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Peer tutoring in EFL higher education: Exploring students' learning through the lens of Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development

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ABSTRACT

English plays a crucial role in Indonesian higher education; however, traditional classroom practices often limit opportunities for personalized learning and active student engagement. This study examines peer tutoring as an alternative approach, drawing on Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which conceptualizes learning as the progression from what learners can do independently to what they can achieve with guidance from More Knowledgeable Others (MKO). Employing a qualitative design, this research explores how peer tutoring supports English language learning in an English Language Education Department at a private university in Yogyakarta. Two main themes emerged from the findings. First, peer tutoring fosters both cognitive and socio-affective development, as students demonstrate enhanced critical thinking, increased motivation, greater confidence, and stronger collaborative relationships within a supportive learning environment. Second, peer tutoring operationalizes ZPD through a structured scaffolding process, beginning with diagnosing learners' current abilities (Zone of Current Development) and advancing their competence toward independent performance (Zone of Actual Development) through guided interaction, explanation, modelling, and feedback. This study contributes to the growing body of research on student-centered learning by demonstrating how peer tutoring functions as an effective pedagogical strategy that integrates sociocultural theory into practical classroom contexts, particularly in EFL higher education settings.

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1. Introduction

Proficiency in English has become a critical requirement for university students in the era of globalization, particularly in contexts such as Indonesia where English functions as a key medium for academic and professional communication (Maxamatismoyilovna, 2020). Despite its importance,

English language learning in Indonesian higher education remains constrained by persistent challenges, including teacher-centred practices, limited opportunities for interaction, and students' dependence on lecturers (Tanjung, 2018; Zamzami & Keumala, 2018). Such conditions restrict active engagement and make it difficult to accommodate diverse learner needs, ultimately hindering effective language acquisition (Freeman et al., 2014; Bond et al., 2020; Redmond et al., 2021).

In response, student-centred approaches such as project-based learning, problem-based learning, and peer tutoring have been increasingly promoted (Djidu et al., 2021). Among these, peer tutoring offers particular potential due to its collaborative and flexible nature. It enables more personalized learning interactions and encourages active participation, allowing students to construct knowledge through dialogue and mutual support (Slavin, 2015; Li, 2025; Silalahi, 2025). However, while existing studies have highlighted the general benefits of peer tutoring such as improved academic performance and engagement, many of these studies remain largely descriptive and are often conducted outside the Indonesian higher education context. Moreover, limited attention has been given to understanding how peer tutoring facilitates learning processes when examined through a strong theoretical lens, particularly Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). The ZPD emphasizes the role of social interaction and scaffolding in enabling learners to progress from their current level of understanding to higher levels of competence. Although peer tutoring is frequently associated with this theory, empirical studies that explicitly connect peer tutoring practices with ZPD processes such as identifying learners' current abilities and supporting their progression through guided interaction remain limited, especially in EFL higher education settings in Indonesia (Alghamdy, 2023; Li et al., 2025; Silalahi, 2025).

In the context of a private university in Yogyakarta, various peer tutoring programs (e.g., Grammavo, Readate, Sparkle, Scotion, and Digiclub) have been implemented to support students' learning beyond the classroom. While these initiatives suggest a strong institutional commitment to collaborative learning, there is insufficient research examining how students experience these programs and how such practices align with sociocultural learning principles. Addressing this gap, the present study investigates peer tutoring from both experiential and theoretical perspectives. Specifically, it explores students' perceptions of the benefits of peer tutoring and examines how peer tutoring processes facilitate English language learning through the lens of Vygotsky's ZPD. Accordingly, this study is guided by the following research questions: 1) What are the students' perspectives on the benefits of peer tutoring in learning?, 2) How does the process of peer tutoring support students' English learning based on Vygotsky's ZPD theory?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Peer Tutoring

Peer tutoring has played a significant role in educational practices throughout history, and its practices can be traced back to the time of Aristotle (Ali et al., 2015). A peer tutor is defined as an individual in a similar educational position as the learner, who collaborates with teachers in the teaching and learning process (Stigmar, 2016). In addition, Ratanarajah et al. (2020) describe a peer tutor as a student who is approached by others for discussion and guidance. Drawing on these definitions, a peer tutor can be understood as a student who possesses a certain level of competence and supports peers in understanding specific academic content under the supervision of teachers.

In its simplest form, peer tutoring is an educational approach in which students take on the roles of both tutor and tutee (Herinek et al., 2025). Typically, a tutor is a student who demonstrates stronger academic performance and works with peers who need support in understanding particular concepts. As noted by Miravet et al. (2014), peer tutoring can also be viewed as a form of cooperative learning, where individuals with different levels of expertise engage collaboratively in discussions, each contributing according to their role.

2.2. Benefits of Peer Tutoring

The primary objective of peer tutoring is to help students understand concepts that have already been learned by their peers. However, it is important to recognize that peer tutoring is mutually

beneficial for both tutors and tutees. Teaching others has been shown to deepen one's own understanding, as it requires learners to reorganize and articulate their knowledge more clearly (Fiorella & Mayer, 2014; Lachner et al., 2021). In this sense, peer tutoring becomes a powerful strategy for promoting deeper learning. Similarly, Ali et al. (2015) emphasize that peer tutoring should function as a reciprocal process, where both participants benefit through the exchange of ideas and shared learning experiences.

a) Academic benefits

From an academic perspective, peer tutoring has been shown to positively influence students' achievement and learning outcomes. It supports the development of transferable skills and strengthens conceptual understanding. Research indicates that tutees often show significant improvement, while tutors also benefit by reinforcing their own knowledge. This improvement is closely related to the scaffolding process, particularly through personalized and detailed feedback (Comfort & McMahon, 2014).

Further evidence is provided by Syafrizal and Tosi Rut (2022), who found that peer tutoring enhances literacy skills through peer interaction, especially when students use language that is more accessible to one another. In addition, Zulkifli et al. (2020) demonstrated that reciprocal peer tutoring in online discussions can improve students' critical thinking abilities, as learners engage in discussions that challenge and refine their understanding. This is supported by Sonawane and Waldia (2022), who argue that peer tutoring contributes to the development of analytical thinking, communication skills, research abilities, and teamwork. Moreover, Parker et al. (2023) highlight that peer tutoring enhances students' overall learning experiences by increasing engagement and motivation. Personalized attention and the opportunity to learn at an individual pace foster a sense of autonomy and ownership. At the same time, a supportive learning environment reduces anxiety and creates a more positive and enjoyable learning experience.

b) Non-Academic Benefits

In addition to academic outcomes, peer tutoring also contributes to students' personal and social development. Miravet et al. (2014) note that the process of teaching others helps students develop a sense of self, build confidence, and strengthen relationships with peers. Through these interactions, students experience a sense of accomplishment while also improving their ability to communicate and collaborate.

Similarly, recent studies show that peer tutoring promotes openness and comfort, leading to stronger social connections, improved teamwork, and the development of communication and leadership skills (Hanifansyah et al., 2024; Dias et al., 2025). These benefits extend beyond academic contexts, influencing students' personal growth and future professional interactions. Colver and Fry (2016) further emphasize that peer tutoring impacts not only academic performance but also confidence and other important aspects of students' lives.

2.3. Peer tutoring as an alternative learning strategy in Higher Education

In recent years, various innovative teaching strategies have been introduced to improve learning outcomes in higher education, including project-based learning, problem-based learning, and peer tutoring (Djidu et al., 2021). These approaches reflect broader efforts to enhance educational quality and respond to the demands of a globalized world. Even before the Covid-19 pandemic, educators had begun experimenting with these strategies. However, their implementation often faced challenges due to institutional constraints and traditional teaching practices. The pandemic accelerated the need for adaptation, encouraging teachers and students to explore more flexible and student-centred approaches. In this context, peer tutoring has gained renewed attention as a collaborative and adaptable learning strategy.

Tanjung (2018) observes that students in Indonesian universities often rely heavily on lecturers, which limits the development of independent learning skills. This issue is particularly evident in language learning, where active engagement is essential. Similarly, Zamzami and Keumala (2018)

highlight that teacher-centred approaches continue to dominate classroom practices, reducing opportunities for student interaction.

Given these challenges, Fitriani (2016) calls for reform in higher education by incorporating alternative strategies such as peer tutoring and scaffolding. Although peer tutoring is not a new concept as it existed since the 17th century (Alwi et al., 2020), it remains highly relevant in addressing current educational needs. As Slavin (2015) argues, peer tutoring enables individualized learning and can be effectively integrated with other instructional approaches to create a more dynamic learning environment.

2.4. Zone of Proximal Development and Scaffolding

Peer tutoring exhibits a close relationship with Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) theory and the concept of Scaffolding, introduced by Wood, Bruner, and Ross (1976). The Zone of Proximal Development was initially formulated and elaborated upon by the Soviet psychologist Lev Semyonovich Vygotsky in the 1920s. In his work, "Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes", Vygotsky defines the ZPD as the space between an individual's current level of development, as assessed through independent problem-solving, and their potential level of development, as determined by problem-solving under the guidance of an adult or in collaboration with a More Knowledgeable Other (MKO) (Vygotsky, 1978). The ZPD signifies the disparity between what students can accomplish on their own and what they can achieve with the assistance of a more proficient peer (Evans, 2019). Figure 1 by Evans (2019) below shows a clearer understanding of the Zone of Proximal Development.

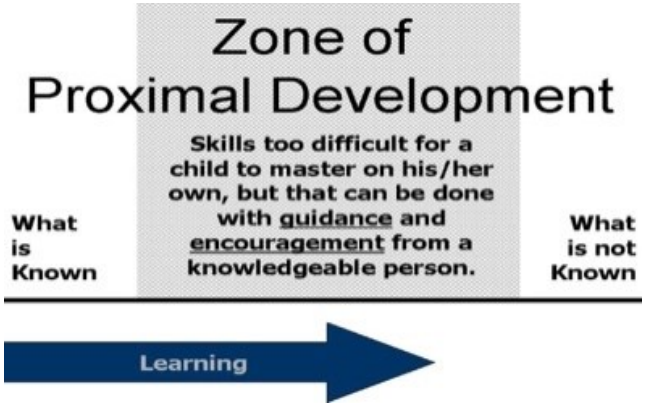

Fig 1. Zone of Proximal Development (Evans, 2019)

According to Figure 1, the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) represents the learner's current level of development and the subsequent developmental level that can be reached with the guidance and support of MKO, or often in collaboration with a teacher. According to sociocultural perspectives on learning, cognitive development is shaped through interaction with more knowledgeable others (MKO) within the learner's environment (Kusmaryono, 2021; Wu & Bakar, 2025). The concept of the Zone of Proximal Development comprises two key elements: learners' potential for development beyond their current level and the essential role of social interaction in facilitating that development (Eun, 2019). Within this zone, learning takes place once the learner's existing knowledge has been identified. The undetected learning potential refers to what the student is capable of learning.

Recent perspectives on Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) emphasize that effective learning occurs when students are consistently engaged in tasks that are slightly beyond their current level of competence, supported through scaffolding and social interaction (Siregar, 2025; Hamid, 2025). Such tasks are often designed to be meaningful and contextually relevant, which helps sustain learners' engagement and promotes collaboration. Through this process, learners

gradually develop the ability to perform tasks independently as scaffolding is reduced, reflecting their progression toward higher levels of competence.

In addition to Vygotsky's ZPD theory, Wood et al. (1976) introduced the concept of "Scaffolding," which refers to the assistance provided by teachers or the MKO to guide learners through their Zone of Proximal Development. Scaffolding, as advocated by Wells (1999), serves as a practical application of Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) theory. Bakker et al., (2015) define scaffolding as an interactive system of communication used by the tutor to achieve several objectives which includes capturing the students' attention, breaking down tasks into manageable components, maintaining concentration during problem-solving activities, highlighting critical learning points, regulating students' emotions, and offering solutions when learners encounter difficulties.

Wells (1999) identified three distinct characteristics of educational scaffolding: the collaborative construction of knowledge through fundamental interactions, the incorporation of relevant activities for knowledge transfer, and the influence of artifacts in facilitating mutual understanding. This perspective is further supported by more recent studies, which suggest that individuals learn more effectively through collaborative interaction, particularly when guided by more knowledgeable peers within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Van de Pol et al., 2020; Aderibigbe, 2021). Through such collaborative endeavour, learners are able to acquire and internalize new concepts, psychological tools, and abilities. In the scaffolding process, the concept of these "knowledgeable others" are typically embodied by peers with a deeper understanding. They engage in various interactive strategies, including 1) Inquiries (asking questions), 2) Recommendations (proposing solutions and personalized feedbacks), 3) Displays (providing examples), 4) Narrations (discussions), 5) Enhancements (building confidence), and 6) Recaps (summarizing learning activities) (Haider & Yasmin, 2015).

The implementation of the ZPD theory through the scaffolding process involves pairing a tutor with a tutee, either individually or in groups, as assigned by the teacher to collaborate on a specific task. This scaffolding process is composed of three fundamental stages: the Zone of Current Development (ZCD), which signifies the learner's existing level of independent knowledge (Smagorinsky, 2018); the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which represents the gap between the learner's current knowledge (ZCD) and what they can potentially achieve with guidance (Evans, 2019); the Zone of Actual Development (ZAD), which reflects the learner's acquired knowledge and abilities after undergoing scaffolding (Van de Pol et al., 2020; Aderibigbe, 2021). Peer tutoring, through the process of scaffolding, commences from the learner's starting point of knowledge at the ZCD, progresses with guidance from more knowledgeable peers to explore the ZPD through task completion, and ultimately aims to reach the ZAD, where learners can independently tackle tasks (Haider & Yasmin, 2015).

2.5. Peer tutoring and students' learning

The implementation of peer tutoring is closely linked with the concept of scaffolding and Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) theory. Vygotsky defines the ZPD as the space between an individual's current level of development, as assessed through independent problem-solving, and their potential level of development, as determined by problem-solving under the guidance of an adult or in collaboration with the MKO (Vygotsky, 1978). From a sociocultural perspective, cognitive development is shaped through interaction with more knowledgeable others within the learner's environment (van de Pol et al., 2020; Aderibigbe, 2021). The MKO may be identified as parents, teachers, coaches, experts, professionals, or peers who are capable of offering instructions and guidance (Purwanti et al., 2019). Wood et al. (1976) introduced the concept of "Scaffolding," which refers to the assistance provided by teachers or the more knowledgeable others to guide learners through their ZPD. Scaffolding, as advocated by Wells (1999), serves as a practical application of Vygotsky's ZPD theory, and identified three distinct characteristics of educational scaffolding, namely the collaborative construction of knowledge through fundamental interactions, the incorporation of relevant activities for knowledge transfer, and the influence of artifacts in facilitating mutual understanding.

Students can enhance their cognitive abilities through guidance, or scaffolding, provided by peers who have a deeper understanding of specific subjects (Van de Pol et al., 2020; Smagorinsky, 2018). Bakker et al. (2015) define scaffolding as an interactive system of communication used by the peer tutor or the MKO to achieve several objectives, including capturing students' attention, breaking down tasks into manageable components, maintaining concentration during problem-solving activities, highlighting critical learning points, regulating students' emotions, and offering solutions when learners encounter difficulties.

2.6. Review of previous studies

To support this research, three previous studies were reviewed. The first, by Chen and Liu (2011), looked at a peer tutoring program in higher education that ran over three years. The program was thoughtfully designed and led by lecturers with support from trained student tutors. Using both qualitative and quantitative methods, they collected data through observations, interviews, and assessments, totalling over 6,500 hours of tutoring. The study showed that peer tutoring not only helped students academically but also built strong, lasting tutor-tutee relationships. It also highlighted the importance of planning, training, and ongoing evaluation to ensure success.

The second study, by Colver and Fry (2016), focused on the real impact of peer tutoring among 349 undergraduate students across various courses. Through interviews and surveys, they found that students overwhelmingly agreed tutoring improved their understanding and assignment performance, with many reporting significant grade improvements. Similarly, Watcharapunyawong (2018) explored online peer tutoring and found that it enhanced grammar skills, with tutors showing greater confidence and achievement.

Although these studies demonstrate the effectiveness of peer tutoring, most were conducted outside the Indonesian context. Therefore, this study seeks to address this gap by examining peer tutoring in an Indonesian higher education setting, particularly in relation to students' experiences and the role of scaffolding in supporting language learning.

3. Method

This study employed a qualitative research approach using a descriptive design to explore students' experiences and perceptions of peer tutoring within an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context. A qualitative approach was selected to enable an in-depth understanding of participants' perspectives and the processes underlying peer tutoring practices (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

3.1. Research Setting and Participants

Qualitative research was chosen due to its suitability for in-depth investigations, aligning with the study's objectives, as highlighted by Creswell and Poth (2018). The study utilized a descriptive qualitative design, focusing on providing a detailed portrayal of the phenomenon. This study was conducted at the ELED of one of Yogyakarta's private universities. This department was chosen as the research setting due to the EDSA provided programs that offered peer tutoring activities to help students with their studies.

In this study, purposive sampling was employed to select the participants. As described by Cohen et. al (2018), purposive sampling involves intentionally selecting individuals who possess specific knowledge, experience, or characteristics relevant to the research focus. Six participants were chosen from the batches of students, with GPAs ranging from 3.0 to 4.0, from the classes of 2019, 2020, and 2021. These students had either independently formed peer tutoring groups or joined peer tutoring groups facilitated by the EDSA. The selection of participants from these specific batches was based on their significant experience and current involvement in peer tutoring activities. It's important to note that each participant must have engaged in peer tutoring activities for at least one year within the context of higher education. All of the participants had been involved in the peer tutoring program for more than a year. To maintain the participants' confidentiality, pseudonyms were used, namely Mulyono, Junaidi, Lela, Sumiati, Vina, and Kejora.

Table 1. Participants' profile

Name	GPA	Batch	Roles
Mulyono	3.9	2020	Tutor and tutee
Lela	3.93	2020	Tutor and tutee
Junaidi	3.97	2020	Tutee
Vina	3.89	2021	Tutee
Sumiati	3.41	2019	Tutor and tutee
Kejora	3.79	2019	Tutee

3.2. Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, allowing participants to share their experiences while enabling the researcher to probe deeper into relevant issues. Each interview lasted approximately 30–45 minutes and was conducted in a flexible manner to encourage open and reflective responses. The interview protocol consisted of guiding questions related to: 1) students' experiences and perceived benefits of peer tutoring, and 2) the processes through which peer tutoring supports their learning. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis.

3.3. Data Analysis

Following the collection of pertinent interview data, the subsequent data analysis step involved coding and evaluation. Coding, as described by Cohen et al. (2018), is the process of assessing and organizing data to comprehend textual meaning, identify categories, and recognize patterns. This phase is crucial for revealing responses to the research questions. The overall data analysis process comprised distinct stages, namely data transcription, member checking, and coding. To maintain the credibility of the data, member checking was conducted. The data were analysed using thematic analysis, following several systematic stages. First, all interview transcripts were carefully read multiple times to achieve data familiarization. Second, initial codes were generated by identifying meaningful units of data relevant to the research questions. Third, these codes were grouped into broader categories based on similarities and patterns.

Subsequently, themes were developed by synthesizing related categories into overarching concepts that captured the essence of participants' experiences. These themes were then reviewed, refined, and clearly defined to ensure coherence and alignment with the research objectives. This iterative process allowed the researchers to move from raw data to well-structured thematic findings.

3.4. Trustworthiness

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, several strategies were employed. Credibility was established through member checking, where participants were given the opportunity to review and confirm the accuracy of the interview transcripts and interpretations. Dependability was addressed by maintaining clear and systematic documentation of the research process, including data collection and analysis procedures, allowing for transparency and potential replication. Confirmability was ensured by grounding interpretations in participants' responses and minimizing researcher bias during analysis. In addition, an audit trail was maintained to document key analytical decisions throughout the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Nowell et al., 2017).

4. Result and Discussion

The first finding highlights students' perspectives on the benefits of peer tutoring in learning English. These insights are derived from interviews conducted with six students. Based on the data, six main benefits of peer tutoring were identified: (1) enhancing students' critical thinking, (2) increasing motivation, (3) boosting confidence, (4) promoting teamwork, (5) encouraging positive peer relationships, and (6) creating a sense of comfort in learning.

4.1. The Benefits of Peer Tutoring

The first findings highlighted the students' perspectives about the benefits of peer tutoring in learning English. These findings are derived from interviews conducted with six students, and to

keep their anonymity, pseudonyms are used for each of them, namely Mulyono, Junaidi, Lela, Sumiati, Vina, and Kejora. Based on the insights gathered from these interviews, the researchers identified six benefits of peer tutoring, namely, 1) enhancing students' critical thinking, 2) increasing students' motivation, 3) boosting students' confidence, 4) promoting students' teamwork, 5) encouraging positive peer relationships, and 6) giving students a sense of comfort.

a) Fostering students' critical thinking

To identify students' existing understanding and areas for improvement, peer tutoring sessions often involve discussions and question-and-answer activities. Through these interactions, tutors and tutees engage in meaningful conversations, which allow learners to explore new ideas and perspectives related to the learning material.

Two participants confirmed that peer tutoring contributes to the development of their critical thinking skills. Lela expressed, "I believe my critical thinking has improved through peer tutoring because it's akin to discussing with peers who possess in-depth knowledge about certain topics." Another participant, Sumiati, also shared a similar opinion, stating, "I think peer tutoring fosters critical thinking among peers." Sumiati further elaborated, saying, "During peer tutoring sessions, there are opportunities for discussions among peers, creating a comfortable environment that encourages students to express their thoughts openly."

These responses suggest that peer tutoring supports the development of critical thinking through active peer interaction. The opportunity to discuss, question, and exchange ideas enables students to reflect more deeply on the material. This finding is consistent with Zulkifli et al. (2020), who found that peer tutoring enhances students' critical thinking through discussion-based learning. Similarly, Sonawane and Waldia (2022) emphasize that such interactions help students evaluate and refine their understanding.

b) Increasing students' motivation

Students who participate in peer tutoring often have expectations that these activities will support their learning. These expectations can influence their level of engagement and motivation, particularly when they are provided with opportunities to explore topics collaboratively. Junaidi expressed, "Engaging in peer tutoring activities with my peers increased my motivation and enthusiasm for learning English." Similarly, Kejora stated, "Participating in peer tutoring sessions motivated me to study more because I could discuss topics I didn't understand with my tutor and peers."

These findings indicate that peer tutoring enhances motivation by creating a supportive and engaging learning environment. Students are more willing to participate when they feel supported by their peers. This is consistent with Parker et al. (2023) who highlight that collaborative learning environments can increase students' motivation and engagement. In this context, motivation is not only an outcome but also a driving force that sustains students' participation in learning.

c) Enhancing students' confidence

The majority of students in these peer tutoring programs are EFL learners. For these students, building, nurturing, and practicing confidence in using English is an essential part of their learning. Confidence plays an important role in language learning, particularly for EFL students. Peer tutoring provides a space where students can practice and develop their confidence in a more relaxed environment. Thus, peer tutoring programs should serve as a platform for students to develop and grow their confidence and should never make them feel otherwise.

Three participants emphasized that peer tutoring enhances their self-confidence. Mulyono expressed, "I feel liberated and more self-assured during peer tutoring sessions because I am among my peers." This statement was echoed by Vina, who stated, "I gained confidence in my learning after engaging in peer tutoring activities; it was enjoyable, and we could seek help from our peers for topics we didn't understand." Sumiati further added, "I feel more assured in our abilities, and it's okay not to understand some materials; we can ask our peers for help without hesitation."

These findings indicate that peer tutoring creates an environment where students feel more comfortable expressing themselves and asking questions. This reduced anxiety contributes to increased confidence in learning. The result supports Colver and Fry (2016), who found that peer tutoring enhances students' confidence, as well as Miravet et al. (2014), who highlight its role in developing self-awareness and self-assurance.

d) Encouraging students' teamwork

Peer tutoring programs within this ELED might involve assignments focused on discussing and summarizing specific topics in their learning sessions. Typically, these assignments are collaborative, requiring students to work together in groups. This collaborative approach encourages students to brainstorm and exchange ideas, ensuring their groups perform well on the assignments.

One of the participants, Mulyono remarked, "Peer tutoring not only improves my understanding but also enhances teamwork with my friends; we exchange ideas during these sessions." Lela also pointed out, "I believe peer tutoring fosters the exchange of ideas among peers, which in turn strengthens teamwork." Kejora further emphasized, "I've observed improved collaboration between students and tutors, fostering a sense of teamwork."

These responses suggest that peer tutoring strengthens teamwork through shared learning experiences. Students learn to collaborate, communicate, and support each other's learning. This is consistent with recent studies showing that peer tutoring enhances teamwork, social interaction, and collaborative engagement in learning environments (Hanifansyah et al., 2024; Dias et al., 2025)

e) Bulding positive peer relationship

Peer tutoring involves continuous interaction between tutors and tutees, which can strengthen relationships over time. Through shared learning experiences, students develop a sense of connection and mutual support.

One participant, Mulyono stated, "This activity not only assists me in completing assignments but also allows me to exchange ideas with my friends, cultivating positive relationships with my peers." Similarly, Junaidi mentioned, "Peer tutoring instils mutual respect and responsibility among peers, fostering positive relationships. I feel a strong positive connection between me and my peers who act as tutors." Additionally, Vina added, "Peer tutoring enhances our communication skills and promotes positive relationships among peers."

The statements made by Mulyono, Junaidi, and Vina clearly indicate that peer tutoring plays a crucial role in encouraging positive peer relationships. In other words, these responses indicate that peer tutoring fosters mutual respect and strengthens social bonds. These findings are consistent with the research conducted by Miravet et al. (2014), which asserts that collaborative teaching and learning experiences with peers promote favourable peer relationships. Peer tutoring facilitates open and positive communication among students, contributing to the development of strong and supportive peer connections.

f) Creating a comfortable learning environment

In peer tutoring programs, one of the peer tutors' responsibilities is to ensure that all tutees have the opportunity to express their thoughts and be actively listened to. Tutors are expected to recognize each tutee's experiences and establish a connection with them to create a comfortable and supportive learning environment.

According to the interview responses, three participants shared that peer tutoring creates an environment where students feel at ease opening up about their confusion or lack of understanding without embarrassment. Mulyono expressed, "I sometimes hesitate to approach the lecturer when I don't understand a topic, but during peer tutoring sessions, I feel comfortable asking my peers about the material I find challenging." Lela affirmed, "Peer tutoring activities provide a safe space to openly discuss confusing topics or ask questions. I feel more proactive; if I'm confused, I immediately seek help from my tutor." Additionally, Junaidi noted, "I tend to use informal language when I'm with a

peer tutor, which makes me more comfortable openly discussing topics I find confusing or don't understand."

These participants shared their perspectives that peer tutoring encourages students to be more open and comfortable when seeking clarification from their peers. These findings suggest that peer tutoring reduces psychological barriers in learning. Students feel safer expressing their difficulties, which encourages participation. This supports Mynard and Almarzouqi (2006), who highlight the importance of a supportive environment in facilitating learning. In this sense, comfort becomes an enabling condition for meaningful interaction.

These participants' responses indicate that peer tutoring encourages students to be more open and comfortable when seeking clarification from their peers. The findings suggest that peer tutoring helps reduce psychological barriers in learning, allowing students to express their difficulties more freely and participate more actively. Such a supportive environment plays a crucial role in facilitating meaningful interaction and engagement in the learning process (Stigmar, 2016). In this context, comfort becomes an enabling condition for effective collaboration and deeper learning.

4.2. Peer Tutoring as the Implementation of ZPD through Scaffolding

As discussed earlier, Vygotsky (1978) defines the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) as the gap between what learners can achieve independently and what they can accomplish with guidance. In this study, students' learning is supported through scaffolding (Bakker et al., 2015; Wells, 1999) and social interaction with peer tutors acting as more knowledgeable others (Van de Pol et al., 2020). The findings indicate that the learning process in peer tutoring can be understood through three stages: the Zone of Current Development (ZCD), the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), and the Zone of Actual Development (ZAD).

a) ZCD stage

At the initial stage, peer tutors attempt to identify students' existing knowledge. This process is essential for understanding learners' starting points and designing appropriate learning support.

1) Establishing discussions

One common strategy used to identify students' understanding is discussion. Through discussion, tutors can assess how much students already know and adjust their approach accordingly. Three participants said that discussions during peer tutoring have enabled them to understand more about certain materials. As said by Mulyono, "During the discussion about difficult materials, usually, the peer tutor or MKO will initially elicit a certain topic and ask the tutee to answer a set of questions according to their knowledge based on the topic." Similarly, Lela said, "One of the activities [in peer tutoring] is discussing issues to solve a problem,…" Finally, Junaidi also said, "First my tutor will open a question and answer about what we are confused about from student exchange, then the peer tutor will answer, and some students will ask more questions."

These responses indicate that discussion is used to explore students' prior knowledge. This approach allows tutors to better understand learners' needs before providing further guidance. This finding is consistent with Haider and Yasmin (2015), who highlight discussion as an effective way to assess learners' understanding.

2) Giving tasks.

Another strategy used to identify students' knowledge is the use of tasks or activities at the beginning of the session. Conversing with tutees to identify the tutees' base knowledge is a common strategy in the peer tutoring programs. These strategies serve as a means to encourage students to share their understanding without fear of judgment, fostering an open and supportive learning environment. Based on the interview, two participants said that the peer tutor initially asked for several activities to test their knowledge at the beginning of class. These can be seen from the statement by Vina.

> *"When I took part in peer tutoring activities in learning to speak, I was initially given an assignment to practice saying several sentences in English; for example, the peer tutor would write a sentence on the whiteboard and then several students would be selected to read it."*

Similarly, Sumiati also said, "First of all, the peer tutor gives an activity about grammar at the beginning of class, and then the peer tutor shows several sentences on the projector screen, and we are asked to identify where the grammar errors are." These activities serve as diagnostic tools to evaluate students' current level of understanding. As suggested by Smagorinsky, (2018), such tasks help identify learners' ZCD. This allows tutors to provide more appropriate support based on students' needs.

These participants noted that the peer tutor uses assignments or tasks at the start of the class to gauge students' current understanding (Smagorinsky, 2018). Based on the ZPD theory (Vygotsky, 1978), the peer tutor who acts as the MKO in this situation is engaging in social interactions (Bakker et al., 2015; Wells 1999) to help them understand the needs of the tutees. The exchange between the peer tutor and the students during their peer tutoring sessions, where tasks are assigned, has helped the students gain a deeper understanding of specific topics. This approach aligns with Haider and Yasmin's (2015) findings, who emphasized that giving tasks through simple assignments is common method used by tutors to assess their peers' abilities. It serves as a way to understand the students' knowledge level before proceeding with the peer tutoring session.

b) ZPD stage

After identifying students' current level, learning continues within the ZPD through guided support. In this stage, peer tutors act as MKOs who provide assistance to help students progress. ZPD stage is a process of knowledge transfer from a peer tutor or MKO to tutees in order to provide a certain degree of enlightenment. Van de Pol et al., (2020) highlights the importance of interpersonal interactions with tutees or peers in the context of the ZPD exploration. This is in line with Bakker et al. (2015) who emphasizes the importance of social interactions between the peer tutor and the tutee in identifying crucial learning points during the exploration of ZPD and providing solutions to help tutees reach their ZAD. In the role of the MKO, peer tutor serves as a guide, helping learners navigate through their ZPD and focusing on the right aspects during problem-solving tasks in order to reach the ZAD (Bakker et al., 2015; Vygotsky, 1978). In this research, several strategies are found in all the peer tutoring programs, namely:

1) Providing explanations.

Providing explanations is one of the main strategies used during peer tutoring. Tutors have a responsibility to recognize and address students' learning challenges by initiating strategies that begin with providing explanations in a way that tutees can grasp. These explanations should be presented in a simple and understandable manner to ensure the acquisition of new knowledge by the students. Two participants stated that the peer tutor provides an explanation of the material during tutoring. As said by Junaidi,

> *"Then after that my tutor gave explanations and directions about student exchange language, how to participate in student exchange properly and correctly, what needs to be prepared to participate in student exchange, and the benefits of participating in student exchange."*

In addition, Kejora stated that, "When I get a difficult assignment, I will ask my peers or my tutor, and then my tutor will explain the difficult material until I can understand."

Based on these findings, it can be seen that tutors provide explanations of specific materials during peer tutoring sessions. The role of the peer tutor involves offering explanations that support learners in exploring their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and guiding them toward their learning goals (Vygotsky, 1978). In this context, the peer tutor, acting as the More Knowledgeable Other (MKO), engages in social interaction while implementing scaffolding strategies (Bakker et al., 2015; Wells, 1999).

Furthermore, these responses indicate that explanations play a crucial role in helping students understand new concepts. This finding is consistent with Vygotsky (1978), who emphasizes the

importance of guided support in learning within the ZPD. It is also supported by more recent studies highlighting that cognitive development is shaped through interaction with more knowledgeable others and structured scaffolding processes (Van de Pol et al., 2020; Aderibigbe, 2021).

Providing explanations therefore becomes a key pedagogical strategy, enabling learners to clarify misunderstandings and internalize new knowledge. In this process, peer tutors function as MKOs who facilitate meaning-making through interaction, allowing learners to gradually construct and consolidate their understanding (Van de Pol et al., 2020).

2) Giving examples.

Providing examples is another strategy that supports understanding. To enhance students' understanding of a specific topic, tutors use examples to illustrate the actual process of how something came to be. By following this activity, students can acquire and comprehend new knowledge effectively. Based on the data, two participants said that giving examples is one of activities that the peer tutor used for peer tutoring. As said by Kejora, "Usually, the peer tutor gives examples so that the material is easy to understand, for example in speaking lessons, the peer tutor first gives an example of how to pronounce a word in English." Additionally, Vina said, "In some material explanations, tutors often also give examples to their tutees so that as a tutee I don't have any difficulties or confusion, and in fact it makes it easier for me to understand the material."

According to their responses, some tutors use examples in their tutoring sessions to assist their peers. Similar to the earlier findings, where the peer tutor, acting as the MKO, utilizes examples as part of the guidance process to help learners achieve their learning goals (Vygotsky, 1978). Through the process of scaffolding, the peer tutor assists learners in recognizing their challenges and offers clear solutions for them to model by providing examples. These findings suggest that examples help students visualize and apply concepts more effectively. This supports Haider and Yasmin (2015) and Wells (1999), who emphasize the role of meaningful learning activities in scaffolding.

3) Giving personalized feedback.

Personalized feedback is also an important part of the learning process. Providing personalized feedback is a crucial activity that assists students in comprehending specific ideas or topics tailored to suit their learning needs. Based on the data that the researcher has obtained, two participants said that giving feedback is also one of the activities carried out by tutors when tutoring. As said by Lela,

> *"After the students come to the front of the class one by one to speak English the peer tutor also gives us feedback about how we spoke in English, the peer tutor explains where the mistakes are and how the words should be pronounced in English."*

Then, Sumiati said,

> *"After working on our assignment with the peer tutor, we corrected the assignment together, not only that, when correcting with the peer tutor we also provided feedback about the correct answer and provided a little explanation about the answer."*

Lela and Sumiati both agree that obtaining feedback is one of the strategies tutors engage in. Due to the limiting nature for the number of students in each tutoring session, tutors sufficient time and space to actively engage with learners, making their involvement in the learning process more meaningful. Consequently, the process of social interactions and personalized feedback between the peer tutor and tutee becomes highly beneficial for the students. These findings resonate with Comfort and McMahon (2014), who emphasized that giving feedback is a key element in peer tutoring strategies. Providing feedback on their peers' work can help them become aware of things they were not previously aware of. Furthermore, Wells (1999) emphasized on the importance of implementing relevant activities for knowledge transfer, and personalized feedback is one important activity to help tutees gain knowledge.

c) Toward ZAD (independent learning)

Although not always explicitly stated, the findings indicate that students gradually develop the ability to perform tasks independently. This progression reflects movement toward independent performance, where learners internalize knowledge and no longer rely on external support. The increase in confidence, motivation, and understanding observed in earlier findings suggests that peer tutoring facilitates this transition. Through continuous interaction and scaffolding, learners gradually shift from dependence on peers to more autonomous learning (Van de Pol et al., 2020; Smagorinsky, 2018; Panadero, 2017).

5. Conclusion

This study highlights the important role of peer tutoring as a student-centred approach that supports both academic and personal development in English language learning. Drawing on Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), the findings show that learning in peer tutoring occurs through meaningful interaction, where students support one another in developing their understanding.

Rather than functioning solely as an additional support strategy, peer tutoring creates a learning space where cognitive and socio-affective development take place simultaneously. Students not only improve their critical thinking, motivation, and confidence, but also build stronger relationships and experience a more comfortable learning environment. These elements work together to encourage active participation and deeper engagement in the learning process.

In addition, this study demonstrates how peer tutoring reflects the practical application of ZPD. The process begins with identifying students' current level of understanding and continues through guided support such as explanation, examples, and feedback. Through this gradual process, learners are able to move toward greater independence in their learning.

Overall, this study contributes to the understanding of peer tutoring by showing how it can effectively bridge theory and practice. It provides evidence that peer tutoring is not only beneficial in general terms, but also operates as a meaningful learning process grounded in sociocultural theory, particularly in the context of EFL higher education.

Based on the findings, several practical recommendations can be offered. For students, peer tutoring should be viewed not only as a way to improve academic performance, but also as an opportunity to develop confidence, communication skills, and collaborative learning habits. Actively participating in peer tutoring can help students become more independent and reflective learners.

For teachers and academic institutions, it is important to design and support structured peer tutoring programs. Providing clear guidance, training, and supervision can ensure that peer tutoring activities are meaningful and aligned with learning objectives. Integrating peer tutoring into regular classroom practices may also help create a more interactive and student-centred learning environment.

For future researchers, further studies are needed to explore peer tutoring in broader contexts. Future research could examine its long-term impact on students' academic achievement and personal development, as well as its implementation across different disciplines and educational settings. In addition, combining qualitative and quantitative approaches may provide a more comprehensive understanding of its effectiveness.

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