

Low attendance on a peer tutoring scheme for English language learners

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Low attendance on a peer tutoring scheme for English language learners

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This study identifies reasons for the low attendance of a peer-tutoring scheme for English language learners at a Colombian university. In what may be the first study of its kind, the article draws on concepts from realist evaluation to analyse the data from semi-structured interviews with six EFL teachers and two peer tutoring scheme staff. The findings suggest the importance of regular communication between tutees and their English teachers for the success of such schemes. The study also identified other factors which impact low attendance such as the value of English, student anxiety, motivation, and institutional constraints. These findings have implications not only for the implementation of English language peer-tutoring programmes in other EFL contexts, but also for EFL teaching more generally. To boost participation rates in such programmes, the study recommends compulsory participation for struggling learners, teacher training in motivational strategies, and activities aimed at increasing stakeholder involvement.

Introduction

The current paper reports on a qualitative study conducted in response to a large-scale evaluation of a peer tutoring scheme (PTS) at a private Colombian university, henceforth referred to as the University of Colombia. This large-scale evaluation found that less than one in ten English language learners (ELLs) who were failing the university's General English programme had visited the university's PTS. Drawing on realist evaluation (RE) principles, teachers in the General English programme and PTS staff were interviewed to explore the reasons for this low attendance. By exploring the processes which might account for the underuse of the university's open access PTS, this study highlights the potential of RE for the evaluation of peer tutoring programmes specifically, and for exploring factors which might influence the learning of a foreign language more generally. It also addresses calls for more research into peer tutoring interventions in EFL contexts (Cole 2014).

Peer tutoring and ELT

Peer tutoring (PT) constitutes a type of peer-mediated learning. It is underpinned by the Vygotskian notion that weaker learners improve through scaffolded communication with more capable learners (Topping 2015). As such, interaction should be cognitively demanding, but remain within the zone of proximal development for tutee and tutor so that both parties benefit (ibid.). This focus on interaction means that PT is broadly consistent with communicative language teaching methods (Cole op.cit.), which strengthens the theoretical rationale for its use in ELT.

One key assumption behind PT, which is of particular importance when learning a foreign language such as English, is that communication with a peer is less threatening and more intimate than communication with a subject teacher because of the former's closer proximity to the tutee in both status and ability (Topping op.cit.). The personal learning relationship that results creates a space for tutees to express their doubts and fears, and for tutors to provide individualised and immediate feedback (ibid.). Moreover, the peer tutor's role is not merely to clear up tutees' doubts or spoon-feed the correct answer, but rather to guide learning through modelling, dialogue and elicitation with the aim of fostering greater autonomy and motivation, enhanced metacognition, better study habits, and reduced anxiety (Ariza and Viáfara op.cit.; Mynard and Almarzouqi 2006).

While differing characteristics of PT schemes make it difficult to determine which models are most and least successful (Topping op.cit.), Bowman-Perrott et al.'s (2016) paper, which systematically reviewed 17 studies into PT for ELLs, found that using peer tutors resulted in positive academic gains for students with or without disabilities and regardless of their level of English, the tutoring format adopted, or the duration of the programme. Similarly, Cole's (2013, 2014) systematic review of the research into the impact of peer-mediated learning on ELLs' performance also found improvements in learning outcomes regardless of the context.

At least two observations can be made about these studies. First, as with almost all research into PT for ELLs, they focus on ESL contexts (where English is the dominant language) as opposed to EFL contexts (where English is *not* the dominant language). However, there are important contextual differences between these settings. For instance, since ESL learners have much greater exposure to English than EFL learners, motivation levels in EFL contexts may be lower, especially in Colombia, where few situations require Colombians to speak English in their daily lives. In addition, ESL learners tend to possess greater integrative motivation - that is, a desire to assimilate into the target culture - than EFL learners, who learn for instrumental purposes such as to communicate with other L2 speakers, or to pass an exam (Dörnyei 1990).

Second, these studies focus on interventions in compulsory education. By contrast, only a handful of studies could be found which investigate aspects of PT programmes in EFL higher education contexts. One such study is Mynard and Almarzouqi's (op.cit.) evaluation of an English language PTS at a women's university in the UAE. The authors report that tutors gained valuable experience in teaching and helping others, which made them more responsible, while tutees made gains in learning, autonomy and confidence. However, Mynard and Almarzouqi also report a lack of commitment among some tutees, which contributed to poor attendance. A second such study was conducted by Ariza and Viáfara (op.cit.) in Colombia. The authors used qualitative action research to evaluate a cross-age PTS that was set up for undergraduates of a Modern Languages degree. They conclude that the programme helped to prepare tutees and tutors for their future careers as teachers, and to gain a better understanding of the English language system and how to use it.

The General English programme

The General English programme at the University of Colombia caters to around 4,500 students per semester. In contrast to other subjects, General English at the University of Colombia is not credit-bearing, so there is no incentive for ELLs to obtain a grade which is higher than the three out of five required to pass a level. Another distinctive feature of the programme is that students are not streamed by age or core subject. Since university degrees in Colombia typically take five years, and students begin a year earlier than in most countries, an English class can therefore be very heterogeneous. This, combined with typical class sizes of more than 20 learners, can result in the use of teacher-centered, transmission-based methodologies. In such a context, PT may be particularly useful since a) it is a cheaper alternative than reducing class sizes, which is particularly important in developing contexts such as Colombia; b) it is a student-centered means of providing differentiated instruction; and c) it provides an opportunity for communicative language practice in a more supportive and intimate setting than the crowded classroom (Ariza and Viáfara op.cit; Mynard and Almarzouqi op.cit.).

The peer tutoring scheme

PT models can vary considerably. For example, programmes can employ same-age peers or older peers either on a one-to-one basis or in a group setting; attendance can be compulsory or voluntary either during class time or as an extracurricular activity; and tutoring can be reciprocal or non-reciprocal either virtually or face-to-face (Topping op.cit.). In the context of this study, PT involves an older and more advanced student guiding a younger and less experienced peer on a one-to-one voluntary basis outside of normal class time (Ariza and Viáfara op.cit.). Since this type of PT consists of cross-age tutoring, it is generally non-reciprocal (Duran 2014). Tutorials are conducted in various designated learning spaces throughout the university, and neither tutors nor tutees are assessed. The university app and website displays the specific schedules of individual tutors, and tutees can attend as many or as few hour-long sessions as they like. Tutors, who are usually selected based on teacher recommendations regarding their academic performance, receive four hours of rudimentary training per semester in learning strategies, clarifying tutees' doubts, and techniques for explaining grammar and vocabulary. All tutors are former students of the General English classes attended by tutees and receive a small stipend relative to their contribution.

The main aim of the PTS according to the programme's grey literature is to address poor academic performance, and the website mentions that tutees should 'be interested in persisting and achieving academic success'. With this in mind, and given that the PTS is open access, student motivation is an underlying assumption of the scheme. This is in line with Duran's (ibid.) assertion that since PT requires the active participation of peers, desire and motivation to learn are key to its success. However, it would be misleading to suggest that responsibility for participation lies solely with the tutees. Indeed, research shows that students are less inclined to seek assistance in competitive classrooms focused on instrumental goal achievement but more inclined to do so in collaborative classrooms focused on the intrinsic value of learning (Ryan, Pintrich and Midgley 2001). Thus, by fostering a positive, inclusive and respectful classroom environment and taking an interest in learners' socio-emotional welfare, teachers can play a pivotal role in whether students ask for help (ibid.). At the University of Colombia the role of teachers in ensuring that struggling students attend the PTS is particularly important since they can formally refer students to the scheme with details of areas to work on. However, in practice, tutors rarely receive prior information about tutees and are therefore typically unfamiliar with tutees' learning material. As a consequence, these unsupervised sessions often lack structure or focus and tend to expose tutors' deficiencies. This, in turn, may account for the small proportion of students attending the PTS. It was therefore felt that increasing the number of teacher referrals, and in the process providing tutors with information on tutees' learning needs, would go some way to interrupting this vicious circle.

With the above in mind, the current study explores the reasons for poor PTS attendance from the perspective of ELLs' regular teachers. In doing so, this article contributes to the lack of research into PT schemes in EFL contexts. Additionally, it addresses calls for research into PT which focuses on processes rather than merely on outcomes (Roscoe and Chi 2007).

Realist evaluation

As mentioned above, this study is informed by RE principles. RE asks not only *whether* a programme works, but also which aspects of a programme work (or do not work), how they work, in which conditions, and for whom (Pawson and Tilley op.cit.). In other words, rather than merely providing information regarding the success or failure of a given intervention, RE allows for a focus on the processes - or contexts and mechanisms in RE parlance - which interact to produce programme outcomes (ibid.). Having already established that the University of Colombia's PTS was not working as hoped due to poor attendance, RE was chosen to explore the role of English teachers in producing this outcome.

Given the potential difficulty of differentiating between contexts and mechanisms when drawing on RE principles, clear definitions of these terms are necessary to guide data analysis. Accordingly, context is defined as 'features of the conditions in which programmes are introduced that are relevant to the operation of the programme mechanisms' (Pawson and Tilley op.cit.: 7); while mechanisms are defined as 'underlying entities, processes, or structures which operate in particular contexts to generate outcomes' (Astbury and Leeuw 2010: 368). In terms of the latter, Astbury and Leeuw's (ibid.) typology is instructive. The authors describe three different types of mechanisms: a) situational mechanisms; b) action-formation mechanisms; and c) transformational mechanisms. The first category, which reveals the influence of social situations on the behavior of individuals, includes belief-formation mechanisms. One example is the 'self-fulfilling prophecy' (ibid.: 371), whereby an individual's preconceived notions of the outcome of an event or situation leads to said outcome. The second category, which examines how individual behavior is shaped by a combination of values, choices and desires, includes the

cognitive dissonance strategies used to reduce the stress of simultaneously holding two conflicting views. Finally, the third category includes the 'bandwagon phenomenon' (ibid.: 371), whereby individuals act or think a certain way because the majority does.

Methodology and methods

A qualitative methodology was chosen for three main reasons. First, the current study aims to gain an understanding of participants' experiences and perspectives, which is consistent with qualitative research designs (Patton 2002). Second, this study aims to improve the PTS and thus constitutes a formative evaluation (ibid.). Such evaluations 'rely heavily, even primarily, on qualitative methods' (ibid.: 220). Finally, qualitative data provide useful contextual information, which forms a necessary component of any RE (ibid.).

Data sources

Data were obtained from PT staff and General English teachers using qualitative interviews, which are particularly useful for investigating conflicting perspectives relating to a programme and its implementation (ibid.). Table 1 below provides an overview of the study's participants, including their position and responsibilities. Interview questions focused on obtaining information regarding programme outcomes, contextual factors and mechanisms. Informed consent was obtained from participants prior to the interviews, and I adhered to the principles of confidentiality and non-traceability by omitting identifying features and using pseudonyms.

(Insert Table 1 near here)

The researcher transcribed and, where relevant, translated all the interviews. The iterative process of thematic analysis was used to analyse the data, which is appropriate for research into participants' knowledge and understanding of reality (Braun and Clarke 2006). This analysis was informed by RE principles in general and Astbury and Leeuw's (op.cit.) typology of mechanisms in particular.

Access was not granted to peer tutees, nor was permission given to use data from the large-scale evaluation into the PTS. These constitute the most significant limitations of this study. At the same time, since the study aimed to explore the reasons for the low attendance rates recorded by the University of Colombia's PTS, the insights of English language teachers, who are responsible for referrals of tutees, provided useful contextual data to inform programme improvement. Further, in order to enhance validity, data obtained from the interviews were triangulated with the available documents and publicity materials regarding the PT programme. Finally, teachers with a range of different backgrounds and experiences were purposively selected in order to ensure a variety of events and processes were uncovered. As Patton (2002) has noted, any commonalities that emerge from such heterogeneous samples are likely to reflect more salient aspects of a phenomenon.

Findings and discussion

This evaluation sought to uncover some potential mechanisms and contexts that might account for nonattendance of the University of Colombia's PTS. Analysis of the data revealed five main themes, which are explored below.

The value of English

According to several of the study's participants, one key reason for poor PTS attendance is the low value attributed to English at the university, since, unlike other subjects, General English is non-credit bearing. This can lead not only to a prioritisation of other 'core' subjects, but also to a lack of academic effort:

Your grade doesn't matter as long as you pass. That means there's a search for mediocrity... and while some motivated students really care about getting the high marks, invariably once they've passed, they may not even take the final exam despite studying all term for it (Keith).

This view is echoed by the PTS coordinator, who, commenting on the reasons for the poor attendance of the PTS, explained that: 'English is the lowest priority for students' (Jair).

The position accorded to English at the university contrasts with the status of English in Ariza and Viáfara's study (op.cit.) whose participants were studying to become language teachers. In such a context, one would expect tutees and tutors to place greater value on English learning. By contrast, at the University of Colombia, English is considered a 'filler subject' (Jair).

Another reason for the low status of English as an academic subject is the dearth of opportunities to use the language in EFL contexts such as Colombia. Jeremy, for example, explained that: 'some students don't see English as something useful for them', while Keith observed that 'they don't see the value of English. They're forced to study English. That's the main issue'. This contrasts with the value placed on English in ESL settings where learners possess integrative motivation stemming from a desire to assimilate into the target culture.

Teacher attitudes to learner motivation

Given that English is considered a low priority both culturally and academically, which negatively impacts learner motivation, it is not surprising that students, even when referred by their teachers, do not attend the PTS. This low motivation is also, according to Cathy, the reason that some ELLs were performing poorly: 'For a good half of them, the reason they failed the (English) exam was motivation. The other five don't need the tutoring in my opinion. They need the motivation.' As Keith's comment in the previous section suggests, Cathy is not alone in viewing motivation as the sole responsibility of the student. However, a body of literature shows that teachers can motivate learners (e.g. Sakui and Cowie op.cit.). In addition, as we have seen, one of the benefits of PT is increased motivation. Thus, a change in teacher attitudes towards learner motivation could lead to a virtuous circle of more referrals, increased PTS attendance, and greater motivation.

Teacher attitudes to poor learner performance

The view of motivation as the responsibility of learners also appears to be symptomatic of a more general view among teachers regarding learners and their needs:

This is wrong, but maybe you can categorise them into those students that just don't want to take the time learning or thinking, but some of them do, but there are some of them who just don't care. They fail, I don't fail them. Or they drop out (Daniel)

Since students' grades are passing grades, I don't feel it's necessary that they need extra help...usually the failing students have problems with attendance. It would have been useful to send those students to the PTS because they could help them catch up with the things they missed (Jeremy)

These comments show that **both motivation in particular and student learning more generally are** seen as the individual responsibility of each learner. In other words, **if responsibility for failure or success rests with the students, there is little an institution or teacher can do to foster greater learning and motivation.** Across the interviews, this was a common sentiment, and suggests the presence of a transformational mechanism whereby 'people influence one another so much that people ignore their private knowledge and rely instead on the publicly stated judgments of others' (Astbury and Leeuw op.cit.: 371). Such 'groupthink' (ibid.: 371) is a useful mechanism of rationalisation for teachers since it absolves them of any **accountability** for student failure. However, one consequence of ignoring 'private knowledge' and relying on the 'publicly stated judgements of others' is that it can lead a person to hold 'two contradictory ideas simultaneously' (ibid.: 371). An example of this is Jeremy's acknowledgement above that although students don't 'need the extra help', they would have benefitted from visiting the PTS since it would enable them to 'catch up with the things they've missed'. Such cognitive dissonance implies that an action-formation mechanism is at work (ibid.).

While poor academic performance is not solely down to the learner, nor can it be attributed solely to the teacher. **Indeed, while training may help address 'unmotivation' (Sakui and Cowie op.cit.: 205) which is caused by internal factors such as conflicts in the teacher-student relationship, negative views of English, or poor communication skills, teachers are unlikely to influence motivation caused by external factors (ibid.).** At the University of Colombia these external (contextual) factors include mandatory English instruction, diverse groups of learners, and large class sizes. These factors might help account for teacher attitudes to students' failure and motivation.

Teacher buy-in

Another mechanism which helps account for poor attendance of the PTS is teacher buy-in. For example, when asked why she had not referred many students to the university's PTS, Agatha explained that: 'I think it's a division politically to give more people jobs,' while Cathy said: 'I don't know that they'll get the help they need. I'd rather just tell them to come to me because I know what they need'.

Clearly, then these teachers did not have a great deal of faith in the PTS to address their learners' issues. This is in line with Carlos's observation that, 'some don't come because they don't have confidence in the credibility of the tutors', and chimes with concerns expressed by teachers in other studies regarding tutors' credentials (e.g. Ariza and Viáfara op.cit; Mynard and Almarzouqi op.cit).

Clearly, if EFL teachers have doubts about the ability of tutors, they will be less likely to refer students to the PTS. But if few students go, an increase in resources is not justified, and this lack of resources validates concerns about poor quality. Thus, doubts about the PTS become a 'self-fulfilling prophecy' (Astbury and Leeuw op.cit.: 369).

Student anxiety

A final factor which may account for low PTS attendance was mentioned by all but one of the study's participants: anxiety. The reasons for this appear to be cultural:

Everyone who performs incorrectly gets to be laughed at. What happens afterwards is they help them or things get fixed...but at the moment, they feel ashamed. That's cultural throughout Colombia. They don't like to feel that they know less than others because that would make them inferior (David)

In public if there's a student who is completely lost...I usually try to get that student to participate and when they participate and don't get it right, the rest would be bullying them. (Lily)

Openly displaying weakness or a lack of knowledge is therefore frowned upon in this context, and suggests the presence of a 'transformational mechanism' (Astbury and Leeuw op.cit: 371) whereby learners feel they must conform to the behaviour displayed by the majority. If the 'bandwagon' mocks weaknesses and divergent responses, then it follows that few students will admit that they need help. And since students are reluctant to participate unless they have confidence in their abilities, it is difficult for teachers to identify which students would benefit from using the PTS.

The influence of this transformational mechanism might be more pronounced in English classes in light of the heterogeneity of such classes and the nature of English as an academic subject. In other words, since mastery of the subject requires students to communicate with each other *using* the subject matter, those who are unable may feel ashamed or drop out of class altogether rather than seek assistance from either their teachers or the PTS.

Conclusions

Drawing on RE principles, this study suggests some contexts and mechanisms that may account for the low attendance of the University of Colombia's PTS. These are summarised in Figure 1.

(Figure 1 near here)

Aside from contributing to the success of PT programmes, awareness of such mechanisms and contexts can inform teaching practices and help ensure that motivation and responsibility for learning is, where possible, shared between teachers and their learners. Moreover, this study suggests that while culture may also play a part, the role of teachers can be pivotal in ensuring successful learning not just in the classroom, but also in PT schemes.

Given the scale and nature of this research project, the claims made here are specific to this context and cannot be generalised (Patton op.cit.). At the same time, this study has illustrated the potential of RE in the field of ELT not only for exploring the inner workings of initiatives such as the PTS, but also for uncovering hidden elements which can influence the learning of a foreign language more generally. In addition, it has described aspects of a PTS in an EFL setting and investigated teachers' views regarding learner motivation, anxiety and poor performance.

Despite the limitations to this study, some recommendations can be made to improve tutee attendance of the PTS:

- 1 The role of motivation in PTS attendance suggests that the scheme may be more effective if participation is made compulsory for struggling students, which could be formalised by means of a learning contract.
- 2 Given teacher attitudes towards motivation, training in how to foster a positive group dynamic may be in order. This will increase the likelihood of ELLs asking for assistance and will make it easier for teachers to identify struggling learners who would benefit from the PTS's services.
- 3 Since most EFL teachers expressed doubts regarding the purpose and value of the PTS, activities which encourage stakeholders to take a more active role in the scheme would be useful. This could include teacher workshops or visits by peer tutors to General English classes. This increased involvement would go some way to interrupting the 'self-fulfilling prophecy' which perpetuates a vicious circle of low PTS attendance.

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Table 1: information about stakeholder participants

	Participant	Consecutive years at the university	Position & responsibilities
PTS staff	Jair	13	Coordinator of all PT programmes
	Carlos	4	Coordinator of the EFL PTS and peer tutor
EFL teachers	David	2½	Adjunct EFL teacher
	Keith	1½	EFL teacher / level coordinator
	Lily	1	Adjunct EFL teacher
	Cathy	3	EFL teacher / level coordinator
	Agatha	18	Full-time EFL teacher
	Jeremy	5	EFL teacher / level coordinator

MECHANISMS

INPUT

- One-to-one cross-age peer tutoring in physical learning spaces outside of class time

- Teacher attitudes to students' needs
- Student motivation
- Student priorities
- Teacher buy-in
- Student anxiety

RESULTS

- Reduced number of repeating students and dropouts
- Improved grades
- Increased pass rates
- Increased student satisfaction with academic life

- PTS is open-access: participation is voluntary
- Value of English
- Teacher workload
- Culture of mocking
- Institutional constraints

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