Peer Tutoring in Japan: A New Approach for a Unique Educational System

Hinako Takeuchi, Akita International University, Japan

Corresponding author: b1201336@gl.aiu.ac.jp

To cite this article

Takeuchi, H. (2015). Peer tutoring in Japan: A new approach for a unique educational system. *Studies in Self-Access Learning Journal, 6*(1), 112-119.

To link to this article

http://sisaljournal.org/archives/mar15/takeuchi

Scroll down for article

Peer Tutoring in Japan: A New Approach for a Unique Educational System

Hinako Takeuchi, Akita International University, Japan

Abstract

Peer tutoring was first introduced in the Western world, where education systems are quite different from the East. While peer tutoring has brought much success as an alternative to educational instruction in the West, it is still in the process of being introduced in the East. As Japanese universities begin to use peer tutoring, we must search for methods that fit the unique Japanese education system, in which social hierarchy plays an important role. This essay will share some preliminary observations on how cultural and systemic aspects of the Japanese education system may impact peer tutoring in Japanese universities. It will first explore multiple definitions on peer tutoring, before analyzing the Japanese education system and social hierarchies. Finally, the essay will provide a case study on a writing center in a Westernized prefectural university in Japan and discuss further research options.

Keywords: writing center, Japanese university, peer tutoring

Literature Review

In Western higher-education institutions, peer tutoring has been playing an active role in helping students achieve academic success. The unique role of students teaching and learning from other students is widely seen as beneficial. Lassegard (2008) writes, "There has been growing interest in this variety of student-centered education, along with the view that such education is beneficial not only to those being tutored but also for the tutors themselves" (p. 357). Ishikawa (2012) sums up other benefits of peer tutoring; "Peer advisors are potentially friendlier, more sensitive to the cultural background of learners, and better able to create a supportive and collaborative learning atmosphere than teachers taking an advisor's role" (p. 94). Therefore, peer tutoring, as a form of collaborative learning, seems to have a positive impact on two parties at the same social level.

It is important to note that peer tutoring is different from peer review in terms of definition, setting, and conductors. Firstly, in terms of definition, Hu (2005) defines peer review as "a collaborative activity involving students reading, critiquing and providing feedback on each other's writing, both to secure immediate textual improvement and to develop, over time,

stronger writing competence via mutual scaffolding" (pp. 321-322). Secondly, in terms of setting, peer review is used as an instructional method by educators inside the classroom, while peer tutoring is a type of service often offered in self-access centers. As Lassegard (2008) writes, peer tutoring "takes place at autonomous learning centres within universities" (p. 358). Thirdly, in terms of participants, peer tutoring "involves those of the same societal group or social standing educating one another when one peer has more expertise or knowledge" (Colvin, 2007, p. 166), while peer review usually occurs among students who have the same level of knowledge helping each other through discussion. Therefore, peer tutoring is distinct from peer review in terms of taking place in different settings and involving different educational participants and agents.

The above information, however, is based on research done in Western countries, where education is quite different from the Eastern world. In the East, students are likely to display a passive learning style, due to the belief that their teachers are correct, which is based on respect for elders and teachers. Roberts and Tuleja (2008) compare the two styles as follows, "A more individualistic and independent (Western) concept of identity tends to encourage students to give feedback and to readily participate in classroom discussion; a more interdependent (Eastern) concept of identity encourages students to listen and to not offer feedback. Furthermore, collectivist cultures place a high value on harmony in order to save face and promote peace and balance within society" (p. 477). They also find that "within hierarchical relationships, both parties know their specific role and adapt to it as expected by societal norms" (p. 478). Therefore, learning styles are different for Western and Eastern students, in that Western students would tend to think critically and state their opinions, while Eastern students would more likely listen out of respect and trust that the feedback they receive is correct.

In regards to feedback, it has been found that Eastern students prefer teacher feedback to peer feedback. Nelson and Murphy (1993) found that L2 students "may mistrust other [L2] learners' responses to their writing and, therefore, may not incorporate peer suggestions while revising" (p. 136). Sengupta (1998) writes that students may put more importance in their knowledge than in their peers', therefore, disregard peer feedback (p.18). Additionally, in her research done in a secondary school in Hong Kong, Sengupta found that peer feedback was not received well by the students as "the teacher, with her knowledge of 'correct English', gives the grades, is thus the only 'real' reader, and is responsible for teaching accurate writing" (p. 25). In

such ways, in both the classroom and in the peer-tutoring environment, Eastern students tend to shy away from peer feedback, and will prefer teacher feedback instead.

With the peer tutoring system created and developed in a Western world, where students are used to thinking critically about their own work and are willing to discuss their work with others, to what extent is it possible in an Eastern institution, where learners are so dependent on the instructor? Are peer tutoring and collaborative learning possible in an environment that puts so much importance on social hierarchy? Should peer-tutoring methods be adapted to such a culture to achieve the same success that it has shown in Western educational settings? While Japanese institutional writing centers originated from Western tutoring methodology, this essay will use a case study of a writing center in a Japanese university to discuss how tutees tend to rely on a power structure that is prevalent throughout the Japanese education system.

Background of Akita International University

Akita International University (AIU) is small prefectural university located in Akita, Japan. Built in 2004, its Liberal Arts Program is specially created to "foster individuals who will contribute significantly to the international and local communities" (Akita International University, 2014) by offering a wide range of courses, all of which are in English. The system at AIU requires its students to spend at least a semester in the English for Academic Purposes (EAP) Program before allowing them to progress to Basic Education (BE), and finally Global Business (GB) or Global Studies (GS) programs. AIU is also widely known for its mandatory study abroad program, in which students must spend one year studying at one of the university's 171 partner institutions. Students are required to attain a TOEFL iTP score of 550, or an equivalent score in TOEFL iBT (80), or IELTS (6.5) or above to meet the requirements for study abroad.

The small student body is made up of a diverse mix of nationalities and cultures. Of the 870 degree-seeking students in April 2014, there were both Japanese and international students from different backgrounds that can be loosely divided into two groups. Firstly, there are Japanese students with an English-speaking background, including returnees (those who have lived abroad for a long period before returning to Japan), students from international schools in Japan or with experience studying abroad, and of mixed ancestry. Secondly, there are Japanese students who were born and raised in Japan, with experience only in the Japanese educational

system[1]. Therefore, the environment at AIU is quite unique, with opportunities to meet and get to know students from all over the world and with different backgrounds.

Because of AIU's challenging curriculum, which is held in a second language for most students, the Academic Achievement Center (AAC) provides a tutoring service for all undergraduate students. The AAC offers peer tutoring for Japanese students in Academic Writing, Academic Reading, Presentation skills, TOEFL, IELTS, and Mathematics. Peer tutors consist of not only undergraduate students, but graduate and international students as well, all of whom meet the necessary requirements to tutor their subjects. Peer tutors are also required to undergo tutor training, which is based on Western tutoring methods, before they begin tutoring at the AAC. The students who visit the AAC usually require assistance or advice in their coursework or with standardized tests. The tutor's main goal is to guide students towards autonomous, or independent learning.

The Japanese Power Structure and Its Effects on Peer Tutoring

Japan shares a similar social and educational hierarchy system to other Eastern countries, such as China. Teachers are given utmost respect, and in interactions between the teacher and the student, the student will use *keigo*, the honorific form of the Japanese language. Even outside of the classroom, students (*kohai*) tend to use *keigo* and speak with respect to older students (*sempai*), who are seen to have more knowledge and experience in not only the school system, but also in life (Ishikawa, 2012, p. 103). Such cases of *sempai-kohai* relationships can most likely be seen during club activities, in which the *sempai* are expected to not only teach, but also mentor the *kohai*. Deep respect is shown for such *sempai*, who are seen to have power and wisdom. "*Sempai* concerns the *sempai's* responsibility to help a *kohai* in learning his/her job and supporting him/her at work. The *kohai*, in return, is expected to show respect and obedience to the *sempai*" (Johnston & Ochitani, 2008, p. 6). This *sempai-kohai* relationship is deeply embedded in the Japanese educational system, and cannot be easily abolished.

This hierarchy may influence tutoring in ways that are positive, but more likely in negative ways. As Hays (2009, p. 591) explains in his analysis of writing centers and tutor-tutee relational differences in North America and Japan. He writes that North American writing tutors

---

[1] AIU's international student body was made up of 167 students from 26 different countries in the 2014 Spring Semester.

focus on collaborative learning, in which tutors "help explain and share ideas, but never *tell* tutees what to do" (Hays, 2009, p. 591) On the other hand, because a Japanese tutor would be used to passive learning, for reasons mentioned above, they would more likely *tell* students what to do instead of maintaining an environment of collaborative learning. Additionally, Johnston & Ochitani (2008) write that a *sempai-kohai* relationship can lead to "students refraining from visiting a writing center, students nodding their heads in agreement during a session when they do not understand a tutor's comments, or students not asking for elaboration even when they do not understand" (p. 7). While peer tutoring, as mentioned above, happens between peers of the same social level, it will be more difficult in this case for tutors to maintain an atmosphere of collaborative learning.

Analysis of the Power Structure at the AAC

The Academic Achievement Center at AIU has a unique integration of the Japanese hierarchy structure in a Western-style institution. Due to the small number of tutors, who range from undergraduate to graduate students, many will experience tutoring not only peers, but also *kohai* and *sempai* tutees. Tutors are, in fact, encouraged to hold sessions in English instead of Japanese in an attempt to lessen the impact of the hierarchical structure. As English does not have an honorific system of *keigo*, it is easier for tutors to maintain the same social standing as their tutees by speaking in English.

However, faced with the problem of students refusing to speak up if the sessions were done in English, the system underwent changes in 2013 to conduct sessions in Japanese if the tutee requested it. With that clause in place, most tutees requested the sessions to be held in Japanese, even if it were for an Academic Writing or Reading course. Based on experience and informal conversations with other tutors, tutees tended to use *keigo* if they were younger than their tutors. Additionally, when tutoring *sempais*, or interacting with older tutees, both parties used *keigo*, making the session seem like a formal educational setting instead of a writing center. It was only when tutors worked with peers of the same year that both parties used informal language, although there were some cases in which even peers of the same year would use *keigo*.

As a tutor at the AAC myself, I was able to apply my own experiences of social hierarchy in peer tutoring to this preliminary observation. I assume that when students are encouraged to use a learning style that they are used to, the tutoring session will go smoothly and they will

succeed. Of the 11 tutees that I had during the spring semester of 2014, 100% requested assistance in Japanese[2]. Eight were *kohai* to me, while three were in the same year that I was in. Therefore, all eight of my *kohais* spoke to me in formal Japanese, while two of my peers spoke to me in both formal and informal Japanese. One peer student spoke to me in informal Japanese, which was probably due to the friendship that we had had before. In the beginning of the semester, I encouraged all my tutees to speak informally to keep the collaborative learning environment, however, many tutees showed an aversion by becoming less vocal and interactive. Because of this, I changed my tutoring style by encouraging them to speak, but did not comment on what language style they should use. The change in the tutoring session was evident, as most of my tutees began to be more active and the sessions went smoothly with the balance of speaking time kept.

Discussion and Implications for Further Research

According to the observations above, when students were free to learn in a style that they were comfortable in, in which they could use *keigo* with the tutor, they tended to be more active and vocal. On the other hand, the students who felt as though they had to treat tutors as equals may have felt anxiety or stress from a setting they were not used to. While I was familiar with the Japanese educational structure and the *sempai-kohai* relationship, it was difficult for me to keep the mutual and collaborative learning style in my sessions. Different factors such as personality and length of acquaintance may have played a role, yet it seems that abolishing the Western style of tutoring led to a more successful tutoring session based on this preliminary observation.

Because the above hypothesis is only based on preliminary observations, there are limitations to the evidence I was able to provide, in terms of lack of adequate data and statistics on success of the tutees. The next steps may be to conduct research with a greater number of participants to see whether more successful sessions are achieved with the initial Western style of peer tutoring, or not. Also, gathering opinions from both tutors and tutees may be a method to see in which situations they find themselves most comfortable. Finally, comparing the AAC

---

[2] This information is from the feedback forms that the author filled out. Although I am aware that this is not the best evidence, it can be argued that it is unbiased information, as I had not planned this project when filling out the forms.

tutoring center and other Japanese university peer tutoring centers may show which methods work best for students of pure Japanese background. Therefore, much research is still needed to find the best methods for peer tutoring in Japan and the rest of the Eastern world.

Notes on the contributor

Hinako Takeuchi is a third-year undergraduate student at Akita International University. She has been working at the Academic Achievement Center as a peer tutor in IELTS, TOEFL, and Academic Reading/Writing. Her interests are in Applied Linguistics and TESOL.

Acknowledgement

References

Akita International University. (2014). *Philosophy and Future Students*. Retrieved from
http://web.aiu.ac.jp/en/about/philosophy

Colvin, J. W. (2007). Peer tutoring and social dynamics in higher education. *Mentoring & Tutoring: Partnership in Learning*, *15*(2), 165-181. doi:10.1080/13611260601086345

Hays, G. (2009). Learners helping learners in an EFL writing center. In A. M. Stoke (Ed.) *JALT2009 Conference Proceedings* (pp. 589-596). Retrieved from http://jalt-publications.org/archive/proceedings/2009/E013.pdf

Hu, G. (2005). Using peer review with Chinese ESL student writers. *Language Teaching Research*, *9*(3), 321-342. doi:10.1191/1362168805lr169oa

Ishikawa, Y. (2012). The influence of learning beliefs in peer-advising sessions: Promoting independent language learning. *Studies in Self-Access Learning Journal*, *3*(1), 93-107. Retrieved from http://sisaljournal.org/archives/march12/ishikawa

Johnston, S., & Ochitani, M. (2008). Nuanced communication in a writing center in Japan. *The Writing Lab Newsletter*, *33*(4), 5-8. Retrieved from http://writinglabnewsletter.org

Lassegard, J. P. (2008). The effects of peer tutoring between domestic and international students: The tutor system at Japanese universities. *Higher Education Research & Development*, *24*(4), 357-369. doi:10.1080/07294360802406825

Nelson, G. L., & Murphy, J. M. (1993). Peer response groups: Do L2 writers use peer comments in revising their drafts? *TESOL Quarterly*, *27*(1), 135-141. doi:10.2307/3586965

Roberts, E., & Tuleja, E. (2008). When West meets East: Teaching a managerial communication course in Hong Kong. *Journal of Business and Technical Communication*, *22*(4), 474-489. doi:10.1177/1050651908320423

Sengupta, S. (1998). Peer evaluation: 'I am not the teacher'. *ELT Journal*, *52*(1), 19-28. doi:10.1093/elt/52.1.19