Learning through Teaching: Tutors’ Reflections and Recommendations When Facilitating Student Learning in Case Studies through Peer Tutoring

Dr. Siew Fong Lin and Mr. Chee Yoon Lin

Faculty of Social Science, Arts and Humanities
Tunku Abdul Rahman University College
P.O Box 10979 Jalan Genting Kelang
50932 Kuala Lumpur Malaysia.

Corresponding Author: Dr. Siew Fong Lin

Abstract
Peer tutoring is an approach commonly used in learning and research on it will enable instructors to refine its use. The purpose of his study is to gain insight on tutor’s experiences in the course of peer tutoring. Two groups of participants consisting of 10 advanced diploma in Financial Accounting students with mixed proficiency using peer tutoring to analyse two business case studies were observed. The peer-tutoring sessions were video-taped. Additionally, the researcher produced observation notes to record down significant incidents. Both tutors and tutees were interviewed and even produced journals to describe their experiences and their opinions on the sessions. Consequently, two categories of information regarding the tutors were obtained. They consist of firstly, their personal reflections and secondly, their recommendations on improving future peer-tutoring sessions. Detailed areas of information covered in this study range from the tutors’ perceptions of requirements as tutors, insights on the process of peer tutoring and clear suggestions on carrying out effective peer tutoring in the classroom. There were suggestions from tutors on how to improve future peer tutoring sessions, too. The tutors’ recommendations were allowing tutors to view videos of productive peer-tutoring sessions, conducting rehearsals for tutors, meeting regularly with instructors for debriefing purpose and providing sufficient time for peer tutoring.

Keywords: peer tutoring, tutors, tutees, case studies, tutors’ insights, task

INTRODUCTION
There is an increase of the possibility of college students failing their courses and therefore, retention rates are given much emphasis by many institutions (Harter & Szurminski, 2001; Johnson & Kreuzer, 2001). Tutoring is a solution to assist students in this predicament. According to Topping (1996), peer tutoring is an approach which involves individuals who are not trained teachers but from similar social groups assisting each other in teaching and learning.

Peer tutoring has been used to deliver instructions in many areas ranging from academic, social and behavioural (Flood, Wilder, Flood, & Masuda, 2002; Gumpel & Frank, 1999; Trovato & Bücher, 1980). In addition, even students with emotional and behavioural disorders can become effective tutors in reading, writing and math classes and further research has even shown positive results in social studies Maheady, Sacca & Harper, &; 1987; Maheady, Sacca, & Harper, 1988). The use of tutoring has even extended to teaching safety skills to prevent firearm play (Jostad, Miltenberger, Kelso & Knudson, 2008).

Peer learning is very much influenced by Social Constructivist Theory. Knowledge which is constructed with the assistance of peer is encouraged. Vygotsky (1978) emphasises on the importance of interactions of learners with their teachers in order to build knowledge. Johnson and Johnson (1990) explain that help-giving is an important feature in collaborative activities. The benefits of assisting others in learning are being able to reflect on errors, form explanations, extend and deepen knowledge (Roscoe & Chi, 2007).

However, there are problems identified during peer tutoring. A study conducted in Israel under PERACH project (Kowalsky & Fresko, 2002) revealed difficulties tutors faced when working with students with learning disabilities. They were being unable to understand their tutees and having tutees being too dependent on them. In addition, the presence of
students who are “lurkers” during collaborative learning may adversely affect the group (Preece, Nonnecke & Andrews, 2004). They are uninvolved in the group’s tasks and were unwilling to participate in the interactions. Therefore, it is important that much research is conducted on the use of peer tutoring in order to increase its effectiveness in the classroom.

On the other hand, research has shown that in some situations, tutors gain more benefits in peer tutoring. Tutors need to prepare themselves to teach and consequently, improve on their cognitive skills and improve the quality of questions formed (Hill, 1995). Tutees benefit from peer tutoring in many ways. They range from improving academic achievement (Cortright, Collins & DiCarlo, 2005; Lidren & Meier, 1991; Sawyer, Sylvestre, Girard & Snow, 1996), increasing responsibility for learning (Schleyer, Langdon and James, 2005), 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) and increasing reading skills (Kourea, Cartledge, Musti-Rao, 2007).

**METHODOLOGY**

There were two groups formed for this study. Each group consists of five participants. The participants were required to analyse two business case studies as their group tasks.

**Participants**

All of the participants were Advanced Diploma in Financial Accounting students from an institution of higher learning in Malaysia. They formed two peer-tutoring groups; Group 1 and 2 to perform their group tasks. Group 1 was led by Chin while Group 2 was facilitated by Enid.

There were 3 males and 2 females in Group 1. The tutor, Chin, had the best proficiency in English in comparison with his tutees. His tutees were Leng, Ting, Jong and Kuan.

Group 2, in comparison with group 1 comprised all female participants. The tutees were Bess, Poon, Yen and Gabby. Their tutor, Enid, had the best command of English in the group.

**Group Task**

There were 2 business case studies analysed by the participants. The first case study was “Some Millionaires Will Not Retire” and the second one was “NIKE Controversies”. Each case study had 5 accompanying questions which the participants had to answer.

The peer-tutoring sessions involved the participants performing a few sub-tasks. They were reading the case studies aloud, finding out meanings of difficult words, explaining and paraphrasing main points in each paragraph and finally, answering the question. Both groups of participants needed a total of 4 sessions to complete the tasks.

**Data Collection**

All of the participants attended their Business English classes which were for duration of one semester. One of the components, Critical Thinking required the learners to apply higher order thinking skills in business contexts. Therefore, business case studies were used to provide practices for the students.

In addition, the tutors were trained on how to play their roles effectively. The training sessions lasted three hours. They were provided with ways on how to guide tutees in performing their sub-tasks such as providing explanations for difficult words and phrases, extracting main ideas and discussing possible answers to the questions accompanying the case studies.

All of the peer-tutoring sessions were video-recorded. The participants spent a total of six hours in the sessions with each session lasting one and a half hours. Furthermore, the researcher was present and made observation notes of the sessions. The tutors had debriefing sessions with the researcher whenever they encountered problems they could not solve with their tutees.

Then, both tutors and tutees were interviewed to gauge their views of the peer-tutoring sessions. They were also required to produce journals describing their experiences. The different research methods used provided triangulation for this study.

**Limitations of Study**

There are a few limitations in this study. Firstly, the number of participants in this study may be a deterrent in obtaining accurate information. The participants may not provide general information on tutors’ perspectives which can be applied to most learners.

Secondly, all of the participants in this study are from the Chinese ethnic group. Therefore, their views obtained may be influenced by Chinese’
beliefs and opinions on peer tutoring. Consequently, the findings may be more relevant for Chinese learners than other learners.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
The findings collected can be divided into two categories: tutors’ reflections on their peer-tutoring sessions and their recommendations on how to improve them. The former covers tutors’ perceptions of requirements as tutors and insights obtained on the process of peer tutoring. However, the latter provides suggestions on how to carry out peer tutoring effectively.

TUTORS’ REFLECTIONS
Tutors’ Perceptions of Requirements as Tutors
Capability of Increasing Tutees’ Understanding
According to the tutors, Enid and Chin, it was important for them to increase understanding of tutees on the topics they were tutoring. It could be made possible by using three ways. They were ensuring that they were speaking clearly, presenting their information in a manner which increased comprehension and simplifying information if the need arose.

Clear instructions could be provided when tutors spoke at an appropriate volume, pronounced words accurately and used correct grammar. According to Chin, his tutees commented that they faced difficulty in following his teaching due to his unclear pronunciation and soft voice initially. In addition, Enid was of the opinion that using English correctly was important in disseminating information.

The tutors had to refine their tutoring skills when some of their tutees commented that they failed to understand them in the first peer-tutoring session. Enid had to train herself to be patient when repeating points to her tutees. Chin, on the other hand, had to do research before his sessions in order to answer questions posed to him in the earlier sessions.

Lastly, the tutors had to simplify information for their tutees. Both of them discovered that their tutees could not internalise pertinent points raised in the case studies at the tutors’ pace. They attributed it to their increased time spent analysing the case studies and the training they received from their instructor. When they were in the course of tutoring, they realised that some of the tutees with poor command of English were unable to follow their lessons. Thus, they had to repeat their explanations by using simple words in English and Mandarin. In addition, they provided lengthy clarifications on the scenarios and characters in the respective case studies to boost comprehension.

Ability to Explain Well
According to Schmidt and Moust (1998), an effective tutor is able to manage students well and communicate in a language which can be understood. There may even be an adverse context created in which tutees may resist their tutors’ advice pertaining to academic writing especially in the areas of content and mechanics of writing (Hansun, 2005). The situation can be attributed to tutees’ identity claim and competing tussle between the tutor and tutees. Therefore, it is important that tutors have the ability to express their ideas clearly.

Both tutors, Enid and Chin were of the opinion that it was important for tutors to be able to explain and clarify information effectively to their charges. During their first few sessions, they realised that they had provided too much summarised information over a short period of time. Consequently, their tutees revealed through the interviews and journals that they became confused and anxious over their learning.

A majority of the tutees confessed their lack of comprehension of the case studies discussed. It resulted in the tutees posing a number of questions to their tutors to check if they had understood them correctly. Hence, both of the tutors realised that they had to speak at a slower rate than before so that their tutees could follow their teaching. They even resolved to constantly check with their tutees if they were able to continually comprehend their lessons. The conducive learning environment would reduce the tutees’ anxiety level, too.

Preparedness to Answer Questions
Being prepared to answer questions from tutees is another important task a tutor should be willing to do. Enid admitted that she was impatient with her tutees’ continual questioning. She almost lost her temper because she felt that her tutees’ action seemed to show doubt over her credibility.

Similarly, Chin was adversely affected by the questions posed by his tutees. His confidence decreased when he could not answer them successfully. Consequently, he even lost his train of thought and rendered inaccurate responses to some of the questions. His tutees were disappointed with his performance and elaborated through the interviews and journals that they would prefer to have a tutor who had more knowledge than them.
The tutors, upon self-reflection over their experiences and during the debriefing sessions with their instructor, started to view the importance of answering questions. It made them realise that they should regard questions positively instead of having animosity towards them. In addition, they attempted to understand their tutees’ intentions when posing questions to them. The tutees’ action might be prompted by their lack of knowledge and when their need to confirm on points discussed.

Insights on Process of Peer Tutoring

Peer Tutoring Improving through Time

Both tutors expressed their opinion through their interviews and journals that the peer-tutoring sessions improved as they spent a considerable amount of time with their tutees. In the beginning, both of them were inexperienced and could not handle their tutees successfully. This had resulted in some conflict between them and their tutees.

It was observed that Enid was getting frustrated with her tutees’ disruptive behaviour of asking many questions when she was teaching them. She was concerned that she would be unable to complete her lesson which had been planned. Her tutees noticed her obvious impatience. However, during Enid’s debriefing sessions, she was alerted that she should regard the questions positively. Furthermore, she was advised to empathise with her tutees whose command of English might affect their ability to comprehend the business case studies.

Chin, too, felt that he had improved as a tutor after a few rounds of peer tutoring. He had felt overwhelmed by his tutees’ boisterous behaviour. When he discussed his experiences with his instructor, he was able to equip himself with the skills to handle the challenging situations. As a result, he was able to successfully lead his group back to their discussions whenever the group was side-tracked by their jokes and conversations unrelated to their topic.

Much time needed

Chin and Enid realised that peer tutoring could be time consuming. They had the notion that they would be able to follow their lesson plan closely for every session. However, they were made aware of difficulties some of their tutees faced when learning from them. It was especially obvious among the tutees who did not have a good command of English.

A longer time than the allocation of time initially set for each session was required. The tutors spent considerable time repeating explanations of points and paraphrasing information in the case studies using simpler English words than those used earlier. Chin and Enid who were altruistic in nature found the time used in assisting their charges to progress in their learning rewarding. The latter admitted in her journals that she became more patient than before after becoming a tutor.

Task Used in Study

Possibility of subjective answers in case studies

Chin was observed not to be totally in control and seemed hesitant during the peer-tutoring sessions. It was due to the subjectivity of answers for the questions accompanying the case studies. Therefore, he decided to request for a list of possible answers from his instructor. He explained through his interviews and journals that it made him feel assured of handling questions from tutees with different answers from his presented answers. However, he realised that the list of answers was not exhaustive and he would have to use his own judgment when the need arose.

Enid, in contrast, was capable of making her own decision in deciding if alternative answers provided by her tutees were acceptable. She stated through her journals and interviews that she was confident because she had made prior extensive research on the case studies before tutoring. She was of the opinion that with the extra knowledge she possessed, she was “qualified” to decide on appropriate answers from her tutees. The list of answers provided by the instructor was only a guide for her.

Case studies unsuitable for inexperienced tutors to facilitate

In a similar vein, Chin and Enid discovered that using peer tutoring on case studies was very challenging to carry out. They admitted through their interviews and journals that they encountered three problems. The difficulties were feeling a high level of stress, having to make more preparations than what they anticipated and lacking knowledge and experience as tutors.

Both of the tutors felt anxious and worried about playing their tutoring roles. They indicated that they would have felt comfortable had they been given a simpler task like teaching tutees basic comprehension or simple conversational skills. Their high stress level when tutoring case studies could be attributed to their confusion over information highlighted in long arguments and discomfort in not being able to handle opinionated tutees.
Chin and Enid were of the same opinion that making preparations for their tutoring role was more time consuming than what was anticipated. The former was preoccupied with obtaining alternative answers for the questions based on the case studies in order to be able to inform tutees of acceptable answers. The latter, however, spent much time researching on the case studies such as finding out the history of the companies involved and reading about policies, achievements and failures of companies and their founders. It was to make it possible for her to have confidence in being a tutor as she possessed deep knowledge of the matters.

Both tutors concurred that they faced problems in handling opinionated tutees. Chin, who was shy and reserved in nature, was overwhelmed and chose to keep silent during heated arguments. It resulted in his tutees doubting his abilities as a tutor. Enid, in contrast, who was confident and sociable in nature, was able to present information effectively but showed her impatience during several encounters when answering questions. Consequently, her tutees sensed that she was unhappy in tutoring them and did not have a positive impression of her.

**Tutors’ Recommendations on Improving Peer Tutoring Sessions**

Enid and Chin mutually agreed that if case studies were to be used for peer tutoring, more guidance should be provided from the instructor. Their four suggestions on helping tutors were obtained from their interviews and journals. The recommendations were allowing tutors to view videos of productive peer tutoring sessions, having “rehearsals” for peer tutoring, being able to meet the instructor regularly for debriefing sessions and providing sufficient time for peer tutoring.

**Viewing Videos on Good Peer Tutoring Sessions**

According to the tutors, they needed to watch videos of student models involved in productive peer-tutoring sessions in order to become good tutors. They were of the opinion that it would help them to gain useful skills. The skills which they regarded as important were teaching clearly, handling questions well and creating a conducive environment for teaching and learning.

Chin and Enid stated that they were unable to learn much of these skills from the training sessions and reading books on pedagogy. However, having life models they could observe during peer tutoring would be beneficial to them. In addition, they could follow up by having discussions on the sessions so that they could decide on how to customise the strategies for their own groups.

**Conducting Rehearsals of Peer-Tutoring Sessions**

Both Enid and Chin agreed that having rehearsals before their actual peer-tutoring sessions would be helpful to them. These sessions would benefit them in two ways. Their confidence would be boosted and they could obtain useful feedback from their participants and observers.

The tutors claimed that they would be confident in peer tutoring if they had had prior practice facilitating the sessions. When they were conducting the sessions in this study, they admitted that they had to assure themselves that they were performing their tasks effectively. However, they honestly felt that they did not perform to their utmost best all the time.

Chin and Enid were of the opinion, too, that they would benefit from feedback provided during their rehearsals. The feedback could be obtained from their tutees and instructors. Thus, they could refine on their peer-tutoring skills.

**Meeting Instructor for Regular Debriefing Sessions**

According to Santee & Garavalia (2006), more time may be spent in training tutors than the actual time spent in the course of peer tutoring itself. In addition, respective studies conducted by Colver & Fry (2016) and De Backer, Van Keer & Valcke (2015) required tutors to have training and orientation time with their instructors before conducting tutoring sessions. Therefore, it shows the importance of preparing tutors for their role in peer tutoring.

Both tutors, Chin and Enid in this study mutually agreed that the debriefing sessions they had with the researcher in this study were crucial. They were relieved that they could consult an authoritative figure who could brainstorm with them in solving their problems faced in the course of peer tutoring. The forms of assistance they obtained were increasing their morale, helping them to view situations from diverse angles and assuring them they were teaching correctly.

The tutors were gratified to have their morale boosted during the debriefing sessions. It was due to the assurance obtained when discussing with the researcher on the progress and challenges faced. After the consultation, they became confident and their belief as effective tutors was reinforced.
The debriefing sessions also exposed the tutors to different perspectives when viewing perplexing situations. Firstly, they became positive towards tutees’ questions and did not regard them as interruptive during their tutoring. Secondly, the discussions revealed to them diverse interpretations of individuals and situations described in the case studies rather than making general assumptions on them.

Another advantage of the debriefing sessions according to the tutors was they could verify on the accuracy of information presented to their tutees. Both tutors stated that they needed regular confirmation that they were teaching correctly. This was due to the immense sense of responsibility they had when tutoring their charges.

Sufficient Time Allotted for Peer Tutoring
Chin and Enid agreed that tutors should be given enough time for their tutoring. They experienced having to change their lessons planned for certain sessions due to their tutees’ confusion, inability to concentrate and having many questions posed to them. As a result, they had to prolong their sessions causing them to be late for their next class.

Each peer tutoring session in this study was 1 ½ hours long. Both of the tutors suggested having extra time to be given for each session. They were of the view that 2 to 2 ½ hour-long sessions would suffice. Having sufficient time was crucial in ensuring that the tutors had sufficient time to allow the tutees to consult them when the need arose.

CONCLUSION
The tutors provided useful information based on their reflections and recommendations. Their reflections could be divided into two categories which were perceptions of requirements as tutors and insights on the process of peer tutoring. Recommendations provided by the tutors were to improve future peer-tutoring sessions in the future.

The tutors’ perceptions of requirements needed in tutors were having the ability to improve tutees’ comprehension, explain well and provide answers to tutees’ questions. Tutors who were capable in playing these roles would be deemed as meeting the needs of tutees which were in a quest to gain knowledge from them. In addition, the insights provided by the tutors in this study were peer tutoring could be improved through time, peer tutoring could be time consuming and challenges faced by novice tutors when analysing case studies.

There were suggestions from tutors on how to improve future peer tutoring sessions, too. The tutors’ recommendations were allowing tutors to view videos of productive peer-tutoring sessions, conducting rehearsals for tutors, meeting regularly with instructors for debriefing purpose and providing sufficient time for peer tutoring.

REFERENCES


