Outcomes of peer tutoring in analysing case studies among ESL advanced diploma students

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ABSTRACT

This study analyses peer tutoring sessions of two groups of advanced diploma financial accounting students with mixed proficiency. Many studies in peer tutoring have highlighted the positive results of the approach due to the scaffolding process which promotes effective learning. Hence, in this study, much emphasis is placed on the scaffolding element. The students' peer-tutoring sessions in analysing case studies were video-taped and they were followed by the production of individual student diary entries and interviews in order to increase understanding of the experience gained during the sessions. In addition, the researcher's observation notes were analysed to increase understanding of the group process. The findings reveal that the scaffolding process was evident during the peer tutoring. It resulted in the tutors assisting the tutees in increasing understanding, clarifying ideas, gaining new information, organising their answers, and improving their command of English. Therefore, peer tutoring is advocated in helping less capable students to learn effectively from their more capable peers.

Introduction

Peer education has been extensively researched due to its promising uses in teaching and learning. It can be categorised into 3 approaches which are peer tutoring, cooperative learning and peer collaboration (Damon & Phelps, 1989). Students have the same status as they pool their resources in cooperative learning and peer collaboration but in peer tutoring, one student accepts the responsibility as a tutor while others take the role of tutees.

Peer tutoring has been regarded as a beneficial instructional programme (Lo & Cartledge, 2004). It has proven to be effective in promoting learning and increasing student achievement at various educational levels (Bargh & Schul, 1980; Greenwood, Carta, & Hall, 1988; Slavin, 1991, 1996). Therefore, peer tutoring has been used at kindergarten (Brady, 1997), elementary (Heward, Heron & Cooke, 1982), middle school (Nazzal, 2002), high school (Maheady, Sacca & Harper, 1987) and college (Fantuzzo, Riggio, Connelly & Dimeff, 1989) levels.

There are 2 distinct models of peer tutoring (Gartner & Riessman, 1993).The old model involves more abled students (tutors) assisting less abled students (tutees) which is a form of remedial work. However, the new model does not have a fixed tutor role and thus, all students are allowed to be tutored and to tutor others.

Theoretical framework

This study is grounded in the social constructivist view of Vygotsky (1978). Its emphasis is on the significance of human interactions through mediators in the learning process. Understanding is derived from a situation in which information is integrated with the prior knowledge of learners.

Collaborative learning creates a learning community in which teaching is not totally dependent on the teacher alone. The student-centred learning approach involves the teacher performing the duties of teaching and learning facilitation among learners. This is unlike the traditional teacher-centred approach which involves the teacher in only performing the single role of teaching.

Harmer (1991) supports the flexible change of the teacher's role from being controllers to facilitators in the classroom. Collaborative learning allows learners to learn independently among themselves without having to source information from the teacher alone. The teacher's role is to encourage peer teaching and learning to occur through the students' interactions. In some situations, a student-centred learning environment can even be more effective for learning than using a teacher-centred approach.

Social interactions enable learning to occur. A social-cognitive theoretical perspective views teaching and learning as social activities (Bandura, 1986; Vygotsky, 1978). In the same vein, cognitive development of learners is affected by social interactions with the teacher, teaching materials and among peers (Vygotsky, 1978). Furthermore, collaborative learning creates harmony in diverse societies in which learning is carried out in a challenging environment (Underhill & McDonald, 2010).

This may occur when more capable learners are able to assist their less abled peers in mastering certain skills through their meaningful exchanges of meaning through interactions with one another. Since peer tutoring has been regarded as a promising instructional programme (Lo & Cartledge, 2004), it has been used widely in different fields of study. Peer tutoring has been advocated to be used for first year biology students (Carroll, 1996), introductory accounting students (Bush, 1985), mathematics students (Oates, Paterson, Reilly, Statham, 2005), academic medicine students (Pololi, Knight & Dunn, 2004) and language students (Kourea, Cartledge, Musti-Rao, 2007).

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Many studies conducted on the use of peer tutoring have uncovered many advantages to both tutors and tutees. They range from students finding the lessons interesting (Potter, 1997), tutors improving on their cognitive skills and therefore improving the quality of questions formed (Hill, 1995), developing deep understanding of subject matter and improving key professional competencies such as critical thinking, communication skills, interpersonal relations and self-assessment (Chaves, Baker, Chaves & Fisher, 2006; Hoyles, Wolf, Kent, Molyneux-Hodgson, 2002), enhancing academic achievement (Cortright, Collins & DiCarlo, 2005; Sawyer, Sylvestre, Girard & Snow, 1996), helping to avoid students' early academic failure (Greenwood, Delquadri, 1995), increasing reading fluency (Kourea, Cartledge, Musti-Rao, 2007), improving thinking skills (Topping & Bryce, 2004), promoting learning (Oates, Paterson, Reilly, Statham, 2005), and fostering scholarly writing in academic medicine through facilitating knowledge, skills and support needed in the writing activity (Pololi, Knight & Dunn, 2004).

Methodology

2 case studies were formed for this study. The participants consisted of 10 advanced diploma in financial accounting students from an institution of higher learning in Malaysia. They had to analyse 2 business case studies in their respective groups as part of their English for Specific Purpose (ESP) lessons.

Participants

Group 1 consisted of 3 males and 2 females. They were Charles (tutor) and Lara, Tong, Jack and Kuan (tutees). Charles, the tutor has the highest proficiency in English compared with the other group members.

In contrast, Group 2 was an all-female group. The group was comprised of Elaine (tutor) and Beth, Phua, Yip and Giam (tutees). Again, the tutor has the highest proficiency in English in the group.

Analysis of case studies

There were 2 business case studies that the students had to analyse in their groups with the help of their respective tutors. The first case study was entitled "Some Millionaires Will Not Retire" while the second case study was "NIKE Controversies".

In addition, they had to answer 5 subsequent questions for each case study. The subtasks they had to perform were reading the case studies aloud, finding out the meanings of difficult words and phrases, explaining and paraphrasing the main points in the texts and answering the questions for each case study. Each peer-tutoring session lasted one and a half hours. Both groups needed a total of 4 peer-tutoring sessions to attempt both case studies.

Data collection

The participants attended critical thinking lessons conducted by the researcher during their English lessons before they embarked on analysing the case studies. The respective tutors received further training from the researcher for 3 hours to prepare them for their role as tutors. The training included a detailed discussion on the content of the 2 case studies and acceptable answers for accompanying questions.

After the training, the tutors proceeded to carry out their peer tutoring with their friends. The participants were divided into 2 groups to perform the 2 tasks for a total of 6 hours with each session lasting 1 ½ hours. Each group was led by a tutor in helping them with the subtasks involved in analysing the case studies.

The peer-tutoring sessions were audio and video-taped. Both the tutors and tutees were individually interviewed after each session. Then it was followed by the writing of personal diary entries for them to describe and to reflect on their experiences during the peer tutoring. All the audio recordings and interviews were transcribed verbatim. In addition, the observation notes were also analysed thoroughly.

Findings

Data obtained from the spoken transcripts, diary entries, interviews and observation notes were triangulated. The findings show that the tutees benefited much from the peer tutoring. It was observed that the tutors' higher mastery of skills than their tutees attributed to the success of the sessions.

The scaffolding process was much evident during the sessions. The tutors, Charles and Elaine were actively contributing to their tutees' attempts in understanding the case studies. Their scaffolding efforts assisted their tutees in their completion of tasks and also impressed the tutees with the productive peer-tutoring sessions.

The tutors needed to have more in-depth knowledge than their tutees of the case studies in order to perform all of the tasks. Through the tutors' valuable guidance, the tutees were able to analyse the case studies thoroughly. It would not have been possible for the latter to carry them out independently due to their lack of information and deep understanding of the case studies.

The following section provides explanations on the outcomes of scaffolding which occurred in this study. The tutees' responses in their diary entries and interviews revealed that the tutors were capable of helping their tutees to increase understanding, clarify ideas, gain new information, organise answers, and improve their command of English.

Increase understanding

The tutees initially found both case studies challenging due to the high level of vocabulary used, complicated sentence structures and the difficult questions which they had to answer. It was found that the second case study, "NIKE Controversies" was more difficult than the first case study.

Therefore, the tutees experienced some problems in attempting the task on their own. However, the tutees claimed that their level of understanding increased during the peer tutoring. As a result, they knew the requirements of the questions and could answer them successfully. Their ability to analyse the case studies was also boosted by the tutors' use of simple English words when elaborating information to them.

Simultaneously, the tutors, too, discovered that they had higher level of understanding of the case studies as they were involved in deep discussions with their tutees. In addition, the tutors had to use different strategies in teaching when their meaning was unclear to their charges. The findings from this study concur with results on the use of a peer-led team learning model which enables the students to deepen their understanding of the material shared during the tutoring sessions (White, Rowland, Pesis-Katz, 2012).

Clarify ideas

The tutees realised that they were able to clarify their ideas through the peer tutoring. They admitted that they were provided with the opportunity to ask questions freely whenever they had doubts over some of the information in the case studies. It was aided by the feeling of being more at ease with their respective tutors when asking questions in comparison to being with their instructor in their usual lessons.

In the course of getting their questions answered, Yip and Tong from Groups 1 and 2 were corrected by their tutors whenever they misinterpreted certain information and scenarios present in the case studies. Additionally, the tutees could seek for repetition of their tutors' explanations of information freely until they could grasp the ideas presented.

Furthermore, the tutors found themselves improving on their communication skills while teaching their charges. They could gauge the effectiveness of their interactions according to their tutees' level of clarity and comprehension towards the information. As a result, they managed to hone their interaction skills with others.

Gain new information

Another benefit of the peer-tutoring sessions was the ability of tutees to gain new information from their tutors. It concurs with the findings that peer tutoring facilitates knowledge, skills and support required in scholarly writing (Pololi, Knight & Dunn, 2004). They were exposed to new ideas and different angles of perspectives through their discussions.

Yip and Phua from Group 2 were impressed with the quantity and quality of ideas shared. They did not have the opportunity to have peer tutoring during their diploma classes in the past and felt privileged to be involved in peer tutoring for they had learned many new things just by focussing and listening to their tutors alone. Moreover, the tutors, Elaine and Charles admitted that they had carried out extensive research in order to equip themselves with knowledge in playing their roles as tutors effectively. Consequently, the tutees preferred peer tutoring to their usual classes due to the effective learning taking place.

Organise answers

Initially, the tutees were uncertain on how to answer the questions pertaining to the case studies on their own. It was through the peer tutoring that they were guided by their tutors and developed confidence on performing the tasks. Consequently, the tutees learned how to organise their answers by following certain steps and to focus on important points in their answers by leaving out inappropriate information.

2 tutees, Yip and Giam from Group 2 stated that their tutor helped them to differentiate between the information in the texts with their own opinions when attempting the questions, too. They were not aware of the importance of doing it. Simultaneously, Elaine who was one of the tutors became much aware of the importance of making clear the steps involved in answering the questions. She was too familiar with the process herself that she failed to realise that her weaker peers were unable to do it without her assistance. Therefore, she realised she should not assume that her tutees were of the same academic level as her in analysing the case studies and to become patient with them during the tutoring.

Improve command of English

The tutees also discovered that they could progress in their mastery of English through the peer tutoring. They realised that the improvement would not have been significant had they attempted the case studies on their own. The areas they had improved on were vocabulary, spelling, grammar and oral presentation skills.

They learned the meanings of new words and were made aware of how to pronounce them by listening to their group members. In addition, Jack and Yip from Groups 1 and 2 were made aware of the importance of using correct grammar when answering the questions. They were highlighted on finding out the type of tense used in both the question and text before forming their answers.

Furthermore, Beth and Yip in Group 2 found that they learnt how to express themselves fluently in English by observing their tutors as they conducted the peer tutoring sessions. The peer-tutoring sessions also helped the tutees to improve their oral presentation techniques. Jack and Beth from Groups 1 and 2 explained that they had learned some specific speaking techniques such as how to behave confidently, organise their points and answer questions effectively. Phua found observing the tutor when teaching them useful in helping them learn how to become good speakers due to the fluency that the tutor possessed. Moreover, the tutor could become a role model for them in oral presentations.

Conclusion

This study has shown the outcomes from the scaffolding process during peer tutoring. They range from enabling tutees to increase understanding, clarify ideas, gain new information, organize answers, improve their command of English and enhance their presentation skills. The tutees initially could not perform the tasks but were able to do them with much assistance and guidance from their respective tutors.

Instructors have to acknowledge the significance of peer tutoring to students. Peer tutors play a vital role in helping their tutees to master skills which may not be acquired from the instructors' formal teaching alone. The collaborative efforts of both the instructor and peer tutor can result in successful learning occurring among students. Therefore, peer-supported learning should be encouraged in schools and further education (Potter, 1997).

It is crucial for tutors to have prior training before peer-tutoring sessions on analysing case studies. Kassab, Abu-Hijleh, Al-Shboul & Hamdy (2005) suggest that student tutors be provided with special training before they can play their role effectively in problem-based learning (PBL) programmes. Similarly, case studies which are used in this study are subjective in nature and therefore, tutors would also require guidance before they are able to conduct their sessions confidently.

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