Peer Tutoring as an Approach in Analysing Case Studies in a Business English Course

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Abstract. The main purpose of this study is to discover the impact of the use of peer tutoring in helping students to analyse business case studies in a Business English course. 10 Advanced Diploma in Financial Accounting students with mixed proficiency in English from an institution of higher learning formed 2 peer tutoring groups in this study. Data was collected using video recordings, interviews, diary entries and observations. The results of this study indicated that peer tutoring has positive results on both tutors and tutees. The characteristics of the tutors, the level of confidence of the tutors and the element of trust from the tutees were significant factors affecting peer tutoring. Due to the diverse perceptions and viewpoints created in the process of case study analysis, tutors need to be flexible in their level of acceptance towards the different interpretations of situations produced by the tutees. It is recommended that debriefing sessions between the tutors and researchers be conducted when the former lack confidence in decision making in the course of tutoring. Reciprocal Peer Tutoring is encouraged to be used as an approach in analysing case studies instead of having a tutor solely in charge of disseminating information to increase the effectiveness of tutoring.

Keywords: peer tutoring; case studies; trust; characteristics of tutors; Reciprocal Peer Tutoring.

Introduction

Malaysian graduates have faced a serious problem in these past few years. It is the problem of unemployment. The situation is a matter of concern to many parties including academicians, economists, business players, politicians and of course, the graduates themselves.

According to a report released by the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education on the statistics of unemployment among graduates in 2009, only 45% out of 155 278 graduates were employed. It was further supported by a report in the following year from Statistics of Labour Force Malaysia (2011) which showed that among the total labour force of 12 575 400, only 3.4% were unemployed. In addition, Statistics of Labour Force Malaysia (February 2012) showed an increase of the unemployed by 16 600 persons (4.3%) to 402 200 persons.

According to Yu (2013), there are up to 40% of public university Malaysian graduates who are either unemployed or facing job mismatch problem. Therefore, TalentCorp collaborated with World Bank in carrying out a survey to investigate graduate employability in the year 2014 (mystarjob, 2014). The study covered 200 companies and involved 245 000 employees from organisations representing National Key Economic Areas. It was discovered that skills mismatch was a main driver in graduate unemployment.

There are other possible reasons for the high unemployment among graduates in Malaysia. They are a lack of proficiency in English, insufficient knowledge and competency in the occupations the graduates applied for in the course of job seeking (Yu, 2013). It is a situation best described by Paramaswari, Ambigapathy and Illangko (2014) as:

"However, the present challenge of graduate education system defects in producing multi-skilled and talented graduates who are capable to meet the changing complexities in a borderless world."

(p.2)

Therefore, RM200 million was allocated in the Federal Budget 2012 for the setting up of Graduate Employability Taskforce. It was a strategy to increase the employability of graduates. Furthermore, an additional of RM400 million was provided for Skills Development Fund Corporation. The organisation functions to provide loans for applicants to undergo the process of re-training in order to increase employability.

Furthermore, the unemployment state of graduates could be attributed to their poor communication ability and their lack of critical thinking skills (The Star Online, 5 March 2012). This concurs with the view of Ambigapathy and Aniswal (2005), Sangaran (2006) and Tarmizi, Md. Yunus, Hamzah, Abu, Md. Nor, Ismail, Wan Ali, & Abu Bakar (2008) that a main cause of the inability of Malaysian graduates to gain employment is due to their lack of critical thinking skills. Therefore, there is a need for the emphasis on the teaching of soft skills such as critical thinking in institutions of higher learning.

Therefore, Malaysian Education Blueprint (2013-2025) stresses much on developing students' thinking skills after recognising the loophole in the education system. It is one of the attributes that every student should have besides possessing knowledge, leadership skills, bilingual proficiency, ethics and spirituality and national identity. The goal is for every child to be able to acquire knowledge, connect knowledge and eventually, create knowledge on one's own. This can be made possible by ensuring that a range of cognitive skills comprising problem solving , reasoning, conflict resolution, sound judgement and courage to do what is right are fostered.

The blueprint aims to promote creativity and innovation among students. Therefore, Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) are incorporated in both teaching and learning. HOTS are defined in the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013 as:

"… the ability to apply knowledge, skills and values while reasoning
and reflecting to solve problems, make decisions, innovate and create."

(p. 50)

One of the programmes planned under the Malaysia Education Blueprint (2013-2025), i-THINK, focusses on developing critical thinking and problem-solving

skills (Rozanna & Lim, 2014). It caters to equip the next generation in thinking critically and being adaptable in order to function well in the future. i-THINK supports higher order thinking skills approach through seven elements comprising curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, resources, community support, co-curricular activities and teacher-capability building.

In the same vein, critical thinking is given much prominence when designing English courses taught at tertiary level. Consequently, case studies are introduced as one of the components in an English course (WXY 553) in a local institution of higher learning. The other components included in the syllabus are public speaking, business proposals, and meeting skills.

However, in the course of teaching WXY 553, it was discovered that there was a challenge in teaching case studies using the lecture and tutorial modes. Students were found to be unable to analyse case studies successfully. Therefore, peer tutoring was used in this study to seek if it was viable in increasing students' ability in handling case studies.

Theoretical Background

Peer tutoring and cooperative learning are two of the most researched areas placed under peer learning (Topping, 2005). Many studies have been conducted to obtain information on the learning process occurring. Much research input has been gathered on the use of peer tutoring at different levels of education.

A characteristic of peer tutoring is the clear and specific role set for tutor and tutee (Topping, 2005). In peer tutoring, a member of a group is regarded as more knowledgeable than others and knowledge is transmitted in unidirectional manner to novice (McCarthey & McMahon, 1992).

In the early years, peer tutoring was regarded as children playing the role of surrogate teachers in assisting other students in learning. However, present day perception is slightly different. It is a situation when individuals who are non-trained teachers from the same social groupings teach in order to help others but including themselves in the learning process (Topping, 1996).

Nowadays, the use of peer tutoring is extended to all age groups. Tutoring can be conducted in the formal classroom or in informal social settings. In addition, it can be carried out on a one-to-one basis or in small groups.

Research has shown that tutors benefit more than tutees in the course of peer tutoring. This was due to a few tasks that tutors were involved in. They were meticulous preparations by the tutor before embarking on teaching (Allen & Feldman, 1973; Annis, 1983; Benware & Deci, 1984), cognitive restructuring or elaboration of knowledge which improved retention (Dansereau, 1985; Wittrock, 1978).

General theoretical perspectives that support use of cooperative learning on performance are motivation, social cohesion, cognitive-developmental perspective and cognitive-elaboration perspective (Slavin, 1996). Motivation is created when reward structures result in goal achievement and when the whole group is successful while social cohesion emphasises on link between achievement with cohesiveness which regards success of individual group members as crucial. Cognitive-developmental perspective focuses on social interactions among students which produce effective learning through higher mental processes for a lot of knowledge cannot be attained alone and the zone of

proximal development is regarded as crucial in making progress in learning (Vygotsky, 1978). Development of high quality conceptualisations from cognitive conflict takes place when students discuss and have differing views. Diverse opinions and perspectives create disequilibrium resulting in learners accommodating new information and changing their thinking to achieve a state of equilibrium in order to produce new knowledge (Piaget, 1959).

Tutors are selected based on their academic ability. They are usually students who have performed well in a course previously and are not deemed as experts but can foster learning in a non-threatening environment (Gosser, 2001). This is a means to promote spontaneous learning.

In fact, Gartner and Riessman (1993) have distinguished two models of peer tutoring. The old model regards tutoring as more capable students helping less abled students in remedial work while the new model of tutoring is having all students being involved in the tutoring experience. Tutoring in United Kingdom is geared towards the new model.

Peer tutoring results in many advantages to its users. Therefore, the use of peer tutoring has been extended to students at different levels of education. They range from kindergarten (Brady, 1997), elementary (Heward, Heron & Cooke, 1982), middle school (Nazzal, 2002), high school (Maheady, Sacca & Harper, 1987) to college level (Fantuzzo, Riggio, Connelly & Dimeff, 1989).

Research has shown that peer tutoring has many benefits on students. It increases student achievement (Bargh & Schul, 1980; Jenkins & Jenkins, 1985; Slavin, 1991, 1996), boosts student performance (Sharan, 1980), creates a learning community (Fougner, 2012), encourages critical thinking (Bell, 1991), and improves one's learning (Oates, Paterson, Reilly & Statham, 2005).

Methodology

Participants

The participants in this study were 10 Advanced Diploma in Financial Accounting students. They formed 2 peer tutoring groups, namely, Groups 1 and 2. Each group consisted of students with mixed proficiency in English.

Each group was led by a tutor who had the best result in the English course they took in the previous semester. The tutor for Group 1, Chong, scored a B+. Ella, the tutor for Group 2 had an A for the course. The tutees in both groups had grades ranging from C+ to C- for the English course they took in the previous semester.

There were 4 tutees in Group 1. They were Lam, Tee, Jim and Koh. Lam scored C- while Tee, Jim and Koh obtained C+ for their English results.

In addition, there were 4 tutees in Group 2. They were Beh, Pang, Yeow and Gan. Beh and Pang scored C- while Yeow and Gan received C+ for their English results.
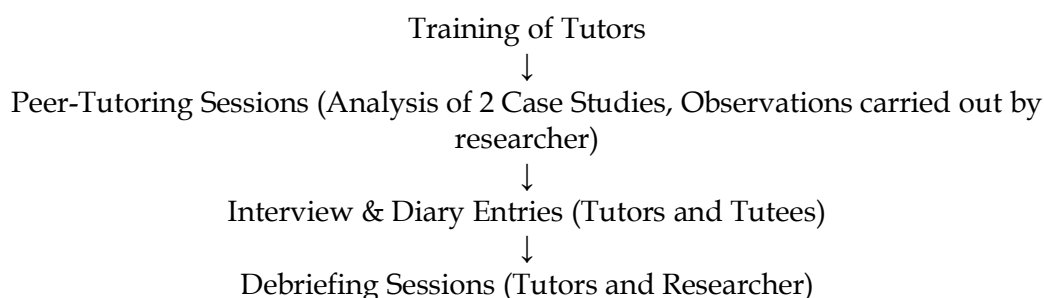
Analysis of Case Studies

Both peer-tutoring groups had to analyse 2 case studies with individual length of 500 to 800 words. The first one was "Some Millionaires Will Not Retire" while the second one was "NIKE Controversies". Eventually, the students had to answer 5 questions for each case study as well.

Both groups spent 3 hours analysing each case study. The students, with much guidance from their tutors, read the case studies aloud twice, discussed meanings of difficult words and important points in the text, summarised points from every paragraph and finally, answered the accompanying questions. The tutees were strongly encouraged to make preparations for the sessions. Most of them had read the case studies and attempted the questions before attending the sessions.

The tutors had received training from the researcher prior to the peer-tutoring sessions. The training lasted for one and a half hours. They had to perform various sub-tasks involving reading the case studies together, discussing meanings of difficult words and important points in the text, summarising points from every paragraph and lastly, answering the questions.

Furthermore, the researcher spent half an hour for a debriefing session with the tutors after every peer-tutoring session. It was a bid to increase their level of confidence in facilitating future sessions. During the debriefing session, there were further discussions on alternative answers provided by the tutees which the tutors were unsure if they were acceptable for the task. Furthermore, the tutors sought guidance on how to further improve their roles as tutors.

Data Collection

All of the peer-tutoring sessions were video-taped. It was to facilitate observations to be carried out. Furthermore, both the tutors and tutees were interviewed and they were required to produce diary entries describing their experiences during the sessions. The different research methods provided the triangulation required in this study.

A summary of the case study tasks and data collection is provided in Figure 1

Training of Tutors
↓
Peer-Tutoring Sessions (Analysis of 2 Case Studies, Observations carried out by researcher)
↓
Interview & Diary Entries (Tutors and Tutees)
↓
Debriefing Sessions (Tutors and Researcher)

Figure 1: A Summary of Data Collection

FINDINGS

Characteristics of Tutors

Chong, the tutor for Group 1 was observed to be a shy, inhibited, easily confused but organised person. He initially had reservations about being a tutor. However, after consulting with the researcher and receiving training prior the peer-tutoring sessions, he gained some confidence in playing his role.

In contrast, Ella, the tutor for Group 2 was articulate, knowledgeable but impatient person. She was very optimistic and excited about becoming a tutor. This was due to her personal belief that she would gain deep understanding of the case studies and she felt that she would enjoy interacting with her friends in the course of tutoring.

To sum up, Chong and Ella had opposite characteristics from each other. Interestingly, it was observed that the tutors' characteristics had different impact on their tutees. Detailed explanations are provided in the following sub-sections.

Chong in Group 1

It was also observed that Chong did not establish much eye contact with his tutees in the first session due to his shyness. The tutees were not paying much attention to him. They were talking among themselves causing Chong to lose confidence and focus.

In addition, Chong did not know how to create rapport with his tutees. He was merely providing lectures to his tutees rather than using a personal and informal approach in communicating with them. Therefore, his tutees looked bored and seemed to lose interest in his sessions.

Hence, during the debriefing session, the researcher advised Chong on how to improve his performance as a tutor. He was reminded to look at his tutees intently as he taught them and pay extra attention to those who looked confused. Furthermore, the researcher advised him to form friendships with his tutees and to teach them in an informal manner. Consequently, his tutees' concentration level slightly improved during the next few peer-tutoring sessions.

However, the tutees revealed through their interviews and diary entries that they found Chong's peer-tutoring sessions boring. In addition, they felt that he could not answer their questions in a few encounters. This caused them to suspect that their tutor did not prepare well for the tutoring sessions. Nevertheless, the tutees were appreciative of their tutor's efforts to facilitate their sessions.

Ella in Group 2

It was evident that Ella was comfortable and enthusiastic in playing her role as a tutor throughout the sessions. Her tutees were very attentive and interested in her teaching. She seemed to increase her tutees' interest in the case studies.

There was a lot of brainstorming going on during the sessions. In addition, the tutees asked many questions during every session. However, Ella seemed flustered and unable to handle the questions successfully.

Therefore, during the debriefing session, the researcher praised Ella on her positive role as a tutor. Furthermore, she guided Ella on how to answer questions posed by her tutees. Ella admitted that she was surprised with the large number of questions posed by her tutees. In addition, she confessed that she felt unhappy with the time spent in answering the questions because she was concerned that she would not have enough time to complete the sub-tasks she had planned for the session. The researcher reminded her to have patience in answering the enquiries and to regard questions as positive for they reflected the high level of interest the tutees had for her sessions.

Generally, the tutees were satisfied with the peer-tutoring sessions. They described Ella as helpful and informative. They admitted that their interest level on the case studies was increased due to her influence. On the other hand, some of them felt that she should allocate more time in answering questions rather than rushing through in answering them. It had resulted in them feeling that the tutor was unhappy in entertaining their questions.

Level of Tutors' Confidence

The tutors' level of confidence when playing their roles affected the outcomes of the peer-tutoring sessions. It was observed that Chong had less confidence than Ella. Ella could control her group better than Chong. As a result, the tutees in Group 1 claimed that they did not benefit much from their tutor's facilitation in comparison to Group 2.

From the tutees' interviews and diary entries, it was discovered that they claimed that they were adversely affected by their tutors' lack of confidence when handling them. They judged their confidence based on their knowledge level, verbal and non-verbal language. The majority of tutees in Group 1 did not find their tutor confident while the tutees in Group 2 were impressed with their tutor's poise.

The tutees in Group 1 realised that their tutor, Chong, was uneasy in playing his role. They described him as lacking in knowledge of the background of the companies discussed and unsure of the sequence of materials to be presented to them. Some of them commented that their tutor had the same level of knowledge as them. Consequently, they lacked interest in the sessions conducted.

In contrast, the tutees in Group 2 were favourable of having Ella as their tutor. They found her possessing deep knowledge of her subject matter, taught effectively and very comfortable in playing her role as a tutor. Some of them were of the opinion that Ella had conducted extensive research in preparing for her tutoring sessions. Therefore, the tutees claimed that they enjoyed discussing with her their ideas and learning from her tremendously.

However, according to Hammond, Bithell, Jones & Bidgood (2010), a tutor's confidence can increase after being involved in peer tutoring. It is ideal for tutors to be confident at the start of the sessions. On the other hand, some tutors may have their confidence level improving in the course of playing their role as tutors. Consequently, they may become better tutors than before.

Element of Trust from Tutees

The element of tutees' trust was found to be important. Tutees did not possess automatic trust of their tutors in the course of peer tutoring. The researcher observed that the tutees needed some time to decide whether they could be convinced that their tutors could teach as well as their researcher. The decision could only be made after a few rounds of tutoring.

Tutors needed to earn their tutees' belief in them before the latter regarded their sessions seriously. This concurs with the result findings of a study conducted by Colvin (2007) on peer tutoring which showed that tutors spent a considerable amount of time to engage in impression management before their tutees trusted them totally. It was explained as:

"The peer tutors had to convince the other students in the classes
that though they were students just like everyone else, they had
additional insight and credibility that allowed them to function as
a resource apart from the instructional staff."

<div align="right">(p. 174)</div>

The tutors from Groups 1 and 2 had mixed results within their groups on their tutees' trust in them. Only one tutee in Group 1 had trust in Chong as the tutor. In comparison, 2 tutees in Group 2 claimed that they had faith in Ella as their tutor.

The findings from the interviews and diary entries revealed that the tutees gauged the trustworthiness of their tutors using a few methods. Firstly, they preferred that their questions be answered instantaneously by their tutors. Secondly, they wanted their tutors to have complete and detailed answers to their questions. Thirdly, they verified the answers given by researching on them on their own to make sure that they were correctly provided by their tutors.

CONCLUSION

The findings from this study revealed 3 major factors which affected peer-tutoring sessions when analysing case studies. They consisted of the characteristics of the tutors, their level of confidence and the element of trust from the tutees. Eventually, they had mixed results on the outcomes of the peer-tutoring sessions.

Ella was more enthusiastic than Chong when tutoring their friends. It could be attributed to Ella's sociable nature for she enjoyed communicating with others. Consequently, Ella's tutees were favourable of her as a tutor.

Again, Ella had more confidence than Chong in the course of tutoring. Her tutees praised her abilities in providing extra knowledge in the subject matter, teaching effectively and being comfortable in playing her role as a tutor. Some of them were of the opinion that Ella had conducted extensive research in preparing for her tutoring sessions.

However, there were mixed opinions on the level of trust the tutees had of their tutors. Only one tutee in Group 1 had trust in Chong as the tutor. In comparison, 2 tutees in Group 2 claimed that they had faith in Ella as their tutor. The tutees judged the trustworthiness of their tutors based on the time required to answer questions, the detailed level of the answers and the correctness of answers provided.

Debriefing sessions between the tutors and researcher were discovered to be extremely useful. The tutors could discuss their difficulties with the researcher. In addition, the researcher could encourage the tutors and provide suggestions on how to improve their tutoring skills. Consequently, the tutors' confidence would improve.

It is suggested that Reciprocal Peer Tutoring (RPT) be encouraged to be used as an approach in analysing case studies. This approach is better than having a tutor solely in charge of disseminating information to the tutees. Reciprocal Peer Tutoring would allow sharing of information from both tutors and tutees. It is crucial for tutors to be flexible in accepting different interpretations of situations and answers to questions when analysing case studies.

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