

CONTEXTUAL FACTORS WHICH FOSTERED USE OF PEER TUTORING IN ANALYSING BUSINESS CASE STUDIES

Siew Fong Lin

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

linsf@acd.tarc.edu.my

ABSTRACT

The main purpose of this study is to discover contextual factors which have impact on peer tutoring (PT). PT sessions involving participants analysing 2 business case studies in a Business English course were conducted. 10 Advanced Diploma in Financial Accounting students with mixed English proficiency from an institution of higher learning formed two PT groups required in this study. Using video recordings, interviews, diary entries and observations, the results of this study indicated that there were contextual factors which promoted the use of PT. Deep understanding of topic, detailed research conducted, simplification of information, sufficient opportunities to ask questions, efforts in being good listeners, establishing a relaxed environment, effective communication, wide sharing of knowledge and direct approach in correction of mistakes were significant factors having impact on PT. Simultaneously, the participants used a popular application for smartphones, WhatsApp, in order to continue their discussions outside the classroom. They found the tool of communication useful in helping them to bond with each other and providing informal teaching and learning opportunities for both tutors and tutees. It is recommended that debriefing sessions between the tutors and instructor be conducted when the former lack confidence in decision making in the course of tutoring. Furthermore, Reciprocal PT is strongly encouraged to be used as an approach in analysing case studies instead of having a tutor solely in charge of disseminating information to increase the effectiveness of tutoring. This is attributed to the diverse interpretations of scenarios presented in case studies which, in turn, provide different answers to questions accompanying the tasks.

KEYWORDS

Case Studies, Communication, Debriefing, Detailed research, Good listeners, Peer tutoring, Reciprocal peer tutoring, WhatsApp

INTRODUCTION

Case studies are commonly used in the process of teaching and learning. They had been in use since 1910 in business colleges. Its use has even been extended to science and nursing classrooms (Sandstrom, 2006).

Case studies are also commonly used in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) classrooms. Its use provides opportunities for learners to practise using the language during their discussions. Interactive case studies can be divided into 2 categories. They are, firstly, to allow learners to use specific skills such as negotiating, interviewing, problem solving and decision making (Castle & Palmer, 1989). The second category allows free interpretation

which enables the teacher to select the appropriate methodology or classroom strategy (Borredon, 1999).

Furthermore, the case approach makes it possible to achieve Bloom's (1965) higher levels of learning. The approach provides opportunities for students to apply their knowledge, synthesize in seeking the best solutions to problems posed and evaluate in selecting the best and appropriate decisions in the situations presented.

Many teachers are advocates of using case studies in the classroom. It can be attributed to the advantages of using them. They can promote active learning (Popil, 2011), foster positive attitudes towards teaching (Yadav & Beckerman, 2009), encourage critical thinking (Popil, 2011; Yadav & Beckerman, 2009), teach soft skills such as interpersonal skills and management skills (Romm & Pliskin, 2000) and increase student participation (Horgan, 1999).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Many learners face language anxiety when using English. Anxiety is described by Hansen (1977) as "an experience of general uneasiness, a sense of foreboding, a feeling of tension" (p. 91). Worde (1998) highlighted that one third to one half of students experienced a high level of language anxiety.

Much research has been conducted to study learners' anxiety. Some researchers have concluded that high levels of anxiety usually have a negative effect on the language acquisition process (Gregersen, 2003; Krashen, 1985; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991). They may face difficulties when using English due to poor command of the language and inability to understand lengthy sentences and high level of vocabulary at tertiary level (Hasan, 2008; Radha, 2007).

Therefore, it is crucial for language teachers to provide sufficient opportunities for learners to practise and communicate in the target language. It is the teacher's responsibility to promote communication in the classroom (Larsen - Freeman, 2000). In addition, Osboe, Fujmura, and Hirschel (2007) discovered that there was a positive correlation between low anxiety and utilisation of small group activities in oral English classes.

Furthermore, Peer Tutoring (PT) can be used to make language learning more communicative (Arta, 2012). The implementation of PT programmes could be traced from the 1960s. PT is a type of collaborative learning used to assist students in obtaining knowledge and skills through active learning and in pairs or groups of peers (Falchikov, 2001; Topping, 2005)

There are 8 goals of PT (Powell, 2007). They range from seeking to improve basic skills in English and Mathematics; reduce school drop-out; foster self-esteem; instill student attitudes towards school subject matter; reduce absenteeism; smooth transition from middle or junior school to high school; refine advanced skills in English and Mathematics and promote the mastery of employment skills (Powell, 2007).

Many organisations have started offering PT programmes as the use of PT has been extended in recent years. According to Welsch (2008), there are specific purposes achieved through the implementation of the programmes. They are to train learners in communication, respect diversity, obtain knowledge of grammar instruction, and work with students with special needs. Furthermore, much focus is placed on training of tutors and establishing writing centres (Welsch, 2008).

Research has shown that learners benefit much from PT. It increases student achievement (Jenkins & Jenkins, 1985; Slavin, 1996), boosts student performance (Sharan, 1980), creates a learning community (Fougner, 2012), encourages critical thinking (Bell, 1991), and improves one's learning (Oates, Paterson, Reilly & Statham, 2005). In addition, it affects the life and profession of learners positively (Okoroma, 2013), improves reading fluency and comprehension scores (Kourea, Cartledge & Musti-Rao, 2007), increases motivation and creates alertness of one's learning (Arta, 2012).

METHODOLOGY

Participants

The participants consisted of 10 Advanced Diploma in Financial Accounting students from an institution of higher learning. They formed 2 peer-tutoring groups; Groups 1 and 2 in this study. There were 4 tutees in each group and they were led by a tutor. The real names of the tutors and tutees used in this paper were changed to maintain anonymity.

In addition, the participants had mixed proficiency in English. The respective tutors for each group had the best proficiency in their groups. Their proficiency was based on the results they obtained for an English course (CVKY 1111) they had taken in the previous semester.

Chow, the tutor for Group 1 had a B+ for his English course. The tutees in his group were Larry, Thong, Jack and Kuan. All of them scored C and C- for their English course.

The tutor in Group 2, Enna, obtained an A for her English course. Her tutees were Beth, Piong, Yip and Gabby. They had C and C- for their English course.

Analysis of Case Studies

The task given to Groups 1 and 2 were to analyse 2 business case studies. The length of the case studies was 500-800 words. The case studies were "Some Millionaires Will Not Retire" and "NIKE Controversies".

Both groups were given 3 hours to analyse each case study with assistance from their tutors. The sub-tasks comprised reading the case studies aloud twice, discussing meanings of difficult words and phrases, summarising main points and finally, answering 5 questions accompanying each case studies.

The training of peer tutors, along with additional support, is critical for the success of PT (Block, 2007; Lieberman & Houston-Wilson, 2009). Likewise, tutors in this study were required to prepare well for the peer-tutoring sessions. Generally, their forms of preparation were to provide answers for the questions and conduct extensive research on the business issues described in the case studies. Furthermore, the tutors were provided with training by the researcher on how to perform their roles as tutors.

In total, they had 2 training sessions. Each session lasted for one and a half hours long. The tutors performed similar sub-tasks they had to carry out with their tutees during the training.

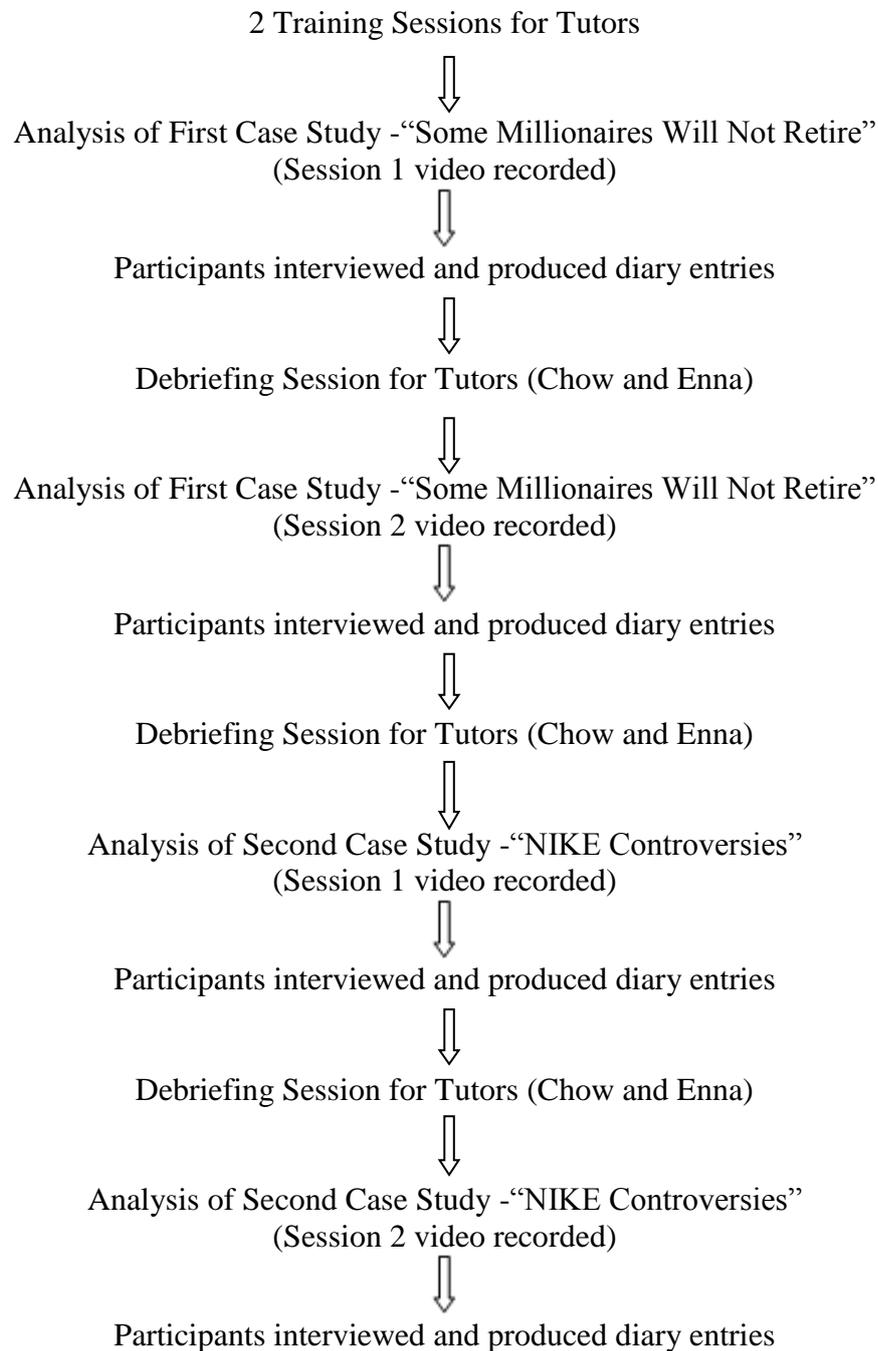
Additionally, the tutors had debriefing sessions with the researcher after every peer-tutoring session. The tutors actually requested for them with the intention of boosting their level of confidence as tutors. They discussed the experiences they faced during the sessions. Moreover, they presented alternate answers from their tutees to the questions in the case studies to verify if they were acceptable. Furthermore, the tutors and researcher discussed at length ways on how to improve the peer-tutoring sessions.

Data Collection

The peer-tutoring sessions were video recorded in order to make observations of them feasible. In addition, the researcher interviewed the tutors and tutees on their experiences faced during the sessions. A third research instrument, diary entries, was also used so that there was triangulation in this study. Furthermore, the participants also provided detailed descriptions of their peer-tutoring experiences in their diary entries. A summary of the tasks and data collection carried out in this study is provided in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Summary of Data Collection



FINDINGS

It was discovered that there were contextual factors which promoted PT. They were having deep understanding of topic, conducting detailed research, simplifying information, providing sufficient opportunities to ask questions, placing efforts in being good listeners, establishing a relaxed environment, forming effective communication, having opportunities

for wide sharing of knowledge and using a direct approach in correction of mistakes. Furthermore, the participants used a popular application for smartphones, WhatsApp, in order to continue their discussions outside the classroom.

1. a) Having Deep Understanding

Both tutors and tutees mutually agreed that having deep understanding of the topic discussed during PT had positive impact on its outcome. Chow, Enna, Larry, Kuan, Beth and Gabby realised that it played an important role in stimulating deep discussion of the subject matter. In addition, students who did not comprehend the case studies would not be able to contribute ideas which could be detrimental for the sessions.

Chow, Larry and Beth were of the opinion that tutors who possessed knowledge of the subject matter had two advantages. They were, firstly, gaining more respect from their tutees. Secondly, the tutors would feel confident in facilitating the sessions. Simultaneously, a conducive peer learning environment was created.

Tutees who had deep knowledge, on the other hand, had two benefits. Firstly, they could participate actively in the discussions. Consequently, they could benefit from the exchange of ideas taking place. Secondly, the tutees could follow the discussions without any difficulty. They would not require further explanations from their group members during their interactions.

b) Conducting Detailed Research

Prior research carried out before PT sessions was found to be beneficial for both tutors and tutees. Tutors who had researched deeply were found to be able to facilitate the discussions effectively. When the tutees did not possess sufficient input to continue their sessions, the tutors then could propose new perspectives for the tutees to look at. Take for example in the second case study, “NIKE Controversies”, instead of only focusing on the predicament of the employees; the tutor for Group 2, Enna, guided her tutees in including the opinions of the employer on the issue of treatment of workers, too.

It was also observed that some of the tutees, Thong, Kuan, Yip and Piong, contributed well during the PT sessions. They admitted during the interviews and when writing their diary entries that they had the initiative to research the case studies before attending the sessions due to their immense interest. Furthermore, their tutors commended their positive behavior for it made them feel motivated in playing their tutor roles effectively.

c) Simplification of Information

A majority of the tutees, six out of eight of them were appreciative of the tutors’ efforts in simplifying complex information for them. They found it challenging to understand certain paragraphs in the case studies due to the high level of business lexicon and complicated business writing style used. However, they were relieved that they could increase their comprehension of the case studies through their tutors’ lengthy but simple explanations. They described the sessions as “worth my time for PT”, “I understand the simple English that my friend used in explanation”, “some English words which I don’t know, all the answer of case study” and “kudos to tutor who understand my problem” during their interviews and in their diary entries.

d) Opportunities to Ask Questions

Six of the tutees, Larry, Thong, Jack, Beth, Yip and Gabby, stated that being provided with opportunities to ask questions heighten their interest in the peer-tutoring sessions. They asked questions due to two reasons. They were to obtain more information to clarify their uncertainties and to test their tutors' level of knowledge.

The appreciated the situation in which they could freely ask questions when the need arose. They might not fully understand the explanations provided by their respective tutors. Therefore, they resorted to directing questions to their tutors hoping that they could clarify their doubts. In addition, they could check with their tutors on whether their answers to the questions in the case studies were correct especially when they had different answers from those presented by their groups.

However, the tutees also used questions to gauge the amount of knowledge their tutors had on the subject matter. Initially, they were uncertain if they could trust their tutors totally in their teaching. When their tutors could deliver answers acceptable to them, the tutees' faith in them increased tremendously.

According to Roscoe & Chi (2008), from a tutor's learning perspective, tutees' questions may be beneficial. They may be used to clarify tutees' doubts and the questions may be formed due to the tutees' curiosity. Consequently, the tutor may be pressured into finding alternative ways of explaining the ideas. Thus, the tutors can further build up their prior knowledge.

Therefore, tutors should be prepared to answer their tutees' questions. Findings from a study on peer-tutoring for learners at tertiary level revealed that unprepared tutors might find the questions distracting and tutees might even lose faith in them when they were unable to handle the questions well (Lin, 2014).

e) Efforts in Being Good Listeners

Having group members who were good listeners was advantageous to both tutor and tutee. The tutors, Chow and Enna felt appreciated and respected when their tutees were attentive to them. On the other hand, the tutees experienced bonding time with their tutors when they took time to listen to them.

Chow and Enna were happy when their tutees listened to their teaching well. They realized that their efforts in preparing to become tutors were rewarded instantaneously. Chow described it as "glad to see them appreciate me" while Enna explained it as "instant joy and respect as tutor" in their interviews and diary entries.

When the tutors took time to listen to their tutees attentively, their tutees felt that they were strengthening their ties with each other. Both parties shared mutual interest which resulted in them interacting effortlessly. Furthermore, they enjoyed their shared time of teaching and learning together.

f) Relaxed Atmosphere

Both tutors and tutees were of the opinion that having a stress-free environment was crucial in peer-tutoring sessions. There were 2 benefits gained by them. They were having their anxiety reduced and creating interest in the teaching and learning taking place.

When the learners' anxiety level decreased, they were open to free sharing of information. They described the situation as "I can say whatever I want", "... make me want to ask question, no feel shy", "I will not stressful because my friend present the answer to us" and "Make me so relax" in their interviews and diary entries. Therefore, they could have positive learning experiences during the PT.

The stress-free atmosphere also promoted the participants' interest in teaching and learning. When they observed that their group members were uninhibited in presenting their ideas, they were likewise influenced into doing it as well. As a result, high quality information and ideas could be shared due to the deep discussions they were involved in.

The findings concur with studies conducted on PT. Arta (2012) believes that a supportive environment of learning is created when because there is no gap between individuals as teachers. In addition, Johnson (2007) highlights the importance of a supportive environment for students' development. They should feel free to present their ideas and opinions. PT can help teachers to create supportive environment where two-way communication can be implemented well by both teachers and students (Arta, 2012).

Furthermore, Castelló, Iñesta, Pardo, Liesa, & Martínez-fernández (2012) discovered that students write better academically during PT when their emotional aspects were managed. 98% of the students explained that being able to discuss their writing problems and simultaneously, revise other classmates' texts helped them to reduce anxiety and to feel more confident with their final texts. In addition, they could regulate the emotional aspects related with receiving criticism of their texts.

g) Good Communication

Establishing effective communication between the tutors and tutees was deemed as important in PT. It resulted in positive and pleasant interactions in the group. In addition, a high level of trust among the participants was also created.

Positive interactions enabled participants to contribute effectively during the sessions. When they felt at ease with each other, they would be able to "think and talk clearly" and "spur each other to present their opinions freely" (as described in the participants' interviews and diary entries). When the element of trust was established among the participants, they would "not feel shy or scare" and "scare in talking" (as described in their interviews and diary entries), too. Consequently, all of them would not feel intimidated in giving their views.

h) Sharing of Information

Both tutors and tutees were of the opinion that sharing of information formed the backbone of PT sessions. When it was allowed to take place, they felt that they were using the time for teaching and learning productively. Furthermore, it helped them to affirm on their understanding of the case studies.

Jack, Larry, Beth and Piong described the sessions as "my friend help me to clear my doubt", "I can also learn new things from friends", "My time not waste in session" and Hope can confirm on what I know n friend make me understand more". They expressed themselves through their interviews and diary entries. The advantages gained by them were only made possible through their wide sharing of knowledge with one another.

i) Correction of Mistakes

The tutees were unexpectedly not discouraged by the correction of their mistakes but actually welcomed it during the sessions. In fact, they were appreciative of the correction so that they would not repeat their mistakes in the future. They also felt that it was acceptable for them to be corrected by their peers in their groups rather than being openly corrected by their instructor in their class.

Thong, Kuan, Beth, Gabby, Yip and Piong described the correction of mistakes as “Good to know where I wrong”, “Know how well I understand and if not get corrected”, “Good my friends will point out on the points that they disagreed”, “I know my mistake” and “Happy to correct here and not in classroom (shy)”. These opinions were obtained from their interviews and diary entries. It can be concluded that the tutees were very much open to learning during the peer-tutoring sessions.

Similar research findings on PT were discovered from another study conducted on the revision of students’ academic texts (Castelló, Iñesta, Pardo, Liesa, & Martínez-fernández. (2012). It was found that a 43% of students, in both conditions described that the possibility of discussing their texts, especially with peers, and receiving feed-back was one of the most outstanding advantages of the intervention. They appreciated having other points of view from their peers.

2. Use of WhatsApp Outside Formal Peer-Tutoring Sessions

It was observed that the participants had the initiative to continue their discussions via WhatsApp outside the formal peer-tutoring sessions arranged by the researcher. They found the application user-friendly and conducive for holding discussions without being too concerned with time constraint. Therefore, the researcher also requested to be included in their respective WhatsApp groups in order to observe their discussions.

The participants found WhatsApp easy to use. In addition, they could freely communicate without incurring much cost due to the availability of WiFi service in campus and in most food outlets in the vicinity. Most of the participants also found the use of emoticons appropriate to express their feelings. The emoticons, too, had been found to be helpful to diffuse tense situations in which arguments over ideas might get overheated.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

There were several contextual factors which had an impact on PT. They were deep understanding of topic, detailed research conducted, simplification of information, sufficient opportunities to ask questions, efforts in being good listeners, establishing a relaxed environment, effective communication, wide sharing of knowledge and direct approach in correction of mistakes. Simultaneously, the participants used a popular application for smartphones, WhatsApp, in order to continue their discussions outside the classroom. They found the tool of communication useful in helping them to bond with each other and providing informal teaching and learning opportunities for both tutors and tutees.

It is recommended that debriefing sessions between the tutors and instructor be conducted when the former lack confidence in decision making in the course of tutoring. The tutors were provided with essential advice and encouragement from their instructor. In addition, the tutors could also refine their tutoring skills.

Furthermore, Reciprocal PT (RPT) is strongly encouraged to be used as an approach in analysing case studies instead of having a tutor solely in charge of disseminating information to increase the effectiveness of tutoring. RPT commonly called bi-directional PT, is a promising instructional approach which fosters especially metacognitive regulation which results in students using it more constantly and in wide variety of uses (De Backer & Valcke, 2012). The use of RPT is advocated in order to make possible diverse interpretations of scenarios presented in case.

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