


Please cite the Published Version

Curry, Nial  (2019) Learners as models: the pedagogical value of near peer role models. *Speak Out! Journal of the IATEFL Pronunciation Special Interest Group*, 60. pp. 34-43. ISSN 2313-7703

Publisher: IATEFL

Version: Accepted Version

Downloaded from: <https://e-space.mmu.ac.uk/632101/>

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The following article was originally published in the journal *SpeakOut!* and can be referenced as:

Curry, N. (2019) 'Learners as models: the pedagogical value of near peer role models' *Speak Out! Journal of the IATEFL Pronunciation Special Interest Group*, 60, pp. 34-43.

Learners as models: the pedagogical value of near-peer role models

At Cambridge University Press, we work with teachers and learners worldwide when developing ELT materials. During the conception of our new adult general English course, we reached out to learners to get a view of their language learning needs.

We surveyed over 14,000 English language learners with the aim of finding out what motivated them when learning English, what challenges they faced, and, in particular, which part of learning English was most difficult for them. Perhaps, somewhat unsurprisingly, we found that speaking in English outranked any other skill or system in terms of challenge. To this effect, we sought evidence-based means to help learners overcome the challenges of speaking, drawing from research in second language acquisition, psycholinguistics and broader educational research to do so. Of course, this is no small feat and it is beyond the scope of this article to detail exactly how this was done. Rather, in order to contextualise near-peer role models research, which is the focus of this paper, first, an overview of speaking research applied to our work in Cambridge is presented. Second, the focus returns to near-peer role models, considering what this term means and, third, the contexts in which it has arisen. Fourth, the theoretical underpinnings of near-peer role models are presented, followed by a discussion of classroom implications for teachers and learners. Finally, a brief review of pronunciation research using near-peer role models is presented followed by a conclusion, which considers how near-peer role models research can be applied to ELT materials development.

Safe speaking environments

In the survey, when specifying the difficulties they faced, many learners articulated a reluctance to participate through speaking in class due to fear of being judged, a frustration with dominant students, a perceived lack of value in peer work and, among other areas, a disinterest in topics covered in class. When speaking English, these inhibiting factors led English learners to feel powerless in the 'real world', indicative in this comment from David in Ecuador: 'The teacher is the leader – not many queries are asked by students during the class, and so it's confusing when we're "out in the open" and supposed to speak to strangers.'

As such, much of the research that we used to address the identified challenges learners face when speaking in English falls within the concept of a 'safe-speaking environment', which, according to Kubanyiova (2018) is: 'an environment in which time for speaking is valued not simply as time for extra practice of previously learned material but as time in which new learning opportunities come to life'. Kubanyiova goes on to position safe speaking spaces as spaces in which learners are seen as resources, where they are engaged at a deeper and more personal level, and where feedback is managed and delivered in a way that recognises

accomplishments and is actionable. Building on this conceptualisation and Kubanyiova's (2018) work, we know that students not only practice language when speaking, but learn it too. To address learner needs, speaking needs to be prioritised in the language classroom and, although it is complex and composed of considerations of time (Kerr, 2017a), task types (Hendra and Jones, 2018), learner-centeredness (Muir, 2018b), feedback (Kerr, 2017b) and peer-interactions (Muir, 2018a), speaking can allow learners to immerse themselves in relevant and personal language that can facilitate language learning. Much of the work referred to here focuses on how teachers can facilitate, monitor and guide learners through expert and effective classroom management techniques. While this is also true for peer interactions and near-peer role models research (Muir, 2018a), equally there is an important focus on learner agency and how learners can take responsibility for their own learning, learn from others, and develop skills in self-regulation (Dörnyei, 2005) that helps them recognise their strengths and weakness when learning. Taking a closer look at this facet of developing speaking skills, the following section centres on near-peer role models and their value for language learning.

On Speaking: Near-Peer Role Models

Let us first begin by defining the concept of near-peer role models. Quite simply, near-peer role models are peers. They will often share certain characteristics with our students such as nationality, age, gender and culture. In some cases, they may share all of these (Murphey and Arao, 2001). Near-peer role models tend to be on a similar path in education or career and represent a version of a learner who is slightly ahead of them in some way, drawing in Dörnyei's work on the ideal L2 self (2005; 2009). Overall, the value of a near-peer role model cannot be overstated.

There is strong evidence of their use in increasing motivation, excitement, risk-taking and the amount of language used in the language classroom. They present a powerful option for effective language learning (Muir, 2018a).

In essence, near-peer role models can serve to help learners see the achievable and reasonable process of language learning. In so doing, this can help them stay motivated and driven over what can be a long learning process. To put it quite simply, 'seeing people who are similar to you succeed makes it reasonable for you to imagine that you may succeed, too' (Curry, 2018). The closeness of the peer is the real asset here, as, following Muir (2018a); working with a near-peer role model can help a learner to stay motivated. This motivation can be achieved through using near-peer role models to better identify learning goals. That is to say, learners will be able to see how their peers have already succeeded and, Muir argues, this allows learners to enter the zone of proximal development (ZPD; Vygotsky, 1978), where they learn through socialising with others who are slightly more advanced than them, in some way. By learning in this way, learners can stage their development and have a map they can follow, a map written by their near-peer language models.

Thus, it is clear that there is a real value in near-peer role models. As a result, near-peer role models call into question the types of models that learners need when learning a language and lead us further into the debate surrounding native speaker-centric language models. Next, these models will briefly be considered.

Near-peer language and learning models

Traditional pedagogic models have offered idealised and simplified approaches to capturing and presenting language (Petzold, 2002), and these models have largely drawn on standard language models (Crystal, 2003). However, Young and Walsh (2010) recognise that there are over one billion second-language (L2) users of English in the world and that ‘it is non-native speakers who will have the main responsibility for the ways in which language is used, maintained, taught and learned’. This has posed a problem for the ELT coursebook, which, following Mishan (2005), must deal with two culture-related problems: the English language culture it represents and the language and culture of the learners who use it. Responding to these needs and the views of researchers such as Jenkins (2007), who view educational materials as traditionally supporting the English native speaker pedagogic model, there is a need to move away from native speaker-centric models for language learners.

Departing from a native speaker-centric view of language learning, near-peer role models offer a worthy alternative. English non-native speakers can act as examples of learners who were successful in their endeavours to learn new skills. They can show language learning in its many stages and levels, and, instead of positioning L2 native-like mastery as the only goal, they can give learners an indication of learning in a step-by-step process. Such a view positions L2 English speakers as ‘speakers in their own right’ (Cook, 1999) and not ‘approximations to monolingual native speakers’. To some, non-native speaking teachers are much better models as near-peer role models than native speaker models who use English in very different ways and contexts. Overall, what becomes clear from the literature is that a focus on near-peer role models would go some way to advance language and pedagogic models in published materials. However, the value of near-peer role models is not confined to representation alone. The following sections will outline the pedagogical value they add, how they can be exploited for language teaching and learning, and their use in pronunciation research.

Theoretical underpinnings of near-peer role models

The concept of near-peer role models is not new. In fact, Bandura’s work (1997) on learning efficacy is built on Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory (1978) arguing that learning in social contexts is more effective. More specifically, Bandura argues that when learners see others like them succeed; they are more likely to think they can succeed themselves. However, for near peers to be successful, it is not necessarily important that strong relationships exist. Kanno & Norton (2003) see a value in learners imagined communities, i.e. identities in the world with which learners have some affinity. These relationships are imagined, in that they are built on shared expectations, experiences and perspectives, and behave similarly to vicarious experiences and need not exist within shared spaces or times. Such research led Murphey and Arao (2001) to the conceptualisation of the near-peer role model.

Though these views of social interaction and community go some way to explain how near-peer role models work, an important question that remains is how near-peer role models maintain learners’ motivation, a trait for which they are most heralded. To answer this, we can turn to Dörnyei’s ideal L2 self (2005; 2009). In simple terms, the ideal L2 self is a version of the self as a language learner who has achieved what it is a learner might want to achieve. Though to some degree this could be attributed to learning strategies, self-regulation or goal setting, where it differs greatly from these is in the detail. Imagining a version of the self in the future with better conversational skills and knowledge of areas of grammar requires a model and some evidence of its possibility. Ultimately, in learning psychology, near peers are a powerful device for the pursuit of the ideal L2 self, where the success of others can help us see

such a future for ourselves – a possible future, a real future. Therefore, to use the ideal L2 self as a motivational tool, near-peer role models are a prerequisite.

Near peers in the language classroom: practical implications for teachers and learners

As of now, it is understood that near-peer role models can help learners improve their speaking, offer more realistic and useful language models and, from a pedagogical perspective, offer many advantages. However, how can this research practically help teachers and learners in the language classroom? The answer is, in many ways. In-group activities for example, students could be paired according to differing strengths and weakness. That is to say, learners and peers could be paired to balance each other out. In this way, an effective pairing could be the combination of near-peer language models, i.e. those with stronger language skills paired with those slightly weaker. However, this is not confined to language alone, as using language requires many different skills. For example, near-peer effective models, i.e. those with positive learning habits could help develop skills in others, near-peer creative models could help develop creativity in others and near-peer pronunciation models can help others understand how they improved their pronunciation. In terms of pronunciation for example, near peer-role models can help others identify which sounds in English have hindered intelligibility and which have not. In stressful contexts, near peers can also offer each other support and reassurance by giving feedback that a teacher cannot, i.e. support from the perspective of students who have recently taken a language exam. Developing a culture of near-peer role models learning together in the classroom can lead to a stronger learner autonomy outside of the classroom, too. Research has also shown that, through effective use of near peers in the classroom, teachers' beliefs can change, and their practices can evolve (Muir, 2018a). Developing this learning culture in the classroom is valuable as it can lead students down a path with greater awareness and greater control of their learning.

Near peer role models in the language classroom serve to develop learner autonomy. This is achieved by helping learners develop their own learning skills, which they can learn from their peers. These skills can be metacognitive and help students take real agency over their learning through self-regulation. Through near- peer role model interaction, classes can reduce the affective filter and give real valuable purpose to peer-interaction. This can directly impact pronunciation, where learners can improve their intelligibility drawing on the experience of others, as in Ruddick and Nadasdy (2013), which is discussed below. For teachers, the practicality lies in their need to change their view of their own roles. In near-peer classrooms, the students play important roles in helping one another, teaching one another and developing one another. The teacher however, remains important where there is a need to educate their students on concepts like the ideal L2 self and train them to understand and exploit the value of their near-peer role models. Teachers' roles become more facilitative and the importance of strategic pairing and grouping of their students directly impacts the efficacy of the near-peer role model.

What this section has shown is the wide-reaching application of near-peer role models to language learning and teaching. However, given the duality of near-peer role models as pedagogical resources and as a representation of alternative pedagogical and language models, their value for the teaching and learning of pronunciation, specifically, is worthy of consideration.

Near-peer role models and pronunciation

To illustrate the value of near-peer role models to teaching and learning pronunciation, Ruddick and Nadasdy's (2013) work on Japanese-speaking adult learners of English is noteworthy. Their work focuses on the challenge of 'rounding off', the adding of unnecessary vowels to final consonants. This occurs as words rarely end with consonant sounds in Japanese and it is a characteristic they term 'negative transfer from their first language' (Ruddick & Nadasdy, 2013). Their work saw the use of near-peer role models, who were 'exceptional speakers of English' from an advanced class in their university, as classroom language assistants. The following, taken directly from their study, are the instructions that Ruddick and Nadasdy (2013) gave to their near-peer role models when they arrived in lower level classes to assist. The advanced students had to:

- Introduce themselves and include a brief language learning
- Take part in listening practice dialogues with the
- Monitor the classroom for problems and help when
- Take part in communicative group
- Listen for and correct students who round off their
- Listen for examples of rounding off, write these examples on the board and correct them for the whole
- Take part in pronunciation practice with the whole

Through their study, they found that the near-peer role models were effective in helping their lower level peers in reducing 'rounding off'. In fact, comparing the results with a teacher-fronted class, which also focused on rounding off, they found that, overall, the near-peer role models' class saw a greater reduction in this feature.

Other studies on near-peer role models have addressed pronunciation, albeit often to a lesser degree. For example, Kirson and Lee (2004) present a study of near-peer role models in Spanish-speaking learners of English. The primary focus of their study is not pronunciation, however, they do report that among the expected advantages of motivation and emotional engagement, near-peer role models allowed for pronunciation and intonation awareness raising. They found learners were less stressed about pronunciation owing to near peers, and this, they argue, had an important impact on practice and fluency development. Further research that touches on pronunciation and near-peer role models is Cheung and Sung's (2014) study of learners of English in Hong Kong. Their research centres on global citizenship, identity and the role of English as a lingua franca (ELF) therein. Their qualitative study shows diverse perceptions of global identities and communication in ELF contexts where, for example, accents in native-speaker English were not particularly significant for the participants. As such, one of their participants saw international students as their near peers and as role models for the kind of English and accents to which they aspired.

Overall, there is still a lack of research on near-peer role models and pronunciation. However, what research there is remains promising. Looking at the few studies reviewed here and returning to the overall contributions that near-peer role models can make to teaching and learning in the language classroom discussed in the previous section, it is arguable that pronunciation teaching and learning can benefit greatly from this model and it is exciting to think of what future research can bring to this area.

Conclusion

In the development of our new course *Evolve*, a problem in language models needed to be addressed: learners around the world are struggling to develop their speaking skills and often this is related to their fears of speaking in front of others and of never being good enough or 'native speaker like'. This mentality does little to serve our learners as, especially for very low-level learners, the gap between their level and the native-speaker makes progress and development seem all but impossible. In learning another language, the road is long. Language learners lose motivation, fossilise pronunciation problems and struggle with tasks that seem too challenging to face. These problems summarised here can be addressed through the use of near- peer role models. In a bid to move away from traditional pedagogic and language models, the inclusion of near-peer elements helps learners benefit from others who are going or have gone through the same process. This alone cannot solve the problem of speaking evident among learners. Overall, through safe speaking research it is clear that there are many opportunities to help learners improve their speaking skills, including pronunciation. Nonetheless, near-peer role models remain a key resource in doing so.

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