

CHAPTER ONE

1.0 Introduction

This thesis explores the effects of peer tutoring on the English Language performance of low achievers in an ESL classroom in SMK Taman Maluri, Kuala Lumpur. The subjects are in lower secondary and will be sitting for their Penilaian Menengah Rendah (PMR) which is the first public examination in secondary school.

This chapter begins with statement of problem. The next section discusses the background of this study. This is followed by the rationale of the study. The significance of the study discusses the contribution of peer tutoring on the language performance of low achievers in an ESL classroom compared to the previous studies done on this area of research. The final section specifies the terms used in the study and their respective meanings.

1.1 Statement of Problem

There has been a decline in the standard of English among Malaysian secondary school students since the introduction of the communicative syllabus in the late seventies. This has become a cause for concern to the Malaysian Ministry of Education, as well to teachers, and parents because the analysis of two public school examinations namely the Penilaian Menengah Rendah (PMR), and Sijil

Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) conducted by the Ministry of Education every year, has shown a decline in performance in recent years. This downward trend is due to the students' inability to understand the requirements of the task given, frequent multiple errors in spelling, word choice, tenses and sentence structures which resulted in uninteresting and flawed essays. Apart from this, predominant use of Bahasa Melayu and interference from mother tongue were also part of the reasons for the poor performance of students in writing (Examination Syndicate of Malaysia, 2001).

Most of the students find it difficult to understand the spoken and written language of their English language teachers. On top of this, these students often cannot comprehend the reading passages given by their teachers as they do not have the necessary schemata for the vocabulary used in the passage. So, it is not surprising that these students perform very poorly in their writing skills although they have successfully undergone the English language programme for six years in primary schools. They have not mastered this language well due to various factors. To name a few, their inferiority complex, fear of approaching their teachers, lack of interest and poor understanding of the language are some of the possible reasons which discourage them from progressing (Veenman, 2002).

Recent changes in the Malaysian government's policy in education has been to increase the emphasis given to English language by introducing the literature component in English from form one to form five levels. It has gone a mile further by conducting preparatory measures to teach Mathematics and Science in English in 2003 to Standard One, Form One and Lower Six students.

With greater emphasis on English at the tertiary level, it has now become very crucial for students in secondary schools in Malaysia to have a good command in the English language. The secondary school English syllabus emphasizes the teaching of all four skills, namely listening and speaking, and reading and writing. Writing is seen as one of the important skills to be taught to students from vernacular schools and the Malay medium schools, as it is seen as a means of communication and expression (Czerniewska, 1992).

Researchers such as Emig (1971) and Raimes (1983) have brought more awareness to the teaching of writing and have shifted focus from product - based teaching of writing to the process - based one. The shift in theoretical perspective to the process of writing has made writing groups more popular (Reid, 1992).

According to a study carried out by Patricks, Diana Vijianthi (1995), this approach was introduced in order to help students become effective writers and to overcome the problem of low achievement in the writing skills. However, her study revealed that the implementation of this approach still seems to be unsuccessful due to the possible reluctance of the teachers to fully accept and implement it.

L2 teachers face three crucial problems in their efforts to improve their students' writing. Firstly, there is little contact time between teacher and students in the writing classroom. Secondly, a large number of students in each class makes commenting and grading the students' compositions even more difficult. Finally, the large student number makes it almost impossible for the teacher to

provide immediate comments as well as ongoing responses to students' compositions.

To overcome this problem, the teachers have to look for new strategies in teaching writing skills. Some forms of group work which are commonly used in writing activities are peer revision, peer responses or peer tutoring. They have been advocated as effective teaching techniques both in first language (L1)(Freedman, 1992) and second language (L2) classrooms (Mangelsdorf & Schlumberger, 1992; Lockhart & Ng, 1995).

1.2 Background of this Study

Peer tutoring is considered as an effective teaching technique both in L1 and L2 classroom (Freedman, 1992). The researcher proposes the use of the peer tutoring strategy. Pupils who continually experience failure will not have high self-esteem. Their low self – esteem does not help them in developing writing skills. They continue to experience failure. Pupils not given responsibilities will tend to remain unmotivated towards learning, and frustrated, often lacking a sense of purpose and commitment in their lives.

It is the researcher's intention to investigate how peer tutoring can benefit low achievers in upgrading their writing ability. Lack of competence in writing, and the fact that it was formally seen as a solitary activity with “no community or collaboration”, made these students lose interest in writing. In the real classroom

situation, most of the writing sessions went on with no real audience for the students to write to.

Peer tutoring in the context of this study can be defined as using more proficient pupil to teach the less able peers in the group to improve writing skills. Thus, this exploratory study is an attempt to get an insight into peer tutoring and to find out how low achieving students develop their ideas through their interactions with the peer tutor assigned to their group. Hence, this study investigates how the peer tutor helps the students to develop and organize ideas on topics given for writing lessons. The study also aims to obtain the students' perception of peer tutoring.

Peer tutoring and comments through which peer tutors help another student's writing is very effective. According to researchers and practitioners in the field of peer tutoring, children enjoy being tutored by other pupils. As a consequence, the learning context becomes more relaxed and less threatening for pupils with learning difficulties (Wheldall, 1999).

Using student teachers in groups to help students learn collaboratively greatly alleviated these fears of potential embarrassment (Crismore and Siti, 1997). Researchers have found that Cooperative Learning (CL) has positively influenced the social relations with pupils of different ethnic backgrounds (Slavin, 1995). The subjects used in this study are fifteen years old, with mixed ethnic and can communicate with friends. Their cooperation was good and they were not shy to use L2 during discussion. So, it was easier to correct their mistakes and guide them in writing compared to the students who were in institutions of higher

learning as in the study conducted by Crismore and Siti. Fears of potential embarrassment while learning can deter students from learning also constructively. So, using peer tutoring while the students are in secondary schools will give them a chance to correct their mistakes in all aspects of language learning. It also instills confidence in them in the process of learning.

Ehly & Larsen (1980) in illustrating some of the advantages of peer tutoring as a form of individualized instruction say:

“ Then peer contact which the tutoring provides may add the spark needed to get certain students to try harder. The child being tutored may be more relaxed or comfortable working with a peer tutor and thus able to concentrate on learning materials. The tutor provides the students being tutored with increased individualized attention, greater closeness and contact with the tutor, more immediate and frequent feedback on performance and a peer model to emulate while progressing towards academic and/ or social achievement.”(p.7)

1.3 Rationale of the Study

The researcher was assigned to teach an ESL class comprising of 41 students in January 2002. These students have been streamlined by the school administration as low achievers based on their performance in Year End Examinations for the academic year 2001. Analysis done by the Key Personnel for English Language on school based Year End Examination for 2001 on Form

Two students' performance in paper 1 showed that 64% of the students were able to answer 30 questions correctly. In paper 2, only 7.3% of the students were able to pass in their answers for question 1, 4.8% of passes in their answers for question 2, and 2.4% of passes in their answers for question 3. This clearly indicates the poor performance of these students in writing skills when compared to their skills in grammar and comprehension.

So, it was entrusted upon the researcher to upgrade these students in comprehension and grammatical aspects in Paper 1, and writing which is an important aspect in Paper 2 in the PMR examinations which was due in October 2002 and will be conducted by the Examination Syndicate of Malaysia.

The researcher used peer tutoring to overcome the problem of big class size, and to give attention to all the pupils because the researcher was assigned to a class of 41 pupils and it is impossible to supervise every student in the class. According to researchers and practitioners of peer tutoring, low-progress pupils respond well to peer tutors.

According to Wheldall (1999),

“...children enjoy being tutored by other pupils. Given that they have been trained to use positive, non-positive tutoring styles, peer tutors can provide valuable instructions in a friendly way”.

Based on Wheldall's theory, the researcher implemented peer tutoring in the class and found substantial benefits have shown to be gained by the tutors as well as the pupils they have tutored.

Although several studies have been carried out on peer conference and effects of collaborative learning, there is no specific study done to improve language performance of students at lower secondary level. Subjects in previous studies on peer conference and collaborative learning were students in institutions of higher learning.

The researcher employed peer tutoring to improve language performance of the low achieving students who are subjects in this study. Language performance of a student is based on his/her performance in answering comprehension, and grammar related objective questions and writing essays.

Peer tutoring was used to improve the students skills in all the areas of language learning in order to prepare them for PMR examination. The researcher focused on writing skill, comprehension and grammar components.

Research Questions /Aim of the Study

This study is guided by the following research questions:

1. Has peer tutoring improved the attitude of low achievers towards learning English Language?
2. Is peer tutoring effective in aiding low achievers in their writing skills in particular?
3. Has peer tutoring brought about an improvement in overall English Language scores?
4. In what areas do low achievers find peer tutoring beneficial?
5. In what areas do low achievers find peer tutoring problematic?

1.4 Significance of the Study

The present study is different from the previous studies as the researcher played the key role by training the tutors with the right materials that are suitable for their age. This research was a Longitudinal Study as it involved The collection of data from February 2002 until December 2002. The result shows that successful peer tutoring occurs where the material to be taught has been organized in a systematic way and where the tutors have been appropriately trained (Wheldall, 1999). The tutors in this study were exposed to tutoring skills and procedures that they employed during tutoring sessions. The researcher selected tutors who had personal qualities such as patience, commitment, empathy and a friendly, non-aggressive disposition. Lastly, effective tutors must be confident to instill confidence in the pupils they are tutoring, and who are sensitive to the needs of pupils with learning difficulties.

To make this study a successful one, the researcher has carried out a motivational session to the tutors to build their confidence because by nature their self esteem was low. Effective peer tutoring wholly depend upon the professional skills and expertise of committed teachers. By coordinating peer tutoring programme in the classroom the researcher has proved that teachers can harness the energy and talent of their pupils to optimize effective learning time.

Not only those who need individualized attention benefit, those who provide the individualized instructions are also fired with enthusiasm. Gartner et al (1971) in reference to Riessman's work note that:

“ What increasingly stood out ... was the fact that the tutors really appeared to be 'turned on' by what they were doing. They were not only excited about it, and deriving a new, heightened self-esteem from it, but they also seem much more interested in the whole learning process. It looked as though they were acquiring a new attitude toward learning, new skills and, perhaps even more important, new awareness about learning and studying.”(p.3)

Perhaps the advantage and merit of peer tutoring are best summed up by Conrad (1974) when she says: “ ... when one teaches, two learn.”(p.1) The findings of this study might give insight to educators especially to lower secondary school teachers who might want to employ this method in their ESL classroom. This study might also contribute to the existing body of research on peer tutoring in the classroom.

Large sized classrooms in Malaysian secondary schools have always been a challenge to L2 teachers. Students in a class comprise of different abilities and attitudes. To make teaching more effective and have a good classroom management, peer tutoring can be employed by L2 teachers and school administrators.

Peer tutoring builds self confidence , cultivates cooperation and motivates less able students to learn from their mistakes. It gives a good climate for learning

to take place in classrooms. So, it is good for teachers to use this method in teaching L2.

From this study, it may be proven that peer tutoring attracts students and they are eager to learn from their peers. So, school administrators could use peer tutoring technique for subjects which are not of great interest to less able students in order to overcome discipline problems such as loitering and more importantly to improve their grades in the subjects concerned.

1.5 Operational Definitions

Peer tutoring :- It is a situation in which the more able pupils who often play the role of leaders are assigned to teach or provide instructional assistance to their less able peers to help them improve their performance in certain subject areas.

Tutees :- Students placed in a writing group are assigned to the more able pupils to get help in certain subject matters.

Tutor :- A more able student assigned to teach a group of peers who have difficulties in learning certain subjects.

Peer interactions :- Verbal communication or discussions among the peer leaders and learners for the purpose of generating ideas and suggestions, and composing and evaluating returned texts. Interactions also include agreements or disagreements of ideas and points of view.

Low achievers :- Students who scored grade D and E in the Year End Examination in 2001.

Cooperative Learning :- Refers to the instructional use of small groups in which pupils work together to maximize their own and each others' learning (Johnson & Johnson, (1994 & 1999). The pupils work with each other to make sure that everyone in the group masters the concepts being taught (Slavin, 1995). Pupils are expected to discuss and argue with each other, assess each others' current knowledge, and complete the gaps in each others' understanding.

Idea development :- How the co-authors generate and use their ideas to construct sentences i.e. the contents for the writing tasks assigned to them.