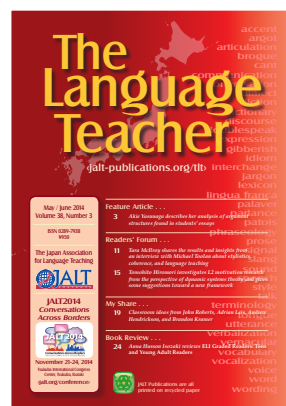# JALT Publications • Online Journals

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The use of peer-assisted learning for review presentations in heterogeneous classes

Julyan Nutt
Tokai Gakuen University

All too often the focal point of learning in the ESL classroom is confined to that of the class teacher, which on the basis of student numbers alone can be inefficient, leaving an untapped resource: the learners' peers. Educational theorists have long been aware of the value of peer-assisted learning (PAL): One of the earliest exponents was the renowned Russian learning theorist Lev S. Vygotsky. It is in his seminal work, *Thought and Language* (2000), first published in 1962, that he first introduces the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development: the area between what someone can achieve on their own and what they can achieve together with a more capable person, defined by Vygotsky as the More Knowledgeable Other (MKO). The MKO is not necessarily a teacher or an adult, but could equally be a more proficient classmate—by definition this could be applied to a large portion of a heterogeneous ESL class. The key here is that the MKO has a complete understanding of the concept being taught. If this is not the case, then there is a possibility of regression taking place, with the less capable learner bringing the MKO down to their level (Tudge, 1992). Both teachers and students have expressed reservations about the merits of PAL in the past, especially when it comes to peer feedback in writing classes. Jacobs (1989) thought that more "miscorrections" (a term he used) "would occur with writing than with speaking because the fact that the words are permanently on the page, rather than vanishing instantly into the air as in spoken discourse, makes errors—real or supposed—easier to find and point out" (p. 69). However, he noted this was not the case when he studied a group of third-year writing students: *miscorrections* were in a minority. To prevent miscorrections or regression from taking place, care must be taken when selecting pairs of students to work together and when

Peer Assisted Learning benefits both higher and lower level students, either from the act of teaching, or by learning from more capable classmates. With this in mind the author devised a presentation task, for a heterogeneous (mixed ability) ESL class in Japan, to review units from the course textbook. Students were placed in groups consisting of two pairs, each pair with a high and low level student, and were asked to prepare presentations within a limited time-frame. The objective was to see whether students could cooperate, learn from each other, and complete the task while under time constraints. Aided by the use of L1 in the planning stages, one pair explained in English, key speaking/listening strategies from the textbook, the other illustrated them using dialog. In anonymous questionnaires, the class agreed that they had either helped or been helped by their peers and that the task had been beneficial to them.

ピアアシスト（生徒相互補助）学習は、教えるという行為や、より能力の高い仲間から学ぶことによって、高いレベルの学生にも低いレベルの学生にも有益である。これを踏まえて筆者は、能力の異なる学生からなる日本のESLクラスのために、テキストの単元を復習するためにプレゼンテーションを行うという課題を考案した。高いレベルの学生と低いレベルの学生で1組になり、2組で1グループを構成した。学生たちは限られた時間内にプレゼンテーションを準備することになった。目的は、学生たちが協力しあえるか、互いから学べるか、時間的に制約された中で作業をやり遂げられるかを見ることであった。立案段階ではL1（日本語）の使用に助けられ、グループ内の1組は、教科書の重要なスピーキング／リスニングのストラテジーを英語で説明し、もう1組は対話により説明した。　無記名アンケートで学生たちは、お互いに助けたり助けられたりして、この課題は自分にとって有益だったと回答した。

devising the task. Students should also be closely monitored throughout.

However, do advanced students benefit from PAL? Studies indicate that they do. Through the act of teaching, students get to consolidate what they have learned, which leads to a deeper understanding of the ideas to be taught. Webb (1989) and King (2002), both educational researchers in the field of PAL, have studied extensively the benefits to the student teacher. They conclude that the act of teaching helps the student teacher to improve his or her comprehension of the subject by encouraging them to think about it in new ways through clarifying or simplifying, generating different examples, and relating the subject to the learner's prior knowledge.

This study therefore adopts the principles of PAL by pairing lower level students with higher ones in order to make review presentations. The primary objective was that the lower-level students would overcome a teacher-perceived lack of understanding of some of the concepts taught in previous classes and better prepare themselves for the forth coming mid-term tests. The secondary objective was for the higher-level students to consolidate what they have learned. While the presentations were being prepared the teacher was to observe and offer assistance when needed. After completion of the exercise, all the students would then evaluate, by way of a questionnaire, whether they thought they had gained a more comprehensive understanding of the concepts.

Participants

The study involved 35 second-year English majors at an all women's junior college in the Tokai area, taking an elective conversation- discussion-focused course. The textbook used was *Step Up 1: Listening, Speaking and Critical Thinking* (Teske & Marcy, 2007). Each theme-based unit contains three chapters: The first chapter introduces the content of the unit with a mini lecture, the second contains more conversations based on that content, and this leads to the third chapter where the listening passages introduce problems for the students to discuss and solve. Each chapter introduces the listening and speaking strategies needed to discuss the issues illustrated, and some also have a section dedicated to the cultural points raised. There is no great disparity in the level of difficulty across the three chapters of a single unit, but the units become progressively more difficult.

To give an insight into a typical chapter, the first chapter, *Making New Friends on Campus*, can be broken down as follows: the listening strategy focuses on how to listen for the main ideas in a mini-lecture; the speaking strategies on how to keep a conversation going and how to add agreements; and the cultural point deals with asking questions to strangers. For this study I focused on the opening unit, *Small Talk: Sociology* and its three corresponding chapters, *Making New Friends on Campus*, *Troubling Conversations*, and *Say the Right Thing*.

The students' levels in the study group ranged from low intermediate to advanced. I had worked with the same group of students for 18 months and was very familiar with their individual abilities. The class was almost entirely conducted in English. The only time L1 was used by the teacher was when monitoring the class and when a student needed additional assistance on a one-to-one basis.

Difficulties encountered when offering support in a heterogeneous class

In classes taught during the previous year, I noted that less able students showed a reluctance to ask for support when they were having difficulty understanding. When support was offered unsolicited, I felt that some of the students were reticent about receiving assistance even when it was clearly needed. Some students indicated through body language and other nonverbal signals that they felt uncomfortable being assisted by the teacher in front of their more capable peers. One student attempted to usher away the teacher, when it was clear she had not understood. In the absence of teacher assistance, while some students were happy to ask their classmates, others seemed content to let the situation slide. The reasons for this behavior were not clear, but may be attributed to cultural tendencies, shyness, embarrassment, or fear of losing face in front of other students. Some of the more proficient students, on the other hand, actively engaged with the teacher when they felt they needed further explanation. This overt display of confidence may have adversely influenced some of the less proficient students in the class, further discouraging them from speaking out.

Task objectives

With mid-term exams approaching, I devised a goal-oriented task in which more proficient

students would work together with their less capable peers (from hereon referred to as LCPs) to produce a presentation within a limited time-frame. Each group of students were to identify the key listening or speaking strategies in a designated chapter which they were expected to be familiar with, then explain those strategies or clearly demonstrate them by way of roleplays to the other groups. It was hoped that both the MKOs and the LCPs would then be able to better understand the strategies of that chapter.

It should be noted that students had been told in the previous class that they would be giving a group presentation on one of the chapters in the textbook (the precise one was not mentioned) and were strongly advised to review all the chapters before coming to class. In the questionnaire given at the end of the class, the vast majority of the students claimed that they had reviewed the chapters as advised.

Procedure

Students were placed in groups of four according to their abilities. While the students naturally tend to sit with their social peers, they are not averse to working with other students: The department at this particular college is small and everyone is, at the very least, cordial with each other. The groups were chosen based on the overall scores from the previous year's class. Two students from the top half of the class were placed with two from the bottom half. The class was not specifically told why they were being placed in different groups, only that it would be good to try something different. At no point were the students told that their ability to work in mixed ability groups was being observed lest it influence their behavior. They were, however, instructed that there were time constraints and that they should work together effectively to complete the task in time.

The class was then told that they had to prepare a presentation within forty minutes on one of the three chapters that had been covered in the textbook so far that semester. Eight groups of four students and one group of three students (headed up by the strongest student in the class) were each assigned to a chapter that was allocated randomly to them. The groups were told that they had to identify the key speaking and listening strategies of their assigned chapter. Once this was done, I separated each group into two pairs (each with one student of a higher level than the other) as I walked around the class, without

mentioning why the particular pairs were being chosen. One of the pairs was given the task of explaining in their own words the speaking or listening strategies of the chapter in English, while the other was told to write original English roleplays illustrating those strategies. Exactly how they were to do this was left to the students to decide. The only other instructions they were given were that in the planning stages using L1 was permitted, but all notes were to be written in English. This was so that I would be better able to monitor progress. The pairs were told to reconvene after 30 minutes and were then given an extra 10 minutes to practice their presentations before giving them in front of the rest of the class. After all the presentations had been given, the class was asked to choose the best (excluding their own) from the other groups.

Observations

For the most part, the MKO and LCP pairings proved effective. The MKOs took on the teaching role and most groups were able to carry out the task with minimal assistance. In one particular group, MKO and LCP had decided to write their own parts for the role-play on separate pieces of paper. They were creating a roleplay between two students meeting for the first time on campus and discussing their new teacher. In response to the statement, "I heard the teacher doesn't give a lot of homework," LCP had written, "I'm afraid you're right." MKO pointed out that it should be, "I hope you're right." This was followed by a discussion of the differences between the two phrases and the rewriting of notes in LCP's textbook.

Although not in a majority, in some other groups LCP was given the role of writing out the roleplay, while MKO told her what to write. On several occasions I observed students either asking for or giving assistance to each other with regards to meaning and language usage—essentially working effectively as a pair to achieve the task.

Feedback

After completing the presentations, the students were given a questionnaire in English in which they were asked to anonymously evaluate the effectiveness of working in new groups to produce a review-based presentation under the pressure of a time constraint. The questionnaire covered a range of aspects of the presentation: preview, preparation, evaluation, and additional comments.

The questionnaire was designed to eliminate fence-sitters. It contained nine statements to which students could respond as follows: strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree. There was no "neither agree or disagree" box, as is commonly found in student feedback questionnaires.

The students responded overwhelmingly in favor of this exercise. To the statement, "Working in a group meant that I was able to help or be helped by other group members," 51% strongly agreed and 46% agreed. Only one of the 35 students disagreed and no one strongly disagreed. Of equal importance, when responding to the statement, "After preparing the presentation, I felt I understood the chapter better than before," all of the students felt that they had: 57% strongly agreed, 43% agreed, and no one disagreed or strongly disagreed.

To the statement, "I felt this was an effective method of reviewing the first half of the semester's work," 86% of the students either strongly agreed or agreed, 6% disagreed, and the remaining (3) students left this part of the questionnaire blank. Similarly, when responding to the statement, "I would be happy to do this kind of presentation again," 83% of the class either strongly agreed or agreed that they would be happy to repeat this format again. Again, no one strongly disagreed, 14% disagreed, and only one student did not complete this section of the questionnaire.

Conclusions

The whole class, MKOs and LCPs alike, agreed that the exercise in making review presentations had improved their understanding of the concepts they had studied. This was reflected in the quality of the presentations. They were to the point and conveyed the key strategies well, with appropriate roleplays. Without a control group, there is no way of knowing whether this translated to the mid-term exam, but students' exam results were better than I had expected. Additionally, with the pressure of having to create and give a presentation within a limited timeframe, the students were put into a situation where they had to cooperate with each other. This situation was alleviated by allowing them to use L1. This approach further benefited the LCPs who were able to discuss the task with their MKOs, and therefore develop a more thorough understanding of the concepts. The use of L1 in the ESL classroom is a contentious issue, but its legitimacy has been gaining recognition in recent years. One of the occasions when using L1 is most valid is when it comes to explaining difficult concepts (Cianflone, 2009). Clearly, when two students with different English abilities are discussing such a concept, using their mother tongue is more efficient and was undoubtedly a key factor in the success of this task. Higher-level students also benefited from gaining a more in-depth understanding of the topic through explaining it, something educators have long been aware of: "While we teach, we learn" (attributed to the Roman philosopher Seneca). Although often underutilized, when implemented properly PAL can be an effective tool in any classroom, freeing up the teacher to play more of a monitoring role.

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Julyan Nutt has been teaching in Japan for 17 years. He is a full-time lecturer at Tokai Gakuen University. His research interests include peer-assisted learning (PAL) and improving motivational issues in the ESL classroom. Outside of the classroom he is an avid vegetable gardener who is striving towards the ultimate goal: self-sufficiency. < nutt@tokaigakuen-u.ac.jp>