5th World Conference on Educational Sciences - WCES 2013

An experience of reciprocal peer tutoring at the university

Lidón Moliner Miravet *, Auxiliadora Sales Ciges, Odet Moliner García

Education Department, Universitat Jaume I, Avda. Sos Baynat s/n, Castellón, 12071 Spain

Abstract

Peer tutoring is conceived as a cooperative learning method based on the creation of pairs, with an asymmetrical relationship, derived from the work of the respective roles. The aim of this paper is to present an experience of reciprocal peer tutoring conducted with student of the Teacher Training degree in the subject General Didactics at the Universitat Jaume I (Spain). We examine, through focus groups, the perceptions of self-concept and attitudes of solidarity of the students. From this initiative can observe the high level of student satisfaction. Peer tutoring stands as one of the methods developed and are in line with the framework principles of inclusive education.

© 2013 The Authors. Published by Elsevier Ltd. Open access under CC BY-NC-ND license. Selection and/or peer-review under responsibility of Academic World Education and Research Center.

Keywords: peer tutoring, cooperative learning, solidarity, inclusive education;

1. Introduction

This paper focuses on reciprocity through the exchange of roles as a method of working in the university classroom, specifically in the course content of the Primary Education specialisation on the Teacher Training degree. Topping (1996) understands peer tutoring as the process by which non-teachers from similar social groups help each other to learn, and learn themselves through teaching. In a later publication, he adds that this learning support is interactive, intentional and systematic (Topping, 2000). Peer tutoring can be either fixed, in which roles are not exchanged, or reciprocal, where peers exchange roles.

Having the opportunity to teach, to feel capable, to be heard, and to win the confidence of one’s fellow students unquestionably pave the way to increased self-esteem. Exchanging roles also prevents replication of the teaching-learning model that can lead to authoritarian attitudes on the part of the tutor, and dependency in the tutee (Braudit, 2000). We also consider the attitude of solidarity to be an important aspect. Prosocial behaviour refers to any conduct that benefits others or has positive social consequences. It can take many forms, including conducts of helping, cooperation and solidarity (Moñivas, 1996).

The objective was established for the present research: to analyse the impact of peer tutoring on students’ self-concept and attitudes of solidarity from their own perspective.

* Corresponding Lidón Moliner Miravet. Tel.: 964 729797
E-mail address: mmoliner@uji.es
2. Method

A non-experimental cross-sectional descriptive study design was used in this research. Hernández, Fernández, and Baptista (2003) describe non-experimental research as a type of study carried out without any deliberate manipulation of the variables and in which phenomena are only observed in their natural environment. The study was cross-sectional because the data were gathered on one occasion only, at the end of the programme.

3. Participants

The peer tutoring was carried out in the Primary Education speciality of the Teacher Training degree at the Universidad Jaume I (UJI). The total number of students enrolled on this course was 85, of whom 39 took part in the research, 31 women and 8 men. Although the peer tutoring method was implemented in all the classes, only 39 students agreed to form discussion groups.

4. Data gathering techniques and data processing and analysis

Discussion groups may be defined as a group conversation with the purpose of bringing together and contrasting different viewpoints through an open, emergent process focused on the research subject (Albert, 2006). Five discussion groups of 3 to 6 students met in a single 40-minute session. The questions addressed to the students therefore revolved around their self-concept and attitudes of solidarity. Data were taken from recordings of the discussion groups, which were transcribed immediately after the sessions in order to obtain an accurate account of the participants’ contributions. We made a descriptive analysis of the information gathered in the discussion groups. The MaxQda 10 software program was used to structure the data.

5. Results

The discussion groups with the students revealed some of the most relevant aspects regarding self-concept. The students saw themselves as being capable of explaining subject content, of looking for information, and of preparing a meaningful discourse; activities that they previously only associated with teaching staff. They highlighted aspects such as feeling useful, being able to prepare a complex worksheet through their own efforts, and being able to explain a topic, in this case to an ideal student (FG, 1). They defined peer tutoring as a “capability”; they reported feeling satisfaction on realising that they were capable of teaching another person, which gave them more confidence to tackle other subjects. They felt important; they had the information beforehand, and it was up to them to explain the subject to their partners; they were constantly in the leading role. All these factors made them see themselves as more autonomous and independent, and were transferred to other spheres and contexts.

The attitude of solidarity emerged throughout the discussions with students, as they noted that they had learned to help their classmates. When the tutees came up against difficulties, they were quickly given support through explanations or clarifications on the subject. In the relationship with their partners, the students recognised that initially they were unaware of their partners’ learning style (even though many of the pairs knew each other). As the sessions progressed, the students increasingly identified with one another and the ensuing engagement allowed them to progress faster. They reported feeling comfortable because they used the same language and were not afraid to admit uncertainties because of the climate of trust they had established and the one-to-one personalised teaching method. Use of the same language facilitated understanding of explanations and the absence of pressure from teachers made it easier to ask questions.

These conversations gave the students the space to ask questions that they would be afraid to raise with a teacher in case they were told “you should know that already” (FG, 5), and fear of the impression they might give. One of the aspects the students highlighted was the chance to interact and communicate with each other. They considered that this experience increased their motivation because they participated actively during the entire session and interacted with their classmates.
A: There’s more feedback, interaction with the other person, because in a traditional lecture, you’re waiting…

A: Watching, waiting for the slide to change to see something different and listening to what the people next to you are saying, so no…

A: And you often switch off, but with the peer tutoring, that doesn’t happen so much because the attention is more personalised, you pay much more attention.

(FG, 2)

They noted how interaction in the pairs improved over time, as did the richness of dialogues and reflections on the subject content. A climate of collaborative work was generated in the class. They also recognised that a change of partner would have been beneficial, since they would have discovered other ways of working and different discourses. When pairs interacted with each other, or they were asked for clarification on something another pair was not sure about, they found it helpful and acknowledged the importance of these contributions. There was general agreement that changing partners would have given them the chance to get to know other students and other ways of thinking.

6. Results

Regarding to academic self-concept, as the course progressed, the students saw themselves as more capable of and competent in helping their fellow students. They felt a sense of importance accorded by the task they were set, namely, that their partners would learn from their explanations and contributions. These are vital aspects that have a decisive impact on improving self-concept. On the whole, students felt more autonomous, responsible and independent. Students in the study by Schleyer, Langdon and James (2005) also recognised the same effects: the students who enacted the role of tutor felt they had become more responsible and that their communication skills improved. The duration of the programme, a complete semester, can probably be considered more than sufficient to act as a facilitating factor in this change. Mickelson et al (2003) observed that the positive effects of reciprocal peer tutoring strengthened when sessions were frequent and lasted over longer time periods.

With regard to attitudes of solidarity, the students evaluated the support of their peers very highly, they felt comfortable and satisfied with the support they gave to and received from their partners. This situation led to an atmosphere of complicity between them. Trust between the two partners was an essential premise. The tutees had to be confident that the information their partner gave them was correct and valid, and the tutors made a commitment to conscientiously prepare the worksheets, since they felt responsible for ensuring that their partners learned. This situation covered one of the basic conditions of cooperative learning: positive interdependence (Johnson & Johnson, 1999). The responsibility of each group member for his or her learning and that of his or her fellow students, in this case partners, is vital. Likewise, Schleyer, Langdon and James (2005) found that through fixed peer tutoring, their students took more responsibility for their own learning. In our programme, students worked together in a coordinated manner, since in each of the sessions they took on a role that implied a series of different responsibilities (preparing the worksheet in the case of the tutor, and review of the subject matter in the case of the tutee). In studies by Duran and Huerta (2008) and Schleyer, Langdon and James (2005), students also experienced positive feelings of commitment and responsibility and mastery of the subject matter.

7. Conclusions

In this paper we have highlighted some of the advantages of adopting reciprocal peer tutoring as a learning strategy from the students’ perspective. In the university context and in line with the recent guidelines framed within the European Higher Education Area, students need to be given an active role in the teaching-learning process.

References