

Obstruction or Promotion? A Study into the Effects of Educational Interventions in Peer Tutoring in Foundational English Learning

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Obstruction or Promotion? A Study into the Effects of Educational Interventions in Peer Tutoring in Foundational English Learning

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Abstract

While “peer tutoring” often refers to “language practice partners” in language learning contexts, the Peer Tutorial Programme at the ASC at KUIS aims to increase English grammar understanding and exam scores. Although there are many examples and cases for training peer tutors with rather general skill sets for running tutorial session, there is limited precedent study on how they can be supported in subject specific areas. In order to seek effective practices in supporting the peer tutors in the subject area, the researcher investigated educational interventions using two different approaches over two years. One of the significant findings was that educational support that maintains tutor and tutee discretion over learning contents and methods is key for supporting tutors.

1. Introduction

The term “peer tutoring” is now widely used and the definition and interpretation of this can vary from one institution to another. While peer tutoring often refers to “language practice partners” or “study buddy” in language learning contexts with emphasis on increasing language input and output, the Peer Tutorial Programme at the Academic Success Center (ASC) at Kanda University of International Studies (KUIS) aims to increase foundational grammar understanding and TOEFL and TOEIC scores. Peer

tutors at the ASC, therefore, are not merely study partners, but they are expected to be facilitators of learning who have better subject matter understanding than tutees. In search of effective tutor training practices, two kinds of experimentations were carried out. The first approach was to introduce tutors to in-house learning materials which controlled both learning contents and methods. These task-based materials were designed in ways to foster deep active learning and cooperative learning among tutors and tutees. The second approach was to develop a test to measure tutees' understanding of foundational English grammar, which left tutors with the discretion over learning contents and methods depending on the test results. This paper is going to discuss the stages and analysis of the action research.

2. The Peer Tutorial Programme at the ASC

In its current format, the Peer Tutorial Programme at the ASC aims to boost students' achievement in areas of academic and language examinations. In order to achieve this, the programme aims to promote, among students, a firm understanding of English grammar; to nurture skills and attitude towards deep learning; to help them develop cognitive and metacognitive skills; and to critically and effectively act to direct their own learning. There are three tutorial areas offered within the programme; foundational English grammar, TOEFL preparation, and TOEIC preparation. Tutorials are carried out in fixed small groups with a maximum of four participants in each group. Each group meets on a weekly basis throughout a semester, adding up to 10 sessions in total. The duration of each session is ninety minutes. Through repeated group activities, trust and friendly culture can develop (Yasunaga, 2015), and collaboration and cooperation can thrive among group members. Such a friendly atmosphere is said to enhance creative attitude and achievement in learning, stimulating intrinsic motivation for learning (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

3. Research method

Action research is the framework in this study. According to Creswell (2013), action research is used to examine immediate social or educational problems, which are often small scale or local. It is cyclical, with the results of one programme being used to inform the planning of the following cycle. The cycle involves the identification of an existing problem, data collection through qualitative and/or quantitative studies, interpretation of the gathered data, and an evaluation of the completed cycle, and further implementation of a new plan to address the identified issues. In the case of educational action research, educators may continue to carry out further research followed by this implementation in the objective for more desirable outcome.

Some of the common data collection methods include observation of individual and/or group behaviour, taking audio and/or video recordings, distributing questionnaires or surveys, conducting interviews, taking field notes, and writing journals. Multiple data collection methods can be combined.

For this paper, a traditional programme consisting of the following four stages is used:

1. Study and plan, 2. Take action, 3. Collect and analyse evidence, and 4. Reflect (Creswell, 2013; Stinger, 2008).

4. Stage 1 (Cycle 1): Study and plan - Reasons behind the action research

Difficulties in the Foundational English stream

The Peer Tutorial Programme at the ASC started offering the tutorial service in foundational English from 2017 in response to a real demand among students for opportunities to learn basic English grammar. The programme seemed to meet their needs at the outset, but it did not take long for issues and challenges to become apparent. Further,

observations and data acquired from the programme evaluation surveys conducted at the end of semester with both tutors and tutees strongly suggested a need for modifications to aspects of the programme.

In the first instance in 2017, through session observations and comments received from tutors, it became evident that many of the Foundational English tutors were struggling with the actual operation of their tutorial sessions. Many commented that it was not clear what the programme was aiming for, whereas the TOEFL and TOEIC programmes were straightforward in terms of their purpose (to improve student test scores). Some tutors reported that attempts to get information from their tutees about what they might want to study in the sessions, typically elicited responses such as ‘I am not good at grammar so I want to improve my grammar’. This was not helpful for tutors to set learning goals. It can also be said that tutors were not equipped with the necessary skills to elicit useful information from tutees by narrowing down such an abstract response.

In order to interpret and understand this situation more thoroughly and to improve the programme, a survey was carried out with all the tutors at the end of the semester. The survey consisted of 21 items asking about tutors’ perception of their own tutoring skills and experiences.

While tutors identified a broad range of issues, the discussion below focuses on four issues that were identified by a significant percentage of the Foundational English tutors, namely ‘Getting tutees to talk’, ‘Getting tutees to think’, ‘Selecting the right learning materials for tutees’ and ‘Dealing with a topic I did not know the answer of’. The details of those four areas are discussed in Kodate (2017).

Limits of the training system

Those highlighted areas of tutoring skills had been addressed in regular training sessions,

but the result of the survey indicated the necessity for support. In training, emphasis had been placed on practice through role plays and other means to exercise the tutoring skills. There are, however, limits to training such as time constraints. Tutors get together for in-person training sessions during one-hour lunchtime breaks and on a weekend. Inevitably, training contents are packed into these sessions. It is thus possible that tutors' understanding and internalisation of the training contents may be compromised. There are also some tutors who cannot attend training due to various commitments outside of the tutorial programme. The most challenging part, nevertheless, is putting learned skills into actual practice. In reality, tutors need to tackle the differences in tutees' understanding levels as well as group dynamics. Even if tutors understand the theoretical aspects of what they learn, it will take certain time and conditions for them to be able to put that into practice.

Tutor turnover

Tutor turnover can also be a factor that can contribute to the issues. Tutors are basically hired under a one-year contract from April when the school year begins, but some students leave the programme mid-year due to participation in study abroad programmes, teaching practicum, and various other reasons. Some tutors continue throughout the year, while others do not. Therefore, the shortest participation period as a tutor can be one semester in some cases. When there is a tutor who leaves the programme, the position needs to be filled by a new tutor. New tutors lack experience and knowhow that experienced tutors may have gained overtime, thus they are required to take training sessions to acquire basic tutoring skills. It is also not realistic to expect tutors to become able to tactfully use the skills that they have learnt into practice immediately after receiving training. For the majority of them, it takes substantial time and experience to be able to perform those skills to a satisfactory level.

In this way, even though those four aspects raised by the tutors are covered in training, it takes certain conditions for tutors to put what they learned into practice. Then, how should educational support be provided to tutors by means other than training? It is simply not possible for the programme staff to sit for tutorial sessions and give advice at times. Session observations are carried out every semester by filming each tutor's session, but the disadvantage of this is that the feedback cannot be provided spontaneously. Increasing the frequency of observation raises the burden not only on tutors and teachers, but also on tutees. This is not realistic from both scalability and ethical perspectives. Considering the means that can directly influence tutors' facilitation skills in the session, a decision was made to develop learning materials that can be used in the session. The four aspects that were identified challenging by the tutors were addressed in ways to assist their skills in the learning materials. These learning materials were then made available to both experienced and new tutors.

5. Stage 2 (Cycle 1): Take action - Materials development

The learning materials that were developed aiming to support tutors in the following four areas:

- Getting tutees to talk
- Getting tutees to think
- Selecting the right learning materials for tutees
- Dealing with a topic I did not know the answer of

Supporting skills to get tutees to talk and think

Clear instructions were included in the learning materials to ensure that everyone in the group would have an opportunity to share their ideas in turn. The sections where both

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tutees and tutors are asked to share their ideas are often followed by a section to select, refine, and summarise those ideas, providing all participants with the opportunities to constructively evaluate their ways of thinking.

Sets of instructions for tutors were designed and developed in ways that ensure various types of interactions (namely solo, pair, and group activities), and these are utilised in order to achieve the main task of each learning material. These solo, pair and group sub tasks were designed also to eliminate free riding. In order to help tutors get tutees to think and talk more, and challenge their understanding, counter examples are presented in the materials. They are asked to point out inconsistencies and errors in the example and give counter proposals to correct the language. By providing opportunities for students to critically analyse the language, ask each other probing questions, the activities aim to promote a “deep approach” to learning (Marten & Säljö, 1997). This allows students to deepen their understanding as it challenges their cognition.

SOLO taxonomy was also used as one of the frameworks to design the learning materials with the aim of deepening tutee understanding of foundational English grammar. Biggs and Collis (1982) proposed a taxonomy of learning (Figure 1) that seeks to move students along a continuum that begins with a stage where they perhaps miss the point of learning altogether, through to a phase where they are able to generalise ideas and deal with abstractions. This taxonomy informs the materials development process as a structural framework to progressively deepen students’ understanding.

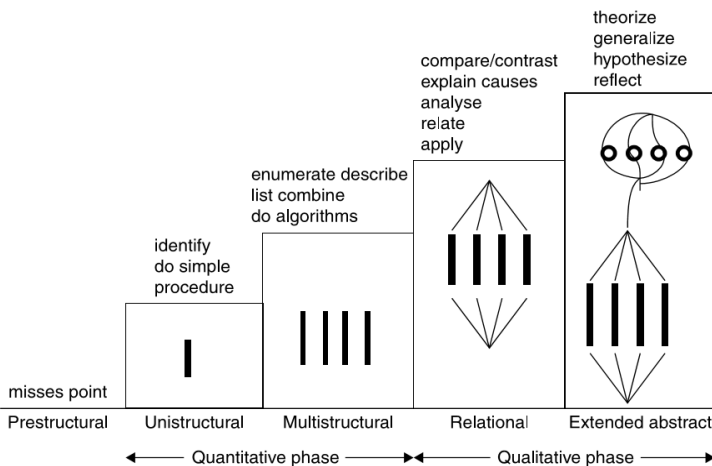


Figure 1: A hierarchy of verbs that may be used to form intended learning outcomes

In this way, a scaffold has been developed to ensure that the right conditions can prevail to afford opportunities for real cooperative learning.

Supporting skills to select suitable learning materials for tutees

Built into this procedure, each activity has a section called ‘Finding learning resources’. This requires students to think about what they have learned so far in the activity. It also requires them to refine their understanding of the linguistic elements necessary to achieve the learning goal represented in the ‘can do’ statement. The activity also asks students to look at the learning resource they selected and discuss how they want to use it in group learning.

Supporting skills to deal with topics tutors do not know the answer to

Democratizing the learning process and moving tutors away from the idea that they

should be infallible sources of knowledge has also been built into the materials development process. Nevertheless, it does not mean that tutors can just walk in a session without having sufficient knowledge about the learning topics of the day. In order to address this and support the tutors further, a “tutor reference” was developed for each learning material. The tutor reference provided the information of the key grammar and vocabulary items, possible points where tutees may encounter difficulties in understanding the learning contents, and the recommended resources to which tutors can refer in preparation for their tutorial session. These references were given to all the Foundational English tutors.

Logistics

For the initial attempt, learning materials that are at the CEFR A1, A2, and B1 were made. The covered areas were Speaking, Reading, and Writing. The concept and reasons behind the materials development were explicitly explained to the tutors in a training session, and Foundational English tutors were instructed to use the learning materials in their tutorial sessions. They were also told that once they completed all the activities in those materials, they could negotiate learning topics with their tutees and resume regular tutorial sessions. The materials were printed so all the Foundational English tutors and tutees had a copy.

6. Stage 3 (Cycle 1): Collect and analyse data

A survey was conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of the learning materials.

Evaluation survey 2018

The survey was carried out with 21 tutors in the Foundational English stream at the end of the semester. It consisted of the following six items asking about tutors’ perception of

the effectiveness of the learning materials and their own tutoring experiences. The survey employed a 5-point Likert scale.

- The level suitability of the learning materials to my tutees
- The learning materials helped my tutees improve their English.
- The learning materials helped me facilitate cooperative learning in my tutorial session.
- The learning materials helped me facilitate deep active learning in my tutorial session.
- The length of time it took to complete the learning materials
- The tutor references helped me prepare my tutorial session.

These items were followed by a commentary section to further investigate the reasons behind their responses. The survey was distributed through an online system, and the tutors were asked to answer the survey every time they completed each learning material. Overall, the average response rate was 82%.

‘The level suitability of the learning materials to my tutees’

For the A1 speaking material, 81% of the tutors felt that it was at the right level for their tutees, and 19% of the tutors answered that it was somewhat easy for their tutees. For the A2 reading material, 62% of the tutors answered that it was at the right level for their tutees, while 14% of the tutors answered it was somewhat easy for their tutees, and 24% of the tutors answered it was somewhat difficult for their tutees. For the B1 writing material, 60% of the tutors answered it was at the right level for their tutees, and 40% of the tutors answered that it was somewhat difficult for their tutees.

It has to be noted that, for instance, CEFR B1 level is said to be equivalent to TOEFL ITP 437 and above (CIEE, 2019) and TOEIC 550 and above (Tannenbaum and Wylie,

2008). Therefore, considering the English levels of the tutees who participate in the Foundational English stream (mostly below 420 in TOEFL ITP and 480 in TOEIC), it remains doubtful whether the tutors were able to accurately judge the English levels of their tutees. Some tutors also pointed out that it was not intuitive for them to understand how difficult or easy each learning material was, judging based on the CEFR levels. The CEFR levels were introduced and explained to the tutors in training beforehand, but as Bower et al. (2015) pointed out, even professional teachers need a certain training and preparation to familiarise themselves with the CEFR levels.

For those reasons, there is room for discussions on whether the CEFR-based learning materials are really suitable in the peer learning context, particularly when that happens in the extracurricular context where students do not have immediate access to teachers.

‘The learning materials helped my tutees improve their basic English.’

For the A1 speaking material, 75% of the tutors strongly agreed, and 25% of the tutors agreed. For the A2 reading material, 29% of the tutors strongly agreed, and 57% of the tutors agreed, while 10% of the tutors somewhat disagreed and 5% answered strongly disagreed. For the B1 writing material, 67% of the tutors somewhat agreed, while tutors who strongly agreed remained 20%, and the remaining 13% somewhat disagreed.

Though the majority of them agreed that there was some positive effect on improving tutees’ English, there were a few tutors who expressed disagreement. Those tutors who disagreed said that the emphasis was over placed on language skills (i.e. speaking, reading, and writing) due to the nature of the task-based learning materials, whereas they wanted to focus more on basic aspects of English grammar.

‘The learning materials helped me facilitate cooperative learning in my tutorial session.’

For the A1 speaking material, 69% of the tutors strongly agreed, and 31% of the tutors somewhat agreed. For the A2 reading material, 24% of the tutors strongly agreed, and 71% of the tutors somewhat agreed, while 5% of the tutors somewhat disagreed. For the B1 writing material, 60% of the tutors somewhat agreed, and the remaining 40% strongly agreed.

Almost all tutors agreed that the learning materials helped them with session facilitation skills. Their comments revealed that this was partly due to the fact that there were many sections that encouraged discussions and comments from tutees. Those tutors who expressed disagreement said that they thought getting tutees to work on reading activities, which forced them to work individually while they were reading, within a tutorial session, reduced the opportunity for cooperative learning. There is a possibility that this may also be an indication that the tutees were not up to the CEFR A2 level reading task. Also that it took a lot longer for them to complete the reading task than the material developer’s intention.

‘The learning materials helped me facilitate deep active learning in my tutorial session.’

For the A1 speaking material, 25% of the tutors strongly agreed, and 75% of the tutors somewhat agreed. For both the A2 reading and B1 writing materials, 40% of the tutors strongly agreed and 60% of the tutors somewhat agreed.

All tutors agreed that the learning materials helped them to facilitate deep active learning in their tutorial sessions. Many commented that the step-by-step construction of the learning contents, which were designed using SOLO taxonomy as a framework, helped

tutees to consolidate their understanding of the foundational grammar. This careful structure of the activities seemed to be perceived effective in promoting deep active learning among tutees.

‘The length of time it took to complete the learning materials’

For the A1 speaking material, 31% of the tutors answered that it took less than 60 minutes and 25% answered that it took 90 minutes. This means about half of the tutors spent one tutorial session (=90 minutes) working on the material, while 12% of tutors spent about three sessions working on the material. For the A2 reading material, only 24% of tutors were able to complete the material within one tutorial session, while it became evident that almost 70% of the tutors spent three or more sessions completing the contents. The similar tendency can be observed for the B1 writing material.

The contents of the learning materials may have been overloaded, and required three or more sessions to be completed for some tutors. As a result, both tutors and tutees got tired of the learning contents and their focus and purpose of learning got lost. SOLO taxonomy was employed with the intention to generate deep active learning, but the survey result suggested that it had the opposite effect in some cases.

Particularly because there is the limited timeframe of 10 tutorial sessions per semester, those tutors who disagreed felt frustrated by the contents of the learning materials designed with learners in general in mind, because they were not able to be more attentive to their tutees’ immediate learning needs.

‘The learning materials helped me deal with questions from tutees.’

For the A1 speaking material, whereas more than half of the tutors found the tutor reference useful, 25% of them disagreed. For the A2 reading material, all the tutors

agreed that it was helpful to some degree. For the B1 writing material, half of the tutors strongly agreed and the other half somewhat disagreed.

Those tutors who expressed agreement said that they were able to check what the learning contents would be by looking at the learning materials in advance. This helped them to prepare for possible questions raised by tutees in actual tutorial sessions. The tutor reference developed for each learning material was also recognised as a useful resource because it provided tutors with key grammar items and expressions, and it also offered information as to what useful learning resources are out there to supplement tutees' understanding. On the other hand, those tutors who disagreed found it was difficult for them to judge whether tutees' answers were correct/accurate when it came to productive tasks such as writing compositions, due to their immaturity of their own English. Some tutors were dissatisfied because some of the grammar points inquired by tutees were not covered in the tutor reference. This was because the tutor references were designed to show tutors only the key grammar and expressions at the given CEFR level. This means that other grammar and expressions at lower or higher levels were not dealt with in the references.

7. Stage 4 (Cycle 1): Reflect

Overall, it would be fair to say that the highly-controlled learning materials gave some directions and guidance to those tutors who were not confident to facilitate Foundational English tutorial sessions. As “foundational English” can be interpreted broadly, the learning materials helped tutors narrow down the learning topics for each session. It was also shown that for tutors who were unfamiliar with the concept of cooperative learning, it gave them guidance and hints on session facilitation methods for such forms of learning. Though, for many of the tutors, the learning materials were perceived positively, the

downside of them were observed by the researcher as follows:

- As the learning contents are prepared in advance by the centre, there is no real flexibility of what can be learned in tutorial sessions unless the tutor has the skills to build his or her session around it. This also means that the advantage of peer learning and the organic nature of peer interaction may be compromised to some extent. Lack of discretion may become a source of frustration for both tutors and tutees.
- As the learning contents are prepared in advance, the real-world weaknesses or requests of tutees may not be taken into consideration in actual sessions.
- It remains challenging for tutors to select the right learning materials for tutees unless they have a good understanding of what each CEFR level means.
- In case of group tutoring, it is only natural that difference in tutee understanding exists because no matter how close their test scores may be at the entry stage of the programme, their understanding may vary depending on the learning contents. Using the CEFR-aligned learning materials with tutees whose English levels vary means it is likely that there may always be a tutee who is not fully satisfied because the task is either too easy or difficult for him/her. Such group dynamics is supposed to work favourably in peer learning, but whether it is always ideal in “tutorial” session is questionable.
- SOLO taxonomy was adopted to design step-by-step activities to complete the main task in the learning materials with intention to promote deep processing of learning contents, but this resulted in a rather crammed, long activities. There is a risk that tutors and tutees lose interest in the learning contents.

Through the action research Cycle 1, it was found that the learning materials which were intended to provide micro-level support can be an obstruction to some tutors. The

learning materials may be more useful for new tutors and tutors who are not confident to get tutees actively involved in their tutorial sessions as they play a role in demonstrating techniques to engage tutees in cooperative learning. The use of the learning materials, therefore, should be optional, not obligatory, especially with experienced tutors. It is a fact, however, that the experienced tutors also expressed concerns with the broad nature of the Foundational English stream. In the second cycle of the action research, an attempt to provide tutors with macro-level support will be discussed.

8. Stage 1 (Cycle 2): Study and plan

In the Cycle 1, the effect of the micro-level support was examined and it was found that it has a potential to be an obstruction rather than promotion of learning in group peer tutorial sessions. The direction of the research then shifted to provide macro-level support.

Getting ideas from the TOEFL and TOEIC streams

The results of the survey conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of the renewed programme indicated that the TOEFL and TOEIC tutors did not seem to have significant issues in planning and managing their tutorial sessions. The reasons behind this may be as follows:

- Because tutees are aware of their own weaknesses and test scores, it is easy for tutors and tutees to negotiate learning contents.
- Because both tutees and tutors are aware of tutees' weaknesses and test scores, session contents can be designed to meet tutees' immediate learning needs. This, in turn, helps retain tutees' motivation high.
- With the test, it is relatively easy for students to narrow down their learning needs and goals as their weaknesses are represented in scores and questions to which they could not answer correctly. Because of the concrete, simple nature

of such goals, they can be easily shared among group members. A shared goal is a vital element in cooperative learning.

It seems that language exams provide some benefits in assisting the process of shaping the directions of learning at the outset. For those reasons listed above, the decision was made to develop a test to measure tutees' understanding of foundational English grammar. It has to be noted that the test and its procedure still have to address the four challenging aspects raised by the Foundational English tutors, namely, 'Getting tutees to talk', 'Getting tutees to think', 'Selecting the right learning materials for tutees', and 'Dealing with a topic I did not know the answer to'.

Addressing the issues through the test

In theory, the test should be able to address all the four issues as described below.

'Getting tutees to talk' and 'Getting tutees to think'

By getting tutees to work on the test prior to the first tutorial session, tutees can understand their own weaknesses and strengths, thus it is easy for them to relate themselves to learning topics. As a result, they become more involved and responsible in sessions, and they are therefore expected to talk and think more proactively in sessions.

'Selecting the right learning materials for tutees'

The original problem was that those tutors, who found it difficult to find the right learning materials for tutees, were also facing difficulties setting the learning goal. By introducing a test, tutees' weaknesses will be revealed and learning goals can be set based on these.

'Dealing with a topic I did not know the answer to'

By getting tutors to mark their own tutees' tests, tutors will be able to see their weaknesses. This should help tutors predict possible questions that may be brought up by tutees.

9. Stage 2 (Cycle 2): Take action

Making the test to measure the understanding level of tutees

Test items (Table 1) were determined based on two sources. One of them was a grammar textbook which was commercially available. In particular, this time, 'Oxford Practical English Grammar Part A and B' (English title: The Good Grammar Book) (Swan and Walter, 2006) were used as the primary source. The textbooks are widely used among EFL learners, and cover foundational grammar points. The other source was "tutor portfolio". In the ASC Peer Tutorial Programme, tutors are required to keep the record and reflection of each session, including what learning resources were used, what went well and what did not went well, and what could be improved in the next session. There is also a section for them to fill in with the information of the prominent questions brought up by the tutees in each session. Among those questions listed in their portfolio, commonly asked grammar questions were picked up and taken into the test items. Mostly, these grammar items are made into descriptive questions in the test.

| | | | |
|----------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------|-------------------------|
| be and have | present tenses | future tenses | past tenses |
| perfect tenses | modal verbs | passives | questions and negatives |
| infinitives and -ing forms | articles | determiners | adjectives and adverbs |
| conjunctions | if | relative pronouns | spoken grammar |
| prepositions | participial construction | | |

Table 1: Test items

Conducting the test

In order for the test to be informative for both tutors and tutees in the Foundational English stream, tutees were asked to complete the test one week prior to the beginning of the first session and hand it in to their tutors. Tutors then marked the tests using the answer book provided by the centre. The tests were returned to each tutee after being marked so that tutees had the opportunity to get to know and understand their own weaknesses and strengths in grammar understanding.

Utilising the test results in tutorial sessions

The tutors were told that mastering the English grammar that appeared in the test was the major goal of the Foundational English stream. In order for this cycle of the research to be less controlled than Cycle 1, how the test results were to be reflected in actual tutorial sessions, what supplemental learning materials to be used to support tutee understanding, and how much time to be spent on each grammar item were all left to individual tutors' discretion. By marking the test themselves, tutors are able to understand weaknesses and strengths of individual tutees. This enables them to better support tutees.

10. Stage 3 (Cycle 2): Collect and analyse evidence

In Cycle 2 of the action research, a survey was also conducted as a qualitative method.

Survey 2019

A survey was carried out with 13 tutors in Foundational English stream at the end of the semester. 3 out of the 13 tutors were involved in the action research Cycle 1, thus had experience using the controlled learning materials. 9 out of the 13 were in their first year as a tutor, and 4 were in their second year. The survey consisted of the following 6 items asking tutors about their perceptions of the effectiveness of the pre-test in supporting the

tutors and their own tutoring experiences. It employed a 5-point Likert scale.

- Overall, the test helped my tutees improve their English.
- Overall, I was able to facilitate cooperative learning in my tutorial session.
- Overall, I was able to facilitate deep active learning in my tutorial session.
- I referred to my tutees' test results to plan and prepare my tutorial sessions.
- The test covered foundational English grammar items sufficiently for my tutees.
- The test should be used again at the beginning of the next semester.

All the questions were followed by a commentary section to further investigate the reasons behind their responses. The survey was distributed through an online system, and the response rate was 100%.

Survey results

‘Overall, the test helped my tutees improve their English.’

For Question 1, 9 tutors somewhat agreed and 4 tutors strongly agreed. The majority of them said that the test was helpful in finding out tutees' weaknesses in grammar understanding, that they felt that it helped them decide tutorial topics. Because they were able to narrow down the learning targets based on the results of the test, they were successful in working closely with their tutees' grammar weaknesses. This seems to be the main factor to make them feel that the test helped their tutees improve their English.

‘Overall, I was able to facilitate cooperative learning in my tutorial session.’

With Question 2, 6 tutors somewhat disagreed, while 5 of them somewhat agreed and 2 of them strongly agreed. By looking at the individual responses, it is noticeable that the more experienced the tutors are the stronger the perception that they were able to facilitate cooperative learning. Those tutors who disagreed gave the following comments

as reasons why they were not able to facilitate cooperative learning:

- As mastering the given grammar points was the goal of the Foundational English programme, it was inevitable for me, as a tutor, to spend more time explaining the key points than getting tutees search by themselves. So, I feel that my tutorial sessions were rather one-way than cooperative.
- There were too many grammar items to cover just in 10 sessions, so I tended to “teach” rather than “facilitate” cooperative sessions because the latter takes up a lot of time.
- It took me the first few sessions to get a good grasp of who my tutees were and what they really needed to learn in terms of foundational English grammar, so I am not entirely confident to say that I was able to facilitate cooperative learning.
- There was a significant gap in tutees’ level of understanding of foundational English grammar in my group, so it was difficult for me to successfully get them involved in cooperative learning.

‘Overall, I was able to facilitate deep active learning in my tutorial session.

For Question 3, 11 of them somewhat agreed, while there was one who strongly agreed and one who somewhat disagreed. Those 12 tutors who agreed gave a similar reason that tutees seemed more actively involved in their learning because they were aware of their weaknesses by taking the test prior to the start of the tutorial session. This helped many tutees build a clear sense of their purpose of learning. Furthermore, some tutors also commented that having the basis of their tutees’ weaknesses cleared prior to the session helped them to plan necessary tasks and activities that tutees may need to deepen their understanding.

‘I referred to my tutees’ test results to plan and prepare my tutorial sessions.’

For Question 4, all the tutors strongly agreed that they referred to the pre-test when preparing for their tutorial sessions. This alone can be an indication that the test was successful in supporting tutors organising their tutorial sessions.

**‘The test covered foundational English grammar items sufficiently for my tutees.’
and ‘The test should be used again at the beginning of the next semester.’**

For Questions 5 and 6, too, all the tutors showed strong agreement. This is an indication that the test was perceived helpful in facilitating their tutorial sessions. In response to Question 6, for example, the following reasons were raised:

- It was quite challenging to identify tutees’ needs before the test was developed. Now, the test allows me to see very clearly what my tutees’ need to work on because their weaknesses and strengths in English grammar are more visible.
- It helped my tutees become aware of the discrepancy between their perception of their own understanding of English grammar and their actual level.
- I was able to devote more time on the actual preparation rather than speculating what my tutees may need to learn.
- It helped both me as a tutor and tutees to see their achievement by taking the same test again at the end of the semester.

These comments are the indications that the test helped tutors set learning goals for their tutorial sessions. It also helped them understand and stick to the aim of the Foundational English stream. As described in the third comment too, the test was perceived useful for not only identifying tutees’ weaknesses and strengths, but also assessing their learning outcomes. Though the learning materials developed in the first cycle also came with self-assessment grid at the end of each task, students found that the assessment by test is more

useful simply because they are more familiar with getting external validation. Furthermore, to be able to effectively use a self-assessment grid takes considerable learner training (Kodate, 2017). In a peer tutoring programme, however, there is a limit to how much such educational intervention can be made due to its student-centred nature. For those reasons, the test may be an effective means for supporting peer tutors.

11. Stage 4 (Cycle 2): Reflect

Though it is not a perfect solution, the macro-level support using the test seemed to be perceived more positively than the micro-level support using the in-house learning materials. Although the test composition was fairly simple, it assisted the peer tutors in identifying tutees' needs, preparing for the actual sessions, and assessing tutees' achievement. In the first cycle of this action research, there was an over-supply of the support for the tutors which in turn made it over-managing. Leaving sufficient room for their discretion while providing the necessary support in the key areas is key to successful support in peer learning.

12. Conclusion

In this paper, the means to provide peer tutors with educational support was discussed. Through the two cycles of the action research, it was discovered that the learning materials which attempted to give tutors support at the micro level has the potential to be an obstruction due to its controlling nature which could reduce the level of tutor discretion and opportunities for organic flow of peer learning. In the second cycle of the action research, less controlled support was provided by using the test for the tutors to check tutees' understanding of foundational English grammar. At the outset, it was predicted that the greater support for the tutors would lead to higher satisfaction and more effective learning among groups, but this was not necessarily the case with the peer tutors

in this study. Though the emphasis should be made that it is the educator's responsibility to offer the necessary support for tutors, such educational interventions need to be carefully thought out to promote effective peer learning in tutorial sessions. The followings are the summary of the key points discovered through the action research:

- Micro-level support (provision of learning materials in this case) may be suitable for less experienced tutors, but can be a source of obstruction for experienced tutors.
- Macro-level support (provision of a diagnostic language test in this case) can be useful for any tutors regardless of the length of their experience.
- A diagnostic language test, which is used to clarify tutees' weaknesses in the subject area, can be an informative reference for tutors to find out about tutees' learning needs.
- Allow tutors to be involved in the process of diagnosis and assessment so they can closely monitor tutees' understanding.
- A diagnostic language test can influence tutee perceptions, cultivating their awareness of their learning needs, thus sense of responsibility in one's learning. This, in turn, helps tutorial sessions be more participative and productive.
- Educational interventions should be made carefully and systematically during preparatory stages, not in actual tutorial sessions.

In the Japanese educational context, in particular, "peer tutoring" in English language learning often refers to study buddy or conversation partners with the aim to increase opportunities for language input and output among learners. Thus, there seems to be a tendency that the accuracy of the language, tutors' ability to support and promote tutees' understanding of the target language, and the ability to facilitate tutorial sessions have not been under great attention. However, the results of the action research suggested that

all those skills are highly important to promote learning in peer tutoring.

The two cycles of action research discussed in this paper are initial attempts in the search for effective means to better support peer tutors. With the increasing demand in the field across higher education in Japan, training and support systems for peer tutors need to be built upon firm understanding of the nature of peer tutoring and their needs.

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