【原著】

Collaborative Learning: Building English Learning Communities

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英語学習における協働学習コミュニティの構築

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Introduction

This paper describes reflections formed as part of the evaluative stage of an ongoing project to support the creation of collaborative learning communities among first- and third-year cohorts of a single university department at a small, private women's university in western Japan. Each year, a few students from the first-year cohort stop attending classes for various official reasons. The four-member project development team felt students' failure to attend classes could be the result of a lack of peer or near-peer support within an unfamiliar and sometimes stressful learning environment, so we designed the Collaborative Learning Project (CLP). The CLP had two main objectives: (1) to create learning communities across cohorts in the department so that struggling students could receive help from stronger students and (2) to raise awareness of strategies and study skills necessary for the TOEIC and university English classes. The CLP was introduced in the first semester of 2013 and was carried out again with slight modifications during the second semester. This paper will explain the background of the initial program and changes to the project that have been or will be made based on observations by the development team throughout the year.

Background

The CLP was initially devised as a supplemental peer-assisted learning program, which can be interpreted as a form of near-peer tutoring, although it has been called by other names (see Kalkowski, 1995 for more). Topping (2005) explains that "Peer tutoring...is characterised by specific role-taking as tutor or tutee, with high focus on curriculum content and usually also on clear procedures for interaction, in which participants receive generic and/or specific training. Some peer tutoring methods scaffold the interaction with structured materials, while others prescribe structured interactive behaviours that can be effectively applied to any materials of interest" (p. 632). Peer-tutoring can take many forms. In their meta-analysis of findings from 65 peer tutoring programs in math and reading at the primary and secondary levels, Cohen, Kulik, and Kulik (1982) identified four common program variables: *structured* or *non-structured*, *cross-age* or *same-age*, *in addition to class* or *instead of class*, and the use of *trained tutors* or *untrained tutors*.

Their meta-analysis confirmed that both tutors and tutees showed improvements in achievements as measured by local and national standardized tests as well as improved attitudes towards the subject matter, but effect sizes varied based on the four variables above in addition to other variables.

One explanation accounting for the success of tutoring is the use of appropriate and timely scaffolding by tutors. According to Slavin, scaffolding "is the process of providing assistance to help students move from the point where they need support to the point where they are able to perform a skill independently" (as cited in Dzubak, p. 1). Scaffolding provides weaker students an opportunity to perform better than they would have had they been working alone. Vygotsky (1978) called this difference between one's actual ability and one's ability while receiving guidance from adults or collaborating with more capable peers the *zone of proximal development* (ZPD).

Adapting an Existing Program

The CLP was inspired by a peer-assisted study program developed and implemented by Craig Manning at the University of Shimane to help remedial students pass a required English course. The peer-assisted study program matched up to three remedial students with a peer or near-peer tutor for a weekly, 45-minute group study session. Tutors were volunteers from among those students who had successfully passed the course, and they received financial compensation. Tutors underwent training sessions before the start of the program where they were introduced to active learning strategies and trained to encourage students to engage with the materials and answer each other's questions. In addition, a teaching assistant was always present in the room to assist tutors if they needed help. Students were free to select which tutor they would work with each week, but all used the same textbook focusing on English grammar encountered in secondary school. At the end of each study session, all members were expected to complete a survey reflecting on how well they performed in the study session, which was actually designed as a training tool to encourage active learning. When comparing the traditional remedial class and the peer-tutored class, Manning (2011) found the peer-tutored class outperformed the traditional class on achievement tests based on the course materials and theorized that it was due to the tutors being trained to encourage active learning strategies.

Context

Our project involved 33 first-year students and 29 third-year students. The majority of students can be described as remedial, a judgment supported by TOEIC scores as well as the department's low admissions requirements. The learning environment is vastly different from the one most students encountered in high school. About half of the required first- and second-year classes are taught by native English teachers following a communicative language teaching approach. In addition, first-year students take a year-long class exposing them to concepts related to self-directed learning, and students are expected to become adept at clarifying manageable learning goals, identifying appropriate learning resources, creating and following learning plans, and using critical reflective skills to manage their learning. Furthermore, students are also

expected to spend considerable time in the English-only Self-Access Learning Center (SALC) engaged in formal and informal language learning activities. Finally, the students are pressured by the department to prepare for and perform well on the TOEIC, suggesting that all students be able to graduate with a score of at least 600 points.

The Collaborative Learning Project

Although based on the program at Shimane, the CLP was heavily modified for our circumstances. First, participation in the project was compulsory for all first- and third-year students and all students received credit for their participation through points awarded for homework and attendance in a required course. Second, although we attempted to recruit volunteer tutors from the third-year cohort, when it was apparent that there was an insufficient number of tutors, we encouraged more third-years to volunteer and offered extra class credit. Third, project team members created in-house materials, calling them 'Study Bundles,' for students to use in the study sessions. These Study Bundles focused on developing skills and strategies for taking the TOEIC test. Project members created four bundles in three categories: Reading, Listening, and Other (grammar) as well as two introduction bundles used in orientations with the students.

In addition, although students could choose their study groups, once chosen, the groups remained fixed for the entire term. The groups were free to choose where to meet, and many chose to meet in the university's SALC where the materials were stored and where there was equipment for the listening portion of the materials. Although groups were expected to meet once a week outside of class time, the length of each study session was determined by the study materials.

Following recommendations found in Manning (2011), orientation and training sessions were carried out prior to the start of the group sessions, and after each session, both tutor and tutees were expected to complete a reflective survey containing self-monitoring and peer-monitoring questions adapted from Manning. The survey was used to implicitly coach students to participate and actively engage their groupmates by "establish[ing], communicat[ing], and maintain[ing] mutual expectations, which may promote beneficial studying behavior" (Manning, 2001, p. 21). During most of the sessions there was also a teacher nearby to assist if needed; however, teachers were not always available.

Methodology

Action Research is a common research methodology used by teacher-researchers who desire to implement effective change within their teaching environments (Mills, 2006). Action Research follows a series of steps, which in our case included (1) identifying a problem, (2) collecting and organizing data, (3) interpreting data and imagining a solution, (4) acting on evidence, and (5) evaluating results. The process can be iterative, with evaluations based on results serving as the catalyst for further investigation and additional changes. As one part of the evaluation process, three of the four members of the development team met, discussed and recorded their reflections,

and made suggestions to improve the project based on their impressions of various aspects of the project during the year. Team members' reflections were based on familiarity with post-session surveys, formal and informal session observations, focus group results, and informal conversations with students. These reflections and resulting suggestions are discussed below.

Results and Discussion

We noted five main themes in our discussion about the year. Below, we introduce each theme, how it affected the project and changes that we implemented or plan to implement in the coming school year.

Communication

There were many stakeholders involved in this project, including the development team, made up of two third-year teachers, a first-year teacher, and a learning advisor; SALC management; center administrators; and students. In the next iteration of the project, communication among our team, and with each of the stakeholders mentioned above, needs to improve. We failed to assign clear roles among ourselves and share these assignments with administrators, which caused problems when there were questions about our materials in the SALC. Two team members were also engaged in research related to the project but rarely discussed their progress or findings with the other members. In addition, although most first-year students were satisfied with the project because they were able to work with what they saw as more capable and experienced students to improve their English abilities, we observed third-year students who were not able to see the benefits of the project to their cohort, and we feel that we could have done more to create buy-in among them. These problems will be addressed by clarifying roles within our team and sharing those roles with SALC management and center administrators, meeting more frequently to discuss progress of the project and any research being done, and by sharing first-year feedback with third-year students so that they can see the effect their participation has on first-year attitudes. Other ways in which we hope to increase third-year buy-in are related to the points below.

Tutor

Although we had originally planned for one third-year student to have the role of tutor in each group, it was observed throughout the first semester that first-year students tended to value being able to work with all third-year students in the group because they were all *sempai*, a Japanese term referring to the senior person in a hierarchy based on age. Manning (2011) had reported that vertical, age-based relationships did not affect his study groups, but our first-year students tended to focus less on the person in the 'tutor' role and instead look for assistance and ideas from all third-year study group members. However, not all third-year students were trained as tutors, and it appeared that some of those third-year students who were not trained as tutors did not feel they had the same status in the group and as a result felt less inclined to contribute to the group sessions.

In addition, development team members had expressed concern at the very start of the

project about the role of 'tutor' because tutor often implies a difference in skill level. In Manning's program, the tutor was unique from the students in that they had (1) successfully completed the course of study and (2) received special training to become a tutor. There was a clear difference in English ability between tutor and non-tutor expressed as an expert-novice relationship. However, our theme was the TOEIC and few third-year students had shown much mastery of the TOEIC in terms of scores or study habits. In fact, there were first-year students who had scored higher on the TOEIC and who showed a better overall English ability than some third-year students. Third year students simply were older and had more experience taking and studying for the TOEIC, regardless of their results. To address these concerns, we stopped using the term 'tutor' and emphasized to all third-year students that they were 'leaders' to take advantage of the familiar social hierarchy already in place. In the future, we would like to emphasize the value of each student's voice and experience in future training sessions with both first- and third-year students.

Training

In a workshop conducted at our university by Manning, he stressed to us the importance of training students using both implicit methods, such as post-session surveys, and regular training sessions. Although we used the post-session surveys he designed, we only managed one ninety-minute training session for potential tutors in January and a ninety-minute familiarization for all third year students at the start of the school year. Follow up training during the year, especially for tutors, was overlooked. Likewise surveys-at least for the third year participants-were not closely monitored, the result of having been carried out using paper booklets unlike the first-year surveys which were conducted on iPads. Digital data was easier to manipulate and summarize than the paper booklets, meaning the first-year teacher could quickly respond to problems that appeared. Changes to technology available in the SALC by the start of the second semester allowed us to make a uniform digital survey for third-year students as well, making closer monitoring of surveys possible. In the new semester, we will redesign our training materials and surveys to focus on how to be a good role model and leader as well as showing respect for individual voices.

Materials

Our goal in creating materials was to provide some kind of structured activity for the study sessions which would encourage discussion and the exchange of ideas, thus giving students the chance to encounter different ways of thinking and give voice to their ideas. Study Bundles included activities introducing such strategies as skimming, scanning, predicting, shadowing, taking notes, and identifying parts of speech. During the first semester, we observed that the bundles did not always create opportunities to discuss and exchange ideas. In fact, sometimes it looked as if students were working independently and just checking answers together. In order to support more collaboration, we created an additional activity for the end of each bundle to be piloted in the second semester study sessions. To complete this activity, students worked together to identify materials and create a study plan in order to study the strategy further outside of the group. In this way, first- and third-year students could always encounter an activity that called on

all members of the group to actively consider and discuss ideas related to the strategy. It also provided a kind of intermediary step towards greater learner autonomy in that each student finished the session with a vetted plan for further study that she could decide to use if it met her personal needs, learning preferences, and goals for English study.

Time

Initially, we decided to require seven sessions over the 15 weeks in the first semester, with each session designed to take one hour. However, in reality each session varied according to the particular Study Bundle and the study skill, usually requiring 20-45 minutes to complete. Students had expressed some dissatisfaction with time because they were using their free 90-minute periods to complete bundles they were told should take 60 minutes. To rectify this, we told students in the second semester to commit a full class period to each study session because of the new collaborative task at the end of each Study Bundle, and to compensate for the longer study sessions, we shortened the number of sessions required to five over a 15-week semester. Students seemed pleased with this change, not only because it reduced the number of sessions but it made it possible for students to use their free periods more effectively, with more time spent engaging with their groupmates in designing and implementing their study plan.

Conclusion

For the next implementation of the CLP, we plan to continue the changes made in the second semester because we observed an increase in positive attitudes towards the program after the changes were made. This includes the extended Study Bundle, which supported more opportunities for in-depth, collaborative learning, and having fewer but longer sessions. We plan to adjust our training materials so that they no longer use the term tutor. We also plan to create orientation activities and surveys to help third-year students realize their roles as role models and encourage them to share their experiences studying for TOEIC and English in general with the first-year students. Finally, we plan to create role cards in order to encourage shared leadership of each session, giving each student an opportunity to exercise and develop leadership skills. Despite the changes made in the second semester, some students still felt negative about the mandatory nature of the program. To keep the atmosphere of study sessions and the program in general positive, third-year students will be allowed to choose participation as one of two options for a grade in the course, but the project will remain mandatory for first-year students. We hope these changes will help the program achieve the initial goals of building a strong learning community across cohorts within the department and helping students prepare for the TOEIC and English classes at the university.

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