Utilizing Peer Feedback by Synthesizing a Peer-Assisted Learning Center with an English Course to Develop English Grammar and Academic Writing Skills

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Abstract
With educational budgets being hindered by a lack of resources, even more so for universities around the globe, these institutions are looking for ways to implement original student activities and programs to cultivate abilities in students that will better prepare them for their post-graduate lives. This study examined the effectiveness of implementing a peer-assisted learning (PAL) center into the curriculum of an intermediate English reading and writing course. The results extracted from this study should be able to assist those in the world of academia in accurately synthesizing a PAL center into the curriculum of their own course designs. This mixed-method study was administered at a Thai university, as demonstrated by the results extracted from the experimental group vis-à-vis the control groups, the findings of the present study determined that integrating a PAL center into a course curriculum does not significantly develop English grammar skills, but can, however, significantly improve student writing skills. PAL centers could be used to cultivate student skills in terms of English academic writing.
Keywords: Peer-assisted learning, peer feedback, English grammar, academic writing skills

1.   Introduction

The ability to write well is a complicated talent for a person to develop in any language, including both their mother tongue and a foreign language such as English (Nuruzzaman, Islam & Shuchi, 2018). Unfortunately, this talent is routinely overlooked among students learning in English as a second language (ESL) environments (Hinkel, 2013). Educators are not always able to be everywhere at once and a framework is necessary wherein the learning environment can be extended, as both exploring pedagogical writing abilities and taking measure of students' compositions can be time-consuming (Sevcikova, 2018). This is especially the case in Thailand, where the government recently passed a requirement that all students who graduate from a Thai four-year university course must first pass an English proficiency test with a Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) B1 English level or higher. This new provision has made many educators within the country nervous in that their students may not be able to graduate with a B1 CEFR English level.

Teaching grammar is significantly dissimilar from teaching reading and writing (Collins, & Norris, 2017). An effective system of words for communication requires grammar as it enables speakers to "combine words and sentences" to build precise sentence structures (Farangi et al., 2017, p.393). There is still great discussion taking place regarding the role grammar plays in education (Polat, 2017), as according to a study about participants in a correspondence course, some challenging aspects to English learning are speaking, vocabulary and grammar" (Teoh, Lin & Belaja, 2016, p.117). Given those facts, there are various aspects of grammar that give students a hard time, and according to Xu

(2018), while examining the layout of a sentence, one of the biggest problem areas for students is subject-verb agreement.

According to a study, it is best to have students learn grammar in a situation where it is meaningful to them by allowing them to practice what they have learned (Polat, 2017), and the function that grammar plays in English classrooms in international settings has been discussed for a long time, but grammar is universally accepted as a fundamental aspect for giving and exchanging thoughts or ideas (Akay & Toraman, 2015). Given those facts, however, teaching grammar is significantly dissimilar to teaching reading and writing (Collins & Norris, 2017).

Social constructivism enables those in academia to understand the communication and meaning-making between those that possess the knowledge and those who do not possess knowledge which enables the successful development of academic writing skills. The researchers suggested starting with inductive open-ended questions giving the participants opportunities to express their views and experiences. Asking this type of question is important to elicit deep experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Therefore, social constructivism is a guiding knowledge claim which was utilized in this study. The next section connects the knowledge claim on how social constructivism can be adapted into an informal learning environment.

A feasible way of extended a learning environment is by implementing a peer-assisted learning (PAL) center, wherein it is aligned with a course's curriculum. Peer-assisted learning is an acknowledged scheme in the world of academia that promotes a secure and careful collaborative learning environment (Thampy & Kersey, 2017), as it entails students, or student peer-mentors (SPMs), helping to educate their fellow classmates in a productive educational setting (Altintas, Gunes & Sayan, 2016). In a similar study, it was found that PAL was beneficial in developing writing skills in their students, but stressed that more research was needed to validate their findings (Puranik et al., 2017).

There are various advantages to utilizing a PAL center. PAL schemes often have outcomes where learning performance for participants have not only advanced, but also develop the learners' "personal growth" (Arendale & Hane, 2016, p.26). Furthermore, PAL fosters the elements of collaboration, assistance and education – all elements that result in an environment of acceptance across various borders with constructive and enjoyable outcomes (Jellison, Draper & Brown, 2017).

Past research on PAL has chiefly concentrated only in two fields: medical and dental fields. Considering the field of PAL, the literature is lacking the details of PAL schemes in their effect on ESL classrooms. Consequently, we have an incomplete picture of the way PAL can develop either English grammar or academic writing skills. Being an influence for this study, Rensing et al. (2016) created a board game-based PAL study that entailed a 6-step process: (1) idea generation; (2) drafting; (3) reading; (4) editing; (5) best copy; and (6) evaluation. This study is not based on board games; however, it is centrally

based on their 6-step process. As previously mentioned, sufficient research has been done in the area of PAL for certain fields, for example, for medical and dental students. However, PAL represents a seamless transition between the formal and the informal learning environments, and there is insufficient research on PAL when synthesizing it with ESL classrooms. Consequently, this is where one of the gaps in the research lies. A second gap in the research has to deal with how grammar could develop in a PAL scheme.

2.   Research Objectives

The purpose of this research is to answer the following research questions: (a) To what extent did the English academic writing skills of participants (dependent variable) of a PAL center (independent variable) develop significantly more than those of the participants in the control group? (b) To what extent did the English grammar skills of participants (dependent variable) of a PAL center (independent variable) develop significantly more than those of the participants in the control group? and (c) How did participants and SPMs respond to the PAL center (based on the results of the participant focus group)?

More specifically, this research had three objectives:

1) to examine whether student involvement in a PAL center could help develop academic writing skills of undergraduate students in an international college in Thailand;
2) to examine whether student involvement in a PAL center could help develop the English grammar skills of undergraduate students in an international college in Thailand; and
3) to analyze the response of the participants and the student peer-mentors (SPMs) to the PAL center where the 10-week study took place.

Information generated from this research should provide educators and administrators with the knowledge on how to properly implement a PAL scheme at their respective educational institutions by synthesizing it with ESL classrooms. The remainder of the article is structured as follows: First, a conceptual framework supporting the participants' involvement in the PAL center. Next, the procedures used to test the hypothesized effects of study are described. The findings of the study are then presented. The article concludes with a conclusion of the study's research contributions and directions for future research.

3.   Literature Review

3.1 Social constructivism

Nowadays, a teacher-centered style is not seen as the ideal educational environment, but an ideal situation is where educators work as facilitators for students in their process of information acquisition (Ait, 2018). Social constructivism possesses the following four factors: (1) place of activity; (2) collaboration; (3) communication; and (4) creation of something significant (Xu & Shi, 2018). The formulation of social constructivism had very prominent psychologists involved in its establishment, including Vygotsky, Piaget, and Dewey (Alzahrani, 2016). Social constructivism permits learners to

be dynamic, formulate, and decipher their own information acquisition processes (Usta & Ayas, 2018) in that it entails students to combine the information they have with newly acquired knowledge by means of inquiring, scrutinizing, and deciphering (Çimer & Coskun, 2018).

3.2 Collaborative learning

Collaboration is a vital element of any PAL scheme (Castelyn, 2018), and the definition of collaborative learning (CL) can be seen as: (1) members strive to solve a common task in a group, (2) tasks are divided evenly among all group members, and (3) all group members' tasks are accumulated in order to solve the task-at-hand (Foot & Howe, 2009). "Collaborative learning is not only active but also interactive" (Devisch et al, 2018, p.3) as there has been a significant amount of research done in the area of collaborative learning in the past 10 years (Testa et al., 2018). Collaborative learning needs to be versatile as it constitutes "a great opportunity for practicing numerous social skills" (Slivar, Golja & Plavšić, 2018).

3.3 Peer Feedback

Teacher feedback is thought of as a vital element in the student writing process (Alnasser, 2018), but teachers cannot be everywhere at once and, sometimes, direct teacher feedback is not always possible, especially in lecture-style classes that have considerable numbers of students (Reinholz, 2018). Peer feedback (PF) allows students to better comprehend and adapt their written compositions (Saeed et al., 2018) as it is "a learning strategy in which learners work together and comment on one another's work or performance and provide feedback on strengths, weaknesses, and suggestions for improvement" (Loan, 2017, p.253). PF allows students to hear diverse viewpoints regarding their written compositions, and, according to a study, "there is evidence that student's engagement and satisfaction with [PF] practice improves with experience" (Dooley & Bamford, 2018, p.7). In short, PF is yet another great resource available to educators for their students to utilize in both formal and informal settings.

3.4 Academic Writing

People learn their first language differently when they learn their second language (Gonca, 2016). According to the results of a study, the numbers of years of education for L1 learners were correlated to their writing competency, and those students without prior experience with academic writing, displayed difficulties in formal writing exercises (Gatti & O'Neill, 2017). Due to the difficulty of English writing skills for L2 learners, working in a cooperative environment that advocates peer feedback is necessary, as cooperative writing activities were shown to be advantageous so students could focus on their strengths and weaknesses in their writing abilities (Cahyono & Amrina, 2016). In addition to a cooperative environment, the importance of technology in the world of academia is irrefutable (Karami et al., 2019), and the results of a study indicate that utilizing an application can help in developing writing skills and increasing motivation (Awada, 2016). Given these facts, the importance of a quality application in a cooperative writing environment cannot be understated.

4.   Research Methodology
4.1 Participants

The study was conducted at an international college in Thailand. The population was 85 and its participants comprised 38 first and second-year students enrolled in an intermediate English reading and writing course with a Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) level of B1 or equivalent. The researchers were not the teachers of the course, so it was deemed that a quasi-experimental study would fit best for this research project. Therefore, two already formed groups were selected, where the control and experimental groups were designated randomly. The study also included 40 SPMs registered in an advanced English course with a CEFR level of B2 or equivalent.

Part A: Score Distribution Analysis

Table 1:.Shapiro–Wilk Test for Normality of IELTS Writing (sig. > 0.05)

Test	N	SWStat.	df	Sig.	Range	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Writing pretest group A	19	0.819	19	0.002	2.5	3.5	6.0	4.447	0.685
Writing group posttest A	19	0.923	19	0.126	2.5	5.5	8.0	6.962	0.589
Writing group pretest B	19	0.904	19	0.057	2.5	3.5	6.0	4.711	0.652
Writing posttest group B	19	0.891	19	0.033	3.0	4.0	7.0	5.237	0.963

Table 2: Shapiro–Wilk test for normality of grammar (sig. > 0.05)

Test	N	SWStat.	df	Sig.	Range	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Grammar pretest group A	19	0.924	19	0.134	19	23	42	30.926	5.800
Grammar posttest group A	19	0.960	19	0.569	26	18	44	33.400	6.351
Grammar pretest group B	19	0.968	19	0.732	25	19	44	30.789	7.277
Grammar posttest group B	19	0.956	19	0.489	21	23	44	34.474	6.177

Consequently, based on the sig. p-levels from the Shapiro–Wilk test that was conducted, it can be inferred at a 95% confidence level that the score distributions were normal grammar tests, but not for the IELTS writing tests.

Part B: Group Compatibility Analysis

Next, groups A and B were tested to determine whether they were comparable using an independent-samples t-test.

Table 3: Independent samples t-test (sig. > 0.05)

Test for	N	Sig. two-tailed	t	df	Mean difference	Standard error difference
IELTS writing pretest: groups A vs. B	19	0.233	1.213	36	0.263	0.217

Consequently, based on the sig. p-levels (two-tailed) from the t-test, it could be inferred at a 95% confidence level that the IELTS writing pretest scores of both groups A and B were comparable.

Table 4: Independent samples t-test (sig. > 0.05)

Test for	N	Sig. two-tailed	t	df	Mean difference	Standard error difference
Grammar pretest: groups A vs. B	19	0.949	0.064	36	0.137	2.135

Consequently, based on the sig. p-levels (two-tailed) from the t-test, it could be inferred at a 95% confidence level that the grammar pretest scores of both groups A and B were comparable.

4.2 Procedures

After receiving ethical approval for this study, the researchers first held mandatory training for all the STMs, and as stated previously in the Methodology section, these were students in an advanced English reading and writing course that had a CEFR level of B2 or higher. As mentioned in the introduction section, this study utilized a quasi-experimental mixed methodology. In order to limit bias, the principal researcher was not the teacher of the participating students, and the teacher of the course taught both the control and experimental groups. Based on the fact that the researchers had little or no contact with the participants of this study, it was decided to institute two already separated groups of students for the purposes of the study: 19 participants were in the experimental group and 19 students in the control group. In an effort to gauge the participants' grammar and academic writing skills, the two groups then completed both a sample International English Language Testing System (IELTS) pre-test (Task 2) and a grammar pre-test (Hopkins & Cullen, 2006).

The study content for the two groups of students was identical; the only difference was that the experimental group was tasked with attending a PAL center for a 10-week program. During the 10-week treatment stage, each participant was randomly paired up with a SPM and for each session they went through the 6-step process outlined in the introduction section: (1) idea generation; (2) drafting; (3) reading; (4) editing; (5) best copy; and (6) evaluate. This process was repeated until the SPM believed the participant's writing was at a satisfactory level (CEFR B2 level). After the completion of the 10-week

program, both groups were required to complete a sample IELTS post-test. Finally, 13 participants were randomly selected (through a lottery system) to participate in the 2-hour focus group. Of these, seven were participants seeking help (in the PAL center) and six were SPMs. The participant focus group interview was video-recorded and later transcribed. These results were kept confidential and only the researcher has access to them.

4.3 Research instruments

The instruments used to collect data in this study consisted of the following items: (1) sample IELTS writing pre- and post-tests (Kaplan, 2016) which was utilized from a textbook specializing in sample IELTS examinations; (2) grammar pre- and post-tests (Hopkins & Cullen, 2006) which was utilized from a Cambridge textbook specializing in grammar development in IELTS examinations.

5. Results and Discussion

5.1 Quantitative results

The present study began with initial separate IELTS pretests and grammar pretests taken by the students from both groups A and group B. The purpose of this was to establish the initial level of writing proficiency as well as the initial level of grammatical accuracy of all the students included in the study to enable their progress to be measured. Participants from group A were tasked with attending weekly study sessions as an extension of their in-class material. These sessions were one hour long, and each participant received additional points toward their final grade by attending the sessions as an incentive. The additional study sessions allowed participants of group A to engage with peer mentors and gain assistance with specific writing and grammatical accuracy tasks. Participants were reminded of the sessions regularly as well as were shown their current attendance records and the impact of these on their final grade. In general, attendance for the additional sessions was very good at 87%.

To facilitate comparison, group A was sampled from group A1 (which originally underwent intervention). Groups A and B were then compared. The study began with an initial group A1 size of 31 students; however, as the size of group B was 19 students, a sample of 19 participants was taken from the original group of A1 participants to facilitate comparison (and referred to as group A).

A score out of nine points was given for the IELTS writing pretest and posttests (which reflects the 9 official ranks of the IELTS service), while a score out of 50 points was given for the grammar pretest and posttests. These tests were analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) to determine the following analysis.

Part C: Score Improvement Analysis

Next, the score improvements of the IELTS writing posttest and grammar posttest for group A and group B were compared to determine a significant difference. An independent-samples t-test was conducted to determine the significance of improvement.

The mean of group A was not found to be significantly higher than that of group B, indicating no significant improvement existed for the grammar component.

Part D: Effect Size Analysis

Finally, the effect sizes of the treatments of teaching writing and grammar in both groups A and B were determined using the Mann–Whitney Test. This test is a non-parametric test and should be used when a basic assumption of a parametric test like a t-test is violated, in this case not being normally distributed.

Table 5: Mann–Whitney test and effect size

Test for	N_1	N_2	Mann-Whitney U	Effect Size	
				Eta squared ($n2$)	d_{cohen}
IELTS writing score effect size	19	19	29.5	0.511	2.046

Consequently, the effect size was found to be "large," indicating a significant effect existed for the intervention treatment of teaching writing to group A. In other words, the mean of the experimental group was in the 97.7th percentile of the control group, indicating a greater than an 81.1% overlap.

Table 6: Mann–Whitney test and effect size

Test for	N_1	N_2	Mann-Whitney U	Effect Size	
				Eta squared ($n2$)	d_{cohen}
Grammar score effect size: groups A vs. B	19	19	172	0.002	0.081

Unfortunately, the effect size (Cohen's d) was found to be less than "small," indicating no significant effect for the intervention treatment of teaching grammar to group A. In this regard, the mean of the experimental group was in the 50th percentile of the control group, which indicates a 0% overlap.

In summary, it can be concluded that the additional intervention treatment of teaching writing resulted in a significant improvement for students in group A (experimental), whereas the additional intervention treatment of teaching grammar resulted in no significant improvement for students in group A (experimental).

5.2 Qualitative results

All qualitative data were based on feedback given by participants who participated in the PAL center focus group as well as the participants who were SPMs for this program.

5.2.1 Overall experience

All the participants reported that they had a positive overall experience during the program. They highlighted the fact that their English was improved; further, they were able to practice several key skills such as writing and speaking and made new friends at the PAL center. One area that was mentioned as having room for improvement was the

competency of the mentors—this point was related to higher-level participants who may demand greater mentoring quality.

The SPMs, who were separate from the participants, also reported a positive experience during the program. They all mentioned that it was a challenging but rewarding experience. Having to manage a wide variety of different student levels and nationalities was a new skill for some of the mentors and they reported that they enjoyed this new experience.

5.2.2 Writing development

The PAL center synthesized a formal learning setting with that of an informal learning setting by encouraging participants to utilize technology in the informal learning setting. Principally, this theoretical framework was demonstrated to be advantageous to the participants in this study by improving their academic English writing skills. Whereas the methodology was favorable, the researcher came to the conclusion that simply encouraging participants to utilize technology was not sufficient enough as there needs to be a comprehensive integrated effort made in utilizing technology in the framework in order to connect the formal learning setting with that of the informal learning setting. It may be productive in subsequent studies to systemically integrate technology into the equation to establish an infrastructure of assimilation between the two learning settings. Only when there is a comprehensive *virtual land-bridge* established, connecting a formal learning setting with an informal learning setting, can there be a truly seamless learning setting. Fragmentation can occur when learning in separate settings and it is up to learners to synthesize the knowledge they have accumulated in different areas as SL allows a way for different learning environments to become aligned with each other (Dilger, Gommers & Rapp, 2019).

5.2.3 Grammar development

Grammar skills development was incorporated into the strategy of this study on the researchers' belief that grammar is an intrinsic facet of the academic writing process. The results of the study supported that the grammar skills of the experimental group developed more so than those of the control group; however, this improvement was not significant. At the conclusion of the present study, it was deduced that, while grammar does play a part in the writing process, other elements also function in pivotal roles when students communicate their ideas in writing. According to the public version of the official IELTS rubric (British Council, n.d.), grammar is a part of the assessment, although there are three additional factors involved as well, including task achievement, coherence and cohesion, and lexical resources. Based on these facts, the researchers are convinced that, other than grammar, these three additional factors should also be taken into consideration when assessing a written composition. Additionally, in future PAL writing studies, grammar, task achievement, coherence and cohesion, and lexical resources should all be part of the assessment process.

6. Conclusion

The establishment of a new Thai governmental regulation that all students, as a prerequisite for graduation from a four-year university, need to obtain at least a B1 (CEFR) level of English proficiency, has made a lot of administrators in Thai higher educational institutions anxious as to how this task can be properly achieved. Because of this, there is an ever-expanding interest in innovative educational approaches, especially those that can be utilized in various learning environments (Kohen-Vacs, Mildrad & Jansen, 2019). In establishing an innovative approach involving synthesizing PAL with SL to create a PASLL theoretical framework, a solution can be offered to not only Thai universities but also educational institutions around the globe that facilitates the discovery of ways for improving English language skills among students.

6.1 Limitations of the study

The findings of this study were based on the utilization of a PAL center at an international college in Thailand and certain limitations must be acknowledged. First, the PAL center's physical location was limited in size and only contained one large room with two additional small meeting rooms. Both of these small meeting rooms were used as writing rooms for the participants of the study. Thus, the PAL center's location itself restricted the number of students that could be accommodated at the PAL center at a given time. Second, only 38 students participated in this study and only 19 participants utilized the PAL center.

7. Acknowledgement

Despite never having met in person, the researchers are inspired by the academic works of Lung-Hsiang Wong & Chee-Kit Looi in the emerging field of seamless learning, which the researchers predict will be the cornerstone of peer-assisted learning.

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