The Impact of Peer Tutoring in a University Language Classroom

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As part of a community of practice project evaluating university students’ attainment of the Hong Kong Baptist University graduate attributes, peer tutoring as a pedagogical approach has been incorporated into a general English course to consolidate the grammar knowledge of adult learners of English. This article reports the students’ perception of the impact of this exercise on their learning effectiveness and attainment of some of the graduate attributes that the language course attempted to cultivate in students. Evidence is based on students’ feedback collected from surveys and focus group interviews over a period of one year. It gives insights into the general effectiveness of the selected form of peer tutoring in helping students attain important life skills. It also highlights key factors that contribute to successful implementation of this pedagogy.

Peer learning, in the form of cooperative learning and peer tutoring, has been increasingly adopted as a strategy to enhance student learning (Boud, Cohen, & Sampson, 1999; Goh, 2006). Research evidence shows that significant achievement can result if peer learning is implemented carefully and with consideration of the target purpose, context, and population (Arrand, 2014; Topping, 2005). In recent years, peer instruction and peer tutoring in higher
education have also gained more attention, and there has been considerable interest among practitioners in evaluating the effectiveness of this pedagogy in the university context (Chen & Liu, 2011; Clarkson & Luca, 2002; Colvin, 2007; Knight, 2013).

This article reports students’ perception of the impact of a peer tutoring exercise in an English language classroom at Hong Kong Baptist University (HKBU) with respect to students’ attainment of some of the university graduate attributes (GAs).

**Background**

In response to our institution’s invitation to establish communities of practice (CoPs) to enhance teaching and learning, a CoP—the Rainbow Team—was established in 2013. The CoP was designed to evaluate the effectiveness of problem-based learning (PBL) and service learning in helping students attain the GAs of HKBU (see Figure 1), which aims to provide Whole Person Education to its undergraduates. Because problem-based learning (PBL) has been implemented in universities for a long time and proved to be an engaging pedagogy (Savery, 2006), it has been adopted by the researcher—an instructor of an English course offered to first-year undergraduate students. The researcher, a member of the Rainbow Team CoP and one of the authors, further attempted to merge the PBL approach with peer tutoring in the teaching of grammar in the course.

The teaching of grammar has long been a challenging task for language teachers, and there has also been heated debate as to whether grammar should be taught in the first place (Krashen, 2008; Nassaji & Fotos, 2011). With HKBU’s students coming from diverse backgrounds and with varied abilities, it is not an easy task for teachers at the HKBU’s Language Centre to cater to the needs of each student in a class. When it comes to the grammar element of two core English courses (University English I and University English II), teachers face a difficult question of how this element should be addressed given it is a compulsory component of the courses’ final examination. Some teachers go through exercises in class; some ask students to self-study; and some spend time going through the grammar concepts. Previous end-of-course evaluations have always indicated that most students find grammar boring and not useful, while some ask for more grammar.

With all this in mind, the researcher redesigned the delivery of these English courses, incorporating a problem-based assignment related to peer grammar teaching, in the hope of motivating students to learn English grammar in an interesting and effective way.
The Intervention and Methodology

The researcher, as a teacher of the two core English courses, required all of the students enrolled in the classes to form groups of 3-5 and to teach a particular aspect of English grammar to their classmates in six 50-minute lessons. Students were asked to think of ways to help their classmates understand the usage of the grammar aspect assigned to them.

The students taking these courses were all Cantonese-speaking students from Hong Kong or Putonghua-speaking students from mainland China. Peer tutoring was not included in Term 1. The grammar topics in Term 1 were covered by the teacher through exercises and instruction. The intervention took place in Term 2 and Term 3. The grammar topics covered in Term 2 were quantifiers and conditionals, verb patterns, phrasal verbs and prepositional verbs, adverbs of degree and reporting verbs, cohesion and nominalization, and non-finite clauses. The topics in Term 3 were the continuous aspect and the perfect aspect, articles and modal verbs, subordinate clauses, modal perfect, future forms and future in the past, and emphatic structures.

Students took turns at different times during the two terms to serve as peer tutors, teaching their classmates the assigned grammar point(s). They changed roles from students to teachers and then to students again as the term progressed.

Students’ perception on their own attainment of the 17 sub-categories of the GAs (See Table 1 in Wong et al., 2016) was collected through a questionnaire survey administered during the third week (right after the add-drop period) and the 12th week (second to last week) in Term 2 (September 2014 to December 2014) (See Appendix A in Cheung et al., 2016).

A focus group interview was conducted at the end of Term 2 to get the students’ feedback on whether they perceived they had improved in attaining the GAs. The interview was administered in Cantonese by a project assistant without the presence of the teacher. The whole process was repeated in Term 3 (January 2015 to April 2015) with a different group of students studying University English II. The interview at the end of Term 3 was conducted in both Cantonese and Putonghua because there were two students from mainland China. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and translated into English.

The interview was a semi-structured one with questions asking students if they thought the peer tutoring exercise had enhanced their attainment of the HKBU graduate attributes. Students were shown a list of the GAs and were asked to express their opinions freely. The interviewer also asked them follow-up questions for clarification purposes when necessary.
Those data of students who did not give consent to the researcher to use their data and those who did not complete both pre- and post-surveys (See Appendix A in Cheung et al., 2016) were excluded from the results. The data of students who consistently gave the highest or lowest score to every question also were excluded. The mean scores were calculated, and the results of the two terms were compared to see whether clearer instructions and more feedback on the part of the teacher in Term 3 had any impact on students’ perception of their attainment of the GAs and learning effectiveness in general.

Results

Out of the 40 students enrolled in University English I in Term 2, 33 completed both the pre- and post-surveys, and 29 students out of 42 students enrolled in University English II completed both surveys in Term 2 and Term 3, respectively.

The survey results show significant gains in the students’ perception of their own attainment in the GAs—namely, disciplinary knowledge, lifelong learning, problem solving, oral communication, and teamwork—in both Term 2 and Term 3 (See Figures 1 and 2).

In addition, students in Term 2 also show significant gains in cross-cultural competence, interdisciplinary knowledge, self-development/spirituality, information literacy, technological literacy, quantitative reasoning, and creative thinking, and those in Term 3 show some gain in critical thinking.

The Focus Group Interviews

Five students from Term 2 and eight students from Term 3 were involved in January and April 2015 focus groups, respectively. Their responses also supported the results indicated by the quantitative data, as the students in general think that the peer-tutoring task helped them attain the GAs of disciplinary knowledge, lifelong learning, problem solving, and oral communication and teamwork. The student comments illustrating their perceptions of each of these GAs are presented next.

Disciplinary Knowledge

The students in general thought that had gained disciplinary knowledge through the task because they needed to prepare to teach their classmates and, therefore, needed to know the content well. A student from Social Sciences and Education mentioned,

. . . before our grammar presentation, we had to have a clear understanding on our topic or else the
whole thing would turn into a mess and it would be difficult for anyone to grasp the concepts presented.
(Focus Group Term 3, Student 5, English)

Another student also commented on the advantages of having student teachers to help them learn the subject:

I think as for disciplinary knowledge, not all of us are good at English. Sometimes the teacher will assume that you already know everything and will breeze through the topic. Students, however, will know which parts require more elaboration and will spend more time explaining it. Since the teacher is good at English she may not know that certain concepts have to be explained to us more than once in order for us to understand. Student-teachers, on the other hand, will know what is hard to grasp and will elaborate more on it. I think this is quite good.
(Focus Group Term 2, Student 2, Social Sciences and Education)

When talking about disciplinary knowledge, the fact that students were more involved also seemed to help them learn better. A student said,

This is an interesting experience as we weren’t simply sitting in the classroom and passively taking things in. We were teaching a topic and at the same time observing others teach. We were more attentive as we were involved in the whole thing. . . . Since we are closer in age, we learn things in a similar manner so we know which methods could help us learn better. (Focus Group Term 3, Student 2, Social Sciences)

Interestingly, when talking about the attainment of disciplinary knowledge through this peer-tutoring task, the role of the teacher was often mentioned. There were at least four comments similar to the following.

I think we did great in knowledge—disciplinary exposure. Whenever we made a mistake or did not explain something well, our tutor would not let us off as if nothing had happened. She would correct us on the spot. Besides, our tutor would look through our PowerPoint slides before our
presentation so we wouldn’t be teaching our classmates the wrong things. (Focus Group Term 2, Student 4, Arts)

Though most students thought they had learned about the topics they presented, some did not think they had learned disciplinary knowledge from their fellow classmates because the student tutors might not know the grammar points well enough. A student made the following comment:

I think I’ve acquired a deeper knowledge on the topic I worked on. But as for other topics, since they were either taught to us way back in secondary school or are grammar concepts that have been left unclarified for years, as an audience we were sometimes dubious as to what the presenters were saying, especially when they didn’t seem to be confident in delivering their own materials. (Focus Group Term 2, Student 1, Social Sciences & Education)

_Lifelong Learning_

Lifelong learning is another area where students thought they had made an improvement. Their motivation seemed to come from the impact of seeing other classmates being peer-tutors. A student commented,

It gave us a bit of motivation. For example if the team before us has performed well, I will tell myself that we have to be as good as them. I would say it has brought about healthy competition among us. (Focus Group Term 3, Student 6, Social Sciences)

Another student also mentioned being able to learn from fellow classmates:

Some students are better in oral English while others are better in writing. I can share my talents with my classmates and at the same time learn from their merits. (Focus Group Term 3, Student 8, Business Administration)

A student said at the interview that he was motivated to learn, as he did not wish to be embarrassed:

I think I have improved in self-development. . . . [I]f
it is you who are going to teach, you will be more motivated to learn about the topic as you don't want to embarrass yourself in front of your classmates. That's motivation there. (Focus Group Term 2, Student 2, Social Sciences & Education)

Problem Solving

Problem solving is another aspect in which students have shown improvement. A student from mainland China mentioned,

We Mainland students learnt English grammar in Chinese but we had to present and explain things in English. That was a challenge for us. It helps me with problem solving. (Focus Group Term 3, Student 3, Social Sciences)

Although in the interviews only one student mentioned the term “problem solving,” there were many comments on the difficulties they faced when preparing the peer-tutoring task. For example, a student made the following comment about the difficulty in setting questions:

I think I have become more creative because I am responsible for coming up with questions for the Q&A session. . . . There are questions online but sometimes these questions are too advanced for our classmates. . . . We had to write questions ourselves, and through all that we got to think more. (Focus Group Term 2, Student 3, Business Administration)

Another student also made a similar comment:

Our topic is cohesion, and if you ask different people to read a statement there will be different interpretations. . . . So I think it was really hard to set a question that would accurately test if our classmates could really grasp the concept of cohesion. (Focus Group Term 2, Student 1, Social Sciences & Education)

Oral Communication

When asked whether they thought the task had helped them improve their oral communication skills, most students thought it did because they were given the chance to practice. Below are some
of the comments:

[The task] has definitely trained our ad-lib skills, as each of us has to improvise for 5-6 minutes while looking at our slides. We are quite lazy, so we didn’t rehearse. (Focus Group Term 2, Student 4, Arts)

We were given an opportunity to sharpen our communication skills, as you had to be really familiar with the outline of your own presentation and you needed to stand in your classmates’ shoes and make sure your classmates would understand what you were presenting. (Focus Group Term 3, Student 1, Communication)

Only a student from mainland China said she did not think the task helped:

I don’t think oral communication can be improved through this presentation. We did present in English but we didn’t really interact much with our classmates. (Focus Group Term 3, Student 3, Social Sciences)

Teamwork

In the quantitative data collected from the survey, teamwork was found to be an area where students in both Term 2 and Term 3 have improved. However, students’ views as to whether the task helped them improve their teamwork skills were quite divided.

Only one student said he improved in teamwork, as he had to find time to discuss the project with his classmates despite their hectic schedules. Some students did give examples of working as a team but did not explicitly state whether they had improved in the area, as indicated in the following comments:

On the day of our presentation one of our members could not speak and so we had to do her part. We managed to learn what to do when something of this sort happens. I think this is part of teamwork. (Focus Group Term 3, Student 7, Social Sciences)

We all have to know what is going on during the presentation. Students who are not that good at explaining get to focus on research or the designing
of worksheets and exercises. (Focus Group Term 3, Student 2, Social Sciences)

There were also students who stated that they did not gain much from teamwork:

After we divided up the work the three of us went on to do our own part and we passed our finished work to our teammate who was responsible for combining all the segments. We didn’t really communicate much. (Focus Group Term 2, Student 5, Social Sciences & Education)

Similar to the projects we have in other courses, we only work on the part we are responsible for and the only collaboration we have happened at the very beginning. . . . Everyone didn’t seem to care what others were doing. (Focus Group Term 2, Student 2, Social Sciences & Education)

Creativity

Besides the graduate attributes mentioned above, students in Term 2 showed significant improvement in creative thinking, and during the interview some students mentioned how their creative thinking skills have improved. One student said,

Sometimes it is hard to come up with examples that would draw people’s attention. If you simply find one online, students may not be able to relate to it so we end up making our own examples, and that’s creativity. (Focus Group Term 2, Student 2, Social Sciences & Education)

A student also commented on her attempt to make the teaching more interesting, with grammar seen as a relatively boring topic:

I think creativity—creative thinking—is achieved. When brainstorming for ideas as to how to present grammar in a more interesting way, we need a certain level of creativity. English grammar is a relatively boring topic to some people. If you don’t put effort into this no one will listen to you. (Focus Group Term 3, Student 1, Social Sciences & Communication)

Another student made a comment on why their group was able to
be more creative:

This grammar presentation project doesn’t count much towards our final grade, maybe just a small percentage of class participation. When working on projects in other courses we tend to be grade-oriented and will look for ways that would effectively bring us the highest grade possible. If the project constitutes a higher percentage of the course no one will be willing to step out of the box and be creative in delivering the presentation, as they will worry that it will pull down their GPA. The fact that this project only weighs 3% has encouraged us to do our presentation in a more unconventional way. (Focus Group Term 3, Student 1, Social Sciences & Education)

Critical Thinking

Though the increase in critical thinking in Term 2 was not as significant as in Term 3, there were student comments related to how critical-thinking skills were enhanced.

A business student majoring in accounting made the following comment:

The students in our session took turns to answer our questions so the atmosphere was okay. Besides, what our classmates gave was sometimes not the model answer so it provided us an opportunity to think and determine whether the answer was correct or not. (Focus Group Term 2, Student 3, Accounting)

Critical thinking was also found to be enhanced when students needed to find appropriate information to suit their topic. Two students mentioned their experience looking for a suitable YouTube video for their topic, requiring them to exercise their critical thinking skills:

We tried to look for YouTube videos so that the presentation could be livelier but we didn’t use any of them at the end as they didn’t seem appropriate. (Focus Group Term 3, Student 5, English & Education)

We did a group presentation on nominalization. We
found some exercises on the internet because they were related to the previous topic and our tutor wanted us to look for more exercises. Apart from that, we also found a clip on YouTube that explored the consequences of overusing nominalization. It was quite interesting. (Focus Group Term 3, Student 6, Social Sciences)

Discussion

With students’ rating of their own attainment of some of the GAs showing significant increases in the surveys and from the generally positive feedback from students in the two focus group interviews, one can see the peer tutoring activity did help students learn important skills for both their university lives and future careers. The interviews reveal students’ evaluation of their learning experience. They also reveal ways in which this peer tutoring exercise, which incorporates research, group work, and oral presentation, can benefit students. Evident are some factors leading to its effectiveness. From the findings, one can see that peer tutoring did serve to enhance students’ learning in a language classroom, as demonstrated by the students’ perceived improvement in the specific GAs mentioned in the previous section. Yet the interviews revealed some factors that are critical to the successful implementation of this pedagogy, such as clear instructions from teachers, relatively low weighting of the task, the teacher’s continuous input throughout the process, and the existence of a supportive and engaging learning environment.

Providing Clear Instructions

Very clear instructions concerning the requirements of the task and the schedule of presentations were given to students at the beginning of the term. This proved to be very important for students to understand what was expected of them. Examples of the kind of teaching techniques students could use were also given to them. Quite a number of students mentioned that they were clear about the requirements and that the whole process was quite smooth.

Making the Tutoring a Low-Stakes Activity

The fact that the tutoring activity constituted only 3% of the final course grade seemed to be perceived as a crucial point in making this task less threatening and more motivating. Students were willing to go “out of the box” to try something new and to make their lessons more interesting and engaging. This is contrary to what teachers
usually think. While we often think students will work harder if a certain activity is evaluated or given a higher weighting, this feedback seems to suggest otherwise. A Term 3 student from mainland China even indicated that the peer-tutoring task should not have been evaluated, because some students were better at speaking, while others did more research work. She would rather see this activity as learning in a “fun” way.

Providing Teacher Input Throughout the Process

Another factor contributing to the success of peer tutoring seems to be teacher input. The continuous guidance from teachers appears to be something students expect and value. With this peer-tutoring task focused on grammar teaching, students who were not strong in the area required help in making sure that what they had prepared was accurate and that the sentences they had written were grammatical. They also needed help in determining if the materials they had found were appropriate. As the grammar components within the syllabi were to be tested in the final exam, students wanted to make sure they were doing the right thing. Based on the comments collected from the interviews, teacher input before the presentation, during the presentation (by interrupting when mistakes were made), and after the presentation (when students sent the PowerPoint slides to their classmates) was considered very important. This actually echoes Savery’s (2006) view that learners who are new to this kind of self-directed learning require a lot of scaffolding to help them acquire “problem solving, self-directed learning skills, and teamwork/collaboration skills to a level of self-sufficiency” (p. 15).

Encouraging Interaction Among Students

From the interviews, it was also found that some students (5 out of 13 students) hoped there could be more interaction and support with and from the audience when they served as tutors. They commented that their “students” were not eager to answer questions, and so it was difficult to know if they were able to understand what they were presenting. They also reflected on their own teaching and suggested ways to improve interaction, such as giving incentives to their classmates or giving them more time to think before answering. They also think it is important for the tutors in a group to have more interaction among themselves in order to enhance teamwork and communication.

Benefiting More From Being Tutors Than Students

In general, it is evident that students benefit more from being
“teachers” than from being “students,” and to some extent this echoed similar findings of Topping (2005), Colvin (2007), and Arrand (2014). Most of the positive comments and learning mentioned by students were associated with the role of being tutors, while most of the negative comments were about being students. With grammar being important for second language learners to master well, very little was said in the interviews about gains in written communication, and no significant gains were observed, based on the survey. Students also expressed some concerns that materials presented to them by their “tutors” were not too clear and activities not too engaging.

These findings call for more reflection on the part of the researcher to evaluate the role of peer tutoring as an effective means of teaching grammar and to investigate whether grammar instruction, even when it is done through the active participation of students, helps students to improve their writing.

Conclusion

The establishment of CoPs at HKBU has definitely enhanced teachers’ growing awareness of the importance of evidence-based teaching and learning. For this researcher in particular, more effort has been placed on identifying the most effective pedagogy in teaching grammar in a university classroom. In general, peer tutoring has been found to be an effective strategy to help students attain the GAs that HKBU attempts to cultivate in them. In addition, students seem to find the tutoring experience a positive one in terms of enhancing their disciplinary knowledge, life-long learning skills, problem-solving skills, oral communication, and teamwork. As to whether the classmates’ role as “students” is equally positive requires further research and verification, especially in areas such as subject knowledge and level of engagement. The effectiveness of grammar instruction by students in a second language classroom is also an area worth exploring further.

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Figure 1
Means Scores of Students’ Self-Perceived Attainment of 17 GA Sub-Categories Before and After the PBL Intervention in an English Course (GCLA1008) in Term 2 ($n = 33$)

![Figure 1](image)

* $p<0.05$; ** $p<0.01$; *** $p<0.001$; $r$ indicates $p<0.0001$

Figure 2
Means Scores of Students’ Self-Perceived Attainment of 17 GA Sub-Categories Before and After the PBL Intervention in an English Course (GCLA1009) in Term 3 ($n = 29$)

![Figure 2](image)

* $p<0.05$; ** $p<0.01$; *** $p<0.001$; $r$ indicates $p<0.0001$.