

# Student perceptions of student interaction in a British EFL setting

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*This article reports on an investigation into how learners in a British EFL setting perceive the classroom practice of student–student interaction and why it is perceived in these ways. Adopting qualitative non-experimental methods, I first explored issues leading to the concept of ‘usefulness’ and identified factors that appeared to have affected learners’ perceptions. I then placed the individual learners’ perspectives within his/her personal biography, so as to provide a more in-depth description. The findings suggested that learners in a British EFL setting perceived the classroom practice of student–student interaction in ways that reflected their initial motives and goals, their expectations of an English course in the United Kingdom, and their wider experiences of living and studying. They also suggested that learner interaction within real classroom contexts was interesting in its potential for interpersonal and intercultural communication but relatively unhelpful in the acquisition of certain aspects of the L2.*

## Introduction

Interaction studies in second language acquisition (SLA) have for the most part drawn on transcript data derived from NS/NS, NS/NNS, and NNS/NNS sources and have primarily been concerned with the extent to which conversational interaction could assist second language learners in obtaining comprehensible input, receiving feedback on their own use of the L2, and adjusting, manipulating, and modifying their own output (Ellis 2003). On the basis of the linguistic exchange between learners and their interlocutors, pedagogical inferences are drawn as to whether interaction does indeed facilitate SLA and which tasks (or task types) are more conducive to second language learning.

When learner perception is investigated at all, retrospective verbal reports are often collected to establish what actually took place (or what went wrong) in the earlier task performance or to gain insights into how learners perceived the relative ease or difficulty of the interaction (cf. Mackey, Gass, and McDonough 2000; Nakahama, Tyler, and van Lier 2001). Approaching the task of investigating learner perception of classroom student–student interaction from a somewhat different perspective (i.e. as it is experienced in a British EFL setting and within the context of individual lives), I hoped to provide a more holistic account and a more in-depth understanding to add to our current perception of the pedagogical strengths and weaknesses of learner interaction within real classroom contexts.

## The concept of 'learner perception'

I have adopted Barkhuizen's (1998) concept of 'perception', which involves learners in expressing a feeling, making a judgement, and making a prediction. During the course of investigation, my research participants expressed a broadly positive or negative feeling or attitude towards the classroom practice of student–student interaction and issues and interests arising from their wider experiences of living and studying in the United Kingdom. They made a judgement about the relative usefulness or effectiveness of learner interaction within real classroom contexts by relating the phenomenon under investigation to their own progress and their prior experiences of second language learning. Drawing on their initial motives and goals and expectations of an English course in the UK, they then made a prediction as to whether the classroom practice of student–student interaction would benefit them in some way once they completed the course. As a result of doing these three interrelated actions, learners formed new motives and goals and new expectations of future learning.

## The research project and procedures

The empirical data for this investigation were collected in two stages, one between January and May 2004 and the other between January and March 2005, conducted with emergent research design and via semi-structured interviews (cf. Dörnyei 2007; Kvale 2007). I briefed the two classes on my research interests and invited participation, the result of which is given in Table 1.

	Stage 1 data collection	Stage 2 data collection
Student level	Upper-intermediate	Upper-intermediate
Student number	12	8
Participant number	8	6
Participant profile	Alexia, Belarusian, female Evelyn, Taiwanese, female Sophie, Italian, female Tomoko, Japanese, female Jeff and Darren, Chinese, male Kobe and Koyama, Japanese, male	Ellie, Saudi Arabian, female Yvonne, Taiwanese, female Zoe, Chinese, female Miki, Mizuho, and Sachi, Japanese, female

TABLE 1  
Participant profile<sup>1</sup>

My initial interview questions were more specifically related to the concept of 'usefulness', such as 'When you talk to your partners in the small group, do you find it useful? How do you like it?' Interview questions which provided learners with options or more information and were less specifically related to the concept of usefulness (for example 'What do you like or dislike about talking to the partner?') were introduced later. On top of these more general reflections on classroom student–student interaction, I also asked my research participants about a number of classroom activities which I observed in person and where pair or small group discussion was seen in action. To join the debate in interaction studies, I then sought opinions from my research participants on issues related to comprehensible input and corrective feedback.

The empirical data were first analysed in a more traditional theme-oriented method, as I brought together opinions, experiences, and feelings *across*

interviews (or interviewees) on issues leading to the concept of usefulness of classroom student–student interaction and on the identification of factors that determine not only how learners perform classroom interactive tasks but also how they perceive the relative usefulness or effectiveness of classroom student–student interaction. The interview data were then analysed *within* each narrative, as ‘narratives allow researchers to present experience holistically in all its complexity and richness’ (Bell 2002: 209). They allowed me, in particular, within the context of this research to ‘gain rare insights into learners’ motivations, investments, struggles, losses, and gains as well as into language ideologies that guide their learning trajectories’ (Pavlenko 2002: 214).

## Findings Usefulness

The concept of ‘usefulness’ is associated with the potential for ‘learning (something new)’ or moving towards more target-like performances within the context of this research, as opposed to using or gaining control of what is already acquired. It concerns the positive effects that classroom student–student interaction can bring about on second language learning, particularly with regard to grammar, lexis, and pronunciation. Learners in this research context first appreciated unanimously the increase of student speaking time made available during the classroom practice of student–student interaction. They then welcomed the opportunity for interpersonal and intercultural communication, featured in particular in contexts such as a British EFL setting where learners of diverse linguistic and sociocultural backgrounds come to learn English.

Addressing, however, features of interlanguage talk (or second language learners talking to each other), Kobe noted that learner language is prone to ungrammaticality, whereas Sophie perceived the phonological inaccuracy of learner language as unhelpful. Alexia, meanwhile, acknowledged the importance of receiving corrective feedback and input from a more advanced partner. She said:

I prefer to speak with the partner whose language, English language, is higher than mine, because partner can correct me, or if partner speaks with me and I don’t understand some words, I can ask what does this word mean, and partner can tell me.

In reality, however, linguistic errors were not always noticed or corrected. Sophie, addressing the issue of peer correction, said simply, ‘No, never, nobody correct me’.

Reflecting on whether her fellow classmates helped her at all with learning, i.e. to improve or acquire the target language, Tomoko said:

Not really, teacher help me, because I can’t learn anything about speaking from Intermediate students, I couldn’t, because their pronunciation, grammar, speaking, not good, so just communicate.

Evelyn, from Taiwan, also considered that her improvement with regard to grammar, lexis, and pronunciation came from the ‘teacher and material’.

## Influences on learner perception

As the interview scheme progressed, it became increasingly evident that learner perception was subject to the interplay of factors such as how well they performed every individual task, who they interacted with, and the

extent to which the broader context of interaction created rapport or inhibition. To further illustrate this, I group into three categories factors that appear to have influenced learner performance of classroom interactive tasks and in turn learner perception of classroom student–student interaction. They are:

- 1 self-dependent factors
- 2 other-dependent factors
- 3 context-dependent factors.

These categories arise from learner reflection on the circumstances in which they find themselves more or less productive during pair or small group discussion. Self-dependent factors are variables that come from within the speaker him/herself, such as the physical well-being at the time of speaking. Other-dependent factors are issues related to the partner, including the partner's personality and ways of taking part in the discussion. Context-dependent factors involve all the other factors in the classroom that cannot be identified as self-dependent or other-dependent, such as the topic.

While these factors appear to have influenced learner performance of classroom interactive tasks, learner perception of classroom student–student interaction can also be understood along the same lines. Learners, for example, draw on their own needs (to practise) and wants (to know people of different cultures) when acknowledging what they like about talking to their partner (i.e. learner perception based on self-dependent factors). They then comment on their partners' lack of interest or contribution in pair or small group discussion and the unintelligibility of their partners' linguistic performance (i.e. learner perception based on other-dependent factors). At times, they have very little knowledge or do not form an opinion of certain topics, which prevents a proper discussion during the course of interaction (i.e. learner perception based on context-dependent factors). Factors in these three categories (and the interplay between them) were meant initially to illustrate the interplay of different factors *within* learners, as to what governs his/her performance and perception at a particular time (i.e. *intrapersonal* validity). They also appeared to have accounted for performances and perceptions *across* learners, as to why they perform or perceive the same language learning activities and classroom practices in overtly different ways (i.e. *interpersonal* validity). Learner perception based on factors in each of these categories is elaborated in some detail below.

### Self-dependent factors

Reflecting on a discussion about guns, for example, in which learners discussed questions such as 'Are guns legal in your country?' 'Are they easy to get?' and 'Do you or does anyone you know own a gun? Why? Why not?' Evelyn said:

Actually I didn't know a lot about guns, so I had no idea about gun, so I think, OK you know something, OK you say something.

This, in my view, is learner perception based on self-dependent (rather than context-dependent) factors, the reason being Evelyn was addressing her own lack of general knowledge and personal story of the topic, rather than evaluating the topic itself. Commenting on another discussion in which

students were told to think of one favourite dish and describe how to make it to a partner, Evelyn said:

One thing is difficult is, I have to think about my dishes and to translate to English, because normally we use Chinese to, maybe write recipe, and everything in Chinese.

The struggle for Evelyn to give a recipe in English was again an issue related to her own (lack of) L2 capability. Under both circumstances, Evelyn encountered a degree of difficulty during the interaction caused by her own lack of content knowledge (or world knowledge) of an unfamiliar topic and her own inexperience in using English for certain purposes, such as giving recipes. While the latter could pose a more positive challenge and push her to deploy her English in another dimension, the former might indeed cause frustration and disappointment since there was very little she could do when she simply did not know what to say or had only very little to say about the topic.

#### Other-dependent factors

Apart from exploring and identifying issues arising from within (the speaker) him/herself, learners also perceive the individual lessons and classroom activities on the basis of who they are interacting with during the discussion. Sophie, for example, was working in a small group with Frank and Tomoko, as they discussed issues related to the use and trade of guns. Reflecting on this discussion, she said:

No, I didn't enjoy a lot, because, but Tomoko, she doesn't speak [laugh], she doesn't exist, sometimes if I provoke her a little bit, she answer but it's not really, she cannot say I want to tell my opinion, it's impossible, she never said that, I never listen her.

Disappointed with Tomoko's lack of participation and contribution, she added,

She doesn't speak and Frank [laugh], Frank is strange, because sometimes he doesn't understand me, or sometime he tells me something, but I really can't understand what he wants to say to me.

Let down by others' (lack of) performance and participation, Sophie formed a somewhat negative attitude towards the interaction, as seen in her opening remark, 'No, I didn't enjoy a lot'. As Frank did not take part in the interview scheme, the following remark came from Tomoko, who considered her performance in this particular task as somewhat restricted by her interlocutors (or others). She said:

I think I didn't speak so much, because when I was same group with them, difficult to speak my opinion, because Sophie speak a lot, and Frank speak very much, and they can't stop, so [laugh].

Thus, it seems that group dynamics would influence learner performance of classroom interactive tasks and in turn shape learner perception of classroom student–student interaction.

#### Context-dependent factors

Factors inside the classroom that cannot be categorized as self-dependent or other-dependent but which have an impact on how learners perform and

perceive classroom student–student interaction, for example the topic, the teacher, and (the level of) the class, are explored in some depth below.

Learners in this research context generally welcomed *all* topics pre-selected by the teacher. Topics, however, related to guns, gun control, drugs, and the black market were considered difficult. Evelyn, for example, acknowledged that ‘gun is not very normal, in the normal everyday life we can’t use the gun’. Yvonne then said:

Marijuana, I never doing this topic, a bit difficult, yeah, I couldn’t speaking many, I just listening only.

Miki commented on the lesson and discussion of the black market,

About black market, is difficult to say our opinion or something, because of the vocabulary or imagination about it, we have not so much

acknowledging in particular her lack of interest:

About marijuana, marijuana or drug, I know it’s a big problem in society, but actually I’m not interested in any drug, so she said please say my opinion, but I have no idea about it, agree or disagree or something, so, yeah, a bit quiet [laugh].

Guns and drugs thus seemed rather ‘remote’ for learners perhaps across the globe, and discussions on such issues generally did not encourage imagination or invite creativity. Despite being aware of the social/political dilemmas guns and drugs presented to society, learners did not seem particularly interested in talking about them.

The teacher factor mainly concerns how the teacher selects the topics and how she/he sets up the tasks. Tomoko, for example, commented on one particular lesson, in which learner interaction was constantly interrupted by the teacher, who wanted to move on. She said:

I think this teacher, I can’t enjoy so much, when we were talking, she stopped talking, she made us stop talking, I think it’s not so good, but maybe her teaching style, but always stop, stop, stop, we just talk, just little bit.

We couldn’t really enjoy it, Huh? Stop again? Huh? Stop again? [laugh].

The way this teacher cut short pair or small group discussion in order to move on was not particularly well received by Tomoko, as they were constantly pulled back while being ready to go ahead and continue with the discussion. Zoe and Miki, meanwhile, acknowledged that they tended to be more articulate and willing to participate in lessons where the teacher was ‘friendly’ and ‘interested’ and could build up an interactive atmosphere.

The class factor, or the proficiency level of the other students, also seems to influence how learners perceive the relative usefulness or effectiveness of classroom student–student interaction. Yvonne, for example, recalled how she was unable to improve her language skills during learner interaction in the term prior to the start of this investigation. She said:

Last term I can’t improve my speaking and listening, because all of them is Japanese, and their level is not so higher, so all of them I speaking only,

they are very quiet and they don't speaking anything with me, so I can't practice my speaking, yeah, and listening also.

She then commented on the class in which this investigation took place:

Now this class is more higher, so their level is high, and similar me, so we can chatting each other if we have a topic, so we can learn vocabulary or something each other.

While the class factor is inevitably associated with the partner (or the other) in the class, the individuality of the partner (or the other) within the class factor is much less explicit and personal than that within other-dependent factors. I thus considered it appropriate to categorize Yvonne's perception here as context-dependent, rather than other-dependent.

### **Learner perception within the broader context of living and studying in the UK**

The inspiration to place learners' perceptions of classroom student–student interaction within the broader context of their living and studying in the UK came from the interrelation between their initially fragmentary remarks on learner interaction and their wider experiences of events and incidents taking place in a British EFL setting. It came as a result of the methodological discovery that by taking issues and interests arising from both inside and outside the classroom into consideration, a much more cohesive account can be established of why a particular learner perceives the classroom practice of student–student interaction and his/her entire English learning experiences in the UK in a particular way.

As an example of how this methodological discovery can achieve and has achieved, the empirical data of this research suggest that an L2 learner could strategically register with an English course prior to his/her arrival in the UK, but explicitly look forward to the opportunity of frequent contact and interaction with the locals or the native speakers, so as to significantly improve or even fundamentally transform his/her English. Once this secret wish or prime concern is not fulfilled, the learner might in turn dismiss the entire experience of interacting with other learners or NNSs inside the classroom. Thus, how learners perceive a particular classroom practice and its relative usefulness or effectiveness on second language learning can be influenced or determined by what happens entirely *outside* the classroom. Consider, for example, Sophie's learning biography.

Sophie studied law in university in Italy and was interested in learning foreign languages, for example French and English, so that she might have a better opportunity for future employment in some international law office. She spent her third year in France, could only briefly introduce herself in French upon her arrival in France, but had to take several modules of law with French university students. Although having huge difficulties with French in the first few months, thanks to the immersion context she was in and the very frequent contact she had with native speakers of French, she quickly picked up the language through speaking and listening and later developed the ability to read and write.

Sophie deliberately chose a university-governed language learning institute in the UK, hoping that the university environment could bring her the opportunity to attend free lectures and to meet English university students, thereby reproducing her French learning experiences. The classroom

context, however, was now different. The teacher was the only native speaker inside the classroom. Her fellow classmates brought with them varying degrees of linguistic inaccuracy with regard to grammar, lexis, and pronunciation. Above all, they were there to learn a language and English was the target of acquisition.

Sophie had indeed understood the different nature of her French and English learning experiences, which, however, brought little comfort in her struggle against the lack of opportunity to speak English at all outside the classroom and the lack of contact with native or fluent speakers of English. It was difficult, for example, for Sophie to talk to her often busy housemates and difficult for her to make friends with British people. Reflecting on her entire experiences of living and studying in the UK, she said:

I don't feel well, I don't feel well really . . . Erm, I don't feel really well because I expect more this experience.

Sophie had previously addressed the lack of intelligibility in her partners' linguistic performance and the need to interact with the more advanced other for input and feedback necessary for SLA. While this was valid in its own right, it now seemed far more revealing when placed within her personal biography. She brought into a British EFL setting her initial motives and goals and expectations of an English course in the UK and her prior experiences of second or foreign language learning. She drew on issues and interests arising from her past, present, and future, embedded in her personal biography, to perceive the relative usefulness or effectiveness of classroom student–student interaction and her wider experiences of living and studying in the UK.

## Discussion and teaching implications

The increase of student speaking time and the opportunity for interpersonal and intercultural communication constitute major pedagogical strengths of classroom student–student interaction, as learners engage in using/practising their L2, thereby developing fluency and a variety of communication strategies. The unintelligibility, however, or linguistic inaccuracy of learner language represents a major setback to the positive effects of learner interaction on second language learning. Learners' apparent need for corrective feedback and the more advanced other (but the lack of it) then further diminishes the perceived usefulness of classroom student–student interaction.

Moreover, learner perception of the relative usefulness or effectiveness of classroom student–student interaction depends to a large extent on how learners perceive the relative ease or difficulty of participating in learner interaction. It can be determined by factors that I categorize as 'self-dependent', 'other-dependent', and 'context-dependent'. Under circumstances where learners are interested in the task and are capable of delivering their own agenda, the sense of enjoyment and fulfilment tends to be felt strongly, thereby enhancing the perceived usefulness of learner interaction. If, however, learners perceive the interaction circumstances, particularly issues related to the other and the context, as broadly discouraging and frustrating, the perceived learning effects of classroom student–student interaction would drop significantly.

Perhaps more importantly and inevitably, learners bring into a British EFL setting their initial motives and goals and expectations of an English course in the UK. They perceive classroom student–student interaction by relating it to their prior and current experiences of second language learning and by assessing the future relevance or significance of unfolding events at present. As such, learner perception of a particular classroom practice needs to be understood within the individual learners’ personal biographies, since a particular classroom practice is inevitably embedded in a particular learning experience, and a particular learning experience is in turn embedded in their life history and aspirations for the future.

Taken together, findings of this investigation contradicted the widely held assumption that one can best acquire a language by simply being in an environment where the language is spoken. They then reinforced the arguments that the classroom can be an ideal place for SLA and that teacher talk can be a valuable source of input for second language learning. While classroom student–student interaction broadly satisfies learners’ demand for speaking practice (or their quantity-related needs for interaction), it fails to provide learners with the kind of input and feedback necessary for SLA (thereby *not* fulfilling their quality-related needs for interaction). The classroom practice of learner interaction can thus be said to have been perceived within the context of this research as interesting in its potential for interpersonal and intercultural communication but relatively unhelpful in its potential for SLA.

On the basis of such empirical findings detailed above, it is essential that classroom teachers become aware of ‘learner individuality and diversity’, used in this research to mean the sum total of a learner’s cognitive and affective experiences across time and space that makes up the unmistakable and irreplaceable thinking and feeling person he/she is today. They then need to always investigate and update learner perception of classroom student–student interaction, as learners can be valuable sources of information on second language learning and teaching (Christison and Krahnke 1986; Cray and Currie 1996). By paying attention to the social dynamics in their classrooms and exploring the motives and goals their learners bring to perform a task, they can monitor learner performance more closely and assist learner interaction more effectively. Classroom teachers may not be able to solve all problems of all learners, particularly with regard to what happens outside the classroom, but they can show concern and support whenever and wherever necessary.

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#### Note

1 The participants have all been renamed to retain anonymity.

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