

PEER INTERACTION AS A DETERMINANT OF EFL ENGAGEMENT: EVIDENCE FROM STUDENTS AT A KURDISH UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT:

The importance of learner engagement for success in L2/FL learning tasks has been discussed extensively. Although the topic of engagement has been explored in many research studies, few studies have focused on the importance of social factors such as peer interaction on behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement of Kurdish learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). The research aims to explore the effect of peer interaction and feedback on learner behavioral, emotional and cognitive involvement, and to determine whether the level of English language proficiency (ELP) influences the relationship between the role of peers and learner engagement. This study explores the role of peer interaction and feedback in the engagement of the learners with respect to the Kurdish higher education system in particular at the university of Duhok. A mixed method design was used, which included focus group discussions, open-ended responses in the survey as well as a standardized English language assessment. The subjects of the study were 134 second- and third-year Kurdish EFL learners and they were divided into three levels: beginner, intermediate and advanced levels based on the Oxford Placement Test. The results suggest that positive peer engagement and feedback are important factors in improving behavioral, emotional and cognitive involvement. The results of statistical analysis revealed that 66.5% of the students expressed positive engagement and that the peer interaction had the highest score for engagement ($M = 1.78$) and was the only statistically significant predictor of positive engagement ($p < .05$) when compared with other variables. The results indicated that a weak positive correlation was found between engagement and academic achievement ($r = .12$). These findings also indicate that the effect of peer support depends on levels of proficiency and that the nature of the peer support (e.g. group size, workload distribution, classroom structure, etc.) affects the impact. Inevitably, smaller groups were related to higher levels of involvement and interaction. Engagement was not always associated with improved learning outcomes. The research emphasizes the need for establishing a supportive peer learning atmosphere which enables meaningful involvement in Kurdish EFL classrooms. This work makes further contributions to the distinctions between learner engagement and motivation, participation, and academic achievement. The methodological transparency and analytical rigor were enhanced through strengthening of reliability procedures, coding procedures, and statistical interpretations.

KEYWORDS: Peer Interaction; Kurdish University EFL Learners; Social Factors; Higher Education.

1. INTRODUCTION

Learning a language is not a solitary cognitive activity; rather, it is a socially situated phenomenon that occurs within specific environmental contexts. For language learning to effectively take place in Kurdish university classrooms, teachers and educators must understand the social factors that may either hinder or support language development. Hence, it is crucial for teachers to create a productive environment where learners feel safe to engage. Some of the factors that can either enhance or hinder learners' engagement include peer connection, classroom dynamics, teacher behavior, and feedback practice (Vygotsky, 1978). Those social factors that hinder active participation include low levels of

interaction, fear of negative evaluation, and traditional teacher-centered practices commonly presented in Kurdish EFL university classrooms. Therefore, using social support systems-practically, peer interaction and feedback is essential for improving learner involvement and teaching effectiveness.

1.1 English as a Tool for Academic and Social Mobility in Kurdistan

For the research Problem, although there is a growing body of consensus that engagement in language learning will be a good predictor of successful language learning very little is known about the relationship between peer interaction and behavioral, emotional and cognitive

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engagement in Kurdish EFL learners. Moreover, the link between participation and success in the academic level in higher education settings in Kurdistan is not yet explored at its depth.

English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in higher education has increasingly gained prominence worldwide, partly because it has helped in the growth of academics, professional and cultural exchange. English is the official language of instruction in most academic disciplines and in those that do not use English as the dominant language, vocabulary and academic terms are still introduced in English. This leads to the fact that English proficiency is often a prerequisite for postgraduate education. In addition to academics, the employment sector shows that English is essential not only in university education, but also in obtaining jobs and advancing careers, in practice, in fields such as diplomacy and foreign business. Consequently, in the Kurdish context, English is not only used as a tool for academic disciplines but also as an instrument to social mobility and an avenue to global knowledge. Although English is an institutional and financial priority, many students cannot actively participate in Kurdish EFL classes, which limits the effectiveness of teaching English and future opportunities for students. To comprehend the role of English in social and educational mobility, researchers must pay attention to everyday classroom learning setting at the university level. The use of English language in Kurdish universities is gaining more and more importance, but the number of passive and uninterested students in EFL classes has not decreased. Teachers' attention is usually directed toward the linguistic elements, grammar, and vocabulary learning with limited attention to the essence of the social classroom interaction. This implies that the contextual and social factors are becoming more important when it comes to defining learning outcomes.

Peer interaction has been studied in great detail in international EFL and L2 research, but its status in L2 Kurdish classroom at the university of Duhok, college of Education has not received sufficient attention. To date, research in Kurdistan has largely centered on language achievement, motivation, and teaching, with little research on the role of peer interaction on engagement behaviors, emotions and cognitions. Furthermore, very little research has been conducted to investigate whether peer engagement is related to achievement differences at varying proficiency levels. This gap hinders understanding of the social processes influencing experiences of language learning in Kurdish Higher Education institutions. Thus, the present study tries to examine the correlation between peer interaction, engagement of learners, and academic achievement for the Kurdish EFL university students at the university of Duhok, college of Education, department of English Language.

2. Literature Review

Language learning is a social process, whereby learners learn by interacting with others, and engaging in meaningful communicative activities. However, in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) setting, social

interaction is of special importance, as opportunities for speaking the target language are restricted to the classroom setting. According to the Socio-cultural Theory (Vygotsky, 1978) learning is mediated by social interaction, language and cultural tools. Learners attain higher levels of performance through collaboration with teachers and their peers, thus acquiring linguistic competence. Therefore, it is crucial to carry out a study on the social factors affecting learners' engagement in language learning to achieve better language learning outcomes.

2.1 Social Context

Social context of learning means the web of connections, interrelationships, and institutional settings that impact learners in their learning. Examples of social context in classrooms involve relationships between students, relationships between teachers and students, classroom culture and opportunities for participation in the language classroom. Supportive and collaborative classroom structures have been found to foster learners' motivation, confidence and involvement in learning, while restrictive or highly hierarchy classroom structures could lead to restriction of involvement in learning (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011).

On the sociocultural level, learning is mediated by the social. Language serves as one of the most important mediational means by which learners build knowledge and acquire communicative competence (Vygotsky, 1978). Classroom settings that foster interaction, cooperation and meaningful communication will therefore be more conducive to the engagement of learners and language development.

2.2 Language Learning Strategies in SLA

Peer interaction has emerged as an important field of study in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research. According to the interactionist views, learning the language is supported when it is used in meaningful interactions, negotiation of meaning, requesting clarification, and giving feedback (Long, 1996). These interactions give learners opportunities to observe language forms, overcome language barriers and develop their language skills.

Research has shown that the use of peer collaboration positively affects language learning by raising the participation, confidence and autonomy of the learners (Swain, 2000). Group work helps students work together to solve problems, share information and practice language in a positive learning atmosphere. These interactions provide the learner with support from more knowledgeable peers and support to others.

Peer interaction can be especially beneficial in EFL environments where authentic opportunities to use the language may be sparse outside of the classroom. Learners typically are more at ease communicating with fellow classmates than with teachers, and this lessens anxiety and encourages experimentation with the target language. Peer interaction therefore is a source of language development and a way of enhancing involvement and participation.

2.3 Classroom Interaction

Classroom interaction involves the ways that teachers and students and students communicate with each other in the classroom. Interactive classrooms allow for students to ask questions, share opinions, join in discussion and collaborate in problem-solving. This type of interaction encourages active learning and language that is meaningful.

Educational research indicates that dialogic and learner-centered classroom interaction leads to increased learner engagement and learner autonomy (Walsh 2011). By contrast, classrooms with a low level of communication and a high level of teacher talk could decrease learners' participation. Interactive classroom practices offer essential opportunities for the EFL learner to practice English, to get feedback, and hence, to build up communicative competence in the EFL classroom context.

In addition, a sense of fear of doing mistakes can be minimized and the readiness to communicate can be enhanced through the collaborative classroom (Dörnyei, 2019). By building a sense of community and belonging within the classroom, students will feel encouraged to participate in class discussions, ask questions and try out new language forms. Thus, classroom interaction is one of the important social factors in affecting learner engagement.

2.4 Feedback in Language Learning

Feedback is key in language learning process as it gives information to learners about their performance and helps to direct future learning. Feedback on performance allows learners to assess strengths and weaknesses, check progress and learn how to be self-regulated learners (Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

In sociocultural theory, feedback is considered a type of mediational help facilitating the learning process in learner's ZPD (Vygotsky, 1978). The role of constructive feedback is that it enables learners to achieve what they might not be able to do on their own. The literature in the field of second language acquisition has consistently revealed that feedback when and where it's needed, targeted to the learner, and supportive of learning boosts learner confidence, motivation, and participation (Ellis, 2009).

The effectiveness of feedback, however, is dependent on how it is given. Feedback is given in a positive and encouraging way which increases engagement and positive attitudes towards learning. Over-critical, unclear and/or public corrective feedback, on the other hand, can heighten anxiety and learner unwillingness to participate. Therefore, feedback is not just an instructional tool, but is also a social process that affects learners' emotional and behavioral responses.

2.5 Learner Engagement

Conceptual Clarification of engagement should be separated from related constructs. Participation is what one sees in the classroom in terms of student behavior, motivation is how willing and motivated students are to learn, and academic achievement is the product of

concrete measures of learning, including test scores and grades. Engagement includes behaviors, emotions and thoughts invested in learning and is a factor that can impact, but does not equal, achievement.

The Engagement Theory views engagement as a multidimensional construct consisting of three components: behavioral, emotional and cognitive (Fredricks et al., 2004). Behavioral engagement is defined as student involvement in learning activities, emotional engagement is defined as student emotions and attitudes towards learning, and cognitive engagement is defined as student commitment to learning strategies and mental efforts.

It is well-documented that engagement is a strong predictor of language learning achievement and academic success. Active learning shows higher level of persistence, motivation and strategic learning behavior (Reschly & Christenson, 2012). Social factors such as peer interaction, classroom communication and feedback practices are significant in EFL classrooms for engagement.

It is evident in the literature that the social factors of peer interaction, classroom communication and feedback are interrelated and impact on the learner's engagement. Positive peer interactions facilitate engagement and decrease anxiety, and positive feedback fosters confidence and self-regulated learning. Most studies have focused on the examination of these factors individually, and not on their integrated effects on behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement.

There is a scarcity of studies in Kurdish higher education that examine learner engagement, peer interaction, and feedback in the context of international EFL. Learner's engagement, peer interaction and feedback have been widely studied in international EFL but are not well examined in Kurdish higher education. Previous research has largely been concerned with language achievement and motivation to learn with less attention devoted to social processes that affect engagement. Consequently, the role played by peer interaction in the engagement of behavioral, emotional and cognitive aspects of Kurdish EFL learners is not adequate enough to be known which is a gap this study seeks to address.

2.6 Previous Studies

Critical Analysis of the previous studies reported positive results with collaboration and peer support, but most of the studies are descriptive or limited to motivation or attitudes. There is a paucity of studies which critically analyze engagement as a multi-dimensional construct and explore the impact of differences in proficiency on the effectiveness of peer interaction.

Karim and Mohammed (2018) examined peer teaching in EFL settings with the Kurdish university students and teachers. Open-ended questionnaires were used and the researchers identified positive attitudes of students and teachers towards peer teaching. Their results indicated that peer teaching could be used to facilitate cooperative learning and offer more language learning opportunities for learners within and out of the classroom.

Alzubi et al. (2024) studied the effects of collaborative learning on the English learning and social interaction of EFL learners. Their research revealed that teamwork, peer learning, self-confidence, and classroom engagement were enhanced by collaborative activities. The scientists found that social interaction is integral to language development and learning of collaborative skills.

In the same way, Omar et al. (2023) examined the impact of friendship networks on the motivation to learn English of Kurdish EFL learners. They concluded that friend plays an important role in the motivation of learners through its creation of supportive communication and language learning environment.

The studies reviewed all showed the significance of social interaction in EFL learning. There are a few things that can be improved, however. First, previous studies on Kurdish L2 motivation and attitudes have mainly been concentrated on motivation and attitudes instead of learner engagement as a multidimensional construct. Second, previous studies on L2 motivation have mainly concentrated on motivation and attitudes, while previous study on L2 motivation has not focused on learner engagement as a multidimensional construct. Secondly, there have been few studies that have evaluated the role of peer interaction on behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement in the same study. Third, little attention has been paid to how engagement is associated with academic outcomes at varying levels of proficiency.

Therefore, there is a need for context-specific studies that explore the role of peer interaction and feedback in enhancing learners' engagement with Kurdish university students. To fill this gap, the present study focuses on the impact of peer interaction on behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement as well as whether that impact relates to academic achievement. This study also helps to fill the gap in the literature related to social factors affecting EFL learning in Kurdish higher education.

All the reviewed studies in this section of previous studies emphasize the role of peer teaching, collaborative learning and friendship-based support in the development of language learning and motivation, but have some drawbacks when compared with the current study. Karim and Mohammed (2018) studied attitudes towards peer teaching, Alzubi et al. (2023) explored the impact of collaborative learning interventions, and Hassan et al. (2023) studied the motivational role of friends in learning English. None of these studies, however, focused on the effect of peer interaction on the behavioral, emotional, and cognitive aspects of learner engagement among Kurdish students in the EFL context in universities. In addition, little has been considered in regard to the effects of greater engagement, due to peer interaction, on academic achievement at various levels of proficiency. Hence, the current study is an extension of these works by exploring the relationship between peer interaction, engagement and academic success in the context of higher education in Kurdistan region.

3. Methodology

This research aimed to examine the impact of peer interaction and feedback on learners' involvement in the

Kurdish EFL university students. To achieve this objective, a concurrent mixed-methods design was used which involved qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis. Mixed methods were chosen to give a holistic view of measurable patterns of engagement and participants' perceptions/experiences of peer interaction.

3.1 Participants and Sampling Procedure

Demographic and contextual details of the participants were students enrolled in an undergraduate English as a foreign language course at different levels, based on the Oxford Placement Test. The sample consisted of male and female students from various socio-cultural and linguistic backgrounds, which was representative of Kurdish EFL learners as a whole. A total of 134 male and female undergraduate students from the college of Basic Education at the University of Duhok in the study of the Department of English Language, including 89 females and 45 males. The students who participated were aged 19-30 years, 2nd and 3rd year. The majority of participants were in their early 20s and identified Kurdish as their mother tongue language while a small number of them reported Arabic or other languages as their first language. Since the participants were easily accessible to the researcher for the data collection period, a convenience sampling technique was used.

All participants were tested for their English proficiency level using the Oxford Placement Test (OPT) which is a standardized, internationally accepted test. Students were categorized according to their scores into beginner, intermediate and advanced proficiency groups. The researcher could analyze the engagement patterns according to ELL level.

3.2 Research Design and Data Collection

Data was collected from one academic semester (six weeks). The collection of qualitative and quantitative data took place simultaneously and was combined during interpretation.

The qualitative component consisted of focus group discussions (FGDs) and open-ended survey questions as both are listed in the appendices section at the end of the paper in Appendices 2 and 3. Four focus group discussions were held with eight to ten students each, and lasting around 30 to 45 minutes per discussion. The FGDs delved into students' experience with peer interaction, classroom participation and feedback practices, and experience of engagement in English language learning. All discussions were audio recorded with an AI-assisted transcription tool and the AI generated transcription was reviewed and manually corrected to ensure accuracy.

The second qualitative tool was the open-ended survey questions, which were aimed to understand students' perceptions about peer support, opportunities for interaction, participation in the classroom, and the impact of feedback on students' learning experiences. Survey items were adapted and drawn from previously existing engagement and interaction frameworks to increase construct validity (Fredricks et al., 2004).

The quantitative part was the Oxford Placement Test and the statistical analysis of engagement-related variables. The English language proficiency test was used to get an objective picture of students' competence in the English language and to compare levels of proficiency.

3.3 Ethical Considerations

Prior to collecting the data, the study was given ethical approval by the University of Duhok departmental research committee. The participants were given information on the purpose of this study and their voluntary participation. All participants gave verbal consent before participating.

No information that would identify individuals or specific cases was collected, for purposes of privacy and anonymity. During transcription, coding, and analysis participants were given numerical codes. All participants also informed about withdrawing from the study at any time without facing any repercussions.

3.4 Validity and Reliability

Reliability Procedures were facilitated by repeated consultation with qualitative data, systematic coding practices, quantitative and qualitative data triangulation, and expert validation. And in order to improve the validity and reliability of the research instruments, the questions for the focus group discussion and the open-ended items of the survey were reviewed by a panel of experts in Applied Linguistics and English Language Teaching, which are listed in the appendices section at the end of the paper in Appendices 1. They were included in their feedback to make it clear, relevant and focused on the research objectives. The Oxford Placement Test was chosen, too, because it is a well-validated and reliable standardized English language proficiency test (Oxford University Press, n.d.).

3.5 Data Analysis

For coding procedure, thematic analysis was used as a qualitative data analysis method, which is the 6-step process used by Braun and Clarke. Descriptive statistics, correlations and regression analyses were used for statistical analysis. The results of the correlation were analyzed with great care and it was not assumed that they proved causation.

Thematic analysis, as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006), was used to analyze the qualitative data from the

focus group discussions and open-ended responses to the survey. The transcripts were read several times to familiarize oneself with the data. Initial codes were given to relevant segments, later these codes were sorted into larger categories or themes. Microsoft Excel was used for codes, themes and supporting quotations organization and management.

R statistical software was used to analyze the quantitative data. Descriptive data analysis was performed to summarize patterns of engagement and distributions of skill levels. Correlation and regression analyses were used to explore the relationships between peer interaction, engagement, and academic achievement. After gathering qualitative and quantitative data, the results were combined to offer a comprehensive interpretation about the impact of peer interaction on the EFL university students' engagement in learning Kurdish language.

4. Results and Discussion

The results of the study are presented and discussed in this chapter. Results are arranged in a way that the research goals and questions are addressed. The quantitative data from the questionnaire and test are presented with the appropriate statistical analysis and the qualitative data from the interview and focus group discussion are analyzed thematically. Findings are interpreted and discussed with regard to the related literature and theoretical framework discussed in the previous chapters.

4.1 Results

The findings of this study based on the collected data is presented in this section. The results are presented systematically in the light of research questions and research objectives. The relationships between the study variables are analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics and the qualitative results are reported to give further insight into participants' experiences and perspectives.

4.1.1 Results of the Statistical Analysis

To understand the relationship between social factors and student engagement, the researcher analysed data from 134 participants. The analysis focused on how different social influences (peer versus family or other influences) relate to engagement levels and academic achievement.

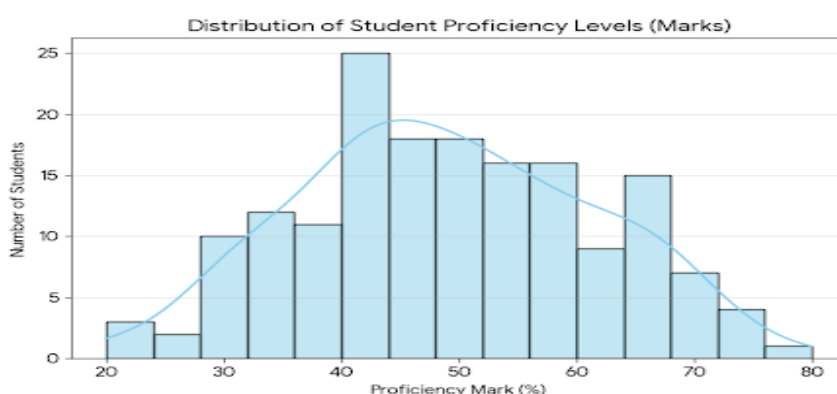


Figure 1: Frequency Distribution of Student English Proficiency Levels

The quantitative analysis included an assessment of students' proficiency levels. As shown in Figure 1, the scores followed an approximately normal distribution, with an average proficiency of 48.8%. This suggests that participants were predominantly intermediate learners, with a substantial proportion scoring between 40% and 60%. The scores ranged from 20% to 80% reflecting the linguistic diversity within the Kurdish (EFL) classroom. This variation highlights the importance of peer interaction and feedback, as social support is a crucial mechanism for bridging the gap between lower- and higher-proficiency students, thus fostering a more equitable and interactive learning environment.

4.1.2 Descriptive Statistics

Qualitative data obtained from focus groups and open-ended survey questions on participant engagement was coded by dominant patterns of engagement shown by each individual participant. Responses showing enthusiasm, confidence, willingness to cooperate, and active participation were recorded as Positive Engagement (+); responses having mixed feelings or uncertainty about participation were considered as Neutral/Uncertain (?); while responses having negative feelings toward participating, frustration regarding classroom participation, or negative views about classroom interactions were marked as Negative Engagement (-). The codes for all 134 participants were totalled to provide an overall picture of engagement experiences.

Table 1 shows frequency distributions for three categories of engagement for all 134 respondents who provided data.

Table 1: Learner Engagement Frequencies (N = 134)

Category of engagement	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Positive Engagement (+)	89	66.5
Neutral/Uncertain (?)	32	24.0
Negative Engagement (-)	13	9.5
Total	134	100.0

The data in Table 1 indicate a large percentage (with 66.5%) of participants demonstrated positive engagement and most students reported positive experiences in relation to participatory classes, peer-to-peer interaction, and learning English as a foreign language. Neutral/mixed responses came from approximately 24.0% of all respondents while negative responses were given by just over 9.5%. The evidence strongly suggests that Kurdish EFL learners show predominantly positive levels of engagement due in large part to their interacting socially with peers in class.

4.1.3 Peer Interaction vs. Other Factors

When the social factors were categorized, Peer/Friend Interaction emerged as the most influential factor associated with student engagement.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics of Academic Performance and Engagement Levels across Primary Social Factors

Factor Category	Avg. Mark	Engagement Score (0–2 Scale)	Positivity Rate
Peer/Friend	48.6	1.78	99%
Family	49.6	1.30	95%
Other	48.8	1.15	86%

Table 2 shows that students' marks were relatively consistent across all groups. However, participants who identified peer interaction as their primary social influence showed higher Engagement Levels (1.78) compared to those who identified family as their primary social influence (1.30). This reinforces the notion that peers play a greater role in fostering engagement in EFL classes.

4.1.4 Correlation and Impact

To analyze the relationship between learner interaction and academic achievement, Pearson correlation analysis was performed. As shown in Table 3, a weak positive correlation was found between learner interaction and academic achievement ($r = 0.12$, $p > 0.05$). Although the direction of the relationship was positive, the strength of the correlation was very small, and this indicates that higher levels of interaction were not strongly associated with higher academic performance in this sample. This result suggests that while peer interaction may enhance learner motivation and engagement, academic achievement is also influenced by other factors such as language proficiency, assessment methods, study habits, and individual learning strategies.

Table 3: Correlation between Learner Engagement and Academic Achievement (N = 134)

Variables	r	p
Learner Engagement and Academic Achievement	0.12	> .05

4.1.5 Summary of Regression

Based on this simple linear model, peer interaction proved to be the only statistically significant predictor of positive engagement ($p < 0.05$). This p-value was obtained from the regression coefficient associated with the peer interaction variable in the linear regression model and was compared to the traditional significance level of 0.05. Students who interacted with their peers were almost twice as likely to report positive engagement (+) as those who lacked a strong social circle in the classroom.

The findings of this study indicate that peer interaction appears to be the key factor influencing engagement. While family support provides a solid foundation, it is peer interaction that encourages active engagement (both behavioral and emotional) necessary for success in studying EFL at the University of Duhok.

4.2 Discussions

The results lend support to Sociocultural Theory since they show the concept of learning as social interaction and meaning making in collaboration. They also validate Engagement Theory by illustrating the differences between cognitive, emotional, and behavioral engagement and their relationship to peer interaction. The present study added to the previous studies by bringing the conditional element of peer support into the Kurdish EFL classroom.

The qualitative analysis revealed five major themes on learner engagement: (1) supportive peer relationship, (2) constructive feedback, (3) decreased language anxiety, (4) preference for collaborative learning, and (5) effects of classroom structure and teacher facilitation. These themes were found in all focus group discussions and open-ended responses, and give insights into the roles of peer interaction in behavioral, emotional and cognitive engagement of Kurdish EFL learners. The following discussion addresses the study's research questions by taking an integrated approach of both quantitative and qualitative results.

1. Engagement and Classroom Environment Influencing Academic Achievement

Engagement is weakly associated with higher academic marks, as indicated by the correlation analysis ($r = 0.12$). The results suggest that interaction with peers significantly foster behavioral and emotional participation. However, it may not fully reflect the formal assessment outcomes. Indeed, in this Kurdish EFL context, grading systems emphasise written examinations and linguistic accuracy over interactive participation, which may explain the weak relationship between engagement and academic performance.

In addition, peer interaction strongly shapes learners' behavioral engagement across proficiency levels identified in the analysis. While, Alzubi et al. (2023) indicated that collaborative learning significantly improved students' English performances and social interaction, the findings of the present study suggest a complex relationship. The results suggest that students with lower proficiency may rely on peer help, while students with higher proficiency improve their knowledge through explanation and correction. Consequently, this diversity strengthens the role of peer interaction as a socially moderated factor that actively shapes behavioral, emotional and cognitive engagement across different proficiency levels, highlighting the influence of learner proficiency on the engagement and achievement relationship.

The qualitative results show that smaller groups (two to four students) tend to encourage more active participation, whereas large groups occasionally result in unequal contribution and reduced engagement. The qualitative data demonstrate that strategic code-switching and teacher mediation influence the way peer interaction functions within the classroom. The results indicate that learners frequently switch to the Kurdish during peer interaction to clarify meaning, explain difficult vocabulary, or assists group members when they struggle to understand English. This suggests that using

English within collaborative learning is supported through strategic code-switching rather than sustained target language use.

Kurdish EFL learners indicate that teachers play a facilitative role in enhancing peer interaction through guiding and organizing group work. Teachers' guidance supports learners to exchange ideas, ask questions, and practice English with peers more actively, as one participant noted, "Especially when you are in a, Miss ... classroom, there's no way to talk in Kurdish language, she will say, 'If you are, if I hear, uh, a word, a Kurdish word, I will...' She will say, 'Minus one point.'" So, there's no way to speak Kurdish language." (P56, FGD). While Karim & Mohammed (2018) attributed students' lack of use of the model to their reliance on their teachers' explanation in order to obtain better marks, as they tend to believe. The present results show that participants emphasized teacher encouragement and structured grouping as factors that support active participation; however, peer interaction itself remained the strongest factor associated with engagement.

Hence, peer interaction is not an independent factor, rather, teachers' encouragement, monitoring, structured grouping, and language policy shape the quality and linguistic direction of peer participation. However, yet engagement itself does not significantly predict higher academic achievement in the Kurdish EFL classroom.

2. The Impact of Peer Interaction on the Various Aspects of Learner Engagement (Behavioral, Emotional, and Cognitive) in Kurdish EFL Classroom

The results indicate that peer interaction plays a positive but conditional role in shaping Kurdish EFL students' engagement in the classroom. The findings demonstrate that the majority of Kurdish students prefer collaborative learning over individual learning, which increases their use of English and classroom participation. The qualitative pattern is consistent with the quantitative results, which indicate that peer/friend interaction had the highest engagement score (1.78) and was identified as the only significant predictor of positive engagement ($p < .05$). In comparison, family and other social factors were associated with lower engagement scores (1.30 and 1.15 respectively). This indicates that peer interaction is more directly related to classroom participation, while family may provide general support.

Most learners (66.5) indicated positive engagement, while 24% reported neutral engagement and 9.5% reported weak engagement, suggesting that engagement among Kurdish EFL learners is unequally experienced. The existence of neutral and negative reaction suggests that peer interaction does not ensure active involvement; rather, its effectiveness appears to depend on the quality of collaboration, emotional support, classroom structure, group size, and fair distribution of workload. Consequently, the effect of peer interaction needs to be recognised or considered as conditional rather than generally advantageous.

Many learners indicated that social interactions with peer influence engagement via emotional and social strategies. The results suggest that engaging with peers

reduces anxiety and create a comfortable atmosphere that motivates students to communicate in English despite of making mistakes, as one participant stated, “Friends influence my language the most because when I practice English with them, I don’t feel shy making mistakes and I feel comfortable speaking English with them.” (P10, open-ended). This paper highlights the importance of peer interaction in promoting emotional involvement by reducing affective barriers. This finding is in line with that of Hassan et al. (2023) who concluded that friends can be considered as a motivator for Kurdish EFL learners to use English and to be more active in their learning activities. Likewise, participants in the present study stated that having supportive peers helped build their confidence, decreased their anxiety, and boosted their participation in classroom conversations.

Regarding cognitive engagement, working together with skilled and encouraging peers fostered engagement. Students reported that such interaction helped them identify mistakes and expand their vocabulary use. As indicated by one participant, “The friends help me to learn English when we make a group and work with each other help me to learn English and when my friends correct my errors in English language.” (P55, open-ended). Such an arrangement provides a safe practice that learners perceive as increasing confidence and engagement.

However, the results also indicate that preference for collaborative learning is not consistent across all participants in all aspects of peer interaction. Some students expressed that peer interaction motivated participation when there was a mutually supportive effort in group work discussion and equal workload “Sometimes partner is less advanced... I carry all work... unfair... but partner also learns some skills.” (P13, FGD). Some students expressed negative attitudes toward critical peer feedback especially when delivered publicly or in a judging tone, as expressed by one participant: “My friend give feedback in classroom that I feel bad about” (p. 26, FGD). These experiences suggest that peer interaction does not always support engagement; rather, the quality and tone of feedback determine whether engagement is enhanced or suppressed.

Generally, the findings suggest that peer interaction affects engagement in a socially mediated and conditional manner. The data explain that supportive peer relationship is linked to higher engagement, while negative peer feedback and unequal participation align with neutral and negative engagement responses. While most Kurdish EFL learners prefer collaborative learning, engagement depends on supportive peer relationship, appropriate classroom structure, balanced group participation, and guided instructional practices. Peer interaction significantly predicts positive engagement, yet engagement itself does not significantly predict higher academic achievement.

5. Conclusion

This research presents a new idea in Kurdish ELT research: peer interaction as a socially mediated mechanism, which is effective based on the level of proficiency, the classroom and the quality of peer

support. This study has investigated the effect of peer interaction on the level of learner engagement for Kurdish university students learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL). The results have shown the importance of peer interaction, as it brings about behavioral, emotional and cognitive engagement, through interaction, anxiety reduction, confidence building and collaborative learning. Supportive peer relationships and constructive feedback were found to be particularly important in creating positive learning experiences. The study is also a contribution to Kurdish EFL literature, as it builds upon the previous studies which focused only on language achievement and motivation, and expanded the scope of research to include engagement as a multidimensional phenomenon. This study is also a contribution to the Kurdish EFL literature since it extends previous studies which focused only on language achievement and motivation to the scope of the present study that included engagement as a multidimensional construct. In contrast to the various studies on Kurds and language achievement that have been carried out in the past, this research yields evidence of the impact of peer interaction on students' classroom experience and participation at various levels of proficiency. The results also provide a new perspective on the engagement–achievement link. Although peer interaction significantly predicted positive engagement, increased engagement did not necessarily lead to higher academic grades. This implies that engagement and achievement can be considered as two different but related concepts in Kurdish EFL higher education. The importance of this study is it is able to show the importance of the social classroom process in language learning. The analysis indicated that EFL teachers are supposed to encourage learners to collaborate in a structured manner and provide constructive feedback for their improvement and stimulate an encouraging environment for motivating learners. The study offers pedagogical insights into conditions that facilitate or prevent participation in the process of education through peer interaction in English language education in Kurdish universities.

6. Pedagogical and Educational Implications

The research suggests that EFL teachers organize group work; that encourages communication among peers and promote clear and constructive feedback practices. Providing an inclusive classroom environment can enhance learners' confidence and long-term interest in participating in the learning process, thereby fostering productive interactions between teachers and students.

7. Recommendation for Further Studies

The study could be extended by examining peer interaction and feedback across diverse EFL contexts and among learners with different proficiency levels. Future research could also explore the mediating role of digital platforms in facilitating peer interaction, as well as the influence of cultural and emotional factors on students' responses to peer feedback. Such investigations would provide further insights into how collaborative learning strategies can be effectively implemented in EFL higher education institutions.

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هەقیشکیبونا کارا وەک فاکتەرەکی سەرەکی بۆ پیشکەداریا EFL: بەلگە ژ قوتابیین زانکۆیین کوردی

یوخته:

د همدو پړوسمیز فیزیولوژیکي دواړه (L2) او زمانې بیاني (FL) دا، پشکداریا قوتبایان وګرځولې چې په نښانه کې سرچینې ته دهیته نیاسیږي. پشکداریا قوتبایان ب شویو میکانیزمونو لکه هایدروپاتیک، لیټال، فلوئید، کیمیاوي، او نورې لاملونې له امله د پشکداریا قوتبایانو د فعالیت د کمزورتیا یا نشتوالي په پایله کې رامنځته کیږي. د پشکداریا قوتبایانو د فعالیت د کمزورتیا یا نشتوالي د تشخیص لپاره د مختلفو میتودونو کارول کېږي. د پشکداریا قوتبایانو د فعالیت د کمزورتیا یا نشتوالي د تشخیص لپاره د مختلفو میتودونو کارول کېږي. د پشکداریا قوتبایانو د فعالیت د کمزورتیا یا نشتوالي د تشخیص لپاره د مختلفو میتودونو کارول کېږي.

د پشکداریا قوتبایانو د فعالیت د کمزورتیا یا نشتوالي د تشخیص لپاره د مختلفو میتودونو کارول کېږي. د پشکداریا قوتبایانو د فعالیت د کمزورتیا یا نشتوالي د تشخیص لپاره د مختلفو میتودونو کارول کېږي. د پشکداریا قوتبایانو د فعالیت د کمزورتیا یا نشتوالي د تشخیص لپاره د مختلفو میتودونو کارول کېږي. د پشکداریا قوتبایانو د فعالیت د کمزورتیا یا نشتوالي د تشخیص لپاره د مختلفو میتودونو کارول کېږي.

په یقین سهره کی: ههڅیشکیو ونا - کارا، قوتاییڼ EFL ل زانکوڼین کوردی، فاکتھرین جفاکی، خواندنا بلند.

تفاعل الأقران كعامل محدد لمشاركة متعلمي اللغة الانجليزية كلغة أجنبية: أدلة من طلبة الجامعات الكردية

الملخص:

في كل من تعلم اللغة الثانية (L2) واللغة الأجنبية (FL)، تعد بمشاركة الطلاب على نطاق واسع كمؤشرا رئيسيا للنجاح. وقد تمت دراسة مشاركة الطلاب بشكل واسع، ومع ذلك لا تزال هناك أبحاث محدودة حول دور تفاعل الأقران كعامل اجتماعي يؤثر بشكل كبير على المشاركة السلوكية والعاطفية والمعرفية الطلاب في تعلم اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية، وما إذا كان يؤثر على نتائج التعلم. تبحث هذه الدراسة في دور العوامل الاجتماعية في التعليم العالي الكردي، مع التركيز على تأثيرها على تعلم الطلبة للغة الإنجليزية، تحديداً في جامعة دهوك، كلية التربية. تم اعتماد منهجية مختلطة، حيث تم جمع البيانات باستخدام أسئلة استبيان مفتوحة، ومناقشات مجموعات التركيز، واختبار كفاءة طلبة الجامعات الكردية. تم جمع البيانات من نفس المشاركين الذين أكملوا اختبار كفاءة موحّد، وتم تصنيفهم إلى مستويات: مبتدئ، ومتوسط، ومتقدم. تألفت العينة من 134 طالباً وطالبة من السنة الثانية والثالثة. أظهرت النتائج أن تفاعل الأقران يساهم بشكل كبير في تعزيز مشاركة المتعلمين، وأن الدعم المتبادل والتغذية الراجعة المدروسة بعناية يُعدّان عنصرين أساسيين لتعزيز المشاركة السلوكية والعاطفية والمعرفية. كما تشير النتائج إلى أن اختلاف مستوى الكفاءة لدى المتعلمين يؤثر في فاعلية دعم الأقران، وأن المشاركة تتأثر بحجم المجموعة، وعبء العمل، وبنية الصف. ومع ذلك، فإن زيادة المشاركة لا تؤدي بالضرورة إلى تحسين الدرجات الأكاديمية بشكل مباشر.

الكلمات المفتاحية: تفاعل الأقران، متعلمو اللغة الانجليزية في الجامعات الكردية، العوامل الاجتماعية، التعليم العالي.