

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT): Exploring EFL Learners Peer Interaction Engagement

Pengajaran Bahasa Berasaskan Tugas (TBLT): Meneroka penglibatan interaksi rakan sebaya pelajar EFL

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Abstract: This study aimed to explore peer group interaction of learners when engaged in collaborative tasks. Eighteen gifted EFL learners aged 14 from an intact class were the participants of the study. The learners were grouped in groups of three and their oral interactions when they engaged in given collaborative tasks taken from their textbook were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Focusing on the dynamics of peer group interaction and learning, this study used a descriptive system of analysis of peer group interaction to analyse the kinds of peer group interactions generated by the participants as they approached and processed the collaborative tasks given to them. Two main dimensions - cognitive processing and social processing - were explored. The qualitative analysis of the recorded interaction revealed that the learner interactions of the participants were very exploratory in nature when they approached and processed the tasks. This exploratory nature of the learner interactions was very much characterised by intensive negotiation. They were also highly argumentative yet collaborative. The article concludes with a discussion on pedagogical implications generated from these findings.

Keywords: peer interaction, TBLT, collaborative tasks, negotiation;

Abstrak: Kajian ini bertujuan untuk meneroka interaksi pelajar apabila terlibat dalam tugas kolaboratif. Lapan belas pelajar EFL berumur 14 tahun dari kelas satu kelas adalah peserta kajian. Para pelajar dikumpulkan dalam kumpulan tiga dan interaksi lisan mereka apabila mereka terlibat dalam tugas kolaboratif yang diambil dari buku teks mereka telah dirakam audio dan ditranskripsikan verbatim. Memberi tumpuan kepada dinamik interaksi dan pembelajaran kumpulan rakan sebaya, kajian ini menggunakan sistem deskriptif analisis untuk menganalisis jenis interaksi kumpulan yang dihasilkan oleh peserta ketika mereka mendekati dan memproses tugas kolaboratif yang diberikan kepada mereka. Dua dimensi utama - pemprosesan kognitif dan pemprosesan sosial - telah diterokai. Analisis kualitatif interaksi yang direkodkan mendedahkan bahawa interaksi para peserta sangat bersifat penerokaan ketika mereka mendekati dan memproses tugas. Sifat penerokaan interaksi pelajar ini sangat berbentuk rundingan intensif. Mereka juga berdebat namun kolaboratif. Artikel ini menyimpulkan dengan perbincangan mengenai implikasi pedagogi yang dihasilkan daripada penemuan ini.

Kata kunci: Interaksi rakan sebaya, TBLT, tugas kolaborasi, rundingan;

Introduction

Research has shown that learning occurs through interaction with others (Tenenbaum et al., 2020; Xue, 2020). Linguists and psychologists concur that interaction is crucial as a channel of exchanging knowledge that would promote both development and learning (Franco, 1996). Interaction has always been regarded as important in a language classroom as it is believed that language is best learned and taught through interaction. In the context of second and foreign language learning, engaging in meaningful oral interaction facilitates its development (Gonzalez-Lloret, 2020; Kurhila & Kotilainen, 2017; Martin-Beltrán, 2017; Sato & Ballinger, 2016).

Peer Interaction

As interaction is essential for language, cognitive, and social development where children and adolescents learn the ways to argue, negotiate and persuade with minimal conflicts, it is an element that needs to be considered in teaching and learning. This is because “an active interaction among students stimulates collaboration in their prior knowledge, perspectives and background experiences which later promote their high-level learning” (Sembiring, 2018, p. 125). It can be depicted as a way of progressing beyond independent to interdependent or mutual learning.

Academically, the dynamics of peer interaction have been generally documented with positive outcomes on academic achievement together with affective and social gains (e.g., Cohen, 1994; Wang & Lou, 2021). Among the positive effects of peer interaction include providing opportunities for self-reflection and shared constructions of knowledge (Forman, 1989), experimenting with the language, interpreting, correcting other learners’ input, and giving feedback which allow them to refine their language use (Philp et al., 2014). Peer interaction is also found to have potential development impact toward languages like Spanish (Davila, 2020) as well as minority ones like Gaelic (Nance, 2019). Apart from that, peer interaction is also found beneficial for group reading discussions where the interaction of the learner talk allows a genuine and insightful perspective using linguistic and textual resources in completing the task (Maine et al., 2020). Peer interaction too is demonstrated to have potential in collaborative online tasks but with substantial time and attention focused on the aspects of text construction (Peeters, 2018).

Peer interaction among learners in classroom, either pair or group work, is a noteworthy process to be explored as it can impart information about what transpires between and among learners in the classroom. This process can also naturally demonstrate learners’ ways of thinking, how they construct their understanding and knowledge, and also their interest in the learning process. Nevertheless, the term peer interaction stays abstract and requires further research especially in learning languages. However, in this article, the authors adapt Boud’s (2001) definition of peer interaction which is “a two-way, reciprocal learning activity. Peer learning should be mutually beneficial and involve the sharing of knowledge, ideas and experience between the participants” (p. 9). In other words, it is a process that involves arguments, persuasions and negotiations.

Interaction and Language Learning

Within the framework of Sociocultural theory (SCT), interaction is seen as an enabling process that facilitates the individual’s cognitive development. For Vygotsky (1986), by engaging in social interaction, individuals are able to co-construct knowledge as well as make-meaning (Lantolf & Pavlenko 1995). The overarching premise of SCT consists of interaction constituting the learning process rather than solely as a ‘source of output for autonomous and internal learning’ (Mitchell & Myles 2004, p.193).

Drawn from the same perspective, second language (L2) learning can occur through a joint activity, as language not only serves to provide linguistic input to the learners (Donato 1994), but also provides the basis for internalisation in the aim to achieve L2 development. In this instance, interaction is regarded as a mechanism for individual’s development in which it can also ‘generate new understandings’ for the learner in the L2 learning context. Peeters (2019) elaborated that the context of peer interaction in language learning is a process in which learners of second or foreign languages are brought together and engage in communicative activities. Learners work together throughout a task completion process in which they are required not only to interact in order to share ideas but to engage in multiple resources and language skills as well, such as asking for information, evaluating ideas, or even monitoring each other’s work. Subsequently when learners engage in peer-to-peer interaction, they co-construct the knowledge as a group in the aim of completing the tasks (Watanabe 2008). In other words, how they interact in their groups are determined by what they understand and what they want to achieve.

Importantly, as learners engage in collaborative activity, they are also able to develop and enhance their 'mental or thinking ability' (Swain 2000, p.104) of the target L2 at hand.

Task-based language teaching (TBLT)

TBLT develops from the communicative class teaching theory which aims to improve learners' communicative competence, focusing on learners' language interaction. According to Pica (2008), task-based instruction involves "activities that engage language learners in meaningful, goal-oriented communication to solve problems, complete projects, and reach decisions" (p.71). Communicative tasks become the core of TBLT curriculum (Lai & Li, 2011). Nunan (1989) defines communicative task as "a piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form" (p. 10).

In language classrooms, the use of tasks become the driving force for language use as it functions as stimuli for generating talk among learners. One advantage of using language tasks is that they offer opportunities for interaction to happen whether in pairs or groups (Bhandari, 2020) and meaningful interaction derived from task completion promotes language acquisition (Guo, 2020). This is also echoed by Lambert (2019) who asserts that 'the use of tasks in L2 instruction is predicated on the notion that language learning is an incidental process that takes place in line with learners' communicative needs while they are focused on achieving communicative outcomes' (p. 3).

One factor that influences interaction is the task or activity learners engage in (Aksoy-Pekacar & Erten, 2021; Baharun et. al, 2016; Baharun et. al, 2018; Baharun & Zakaria, 2017; Eslami & Kung, 2016; Kaivanpanah & Miri, 2017). However, it is important to identify the kind of tasks that will elicit the kind of learner interaction which will facilitate language proficiency as well as promote cognitive development. Thus, it is vital to explore how communicative tasks may influence the kind of interaction learners produce when they engage in task completion as the understanding can guide language teachers in designing or selecting tasks for their learners.

The Study

The study aimed to explore peer group interaction of learners when engaged in communicative tasks. Focusing on the dynamics of peer group interaction and learning, this study used a descriptive system of analysis

of peer group interaction (Kumpulainen and Wray, 2002) to analyse the kinds of peer group interactions generated by the participants as they approached and processed the tasks given to them. Two main dimensions - cognitive processing and social processing - were explored. Specifically, the study was guided by the following research question: How do learners interact as they approach, and process given communicative tasks for task completion?

Methods

This section discusses related elements which include the research approach undertaken, the participants who took part in the study and the research setting, the materials used and the procedures on how data was collected. A section on data coding and analysis is also presented.

Research Approach

The study is based on classroom descriptive research which adopted a qualitative approach both in the collection and analysis of the data to examine how the participants approached and processed collaborative tasks given to them. Learner interactions were gathered and qualitatively examined. Qualitative approach in the context of this study is deemed suitable as the aim of this study is to examine the participants' peer group interaction generated using selected collaborative tasks. The qualitative approach places emphasis on the process rather than the outcomes (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Merriam, 2001). According to Bogdan and Biklen (2007), "qualitative researchers are concerned with process rather than simply outcomes or products" (p. 6) and the qualitative emphasis on process has been particularly beneficial in educational research. By using the qualitative approach in the collection and analysis of the data, the authors were able to gain in-depth information useful for this study.

Participants and Research Setting

A total of eighteen 14-year-old EFL learners from an intact class participated in this study. Out of which, eight were male and ten were female learners. The participants were learners from a fully residential college known as Kolej Genius Insan (KGI). The college is situated in the premise of a public university in Malaysia. The participants were part of the nation's esteemed gifted learner programme, Permata Pintar. Prior to being selected to be part of the programme, the participants went through stringent academic and religious observation screenings. Based on results from the

screening, the participants were considered gifted and were selected to be in the programme.

Gifted learners possess unique personality structure with three main characteristics that shape them, namely the work ethics, value structures and relationship with peers (Winner, 1996). In terms of work ethic, they are highly motivated to work to achieve mastery, they love challenges, and at least by adolescence, they have an unusually strong sense of who they are and what they want to be as adults. With regards to their value structures, gifted learners are known to be independent and nonconforming, and they display advanced moral reasoning on various ethical, moral, and political issues. Their relationship with their peers can be rather different compared to what is normally observed as they tend to be more introverted and lonelier than the average child, both because they have so little in common with others and because they need and want to be alone to develop their talent (Winner, 1996).

Procedure and Materials

An ethics committee approval was first obtained from Jawatankuasa Etika Penyelidikan USIM to conduct this research (USIM/JKEP/2019-47, Date: 24 April 2019). Permission to carry out the study with the participants was also sought from the Director of the college. The class teacher was approached, and details of the study were explained to him. This was followed by a meeting with all the participants. During the first meeting, the researchers provided details of the study to the participants. They were also informed that participation from them was on voluntary term and that they could leave at any point of the study.

The participants were randomly assigned into groups of three and given two collaborative tasks to complete. The tasks were taken from their school textbook, Pulse 2. Pulse 2 is also the textbook used by all national school form 2 students in the nation. In the textbook, the tasks were labeled as Collaborative Projects. There were in total 3 collaborative projects found in the book and the aim of the projects was to ‘provide an opportunity for the students to work collaboratively’ (Pulse 2, Teacher’s Book, p.vii). For Task 1, the Collaborative Project that the groups were required to complete was to make a poster (Pulse 2, p.72) and for Task 2, the participants were required to design a tourist information leaflet (Pulse 2, p.104). The pages of the tasks as found in the textbook are shown below (Figure 1 Making a Poster and Figure 2 Making a Tourist Information Leaflet).

Figure 1. Making a Poster

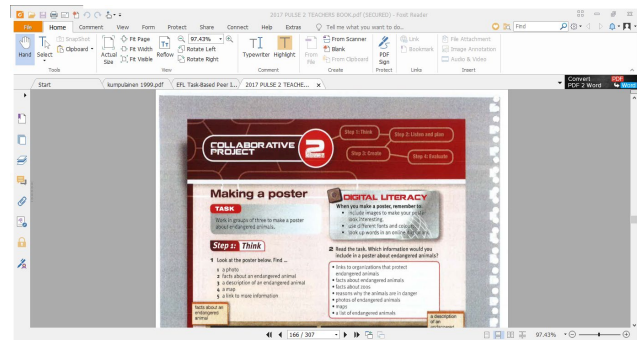
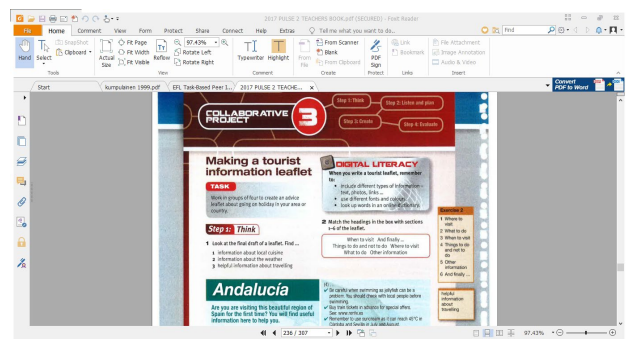


Figure 2. Making a Tourist Information Leaflet



To ensure formal lessons were not disrupted, task completion for the purpose of data collection was conducted following the teacher’s lesson plan and time. The learners’ oral interactions were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Transcription is the process of “converting audio-tape recordings or field notes into text data” (Creswell, 2005, p. 233) and it is deemed important to examine the participants’ peer group interaction.

Data Coding and Analysis

The participants’ peer group interaction was examined focusing on the kinds of interaction generated by the participants when they approach and process the tasks given to them. Analytical framework of peer-group interaction (Kumpulainen & Wray, 2002) was used to code and analyse the data. The theoretical base of the analysis framework is rooted in the sociocultural perspectives to interaction and learning. Data were coded using predetermined categories as well as those that emerged from the data gathered.

The framework is a three-level parallel analysis that consists of three dimensions; the functional analysis, the cognitive processing and the social processing. As the aim of the study is to investigate how the participants approached and processed the tasks given to them,

analysis focused on the cognitive processing and the social processing. The cognitive dimension examines the ways learners approach and process learning tasks in their social interaction. The other dimension investigated is the social processing. When analysing learners’ social processing in learner interactions, the emphasis is on the nature of learners’ collaboration – how they collaborate or their mode of collaborative work. The adapted framework is shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Analytical Framework of Peer-Group Interaction

Dimensi on	Analytical Category	Description
COGNITIVE PROCESSING	Exploratory/interpretative	Critical and exploratory activity that includes planning, hypothesis testing, evaluating and experimenting
	Procedural/routine	Procedural on-task activity which focuses on handling, organising and executing the task without reflective analysis
	Off-task	Activity not related to the task
SOCIAL PROCESSING	Collaborative	Joint activity characterised by equal participation and meaning-making
	Tutoring	Student helping and assisting another student
	Argumentative	Students are faced with cognitive/social conflicts which are resolved and justified in a rational way
	Individualistic	Student(s) working on individual tasks with no sharing or joint meaning-making
	Dominative	Student dominating the work, unequal participation
	Conflict	Social or academic conflicts that are often unresolved
	Confusion	Lack of shared understanding,

	student(s) do not understand the task or each other, often includes silent episodes
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#Adapted from Analytical framework of peer-group interaction (Kumpulainen & Wray, 2002)

Findings and Discussion

For both collaborative projects, all the participants had similar and shared access to the information. Following the instructions given in the textbook, they needed to discuss and were expected to work toward a single outcome. The flow of information was two-way as the participants had to discuss and reach an agreement.

It was observed that the participants explored and shared ideas, argued, provided justifications and made decisions together. Their interactions were generally exploratory in nature. Evidence of collaboration could also be observed in the interaction episodes. Interestingly, they interaction also displayed some argumentative episodes. However, the episodes were to negotiate their differences and resolve conflicts. The subsections below illustrate how the participants approached and processed the collaborative projects in greater detail.

Exploratory yet Procedural

As the participants began working on project 1 (Making a Poster), their learner interactions appeared exploratory in nature. It was observed that right from the beginning the participants interacted spontaneously. The exploratory nature of interactions was characterized by asking questions and providing answers to one another. This can be observed in Excerpt 1 below where the participants were observed to engage in asking and answering episode without providing any justifications for their answers. However, despite exploring possible options, the episode was very procedural in nature with no evidence of intensive negotiation. It was procedural as the participants had an aim to achieve which was to choose an endangered animal. So, even though the interaction appeared exploratory in which the participants suggested endangered animals they would want to use in their poster, it was actually very procedural.

Excerpt 1

- 1 B: So what you want? White Rhino?
- 2 [A: Muttering]
- 3 B: Oh... no... white bit...

4 A: White tiger?
 5 B: Ah white tiger!
 6 [C: Muttering]
 C: eh, wait... it's not Siberian eh?
 [Group 2: (Silence, 3 seconds)]
 7 A: What?
 8 D: Siberian tiger.
 D/B: Loggerhead turtle?
 [Group 2: (Silence, 5 seconds)]
 D: Giant panda? Rhinoceros?
 9 A: Hmmm
 10 C: Aquatic?
 11 A: Turtle?
 12 D/B: Turtle, Killer whale, Dolphin
 13 A: Mmm
 14 D: Coral?
 15 A: No! [Laughing]

(Task1Group2)

Exploratory and Collaborative

A different kind of learner interaction can be observed when the participants attempted project 2 (Making a Tourist Information Leaflet). In the episode below, evidence of exploratory interactions can be observed as the participants jointly created and tested strategies and solutions. The participants were observed to explore and communicate ideas, share suggestions and negotiate joint solution. As they interacted in their group to choose a destination for the leaflet, they included justifications and elaboration. These reflected intensive task engagement of the participants in which their learner interactions were highly collaborative with episodes of intensive negotiation (Lines 3 – 4, in bold).

Excerpt 2

1 SZ: Okay... So our task is to make a tourist information leaflet... So which destination are we going to pick?
 2 AL: We have to talk about, we have to plan our leaflet and choose our destinations, so...
 [Background chattering, coughing]
 3 SZ: **We have to have... like good accommodation... like accommodation for backpackers, for nature lovers... So we need to have a place...Umm... Like...**
 4 SB: **We need some knowledge for, how to attract people, like umm from four seasons, like summer, autumn, Winter, and Spring. So, let's start from ... Destination.**
 5 SZ & AL: So you want to...
 SZ: One destination or? Pick a destination that already exists?
 6 AL: Such as? Oh
 7 SZ: Such as anywhere, in any country. Or we just

make our own place?
 8 SB: [Thinking] Hmm

(Task2Group3)

Evidence of exploratory and collaborative episode can also be observed in Excerpt 3 below. In this episode, it can be seen that the participants engaged in exploratory activity when they approached and processed the task. This exploratory nature of the learner interactions was very much characterised by intensive negotiation and was also highly collaborative (Lines 3 – 9, 14 – 21, 23 - 31). The participants took time to explore ideas and they engaged in intensive negotiation. Exploratory talk fosters critical thinking and cognitive development (Mercer, 1996) and this is the kind of talk that should be encouraged in the classroom.

Excerpt 3

1 AL: There's a beach and there's mountain. For hiking!
 2 SZ: Ah!! Hmm maybe the place will have Adventure Park? Or a park? I don't know
 [Giggling]
 SZ: Like Never Land? Or Magic land? I don't know
 [Giggling]
 3 SB: **So for animation? Things like cartoons?**
 4 SZ: **Oh**
 5 SB: **So we can find, some activities, like impossible guide.**
 6 AL: **Maybe like new technology playground?**
 7 SZ: **Yeah**
 8 SB: **Hmm... Artificial Park?**
 9 AL: **Yeah, everything is green!**
 10 SZ: Yes!!
 [Laughing]
 11 AL: And it's safe! Maybe? Bring new technology
 12 SZ: Yeah I think/
 13 AL: Something like, actually
 14 SZ: **New and Modern? I think we have to do it new and modern. Simple**
 15 AL: **Yeah at the same time/**
 16 SZ: **ECO??**
 17 AL: **Yes ECO.**
 18 SZ: **Hmm, what is Eco Modern?**
 19 AL: **Eco-friendly**
 20 SZ: **Yeah Eco-friendly**
 21 AL: **Okay Eco-friendly and modern... Modern...**
 [Silence, 3 seconds]
 22 SZ&AL: Okay
 23 AL: **So? For the beach? We have? What we have for beach?**
 24 SZ: **Beach? Yes beach...**
 25 AL: **What beach we have among them?**
 26 SZ: **Okay**

- 27 AL: **Beaches [giggles]**
 28 SZ: **And then for the eco-friendly park thing we have to wait**
 29 AL: **I think we could have buildings like, green and plants wall**
 30 SZ: **Ummm, at the rooftop of the building ada a plants**
 31 AL: **Plants and rooftop**

(Task2Group3)

Argumentative

Apart from being characterised by joint investigation and joint meaning making, learners' collaborative interaction was also characterised by argumentative episodes during which the participants negotiated their differing understandings or differences in a rationale way. Argumentative mode did not imply that the participants argued with one another during their discussion. Instead, they negotiated their differences and resolved conflicts by arguing their points in a rationale way (Lines 1 – 4). They provided reasons and justifications in order to achieve a shared understanding of the situation. Judgments and justifications normally led to a shared understanding of the situation as observed in Excerpt 4 (Lines 7 – 16). Despite the intensive negotiation episodes exhibited in the learner interactions, they did not display the participants' need to clarify linguistically problematic utterances. Instead, episodes of confirmation checks and clarification requests as well as asking for help, asking for and providing explanation, and arguing and expressing disagreement were identified in the participants' peer interactions. The intensive negotiation episodes were exploratory in nature depicting the participants' cognitive processing which was dynamic in nature. Attempts at solving problems were also observed in the episodes.

Excerpt 4

- 1 AL: **there's a barrier... we have high technology, maybe there's a very ...**
 2 SB: **Wait umm ahh**
 3 SZ: **No**
 4 AL: **If there's a tsunami over there, defend barrier... There's one in case of a tsunami... It's like maybe the beach like we will have a wall**
 [SB: Keeps interrupting AL]
 AL: **So we will have a warning first so the people go back a bit and only the barrier come out**
 ALL: [making a fuss over AL suggestions]
 AL: Like they have a sensor

- 5 SB: I think I think /
 6 AL: Why are we thinking about this?
 7 SZ: Right?
 [Laughing]
 SZ: **Why why we talking about that?**
 8 SB: **Because this is our happy land, we need to avoid disaster**
 9 AL: [Laughing]
 10 SZ: **You guys are really over**
 11 SB: **No disaster**
 12 AL: **Too much over thinking**
 13 SZ: **I think I have have have/**
 14 SB: **All happy, No disaster**
 15 SZ: **We can proceed with**
 16 AL: **We have to think about tourists**

(Task2Group3)

Evidence showed in the excerpts above illustrate how the participants approached and processed the projects they needed to complete. Meaningful interaction could be observed in the episodes and these episodes are believed not only can promote cognitive development of the learners but also facilitate language acquisition among learners (Guo, 2020).

Conclusion

Generally, developing language skills among learners involves both the cognitive and affective aspects of learning. However, as indicated by Melor Md Yunus, Nur Ainil Sulaiman and Mohammed Amin Embi (2013), gifted students use more indirect strategies which include metacognitive, affective and social. Their ability to interact with their peers would depend on their preferred strategies when dealing with the communicative tasks and activities given to them.

The peer interaction spectrum disclosed in the findings of this present study shows that gifted learners are aware of their learning and could regulate their own learning. The language learning experience while engaged in the collaborative tasks encourage gifted learners in the development of their cognitive processing ability especially in the exploratory spectrum (Kumpulainen & Wray, 2002). As their ability to perform the tasks given to them is often influenced by their unique characteristics (Winner, 1996), knowledge on how they approached and processed tasks given to them, as well as the learning strategies used, could guide language teachers in planning tasks to be given to gifted learners. This form of knowledge would help language teachers to capitalize on their cognitive abilities when planning and structuring class activities, lesson delivery and evaluation for the gifted learners.

The findings regarding the strategies used by gifted students as found in their peer interaction provide context for language use. Strategies such as planning, hypothesis testing, evaluating and experimenting (Kumpulainen & Wray, 2002) which promote cognitive development come into play when they interact with their peers and work on managing and solving given tasks. Language learning activities and tasks could be designed with the strategies in mind. This would present best practices for language teachers especially for those dealing with gifted students. Using the strengths of their preferred peer interaction strategies would produce effective approaches to teaching and learning in the language classroom. Modification and improvement on the teaching and learning approaches could also be made in the language tasks and activities so that gifted learners could further sharpen their peer interaction skills and at the same time build their talents and other skills. In other words, differentiated instruction strategies for language learning for gifted learners are crucial (Kamis et al., 2019; Mohd Hasrul Kamarulzaman, Hazita Azman & Azizah Mohd Zahidi, 2017).

Because of the uniqueness of gifted learners, it is clear that one shoe does not fit all. Thus, with all that have been elaborated, it is believed that there is a need to examine whether gifted learners should be using the same textbook as the rest of the nation. Equally important is an investigation on differentiated instruction strategies for language learning for gifted learners to develop their communicative abilities, enhance critical thinking and promote problem solving skills.

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