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Near-Peer Tutoring in an ESOL Music Project

TEACHERS AND STUDENTS IN ADULT LEARNING PROGRAMS SOMETIMES EXPERIENCE a sense of academic isolation and absence of community. To address these two issues, our two ESOL classes in a university-based adult education program worked together on a music project using "near-peer tutoring." Near-peer tutoring, which reflects an "andragogical model" or learner-centered instruction (Knowles 1984), guided the development of the music project by the students. While the notion of near-peer tutoring has been slowly integrated into the field of teaching ESOL, it has been widely accepted in the higher education setting, where it can be effectively modified for the adult ESOL learner. This article presents the progression of the music project from its introduction to the culminating program ceremony, identifies the five elements described by Imel (1994) for successful adult learning, and discusses the affective-sociological and cognitive-linguistic benefits of near-peer tutoring.

Definition of "near-peer tutoring" and the student population

Tutoring is a system for learning in which students work together on a one-to-one basis to acquire knowledge and skills. *Co-peer tutoring,* which is more common in the educational setting, occurs when students function predominantly on the same level. In contrast, *near-peer tutoring* is a form of learning in which one of the partners is more advanced in the content area than the other partner.

In our music project, the near-peer tutoring was used with two different levels of adult ESOL classes, Level 1 (beginning) and Level 6 (advanced). With the exception of one French-speaking student, all 14 students in the ESOL 1 class were Spanish-speaking, and they ranged in age from 18 to 45. Their length of stay in the United States ranged from 4 months to 15 years. A majority of the students were homemakers who expressed a desire to learn English in order to overcome their alienation from society. Their environment allowed little opportunity for interaction in English, and for most of them, the class was the only occasion to communicate in the target language. Languages represented by the 16 students in the ESOL 6 class were Spanish, French, Portuguese, and Japanese. Their age range and length of residence in the United States were similar to those of the ESOL 1 class. Many of them were in the work force and were motivated to improve their English for their jobs. Others were parents seeking to help their children with their studies. The beginning class met four times a week for four hours each day; the advanced class met three times weekly for four hours each day.

The project

The music project initially consisted of a song to be learned by both classes, with the lyrics (see appendix) and melody composed by a student in the advanced class. Each teacher introduced the project to her classroom to determine student interests and abilities. The music project began in the middle of the semester, after a sense of community had developed within each of the classrooms among students and between students and their teacher. Over the course of the half-semester, the project evolved from a single song to choral speaking and corresponding gestures, which were per-

formed at a year-end ceremony. The project, which is described in the following section, was mostly initiated by the students. The two classes met together two hours weekly for six weeks. Everyone was required to participate.

When the project started, our general expectation was that the students would benefit from interacting with each other during the learning process and that the advanced students would take on the teaching role as near-peer tutors. In fact, this process became reciprocal as beginning and advanced students took on the roles of both teacher and learner. The specific outcomes we anticipated included cognitive-linguistic benefits in vocabulary, pronunciation, intonation, and comprehension; and affective-sociological benefits in negotiation skills, social relationships, and individual and group sense of accomplishment.

The process

In contrast to the term *pedagogy,* which is generally used to describe "the science of teaching children," *andragogy* refers to the "art and science of helping adults learn" (Knowles 1970, 38). The term *andragogy* was first introduced in the mid-1960s by Malcolm Knowles to describe adult learning as a process of self-directed inquiry. Knowles (1980, 1984) further developed this idea into the andragogical model or learner-centered instruction, which is considered one of the most effective ways to teach adults for a number of reasons. First, adults have a need to be self-directing in their learning process; second, they have a diversity of experiences that can serve as a resource for learning; third, they enter the learning process with a task-centered orientation to learning, and finally, they are motivated by intrinsic rather than extrinsic factors. Imel (1994) took these four characteristics of adult learning into consideration and provided five suggestions for an effective learning environment. These suggestions, which reflect Knowles' andragogical model, support the needs of learners and help create a successful partnership between learners and teachers. We developed our music project within the framework of Imel's suggestions as follows:

1. Capitalize on the first session

For the first session, Level 6 students welcomed Level 1 students to their classroom by writing greetings on the board. The stu-

dents from both classes sat in a large circle, began by introducing themselves, and then learned the first few lines of the song as a whole group. Next, we asked the students to sing a couple of lines of the song individually while the other students listened and participated in placing them into the appropriate vocal group (soprano, alto, and bass). Once the students were placed in the three groups, they practiced reading the lyrics of the song without music.

2. Incorporate group work

Most of the class time was spent in group work. Students were encouraged to pair up with a student from the other class or work either in small groups or their vocal groups to complete the day's task. Their task included memorization, pronunciation, intonation, and coordination of gestures for the song. When in small groups, they took turns being the group leader for the day. When they worked in a near-peer arrangement, at first the advanced students exerted the leadership role. The beginning students felt comfortable with their peer teachers, knowing that they had similar language learning experiences. In time, there was a switching back and forth of roles as each student developed greater confidence. Throughout the process, there was a mutuality of purpose and motivation. While the students worked in groups, we observed, assisted, and assessed student progress. As co-facilitators, we identified problem areas that needed to be corrected either within the small group or with the class as a whole.

3. Break the traditional classroom routine

By incorporating near-peer tutoring into our music project, we created many opportunities to break away from the traditional classroom routine. First, two different classes coming together once a week provided a different physical space and learning environment because the students met in each other's classrooms as well as in a designated rehearsal space prior to the actual performance. Second, the use of song as the project material and the preparation of the song for the end-of-the-year ceremony was a novel classroom experience. Third, since students worked mostly in groups with their group leader, the teacher no

longer played a traditional role as the only *knower* of the learning materials.

4. Use humor

The students were challenged by the need to memorize the entire song and the physical gestures that went along with it. One important task was to memorize a portion of the song and perform it in front of their peers, which generated successes, mistakes, and laughter. When the co-teachers made mistakes in directing the students, there were other opportunities for humor.

5. Support opportunities for student-initiated problem solving

In small groups, often with a student leader, students were able to target problematic areas of the task at their own pace and in their own way. During the process, students decided that they wanted to add choral speaking and physical gestures to the song for a more interesting performance. This required them to generate and agree upon sentences for the spoken portions and gestures to go with the song.

The benefits

Affective-Sociological

The power of near-peer tutoring lies in its impact on the affective-sociological components of adult learning. Adult learners are "outside the 'regular' learning community of the university"; they may feel "isolation…on many campuses" (Schneider 1989, 64). Bringing adult learners together encourages an ambiance of support and comfort that helps them feel safe in the learning environment, develop bonds with each other, and thereby enhance their ability to learn. They recognize that all learners experience successes and challenges, understand that the learning process is ongoing, benefit from the perspective of their peers, and as a result, lower their *affective filters* (Krashen 1982), that is, the barriers to learning arising from fear and inhibition. Additionally, changing the physical space helps add and maintain interest for the students (Apps, 1991). As the students moved from classroom to rehearsal room and back, the novelty of the new spaces furthered their enthusiasm for the project. At the same time, any sense of vulnerability from being in a new venue was assuaged by the supportive relationships they had developed with each other.

An example of how a student's affective filter is lowered occurred during the initial stages of the music project. One of the students in the beginning ESOL class said she found the project "childish." It was our belief that this student did not feel safe or comfortable with the learning environment, which resulted in an inhibition that prevented her from learning. Initially, her fears, apparently masked as disinterest, were calmed by her peers as she continued to participate, albeit reluctantly. As the project developed, the pull of social relationships and academic stimulation was sufficient to keep her involved, and she ultimately sang with pleasure at the end-of-the-year ceremony.

The effectiveness of near-peer tutoring was evident in the joy that was transmitted during the learning process. Because there were three vocal groups of near-peer learners, they supported each other not only within their specific group but also across groups. Often, one group would perform in practice for the other groups, receiving "bravos" from their near-peer audience. The sociology of the adult near-peer tutoring environment was one of collaboration and compassion.

At the same time, the peer learners identified areas that needed strengthening in their performances. They acknowledged when there was more work to be accomplished, whether in pronunciation, memorization, or choreography of physical gestures. They became confident critics of their own work and that of their peers. Learning became an active empowering process for them as individuals. They recognized their autonomy and were free to direct themselves (Knowles, 1984).

Cognitive-Linguistic

Near-peer tutoring produces cognitive-linguistic benefits for the adult learner. Adults may seek to learn out of pure curiosity or a desire for self-realization, or they may be pushed into a learning environment by work requirements or family needs. Whatever the motivation, the process of near-peer tutoring is an effective tool for cognitive growth.

Developing listening and pronunciation skills are essential cognitive components in learning a song. In other words, learning a song is not just about learning oral language, but also about developing the ability to process text and understand meaning. Learners may approach the task by "…[B]ottom-up processing where the listener builds up the sounds into words, sentences and meaning" or by "[T]op-down processing where the listener uses background knowledge to understand the meaning of a message" (Schoepp, 2001). Near-peer tutoring enables students to learn from each other's method of processing and to experiment with listening for comprehension. At the onset of the music project, we facilitated cognitive growth by discussing vocabulary and pronunciation with the students. The peer groups then elaborated on their understanding by discussing semantics from their own perspectives and experiences, and by practicing pronunciation and intonation of words and sentences. One example that demonstrates how the students attacked semantics occurred with the word *soar*. To express their understanding of the word, the students fluttered around the classroom with their "wings" spread open in an imitation of butterflies.

The students' musical presentation was interspersed with choral speaking related to the message of each stanza. Through their spoken words and performance, the learners became true partners in their acquisition of knowledge. Together, they decided "how to carry out the learning process (direction) and their competence to do so (support)" (Pratt 1988, cited in Imel 1994a). Initially, individual students were chosen to deliver each set of spoken lines. After several trials, the learners opted for near-peer pairs to perform the choral speaking. Ultimately, the peers chose to speak the lines in unison as vocal groups. Peer directing of the learning process reduced the stress often associated with pronunciation and memorization; therefore, the choral speaking lines were learned with relative ease.

Automaticity, defined by Gatbonton and Segalowitz (1988) as "a component of language fluency which involves both knowing what to say and producing language rapidly without pauses," is a clearly identifiable cognitive-linguistic benefit of using singing as a vehicle for language learning. The near-peer relationship enables adult learners to develop automaticity in a nurturing, creative, and goal-oriented environment. Students practiced ceaselessly in their efforts to develop accuracy and fluency in the sung and spoken words.

Conclusion

Using near-peer tutoring as the methodology for the music project was a reciprocal learning experience for both students and teachers. The students obtained affective-sociological and cognitive-linguistic benefits, and we teachers gained valuable insights into the feasibility of near-peer tutoring in an ESOL environment. In terms of learning strategies and processes, the students learned as much from one another as they did from us. This process helped give them "voice" and, therefore, a feeling of empowerment. The music project was an example of true learner-centered education in that it enabled our students to be self-directing. At the same time, we did not abdicate our roles as trusted facilitators of the learning process. We recognized and accepted the evolutionary nature of near-peer tutoring as the music project took shape. We witnessed the joy of learning when the students performed the song at the end-of-the-year ceremony in front of hundreds of people. This music project crystallized our understanding that the more we are aware of the learning processes of our students, the more adept we can become at providing a learning environment that is risk-taking, exploratory, and comforting for our students.

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APPENDIX | THE SONG: **READING**

Near-Peer Tutoring in an ESOL Music Project • *Tamara Kirson* and *Jung-Yoon Lee*

Reading and reading,
Time after time.
Can you find the meaning
In what the author wrote?

(Reading is meaning!)*

Reading and reading,
Time after time.
To have your mind wide open
And learn what others know.

(Reading is learning!)

Reading and reading,
Time after time.
To enjoy so many worlds
And soar like a butterfly.

(Reading is exploring!)

Reading and reading,
Time after time.
To enrich your vocabulary
And speak so others understand.
(Reading is speaking!)

Reading and reading,

And reading by yourself.
That is the perfect way
To help your English and speak well.
That is the perfect way
To help your English and speak well.

(We love English! We love New York!)

*Words in parentheses were choral speaking, accompanied by gestures.