

Peer Mentoring: An NPRM-Driven Online Group

Dana Lingley

Kansai Gaidai University

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The aim of this paper is to discuss the effectiveness of a student-led project created to assess the potential for near peer role models (NPRMs) to encourage younger students preparing to study abroad within an online group. Feedback from open-ended questionnaires suggests that the NPRMs positively affected the enthusiasm of the participants they mentored. Participants reported an aspiration to emulate the NPRMs, who demonstrated realistic attainable examples of successful study abroad practices while transmitting stories of their experiences to help “light the tunnel” to possible future L2 study abroad experiences throughout the term of the online group. A further benefit of participation in the project was that many students were able to feel better prepared and knowledgeable about aspects of studying and living abroad, which in turn reduced their anxieties associated with studying abroad.

本論文は、留学準備段階にある生徒の意欲向上へのNPRMs(near peer role models:自分に職業、年齢、人種などが似ていてお手本になる人)の有効性及び可能性について調査する為、生徒主体のオンライングループでプロジェクトを編成し、そのプロジェクトの調査結果について論じたものである。プロジェクトでのアンケート調査から、NPRMsの助言が、参加者である留学準備段階の生徒達の意欲向上にポジティブに作用するという結果を導き出した。参加した生徒達によると、現実的かつ自分達にも実現可能であるNPRMsの留学の成功経験を聞き自らの留学生生活を想像する事で、自分達もNPRMsに劣らない留学をしたいと熱望する様になるのである。このプロジェクトに参加した事によるさらなる利点として、多くの生徒が留学や留学先での生活についてしっかりと準備し知識を培われたと感じた事により、留学への不安を緩和させる事ができた点が挙げられる。

The Japanese Ministry of Education (MEXT) has recognized the importance of increasing the number of Japanese students who study abroad. This recognition and the related goal of sending 300,000 Japanese students and professionals abroad by

2020 (MEXT, 2011) are expected to benefit the future of Japan. This has created a need for educators and institutions to better prepare students to embark on study abroad programs. Obviously, studying abroad is a major event in any young person’s life. As such, careful thought and planning are paramount to ensure a meaningful experience. Homesickness, cultural misunderstandings, the inability to forge new friendships, and a lack of confidence in one’s own L2 ability are potential problems that require consideration prior to study abroad trips. Preparing students for these problems is a formidable task for educators, as there is often a barrier between students and teachers in terms of age, life experience, and cultural background. One potential way of addressing this problem is by drawing on the resources of near peer role models (NPRMs), who are peers close in age, social standing, or profession (Murphey, 1998). These students have enormous potential to aid study abroad candidates, as they have already experienced studying abroad and are often willing to mentor younger students. Therefore, they can be more effective than teachers as they display more attainable models who are close to those they are mentoring. The aim of this project was to provide a space for free interaction among study abroad candidates and more experienced peers that would potentially lead to increased levels of confidence as a result of greater awareness of the realities of studying abroad and living in a foreign country. Online groups were established in which younger students were mentored by NPRMs in relation to the study abroad preparation process, studying in foreign classrooms, and life in a foreign country. Through participation in the project, participants were able to hear stories of the NPRMs’ experiences, collaborate with both direct peers and NPRMs, and gain encouragement from both their peers and NPRMs. The results indicate that the participants were able to gain a sense of ownership over the study abroad experience as they learned from older, more capable peers.

Near Peer Role Models

NPRMs, as defined by Murphey (1998) and Murphey and Arao (2001), are peers who are close in social standing, professional position or age, and who may be respected or

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admired. Educators have used NPRMs in EFL classrooms because of their effectiveness in increasing self-efficacy in terms of ability to achieve language-learning goals. Bandura's (1977, 1986) social learning theory and Vygotsky's (1930s/1978) zone of proximal development underpin the concept of NPRMs as potential learning resources. The main premise supporting NPRMs is that, under the right conditions, exposure to such peers can create a desire to imitate them, or at the very least, the NPRMs can be an inspiration to younger peers to aspire to a position similar to that of the model.

In two studies conducted by Murphey and Arao (2001) and Murphey and Murakami (1998) students watched short video clips of older students discussing (in the L2) the importance of attaining English skills and not being bothered when they made mistakes. The participants in these studies reported positive changes in their beliefs about their own ability to achieve the English level displayed by the NPRMs and desire to emulate the models. The premise is that the abilities displayed by the NPRMs appear to be more attainable to younger peers than the abilities of a Japanese teacher or certainly a foreign native English-speaking teacher.

In a study conducted by Ruddick and Nadasdy (2013), NPRMs were used to address the issue of Japanese university English students adding unnecessary vowel endings (rounding off) to English words. Older, more capable peers were used as tutors who demonstrated the pronunciation of English words without rounding them off. This study concluded that exposure to the NPRMs effectively aided in the reduction of such occurrences in comparison with students who had no such exposure.

Lingley (2015) conducted an action research project in which NPRMs were utilized in an effort to increase motivation and decrease anxiety associated with studying abroad. Second-year university students who were considering studying abroad were exposed to NPRMs via online video calls from study abroad locations. The NPRMs presented short reports of study abroad life while outlining both the positive and negative aspects of their experiences. Participants self-reported their motivation and anxiety levels in relation to study abroad in questionnaires administered before and after, and the results indicated positive changes. The project reported here is a continuation, except that all the participants were study abroad candidates and the exposure to NPRMs was ongoing. In comparison with previous work done with NPRMs, this project was novel in that the purpose was to prepare students for a specific L2 experience and not to directly affect L2 learning.

Context

To date, 74 (58 female and 16 male) 2nd-year university students have participated in the online groups, including recent study abroad returnees and those still studying at foreign

universities. The participants were all English majors from a private university in western Japan. More precisely, 18 of the 74 participants participated as NPRMs, and the remaining 56 were study abroad candidates. The participants were taking compulsory English within a general English skills program in which they received 720 hours of classroom instruction over the first 2 years from two native English-speaking instructors. Classes were streamed based on the paper-based TOEFL test administered by the university. The average TOEFL score range of the participants in this study was 480-550, indicating considerable variation in English ability. Because the project was student led, the bulk of the interactions were online through social media and computer-mediated communication tools.

Following Harmer's proposal that language educators be facilitators who promote learning through group work (2007), I maintained a role outside of the online groups. As facilitator, I provided guidance to both the NPRMs and the participants when necessary, made introductions, provided a list of possible question topics to the participants, and also conducted interviews and administered questionnaires twice during the project.

As a result of informal interviews with students who had returned from studying abroad, I noted that a majority reported an initial period abroad (sometimes upwards of 6 weeks) of "wasted time," in which they felt they could not do anything other than stay in their rooms. This was the result of feeling overwhelmed with life in a new country. When questioned further about this, the majority of the interviewees expressed regret about this loss of time. It was felt that with more preparation, knowledge of living abroad, and realistic expectations, the participants would be able to avoid this sense of lost time. Another potential problem I sought to address was maintaining the motivation of the participants to keep up with the study abroad preparation process and with their class work prior to departure. Many students experience doubt in their own abilities as they try to achieve target scores on the TOEFL and keep up with their course work. Failure at either can lead to dismissal from the study abroad program. It was believed that the NPRMs would be able to encourage the participants, as they had experienced the same uncertainty prior to studying aboard.

The first aim that guided the project was to investigate whether exposure to NPRMs modeling attainable examples of successful study abroad practices had the potential to encourage students who had not yet studied abroad. The second aim was to explore the potential of online groups as student-led activities that can address specific needs related to studying abroad. As Hargreaves (2010) contended, the relationship between peers is often grounded in trust and mutual cooperation, and it was felt that these qualities would enable the NPRMs to be better able to address specific needs that the participants

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might feel uncomfortable discussing with a teacher. A final aim was to assess if online groups were a suitable platform for mentoring students.

The Project

Initial interviews with participants yielded outcomes that were similar to the earlier study conducted by Lingley (2015), which showed that the anxieties most common to the participants were related to potential friendships, foreign classroom competence, communicative competence, and interference with job-search activities, among others. As the NPRMs had successfully negotiated these same issues, it was felt they could be helpful in mentoring the participants. The preliminary interviews were also designed to gauge participants' interest in joining an online group to discuss and learn about studying abroad.

Participants in the project were introduced (typically by email) to an older student (NPRM) who had either returned from studying abroad or was currently in a study abroad environment. The NPRMs were told that they would be mentoring younger students who were preparing to study abroad. Participants and NPRMs were advised to discuss studying abroad. In particular, participants were encouraged to ask NPRMs about the specific aspects of studying abroad such as the amount of study done outside of class, life in a foreign country, and the parts of the preparation process that they were currently worried or curious about. The specific discussion topics were left to participants to decide and navigate on their own. From this initial introduction, participants and NPRMs created online groups in which NPRMs adopted the role of an expert in relation to studying abroad.

Virtual groups emerged, and the resulting feedback from open-ended questionnaires provided the basis for an evaluation of the successes and failures of the project. Typically, the groups continued for the 3 to 4 months leading up to the participant's departure date, and each group consisted of three to six members, including NPRMs. Several participants have reported that they continued to communicate (to varying degrees) with group members and NPRMs while studying abroad. Although many of the initial introductions resulted in the creation of online groups, some declined to follow through on the initial meeting.

Evaluation

An open-ended qualitative questionnaire (see Appendix) consisting of 12 questions was distributed to the participants approximately 2 weeks prior to departure on their study

abroad programs. The questionnaire was in Japanese, though seven respondents provided feedback in English. In total, 42 (75%) of the 56 participants completed the questionnaire. Responses from the 42 completed questionnaires indicate that participants viewed their involvement in the groups as beneficial. The main reason cited was that the information they attained through membership in a group enabled them to feel more at ease both about the preparation process and about imagining themselves in study abroad settings.

Student Feedback

There was a positive response by the participants in terms of what they believed were the ultimate benefits of participation in the project. Many participants (69%) felt the main benefit was having direct access to someone (an NPRM) who had experienced the same setbacks during the study abroad preparation process, such as this comment: "For me, the best thing was making friends with an older student who had the same problems I had and still could go to the U.S." This allowed them to seek advice as well as see a positive example of the effort. The second most-cited benefit was access to the NPRMs' study abroad experiences and stories. For example, one student reported, "I appreciate Yukisan because her stories about living in the U.S. made me understand the reality. I really think she is great." As many of the stories provided were directly connected to anxieties the participants had, it seems likely that the experiences of the NPRMs aided in reducing those anxieties because they saw that the NPRMs had overcome similar obstacles. The third most commonly reported benefit was the closer friendships the participants were able to create with other participants as they worked together to prepare to study abroad. Approximately 40% (17) mentioned this, as illustrated by this comment: "I'm really happy to join this group because I made new friends who will also go to study in the U.S." Finally, nearly 43% (18) of the participants reported gaining greater understanding of the study abroad process. Specific areas reported were better understanding of life and study in foreign countries: "This group helped me to learn more about studying abroad. I feel I know more than last semester." At the beginning, a majority (26) reported feeling overwhelmed and powerless, but then stated they had gained confidence as they became better informed, which instilled a feeling of control over the process.

In terms of the second aim of exploring the potential of online groups to address specific needs related to studying abroad, 76% (32) of the respondents reported that they believed their knowledge of studying and living abroad had increased as a result of their participation in the group. To Question 9 of the questionnaire (Has your image about making friends with non-Japanese people changed in any way?), 54.7% (23) of the

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respondents mentioned gaining an understanding of the difficulties involved in developing friendships with people from other countries. Half of the respondents (21) reported that their image of the academic workload had changed after talking to NPRMs. This indicates that the online groups aided participants in attaining more realistic views of study abroad. Slightly more than half (22) reported feeling pressure to learn more useful information or solve a problem that they could share with fellow participants (Question 6: Did your participation in the group cause you to experience stress or problems?). In spite of using the term “pressure,” they reported this to be positive because they were able to see that they had made a transition from being a passive member to a more active participant. A further 76% (32) of the participants reported that they went back to reread conversations to gather information illustrating that a shared repertoire of information was produced.

A total of 78.5% (33) of the participants reported feeling admiration for the NPRMs, and 74% (31) reported aspirations to emulate the NPRMs. This is similar to results reported in previous work (Murphey & Arao, 2001; Murphey & Murakami, 1998), which revealed that exposure to NPRMs leads to students wanting to emulate them, and indicates that the NPRMs demonstrated attainable examples that the participants hoped to follow. To Question 8 (After participating in the group do you feel you have a better understanding of what life will be like when you study abroad?), 62% (26) participants stated that they believed they had a better understanding of what life in a foreign country would entail. This was interpreted to suggest that the project had enabled some students to better imagine a future L2 learning experience studying abroad.

Some of the negative feedback from participants was related to personality clashes with NPRMs. One participant stated, “She [the NPRM] was too direct in her criticism of my ideas.” Another participant stated, “He [the NPRM] only talked about studying. I wanted to know more about life in America. He was too serious!” This student went on to explain that as a result of the personality of the NPRM, he lost interest in joining the online group. In total, 19% (8) reported negative impressions of the online groups and the most commonly cited response (by 4) was that the time spent in the group was wasteful. In total, approximately 20% (9) of the participants made negative comments related to personality differences, dissatisfaction with the information they received from NPRMs, and doubts as to whether the time spent as worthwhile or not.

The overall results of the questionnaire indicate that participants benefited from their involvement in the online groups. The main benefit seemed to be that NPRMs were able to provide participants with knowledge about studying abroad, which led to increased confidence and more realistic expectations. In comparison, I noted that nonparticipating

students seemed to exhibit higher levels of anxiety prior to studying abroad than those who participated. Those who did not participate seemed to have unrealistic expectations about life inside and outside of foreign classrooms. Participants also reported a desire to emulate the NPRMs as they identified them as successful study abroad practitioners. Finally, involvement in the online groups fostered friendships among participants that led to greater cooperation as they prepared to study abroad.

Limitations and Future Directions

The informal nature of the project is one of its main limitations. A future project using a more representative sample of participants would be useful in gathering results that could be generalized to other groups. To ensure greater validity of the results, more rigorous and detailed data collection would be necessary in order to triangulate findings.

In terms of future directions, a study investigating the effects NPRMs had on participants after they arrived for their year abroad would be worthwhile. Although this study showed that the exposure to NPRMs had positive effects, more detailed information about the long-term effectiveness of NPRMs needs to be gathered to conclude that the project was successful. Another area with potential for follow-up research is to examine study abroad candidates who did not participate in the project with NPRMs so as to gauge any differences in expectations of living and studying abroad. To date, information about these expectations has been gathered informally. A final area of potential inquiry would be to test the viability of completely open groups where any student with interest in the topic could participate and benefit from the information.

Conclusions

In this paper, I have emphasized the potential of student-led online groups that utilize NPRMs as mentors who model attainable examples of successful study abroad practices. Based on questionnaires and results from an earlier study (Lingley, 2015) that identified some common anxieties related to studying abroad, the NPRM-led online groups were established in order to reduce anxiety and increase study abroad-related knowledge and enthusiasm. Both participants and NPRMs were provided with potential topics to address prior to the start of the largely student-led activity, but otherwise there was no explicit direction regarding their interactions.

The results indicate that the online groups aided participants as they prepared to study abroad. Specifically, participants reported feeling more at ease about studying and living in a foreign country after exposure to NPRMs. Moreover, the results of the questionnaire

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suggest that many participants used the time spent with NPRMs to gather information and advice that helped them prepare for their own study abroad programs. Based on negative feedback, it seems that personality clashes with NPRMs and differing expectations of what the online group should have entailed were the main drawbacks. Prior to establishing the online groups, I felt that online communication would mitigate situations in which one student dominates a discussion, as Warschauer (2001) contended; however, it seems that in some instances the NPRMs dominated the discussion.

Finally, in relation to the final aim of the project, the questionnaire responses suggest that online groups are a suitable platform for mentoring students with NPRMs under the right conditions. Dörnyei and Murphey (2003) stated that modeling is a powerful way of teaching. This assertion appears to hold true in online groups, as many of the responses from participants showed that their participation increased their knowledge of studying abroad. One advantage of online group interactions was that a record was produced that the participants were able to revisit. As Shulman (2004) noted, “Learning is least useful when it is private and hidden; it is most powerful when it becomes public and communal” (pp. 36-37). Although the individual groups in this project were communal in nature, access was limited to group members. The overall strengths of the project were connected to the relationships created between participants. Through these group relationships, many of the participants were able to trust the NPRMs’ guidance, which in turn increased their knowledge of study abroad and helped to reduce anxieties associated with such an endeavor.

Bio Data

Dana Lingley has been teaching EFL in Japan and Mexico in various contexts for 18 years. He is currently an instructor at Kansai Gaidai University where he teaches 2nd-year students. His research interests center on motivation, authentic materials, content-based instruction, and autonomous learning.

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Appendix Questionnaire

1. How often did you participate in your group by asking a question or answering a question?
2. On average how much time did you spend per week offline preparing information or questions for your group? What sorts of things did you prepare? Did this time increase or decrease from beginning to the end?
3. What was your impression of the older students (NPRMs)?
4. On average did you spend more time discussing aspects of study abroad with peers or with the older students (NPRMs)?

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5. Did you ever go back to reread older posts and conversations in your group? If yes, how often?
6. Did your participation in the group cause you to experience stress or problems? Please explain.
7. Do you feel you gained valuable information about classroom environments in foreign countries? Why or why not?
8. After participating in the group do you feel you have a better understanding of what life will be like when you study abroad? Why or why not?
9. Has your image about making friends with non-Japanese people changed in any way?
10. Has your thinking changed about studying in a foreign country in any way?
11. What is your overall impression of the benefit of the group?
12. What is your overall impression of the limitations of the group?