Peer Tutoring in Speaking

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Abstract

In order to help Secondary Three students overcome difficulties in oral English, a group of Secondary Six students were invited to be the peer tutors. On the one hand, the peer tutors can monitor tutees’ learning progress and give timely feedback for improvement. On the other hand, the big brothers and sisters provide the lower form students with support and encouragement.

This action research focuses on understanding three central questions:

1. What are the difficulties Secondary Three students encountered in their speaking tasks?
2. How can peer tutors help enhance Secondary Three students’ performance in speaking?
3. What have the peer tutors and tutees changed after this programme?

The Planning, Experimentation and Reflection (PER) model of change (Taylor et al. 2005) was adopted to carry out this action research. Questionnaires and group interviews were conducted to collect data.

Introduction

Secondary 3 students have to sit for the Territory-wide System Assessment (TSA); however, some of them are not very motivated and serious in their daily practice. To alter the situation, improving the academic potential among learners, particularly those less competent ones is crucial. Also, feedback and guidance from teachers are needed when students are doing their speaking tasks. Nonetheless, it is always difficult for a teacher to oversee all the groups in a speaking lesson. In view of this, we consider that inviting Secondary 6 students as peer tutors could help in two ways offering timely feedback (as tutors) and support (as “big brothers and sisters”).
There have been studies reporting the effectiveness of peer tutoring in enhancing student learning (Goodlad & Hirst, 1990; Goodlad, 1995; Lake, 1999). The peer tutoring system has numerous benefits for both tutees and tutors. For the tutees, benefits include improvement in learning strategies and skills, communication, interpersonal skills, confidence, passing rates, development of team spirit and identity. Peer tutors, on the other hand, show improvement in learning, confidence, self-esteem and leadership; acquisition in group management skills and attainment in presentation skills (Loh, 1993). In short, peer tutoring is a learning support system among peers to facilitate learning. Students serving as tutors help their peers to become active learners who can contribute to effective learning.

This action research focus on understanding how Secondary 3 students learn in attempt to enable them to overcome difficulties they encountered. The three central questions are as follows:

1. What are the difficulties Secondary 3 students encountered in their speaking tasks?
2. How can peer tutors help enhance Secondary 3 students’ performance in speaking?
3. What have the peer tutors and tutees changed after this programme?

Research Design

We intend to adopt the Planning, Experimentation and Reflection (PER) model of change (Taylor et al. 2005) to carry out this action research.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Aims</th>
<th>Teacher-researcher activities</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Planning</td>
<td>- to identify goals and design strategies for enhancing learners’ motivation and competence in speaking</td>
<td>- collaborative lesson preparation meetings</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(i) among teacher-researchers</td>
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<td>(ii) among teacher-researchers and peer tutors</td>
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<td>Experimentation</td>
<td>- to put the plan into action in classroom</td>
<td>- implementation, peer observation &amp; evaluation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reflection</td>
<td>- to review the actions and plan for future actions</td>
<td>- post-observation conference</td>
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<td>- group interviews</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(i) S.3 tutees (ii) S.6 peer tutors</td>
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<td>- reflection and evaluation</td>
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The advantages of adopting the PER model are manifold:
- it creates opportunities for collaboration and teamwork among the two teacher-researchers in this action research;
- it locates the changes in pedagogy based on the teaching subject English Language;
- it adopts a problem-solving and critical approach in learning and teaching;
- the change becomes an open venture. (Law et al. 2010)

Put simply, S.3 students (tutees) are expected to be more motivated to speak and better equipped for the TSA speaking tasks, while S.6 students (tutors) would gain confidence in expressing themselves in English. What’s more, the evaluation of the programme would help the teacher-researchers plan the curriculum. This can also be an example for other English teachers, thus enhancing professional development among our team.

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<tr>
<th>Stage (Time)</th>
<th>Procedures</th>
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<tr>
<td>Planning</td>
<td>- TR identify goals and design strategies (11 March) (decide the foci: vocabulary, pronunciation, ideas, expressions for communication, sentence patterns and set the goal of getting ‘2’+ ‘2’ marks out of 6 marks in the two domains (a) ideas &amp; intelligibility &amp; (b) strategies for oral communication)</td>
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<td>- recruiting four PT</td>
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<td>- discussion among TR &amp; PT to refine strategies (16 March)</td>
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<td>Experimentation</td>
<td>- TR offer a training session to PT (16 March)</td>
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<td>Cycle 1 (24 March)</td>
<td>- four PT oversee four groups of S.3 students (mix-ability grouping) to do their speaking tasks in class</td>
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<td>- TR walk around and observe the lesson</td>
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<td>- discussion among TR &amp; PT to identify the problems S.3 have, evaluate the programme and design strategies for the next cycle</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cycle 2 (7 April)</td>
<td>(repeat the steps in cycle 1)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reflection</td>
<td>- TR review the programme</td>
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<td>(Apr-May 2011)</td>
<td>- TR conduct group interviews (i) S.3 tutees; (ii) S.6 peer tutors to evaluate the programme (8 April)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- TR plan for future actions to help S.3 students improve their speaking</td>
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*TR=teacher-researcher  PT=peer tutor
Planning

To provoke honest response (Lowe, 2007) and identify the difficulties our students face in TSA group interaction, questionnaires were distributed before the implementation of the programme as the basis of need analysis. This helps diagnose the major areas of concern and the design of the programme accordingly.

(1) Difficulties students encountered in TSA group interaction

Fourteen questionnaires were collected. Nine students stated that the challenges they faced doing TSA group interactions were their weak ability in English. They claimed they did not know English to the extent that they could not comprehend the questions in the TSA papers or understand what other candidates say and they did not know how to express themselves during discussion. Four claimed that they did not know how to speak better as they did not know what to say, and they lacked speaking skills. One of them went even further by indicating his difficulties in expressing agreement, disagreement and giving elaboration. Another student pointed out that she was able to think of the ideas in Chinese, but not in English.

(2) What students expect teachers to help

Four students expressed that they would like the teachers to help them acquire speaking skills. One of them stressed in particular that she would like the teachers help her with interaction; whereas another student would like to understand what other candidates say. One student expressed his need to enrich his vocabulary bank.

(3) What the students expect the S.6 tutors to help

Most of them generally expressed they would like the Secondary 6 tutors to help them improve their English speaking skills. Some of them expected the tutors to help them with intonation and uttering complete and fluent English sentences.
Experimentation

As the tutors would play an important role in leading, helping, encouraging and enabling S.3 tutees to discuss in English, they attended an informal training session conducted by the one of the teacher-researchers. A handout which included the discussion topic ‘Healthy Living Week’ and possible ideas in sentences was distributed. Then tutors spent some time reading, followed by asking questions for the parts they were unsure of. The rationale of listing the ideas in sentences was that this could limit the target sentence patterns learnt by the S.3 tutees. In order to survive in the TSA, in fact, they do not need very complex and varied sentence patterns. Recycled language items, such as, ‘in this way’, discourse markers, connectives, modal auxiliary verbs and conditional sentences, if use appropriately, are adequate for them to express themselves clearly.

Cycle 1

On 24 March, the four tutors oversaw four groups of S.3 students. The first step was brainstorming ideas in ten minutes. Tutees’ response varied. Some of them uttered some words in English while some of them kept quiet. Under this circumstance, the tutor of group 1 kept asking the tutees questions with reference to the topic and hints provided. Then she required the tutees to jot notes. In group 2, the tutor let the tutees expressed whatever ideas they had, with minimal interference. In this group, two boys gradually asked the tutor questions to check whether their points were reasonable and accurate. Group 3 kept silent and so did the tutor. The tutor seemed to be quite embarrassed and he was quite helpless. Fortunately, after about four minutes, a tutee contributed some simple examples and the tutor then tried to guide the whole group to express their ideas in sentence slowly. His strategy was making use of the tutees’ points to form sentences without pointing out the errors made by the tutees. Tutees in group 4 were engaged in learning. They were particularly interested in the pronunciation and spelling of words. Sometimes they had brilliant ideas but they expressed them in Chinese and asked the tutor for translation. Once they asked the tutor of the spelling of a word, but one of them queried the spelling offered by his tutor. Then he went to his English teacher (one of the teacher-researchers) and asked for the correct spelling.

The second step was having three minutes for preparation. Tutees revised what they had learnt. Most of them were serious and they did their preparation quietly. Then, each group
had a three-minute group discussion, same as the format of TSA group interaction. During the
discussion, tutors wrote down short comments on each tutee’s performance in the two
assessment domains, namely, ideas and strategies for communication. They also noted down
the mispronounced words among the S.3 tutees. Afterwards, there was a ten-minute feedback
session. Tutors gave their tutees oral feedback on the areas they could achieve and the major
area they need to improve. Some tutees claimed that they performed quite well and asked for
more stickers from the tutors.

After the lesson, the tutors were quite fascinated by the positive attitude of the tutees.
Even though some of them did not contribute much, they could see that they were motivated
to learn and had tried to apply what they had learnt in their discussion. All groups could talk
for more than three minutes and S.3 tutees seemed to find it easy to sustain oral interaction in
English. The tutors felt that the strategies adopted were successful and we all agreed to
employ the same strategies in cycle 2.

**Cycle 2**

Cycle 2 was conducted right before the mock speaking test. This further boosted S.3
students’ initiatives to do better. The topic was ‘Starting a new club’. Apart from sentence
patterns used in cycle 1, the use of ‘I suggest’, ‘I reckon’, ‘moreover’ and ‘furthermore’ was
introduced. This time, multiple strategies were adopted to help the tutees learn. The
instructions were the tutors’ own improvisation rather than following strictly the materials
given by us. The tutor in group 1 tried to link what the tutees had learnt in cycle 1 and asked
them whether they remembered the vocabulary and phrases. It was more of a tutoring or
lecturing mode. The tutor in group 2 responded to the tutees’ questions as two higher ability
boys kept asking her questions in English. Tutees in this group took a more active role in
learning. The tutor in group 3 tried to give explanation in Chinese as the tutees seemed not to
be very motivated to brainstorm ideas. He helped the weaker students understand the topic.
Also, he frequently asked them to have a try to encourage the tutees to participate in the
learning activities. He played the role of a counselor here. The tutor in group 4 interacted with
the tutees spontaneously and the atmosphere was harmonious. Both the tutor and the tutees
seemed to be co-learners in the group. For the rest of the lesson, students did their preparation,
had group interactions and a feedback session, which was similar to that of cycle 1.
Reflection

After the programme, a questionnaire was distributed to Secondary 3 tutees, and two group interviews were conducted among the Secondary 3 tutees and Secondary 6 tutors to further understand how they perceived the programme and their change.

Secondary 3 tutees

Eleven questionnaires were collected. The majority of students had positive feedback in terms of the inclusion of the tutors in class and the speaking skills they learnt. Most students acknowledged the assistance of the tutors in helping them with pronunciation and spelling. They found it relaxing to practise group interactions with their tutors. It suggests that a non-threatening learning environment was created, which was beneficial in an ESL classroom. (Garcia, 1988) Also, most of the tutees claimed that they had acquired some words and sentences in the speaking sessions. According to Garcia (1988), young learners may derive pleasure learning from their peers than their master as it is easier. As observed by us, most of the students were actively engaged in the practice. After the first speaking session, some students even expressed their enthusiasm by keeping asking the teacher when the next session would be held.

Whereas more than half of the students said that they could speak more in the discussion, others disagreed. When asked if they felt more confident in speaking English, nearly half of the students responded negatively. To further investigate this issue, a group interview where five S.3 tutees were invited based on random sampling was conducted afterwards. Students claimed that they had learnt more vocabulary and the tutors were eager to teach them pronunciation and sentence structures. They could recall the expressions learnt, such as ‘I reckon that’, ‘in this way’ and ‘I could/ should’. They could also speak for longer time after practice. Nevertheless, they still found they might not understand the topics once there were many new words. This could be one of the reasons why they were still not very confident in speaking.

From both the survey results and response during the interview, all the students showed appreciation of the efforts the tutors paid. They particularly liked the sufficient guidance in decoding the topic, brainstorming the ideas and teaching of useful expressions, which helped enhance their knowledge and skills in group interactions.
Secondary 6 tutors

An interview with all the S.6 tutors was conducted after the programme. According to them, there were primarily two concerns before the implementation of the programme: Secondary 3 students may not understand what they say and may not pay attention to them. In view of this, the tutors took the initiative to chit-chat with the students a bit the first time they met, in an attempt to break the ice and build a rapport with the tutees.

In the first speaking session, the tutors were quite satisfied with the Secondary 3 tutees' performance as they were fairly attentive and able to achieve the goal of the lesson-completing the speaking task with the expressions prompted. Although the tutors were geared with proper tutors behaviors and teaching techniques in a training workshop (Garcia, 1988), some tutors, claimed that it was a little bit chaotic in the early phase of the course as they had not quite yet familiarized themselves with the role as a tutor. Nonetheless, as the session went, along with notes provided in the training workshop before, they soon found ways to better facilitate the students. In the second speaking session, they revised the notes in advance, gave more guidance amidst the discussion and were more encouraging. As what the tutors suggested, both cognitive and affective development among the tutees was evident. They found guiding Secondary 3 tutees to acquiring vocabulary and expressions, as well as encouragement were crucial in the success of a speaking task.

All the tutors agreed that they were more confident in tutoring Secondary 3 students and were ready to join another speaking session. This was because they witnessed the success of tutees' learning they did try to apply what they had learnt in the first session when having their second session. Some of the tutees could express their ideas more freely and took more initiatives in seeking help from the tutors. This was very encouraging.

Conclusion

Undoubtedly, the programme enabled both the tutors and tutees to grab some new English words, sentences structures and develop an awareness of speaking accurately and fluently. These are all essential skills for effective communication in examination and daily life. “The saying, ‘He who teaches others, teaches himself,’ is very true, not only because constant repetition impresses a fact indelibly on the mind, but because the process of teaching
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in itself gives a deeper insight into the subject taught.” (Ehly and Larsen, 1980) As revealed by a tutor, the process of preparation and tutoring helped him realize and eradicate the mistakes he used to commit. Particularly useful for the tutors was the ways to express themselves in simple English in an organized way. More importantly, these tutors became more confident in speaking, and themselves. Apart from English, the tutors also developed a sense of responsibility. As the tutors claimed, it would give the Secondary 3 students confidence if they spoke fluently and accurately. Therefore, for the words in the notes they were uncertain of the pronunciation, they looked up the words in dictionaries or consulted a teacher in advance. This positive attitude is, undoubtedly, useful in tackling challenges they face in their own learning too.

This study confirmed what Ng (1996) purported as the tutors felt to be valued for they could help their tutees achieve their goals. This would also help boost the tutors' self esteem as they feel to be needed. Finally, all the tutors claimed they took more initiative in speaking English and were more confident in expressing themselves in English.

Despite the slight disagreement in terms of students’ confidence in speaking English, this study confirms the importance and values of peer tutoring. The goal of a speaking lesson is to render ESL students with more opportunities to achieve communicative competence (Garcia, 1988), peer tutors playing the roles of a facilitator, a resource person, a counselor, a co-learner, or simple a “big brother” or a “big sister” did offer more individuals guidance and attention to the Secondary 3 students, which would enable the tutees to acquire the speaking skills better, in a supportive and cooperative environment. (Ng, 1996) The programme also facilitates learning among the tutors as they tried different ways to convey their meaning in English clearly and motivate the tutees to learn. This was an invaluable learning experience among these young adults.
References


