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To lead or not to lead: The fluctuation of peer leadership in collaborative oral argumentation

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Abstract

Working with peers in small groups is conducive to learning, and collaborative learning has been widely adopted in second language classrooms. Leadership, defined as the initiative taken to influence others in a group, plays a significant role in successful teamwork, but has not received due attention in research on collaborative peer work. To address this research gap, we conducted a case study in a university English as a foreign language classroom in China in which the participants navigated their oral argumentation tasks collaboratively. The current study offers insight into the fluctuation of peer leadership in collaborative oral argumentation based on group discussion and semi-structured interview data. The findings suggest that peer leadership is a dynamic process that fluctuates in function and individual contribution over time. The study also revealed that

peer leadership is a complex process influenced by multiple factors, including intrapersonal, interpersonal, and task-related ones. In conclusion, we stress that, to optimize collaborative peer learning, teachers should strive to stimulate and nurture the emergence of leadership and provide space for its long-term development.

Keywords: peer leadership; collaborative argumentation; oral argumentation; peer interaction

1. Introduction

The ability to argue is "a key academic purpose" for second language (L2) learners (Coffin et al., 2012, p. 38). Typically defined as "a process or interactions between individuals exchanging evidence to convince each other of the validity of their claims" (Lee, 2017, p. 91), argumentation enables joint inquiry into a topic, the development of rational thoughts, and the advancement of knowledge (Andrews, 2010; Coffin et al., 2012). Argumentation, nonetheless, constitutes a significant challenge to L2 learners, who often face a dual burden of language and content (Salter-Dvorak, 2016). Gathering students in groups helps learners meet the challenge. Compared with individual work, collaborative argumentation encourages learners to deepen and broaden their argumentation by adding new arguments or counterarguments (Marttunen & Laurinen, 2007). Nonetheless, when put into practice, the collaborative approach to argumentation does not always result in positive collaborative learning due to insufficient engagement with peers' contributions (Su et al., 2021).

Leadership, valued as a crucial predictor of productive teamwork (Hackman & Wageman, 2005), offers us a new lens through which peer interaction in collaborative argumentation can be explicated. Peer leadership is dynamic, varying across time, tasks, and individuals (Leeming, 2024). However, there is little research on the dynamics of peer leadership in L2 learning contexts, and much remains to be known about factors driving or inhibiting leadership emergence in authentic classrooms. The current research bridges this gap through focusing on the initiative taken by English as a foreign language (EFL) learners to influence group members to co-construct oral argumentation, exploring how such peer leadership fluctuates in collaborative oral argumentation over one semester, and revealing what factors lead to such fluctuation. Disentangling peer leadership throws light upon the proactivity that ushers in a joint effort into argument construction. It also helps teachers and researchers gain a deeper understanding of peer interaction, and hopefully create conditions to nurture reciprocal peer influence in L2 classrooms.

2. Literature review

Engagement in peer interaction is essential for constructing and developing arguments. Peer leadership, which denotes a proactive engagement in groupwork, thus comes to the fore. The constructs of collaborative argumentation and peer leadership will be further illustrated with extant literature.

2.1. Collaborative learning and argumentation

The philosophical basis of collaborative learning lies in the theory of social construction, which regards learning as "construction of knowledge within a social context and which therefore encourages acculturation of individuals into a learning community" (Oxford, 1997, p. 443). According to Vygotsky (1978), learners might solve problems they cannot solve independently with the assistance of more knowledgeable others and cognitive development arises from social interaction. The Vygotskian conceptualization of collaborative learning has been corroborated in empirical research. For instance, Selcuk et al. (2019) found that when EFL learners were working in collaborative writing groups, the more capable members supported the less capable ones to complete writing tasks by planning discussion, assigning tasks, explaining linguistic knowledge, and offering encouragement. The facilitative role of peers thus highlights the significance of social interaction and collective scaffolding.

The essence of argumentation meshes well with insights from sociocultural theory. As a social activity that entails persuading others, argumentation must be understood as a social practice constantly under the influence of powerful group contexts and social norms (Kuhn et al., 2013). Therefore, growing scholarly attention has been directed toward collaborative argumentation, "the dialogical interaction or group discussion among several students over a certain issue in order to co-construct an argument" (Jin et al., 2020, p. 24). Empirical research evidences that engaging in collaborative argumentation strengthens learners' argumentative skills (Jin et al., 2019). In addition, collaborative argumentation promotes motivation, fosters engagement, and stimulates greater utilization of cognitive processes (Chinn et al., 2001).

However, the potential benefits of collaborative argumentation do not just happen naturally because simply gathering learners in groups does not ensure collaboration (Kreijns et al., 2003). Su et al. (2021), for example, found that during the group discussion on evidence EFL learners tended to accept teammates' ideas without challenging and debating, and the limited engagement with peers' contributions deprived their argument of critical evaluation. This

could jeopardize the development of argumentation as arguments advance when questioned, challenged and critiqued (Felton & Kuhn, 2001). In other words, to achieve fruitful collaborative argumentation, learners need not only to devote themselves to groupwork but, more importantly, to take the initiative to influence and engage their peers.

2.2. Dynamics of peer leadership

Leadership embodies an initiative to influence teammates to achieve a common goal (Northouse, 2016). A process-oriented understanding of leadership emphasizes that leadership is "not a linear, one-way event, but rather an interactive event" (Northouse, 2016, p. 6). An individual can rise to leadership without others perceiving him or her as particularly leaderlike and without the focal individual "claiming the leader identity" (Badura et al., 2022, p. 2070). In this view, leadership is no longer restricted to a formal title or position but becomes something everyone can access (Northouse, 2016).

Peer leadership can be categorized into different types according to functions. Three types of leadership behavior in collaborative argumentation have been identified in previous studies, namely, task-oriented, relationship-oriented, and content-oriented leadership (Wu et al., 2023). *Task-oriented leadership* reflects leaders' concern for goal attainment and task accomplishment (Yukl, 2010). It manifests as managing turns, making plans, assigning tasks, and controlling the direction of discussion to improve groupwork efficiency (Li et al., 2007; Wu et al., 2023). *Relationship-oriented leadership* contributes to the group's interpersonal relationships and socio-emotional climate (Yukl, 2010). Its manifestations include offering support to others, showing concern for their feelings, and expressing recognition and acknowledgment (Li et al., 2007; Wu et al., 2023; Yukl, 2010). *Content-oriented leadership* reflects efforts to develop and consolidate group arguments (Li et al., 2007). It emerges when learners propose new ideas about argument construction, encourage teammates to elaborate claims with evidence and details, or raise an objection to teammates' opinions (Li et al., 2007; Wu et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2013).

Furthermore, peer leadership is more a dynamic and fluid process than a fixed and unchangeable state, which has been brought to the fore in recent leadership research (Badura et al., 2022). For instance, Gerpott et al. (2019) explored the development of verbal leadership behavior in 42 self-managed teams in a consulting project over eight weeks. They found that leadership aimed at attaining solutions and improving relations surged in midterm discussion, while leadership targeted at initiating actions stayed stable. However, Gerpott et al.'s (2019)

inquiry adopted a quantitative approach, and the trend was obtained through accumulating leadership behaviors of all teams. The multilevel modeling analysis was not sufficiently fine-grained and failed to spell out why peer leadership fluctuated in this way and how participants interpreted their experiences. Likewise, Leeming (2024) focused on the dynamics of peer leadership in a Japanese oral English course over two semesters. Eighty-one EFL learners who worked in small groups rated the extent to which they perceived leadership in their teammates via an impression questionnaire. The study illustrated distinct developmental trajectories of three focal learners. The first participant demonstrated consistent leadership and dominated group discussion over two semesters; the second one stood out because of his leading role in the first semester but dramatically became a social loafer in the second semester; the third one, in contrast, remained silent at first but turned into a strong leader afterwards (Leeming, 2024). Albeit the study is inspiring, Leeming (2024) measured leadership primarily with an impression questionnaire, which is susceptible to personal bias and subjective criteria and thus unable to track the progress of actual leadership performance.

The emergence of leadership involves various factors. Individual attributes, such as personality, intelligence, and skills, are predictors of leadership emergence in group discussions (Ensari et al., 2011). At the same time, contextual factors, such as task design, organizational level, and follower characteristics, are also relevant to leadership (Qiu & Lo, 2017; Zaccaro et al., 2018). These factors may all give rise to leadership fluctuation. Enlightening as these previous inquiries are, most of them have concentrated on leadership in workplaces, which is very different from leadership in classrooms because of workplaces' prominent organizational structure and hierarchical relations. In Leeming's (2024) study mentioned above, extraversion, language proficiency, group membership, and gender balance were found to potentially influence peer leadership in EFL classrooms. This study, however, predetermined most of the factors influencing leadership rather than allowing them to emerge fully from the data. Thus, it offers limited insight into what could be done to nurture and maximize the benefit of leadership in a collaborative L2 classroom. The factors influencing peer leadership are arguably more complex, and further exploration is clearly warranted.

The literature review suggests that little is known about why learners rise to or relinquish leadership in L2 classrooms. Therefore, more research is needed to broaden the scope of peer leadership by exploring its fluctuation and factors influencing it during the collaborative construction of arguments. The exploration makes it possible to create an environment conducive to successful leadership and amplify leadership's positive effect on L2 learning. The present study is situated in a Chinese EFL classroom, investigating how leadership resources could be capitalized upon in collaborative learning and identifying the benefits

and problems associated with small group discussion. The following research questions were addressed in this study:

1. How do EFL learners' peer leadership fluctuate in collaborative oral argumentation over a 14-week semester?
    a. How do three types of peer leadership (i.e., task-oriented, content-oriented, relationship-oriented) fluctuate in collaborative oral argumentation?
    b. How does individual contribution to peer leadership fluctuate in collaborative oral argumentation?
2. What factors shape the fluctuation of peer leadership in collaborative oral argumentation?

3. Methods

3.1. Research context

The present case study was conducted in an English-for-academic-purposes (EAP) class at a Chinese university. The EAP course pursued the goal of improving non-English major undergraduates' academic English skills and helping them acquire communicative competence in academic contexts. The EAP class met weekly over one semester, with each of the 14 lessons lasting 90 minutes. The course revolved around a collaborative oral argumentation task assigned to students every two weeks. The students went through six rounds of collaborative oral argumentation over the semester.

Each collaborative oral argumentation task followed a four-stage procedure. At Stage One, students were given ten minutes to read a text. The reading texts were selected from a column named "Working Life," published in *Science*, where scholars from all over the world share their confusion about and predicaments in their academic careers to provide insightful suggestions for readers. Each text contains 600 to 700 words. At Stage Two, students had ten minutes for group discussion, during which they should collaborate to figure out the author's opinion, stake out their position on the issue, clarify their reasons for holding their position, and find examples to support those reasons. Students were allowed to choose their preferred languages for group discussion to remove the language barrier and enable efficient group communication. At Stage Three, each group sent no more than two members to outline their oral argumentation on the blackboard, including the group's position, supporting reasons, and evidence. At Stage Four, each group sent one representative to present a two-minute oral argumentation in English in front of the class.

3.2. Participants

Thirty-six freshmen (23 males, 13 females) composed the EAP class. The students had been rated as advanced in a university-organized English placement examination held for all first-year non-English majors, suggesting they had similar levels of English proficiency, roughly equivalent to CEFR B2. The students were required to form small groups in the first lesson, and group membership was left to their discretion. Six groups were created as a result.

The current study adopted a qualitative case study method, which is used to investigate a contemporary phenomenon, that is, peer leadership of a group of EFL learners in this case, when it is difficult to separate the phenomenon from its context (Yin, 2018). Contextualizing this investigation in an authentic L2 classroom allowed an in-depth analysis and a better understanding of peer leadership in the setting where it naturally occurred (Duff, 2008). According to the classroom observation in the first round of collaborative oral argumentation, a group of six EFL learners were selected from the class as the focal group. The six members participated in discussions differently, with some being more proactive and others more reticent, which might offer insight into the diverse demonstrations and developmental trajectories of peer leadership. Informed consent was obtained from the six participants, and anonymity was guaranteed. All six participants were native speakers of Chinese (see Table 1 for details).

Table 1 Profiles of the focal group

Pseudonym	Sex	Age	Major
Susan	Female	18	Medicine
Vicky	Female	17	Medicine
John	Male	18	Medicine
Tom	Male	18	Chemistry
Luke	Male	18	Chemistry
Davis	Male	19	Chemistry

3.3. Data collection

As the participants completed six rounds of collaborative oral argumentation task over the semester, data collection started in the second round so that the participants could familiarize themselves with the task procedure in the first round. Thus, five rounds of discussions on collaborative argumentation were audio-recorded in total to answer the first research question. One audio recorder was placed on the desk of the focal group at the very beginning of each lesson so that the participants got accustomed to its presence when their group discussion started. One-

on-one semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant of the focal group to answer the second research question (see Appendix for the interview protocol). The interviews sought to elicit the participants' feelings and thoughts on the collaborative oral argumentation task and their motivation for and perceptions of peer leadership. The first author interviewed the participants at the end of the semester, and the interviews were conducted in Chinese so that the participants could better express themselves in their native language. A total of 290-minute data was gathered, each interview ranging between 30 and 60 minutes.

3.4. Data analysis

The audio-recordings were transcribed verbatim and segmented into turns as the unit of analysis of leadership behavior. Each talk turn was coded for leadership or non-leadership. The coding was guided by the three-dimensional leadership framework developed by Wu et al. (2023). This framework was adapted from extant literature on leadership to fit the context of collaborative argumentation and thus matches the present research. Two principles guided the identification of leadership turns: (1) the turn was directed toward certain addressee(s), and (2) the turn "involved the addressee(s) in believing or doing something to accomplish the task" (Wu et al., 2023, p. 5). Drawing upon the three-dimensional framework, each leadership turn was then coded into the three types, and a long turn could be coded for more than one type (see Table 2). The first author and a research assistant independently coded all discussion transcripts. When disagreement arose, the two coders discussed them to reach a consensus. The numbers of three types of leadership behaviors in each discussion were counted separately to reveal the changes of different types of peer leadership, and the numbers of leadership behaviors performed by each participant in each discussion were counted to display the changes of individual performances.

Table 2 A three-dimensional leadership framework (Wu et al., 2023, p. 6)

Leadership behavior	Aim	Example
Task-oriented leadership	To improve group efficiency and accomplish tasks	"Try to figure out the second and the third reason."
Content-oriented leadership	To construct and develop the group argument	"The central idea is to write in a top-down way."
Relationship-oriented leadership	To promote mutual trust and maintain a positive socioemotional group climate	"You can put it in English like this . . ."

Note. The examples were extracted from the group discussion data collected for the current study.

The interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and coded for factors influencing leadership fluctuation. An inductive approach was employed to analyze

the interview transcripts. First, the first author read the interview transcripts back and forth to familiarize herself with the data. Then, the interview data went through three rounds of coding. During the first coding round, in vivo codes were extracted from the transcripts using the words generated by the participants (Saldaña, 2013), such as "poor English." In the second coding round, the in vivo codes were refined and grouped into subcategories (e.g., self-efficacy). In the last coding round, these subcategories were further merged into three main categories: intrapersonal factors, interpersonal factors, and task-related factors. The first author coded the interview transcripts twice at a one-month interval to ensure intra-coder reliability. The intra-coder agreement was over 95%.

4. Findings

The analysis of the group discussion and interview data traced the fluctuations of peer leadership in collaborative oral argumentation over time, and uncovered the rationale behind these fluctuations. This section reports leadership fluctuations first and then the influencing factors.

4.1. Fluctuations of peer leadership

The total number of peer leadership behaviors continued to fall throughout the semester as the total turns kept decreasing (see Table 3). Specifically, peer leadership of different types fluctuated over the span of a semester. The participants also demonstrated different trajectories in leadership development.

Table 3 Total number of peer leadership and non-leadership behaviors

	Round 2	Round 3	Round 4	Round 5	Round 6
Total turns	148	137	86	74	68
Leadership turns	97	88	61	54	46
Non-leadership turns	51	49	25	20	22

Note. Round 2 refers to the group discussion in the second round of collaborative argumentation, etc.

4.1.1. Fluctuations of leadership type

As shown in Figure 1, content-oriented leadership decreased in the first few rounds of collaborative oral argumentation and evened out in the last. Task-oriented leadership rose and fell between the second and fourth rounds, eventually stabilizing in the last two rounds. Relationship-oriented leadership generally displayed a decreasing

trend with a slight fluctuation between the fourth and last rounds, reaching its peak at 18 in the second round and touching its lowest point at 3 in the last round.

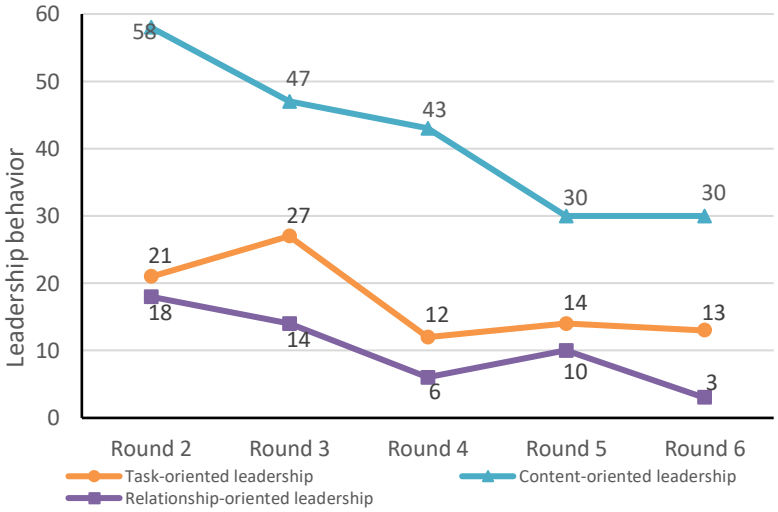

Figure 1 Fluctuations of leadership type

Overall, the participants performed many more content-oriented leadership behaviors than task-oriented and relationship-oriented leadership behaviors. Excerpt 1 exemplifies how each type of leadership serves collaborative oral argumentation:[1]

Excerpt 1 (Group discussion, Round 2)

1	Davis:	Let's think about *reasons*. What *reasons*? What *reasons* do we have?	Task-oriented leadership
2	Vicky:	We need examples.	Task-oriented leadership
3	John:	The author of this article can be an example.	Content-oriented leadership
4	Tom:	An example of being widely read.	Content-oriented leadership
. . .			
14	Vicky:	Our central point is being well-prepared to grasp opportunities. In this article, the author extends from being well-read to being well-prepared. As for our presentation, we need first to clarify our central point and then extend to "*from the article.*"	Content-oriented leadership
15	John:	Zhuge Liang makes perfect sense!	Relationship-oriented leadership

In the above excerpt, Davis clarified their current goal of discussion, that is, to generate propositions to corroborate their stance (Turn 1). When referring

[1] In the excerpts, Chinese words were translated into English, and English words were italicized.

to *reasons*, Davis switched from the first language (L1) to L2 to align with the language use of the worksheet instructions to make his instructions more comprehensible to other members. Vicky further specified the aim as supporting examples (Turn 2). Both undertook task-oriented leadership to direct the progress of oral argumentation and make it flow. Following their direction, there were demonstrations of content-oriented leadership. John and Tom proposed the protagonist of the reading material as a readily available example for their argument (Turns 3, 4). Likewise, Vicky, who also displayed content-oriented leadership, offered a valuable insight into the logical line of their argumentation as she elucidated the relation between their main claim and the supporting example (Turn 14). L2 was utilized here to confirm the evidence source (i.e., *from the article*). As such, content-oriented leadership helped the participants structure and flesh out their collaborative argumentation. Vicky's contribution was acknowledged by John, who praised her as *Zhuge Liang*, an ancient Chinese military counselor and an icon of wisdom, showing relationship-oriented leadership to facilitate a responsive and reciprocal interaction (Turn 15).

4.1.2. Fluctuations of individual contribution

As Figure 2 shows, the participants demonstrated different trends in leadership performances. Vicky's leadership behaviors reached their highest point at the beginning and then gradually declined. Susan's leadership behaviors fluctuated at a high level. Davis's leadership behaviors remained at a medium level with slight variation. The other three participants' leadership behaviors generally remained low.

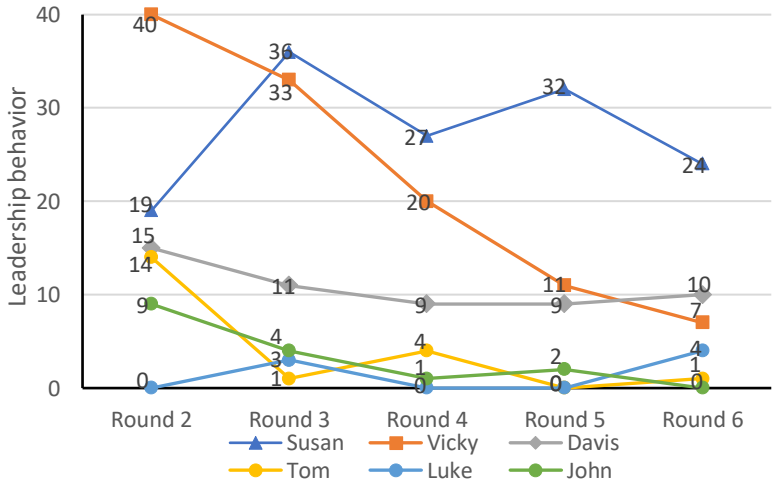

Figure 2 Fluctuations of individual contribution

The fluctuations of individual leadership performances imply that the focal group, by and large, followed an imbalanced pattern in which Susan predominated, while other members displayed scattered leadership behaviors. Excerpt 2 provides an example of such a pattern:

Excerpt 2 (Group discussion, Round 5)

1	Vicky:	Another reason is that uncertainty represents something new, something that you never know.	Content-oriented leadership
2	Susan:	Oh, in the movie A Gan Zheng Zhuan. *Life is a chocolate box; you never know what is next.*	Content-oriented leadership
. . .			
4	Susan:	Write this sentence on the outline. What's the name of the protagonist in English?	Task-oriented leadership
5	Davis:	*Gump*, just *Gump*.	Content-oriented leadership
6	Susan:	(To John) Did you hear him?	Relationship-oriented leadership
7	John:	No, I didn't.	
8	Susan:	(To Davis) Say that to him again.	Task-oriented leadership
…			
14	Susan:	(To John) You can say "*as the saying goes.*" You can just take it as a proverb. (To Vicky) Then you just implant your ideas in his mind.	Relationship-oriented leadership, task-oriented leadership

The discussion excerpt occurred in the fifth round of collaborative oral argumentation when Vicky had withdrawn most of her leadership, and Susan began controlling the group discussion's direction and progress. Susan first performed content-oriented leadership behavior by advancing an available example to corroborate the claim (Turn 2). Her content-oriented leadership helped the focal group identify supporting evidence for the oral argumentation. She resorted to the L2 to expound on the details of the evidence. Then, she demonstrated a string of task-oriented leadership behaviors. She told one member to write the outline of the oral argumentation (Turn 4), assigned Davis to help John express the example in English (Turn 8), and required Vicky to tell John the supporting reason she had proposed earlier so he could use it in the presentation (Turn 14). These assignments were made in such a firm and even imperative tone that they sounded almost unchallengeable, and there seemed to be no alternative but to follow them. Her manifestations of task-oriented leadership, nonetheless, mobilized members to complete subtasks of the oral argumentation with greater efficiency. The L1 was used to ensure the clarity of subtask assignments. Susan also conducted relationship-oriented leadership behavior by caring for John and mentoring him to organize the oral argumentation (Turns 6, 14), demonstrating her concern and

support for the less capable member. She switched from the L1 to the L2 to assist John in orally expressing the evidence source (i.e., *as the saying goes*).

Such a leadership pattern enabled the group to accomplish the task with the least effort. Human resources were optimized, and individuals were fully mobilized when tasks were assigned and goals clarified. It was also time-saving because the decision-making process was simplified and centralized. Notwithstanding its efficiency, the imbalanced pattern could be detrimental. Susan's leadership, which appeared to be an example of rather top-down control, might have prevented others from proactively engaging themselves in collaborative knowledge construction and turned them into passive followers to some extent. In the above excerpt, for example, John became the object that was "implanted" ideas (Turn 14). Davis was perceptive of predominant leadership's double-edge nature: "Some ideas might be forced upon you. If you have nothing in your mind, you will accept whatever they tell you. But we need a leader to give us a framework to think and practice."

4.2. Factors influencing the fluctuation of peer leadership

To explore the rationale behind the dynamics of peer leadership, we analyzed the interview data. Individual characteristics, interpersonal relationships, task design, and task requirement were found to inform peer leadership in collaborative oral argumentation.

4.2.1. Intrapersonal factors

Three intrapersonal factors emerged from the data to connect with the fluctuation of peer leadership: self-efficacy, self-perceived role, and personality traits. Self-efficacy refers to the extent to which an individual believes he or she can perform a certain task (Bandura, 1986). Susan, who had a predominant role in the focal group, reported high self-efficacy because she had great faith in her cognitive and management competence. According to Susan, her ability to "think fast" enabled her to act quickly and efficiently, helping her get the group to complete tasks within a limited time. Her other specialty, "grasping people's personalities and strengths," allowed her to maximize human resources. Susan's high self-efficacy accorded with her performance in group discussions, during which she often played an essential role in monitoring group progress and assigning tasks. High self-efficacy motivated her to perform leadership behaviors. In contrast, Luke, Tom, and John demonstrated fewer leadership behaviors, and all reported low self-efficacy derived from limited English proficiency. Tom thought his English vocabulary

was "much more limited than other members." John lacked confidence in spoken English and felt anxious about giving oral presentations in class. Similarly, Luke admitted "having difficulties getting the point of the reading materials," which prevented him from engaging fully in group discussions. Their low self-efficacy due to their perceived limited proficiency made the trio feel unqualified for leadership.

Self-perceived role was also central to reflecting on the participants' leadership performances. It represents learners' belief in what they should do as a consequence of various reasons such as philosophical beliefs, previous experience, or perceived competence. Susan perceived herself as a manager who could "arrange groupwork and assign tasks," and a monitor who moved the discussion forward when members spent too much time on one issue. Her self-perceived roles corresponded with her leadership performances, which contained most of the group's task-oriented leadership. On the other hand, Davis viewed himself as a moderate-level member for "not being the best while not being the worst." As Davis explained in the interview, the rationale behind his self-perceived role lies in "the Doctrine of the Mean (*Zhongyong* in Chinese)," a Confucian doctrine that favors modesty and adheres to the principle of not acting in excess. This aligned with his moderate leadership performances, as he did not stand out as much as Susan and Vicky but demonstrated more leadership behaviors than the other three members. Luke, John, and Tom, who displayed far fewer leadership behaviors, regarded themselves as "a participant," "an observer," and "a learner," respectively. All these roles were relatively passive and did not involve taking the initiative to engage in groupwork. Lacking prior experience in small-group learning, John felt hesitant about telling others what to do and felt comfortable with the role of "an observer." Tom believed he only got into the class by excelling on the placement test; his English proficiency did not qualify him for leadership. This made him position himself as "a learner" from the beginning. Therefore, the participants' various self-perceived roles were inextricably linked with how often they undertook leadership and reinforced their leadership performances.

Personality was another intrapersonal factor influencing leadership emergence. The participants with a limited number of leadership behaviors tended to attribute their leadership performances to their reserved and introverted personalities. For example, when asked why he preferred not to play a leading role in their group, Davis explained that he was "afraid of being objected to by others" because his previous proposals had often faced objections. Following the Doctrine of the Mean and keeping a low profile prevented him from being objected to and assuming to leadership. Luke's introversion made expressing his thoughts in groups of people challenging, which troubled him. Contrarily, they nominated Susan as a good leader for her extroverted and agreeable personality, such as "being an approachable and effective communicator" (reported by Luke) and "being

extrovert and willing to talk" (reported by Tom). This presents an interesting contrast between introvert and extrovert personalities, which brought about distinct performances of peer leadership.

4.2.2. Interpersonal factors

The participants also mentioned factors related to social norms and interpersonal relationships as being closely associated with the fluctuations in peer leadership. Two interpersonal considerations were identified, that is, depending upon others and avoiding conflict. Firstly, several participants were aware of a tendency to depend upon others, which turned some members into social loafers and hindered leadership emergence. As Susan, Vicky, and Davis observed, some members remained silent and rarely gave their opinions in group discussions. When proactive members like Susan and Vicky took the lead in the discussion, "others tended to listen and barely think," recalled Davis. This was confirmed by their discussion transcript, shown in Excerpt 3:

Excerpt 3 (Group discussion, Round 5)

1	Vicky:	It's about not being afraid of making decisions and then embracing uncertainty.	Content-oriented leadership
2	Susan:	This essay is about embracing uncertainty and being the true self.	Content-oriented leadership
3	John:	What?	
4	Vicky:	Don't be afraid of making decisions, and enjoy the process.	Content-oriented leadership
5	Susan:	I don't think it's about enjoying the process . . . I think the author means that we need to be ourselves instead of being defined by others.	Content-oriented leadership
. . .			
9	Susan:	(To John) If you hold a different opinion, you can talk about it. Let's have a discussion.	Relationship-oriented leadership
10	Vicky:	(To John) So what's your opinion?	Task-oriented leadership
11	John:	Don't be afraid of uncertainty, be yourself.	

In Excerpt 3, Susan and Vicky demonstrated content-oriented leadership by sharing their understanding of its main idea (Turns 1, 2, 4, 5). Given that John was that day's presenter, they then turned to him for his opinion (Turns 9, 10). However, John did not provide any new comment, and he just repeated what Susan and Vicky had just said (Turn 11). He drifted with Susan and Vicky's opinions and failed to contribute new ideas even when they made it clear they were open to discussion. Leaving all decisions to those members who more proactively

engaged in groupwork and demonstrated more leadership behaviors, the reticent members "neglected their obligation in collaborative work and left their obligation for the other members to fulfill," as Susan put it, and thus had a limited number of leadership behaviors.

Alongside depending upon others, avoiding conflict was reported by Vicky as an important interpersonal consideration for withdrawing leadership. As shown in Figure 2, Vicky emerged in a leading role and performed the most leadership behaviors initially. However, unlike all other participants, her leadership later showed a steady and continuous decline. When asked about her decreasing leadership, Vicky explained that she had intentionally withdrawn herself from group discussions to avoid conflict with Susan. She often held different opinions from the other members but felt inhibited about expressing them, as illustrated in the following interview extract:

Excerpt 4 (Interview)

Vicky: Honestly, I often had opinions of my own. However, my opinions were not welcomed . . . Susan took too much control, and our group discussion basically followed her will. Whatever I said made very little difference . . . Also, I don't want our relationship to sour. If someone always opposes you, it must feel bad. I don't want to make others feel bad.

Vicky thought that Susan controlled their discussion so no one could go against her will. Susan's dominance in group discussions made Vicky feel her proposals were not appreciated. In this case, Vicky was aware that raising an objection could cause a collision between her and Susan. Vicky's concern was not unfounded. Confrontations between Susan's and Vicky's leadership could be easily found in discussion scripts; in some cases, their disputes were not handled appropriately. Excerpt 5 serves as an example:

Excerpt 5 (Group discussion, Round 6)

1	Susan:	Then what examples should we use?	Task-oriented leadership
. . .			
3	Vicky:	We should work on the reasons first.	Task-oriented leadership
4	Susan:	The reason is that only by doing this can we succeed.	Content-oriented leadership
5	Vicky:	But how can we succeed? Shouldn't we explain that it's because there is a limit to one's energy?	Content-oriented leadership
. . .			
9	Susan:	Then we'll just argue that different people have different expertise. How to say expertise in English?	Content-oriented leadership

10	Vicky:	That's because there is a limit to one's energy.	Content-oriented leadership
11	Susan:	Not necessarily. We can only say everyone has their own expertise.	Content-oriented leadership

According to Excerpt 5, Vicky initially involved herself in the discussion via task-oriented and content-oriented leadership. She proposed that reasons supporting their claim should come before their evidence (Turn 3), but Susan gave a perfunctory answer, showing little concern about Vicky's proposal (Turn 4). Later, Vicky again asserted the need to come forward with reasons first and proposed a reason (Turn 5). Susan did not respond to Vicky's suggestion and made a new proposal instead (Turn 9). Vicky made another attempt, which Susan rejected without further explanation (Turns 10, 11). This dialogue occurred in the last round of collaborative oral argumentation and was the point at which Vicky's frustration culminated; she did not say anything after this argument. The excerpt illustrates a collision between Susan and Vicky, with both demonstrating strong content-oriented leadership. However, Susan tended to overrule Vicky's initiatives without explanation or reluctantly follow Vicky's suggestions without offering recognition. This discouraged Vicky from actively participating in group conversations. Later in this discussion, she remained reticent and did not perform any type of leadership behavior. Susan, nevertheless, did not seem to realize the problem, and no amendment was observed in later discussion. She attributed her leadership style to a belief that "the result matters more than the process." When priority was given to completing the task, the need for meaningful and constructive negotiation could be neglected.

4.2.3. Task-related factors

The participants also regarded task-related factors, including task design and task requirements, as connected with their leadership performance. On the one hand, the task design was presenter-centered. Even though their group argument was an outcome of teamwork, only one member presented their argument to the class as a group representative each time. In Susan and Vicky's views, this positioned the presenter as the focal point, meaning that members not responsible for the presentation would invest less effort in group discussions. Luke verified their concerns, admitting he would be more proactive if he were the presenter. Figure 2 shows a slight increase in Luke's leadership behaviors in the third round of collaborative oral argumentation when he took charge of the oral presentation; his leadership behaviors remained zero in most other cases. As such, the presenter-centered task design allowed some members to slack off on the discussion and did not provide sufficient stimulus for them to perform leadership behaviors.

On the other hand, the collaborative oral argumentation task followed an iterative design that contained six rounds of procedurally repeated practices. According to Susan, such an iterative design enabled them to adopt a one-size-fits-all method that required the least effort to complete the task. As the participants became familiar and even bored with the tasks, their group discussion turned into a mechanical routine in which proposing innovative ideas and negotiating different ideas became unnecessary. This may partially explain why content-oriented leadership continued to decline, as shown in Figure 1. Such task-oriented leadership behaviors as allocating tasks and monitoring progress, meanwhile, are indispensable for preserving the structure of the routine. This might account for why task-oriented leadership remained steady during the latter half of the semester (see Figure 1).

Task requirement was also reported as a key factor for the fluctuation of peer leadership. The requirement of fixed membership was perceived as facilitative to leadership emergence. According to Davis, collaborating in a group with fixed membership during the semester made him fully aware that "the group exists as a unity," and his interest was closely connected with the group. This awareness encouraged him to invest moderate and constant efforts in groupwork, contributing to his steady trend of leadership with little variation. The time limit, another task requirement, however, could discourage peer leadership. Having minimal time for group discussions, Vicky felt that if she stuck to her position and spent too much time persuading teammates, the group might fail to complete the argumentative task within the time allotted, and she would be blamed for hampering groupwork progress. Therefore, she preferred to make concessions when others did not favor her proposal, which could demotivate her from performing content-oriented leadership and give rise to a decrease in her leadership behaviors.

5. Discussion

The current study delved into how six EFL learners' peer leadership fluctuated over one semester when collaborating on oral argumentation tasks. It was shown that peer leadership is a dynamic process undergoing constant changes under the influence of multiple factors.

5.1. Fluctuations of peer leadership

This case study extends the current knowledge of leadership dynamics by revealing the variations in function and individual distribution over time. Task-oriented leadership decreased initially and leveled off later, while relationship-oriented

leadership displayed a gradually declining trend. These findings, however, differ from those of Gerpott et al. (2019), who found a sharp increase in task-oriented and relationship-oriented leadership at the midterm meeting. The discrepancy between the two studies may be ascribed to different tasks. Gerpott et al. (2019) studied leadership behaviors within one single task, a highly competitive and rewarding project that required the participants to devise a workable solution in eight weeks. The intense schedule and promised reward could have prompted the participants to undertake more leadership in the latter half of the project to ensure its accomplishment. The present study, in contrast, adopted an iterative task design and examined peer leadership across multiple rounds of the same task over fourteen weeks. This was less straining for learners because they could take their time over trial and error and find a regular pattern for their teamwork. Once they had settled with the pattern, there was less motive for leadership, hence the decline of leadership behaviors. The findings suggest that leadership emergence is conditional in L2 classrooms, and its development is contingent upon various factors.

Furthermore, the current study also highlights individuals' diverse fluctuating trajectories in collaborative learning in an L2 classroom. This finding contradicts Leeming's (2024) observation that peer leadership in a Japanese EFL classroom remained relatively stable in the same group but changed when learners joined a new group. The studies' different approaches to leadership measurement could cause the contradiction. Leeming (2024) focused on perceived leadership, while the present study probed observable leadership behavior. The former is more entrenched and difficult to change once a general impression has been established, whereas the latter can be more explicitly observed and tracked, hence sensitive to change. The dynamic changes in leadership revealed by this case study confirm that peer leadership is more a fluid emergent process than a fixed state of being, which points to its potential to be improved and optimized in L2 classrooms. Nevertheless, the disparate and imbalanced individual contribution revealed by the present study provides a glimpse into the two-sided nature of peer leadership. For one thing, leadership facilitates efficient groupwork; for another thing, excessive leadership suffocates interaction and hinders participation (Leeming, 2024). This calls for more attention to peer leadership in L2 classrooms to enable learners to benefit from the process.

5.2. Factors influencing leadership fluctuations

This case study advances the current knowledge of peer leadership by uncovering factors influencing leadership fluctuation. By allowing these factors to emerge from interview data, this case study offers an insider's perspective to unpack the rationale

behind peer leadership emergence or decline. This enriches the understanding of group dynamics of L2 learners and helps maximize the benefits of peer collaboration in L2 classrooms. Leeming (2019) found that intrapersonal factors like proficiency and extraversion did not necessarily connect with perceived leadership as the leader can be the most proficient, most extroverted, or neither proficient nor extraverted, suggesting the existence of other factors shaping peer leadership. As such, echoing Leeming's (2019) findings, the current study underscores the complexity of peer leadership and confirms that its development involves a combination of intrapersonal, interpersonal, and task-related factors.

Self-efficacy, self-perceived roles, and personality traits were identified as relevant intrapersonal factors. The findings of the current study align with the results reported by Sulis (2022), who found that self-efficacy was central to L2 learners' changes in behavioral engagement. Peer leadership, as one manifestation of behavioral engagement, is informed by self-efficacy. The identification of self-perceived role as a factor influencing peer leadership also corresponds with a previous longitudinal study which found that whether an individual viewed themselves as a leader greatly impacted whether and how frequently they emerged as one (Emery et al., 2011). The current finding that an introverted personality is an important factor in discouraging learners from demonstrating leadership is consistent with Li et al.'s (2007) research, which identified quietness as the greatest factor in decreasing the chance of leadership emergence.

Interpersonal factors also emerged from the data analysis in the current case study. Some participants sat back during the discussion and rarely contributed to the groupwork, instead depending on others, possibly due to a lack of individual accountability. Individual accountability exists when individual performance is assessed, making everyone fully aware that they are responsible for contributing to group work fairly (Johnson et al., 1991). Even though it was stressed to students that the group should jointly construct oral argumentation, no assessment was given on individual contributions in group discussion in the present research. Without external stimulation, introverts were less motivated to perform leadership behaviors. Another interpersonal factor emerged when Vicky withdrew her leadership to avoid conflict. Vicky's withdrawal echoes Wang's (2012) observation that Chinese EFL learners perceived expressing conflicting opinions as confrontational rather than constructive; they tended to give up their ground quickly in the face of disagreement to preserve their face (Wang, 2012). Such a belief could prevent them from engaging in meaningful group discussions to maintain harmony at a surface level, thereby inhibiting leadership behaviors. Additionally, Susan's excessively predominant leadership, the cause of Vicky's withdrawal, points to a lack of tactics for dealing with disagreements. Showing little recognition and willingness to negotiate could make collaborative group dialogue fraught with "competitive talk

and individualized decision-making" (Evagorou & Osborne, 2013, p. 213), which might hinder the emergence of peer leadership.

Task-related factors were also found to inform peer leadership. The presenter-centered design may induce a lack of individual accountability (Johnson et al., 1991) for putting a certain member in the limelight and allowing the others to sit back, hence the decline of leadership behaviors. Moreover, procedure repetition of the iterative design was found to be associated with leadership decline. This is consistent with Qiu and Lo's (2017) finding that procedure and content repetition negatively influenced students' behavioral and cognitive engagement. Task requirements were identified as another significant factor affecting leadership. While existing literature indicates that whether learners could decide on group membership did not significantly affect behavioral engagement (Poort et al., 2022), the current study suggests group membership duration could matter. Also, identifying time limits as a factor influencing peer leadership provides a possible explanation for Lai's (2021) conclusion that perceived task difficulty negatively predicts learners' behavioral engagement in group-based learning. As a time limit increases the difficulty of collaborative oral argumentation, learners might prioritize completing the task on time over constructive negotiation, leading to less behavioral engagement, including leadership behavior.

6. Conclusion

This study has provided interesting insights into the fluctuation of peer leadership in a collaborative oral argumentation task. Nevertheless, several limitations of the investigation need to be acknowledged. One concerns the small sample size, that is, six participants, which might be too few to obtain a thick description of leadership dynamics. Another limitation of this study is that only verbal leadership behaviors were examined, but leadership can be conveyed both verbally and nonverbally. Also, this study only tracked leadership fluctuation over a 14-week semester. In light of these weaknesses, future research may consider investigating peer leadership in a larger sample and utilizing quantitative instruments to verify the effect of various factors influencing leadership. Peer interaction might also be video-recorded in future research to track verbal and nonverbal leadership behaviors and capture a fuller picture of peer leadership. In addition, researchers can further explore peer leadership on different timescales and make comparisons between them so as to examine the dynamics of leadership with different granularity.

Despite its limitations, this case study has valuable pedagogical implications. First, the identification of intrapersonal factors influencing peer leadership implies that voluntary or random grouping might run the risk of putting students with low

self-efficacy or introverted personalities in a group. Given the poor initial condition, it would be difficult for the group to improve. Questionnaires can be administered before forming the groups to collect learners' intrapersonal information to ensure heterogeneous group composition and create a balanced group environment where leadership is more likely to emerge. Second, exploring interpersonal factors informing peer leadership shows that a lack of social skills could lead to communication breakdown and leadership withdrawal. Thus, teachers can take steps to equip students with social skills in pre-task training, such as listening attentively and respectfully, commenting constructively, and making decisions democratically (Gillies, 2016). In the course of groupwork, teachers could monitor group discussions and award those following these principles to encourage the practice of social skills. Finally, as task design and requirements relate to leadership performance, an environment conducive to leadership emergence could be carefully planned. For instance, teachers may consider evaluating individuals' participation in group discussions to reduce social loafing and nurture mutual interdependence, or incorporating different tasks in an L2 class to avoid procedural task repetition and elicit learner engagement.

In summary, the present research represents an initial effort to trace the fluctuations of peer leadership behaviors over time in collaborative oral argumentation in an EFL classroom. The findings indicate the potential for peer leadership to be fostered among L2 learners. This exploratory attempt also paves the way for future empirical investigations into leadership dynamics in L2 learning contexts.

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APPENDIX

Interview protocol

1. What factors do you think influence the performances of your group?
2. How do you understand leader or leadership?
3. What attributes do you think make someone eligible to be a leader in an EFL classroom?
4. Does your group have any leaders? If it does, who are they and why?
5. How have the leaders facilitated or hindered you in terms of comprehending the text, devising the outline and constructing the group argumentation?
6. Have you ever been a leader in your group? What has prompted you to be one or what has prevented you from being one?
7. What role do you play in your group?
8. Please comment on every member's performance in your group.