

Peer Learning and Academic Standing in Japanese Writing Centers: Preliminary Findings

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Abstract

This preliminary research shows incidences of positive true peer learning during tutoring sessions in writing centers at Japanese universities. In most writing centers at Japanese universities, tutors are required to be graduate students. There is a preconceived notion among some administrative staff and some faculty that undergraduate students are unable to properly assist each other because someone must always be in the “teacher role” and someone must always be in the “learner role”. This assumption, often referred to as *peer teaching*, is in direct conflict with the foundation of *peer learning* (Boud, Cohen, Sampson, 2001). Most writing centers allow graduate students to tutor other graduate students and in some cases even faculty members, but undergraduates are usually prohibited from formally assisting other undergraduates. In order to discuss the case for more authentic peer learning, this paper first defines peer learning and identifies how it should take place within a sample tutoring session. To further illustrate this point, several tutoring sessions at a Japanese university writing center have been analyzed and examples of peer learning through conversation were examined. The tutors in the sessions were of a similar or lower academic standing than the writer (i.e. – graduate student tutor assisting a faculty member writer, and so on). The paper concludes with the argument for more acceptance of true peer learning opportunities in writing centers at Japanese universities.

要旨

本研究は、日本の大学のライティングセンターのチュータリング・セッションにおいて、本来の意味でのピア・ラーニング (Peer Learning) を導入することに関する予備的な研究であり、それが大学のライティングセンターの運営に良い結果をもたらすことを示唆している。

日本の大学のライティングセンターの殆どは、チューターが大学院生以上であることが求められている。そこには、大学教職員の間に、学部生同士ではお互いに適正な支援をすることはできないという先入観がある。この先入観は、セッションにおいて教師役と学習者役が常に固定されていなければいけないと考えていることに一因がある。この問題につ

いては、ピア・ラーニングの基礎についての論争をまとめた「Peer Teaching」(Boud, Cohen, Sampson, 2001)においても、しばしば言及されている。興味深いのは、日本においても、多くのライティングセンターにおいて、大学院生が他の大学院生のチューターになることは許可しており、またいくつかのケースでは教職員の間でも同様のケースが認められているという点だ。しかし、一方で学部生が他の学部生のチューターをすることは、通常禁止されているという現状がある。

本研究では、より本来のピア・ラーニングに近づく議論をするために、まずその概念を定義し、次にチュータリング・セッションのサンプルを紹介する中で、どのようにピア・ラーニングを実践していくべきかを考察している。

すでに先行研究等で、日本の大学のライティングセンターにおけるチュータリング・セッションの在り方は分析されてきており、会話を通じたピア・ラーニングの例も検討されている。これらのセッションのチューターたちは、学習者(ライター)と同等か、もしくは学業的なポジションが逆転している(例:大学院生のチューターが教職員の支援をしているなど)者であったという報告もある。

本研究では、こうした先行事例も踏まえて、本来のピア・ラーニングを日本の大学のライティングセンターに普及し導入していくことの意義について検討した。その調査結果から、今後日本の大学の英語教育において、より活発にピア・ラーニングについての議論がなされていくことが重要であると結論付けられる。

Introduction

Peer learning is a term that sounds exciting and positive. It appears frequently in faculty development seminars, and it is often associated with other recent trends in education such as self-access (Adamson, Brown, & Fujimoto-Adamson 2017) or active learning (Ito 2017). The idea of peer learning is hardly a new one. It can be traced back over years of formal learning, but the modern idea of “peer-learning” gained popularity in the early 1980s (Topping 2005).

In Japan, and specifically at Japanese Universities, there had not been much importance placed on true peer learning. In large, lecture-style classes, students may occasionally work in pairs, but the notion that the instructor possesses all-important knowledge/answers is very prevalent (Williams 1994). Traditionally, students are expected to receive knowledge from a master and then accumulate or assimilate the knowledge as their own. Especially in language teaching this traditional view of education is a rough description of the transmission model (Johnson 2006). It has also been described in colloquial terms such as “sage on the stage” (King 1993) or “chalk and talk” (Young, Robinson, Alberts 2009). In recent years, there has been a directive to make learning more active and engaging (Kimura and Tatsuno 2017). One way of accomplishing this is to implement more peer learning at Japanese Universities. Most learners who engage in peer learning with the proper guidance find it stimulating and beneficial (Bradford-Watts

2011).

Definition of Peer Learning

Peer learning can best be defined as “learning [that] should be mutually beneficial and involve the sharing of knowledge, ideas and experience between the participants. It can be described as a way of moving beyond independent to interdependent or mutual learning” (Boud 1988). In his research, Boud makes a further distinction that mutual beneficial learning always occurs between peers or near-peers, but any pair or small group still has the possibility to break down into a kind of transfer of knowledge from one party to another. This negates the mutual benefit of peer learning. There is a common misconception that the number of participants (one to one, two to one) is the sole defining factor of peer learning. This is not true. While peer learning most often occurs in small groups or pairs, the mutual benefit and sharing of knowledge is the key factor.

Boud also later clarifies what peer learning is not, by establishing who can be peers. Peers can be considered at the same level as one another and “do not have power over each other by virtue of their position or responsibilities” (Boud 2001). This is another common misconception that is often paired with the prior misconception (number of participants defines peer learning). When two individuals are working together, one can assume a role of power over the other. Knowledge becomes transferred in one direction and the learning opportunity is no longer peer learning based.

Examples of peer learning have been described in the following ways by peer learning researchers (Griffiths, Houston and Lazenbatt 1995):

- Collaborative project or lab work
- Community activities
- Discussion seminars
- Learning Cells
- Proctoring models
- Parrainage (Buddy System)
- Peer-assessment schemes
- Private study groups
- Projects in different sized groups
- Workplace mentoring

A writing center can draw on several of these peer learning methods, most noticeably through collaborative work, discussion, buddy system and a proctoring model.

Description of the Writing Center

The next question is what kind of peer learning occurs in a session at a writing center at Japanese University or what does peer learning look like within the writing center. Before discussing the context of a writing center at a Japanese University, the reader

should consider what would happen in an ideal setting at a writing center with evident peer learning. The ideal tutorial setting in this section is a combination of actual observed practice at writing centers in Japan and some theoretical necessities as described in literature. In an ideal tutorial session, a writer should come prepared with several questions about his or her writing. The stage of the writing (brainstorming, draft or final copy) is not important (Roen D et al. 2002), but the writer's attitude towards the writing is extremely important. Prior to the session, the tutor should have undergone training for asking/phrasing questions. The tutor and writer then meet at a designated time in the writing center, a neutral meeting site. The tutor should be as close to a peer to the writer as possible. It is difficult to consider all factors such as age, academic standing and course of study, but hopefully the tutor will be as close of a peer as possible (Hogan and Tudge 1999). When the tutor and writer meet, the tutor will likely take a lead in organizing the session and offer suggestions for goal setting, but the tutor will not dominate the session. The tutor will default to the wishes of the writer and ask a series of questions to help the writer to think more deeply about his/her own writing.

Tutors should refrain from asking only Yes/No questions and instead ask open-ended questions that require the writer to explain his/her stylistic choices in detail. A tutor may ask a writer why he or she chose a certain phrase or certain structural format. A tutor may also ask the writer to clarify sections that seem unclear or lack sufficient detail. In doing so, the tutor is not attempting to exert power over the writer, nor does the tutor try to take ownership of the paper. Instead, the tutor tries to empower the writer and help them see their own writing in ways they may have not have considered.

While the above description is ideal, the context of a Japanese university may interfere with the nature of peer learning. As stated earlier, Japanese learners have a strong preconception of the role and responsibilities of a teacher or instructor. One interviewed tutor recalled an episode where he tutored a writer and the writer consistently raised his hand and said "excuse me teacher," before each question. While the image of one writer raising his or her hand in a one-on-one tutorial session may appear extreme or comical, it reinforces the belief that even a tutor can be seen as a not a peer or near-peer but a person in a position of power.

Luckily, these kinds of situations can be rectified easily. If writers receive skillful tutoring, they often begin to inherently appreciate the logical questioning of a tutor. Writers will transfer what they have cooperatively learned in a session to their other writings. Whether online or in person, writers are encouraged to use writing centers as repeat users (Rilling 2005). Hopefully in doing so they will come to appreciate the peer learning style, or as close to a peer learning style that is possible in the circumstances.

Another problem that can cause interference with peer learning can be the selection and hiring of tutors. Most Japanese universities classify tutors as a specialized form of university sanctioned part-time work. For administrative purposes, a tutor is likely considered to be similar in nature to a teaching assistant (TA). Because of the academic

and/or clerical responsibility placed on TAs, many universities have a stipulation that only graduate students can hold the position of TA. Therefore, at some universities tutors must be graduate students. (Please see <http://www.cie-waseda.jp/awp/en/wc/sp/tutor.html> or <http://sophiawritingcenter.weebly.com/tutors.html> for more specific details of tutor recruitment and eligibility requirements.) Furthermore, some administrators worry that only graduate students are mature enough to tutor or that only graduate students possess enough content knowledge to teach writers who use the writing center. It is important to note the misconception that overt “teaching” is what occurs in a writing center.

At most Japanese writing centers true peer learning occurs at the graduate level, but not necessarily at the undergraduate level. An undergraduate student is not allowed to tutor a graduate student or a faculty member, yet a graduate student can tutor another graduate student or a faculty member. Many universities set this invisible threshold of graduate students as a tutor. True peer learning currently occurs at the graduate level among graduate level writers and tutors. So university administration and writing centers, themselves, must be aware of the positive implications. Research shows that learners are aware of these benefits and that academic performance increases with additional peer learning experiences. (Topping & Ehly 1998).

The next section will examine transcripts of tutorial sessions where the tutor is of a similar or lower academic standing than the writers. The argument can then be made that a tutor who is a peer and is well trained in questioning, is able to assist others. Peer learner status should take precedent over graduate level status.

Examples of Peer Learning in Tutorial Sessions

What follows are three excerpts from transcripts of longer tutorial sessions. Depending on writing center policy, a session can last from 30 minutes to 60 minutes. In each of the following cases, the sessions were 45-minutes long and the corresponding transcripts were over 70-pages long. The reader should keep in mind that the sections were chosen because they exemplify some aspect of peer learning. These excerpts are not the exceptions, but must be presented in their current form due to limited space and time.

Session 1

In the first session, a doctoral student brought an overview of a presentation for an academic conference. The tutor was a masters student and younger than the doctoral student, but was a competent tutor (more than three semesters of tutoring) who had undergone preliminary training (two week intensive training program with practice sessions supervised by a veteran tutor) and consequent weekly professional development meetings.

In this excerpt, which appears towards the end of the tutorial session, there is clear evidence of a friendly rapport between the tutor and writer. The tutor feels confident to give ideas or suggestions, but still allows to the writer to voice (in this case the writer was male) his concerns about the quality of his own writing. In Lines 1, 3 and 8 the tutor asks the writer general questions about the overall organization of the writing. In Line 1 the tutor checks with the writer and allows him to redirect the session to see if he has any concerns about the previous area they had discussed. The tutor feels that the either the discussion is complete or other areas have more immediate concerns, such as the comment sections. While the tutor did not instruct the writer to move to the comments section, he suggested doing so after reaffirming with the writer. The tutor acted in a manner conducive to peer learning by not exerting power over the writer, but by giving helpful suggestions.

The writer also values the opinion of the tutor as a peer. As seen in Line 4 the writer offers to read a section of the presentation to gather the insight of the tutor. The tutor did not instruct the writer to do so, but carefully led the writer to make this decision on his own. Also, in Line 8, the writer asks for clarification in true peer learning style. The tutor is not an experienced writer in the tutor's field, but is asked a specific question requesting for tutor feedback and suggestions.

While this excerpt shows a brief glimpse of a friendly and meaningful peer learning exchange that can occur without concern for academic standing, there is also something of concern. The amount of the tutor's speech is much greater than that of the writer. The writer should speak more than the tutor. In an ideal setting the tutor's speech should only account for 30%, whereas the writer's speech should account for the other 70%. Failure to allow the writer to speak freely can undermine the role of a peer as a tutor. In sessions where the majority of the speech originates from the tutor, the writer can perceive the tutor as an instructor and disrupt the important peer relationship. This issue is one that can occur in any tutoring session. While it is not something in itself to be praised, the very fact that these kinds of issues can occur in any level of academic standing between tutor and writer means sessions are truly similar.

Fig 1.

Content Language: English

Discussion Language: English

Tutor: Masters Student

Writer: Doctoral Student

Tutor and Writer Utterances	Coding/Interpretation
1. Tutor - Alright, but otherwise, I guess do you have any other concerns about this?	Questioning
2. Writer - No.	
3. Tutor - Alright. Yeah. Alright. And how about the comments section?	Suggestions, Choice
4. Writer - Okay, I'll read it out then.	
5. Tutor - Oh, yes, please.	Courtesy
6. (LONG READING CUT)	
7. Tutor - Nice. Alright, and any kind of concerns or things that you believe...	Repetition
8. Writer - Is there a better way than 'strong point'?	Suggestions
9. Tutor - Yeah 'and one strong point' - I guess I was looking at that as well. So this is kind of like how your - or in my opinion this is kind of like how you organize the thing; so two additional flaws and one strong point. One - and I guess the strong point is down here.	Interested, Organization <i>Long Tutor utterance</i>
10. Writer - Right.	
11. Tutor - Okay. I understood it here but and one -so two additional flaws and one - maybe instead of flaws, flaws, and strengths, maybe I would maybe more - it would be like strengths and weakness.	<i>Long Tutor utterance</i>
12. Writer - Yeah.	
13. Tutor - So like 'has two additional weakness and one strength'.	Clarification

Session 2 and 3

In the second and third session presented here, a part-time faculty member brought a portion of an academic research article that was then adapted into a presentation for a conference. The tutor was a doctoral student and younger than the part-time faculty member. Like the tutor in Session 1, this tutor was also a competent tutor (more than two semesters of tutoring) who had undergone preliminary training (two week intensive training program with practice sessions supervised by a veteran tutor) and consequent weekly professional development meetings.

There are two things that may immediately catch the reader's attention when skimming these excerpts. The first is the incorporation of laughter into the session. In Session 2 Line 5 the writer begins to laugh immediately after her own utterance and the tutor joins with genuine friendly laughter. The tutor and writer have formed a bond of trust and acceptance in a very short amount of time. It is difficult to describe the quality of laughter, but in the audio recording the laughter sounds genuine. The laughter shows evidence that the two are working in a true peer learning fashion without one exerting power over the other. There is a "mutually beneficial situation" with the "sharing of knowledge" (Boud, 1988).

The second point the reader may notice quickly is the limited responses or one-word responses of the tutor. It can be assumed that the tutor used the strategy for a specific purpose. On a surface level inference, it appears that the tutor is using a simple kind of verbal acknowledgement of the writer, which is true, but on a deeper level the tutor is remaining engaged while encouraging the writer to think aloud or make her own suggestions without relying on the tutor. A key example would be Session 2 Line 16. Here the tutor has asked for clarification in her previous utterance and the writer responds with a possible way of clarifying. Instead of reassuring the writer directly, the tutor continues to use small phrases to indirectly make the writer continue to challenge her own suggestions and assumptions. The tutor does not say "Yes, you are correct." the tutor says "Yes, I understand what you are trying to say." and the writer continues her questioning of her own explanation and word choice.

Finally, the third session has the same concern as the first session. In this case the tutor's speech is overtaking the writer's. It is important to note, that the writer is in agreement with the tutor and is preoccupied with taking more notes from the beneficial discussion, but as always there is the worry that the roles of peers will begin to break down and the tutor will take the role of the direct instructor.

Fig. 2

Content Language: English

Discussion Language: English

Tutor: Doctoral Student

Writer: Part-Time Faculty Member

Tutor and Writer Utterances	Coding/Interpretation
1. Tutor - Okay.	
2. Writer - Probably, I'll take a break now and ask if they have any questions.	
3. Tutor - Okay. Good.	Reassurance
4. Writer - I think people might have questions after that.	
5. [Laughter]	Rapport, Comfort
6. Tutor - Okay, great.	Reassurance
7. Writer - Things about when writing a stem and if you remember stem is a question	Checking for understanding/ clarity
8. Tutor - Umm.	Reassurance
9. Writer - You want to make sure that each stem is independent of other stems in the same test.	Clarification
10. Tutor - Umm.	Reassurance
11. Writer -That means an answer to one item shouldn't give you an answer to another one.	Clarification
12. Tutor - Yes.	Reassurance
13. Writer - A stem shouldn't be able to hint at the answer. Another thing is when you're writing stems you want to avoid negatives. I think I should put an example here. But I worry, it's too - too much text.	Clarification
14. Tutor - Can you give a oral example?	Clarification
15. Writer - Yeah, just a oral example, like instead of saying what is not an example of this, you just ask which is an example.	Clarification Questioning
16. Tutor - Umm.	Reassuring/Questioning

Fig. 3

Third Session

Content Language: English

Discussion Language: English

Tutor: Doctoral Student

Writer: Part-Time Faculty Member

Tutor and Writer Utterances	Coding/Interpretation
1. Tutor - Yes, umm. And - and then, last I just want to make a small suggestion which...	Suggestions
2. Writer - Umm.	Acknowledgement
3. Tutor - ... can possibly help with the issue of the theoretical background.	(Note-taking) Incorporating suggestions
4. Writer - Umm, umm.	
5. Tutor - I think one possible way to deal with it is to how this issue has been considered in Japan...	Clarification
6. Writer - Umm, yeah.	Agreement
7. Tutor - ...and in the US.	Clarification
8. Writer - Contextualize it, there.	Suggestion
9. Tutor - Yeah. It's - yeah, since you mentioned that it seems - in Japan...	Reconfirming the writer's original suggestion
10. Writer - Umm.	Agreement
11. Tutor - ... the topics that they were mainly concerned about seems to be...	Fast-paced interaction, both parties able to speak freely
12. Writer - Umm.	
13. Tutor ... slightly different or different from what are the ...	Clarification
14. Writer - Umm.	
15. Tutor - ...main concern in the US so...	Writer takes more notes
16. Writer - Right.	Agreement
17. Tutor ...by putting into a more contextualized background, maybe you'll also clarify the issue a bit more.	<i>Long Tutor utterance</i>
18. Writer - Yeah, that's very true, I think.	

Further Areas for Research

Due to limitations of time and space, there were several variables that influence peer learning at writing center sessions that were not discussed in this paper. The most invasive variable that threatens to alter true peer learning is the presence of a native speaker. Native speaker tutors are the most often sought after for sessions by students who are writing in their non-native language. Students will attempt to request a native speaker if given the choice, and are sometimes very clear in expressing their disappointment when native speakers are not available. This belief is commonly referred to as the “native speaker fallacy” or NSF — is the belief that “the ideal teacher of English is a native speaker” (Phillipson, 1992). This research can be expanded upon in to a longer section or entirely new research project. The NSF is one of the few exceptions that will supersede the age/experience issue in training, employing and hiring tutors. When writers request native speaker sessions, they are often unaware of what occurs in the center and are not looking for a peer learning experience. It is important to explain to writers what the goals are of a true peer learning experience.

Conclusion

While only three short examples were explored in this paper, each of them showed the basic formation of a greater peer learning experience. Only a simple, preliminary round of coding was done to search for emerging patterns. A deeper study could include in vivo coding or the data could be further analyzed using grounded theory. For this current introductory research, things like building rapport, laughter, open ended questioning and allowing the writer to lead the session are all important to a creating positive writing center experience and subsequently a good peer learning experience. While many universities and university writing centers do not acknowledge peer learning at every level, the case can be made that peer learning is occurring in some form at Japanese university writing centers and it could be expanded even further to include more peers helping other peers. With the proper training and management of a writing center, all students (undergraduates included) can become able to help each other in a true peer learning experience.

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