

IMPROVING READING COMPREHENSION USING PEER TUTORING AMONG YEAR 7 STUDENTS AT A HOME-SCHOOL CENTRE

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ABSTRACT: *This research explored how peer tutoring aided in reading comprehension performance of Year 7 students that attended a home-school center. 20 students took part in this study and were then divided into two groups; controlled and experimental group. The experimental group received 12 weeks of peer tutoring sessions and data were collected using reading comprehension of IGCSE past year paper, learning journals and semi-structured interviews. Findings were analyzed using paired t-test for quantitative data whereas qualitative data were analyzed using thematic and document analysis. The findings suggested that peer tutoring allows students to obtain the meaning of the text through the translation of their mother tongue in addition to receiving guidance and support in the English language classroom. Thus, this research is significant as it contributes to a better understanding of implementing peer tutoring in a home-school environment.*

Keywords: Peer tutoring, reading comprehension, home-school centre

1. INTRODUCTION

The trend of home-schooling is still in its early phases in Malaysia [1]; however, it is rapidly increasing as parents prefer to send their child to home-school centers rather than government schools [2]. Many of the home-school centers employ the Cambridge syllabus; a curriculum from the United Kingdom. The Cambridge curriculum offers International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE) qualification which is comparable to Malaysia's qualification of Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM). Therefore, due to the usage of the international syllabus, home-school centers utilize English as the medium of instruction [3]. Taking this into account, many English second language learners struggle to understand English and have difficulty to excel in the English subject. Since all the learning materials are in English, many students have difficulty understanding the text that is required of them. It is believed that being able to read in English is not sufficient if students are incapable of obtaining the full meaning of the text [4]. Due to the complexity of understanding the text, it will inevitably lead to problems when answering reading comprehension questions [4]. This becomes more critical as IGCSE questions consist of higher-order thinking skills type of questions [5], yet students are unable to use the language and portray ideas effectively or make connections with what they have read [4]. Furthermore, [6] identified that students were unable to identify the main idea of a paragraph. This is proven when the teacher asks students to read individually then ask them to state the main idea of each paragraph. This will then lead to students murmuring random sentences from the paragraph.

In addition, students also have difficulty differentiating between main ideas and supporting ideas [8]. Identifying the main idea and supporting ideas is a crucial skill if anyone is to master the reading comprehension; this is because it is the basic skill of reading comprehension. However, for second language learners, this is a significant problem because they do not understand what they are reading.

Moreover, relating to problems conveyed by [4] mentioned previously, to make a connection with the text students should be able to comprehend the implicit meaning of the text as well as learn how to relate clues together and identify the

meaning of words that is related to context [6]. Nevertheless, these skills are all lacking in students [6].

In today's English language classroom, it is not surprising to be in a class full of passive learners. In many cases, students would hesitate to answer questions given by the teacher and would usually end up with the students not providing any useful response [6]. This illustrates that students have a fear of participating in the class. The fear may be due to feeling worried about getting teased by their peers or scared they might be scolded by the teacher for not understanding. Consequently, these actions suggest that if students are afraid to contribute then they will also be afraid to ask questions that can further develop their understanding.

Previous studies have utilized peer tutoring in the classroom as a method to enhance students' reading comprehension performance and have resulted in positive improvements [7]. However, there is a deficiency of studies that reveal exactly how peer tutoring can assist in these improvements. Thus, this study investigated how peer tutoring was able to improve Year 7 students' reading comprehension performance at a home-school center.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Reading Comprehension

According to [6], reading comprehension differs from one reader to another and it can be considered as a personal activity. The process of reading comprehension comprises of many activities. It is not just merely answering the reading comprehension question. It requires students to interpret the writer's mind along with expressing the writer's meaning [6].

To be able to execute this task, students need to be able to use their background knowledge [6]. When relating background knowledge with the text, it provides the students with a method to relate the text to themselves and gain a better understanding of the text. This is supported by [4], whereby it was stated that students are able to enhance their understanding when background knowledge is involved. [4] informed that it is vital for teachers to activate students' background knowledge in order for them to comprehend effectively comprehend the text.

Furthermore, the Cambridge curriculum, especially English as a First Language subject requires students to analyze

phrases and words from the text in great detail, in addition, to explain why these words and phrases are used by the writer [5]. This indicates that students are in need of good comprehension skills and the ability to go beyond the text. A weak knowledge in the English language would lead to weak reading comprehension skills [4].

Respondents of this study were second language learners taking English as a First Language subject; hence, the complexity of the situation. It is said that second language learners are weaker than first language learners in the aspect of their linguistic competence whereby difficulty can be found in areas such as establishing key points, inferring ideas and employing cue words effectively [8].

B. Peer Tutoring

Peer tutoring is possibly an efficient method to improve reading comprehension for home-school center students; this is because it encourages interaction among each other in the classroom. Many of the students at the home-school center lack social skills as they mostly come from the traditional method of home-schooling.

Peer tutoring allows the student to work in pairs where the higher achieving student will be the mentor and weaker student will be the mentee [6]. The students would learn to help each other when put into these roles; nevertheless, the class is still controlled by the teacher [6].

In order to execute peer tutoring effectively, the level of communication between the mentor and mentee during tutoring is very important [9]. This implies that the mentor should have the ability to explain and guide the mentee and at the same time create a positive relationship so that learning would be enjoyable and stress-free. In addition, based on the researcher's experience carrying out the peer tutoring session, the mentor tends to provide an answer to the mentee either verbally or pointing out the answers from the text; thus, this kind of action may lead to the mentee not being able to improve anything.

Previous researchers, such as [6] employed peer tutoring techniques on first-grade students to aid in enhancing students' reading comprehension. The findings of the study did not only indicate the effectiveness of the technique in improving reading comprehension but also illustrated that the class will become more active and create autonomous learners.

Furthermore, another study conducted by [10] demonstrated that using peer tutoring for reading comprehension had led to a moderate performance whereby only a few of the students had shown an improvement. However, [10] mentioned that the weaker students were able to gain new knowledge throughout the experiment and due to this, they had gained the most.

C. Home- School

In Malaysia, there are many various types of home school. According to [2], the most acknowledged form of home-schooling is the traditional method whereby students learn at home and are taught by their parents. This traditional concept of homeschooling provides the parents with their own choice of syllabus and methods of teaching [2].

Another concept is in the form of a learning center, it is aimed for busy parents with limited time to personally teach their children at home [2]. The home-school center does not

provide the full facilities as provided by schools; nonetheless, students do follow a fixed timetable as well as learn in a classroom environment.

3. METHODS

Qualitative and quantitative data were collected at different phases in this study; therefore an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design was employed. This section focused on the instrumentation, respondents, and procedures of the research.

A. Instrumentations

One of the instruments used for this study is a standardized reading comprehension test, which was adapted from Cambridge IGCSE past year paper. Only questions related to the reading comprehension were kept for the purpose of this study. In addition, the comprehension test was used for the pre-test and the post-test of this research.

Secondly, the learning journal was employed after each peer tutoring session so that students would record their feedback on the session. The purpose of the learning journal was to support the answer obtained from the interview at the end of the study. After the twelve-week period, students may have difficulty providing detailed answers for the interview or leave out any relevant information; thus, information from the learning journal provided sturdy elaborations.

Lastly, a semi-structured interview was conducted to students that had shown improvements in the reading comprehension test. Additionally, the interview was to record information on how peer tutoring had assisted them to develop their reading comprehension performance.

B. Respondents

The respondents of this study were all English as second language learners, whereby English is not their first language nor is it their main medium when communicating. They were in Year 7, which is similar to Form 1 in Malaysia's government schools and they are required to sit for English as a First Language for their IGCSE examination.

20 respondents took part in this research and were then divided equally into two groups; experimental and controlled. The experimental group (Group A) experienced 12 weeks of peer tutoring session whereas the controlled group (Group B) received normal lessons without any exposure to peer tutoring.

The respondents of this study came from different schooling background. Students from Sekolah Rendah Kebangsaan had a basic knowledge of the English language in terms of reading, writing, speaking, and understanding. On the other hand, students from Sekolah Jenis Kebangsaan showed major difficulty in reading, writing, speaking, and understanding. In addition, students with home-school and international school backgrounds had moderate knowledge in reading, writing, speaking, and understanding.

Table 1 indicates the type of primary schools the students were from. Therefore, based on table I, it can be said that most of the students involved in this research were from Sekolah Jenis Kebangsaan whereby their English proficiency was very low.

Table 1: School background of respondents in group A

School Background	Number of Respondents
Sekolah Rendah Kebangsaan	1
Sekolah Rendah Jenis Kebangsaan	5
International School	2
Home-school	2

C. Procedure

At the beginning of the research, both groups were required to take the reading comprehension test, which acted as the pre-test. Then, Group A underwent 12 weeks of learning with peer tutoring sessions and after each session finished the respondents wrote down their responses in the learning journal.

Students were observed and guided for the first two weeks, as understanding is the main concern; students needed time to adapt to the new techniques. The teacher's observation was also required during the mentor and mentee session to make sure the role of the mentor was carried out successfully. Towards the end of the 12 weeks, the teacher's dominancy in the classroom decreased.

At the end of the 12 weeks, Group A and B took a post-test, which was the same reading comprehension test used in the pre-test. The final procedure was to conduct an interview and it was only conducted to respondents that illustrated improvement in the post-test.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This section discussed the results retrieved for this research. As mentioned previously, the study contained quantitative and qualitative findings. The quantitative data were analyzed using a paired t-test whereas the qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis and document analysis.

A. Quantitative Findings

A paired t-test was conducted to identify if there was a significant difference on the pre-test and post-test of Group A and B.

The result of the findings indicated that Group A had shown a significant improvement in their post-test, whereby the mean score increased from 13.80 to 14.70 in the post-test. Meanwhile, Group B had shown a decline in their post-test, whereby the results of the mean score decline from 14.90 in the pre-test to 14.10 in the post-test. However, there was no significant difference between the pre-test and post-test of Group A and B as data recorded that $p > 0.05$.

Based on the findings, it can be inferred that the group which received treatment was able to perform better than the group that did not receive any treatment, yet it can be said that their performance may be influenced by other factors. The findings illustrated some similarities with a study conducted by [6] whereby the results indicated a positive effect and an enhancement in academic performance on students that took part in peer tutoring than those that did not take part in peer tutoring.

Another study with similar findings was conducted by [8]. The result from the pre-test and post-test obtained from [8] indicated an increase in the post-test after implementing peer tutoring. Additionally, the mean score from the pre-test had

increased from 56.83 to 68.58. The findings suggest that students' reading comprehension improved significantly when peer tutoring is employed.

B. Qualitative Findings

The qualitative findings of this study were obtained from information recorded in students' learning journals in addition to answers elicited from the semi-structured interview. Data were collected from students that demonstrated an increase in the post-test. This is so that relevant information would be gathered in regard to how peer tutoring had contributed in their learning.

The results revealed that out of 10 students that were involved in the peer tutoring session, only two students (Student A and Student B) managed to illustrate an improvement in answering the reading comprehension questions.

Even though previous researchers had proved that peer tutoring was an effective method to improve reading comprehension, this study has proven otherwise. This is because not even half of the students in the experiment managed to indicate improvements. Despite this being said, respondents from Group A did enhance their knowledge in reading comprehension; though, it can be safe to say that they have not yet mastered it.

Additionally, this result is similar to [10] whereby peer tutoring did show any overwhelming results. In the study conducted by [10], results reported that peer tutoring did not increase reading comprehension or fluency. Also, weaker students were able to improve their skills and were no longer at a very troublesome stage.

Based on these findings, it can be implied that peer tutoring is effective yet for it to be successful; it requires more time and effort from the students. Students need more time to understand the concept and when they do understand they still need time to learn to put their understandings to work. Thus, without the students' effort to improve, no strategies will be able to help.

Furthermore, the outcome from the semi-structured interview and learning journals of both students informed that peer tutoring had mostly helped them when they needed their friends' help to translate certain words and phrases to their mother tongue. Getting translation had become one of the most effective outcomes of peer tutoring as students tend to understand better when using their native language.

In addition, the results also indicated that peer tutoring had assisted students in their learning when the mentor slowly guided the mentee to understand the reading text as well as the questions. Student A reported that he was able to do the test at the end of the experiment because his mentor had helped explain how to identify the main idea and supporting ideas from the text. In addition to this, Student A wrote in his learning journal that his mentor had spent numerous amount of sessions to explain the Wh- questions. This means that before the session, student A was unable to understand what the question wants thus does not know how to answer.

Student B stated that working with his friend had helped because his friend (mentor) was able to listen to him when he re-tell the information from the text using his own words. His mentor would help inform if the information was wrong or lacking, this way Student B was able to improve in his

understanding and learn to improve parts in which he was still lacking. Student B also mentioned in his learning journal, that he was not afraid to speak wrong English when re-telling the information because he knew his friend would still be able to understand.

Findings from the learning journal also indicated that students were more confident when learning from their friends as they do not feel scared to ask as many questions as they want or feel afraid that their question is irrelevant. This case is different when the class is more teacher-centered as students may feel nervous to ask many questions in class. These findings are comparable with research conducted by [8], whereby it was pointed out that student acquires knowledge more effectively when learning from their friends, this is because they are more comfortable and will lead to higher motivation and confidence. Therefore, it is believed that when the learning environment consists of students not feeling pressured or afraid it will motivate students to learn thus resulting to improved performance.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The research reported in this paper was intended to identify in what ways peer tutoring had assisted Year 7 students from a home-school center to improve in their reading comprehension. The results of the study indicated that translating and explaining the text using the students' native language was the most efficient method used during the session. Results also indicated that being guided at the mentee's own pace helped increase students' knowledge and understanding. In addition, students felt more safe and confident when learning with their peers which had aided in developing their motivation and confidence in learning English.

Therefore, based on the results of this study, more research should be conducted in this area especially surrounding the home-school environment. Further studies should be conducted involving a larger population and sample size as it would be able to provide a wider aspect that can contribute to the existing knowledge in this field of research.

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