"THE STRENGTH OF TWO: A STUDY OF EFFECTIVENESS IN PEER TUTORING TO IMPROVE THE WRITING OF LOW PROFICIENCY STUDENTS"

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TABLE OF CONTENTS</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF TABLES</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF FIGURES</td>
<td>vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS</td>
<td>viii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>ix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRAK</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

1.0 An Overview .......................................................... 1  
1.1 Background of the study .......................................... 1  
1.2 Statement of the Problem .......................................... 2  
1.3 Scope of the Study .................................................. 3  
1.4 Research Objectives ................................................ 4  
1.5 Research Questions .................................................. 4  
1.6 Hypothesis ............................................................. 4  
1.7 Significance of the Study .......................................... 5  
1.8 Definitions of Key Terms .......................................... 6  

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0 Introduction .......................................................... 8  
2.1 An Overview of Peer Tutoring ...................................... 8  
2.1.1 What is Peer Tutoring? .......................................... 8  
2.1.2 What Makes Peer Tutoring Effective? .......................... 10  
2.1.3 Benefit of Peer Tutoring ...................................... 12  
2.2 Related Research of the Effectiveness of Peer Tutoring .... 15  
2.3 Present Study in Relation to Other Related Studies .......... 16  
2.3.1 Similarity in Present Study Compared to Other Related Studies .................................................. 17  
2.3.2 Differences in Present Study Compared to Other Related Studies .................................................. 17
III RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.0 Introduction .................................................................................. 19
3.1 Subjects of the Study .................................................................... 19
3.2 Data Collection Instruments .............................................................. 20
  3.2.1 Secondary Data ........................................................................... 20
  3.2.2 Lesson Plans ............................................................................... 20
  3.2.3 Marking Scheme .......................................................................... 21
  3.2.4 Semi-structured Interview (Students) ........................................... 21
  3.2.5 Observation ............................................................................... 22
3.3 Data Collection Procedure ............................................................... 23
  3.3.1 Getting Started .......................................................................... 24
  3.3.2 Identifying Subjects .................................................................... 24
  3.3.3 Teaching Session ......................................................................... 24
  3.3.4 Briefing Session ......................................................................... 25
  3.3.5 Reflection Session ....................................................................... 27
  3.3.6 Interview .................................................................................. 28
3.4 Data Analysis ................................................................................. 28
3.5 Summary ....................................................................................... 29

IV DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

4.0 Introduction .................................................................................. 30
4.1 The Subjects (TEs & Ss) .................................................................. 30
  4.1.1 Student Respondents (Tutees or weak students) ......................... 31
4.2 Summary of the Comparison of Marks Obtained by Subjects in Pair Work Task and Peer Tutoring Task .............................................................. 32
4.3 Summary of the Informal Interview with the Weak Students and Classroom Observation ................................................................. 33
  4.3.1 Section A: Students’ experience in using pair work and peer tutoring ................................................................. 33
  4.3.2 Section B: To find out students’ views ........................................... 35
  4.3.3 Section C: What Ss say about their pairs or peers ....................... 36
4.4 The findings from the classroom observations .................................. 39
4.5 Conclusion ...................................................................................... 44

V SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.0 Introduction .................................................................................. 46
5.1 Summary of the Study .................................................................... 46
5.2 Summary of the Findings/Conclusions ........................................... 47
5.3 Implications of the Findings ............................................................. 48
  5.3.1 General Implication ................................................................. 49
  5.3.2 Implications for ESL Classroom ............................................... 50
  5.3.3 Implications for the Learners .................................................... 51
# List of Tables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tables</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>Summary of marks and the marks comparisons for pair work and peer tutoring tasks</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3.1</td>
<td>Students’ past experience</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3.2</td>
<td>Indication of students’ views</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3.3</td>
<td>The views of their pairs and peers</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4.1</td>
<td>Finding from Observation 1: Pair work</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4.2</td>
<td>Finding from Observation 2: Peer tutoring</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# List of Figures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figures</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>Data collection procedure</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ESL – English as a Second Language

Jane_\textsubscript{n} – n\textsuperscript{th} Female student (n = 1 to 18)

John_\textsubscript{n} – n\textsuperscript{th} Male student (n = 1 to 8)

pp – page

S_\textsubscript{n} – n\textsuperscript{th} Student respondent (n = 1 to 6)

SPM – Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia

TE_\textsubscript{n} – n\textsuperscript{th} Tutee (n = 1 to 6)
ABSTRACT

“The Strength of Two: A Study of Effectiveness in Peer Tutoring to Improve the Writing of Low Proficiency Students”

Chung Ching Ying

In Malaysian curriculum, writing is one of the most essential skills. Writing is important in order to pass the SPM writing examinations. Although writing is emphasized in school, students are still having difficulties to write competently. Most of the students are unable to write or make meanings.

This study aims to discuss and prove the effectiveness of peer tutoring to improve writing skill of the weaker students in an upper secondary school in Kuching. It also looks at the weak students’ perceptions or views about pair work and peer tutoring.

The subjects of the study were twelve (12) out of twenty-six (26) students selected from Form 4A. The data collected was through marks obtained from the descriptive writing task of the six weak students in both the pair work activity and the peer tutoring activity, semi-structured interview with the six weak students and the observation of the discussion session of both pair work and peer tutoring activity.

The findings of the study showed that students performed better after going through the discussion session of peer tutoring activity compared to after going through the discussion session of pair work activity. Majority of the students expressed their view in favour of peer tutoring rather than pair work approach in helping them with their writing task. Generally, the students prefer the peer tutoring approach.

The hypothesis of the study showed that weaker students performed better in descriptive writing task after going through peer tutoring activity compared to pair work activity.

The study concluded by suggesting some recommendations based on the findings. The study can be further conducted on the problems faced by teachers when conducting peer tutoring activity in their schools, the problem faced by the tutors and the tutees in using peer tutoring method and others.
ABSTRAK

"Dua Kekuatan: Kajian tentang Keberkesanan ‘Peer Tutoring’ dalam Memperbaiki Prestasi Penulisan Pelajar-pelajar Lemah”

Chung Ching Ying

Dalam kurikulum Malaysia, penulisan adalah kemahiran yang paling penting. Penulisan adalah penting untuk memastikan para pelajar lulus dalam peperiksaan SPM. Walaupun penulisan adalah ditekankan di sekolah, pelajar-pelajar adalah kurang cekap dalam kemahiran ini. Kebanyakan pelajar tidak dapat menulis dengan cekap.

Kajian ini bertujuan untuk membuktikan keberkesanan tentang ‘peer tutoring’ dalam memperbaiki prestasi penulisan pelajar-pelajar lemah dari sebuah sekolah menengah di Kuching. Kajian ini juga meneliti persepsi atau pandangan pelajar-pelajar tentang kaedah ‘pair work’ dan kaedah ‘peer tutoring’.

Kajian ini merangkumi dua belas (12) daripada dua puluh enam (26) orang pelajar Tingkatan 4A sebagai responden-responden. Data-data yang digunakan dalam kajian ini terdiri daripada markah-markah yang diperolehi melalui penulisan diskriptif oleh pelajar-pelajar lemah dalam aktiviti ‘pair work’ dan ‘peer tutoring’, temuduga dengan enam orang pelajar lemah dan pemerhatian dalam sesi perbincangan aktiviti ‘pair work’ dan ‘peer tutoring’.

Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahawa pelajar-pelajar mempunyai prestasi yang lebih baik selepas melalui sesi perbincangan aktiviti ‘peer tutoring’ berbanding dengan selepas melalui sesi perbincangan aktiviti ‘pair work’. Sebahagian besar daripada pelajar meluahkan pendapat bahawa mereka lebih menyokong atau menyukai kaedah ‘peer tutoring’ daripada kaedah ‘pair work’ dalam membantu memperbaiki prestasi penulisan mereka. Pada dasarnya, pelajar-pelajar lebih suka akan kaedah ‘peer tutoring’.

Hipotesis kajian menunjukkan bahawa prestasi pelajar lemah dalam penulisan diskriptif selepas melalui perbincangan ‘peer tutoring’ adalah lebih baik berbanding dengan selepas melalui ‘pair work’.

Pada akhir kajian, cadangan kajian ialah ia boleh dijalankan dengan lebih lanjut berdasarkan masalah yang dihadapi oleh para guru semasa menggunakan kaedah ‘peer tutoring’ ini didalam aktiviti pembelajaran, masalah yang dihadapi oleh ‘tutors’ dan ‘tutees’ semasa menggunakan kaedah ‘peer tutoring’ tersebut dan sebagainya.
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.0 An Overview

This chapter discusses the background of the study, the problem, the research objective, the research question, the hypothesis of the research, the significance of the research, and the definitions of the key terms.

1.1 Background of the Study

This research aims to discuss and investigate the effectiveness of peer tutoring to improve writing skill of the weaker students in an upper secondary school. This research will also compare peer tutoring and pair work to see which methods is more effective in improving the weaker students' writing skill.

In Malaysian curriculum, writing is one of the most essential skills. The students have to master the skill in order to pass most of the examinations either in higher or in further education. Unfortunately, in most of the schools, writing is the skill most students are least proficient in (Nesamalar, Saratha & Teh; 1997). They have lots of students who are still unable to write or make meanings. There are having difficulties in expressing their ideas in the form of written language. Even if they can write, they are unable to put their
ideas cohesively and coherently. According to the Ministry of Education, Malaysia (1991), many students of English consider writing as the most difficult language skill to master.

Pair work has been one of the methodologies used in writing activities by some of the teachers in school. Pair work refers to working together in pairs to produce the learning goals; for example in a writing task.

Pair work is one of the approaches in learning but another alternative for enhancing weak students’ proficiency in learning is through peer tutoring. Peer tutoring will benefit not only the weak students but also the good students. When proper peer tutoring is being carried out, weak students can progress in their learning. To counter writing problems, pair work can be done but better approaches that can be considered or used is peer tutoring.

Even if some students are unable to write, there are still some who can write. Why not use the “human resource (those who are able to write) ready at hand and it is surely the function of remedial teachers to train and deploy this potential force of helpers” (Dickinson, 1972).

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Essay writing is traditionally regarded as the most difficult of academic skills (Wall, Nickson, R.R. Jordan, Allwright & Houghton; 1988). Writing is usually given the most emphasis in the teaching and learning process in most of the schools. Although writing was given the most emphasis on, there are still weaknesses occurring. Students are
exposed to pair work in writing but how far does the learning take part in pair work? Apart from that, the time given to each individual student is not sufficient due to time constraints of a teacher in a classroom. A teacher is only given 40 minutes to 80 minutes to complete his or her lesson. Can a teacher entertain all weak students in just the time given in class? A teacher cannot spare enough time to entertain the weaker students in class what more to mention pair work. If pair work is part of the activity in class, the time allocated will not be sufficient enough to carry out the pair work activity. At the end, one of the pair will have to finish the task alone. Usually the weak students will not volunteer to finish the task as they are not confident to do so or his or her partner is not confident enough to let him or her to finish the task. As a result, some of the students still could not write fluently even though they have gone through the pair work approach. Therefore one of the problem faced by the students is writing skill.

1.3 Scope of the Study

This research will not look at listening, speaking and reading skill. It will only focus on writing skill and it is also further narrowed down to a type of writing; which is descriptive writing. It is basically focusing on description of scene.

This research will also look at peer tutoring and how it can help weak students in improving their performance in descriptive writing.
1.4 Research Objectives

This research focuses on the effectiveness of peer tutoring towards the learning of a specific language skill: writing skill. This study hopes to prove that peer tutoring gives positive effects in improving writing of the least or inexperienced students, in short, the weaker students. This research will also look at peer tutoring as compared to pair work. It is to prove that peer tutoring is much more effective and beneficial than pair work.

The objectives of this research is to find out:

a) whether weaker students perform better after going through the discussion for peer tutoring activity compared to after going through the discussion for pair work activity in descriptive writing skill.

b) the students’ reactions or perceptions of peer tutoring activity and pair work activity.

1.5 Research Questions

a) Does peer tutoring activity help weaker students to perform better than pair work activity in descriptive writing task?

b) What are the weaker students’ opinions about peer tutoring activity and pair work activity?

1.6 Hypothesis

The Alternative hypothesis:-

Weaker students will perform better in descriptive writing task after peer tutoring activity compared to after pair work activity.
The Null hypothesis:

Weaker students will perform better in descriptive writing task after pair work activity compared to after peer tutoring activity.

1.7 Significance of the Study

The significance of this research is to prove that peer tutoring is effective in improving the writing skill of weak students. It also wants to prove that weak students are able to perform better or improve their writing skill after going through the tutoring session. With this research being carried out, students are able to experience a new approach (peer tutoring) in their school to improve their writing skill. With this research, it is hoped that this approach can be recommended or implemented to the school as a means to improve the standard of the writing skill and also as an alternative for the pair work approach.

Another significance of this research is to see the comparison between peer tutoring and pair work. This research wants to prove that peer tutoring gives better performance than pair work approach in writing skill. It compares between peer tutoring and pair work to see whether peer tutoring for weak students does benefit them more than pair work.
1.8 Definitions of Key Terms

For the purpose of this research, the following terms are defined as follows:

a) Peer tutoring

Peer tutoring here focuses on students helping other students’ method. These students are all in the same age category. Peer tutoring is characterized by accepting specific role: at any point someone has the job of a tutor while the others are taking the job as the tutees. Peer tutoring is highly focused on the curriculum content (Topping; 1996).

In this research, peer tutoring is an activity where the tutors (good students) will be paired up with the tutees (weak students). The tutors will help and tutor the tutees in the given task. Later, each individual student is to write his or her task separately and individually.

b) Pair work

Pair work in this research refers to two students; one from high-level proficiency student and one weak student will be paired up and given a task. The pairs are given time to discuss the task and each individual student is to write his or her task separately and individually.

c) Writing

Writing here refers to the creation of original text using individual’s intellectual and linguistic competence rather than copying someone else’s productions. Writing is seen as forms of written compositions such as descriptive, narrative, argumentative, discussion
and other forms of compositions. It is not focusing on making sentences, fill in the blanks or practicing handwriting (Hudelson; 1988). In this research, one writing skill will be focused on – that is writing description of scenes.

d) Language features

The language features in this research look at basic grammar. Language features look at descriptive words – adjectives, adverbs, and others.
CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0 Introduction

This chapter reviews the studies related to Peer Tutoring. This chapter will also look at what is peer tutoring, how peer tutoring is effective as well as the benefits of peer tutoring.

2.1 An Overview of Peer Tutoring

2.1.1 What is Peer Tutoring?

Ask any parent or teacher to name the strongest influence on children, and the most frequent response will be ‘peer group’ (Judith, 1998). From this assumption, exist a learning strategy known as peer tutoring; a group of students who get into study groups and study with their friends and help each other if someone does not know how to do their work. According to Sheila (1994), the purpose of the peer tutoring strategy is to enable both tutor and tutee to gain from the experience of one – to – one teaching and engage actively in the learning process.

Before looking in depth at the basic concept of Peer Tutoring, it is important to look at some of the definitions given by some of the authors or
researchers in this field. This will help us to have better understanding of this learning strategy.

According to Sheila (1994), Peer tutoring is a type of cooperative learning in which both ‘teacher’ and ‘student’ benefit. She further claimed that it is not a new concept. Students helping other students learn have a long history in America education. Bloom (1976) and Sherman (1987) also claims that peer tutoring, whereby one student acts as the teacher of a peer, is an old strategy whose use is reappearing with increasing frequency. It is an instructional strategy in which students teach other students, who are approximately the same age (Topping, 1996). Goodlad (1979) also defines it as the system of instruction in which students help each other and learn by teaching as the basis to the understanding of the work. Peer tutoring is based on the premise that all learning is student–centred, and recognised that with a continued reduction of the unit of resource it is easy to lose the centrality of the learner in the process of education (Wallage, 1996).

Peer tutoring offers tutors the opportunity to review and restructure the knowledge they possess as they re-present it to students younger than themselves. It can give anyone whose act is a tutorial role this rewarding revelation (Goodlad & Hirst, 1989). It is characterised by specific role taking: at any point someone has the job of tutor, while the others are in role as tutee(s). Typically, it has high focus on curriculum content (Topping, 1996). He further adds that, peer tutoring recognises that the most effective learning environment is one where learning is an
active process fully involving the learner, and can be strengthened by a fully collaborative approach with tutor and tutee. In other words, effective interaction and cooperation among the learners will make learning more effective and meaningful.

Apart from that, peer tutoring is a particularly effective for those engaged in the tutoring role to acquire broad educational goals (e.g. development of communication skills; development of a sense of personal adequacy; and ability to co-operate better with their own teachers) (Magin, & Churches, 1995). They further added that, it is also effective for those students who are taught by their peers (tutees). Having a peer as tutor is seen as providing a climate in which students can feel less inhibited about asking questions and seeking help, and are able to be more open about what they do not understand.

Therefore, it is very clear that the increase use of peer tutoring may be attributed to its effectiveness, its benefits for tutor, tutee, and teacher, the presence in rooms of many students with the needs for one-to-one attention, and the increase in split grades (Bloom, 1976). The benefits of peer tutoring will be presented in the next section of this chapter.

2.1.2 What Makes Peer Tutoring Effective?

Peer tutoring is found more effective because of some reasons. According to Allen (1976), one of the main reasons is due to the fact that children have certain
advantages over adults in teaching peers. They can easily understand tutees' problems because they are cognitively closer. Cohen (1986) indicated that the fact that their 'cognitive framework' is similar might also help peer tutors present subject matter in the terms that their tutees understand.

Apart from that, peer tutoring can be more effective as peer tutors can effectively model study skills to the tutee such as concentrating on the material, organising work habits, and asking questions. Cohen (1986) notes that, similarity between tutor and tutee can increase the influence of modelling. She further adds that an at-risk student may easily identify with a student relatively close in age, particularly one of the same ethnic or social background, than with an adult. Higher status also promotes the effect of modelling. Due to that fact, students learn better with their peers.

Why peer tutoring is more effective may also be due to the fact that tutors who have struggled academically may be more patient and understanding that those who have not (Lippitt, 1976). In other words, the tutors understand the tutees better as they themselves have experienced the same problem. Therefore, they can be more patient with the weak students (Gaustad, 1992).

Finally, (Stofferahn, 1988) claimed that peer tutoring often improve the overall school atmosphere. Teachers and parents found peer tutoring to reduce competition and create a more supportive classroom environment. Stofferahn
further adds that in peer tutoring, students seemed much more accepting of their peers and classmates.

Therefore, based on these advantages, peer tutoring is more effective compared to other learning strategies. This is due to the fact that students learn better when learning from friends of their own age and ability.

2.1.3 Benefit of Peer Tutoring

Research on peer tutoring indicates that intervention is relatively effective in improving both 'tutor' and 'tutee' academic and social development (Cohen, Kulik & Kulik, 1982; Hedin, 1987; Goodlad, 1989; Greenwood, Delquadri, & Hall, 1989; Bernad, 1990 & Swengel, 1991). The increase in the use of peer tutoring may be attributed to its effectiveness, its benefits for tutor, tutee, and teacher (Sherman, 1986). She further adds that this learning strategy may be more effective than adult tutors. This is due to the fact that, they are often more directive, are familiar with the material, understand the frustration of their fellow student, speak the same language, and use more meaningful and age-approximated examples. Thus, both tutor and tutee benefit in terms of academic improvement and social skill development when using this strategy.

As stated by Bloom (1992), during the 1960s and 1970s, a large amount of research documented the effectiveness of using peer tutoring for disadvantaged students, particularly those from minority groups who were achieving below their
ability levels. For instance, today, a number of dropout prevention programs serving at-risk children are using this strategy and finding it to be effective in promoting student achievement, improving attendance among at-risk students, improve academic skills, encourage critical and higher order thinking skills, and provide opportunities to practice and improve communication skills and work habits. And most importantly, improving student attitudes toward learning and school (Cardinas et al, 1991; Cohen, 1986).

Sherman (1987) also claims that, according to studies on peer tutoring, it is found that both tutor and tutee show academic and attitudinal improvement as a result of participating in the tutoring process. In other words, not only students who are tutored benefit, the students who do the tutoring also benefit often more than those who are being tutored. Apart from that (Goodlad, & Hirst, 1989), peer tutoring often offers tutors the opportunity to review and restructure the knowledge they possess as they re-present it to other students. For instance, as tutors, students relearn the material that might not have been mastered fully the first time. Thus, they further develop and refine their knowledge and skills. This will lead to better achievement in their test.

Sheila (1994) has listed several benefits when students learning using this strategy. Among them, include: