Chapter 14

Academic and Personal Impact of Peer Tutoring on the Peer Tutor

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ABSTRACT

This chapter features results of a mixed-methods study of the academic and personal impact of peer tutoring on tutors at the Tutorial Centre, Centre for Preparatory Studies at Sultan Qaboos University, Oman. The perceptions of the impact of peer tutoring were gained by interviewing 12 experienced current and former peer tutors who have not yet graduated, that is, former peer tutors who had only recently finished peer tutoring. Transcriptions of the audio-recorded interviews were analyzed using a process of thematic analysis to explore emerging themes. In addition, participants’ GPAs before they began tutoring were compared to their current GPAs after they had completed at least two semesters of tutoring through a paired samples t-test. Practical implications of findings for future peer tutoring practice are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Oman has travelled a long way down the road of education in general, and the teaching of English in particular, in a relatively short period of time since 1970. In 1999, there was a major reform of the education system from the General Education to the Basic Education system, which advocated less rote-learning, more critical thinking skills, and more focus on the process rather than the product. Basic Education also brought forward the inclusion of English language teaching from Grade 4 to Grade 1 (Al-Issa & Al-Bulushi, 2012). Despite the improvements in the teaching of English at primary and secondary schools in this system, there are still a sizeable number of students entering the country’s national university – Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) – who are placed into the lower levels of the foundation programme.

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The then Language Centre (now known as the Centre for Preparatory Studies (CPS)) decided to address this issue by introducing a Tutorial Centre in the Fall of 2011 as one part of its Student Support Unit. The aim was to provide support on all aspects of English language studies for students primarily in the lower levels of the foundation programme (FP), staffed by carefully selected, trained, and mentored peer tutors, generally in a one-to-one setting. As coordinator of the centre since Fall 2015 at the time of writing, the author has seen first-hand the benefits of this additional exposure to English and the focused work on aspects of the English language FP for these students as evidenced by the high and constantly increasing usage of this facility. The centre provides approximately 1,200 hours of tutorial sessions each semester. As well as benefiting students who attend these sessions (tutees), anecdotal evidence from peer tutors suggests that they too gain a great deal from their tutoring experiences both academically and personally. The purpose of this study is to formalise this evidence with a view to encouraging more potential peer tutors to apply and other institutions to consider setting up similar centres.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Peer tutoring has been widely documented as being beneficial to tutees across a variety of disciplines, including maths, science and nursing (see American River Project, 1993; Brannagan, Delling, Thomas, Mitchell, Lewis- Trabeaux, & Dupre, 2013; Loke & Chow, 2007; Moust & Schmidt, 1994), as well as for predominantly non-content based subjects such as English language skills (Alraji & Aldhafri, 2015; Finlay, 2017). From these studies, it is generally agreed that, when tutors are well chosen, well trained, and well mentored, and when financial backing and the availability of resources are in place, tutees greatly benefit academically from this support as a complement to their classroom based studies.

Other studies focus on the effects of tutoring on the peer tutor. Chai and Lin (2013) looked at the perceptions of the challenges faced by Business Administration peer tutors of small groups of tutees at an institution in Malaysia. In this study, the groups of tutees were given group decision-making tasks facilitated by the peer tutor, which were video-recorded. Peer tutor participants were also interviewed and asked to complete diary entries of their experiences. Perceptions of peer tutoring appear to be quite negative, with the main challenges being tutees' attitudes and lack of interest. Alsup, Conard-Salvo and Peters (2008) described more positive experiences in the Purdue University Writing Lab in the United States, in which Peters was a tutor before going on to be a pre-service English teacher. Benefits reported by this study include gaining authentic teaching experience, and learning how to be flexible and responsive to the needs of tutees.

Nisbet, Haw and Fletcher (2014) investigated a peer tutoring program, including the experiences of peer tutors, to support a problem based learning approach for first year undergraduate engineering students. Financial gain, CV enhancement, and improved time management and communication skills were the main benefits highlighted by focus groups conducted with peer tutor participants. Further, Loos, Menzel and Poparad’s (2005, pp. 2-3) study of peer tutoring for a computer science course include reporting the experiences of one tutor who explained the benefits of tutoring as including the social relationships and support systems developed with other peer tutors, the respect gained from being a female tutor in a male-dominated course, consolidation of the content and concepts of the course in the tutor’s own mind, and increased confidence in her future studies. Beasley (1997) examined the benefits of a pilot peer tutoring program for commerce undergraduates at an Australian university via parallel questionnaires completed by both tutors and tutees. The tutors also participated in an oral feedback session at the end
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