Students teaching students? Peer teaching in the EFL classroom in Japan

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Peer teaching, pedagogy, EFL, peer-teaching method

Peer teaching is enjoying increasing popularity in both formal and informal educational contexts. This paper reports on a one semester program in which groups of learners assume responsibility for teaching a unit of the textbook in EFL classes at a tertiary education institution in Japan. In this program, groups of learners teach course content to their peers.

「ピア・ティーチング」が学校内外の教育分野においてますますポピュラーになりつつある。本論では、日本の大学で、学生の各グループがそれぞれ教科書の担当部分を他のグループに教える責任を負う半期プログラムについて論述する。

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What is peer teaching?

Peer teaching is a suite of practices in which peers instruct each other in a purpose-driven, meaningful interaction. Many programs feature older, more experienced peers, or those with greater mastery in a subject area teaching younger, less-experienced peers or those who are yet to master the skills and content of the subject area. Others organize students within a course to collaboratively notice areas or items that they do not know and then to learn and teach each other. Kalkowski (2001) identifies a number of manifestations of peer teaching, as well as the range of labels applied to these practices, including "peer tutoring, … cross-age tutoring, … peer teaching, peer education, partner learning, peer learning, child-teach-child, … learning-through-teaching, … [and] mutual instruction" (para. 4). Although this list is not exhaustive, what all peer-teaching programs have in common is a Vygotskian approach wherein learning is understood to occur through negotiation of meaning with others within the learning environment.

Examples of peer teaching exist in descriptions of second or foreign language classroom practice. A video example of a highly scripted lesson peer-taught by 8 year old Japanese students learning English in Japan is available on YouTube (HandsOn Japanese ESL 8 yr olds Practice Peer teaching). Fraser (1988) outlines a program in which returning study abroad students of German teach their classmates who are unable to travel to Germany. Finally, Murphey (1996) shares a method, referred to as *near peer role modeling*, in which written, audio, and videotaped student comments are used to increase learner knowledge and motivation towards the process of learning.

The list of reported benefits of peer teaching include improving competence in the subject area, easing students into

university life, the development of autonomous learning skills, "developing networking opportunities; … building confidence and self-esteem; enhancing team-working skills, and developing leadership skills" (Mynard & Almarzouqi, 2006, p. 14); and positive attitudes toward school and subject area (McNall, 1975).

Many teachers of English (and other subjects) at universities and colleges in Japan struggle to help learners develop at least some of the attributes listed above. While improving language proficiency is the major aim of our lessons, we also strive to nurture autonomous, confident learners who work well together, fostering a positive attitude to the language and the school. The use of peer teaching within a program would appear to have the scope to enhance learning and student experiences. This paper represents an attempt to both describe a peer-taught program in use at a Japanese university and junior college and to document the types of benefits that students report about the program in their final self-evaluations.

Description of a peer-taught program

For the past four years this program has been conducted during the second semester of compulsory first year university and junior college oral communication courses. The compulsory English classes are composed entirely of students of a single department. Each semester has 14 scheduled weekly 90-minute lessons, as well as an examination in the 15th week. Classes range in size from 30 to 40 students of generally mixed English proficiencies. In these courses, use of a set text is mandatory.

First semester

In the first semester, the teacher provides a full schedule of planned textbook-based classes. Some lessons are designed to provide communicative opportunities through a range of activities, including interviews, group discussions, and communicative games. Other lessons include different modes of peer teaching, such as researching and teaching other students about another country. At the end of each class, learners write their reflections (part of a year-long learning journal) about the class in a set format (see Bradford-Watts, 2002).

Second semester

In the second semester, students share the teaching tasks with the class teacher. The first class meeting of the semester constitutes planning time, in which group members a) decide the unit of the text that they will teach, b) choose the relevant section(s) of the unit that they deem important for the class to learn, and c) negotiate the format of the hour-long lesson, including non-textbook practice activities for the selected materials. It is important to monitor the time for the planning session carefully, because it is important for all groups to complete the process within 90 minutes.

Week 1

The initial task of the first class is to randomly assign learners to eight groups, numbered one through eight. The group numbers are written on the left hand side of the board in a grid. The number of groups may be altered to fit class size and teaching schedule.

Groups are instructed to look through their textbooks and determine which of the units not yet studied looks most interesting to them. As groups call out their preferred unit, the class teacher records the unit number on the grid next to the group number, ensuring that there is no duplication of units. When the grid has been completed, the class teacher outlines the details of the hour-long teaching task. The activities taught by the group must include at least one significant speaking practice task.

It is important to stress to learners at this time that teaching is not the same as doing a presentation. When teaching, the main focus of the exercise is for learners to practice the target language and show understanding and competence in, for example, the new grammar point, vocabulary, or genre type. It is useful to limit the time that groups spend on teaching from the textbook to 20 minutes, leaving 40 minutes for practice activities that they construct themselves.

During the planning stages, the class teacher circulates among the groups, acting as a sounding board for ideas, confirming student answers to textbook questions, and approving final plans. Plans must be written, indicating order and outline of activities and activity times, and all group

members and the teacher must have a copy for reference—phone cameras can be used to take copies of the lesson plans. The teacher may veto plans that include, for example, playing a game below the level of class, using a video segment of more than a few minutes, or involving tasks that are difficult to accomplish due to the layout of the room.

As each group finalizes their plan, they choose a date for their teaching session and it is written onto the class schedule (camera phones can be used to document this). Group members are encouraged to exchange contact information at this stage in case of illness or other problems that may arise on their teaching day.

Weeks 2-14

In the second class, the teacher presents a textbook-based lesson as usual. Peer-taught lessons generally begin in the third week of classes to allow the first teaching group the time to prepare their lesson to their satisfaction. Peer-teaching proceeds until the end of the semester according to the schedule decided in the first class. Learners continue to write their class reflections at the conclusion of each class.

Lesson content

The classes are based on the textbook units to be covered in the semester. Groups often choose grammar or vocabulary exercises from the book as a basis for their lessons, although some groups choose reading or listening activities. Usually groups choose to present the textbook content to open the lesson, although variations have occurred. Practice activities have included:

- Listening tasks using songs, videos, puppet and role plays, or descriptive passages, with learners completing cloze tests or answering questions;
- Reading tasks involving learners matching information and then creating skits to be performed in front of the class, or answering quiz questions;
- Games created by the teaching group;
- Guided discussions based on questions created by the teaching group;
- Learning groups creating jingles and singing them for the rest of the class in response to pictures or descriptions of products

These activities have generally been presented in a fun and professional manner and have been well accepted by the learning groups.

Teachable moments

Issues will arise with respect to such aspects as pronunciation or grammatical points that were not apparent in the initial textbook unit selection or in the planning stages. The groups teach for one hour, so there is time available for addressing these issues, which may be considered *teachable moments*, that is, opportunities for the classroom teacher to present mini-lessons in response to classroom events such as student questions, student interest, or news.

Willis (2007) suggests that "novelty, emotion, and surprise are often components of teachable moments, and new information connected to these moments has greater potential to be perceived, encoded, and patterned into the memory circuits" (para. 10). The classroom teacher must decide whether to exploit a teachable moment or whether the time is better spent in other course-related ways.

Evaluation of lessons

Peer teaching in this course constitutes 20% of in-class scores. There are three forms of evaluation for this activity: teacher, peer, and self-evaluation. These are equally weighted.

After recording her score at the conclusion of the lesson, the teacher thanks the members of the teaching group and sends them into the corridor. Before they are invited back to the classroom, the teacher asks students in the learning groups to indicate by show of hands which grade the students would give the teaching group: A, B, C, or Z (Z being the lowest), and the average of this grade is also recorded. After this, the teaching group returns to the classroom and all the students complete their class reflections. The teaching group shows their reflections, including self-evaluation of their teaching, to the teacher, who reads them and records their individual scores. These are returned to the students who store them in a clear plastic multi-pocket file with their other work for use in their final self-evaluations.

Student feedback

Course feedback is collected in January via final self-evaluation reports. Since the self-evaluation is an open ended, short answer format, students can identify as few, or as many, factors as they wish. There is no specific mention of the peer-teaching task in the self-evaluation questions. The comments analyzed below represent those of five classes conducted during the 2007 school year only and are summarized in Table 1.

Almost all learners reported benefits related to their peer teaching experiences. Not surprisingly, due to the nature of the task, many described how they planned and prepared for the class, and that they have developed an awareness of choices available to them in terms of teaching method. They also suggest that they could easily understand the content of lessons taught to them by their peers, which may, in part, be due to the lessons being based on units from the textbook. The combination of these factors appears to have been a positive influence on attitudes towards learning and the classroom atmosphere, in addition to having a self-reported positive effect on learner self-development. Almost all students reported having enjoyed the experience of peer teaching and learning, even those who noted that it was difficult for them. There were, however, six students who did not mention the peer-teaching component of the course, focusing instead on other activities completed during the semester. Given that the students themselves identify these benefits and report having enjoyed the peer teaching experience, it would appear that peer teaching is an effective means of student-centered, socially-constructed instruction for the foreign language classroom.

Table 1. Benefits of peer teaching described in student self-evaluation reports.

Benefit (identified in literature)	Number of references (total 153 respondents)	Sample comment
Goal setting and planning	44	*I learned that "planned behavior" is important. Thanks to carefully planned [lesson], we success in that.*
Approaches to teaching	44	*There were various methods to teach and I was able to enjoy it.*
Enhanced learning by peer-taught lessons	43	*When I listen to my classmate's teaching, I understand more and more.*
Attitude to learning	39	*I learned pleasure to speak English in teaching group.*
Classroom atmosphere	38	*I get new skills which is how to take pleasure for English and to communication in English.*
Positive self-development	33	*I cared my pronunciation before, but I speak magnificently now. It's very important this change.*
Communication	31	*It was fun to communicate by doing group teaching.*
Teamwork	26	*We learned teamwork and helped each other.*
Making friends	22	*My number of friends has increased.*
Cooperation	18	*I was able to cooperate in everyone of the teaching group and it was very happy.*
Comments referred to topics other than peer teaching	6	
Difficulty of peer teaching	3	*It was difficult for me to become a teacher and to teach a picture story show.*

Conclusion

On the whole, students have worked well together to develop interesting and interactive classes for their classmates in this program. There have, however, been a number of problems. The major challenge continues to be the timing of the initial planning class. Once students have been divided into teaching groups and the task explained to them, they have just over an hour to finish planning their lesson. Planning goes more quickly if students realize that they can only choose their teaching date once their plan has been approved by the teacher. However, it is important for the teacher to monitor the ongoing planning of all groups in order to adjust activities, etc, as soon as possible, giving the students a chance to complete the task within the class period. Another problem arises if a significant number of students do not attend the first class of the semester. If this occurs, I keep the second last class of the semester open and create a group of those who were absent. They then need to meet in their own time to plan their class, and report their progress at the end of the following class. Negotiations with this group may take several weeks. If individual students miss the first class, they can be incorporated into pre-existing groups and assigned tasks by the members. The third problem also relates to planning—students may under, or over, estimate the length of time that an activity may take for their classmates to complete. This is where the knowledge and experience of the class teacher is helpful in a support role during the initial planning phase.

The development of the system of peer-taught units is ongoing, reflecting student feedback and teacher experience and reflection. Through sharing the role of teacher with my students, I have learned that students are very able, with support, to learn and share their learning with their classmates. Among the various lessons taught in second semester, many identify this series of lessons especially as important for their language development and personal growth.

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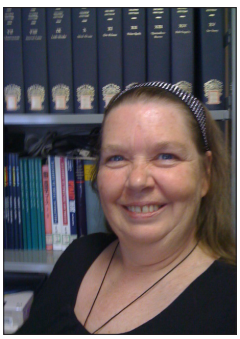

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