and learning engagement through iterative stages of interactive peer-based learning. Based on findings in the study, a matrix demonstrating iterative stages of the peer learning process may prove useful for educators in similar teaching contexts. This article describes unique similarities and subtle differences between ESL and EFL undergraduate learning in two different cultural contexts, demonstrates a 'stages of learning matrix' teaching tool to encourage civic skills and self-efficacy, and also suggests ways for teachers to improve on inconsistencies in group-based learning in order to promote more inclusive and congruent learning experiences for English language learners.

**Communicative language teaching and peer learning**

The study utilizes a program of interactive peer-to-peer learning which employs the approach of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) (Canale & Swain, 1980; Hymes, 1971, 1972) where interaction between peers and with the teacher is the catalyst to engage and guide student learning. Many definitions of CLT exist; however, Brown (2000, p. 266-267) has summarized the general principles to include: 1) a focus on communicative competence that is not restricted to grammatical or linguistic competence; 2) language learning which aims to engage learners in authentic meaning making rather than organizational language forms; 3) fluency and accuracy as complementary to communicative techniques; and 4) students' ability to use the language productively and receptively in unrehearsed contexts. These characteristics have produced an important change in the way language is taught by focusing on learner-centred instruction rather than

discrete language forms. This interpretive view of education emphasises that learners must reconstruct the skills and knowledge for themselves and cannot simply 'receive' these from external sources (Nunan, 1999).

Based on CLT principles involving social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1962, 1987, 1997), interactive peer-based learning is a CLT strategy where students collaborate and work together to design a product or complete tasks such as solving problems, creating role plays, conducting research and presenting seminars. The emphasis is on making meaning through dialogic interaction and use of the language. Thus, social constructivism means that students construct knowledge and skills based on active interaction, individually and with peers and teachers, in combination with prior experiences and reflections on the process. In this way, constructivism may be defined as "a philosophical approach that argues that knowledge is socially constructed rather than having its own independent existence" (Nunan 1999, p. 304). Experiential social learning involves an active participant rather than a passive onlooker in the process of learning.

Social constructivism has been a significant influence in educational innovations for several reasons. The emphasis on social interaction to build knowledge and understanding underpins the principles of CLT (Canale & Swain, 1980; Hymes, 1972), where the focus is on creating meaning and communicative competence. The cumulative process of learning, where new language forms are encouraged through social interaction, is thus highlighted rather than passive or rote memorisation of discrete grammar forms. Vygotsky (1962, 1987, 1997) refers to ripening skills in the zone of proximal development and recognizes the mediated connection between thought and language, where thoughts first pass through meanings and then through words. His suggestion that "what a child can do in cooperation today he can do alone tomorrow" (1997, p. 188) indicates the importance of mediated activities, the influence of peers and significant experts. Thus, cooperative dialogic action is vital in developing awareness, experience and prospects for reflection.

Another reason for the growing popularity of social learning is the move toward more active, communicative and learner-centred teaching. With greater focus on the learner, making meaning with the language takes greater prominence, and there is less emphasis on the external grammatical structures and language forms to be transferred. Successful

communicators in a second language are able to differentiate between "learning that" and "knowing how" (Nunan & Lamb, 2001), or what to say to whom and when. Such distinctions in language use make the difference between reciting rote dialogues and being able to interact with other speakers and communicate in a meaningful way (Brown, 2000). Also, the importance of self-management in learning is gaining increasing recognition for its importance in success, particularly when students may be faced with uncertainty (Rubin, 2008), such as when learning in a new culture or environment. Many ESL and EFL learners come from traditional learning backgrounds where CLT is not commonly used (Bozkurt, 2006; Kalantzis & Cope, 2005; Kinzer, 2001; Li, 2001). Researchers point out that these international students have far less social support, experience more isolation, exhibit dysfunctional coping strategies and face greater dissimilarity between their expectations and experiences of tertiary life (Khawaja & Dempsey, 2008). These adjustment difficulties are not new and have been labelled by some researchers as "foreign student syndrome" (Ward, 1967), "uprooting disorder" (Zwingman, 1978), "acculturative stress" (Berry, Kim, Minde, & Mok, 1987), and "international adjustment" (Tsang, 2001). Thus, the challenges to international students can be overwhelming. However, iterations of active mediation and building communicative competence through interactive peer-based learning in this study enhanced the potential for engaging English learners with authentic communication and accelerated learning experiences.

**EFL and ESL: Two comparative case studies**

In order to investigate student voice, a qualitative case study methodology (Stake, 1995, 2003, 2005; Stake & Trumball, 1982) was chosen for probing deeply and analysing intensively (Burns, 1995). Another reason for choosing case study methodology relates to the epistemology of the particular (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005; Yin, 2003) in that it is possible to learn from particular cases in order to compare how one case is like or unlike other cases. Since ESL and EFL are rarely compared, the study was designed to look at how interactive peer learning functions in two different contexts, with each engaged in a different English-teaching approach and the outcomes that can be achieved when using interactive peers to facilitate learning. The data were triangulated by using student reflective logs, focus group interviews and researcher field notes. Table 1 provides information on the two case study samples of volunteer participants who agreed to

respond to weekly focus questions in a reflective log and also signed an ethical clearance from a Queensland university.

|  | **ESL** | **EFL** |
|---|---|---|
| **Research site** | A university in Queensland | One of the largest universities in Turkey |
| **Sample number** | 88 international undergraduates | 79 undergraduates |
| **Course** | *Communication; Communication for Business; Communication for IT* | *Teaching English to Children* (for English teacher training) |
| **Age and Gender** | 19 – 24 years (some mature age mid-30s with families); 49 females, 39 males | 19 – 24 years (mostly single); 45 females, 34 males |
| **Home Countries** | China, Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Indonesia, United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Brunei, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Vietnam, Thailand, New Caledonia, Sri Lanka, India | Mainly Turkey but also Bulgaria, Kenya, Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Iran |
| **Course** **Expectations** | Required core course for faculty entry; complete degree and/or postgraduate degrees; return to home country with advanced skills and training; migrate to Australia with required skills; up-skill for home company and career advancement | Complete university degree to become an English teacher in home country; travel and teach English; go to an English-speaking country and teach; speak and communicate with tourists; help foreigners to know Turkey better |

*Table 1: Case study participant information*

A program of interactive peer-based learning was implemented over a 12-week semester in both case study contexts. Although CLT and interactive peer-based learning are common approaches in western educational contexts, many of the Turkish EFL and international ESL students were not accustomed to collaborative learning. As a result, iterations using group structures (Johnson, Johnson & Holubec, 1993; Johnson & Johnson, 2003; Kagan, 1994, 1999) over a training period of two to three weeks provided a key format and organisational pattern for the EFL and ESL students to recognise and follow. Collaborative teamwork was encouraged as students were introduced to simple structures, for example, Think-Pair-Share, and the associated roles such as recorder and reporter. Through considerable practice and repetition, the students gradually began to respond to interactive

peer-based learning and to operate with increasingly advanced skills during weeks four to twelve.

Although the teaching and learning content varied, the students became familiar with various collaborative structures and assumed the associated role responsibilities more readily during class time. After subsequent iterations, group efforts facilitated positive outcomes, such as active participation, extended speaking, and respect for diversity. The Iterative Stages of Learning Matrix (see Appendix A) details this learning process, which first develops basic social skills, followed by developing task repertoire and finally greater complexity in task completion. In this way, the iterative process is essential for English language learners to revisit and consolidate skills as peers add new scope, just like 'completing the jigsaw' of an expanding learning picture.

Students responded to weekly focus questions in their reflective log entries; at the same time, the researcher made field notes from observations and informal interviews. The student reflective logs were analysed for recurring themes which were grouped under headings according to the number of mentions. The convergence of themes in the data led to labels across data sets which were eventually collapsed under major themes and component sub themes. The data were reviewed and analysed by two experienced researchers and a lecturer. There was more than 80% agreement on the identification of themes, a high rate for a qualitative study. At the end of the semester (but before final exams), students were asked to volunteer for focus group interviews. A cross section of 11 multinational undergraduates from Turkey, as well as two separate groups of 6 and 12 international students in Queensland, participated in order to give representative voice to more nationalities. In the recorded focus group interviews, students were asked to elaborate on the themes emerging from logs using semi-structured interviews from focus questions, as shown in Appendix B.

**Findings and discussion**

The two case studies offer an interesting contrast because the differences between ESL and EFL are seldom discussed (Hiep, 2005; Li, 2001). Language immersion is generally considered an advantage in learning a language (Montgomery & Eisenstein, 1985; Schmidt & Frota, 1986), since students also are able to learn the culture at the same time. Some

researchers have suggested that classroom immersion and naturalistic acquisition studies reveal that when instruction is meaning focused only, learners do not develop the linguistic features at target-like levels (Doughty & Williams, 1998). Thus, in a non-English speaking country, EFL learners may frequently revert to their native tongue as soon as they leave the classroom, offering fewer opportunities for extended second language practice. This may also happen in ESL contexts when students revert to their mother tongue with friends; however, the ESL students are expected to speak English in order to carry out daily routines. Team efforts, as in interactive peer-based learning, thus maximise opportunities for more students to use the target language to make meaning.

Despite the differences between EFL and ESL, the learning responses from both cohorts were similar in several themes. These included speaking, skill diagnosis, engagement and self-efficacy. The main difference reported was in relation to learning dispositions, where the Turkish EFL students criticized the rote learning and passive memorization of their traditional education as useless "soap foam" learning, whereas the ESL students discussed their duty to learn (Pillay, 2002). As part of the data, the next section will briefly discuss four major themes across both case study cohorts and then detail the 'stages of learning' matrix.

*Learning dispositions*
The first theme related to learning dispositions or the learning favoured by students. The majority of Turkish undergraduates criticized their educational system because of the reliance on memorization and rote learning. One student claimed it was *just like soap foam to learn something by heart* because it only worked when it was required and did not stay with you for long. Some students believed that memorization did have some benefits for learning various language rules such as verb forms, for example, but alleged that critical thinking or research skills were not developed in an educational system which emphasises rote memorization. One undergraduate commented: *thinking should be active and education should lead us to be productive*. The researcher observed in field notes that Turkish children, adults and university students frequently repeated the same four questions as a basis for communication: *What is your name?; Where are you from?; What is your job?;* and *How old are you?* After this programmed dialogue had run its course, the Turkish speakers were often unable to sustain further conversation. This observation indicates the

limitations of communicative competence when memorized language forms are used. Current literature concurs that the Turkish education system, including its English teaching education, needs to evolve from being "based on rote memorization to a system that encourages free inquiry and unorthodox thought" (Bozkurt, 2006; Kalantzis & Cope, 2005; Kinzer, 2001). The Turkish students also claimed that they could *remember the topic better* after discussion and *learned faster*.

In contrast, international students in Australia recognized that learning assessment in Western contexts related to participation and required active engagement. These students discussed learning as a duty (Pillay, 2002) owing to the cost of family sacrifice, living alone in a new culture and greater expectations for success. Thus, many international students were motivated to work harder. One of them commented: *We pay money and we want to study here…we have to be able to read and understand study information; we've got to improve our knowledge.* Another student said: *I think because you come here, you pay money for studying. If you don't want to study, you lose your money, just waste your money.* One of the differences for the international students constituted more diligent preparation, a duty seen as inherent in their choice to study overseas. By recognizing this, the international undergraduates demonstrated a growing agency and self-efficacy in adjusting to a new culture and educational style.

*Speaking: No confidence and power distance*
Turkish students expressed little confidence in speaking or using the language to make meaning because years of English language study in their country afforded few opportunities to speak and use the language outside the classroom. Frequent comments were: *No one can speak in class*, or *We never spoke in English, just wrote and read*. Their international counterparts in Australia claimed a lack of confidence in speaking because of power distance (Hofstede, 1980) and the teacher or native speaker's perceived higher status. A fear of lecturers was confounded by lack of support from some native speakers. One international female commented: *Australian people don't think that I can speak English properly; they don't know how to encourage my speaking.*

Both cohorts agreed that interactive peer-based learning promoted more chances for speaking in a non-threatening environment, expanded vocabulary, increased fluency and

provided friendly warnings about mispronunciation or incorrect lexical use. These findings are congruent with researchers (Johnson & Johnson, 2002; Kagan, 1994) who claim that collaborative learning offers more communication skills practice to larger numbers of students at any one time. Researcher field notes indicated that small interactive groups assisted in building confidence while also pointing out incorrect pronunciation in a less embarrassing manner for the learner.

*Learning diagnostic: The missing piece of the jigsaw*
Both cohorts of students commented that interactive peer-based learning was useful in pinpointing skill gaps, comprehension anomalies and pronunciation errors. The Turkish students made comments such as: *We can notice our deficits on topics and we can complete them easily;* and *It's useful to complete my deficiencies with the help of my friends.* Another student wrote in his reflective log: *The knowledge I gain from interactive learning remains for a long time in my mind.* These statements indicate that students recognized the constructive and reflective quality of interactive peer-based learning, echoing Vygotsky's (1997) claim that thought and speech are close to human consciousness. Peer-based dialogues and social learning assisted the students in becoming aware of their skill deficiencies or gaps in knowledge.

In the same way, international students in Australia agreed that working with their peers completed *the missing jigsaw piece* and assisted them to see a broader, *more multi-dimensional* picture of learning. International students claimed that viewing problems and solutions through another's perspective provided a powerful cultural dynamic or ideology. Both groups believed that peer learning assisted higher levels of cognitive engagement, increased success potential and expanded creativity. These views are consistent with other research which supports the perspective that groups who know how to dialogue increase collective intelligence to a level higher than that of the brightest group member (McGee-Cooper, 1998; Surowiecki, 2004).

*Engagement: "Cherish your time"*
A fourth theme related to engagement, in which students were challenged and their attention held by the learning activity. Both cohorts of students said time passed more quickly and enjoyably because of working with friends. Turkish students in the focus group

discussion said that interactive learning made them *feel very happy and energetic and creative*, while another logged that *the work becomes so colourful*, it was disappointing to stop. Another student commented that when working with friends *you cherish your time* and are able to remember the lesson better.

The international students in Australia similarly discussed the challenges and fun in group work. Some of their comments included: *more fun compared to self-learning; lectures are too boring but group activities are more fun, time flies and we learn more; working in groups motivates me to perform better and be harder working;* and *it's a good chance to upgrade myself*. One international undergraduate insisted that group work influenced him to work harder because he didn't *want to be a worse person in the group.* Engagement thus involved challenge, fun, motivation and friendly competition as subcomponents.

Flow theory (Csikszentmihaly, 1997; Csikszentmihalyi, 1996; Tardy & Snyder, 2004) is associated with a mental state resulting from peak experiences in which the level of challenge is high but manageable given an individual's skills. During flow experiences, attention is fully focused and devoted, which leads to a loss of self-consciousness and a distorted sense of time. Csikszentmihalyi (1997, p. 33) claims the flow experience is "a magnet for learning" because continued realisation of the flow state requires ongoing new challenges. This notion is also reminiscent of Vygotsky's (1997) ripening new skills in the zone of proximal development. The undergraduates were aware that interactive peer-based learning enhanced their engagement in learning, developed relationships with others and led to the development of new skills.

**Stages of learning matrix**
These student voices point out beneficial aspects of collaborative learning in promoting speaking fluency, providing diagnostic assistance and encouraging engagement through interactive peer-based learning. Students were guided through iterative cycles, as shown in Appendix A, the 'Stages of learning matrix', to consolidate and progress collaborative skills. The first stage orients students to communicative language teaching principles based on social constructivism. In this stage, short activities encourage active, learner-centred teaching where students begin to develop interpersonal skills and share ideas. Basic citizenship skills such as listening, responding and appreciating diversity begin to emerge.

ESL or EFL students, who may not be used to communicative language teaching approaches and/or may not have the basic learning strategies or learner readiness, thus are introduced to the procedures and responses expected through several iterations. Through this repetition, students can experience other learning models, participate in them and reflect on the process. The stages of learning matrix thus allows various "zones of proximal development" (Vygotsky, 1962, 1987, 1997), where students can become more familiar with interactive collaborative learning and develop readiness through rehearsal and reflection on civic skills.

In the second stage, learners extend new learning strategies through collaboration, discussion, listening, negotiation and development of positive interdependence during a range of longer activities. The focus is on expanding students' knowledge of the target language and providing a greater range of opportunities and tasks to combine making meaning and new civic skills. Collaboration can be extended by building task repertoire through learning new group structures (Think-Write-Share), completing various problem-solving activities, creating role plays, leading group discussions or designing products in groups. During this stage, peers collaborate in a variety of ways for a variety of purposes.

The third step involves amplifying the complexity of content and task requirements so that students develop cognitive and metacognitive thinking skills. Students might conduct research, write reports and create graphs from their research, as well as simulate a group business meeting presentation through role-playing. The academic skills required are more complex, as are the preparation and level of peer collaboration. The students' likelihood of success increases particularly after building trust and confidence in their peer relationships during the earlier stages of learning.

Teachers have an important role in this kind of teaching in setting clear guidelines, following up the progress of each group and encouraging interaction. By using group structures and assigning clearly delineated roles, ESL and EFL students who may not be used to collaborative learning have a framework and pattern to follow. By starting with simple tasks, the level of complexity can be increased with successive iterations. Only after students have mastered the basics of listening to others and responding civilly can they be expected to develop more complex skills through successive iterative cycles. In an

undergraduate Communications class oral presentation, international ESL students took on the roles of business colleagues to prepare questions and responses for a business meeting simulation. The students collaborated through email and online learning management systems, and also met several times outside of class in order to prepare their group presentation. With the use of designated roles, each student becomes accountable for part of the task outcome, thus increasing positive interdependence. Peer-based learning also holds the potential to move learning beyond the classroom. With these guiding principles, overcoming group work inconsistencies is facilitated.

**Conclusion**

This study demonstrates some useful insights into teaching English as a Foreign Language and English as a Second Language learners. The majority of EFL and ESL undergraduates in the study preferred active learning in comparison to traditional styles of passive learning and rote memorization. By working with their peers, the students experienced gains in learning disposition awareness, speaking fluency, diagnostic corrective and learning engagement. Student comments and researcher field notes indicated that successive iterations of interactive peer-based learning assisted in developing language learners' communicative competence, self-efficacy and also value-added authentic communication skills for future employment. The implications for educators are that the stages of learning matrix offers a peer learning management tool for educators to utilize when implementing interactive learning, so that students can develop through the zones of basic civic skills, followed by collaborative skills and finally move toward more complex, higher order thinking skills. As in learning a language, the stages of learning matrix offers iterative phases for the students to rehearse, interact and reflect upon before further repetition to build confidence. Interactive peer-based learning offers a vital dimension for quality teaching and learning environments (Boud, Cohen, & Sampson, 2001) because of the potential to extend, enhance and accelerate authentic communicative skills.

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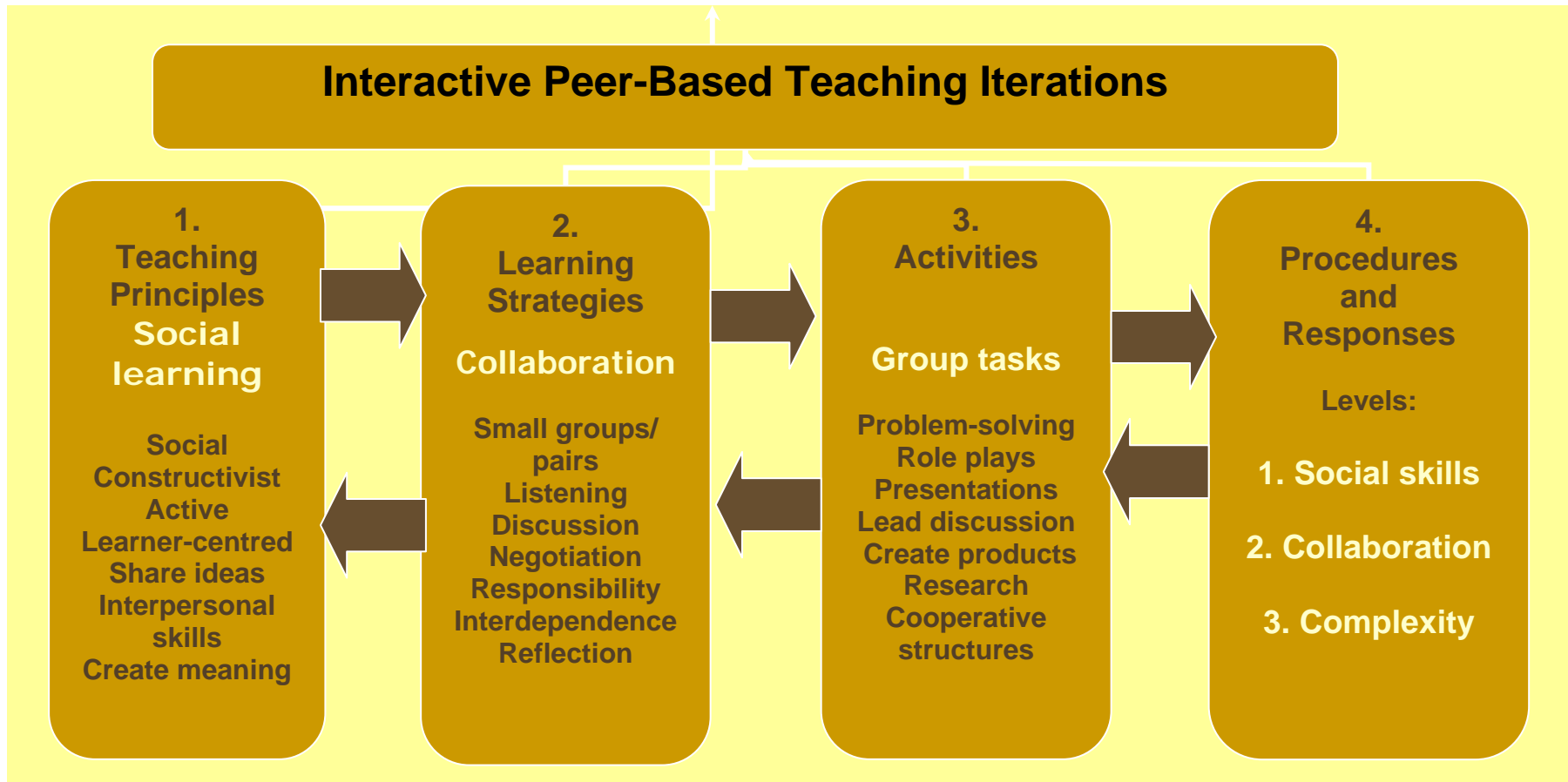
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**Appendix 1**

**Stages of Learning Matrix**

## Interactive Peer-Based Teaching Iterations

| 1. Teaching Principles Social learning | 2. Learning Strategies Collaboration | 3. Activities Group tasks | 4. Procedures and Responses Levels: |
|---|---|---|---|
| Social Constructivist Active Learner-centred Share ideas Interpersonal skills Create meaning | Small groups/ pairs Listening Discussion Negotiation Responsibility Interdependence Reflection | Problem-solving Role plays Presentations Lead discussion Create products Research Cooperative structures | 1. Social skills 2. Collaboration 3. Complexity |

**Appendix 2**

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**Focus Questions for Students**

1) How did working with your peers in a pair or group <u>make a difference</u> or <u>make no difference</u> to your learning? Describe the difference or lack of difference.

2) What did you think about your group's discussion? Was it good quality or not? Why?

3) How would you compare interactive peer-based learning with other teaching strategies? Discuss some plus and minus points in your comparison.

4) How does interactive peer-based learning influence your understanding of the topic or subject?

5) Does working with others motivate you? Why or why not?

6) Is interactive peer-based learning enjoyable for you? Why or why not?

7) Which educational strategies do you prefer and why? (e.g., listening to a lecture, studying alone, doing group work, working with a partner, etc.)

8) How do your peers help you to understand the subject/ topic of the lesson?

9) What do you gain from peer-based interactive learning?

10) Which strategies or approaches to education are the best for English language learners? Why?

11) Other comments?

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