Language Peer Helpers: What Effect Does it Have?
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Abstract
Elective teachers are given the task of teaching every level of learner from the gifted to the emotionally disturbed, with up to 30 students. This research is based on guided peer mentoring/helpers in Work and Family Studies labs. Peer language helpers were paired with students with limited English skills in order to guide them through the classroom assignments using English and their native language. Students in the classes involved include Vietnamese, Urdu, and Spanish speaking students. This use of the language peer helpers technique aided students who have limited English language skills adjust more quickly to the demands of the academic curriculum. It had a positive effective on the entire class as well. Both ESL students and general education students in the same classes demonstrated less misunderstanding and more classroom success. Classroom behavior also improved.

Introduction
This study focuses on the use of language peer helpers in a Work and Family Studies elective program. Our program attempts to support the core subject area and to reinforce the standards addressed in the Virginia State Standards of Learning (SOLs) so that we might help improve student test scores as much as possible. Along with the expected safety, cooking, nutrition, and sewing, we spend a lot of time on Standard measurements (inches, yards, and fractions there of—gallons, quarts, pints, cups, ounces). We also cover percentages with graphs and charts for levels of nutrients in the foods these teens consume. To successfully complete assignments for this class, students needed to be able to:

- Read and comprehend the content
- Follow step-by-step instructions
- Complete self evaluation if their work

Statement of the Problem
In contrast to the core subject areas, where English as a Second Language (ESL) students could be grouped as much as possible according to English language ability, it was nearly impossible to do this with elective classes such as Physical Education, Shop, Computer Lab, and Work and Family studies. This presented me with the challenge of teaching students of both multiple ability and language levels in one classroom.

As each school year progressed, it became obvious to me that my ESL students were totally frustrated by language issues – to the extent that they failed
to engage in the learning activity and just sat and watched as the rest of the class participated. I needed to find a way to help my ESL students engage in the academic lessons, to learn to experience the fun of learning by doing, and to learn English along the way.

The purpose of my research, therefore, was to find a better way to teach 6th, 7th, and 8th graders with little or no English proficiency who were in the same classes with general education students of all academic levels. Eventually, the technique I decided to try was some form of peer-tutoring.

Locating the Proper Technique

My classroom research began taking form during the first semester of the school year. My initial plan for this research project was to use translation dictionaries with my students. I based this idea on a personal experience from my past. In the summer of 1973, my father (US Army) received orders to move our family to Bamberg, Germany. Our family was very excited about having the opportunity to go to Germany. We purchased German/English dictionaries and immediately began to familiarize ourselves with the language.

I purchased 8 Spanish/English dictionaries for the classroom and began using them. Many times my translations were comical because I chose the wrong word in context. Yet this did not bother me and the students loved it. They knew I was trying and began using more spoken English to me even in the hallways to and from class.

Yet I eventually realized that using dictionaries was a setback. The dictionaries for the Vietnamese and Urdu languages were very expensive and hard to find. They were even on back order for Amazon.com customers.

Maybe there was another way to help make the content I was teaching accessible to my ESL students. An interesting event happened in one of my classes. In one class group of 26 students, four of the students had little or no English skills. At one point, I asked for language helper volunteers. Only one student volunteered to help. As I paired this student with an ESL student I watched as they worked together as a team. Immediately, there was an improvement in the ESL students’ performances.

If translation dictionaries were not a practical solution, perhaps peer-tutoring techniques might work. There were quite a number of approaches from which I might choose. My initial search for peer-tutoring techniques led me to explore techniques in cooperative learning groups. In some cases, groups could be formed so that students were more personally engaged in the learning process. In other cases, peer tutoring programs allowed students to become “teachers” in an after school timeframe. I began to think about how I might group my students to create a system of peer language helpers/mentors within my classroom. I found a 1975 study involving teachers who had both Korean and Spanish speaking students in their classrooms. Alelia Akigbe had too many students and not enough teachers, so she began pairing students of high academic ability with ESL students who had not yet mastered English.

Based on the successes described in her study, I decided to use the language peer helpers technique she described. Language peer helpers is a
Implementation of Language Peer Helpers

Second semester in my classroom was a very different story – for a number of reasons. The challenge to reach my ESL students had grown immensely. Now I needed to find a way to teach Spanish, Vietnamese and Urdu students with little or no English language skills – all in one group of 29 students. At first I searched for dictionaries, but to no avail.

I quickly asked for volunteers and many students were readily willing to help. Now I had the opportunity to group students in one-to-one pairings or two-to-one pairings. One of my Vietnamese peer helpers served as one of two helpers for one young man very new to this country. She even brought her own electronic dictionary to class. Soon I also had three Spanish-speaking pairs and one Urdu pair actively helping in the class.

Findings and Analysis

The success of these very effective teams was evident since the first day we tried using the language peer helpers technique. Both my Vietnamese and Spanish helpers had been behavior problems in my 6th grade classes the previous year. Given their newfound roles, their disruptive classroom behavior completely disappeared (an added bonus).

Across the board, I also noticed that my students’ performances reached a new high that year. Only four students out of ninety-two earned C’s, all the rest earned A’s and B’s. Of the four C’s, none were part of the language helper pairs. The student projects and labs were being completed with more pride and understanding than ever before. All students seem more engaged in the learning process. They had a better sense of purpose and, most importantly, knew that I care about everyone’s ability to understand and do well. By far, this had been a great year and one I will remember as a milestone in my path to being a more effective teacher.

In order to better understand how this technique affected my students, I conducted a survey in class regarding their ability to learn from other students. I surveyed only my 7th grade classes since my sixth graders only meet with me nine times and I only teach 15 8th graders spring semester. Nearly all of my students have been ESL students at one time in their schooling years. Only nine of my students were native speakers of English; the other fifty-nine had learned English as an additional language to their home language.

I asked my students questions about working together, working separately, working one-on-one with the teacher, and whether or not they liked helping others learn. The majority responded that they believed they learned better by working with others. Only seven responded they do not like helping other students learn.

Based on their responses, the benefits of using language peer helpers include a stronger, more productive academic and social atmosphere in my classroom. Most of the language peer helpers seemed to enjoy helping others
learn because of their own experiences with the difficulty of the English language. My paired students bonded both inside and outside my classroom. I witnessed them supporting each other in activities all over school and in the hallways. They became less afraid to try to use their new English skills with others and me. I got to see their true personalities and self-confidence emerge quickly.

Summary

This leads me to conclude whether, in the past, my ESL students did not have an easy of getting help. No one was giving them specific guidance on how to get help. Upon reflection, I'm not sure if it would have been possible to accomplish our classroom activities with as much success without the help of language peer helpers. The students developed instant friendships and had someone to confide in for all matters (not just school subjects, while the teachers had interpreters to help bridge differences in language, culture, and knowledge.

Recommendations include a continued search for ways to decrease the time required to master English and understand more about the American school system. By pairing students with very successful students from their own cultural background, I believe students became more engaged in the learning process. A measure of our success as teachers is in our ability to find a way to reach students at all levels and to “turn them on” to the learning process. Students have more success convincing their peers of the importance of learning than adults ever will.

My eyes have been opened to some of the ways ESL students can learn when given the monumental task of acquiring English skills on a highly academic level. Using language peer helpers helped these remarkable young people to achieve better in their schoolwork and excel at rates much faster than I could have imagined.
References


Appendix I

Work and Family Studies Student Survey
(Modified from original form to save space)

Do you learn better when paired with another student?
Always 25  Sometimes 43  Never. 2

Do you learn better working by yourself?
Always 9  Sometimes 50  Never 10

Do you learn better in groups or 4 to 6 students?
Always 18  Sometimes 40  Never 11

Do you learn better one-on-one with a teacher?
Always 26  Sometimes 31  Never 12

If English is your second language, do you learn better paired with someone that speaks your first language?
Always 18  Sometimes 24  Never 15

Do you like helping other students learn?
Always 17  Sometimes 14  Never 7
Appendix II

Example of further learning attained from student folder.

I  tôi
they ho
we j
use đằng
from ở đâu
Right là đằng
not không
me too
all người đằng
of
how
hello
finish

English/Vietnamese