

From Low-Proficiency Loops to Hybrid Scaffolding: Adolescent EFL Learners' Perceptions of Peer-Mediated Vocabulary Learning

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Abstract

Lexical acquisition continues to pose a recurring obstacle for Indonesian EFL learners, largely owing to the scarcity of authentic English exposure beyond the classroom setting. Although peer interaction has been widely regarded as a pedagogically viable alternative, relatively few studies have examined how learners personally construct and interpret meaning from such exchanges within structured vocabulary learning activities. This study adopts a descriptive qualitative approach to examine senior high school students' perceptions toward peer interaction in the context of English vocabulary learning. Employing purposive sampling, three tenth-grade students representing distinct proficiency levels were recruited as focal participants at a public senior high school in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. Data collection relied on semi-structured interviews and non-participatory classroom observations, with the resulting data analyzed through Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis procedure. Four overarching themes emerged from the analysis: (1) peer interaction fosters a psychologically safe learning environment that effectively reduces students' affective filters; (2) collaborative engagement in shared tasks promotes bidirectional lexical retention among participants; (3) proficiency-homogeneous groupings, particularly among lower-ability learners, generate communicative stagnation commonly referred to as a "low-proficiency loops"; and (4) contemporary adolescent learners strategically draw upon digital tools as part of a "hybrid scaffolding" resource to compensate for the limitations inherent in human-to-human interaction. Collectively, these findings underscore that the success of peer-mediated vocabulary learning is substantially dependent on deliberate instructional grouping decisions and the thoughtful incorporation of technology into the learning process.

Keywords: EFL vocabulary learning, hybrid scaffolding, low-proficiency loops, peer interaction, student perception

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INTRODUCTION

Among the various components of English language learning, vocabulary stands as the most essential foundation. It determines how effectively a person comprehends written texts, articulates ideas, and operates across the four core language skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Schmitt, 2010). In the absence of sufficient word knowledge, even a thorough command of grammatical rules offers little practical

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value. Indonesia presents a particular challenge in this regard, as English occupies the status of a foreign language (EFL) with limited use in daily communication outside formal instruction (Crystal, 2003). While digital platforms such as social media, YouTube, TikTok, online games, and music have expanded students' incidental exposure to English vocabulary, this exposure tends to be fragmented, self-directed, and unmediated by explicit guidance or feedback. As a result, structured classroom interaction—particularly peer interaction—remains a decisive space where vocabulary acquisition can be consolidated through negotiation of meaning, scaffolding, and mutual correction, processes that unstructured digital exposure alone does not reliably support.

The current condition in Indonesian secondary schools, however, does not reflect this importance adequately. Research consistently indicates that students' vocabulary knowledge falls below the benchmarks set by the national curriculum (Zuhairi & Mistar, 2023). Learners face persistent barriers to lexical growth, including insufficient meaningful input, weak intrinsic motivation to engage with English independently, and limited real-world opportunities to apply newly encountered words. Compounding these issues is the widespread reliance on passive memorization as the dominant vocabulary teaching method, a strategy that has been extensively criticized for its failure to produce durable retention (Webb & Nation, 2017). Word lists committed to memory without deeper cognitive engagement are rapidly lost. This situation calls for instructional alternatives that are more interactive, participatory, and socially embedded.

Optimizing peer interaction, defined as structured verbal and collaborative exchanges among students, represents one such alternative. The classroom itself is not merely a physical space but a multidimensional environment in which social, psychological, and instructional forces converge (Dong et al., 2018). The social dimension, expressed through student-to-student communication, carries particularly strong implications for vocabulary growth. This study is primarily grounded in Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Theory, which serves as the main theoretical framework underpinning the analysis of peer interaction in this research. Sociocultural Theory holds that higher cognitive functions, including lexical development, originate in social interaction before being individually internalized. Central to this framework is the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which explains that learners can attain vocabulary competencies beyond their independent capacity when supported by more proficient peers—a principle that directly informs how this study interprets the collaborative exchanges observed among participants.

To complement this primary framework, two supporting theories are drawn upon to account for the affective and interactional dimensions of peer-mediated vocabulary learning. Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis explains how peer-based communication reduces language anxiety and builds learner confidence, thereby creating emotional conditions more conducive to vocabulary absorption. Long's (1996) Interaction Hypothesis further accounts for how meaning negotiation during peer exchanges compels learners to attend more carefully to unfamiliar vocabulary, facilitating its transfer into long-term memory. Together, these three perspectives—with Vygotskian Sociocultural Theory as the central lens—form the theoretical foundation for examining how peer interaction shapes vocabulary development in this study.

Prior research has begun to illuminate the role of peer interaction in EFL vocabulary learning. Astuti and Barratt (2021) employed qualitative methods to examine how peer interaction naturally scaffolds vocabulary understanding in cooperative tasks within Indonesian EFL settings, finding that such arrangements

support meaning negotiation, comprehensible input, and learner confidence. From an experimental standpoint, Noroozi (2016) demonstrated experimentally that vocabulary instruction delivered through peer interaction produced measurably higher self-efficacy gains than individual study. More recently, Fikry and Inderawati (2025) found that peer interaction in low-stakes, informal settings meaningfully supported affective outcomes and communicative confidence among Indonesian university EFL learners, suggesting that similar dynamics may extend to other language skills such as vocabulary. Despite these contributions, important dimensions of the topic remain unexplored.

Three specific gaps emerge from reviewing the existing body of literature. First, the subjective dimension of peer interaction remains largely unexamined; most studies prioritize measurable outcomes such as test performance or self-efficacy ratings without attending to the personal meanings learners ascribe to their interactive experiences. Second, among the studies reviewed for this research, qualitative approaches to this subject appear considerably outnumbered by quantitative ones, leaving the emotional texture, contextual nuances, and lived realities of students engaged in peer-based vocabulary tasks insufficiently documented. Third, the senior high school EFL environment in Indonesia is considerably underrepresented in peer interaction research despite its distinctive instructional conditions and vocabulary-related challenges. These overlapping gaps establish the rationale for a qualitative study centered on learners' own perspectives.

Responding to these gaps, the present study seeks to explore how tenth-grade students at a public senior high school in Yogyakarta perceive peer interaction in relation to English vocabulary learning. Adopting a descriptive qualitative design, the study gathers data through semi-structured interviews and non-participatory classroom observations with three purposively selected participants representing different proficiency levels. The findings are intended to enrich the theoretical understanding of socially mediated vocabulary learning while providing actionable guidance for English educators aiming to cultivate genuinely collaborative classroom environments suited to Indonesian adolescent learners.

METHOD

The study was conducted within a descriptive qualitative research framework, selected because it prioritizes the capture of participants' subjective meanings and lived experiences. This design was considered appropriate for the present study because the primary aim was to describe, in a naturalistic and open-ended manner, how senior high school students perceive and interpret their peer interaction experiences during vocabulary learning, without imposing predetermined categories or numerical measures on their accounts (Sandelowski, 2000). Through this design, the researcher was able to remain closely attuned to participants' own language and meaning-making as they discussed their experiences with peer interaction, producing a rich and contextually grounded account of the phenomenon under study.

The research site was a public senior high school in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, operating under a national EFL curriculum. Three tenth-grade students between the ages of 15 and 17 were recruited through purposive sampling using a maximum variation strategy, with English proficiency levels determined based on the recommendation of the students' English teacher according to their observed classroom performance. This strategy was employed to capture a diverse range of peer interaction experiences across

different positions in classroom social dynamics. To safeguard participants' privacy, all were assigned pseudonyms used throughout the study.

Two data collection methods were employed in combination. Semi-structured interviews functioned as the primary source of data, providing participants with the freedom to articulate their perceptions and experiences through open-ended questions organized around four thematic dimensions: socio-academic interaction, cognitive scaffolding and vocabulary retention, affective and emotional support, and interactional challenges alongside coping strategies. Interviews were conducted in Indonesian to allow for natural and unrestricted expression and were subsequently translated into English for analysis. Non-participatory classroom observations served a supplementary role, allowing the researcher to assess whether participants' reported experiences were consistent with their observed behavior during actual English vocabulary learning activities.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the six-phase procedure proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Themes were generated inductively from the data and subsequently connected to the theoretical framework in the discussion.

Trustworthiness was established through the criteria set forth by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Credibility was strengthened through triangulation of interview and observation data, member checking, in which key excerpts were returned to participants for confirmation, and peer debriefing conducted with the thesis supervisor. Transferability was supported by providing thick, contextually rich descriptions of the research setting and participants. Dependability was ensured through meticulous and transparent documentation of all methodological decisions. Confirmability was reinforced through the direct inclusion of verbatim participant statements and ongoing researcher reflexivity, in which the researcher actively identified and set aside prior assumptions during analysis.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Thematic analysis of the combined interview and observation data produced four interrelated themes that together illuminate how tenth-grade students understand and experience peer interaction in English vocabulary learning: peer interaction as a dual source of academic and emotional support, collaborative engagement as a driver of vocabulary retention, the constraining effects of proficiency-homogeneous groupings, and the adaptive integration of digital tools as a supplementary scaffolding mechanism.

The most salient theme to emerge among the three participants was the dual function of peer interaction as simultaneously an intellectual resource and an emotional anchor. All three participants expressed greater ease in seeking vocabulary assistance from classmates rather than from their teacher, a preference they attributed to the non-evaluative nature of peer relationships. Both Participant R and Participant A described peer interaction as a psychologically safe learning space. Participant R explained that they frequently relied on more proficient classmates for vocabulary support, noting that *"my understanding of English vocabulary is still limited, while Participant I is more fluent. So, when I find something unfamiliar, I usually ask them."* (Participant R, Interview). Likewise, Participant A emphasized that peer interaction increased confidence during vocabulary learning, explaining that *"because having a friend makes me feel more confident, and we can gain new understanding or experiences. When I*

don't understand something, I usually ask another friend, and it is very helpful." (Participant A, Interview).

Classroom observations lent support to these accounts: students were frequently seen asking seatmates about unfamiliar words and displayed noticeably higher engagement during pair and group vocabulary tasks than during individual work. These responses and observed behaviors reflect the mechanism Krashen (1982) identifies as a lowered affective filter, whereby the reduction of psychological barriers enables learners to process and retain linguistic input more efficiently. In contrast to the teacher-student dynamic, which inherently carries evaluative weight, peer relationships in this study were built on greater social equality, cultivating a sense of psychological safety that supported communicative experimentation with unfamiliar vocabulary. Among these three participants, this finding echoes Fikry and Inderawati's (2025) observation regarding the benefits of low-pressure peer environments, pointing to the removal of evaluative authority as one plausible mechanism behind this sense of safety.

The second theme demonstrates that, for these three participants, collaborative task engagement, particularly through reciprocal explanation and shared meaning construction, generated a two-way retention advantage whose character differed based on each participant's interactional role. Participant R described how collaborative discussion strengthened vocabulary retention, explaining that *"after interacting with friends, we usually find out the meaning of something that we previously did not know."* (Participant R, Interview). Similarly, Participant I reflected on the reciprocal nature of peer learning, noting that *"they usually ask me about the meanings of vocabulary they do not understand, so I remember the meanings more often as well."* (Participant I, Interview).

Classroom observations reinforced this pattern, with students regularly seen discussing vocabulary, exchanging meanings, and explaining words to one another during group tasks, making the classroom appear more interactive during collaborative activities than during individual work. These patterns align with both Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development and Long's (1996) Interaction Hypothesis. For the learner seeking help, peer dialogue triggered active engagement with unfamiliar words and opened pathways for comprehensible input. For the learner offering explanation, articulating word meanings aloud demanded precision and reinforced internalization through productive language use. This bidirectional dynamic offers a more detailed account, within the scope of this study, of how peer dialogue may support vocabulary consolidation than that previously documented by Noroozi (2016) and Astuti and Barratt (2021).

The third theme introduces an important qualification to the otherwise favorable portrait of peer interaction: collaboration did not automatically yield productive learning outcomes for all participants. When group members collectively lacked sufficient vocabulary knowledge, peer exchanges could amplify confusion rather than reduce it. Participant R acknowledged that peer interaction became less productive when group members shared similarly limited vocabulary knowledge, explaining that *"there were some difficulties, especially when discussing with friends who were also not fluent in English. Instead of understanding better, we sometimes became even more confused."* (Participant R, Interview).

Classroom observations captured this dynamic directly: when peer discussions stalled, typically because no group member could supply a reliable answer, students independently turned to their smartphones, suggesting an awareness of their peer

group's limitations and a search for alternative scaffolding. Interpreted through a Vygotskian lens, this appeared to occur when the conditions necessary for the ZPD to function were absent; without a More Knowledgeable Other to provide guidance, peer interaction degenerated into what this study calls a low-proficiency loop, in which shared uncertainty multiplied rather than was resolved. Within this study, this pattern suggests that students who gravitate toward socially familiar peers of similar ability levels may inadvertently dismantle the very conditions under which peer interaction delivers its intended benefits. This observation adds nuance to the concern raised by Astuti and Barratt (2021) regarding proficiency imbalance, suggesting that, at least among these participants, productive peer interaction depended on deliberate, teacher-orchestrated group formation rather than occurring spontaneously.

The fourth and most distinctive theme documents how these students strategically turned to digital tools, notably smartphones and Google Translate, when human peer interaction proved insufficient. Participant A explained that digital resources became an alternative source of support when peer discussion reached an impasse, stating that *"since none of my friends knew the answer, I searched for the correct spelling on my phone."* (Participant A, Interview). Similarly, Participant I reported using digital tools to supplement peer interaction, noting that *"I also search for the meanings of unfamiliar vocabulary on my smartphone, such as through Google Translate."* (Participant I, Interview).

Classroom observations confirmed that digital tool use was particularly concentrated in moments when group discussions stalled; all three participants were observed consulting their smartphones when peer exchanges failed to produce clear answers, consistently returning to group discussion afterward. This sequential pattern—peer interaction stalling, a digital tool being consulted, and collaborative discussion resuming—suggests that, for these students, technology was not used as an escape from peer engagement but rather as a bridge back to it. From a Vygotskian standpoint, the smartphone appeared to function as a psychological mediating artifact, temporarily filling the role of the More Knowledgeable Other when no human counterpart was available. This observation extends Taufan's (2024) finding that exposure to English-language media supports vocabulary recognition by illustrating, within this small sample, a purposeful, goal-oriented mode of digital engagement woven into active peer learning. Within the scope of this study, these findings offer an early empirical illustration of what might be described as a hybrid human-digital scaffolding model, in which peer interaction and digital mediation appear to operate as mutually reinforcing resources rather than opposing forces.

Considered collectively, these four themes suggest that, among the three participants in this study, views of peer interaction were neither straightforwardly positive nor negative, but appeared to be shaped dynamically by the conditions governing each interaction. The presence of psychological safety, the degree of proficiency variation within groups, and the availability of alternative scaffolding resources jointly appeared to determine whether peer interaction delivered the lexical benefits anticipated by Vygotsky (1978), Long (1996), and Krashen (1982). While these findings cannot be generalized beyond this sample, they offer a detailed, contextually grounded account suggesting that effective peer-based vocabulary instruction in Indonesian EFL classrooms may depend less on incidental social contact and more on deliberate, carefully structured pedagogical planning.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how tenth-grade students in an Indonesian EFL setting perceived peer interaction in the context of English vocabulary learning. Three principal conclusions can be drawn from the findings. First, peer interaction functions as an affective enabler by generating psychological safety, which reduces learners' affective filters and opens a space for communicative risk-taking with new vocabulary. Second, the cognitive value of peer scaffolding and collaborative meaning negotiation is strongly dependent on group composition; while mixed-proficiency groupings support a reciprocal retention benefit for learners at both ends of the ability spectrum, groups composed entirely of lower-proficiency learners risk entering a low-proficiency loop characterized by communicative stagnation. Third, today's adolescent learners naturally gravitate toward a hybrid scaffolding pattern, fluidly incorporating digital translation tools as mediating resources to compensate for the limitations of peer-only interaction. These findings carry clear pedagogical implications: English teachers should move beyond allowing students to self-select into groups and instead deliberately construct proficiency-diverse collaborative configurations, while thoughtfully embedding digital tools into peer learning activities to sustain productive engagement.

Several boundary conditions should be considered when interpreting these findings. This study prioritized qualitative depth over statistical generalization, drawing on a purposive sample of three students within a single public senior high school in Yogyakarta; the findings therefore reflect the lived experiences of these participants rather than representing a pattern generalizable across Indonesian EFL learners more broadly. The research also captured a cross-sectional snapshot of students' perceptions at a single point in time rather than tracking how peer interaction patterns evolve over sustained instruction. In addition, because participants expressed their insights in Indonesian, their responses required interpretive translation into English; although careful efforts were made to preserve semantic equivalence, some cultural and contextual nuances inherent to the participants' original expressions may not be fully captured. Finally, peer interaction was examined within the natural ecology of general classroom vocabulary activities rather than within specific task types, leaving open the question of how different activity formats might further shape peer collaboration.

These conclusions and limitations point to several practical and research implications. English teachers are encouraged to design structured peer vocabulary activities with intentionally heterogeneous proficiency groupings, while actively monitoring group dynamics to identify emerging low-proficiency loops, recognizable when interactions stall or become overly confused, and intervening through group reassignment or targeted scaffolding. Students, in turn, are encouraged to engage actively in both roles within peer interaction, seeking help as well as offering explanations, since taking on the role of the explainer appears to reinforce the explainer's own vocabulary retention. For future research, replicating this study with a larger and more diverse sample across multiple classrooms or school sites would strengthen the transferability of these findings, while a longitudinal design extending across a full semester would help illuminate how peer interaction patterns and vocabulary development evolve over time. Future studies might also examine specific vocabulary task formats to identify which structures most effectively activate the ZPD and facilitate negotiation of meaning and could adopt a mixed-methods design combining qualitative interviews with standardized vocabulary assessments to triangulate perceptual data with measurable learning outcomes.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

RDO was responsible for conceptualizing the study, designing the research methodology, collecting empirical data through interviews and classroom observations, conducting the initial thematic analysis, and composing the original manuscript. PRY contributed through supervisory oversight, critical evaluation of the analytical frameworks, participation in the final data interpretation, and substantial revision of the manuscript. Both authors reviewed and approved the final submitted version.

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