

**Understanding the Effectiveness of Peer Tutoring as a Process to Improve English
Writing Among Beginner-level Efl Students.**

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Abstract

This research aimed to understand the potential effectiveness of peer tutoring to improve the writing skills in English beginner-level students. This study was conducted in a public university in Colombia; participants were four tutees from first semester, their age ranged from 16 to 19 years old, and one tutor from sixth semester.

The researcher used interviews and tutoring session observations as main instruments of data collection. Findings indicated that tutoring sessions, an extra class practice helped participants to advance in their knowledge experience; and tutoring sessions helped tutees to improve English writing skills. A main disadvantage described by tutees was the lack of a more rigorous planning on the part of the tutor.

Introduction

Foreign language teachers have used several strategies in order to help students learn more easily and efficiently. The most common strategies are: Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), use of Portfolio, and Direct instruction (DI.) They have been largely documented in several studies because they have shown efficacy when students learn a broad topic, also, it is known as an effective intervention for children with academic and/or behavioural difficulties in writing (Kroesbergen & Van Luit, 2003).

This was a case study which attempted to understand the potential effectiveness of peer tutoring to improve English writing among first semester students. The researcher's purpose was to identify the main advantages and disadvantages of this process. At this stage peer tutoring is defined as —a system of instruction in which learners help each other and learn themselves by teaching, (Goodlad & Hirst, 1989). Others have defined peer tutoring as a way for all students to get one-on-one help and enough time to practice and learn; because of this, peers mutually support each other's knowledge growth (Ariza & Viafara, 2008), and it even helps students who generally have little trouble learning. Peer tutoring is very helpful for students who are at risk and for students whose parents and teachers worry that they will start to have problems in school (Meneses, 2005).

Although peer tutoring (PT) has been implemented in beginner semester courses (first and second semester) at the university where this study was conducted, there is not enough evidence to present its advantages and disadvantages. In addition, this study aimed to answer the following research questions: What is the effectiveness of Peer Tutoring in order to sort out writing skill difficulties in tutees? And what are the advantages and disadvantages of Peer Tutoring when used to improve writing skill?

Literature review

This literature review presents several studies undertaken in the field of peer tutoring. Although this process has been studied so far, this particular study focused on the approaches and the concepts given to peer tutoring, and tutors that emerge within the study. This section will show different studies which will help this research be differentiated among the others already conducted.

Although there are several concepts of peer tutoring, this study has chosen Thurston's (2008), in which the author states that peer tutoring is —characterized by specific role taking as tutor or tutee, with high focus on curriculum content and clear procedures for interaction, in which participants receive generic or specific training.

Similarly, it is necessary to understand the actors involved in this strategy. One of them is the tutor, —A more capable, knowledgeable, and experienced peer with a supportive role. (Topping, 1996 as cited on De Smet, 2009). This study took the conception of tutor as a peer with high curriculum level because this is how peer tutoring is developed in the setting studied.

In Cheng & Yu-ku (2008) a quantitative research, the participants were 105 undergraduate students from the same semester who took a Technology in Education course at a university in western United States. They found that students' attitudes revealed that what students liked about reciprocal peer tutoring (RPT) were helpful group members, opportunities to work in groups, feedback from groups, knowledge sharing, in fact, they didn't feel intimidated when asking. What students disliked about RPT were the unnecessary work and lack of interaction.

Similarly, Yuen Loke & Chow (2005) included enhancement of deep learning, cooperative learning, and personal achievements/gains. In regards of bad points, there were discrepancies because of the styles of each tutor to teach and the issue of not having enough knowledge to teach.

Meneses (2005) found that all students receiving the intervention (reciprocal and tutee groups) produced a significant increase in the number of digit corrects on a math probe. These results showed the effectiveness of peer tutoring above and beyond that of traditional classroom instruction.

Likewise, these findings can be compared with Harts & King (2007) a multiple case study, because this research supported previous assertions that service-learning positively influences student academic achievement. The data gathered provided evidence that this positive influence is related to several design features. Specifically, the value placed on the service increased student motivation to learn course contents, besides, it allows students to develop a sense of empathy and understanding in their education, rather than view their education as a means to an end.

On the other hand, Ariza & Viáfara (2009) pointed out that the relationship between tutor and tutee was less tense because these sessions were more open to multiple options and each one of the actors involved were acquaintances of each other. Likewise they discovered that tutees' learning process was strongly influenced by the tutor's personality and attitudes, passing on even mistakes made by the tutors.

Furthermore, in Thurston (2008) data was collected from an on-line peer tutoring project. Results indicated that pupils tutored each other in using Piagetian techniques of error correction during the project; error correction provided by tutors to tutees focused on syntax and morphology, more specifically on verb correction. Personal attitudes of impact on tutees

corrected were observed; moreover, some implications for peer tutoring initiative via on-line environments were discovered, such as implications cheats when doing tasks because of the technology.

In comparison with the previous studies, De Smet et al (2009) conducted a case study in an authentic university setting. Results revealed that it was assumed that tutor training can also affect tutor characteristics such as self-efficacy beliefs, perceived collective efficacy, and personal training evaluation influenced in a negative manner tutees' performance of their skills.

Although all these studies have presented advantages and disadvantages in almost all the four skills, this research studied the general success or failure of tutees focused specifically in the writing skill process used in a tutoring session.

Methodology

The researcher adopted a qualitative case study, which according to Creswell (2005) is —an in-depth exploration of a bounded system in time and space. This study lasted ten weeks. Participants were: One tutor from sixth semester; and four female beginner students who played the role of tutees, their ages ranged from 16 to 19 years old and their pseudonyms were Manzanita, Amy, Jully and Clöe. Tutees were purposefully selected. According to Patton (2001) purposeful sampling is a non-random method of sampling, therefore, the criteria for the selection of participants was based on selecting cases that were —information-rich.

The main instruments used to collect data were two interviews and three tutoring session observations. Interviews were one of the main instruments to gather data used by the researcher; he interviewed three participants twice, using two different types of questionnaires. The first interview took place during the third week, and the second one during the last week of the study (see Appendixes A and B). Interviews gave the researcher the opportunity to get first-hand data from participants' voices.

The author also conducted three peer tutoring session observations. During these observations the researcher played the role of a non-participant observer, someone who does not take part in the class, an unobtrusive agent in the class only observing and taking notes (Creswell, 2005). The natural setting gives the opportunity to observe the student's attitudes and reactions; moreover, observation is the process of gathering first hand data by observing people and places at a research site, Creswell (2005). The researcher followed a protocol in order to observe the peer tutoring sessions (see Appendix C), and to write as many details as possible. These protocols also gave him the opportunity to make reflections on the

descriptions made in order to have a better understanding of the setting and the phenomenon being studied.

Data was analysed through the interpretative model suggested by Hatch (2002); first the researcher read all the raw data from the interviews, the tutoring session observations and three copies from participants' notebooks. After this, the author reduced data into domains by using MAXQDA, software used to organize data and classify it into domains for a better understanding of the data. During this process the researcher made several reflections and classifications of the most important data in light of answering the research questions. Finally, the author chose the themes which became the foundations of the study.

Findings

After analysing data, two major themes emerged in the light of the research questions: Peer tutoring advantages, and its disadvantages.

Peer tutoring advantages: The researcher identified three advantages in the process of peer tutoring: 1) Group work opportunities; 2) extra help outside the classroom; and 3) Tutor help to foster students' self-confidence.

1) Working in group opportunities: Participants agreed that the guidance of the tutor was essential in the development of a better writing process. During a tutoring session observation, the tutor asked tutees to write a simple essay about a topic and then he asked them to exchange their essays in order to correct each other's essay; this strategy gave participants the opportunity to learn by correcting mistakes from their classmates. Writing production was well corrected by the tutor, because he made students write everything in a

notebook used in the tutoring sessions (see Appendix D). Tutees wrote down everything that the tutor asked them to write.

Likewise, participants agreed that tutoring allowed them to make corrections of a written activity as a group; this is because the tutor provided the opportunity to work as a group, at the same time learning by correcting other's mistakes. As one of the participants expressed:

“La tutoría me ha ayudado a darme cuenta de mis errores porque el tutor hace que entre todos identifiquemos los errores de otros” (Jully)

These activities described the way participants collaboratively worked with classmates in order to sort out doubts and to improve their writing skills. In several tutoring sessions observed, participants demonstrated a relevant understanding of knowledge because after a group's correction they were able to correct their own mistakes, based on what they had learned from their peers' corrections.

2. Extra help outside the classroom: All the participants agreed that tutoring was a way to get extra help outside the classroom. Participants acknowledged that tutoring sessions were an opportunity for them to sort out doubts and improve their skills by attending these tutoring sessions which allow them time and space to work on such difficulties presented in the English classes; likewise, the researcher assumed participants surely had no other time or space to work on corrections and solutions of doubts. As one of the participants said:

“No tenemos otra manera de estudiar y pués.....se me hace más fácil asistir a estas tutorías, además me gusta porque algunas veces compartimos conocimientos”¹

It can be inferred that all participants agreed that this process gave them an opportunity to work with classmates with similar needs and skills towards the improvement of their writing

skills. In different tutoring sessions, participants arrived early and talked among themselves about the expectation of working together.

3) Tutor helps to foster students' self-confidence: Tutoring sessions contributed not only to improve tutees' writing skills, but also it helped them to feel more confident. The friendly environment in which the tutoring sessions were carried out allowed participants to rehearse, and overcome certain obstacles enabling them to be more secure when in class. During the tutoring session observations, the researcher found how students felt comfortable with the tutor's attitude. For example, the tutor approached his tutees in such a way that made them feel secure, although tutees made mistakes, the tutor did not make them feel embarrassed of their mistakes, for that reason the researcher observed how the four tutees were paying close attention to the tutor's explanation. The following comment from a participant, explains how the tutor fosters students' self-confidence. "... También el tutor nos pone a que cada uno dé un ejemplo de una frase y entonces él dice si está bien el orden de la oración o no, así me atrevo a ensayar por mí misma."

It seems that peer tutoring has helped students to improve not only writing skills, but it is probably a relevant support to improve oral production which would guarantee a better performance in the term exams. This is an example of how the tutor fostered student's self-confidence. When being interviewed, Amy stated:

"Pues la tutoría nos ayudó mucho en la parte de escritura de cuentos pero lo mejor fue que el tutor nos ayudó a pronunciar bien para el parcial oral.....mmmm él siempre nos ayuda en lo que necesitamos."

Although there are several advantages reported, this research revealed that peer tutoring has some disadvantages. The researcher identified several instances in which students seemed to be bored with the methodology of the tutor. For instance the tutor asked

what to do for the next class and because nobody answered he then proposed to study “prepositions”. Jully one of the participants answered:

—no me gusta ese tema, pero no hay de otra.....ups perdón|| she seemed to be sorry of the attitude but then she said: —lo siento pero es la verdad.....ese tema no es muy bueno para trabajar||. (Jully)

Moreover, there were some concerns in the interview when the researcher asked them about the materials and methodology used by the tutor.

—Siempre usamos el tablero para explicar, me gustaría que fuera más personalizado.....es decir trabajando juntos en el cuaderno|| (Jully)

Amy stated she did not agree with the strategies used by the tutor to explain some topics which should have been worked on with other materials for instance as she stated, by working one-on-one and writing down in the notebook.

On the other hand, the researcher observed and identified the process followed in a normal tutoring session:

- 1) The tutor and tutees look for a classroom in order to develop the tutoring session.
- 2) The tutor asks students for questions and doubts about whatever topic to deal with.
- 3) If there are not doubts, the tutor makes an exploration and explanation of a common topic worked in the normal classes.
- 4) The tutor explains on the board with an exercise and then he asks students to write in their notebooks.
- 5) After writing the example he asks one student to come to the board and write his/her example in order to correct this as a group.

6) Finally, the tutor gives students a probable topic to be worked in the next tutoring session in the case they do not have doubts for that session.

Even though it was not always the same process followed to develop the tutoring sessions, participants agreed that the tutor should have a plan to work with them. In addition, participants reflected they were bored with the methodology used by the tutor to develop the tutoring sessions.

Conclusions and further research

During the participation of tutees in the process of peer tutoring, they experienced the process as a meaningful learning background for their lives and also they realized their future role as a teacher and the elements surrounding the process of peer tutoring. Tutees also discovered the importance of this process in order to improve their skills, and more importantly, writing skills.

On the other hand, tutors played an important role in the tutee's development of writing skills; this actor gave tutees the opportunity to feel comfortable to ask and to clarify doubts during the tutoring sessions, also, he allowed them to work one-on-one in order to make constructed-group knowledge; this was an excellent occasion to teach students how to work as a group and increase level in a specific skill. Likewise, the tutor reflected a particular tutor style to teach; even though this was not completely supported by significant data, this could be deeply studied in further research in order to look for more evidence of this potential theme.

The extra class practice is a key advantage of peer tutoring identified during this research, participants stated they liked the implementation of peer tutoring in their learning

process because this was an opportunity to improve their skills, especially good writing which is not well developed at a beginner level.

In addition, during the analysis of data the researcher found that tutor fostered student's self-confidence for instance when the tutor was close, students felt confident to ask and sort out their doubts, also he supported self-confidence by making them correct each other's mistakes, orally or written; also, this strategy allowed tutees to be aware of their own knowledge and their classmates' knowledge creating a group work environment.

In contrast, the main disadvantage of this peer tutoring session revealed the need of the tutor to integrate a tutoring session plan; even though this was a remarkable disadvantage, this process was considered by participants as an excellent extra class help because most of them did not have another time and space to study in group.

Finally, this research found that there are certain principles that participants required for shaping tutor preparation; this is because participants stated that tutor preparation affects student's performance in the development of their skills. However, it was not possible to analyse, because there was not enough evidence to support this potential theme. This theme could be deeply studied in further research.

* Adrian Celis is a foreign languages student, and a member of SILEX. His research interests are: foreign language oral communication issues; and the use of TIC's for teaching in FL learners.

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APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW # 1

Date: _____ Hour: _____ Site: _____

Focus: _____

Objective: _____

Interviewer: _____

Interviewee: _____

La siguiente entrevista tiene como objetivo recolectar información acerca de los beneficios o desventajas de la tutoría para el mejoramiento de la habilidad de escritura, esta tutoría tiene como participantes estudiantes de inglés de nivel A1. El nombre de este estudio es —Understanding the effectiveness of peer tutoring as process to improve english writing among EFL beginners at a public university, a case study

La información que usted proporcione en esta entrevista será tratada con todas las consideraciones éticas y tendrá como único fin la recolección de datos del estudio previamente citado. El propósito de esta entrevista es aprender de sus experiencias y averiguar sus opiniones sobre el tema, por lo tanto, sus profesores no tendrán conocimiento de esta entrevista ni mucho menos esto influirá en sus calificaciones. Les pido de manera atenta su completa sinceridad a la hora de responder esta entrevista.

QUESTIONS

1. ¿Cómo ha sido su experiencia en la universidad en la parte de escritura del inglés?
2. ¿Podría decirme como es el proceso que siguen sus compañeros y usted en la tutoría?
3. ¿Cuáles son los pasos que sigue su tutor para enseñarle gramática?
4. ¿Podría describirme cómo ha influido la tutoría en su producción escrita?
5. ¿Qué otras maneras para estudiar utiliza usted?

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW # 2

QUESTIONS

1. ¿Tuvo algún problema para asistir a las tutorías? ¿Qué tipo de problemas?
2. ¿Podría contarme cómo fue su proceso de tutoría durante estas semanas?
3. ¿Encontró alguna dificultad en la explicación de un tema explicado en la tutoría? ¿En qué sentido le fue difícil superar el tema?
4. ¿De qué manera la tutoría influyó en su desarrollo de la habilidad escrita?
5. Según su punto de vista, ¿qué debería cambiarse en la tutoría ?

APPENDIX C

TUTORING SESSION OBSERVATION

DATE: _____ SEMESTER: _____ OBSERVATION NRO:

OBSERVER: _____ TIME: _____

NUMBER OF STUDENTS: _____

OBJECTIVE: _____

FOCUS: _____

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE SETTING:

TIME WHAT I OBSERVED MY REFLECTIONS

APPENDIX D

Object Pronouns

<p>I → me</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You don't understand me • I don't understand you • I need you • I love you • She teaches him how to sing. • Show your love to her. • Show her your love • Do you understand it? • Bring it!, show it!, kill it! Kill her! kill him! • Sing it! teach it! • She says • She tells us lies • She teaches us • She sings us • She speaks to us • She hates us 	<p>I → me</p> <p>YOU → you tu/ti/te</p> <p>HE → him aél/lo</p> <p>SHE → her a ella/la</p> <p>IT → it lo/a eso</p> <p>WE → us nos/a <small>nos/as</small></p> <p>THEY → them</p> <p style="margin-left: 20px;">Speak → va con él/ta always</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Where can I find them? • She loves us • She dances for us • I wanna room for them • She hits us • She kiss them • I want a • I wanna help them • He listens to them • I want a drink for them
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