Peer Mentoring in an Advanced English Class for Non Native Speakers of English - A Project
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Abstract
Adjusting to the particular demands of university life in first year may be a daunting experience, especially for non native speakers of English. Not only do some of these students have to deal with new concepts and strategies but also have to struggle with possible difficulties with the English language. This year the Faculty of Arts initiated a peer mentoring project in the Advanced English for Speakers of Other Languages major. The project involved third year students mentoring first year students over the first semester. The purpose of the project was two fold: to help students with support in settling into university life and to help with the practice of skills in English language use. The students were divided into groups which worked on specific assessable tasks related to their course of study. Evaluation of the project showed that the students found it a positive experience. The first year students felt that they did have a better understanding of university life and so felt less anxious and the assigned task also was an aid in the improvement of their English skills. The third year students as mentors found the experience very rewarding because the interaction and the assessable task were invaluable in understanding the issues involved in the use of the English language.

Introduction
In recent years studies have discussed the issue of university transition being one in which first year students should be facilitated by the development of learning communities and hence be exposed to a supportive environment; specifically by peer mentor support (Tinto 1995, Candy, Crebert and O'Leary 1994).

Several specific programs set up in Australian universities have reinforced the idea that these mentoring programs are an excellent way of helping first year students feel at ease with the transition and the overall university experience (Benn and Davis 1998, Pope and Van Dyke 1998). Furthermore peer support may contribute to interactions that can lead to an individual's development (Clulow 1995).

Even though on the whole these programs are catering for first year students from all backgrounds, one should note that it is non native speakers of English who are recent arrivals and/ or who have limited competence in their knowledge of English who can experience problems that may be obstacles to progress in their study and university experience (Ballard and Clanchy 1997, Tsang, Bull and Shou 1997).

It is particularly these students who within the supportive environment should have the opportunity to be exposed to the integration of skills. In the context of teaching English to non native speakers students' use of language communicatively needs to be reinforced. This approach is known as Communicative Language Teaching which has "placed emphasis on the broader communicative aspects of language as well as on the role of the individual learner in his or her own learning." (Burns 1990 p.36) . In this approach the teacher is viewed as a facilitator whose role is to expose learners to a wide range of communicative learning experiences.

Recent research has also highlighted the benefits of a task-based approach to language teaching which looks at the target language as a whole (Long and Crookes, 1992). The tasks should be communicative, authentic, interesting and involve the learners in interacting in the target language and in particular pay attention to the message being communicated (Nunan 1989, Brown and Nation 1997). Furthermore it has been shown that oral communication is enhanced when learners are given opportunities to express personal ideas (Yamashiro and Johnson, 1997).

Thus the educational principles the project was based upon were about the development of student centered learning, specifically of students working collaboratively on tasks which required the use of the target language communicatively and allowed for the integration of the four language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing.
This paper will describe the project and its implementation and then present the findings of an evaluation conducted.

The Project

The Faculty of Arts at Victoria University of Technology (VUT) conducted pilot peer mentoring programs in first semester 1998. One of these programs was that of cross year peer mentoring by senior students in the major called Advanced English for Speakers of Other Languages (AESOL). This major caters for non native speakers of English who have had on average a maximum of five years of English schooling and who wish to continue with their English study. The project involved the first and third year students.

Aims of the Project

Taking into consideration the two important aspects of first year transition:

    a) having peer support
    and

b) aiding non native speakers of English

the purpose of this project in the AESOL major was two-fold:

• to help students with support in settling into university life and
• to help with the practice of skills in English language use.

Added to these two main aims were also specific objectives such as:

• to help first year students share their concerns, anxieties and queries about university life.
• to assist in-coming students in adjusting to the particular demands of study required at university level.
• to promote students' self-confidence.
• to encourage students' development of supportive relationships with other students.
• to enable students to practise and develop professional skills such as the organisation, communication and sharing of ideas simply and effectively; the control and use of their knowledge; and the abilities to work interactively with other people and to respond to specific situations.
• to provide opportunities for students to increase their understanding of the subject and raise their awareness of their own learning.
• to allow senior students to benefit from the experience of having to identify and examine issues on particular areas and then explain them.
• to help students to evaluate their learning skills by working collaboratively.
• to provide a good environment for discussion in which students can compare and contrast each others' preferred ways of learning.
• It was hoped that these aims would be met by the first and third year students working collaboratively.

Implementation of the Project

In semester one 1998, the enrolment numbers for AESOL were thirty-one students in first year and six students in third year. In order for the project to help assist with English language skills the content of both the first and third year subjects was considered in order to structure this mentoring project. The first year subject concentrates on the four skills of communication of listening, speaking, reading and writing while the third year subject concentrates on the more specific linguistic analysis of the English language.

In the second week of semester the aims of the mentoring project were explained to the first and third year groups separately. They were also informed that they would be working in groups on specific assessable tasks relevant to their course.
Following were the specific tasks given to the students:

First Year Assessable Task:
Students in their assigned group were asked to interview their third year mentor to discuss and/or ask any questions about university life. The students were asked to prepare the questions and to tape the interaction. This would then form the basis of a listening comprehension task prepared by the group and completed by the whole first year class.

Third Year Assessable Task:
The third year students were asked to have a conversation with two of the first year students to discuss their impressions of university life in their first weeks. The task required that they tape this interaction and analyse the communication strategies used by the students which would be the basis of an oral presentation and a written essay.

Thus working on these tasks allowed the students to focus on the topic of university life while interacting and working collaboratively in the target language.

Formation of groups
Because of the enrolment numbers the groups were divided into approximately five first year students to one third year student, forming six groups in total. The first year students were asked to form their own groups because it was thought they may feel more comfortable being with students they may have already known or who were studying the same subjects. Each third year then was assigned a group at random.

Meetings
The groups met formally four times in the time-tabled first year class time; one hour of the two hour class was set aside for the mentoring project. For the third year students this caused problems at times due to either time-table clashes or other commitments, but on the whole the third year students managed to attend the whole group sessions.

Project Time-line:

**Week 2** All students were made aware of the aims and each year was given an outline of what each formal meeting entailed.

**Week 4** The first meeting of groups took place. This meeting was a "getting to know you session". The third year students were asked to introduce themselves, talk generally about their life, reasons for study at VUT and their goals. They then encouraged the first year students to introduce themselves. The third year students handed to their mentor group a sheet of "getting to know you" exercises which concentrated on their perceptions of University life as well as a general information about themselves. Each student was given time to complete it and then the mentor initiated a general discussion on responses.

Even though this meeting had been directed by the lecturer each mentor could progress through it as they wished. Many of the groups remained in the same room while others found other areas in the university to continue with their meeting.

**Week 6** At this meeting the first year students were to complete the interview section of their assessable task. Prior to this meeting class time had been set aside for the first year groups to decide on the questions they wished to ask their mentor.

They were given the following instructions:

- as a group decide the questions that you will ask your mentor.
- questions must be based on University life - difficulties they have encountered; things they enjoy about University; any improvements they would like to see at VUT etc.
- you can give the questionnaire earlier to your mentor.
the interview must be at least 10-12 minutes in length.
make sure that when you are taping it is done in a quiet area so there is no background noise.
each member of the group must take part in the interview process asking questions.
After you have taped the responses as a group you must prepare a worksheet for the class. The work
sheet must include comprehension questions as well as questions on vocabulary and expression use.
In class the taped interviews will be listened to and the prepared worksheets will be completed by all
students.

Week 7 During this meeting the third year student interviewed the students about their
perceptions of university life. The taped responses would be the basis for the mentor's assessable
task.

Weeks 8-9 In the remaining weeks time was given to the first year groups to work on the listening
comprehension task to be given to the class.

Week 10 Assessable tasks took place. The mentors were invited to attend the listening
comprehension sessions which took place over a period of two 2 hour classes. The first year groups
did put a lot of effort into these listening comprehension tasks; each student in the group prepared a
section based on the taped responses of their mentor. Some examples of the exercises included
comprehension questions; filling in gaps; definition exercises of particular vocabulary used and
specific grammatical questions. These classes also allowed for a general discussion about the issues
raised in the mentor groups.

The third year class presented their conversation analysis in class. However, the first year students
were unable to attend either due to time-table clashes or to the class being held during the evening.

Evaluation of the project
Questionnaires were given to all students at the completion of the project. The aim of the
questionnaire was to determine:
- the positive and negative aspects of the project
  - which issues were raised in the mentoring groups
- if speaking about and working on these issues helped in any way

A summary of responses follows:

Third Year Students
All six students thought that they gained a positive experience from this project. Responses
demonstrated that the experience helped them in the areas of social development and English
language skills.

Social skills
There was a range of responses in this area. The students stated that the project helped them with
negotiating and communication skills which they saw as a help with their future jobs. The project
also helped them in the area of interview techniques that allowed them to collaborate with different
students. Finally they stated that the project helped them gain a sense of achievement and confidence
in working and talking in front of small groups.

English language skills
Since their assessment task required that they organise the interview with the first year students and
then present an analysis of the spoken language as an assessment task; the students thought that the
project helped them with their speaking and analytical skills of the different styles of the spoken language.

When asked if they would be in further contact with their mentor group five students responded that they would. One could surmise from this that they had developed some type of bond with their group and felt comfortable with still maintaining contact even though the project had finished.

Some examples of responses were:

I met new students from other countries.

It helped me with my linguistics study and I am now aware of the different styles of spoken English.

It has helped to improve communication skills and interview techniques.

I have gained confidence in working in small groups.

I can develop my negotiating skills which is important in the future because I want to be a business woman.

It helped self-criticism skills during the answering process and later when listening to answers.

First Year Students

The students were also asked a range of questions and a range of responses were given. Firstly they were asked which were the issues discussed in their mentoring group and the responses given were:

- study and time management
- study methods and exam preparation
- general university facilities eg. library, computer and parking facilities
- note-taking during lectures
- language difficulties
- adaptation to new environment
- importance of friends in coping with pressure
- Student Learning Unit
- Student Union

When asked if working in a mentor group helped them to deal with these issues twenty-five out of the thirty-one respondents said that it did. They stated that discussing the issues helped them to realise that other students have the same concerns and that it is best to talk about the difficulties one has. Many said also that it helped them to understand university life in a better way as well as to deal with more practical issues such as getting suggestions to take notes and study for exams.

Some responses were:

Being with a senior student made us realise that the difficulties we go through are normal and life will be different once you move on from first year.

I have learnt to use different student facilities and studying methods to my advantage.

I understand better the facilities that are available in the University.

It has helped me to understand how to solve some difficulties.

I have a general and better picture of university life and study.

The remaining six students stated that discussing the issues did not help them for the following reasons:

Students have different ways of dealing with problems. Some problems had existed for a long time and still were not solved.

The students are still facing the same problems.
Problems must be solved individually.

To the question asking them what positive things they gained from the project, a variety of responses were given. These can be grouped into personal, social benefits and educational benefits.

**Personal and social benefits**

- more confidence

- realised that most students have similar problems and so feel less stressed

- it was the first time speaking to a senior student and enjoyed the experience of sharing information

- realised that language barrier is not important and that there is help

**Educational benefits**

- learnt different skills - how to do assignments; how to handle pressure and cope

- helped with listening and writing skills in English

- have seen an improvement in English listening and speaking skills

- obtained ideas on how to plan work, study and use library

When asked if they encountered any difficulties the only responses dealt with the difficulty of trying to find a common time so the whole group could meet and one student found it difficult working in the group.

Students were then asked to tick relevant statements on how the mentoring group helped them. Following are the results:

**Responses out of 31**

1. make new friends 20
2. feel more comfortable with university life 13
3. understand university life more easily 10
4. develop study skills 13
5. develop negotiating skills 7
6. learn to collaborate with other students 14
7. learn from the experiences of senior students 20
8. understand the English language better 10
9. speak English more confidently 11
10. be aware of different ways of speaking and writing in English 12
11. learn new skills in using the English language 13
12. none of the above 0
13. any other(s)? no responses

Similar to the third year students the first year students seem to have gained both social as well as English language skill gains. The majority of students found that working in a mentor group helped them make new friends; learn from the experiences of senior students and feel more confident with the English skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing.

Finally they were asked if they would be interested in being involved in a similar project next year and if they would be in further contact with their mentor in their own time.
Twenty students answered that they would be willing with the reasons ranging from that they felt it was a good opportunity to meet new people and make friends. Several students stated that they would be happy to help first year students because they realised that sharing ideas was a help and at the same time the project helped with their English skills. The remaining students who did not wish to be involved gave the reason that they did not feel confident with their spoken English. As for contact with their mentor eighteen students said they would continue seeing their mentor.

Conclusion

One can state that on the whole this mentoring project was a success since the majority of the first and third year students found it a positive experience. The project was valuable in that it was able to integrate peer mentoring with course content and link both to learning outcomes. Not only did it provide support to students it helped to enrich the learning experience for all participants.

Even though the students only met formally four times over the semester they still managed to gain social and educational benefits. The two main aims seem to have been achieved. The first year students did feel they had some support in settling into university life and the assigned task did make them feel that they were using and at the same time improving their English language use. As for the third year students, they enjoyed the interaction with their group and the task also made them concentrate on the specific communication strategies of non-English speaking background students.

The project worked well because there was an assessable component for both first and third year students. The students did not see this as a hindrance or disadavantage, rather it allowed the groups to work towards a specific goal.

Recommendations

- That first and third year class time be time-tabled at the same time once a week in order for the groups to be able to meet more regularly. This would allow an even closer bond to develop.
- That two lecturers be involved - each involved with a year level. This would allow for working collaboratively in teaching content and assessment procedures.
- That third year students have more participation into the listening comprehension sessions, giving them the opportunity to comment on their language use and thoughts about university life to the whole first year group.
- That this type of mentoring project be encouraged to be trialed in other majors in which there is a relation in subject content in first and third years.

References


Candy, P., Crebert,G., & O'Leary, J. (1994) Developing Lifelong Learners through Undergraduate Education, NBEET Report No. 28 AGPS.


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