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## **Youth and the Disruption of Power: Student-run Conversation Workshops in a Mexican Self-access Centre**

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### **Abstract**

Within self-access learning there has been a gradual shift towards incorporating approaches to learning involving strong elements of peer interaction. In the USBI Xalapa self-access learning centre (SALC) that is part of the Universidad Veracruzana in Veracruz, Mexico, work placement students (WPS) have begun to run daily conversation workshops with students from the centre. By drawing on the works of Acuña González, Avila Pardo, & Holmes Lewendon (2015), Murray (2014), and Hughes, Krug, & Vye (2011) relating to peer-supported learning in self-access environments, a small research project was developed to understand the effectiveness of the student-run workshops. This involved conducting interviews with WPS and English students who attended the workshops. By comparing and contrasting the responses, a rich, heterogeneous set of data was uncovered which provides insight into peer-centred learning. The findings suggest the need incorporate peer-based learning to break down hierarchical relationships in which power divisions construct a traditionalist learning environment governed by fear of making errors. Also, the role of WPS needs to be reconsidered to allow them to take a more active role in the institution due to their positive relationships with learners. Beyond these aspects, it can be seen that a deeper understanding of the role of peer interaction in learning environments is essential in self-access centres.

*Keywords:* peer interaction, peer-centred learning, self-access centres, self-access learning, power, hierarchy

### **Background**

The USBI Self-Access Learning Centre (SALC) of the Universidad Veracruzana in Xalapa, Veracruz, Mexico, has existed for over sixteen years. It functions as a learning space where learners can study English autonomously, while being supervised by language advisers who have been trained to operate in SALC settings. Learners have a somewhat individualized relationship with the adviser, which often involves more personal contact as a result of one-on-one interactions.

The SALC provides the Universidad Veracruzana campuses throughout Xalapa with language learning opportunities for students to take general English courses aimed at levels pre-A1 and A1, respectively, of the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (Council of Europe, 2001), which are compulsory for all university students.

Each year about 1500 students are enrolled in the courses for which there are five full-time and three part-time English advisers. Students are required to complete courses which focus on the four major skill areas of listening, speaking, reading and writing. The central activities for advisers are advisory sessions, conversation workshops, exam revision, curriculum design, material creation, exam administration, and cultural events.

Writing about a different Universidad Veracruzana SALC in the city of Veracruz, Herrera Diaz (2010) discusses in detail the complexity of defining SALCs (within the context of the Universidad Veracruzana), as they are not strictly “autonomous”. For example, the amount of control students actually have over their learning is considered to be minimal by some teachers. While the level of autonomy is questionable, the focus of this article, like the research, is on peer-interaction in conversation workshops within the centre rather than focusing on defining and explaining how the centre operates as a whole.

Through working with these students and by having conversations with other English advisers, it has become apparent that students struggle to grasp spoken English and have difficulty with communicative interactions. Their marks tend to be lower in these areas and some students cannot even perform basic social functions in English by the end of the semester. With this in mind, unpublished research involving observation was conducted into how such skills could be improved in the SALC. Studies relating to social dimensions of SALCs (Murray, 2014) and peer interaction in language learning (Hadwin & Oshige, 2011; Hughes, Krug, & Vye, 2011; Vygotsky, 1978) were influential in shifting focus towards social-based approaches to improving skills. While different options were being considered, little progress could be made as the centre was understaffed in the period August 2015 – January 2016. It was however in this period that an effective change occurred in which work placement students (WPS) from the Faculty of Languages at the Universidad Veracruzana were incorporated into the conversation workshop roster. Generally, these students are in their early 20s in their final year of study, and are required to cover a total of 480 hours of service without remuneration. They are monitored by advisers at the SALC, and are predominantly expected to help with the creation of materials that can be used in the centre. For the WPS involves, all were studying English as their major, with an approximate B1/B2 level of proficiency.

As will be discussed further in this paper, this change has unintentionally created a substantially more positive learning environment for learners at the centre and given WPS invaluable experience. The inclusion of WPS in conversation workshops has primarily impacted upon how learners *feel* when required to express themselves orally, by giving them greater confidence and reducing stress and pressure. Furthermore, traditional relations of power and knowledge in language learning have been disrupted and reconstructed in a positive way which weakens pre-existing power hierarchies. These pre-existing hierarchies relate to the way in which control and power are centralised in the figure of the “teacher” or adviser. Such a change has meant learners become more empowered within their learning experience through the construction of mutual bonds with WPS. Therefore, making such changes has been highly effective in improving the learning environment and learning experiences of learners at the centre. For greater clarity in the following sections, *learners* will refer to learners who are enrolled in English courses at the SALC.

### **Methodology and Literature**

The central goal of this research was to find out how WPS and learners feel within student-run conversation workshops as opposed to those run by regular English advisers. The complementary goal was to understand *why* they felt this way. Therefore, in order to understand their experiences, individual, semi-structured interviews were conducted by the author during September, 2015, and all names of the interviewees have been changed for publication. Taking 5 to 10 minutes per participant, interviews with both WPS and learners from the centre were recorded. Each interview was conducted in Spanish due to the participants’ low levels of English proficiency and to allow them to be more comfortable and more articulate. The interviews took place just after learners had finished a 30-minute WPS-run conversation workshop focusing on grammar and vocabulary they had studied. This was done to make sure the experience was fresh in their minds. In general, WPS spoke longer and gave richer information than regular learners. This was perhaps a result of their current involvement and commitment to education through their studies.

A qualitative methodology was chosen as it permits one “to understand the multiple social constructions of meaning and knowledge” which allows “the concepts of importance in the study to emerge as they had been constructed by participants” (Mertens, 1998, p. 11-

13). This is therefore pertinent as it facilitates the rich, varied accounts of the interviewees and reveals themes that are considered to be important by interviewees. Such an approach acknowledges the subjectivity of interviewees' responses and does not limit their responses to categories pre-defined by the researcher. In the interviews, all questions were open-ended thereby enabling interviewees to express themselves freely and expand their responses when necessary. As discussed by Eichelberger (1989), by using such a methodology researchers are "constructing the 'reality' on the basis of the interpretations of data with the help of the participants who provide the data in the study" (p. 9). Also, as can be noted in the following sections, ample space has been given to participant responses in a way which allows their experiences to collectively construct the findings.

When it came to organising the information, there were several themes that could be dissected from the abundant data. After transcribing the somewhat overwhelming data, it was not too difficult to organise as the questions were direct and the semi-formal format allowed for necessary clarification during the interview. As themes began to emerge from the data, relevant information from each interview was categorised as pertaining to Age, Knowledge, or Power. In places where information overlapped, an attempt was made to include this in the findings. Thus, rather than dividing findings in terms of WPS and learners, a much deeper understanding of issues can be demonstrated by interweaving concepts which transcended the type of participant, thereby allowing for a farther-reaching representation of interviewees' experiences.

In terms of how the interviews were conducted, all (five) of the WPS (three men/two women) were interviewed. Also, eight randomly-chosen learners (four men/four women) from both English I and II who had participated in both student-run and adviser-run conversation workshops were interviewed. An effort was made to achieve gender balance in the research as a way of acknowledging the role that gender plays as it "influences all aspects of our being, of our relationships and of the society and culture around us" (Järviluoma, Moisala, & Vilkkö, 2003, p. 1). While this is a critical point in qualitative research, surprisingly there were no great discrepancies in the interviewees' experiences of the workshops based on gender. To consider such areas, it would be necessary to conduct in-depth discourse analysis of the interviews and dramatically change the focus of the research. Both WPS and learners answered four questions relating to their

experiences and opinions of the student-run workshops (see Appendix A). They were asked to compare the workshops with those run by permanent English advisers and comment on the advantages and disadvantages of both types of workshops. The intended purpose of this comparison was to provide the researcher with greater insight and understanding of the perceived effectiveness of the workshops.

In terms of related literature, a Vygotskian perspective of peer-learning was important which can be understood as process involving “more competent learners supporting weaker students and this helps their progression through the zone of proximal development i.e. the difference between a learner’s performance unaided and that when assisted by an adult or more competent peer” (Mynard & Almarzouqi, 2006, pp. 13-14). While earlier studies have focused on the benefits of peer-learning in general (Beasley, 1997; Tudge & Winterhoff, 1993; Tudge, 1992) it has also been critical in recent studies looking at peer-mentoring in self-access language learning (Everhard, 2015a) and a case study from Southern Mexico in which a SALC was conceptualised as a ‘community of practice’ (Acuña et al., 2015). These studies (and this current one) incorporate underlying social dimensions of autonomy which are commonly overlooked in respect to SALCs (Murray, 2014). From such studies it is evident that there is a growing body of work relating to peer-learning in SALCs to which this study is indebted.

### **Findings**

Both students and learners (see Appendix B for a summary of participants) expressed an overwhelming sense of satisfaction with the student-run workshops. Only one learner expressed strong negative views, two learners were neutral, while the other ten interviewees articulated both negative and positive aspects with general to strong appraisal towards the workshops. It can be noted that of the participants the vast majority fully supported continuing the implementation of the workshops, with some recommending more hours each week. In general the WPS were more enthusiastic about their experiences and pleased with the results than the learners who participated. The WPS were generally pleased with their involvement in the workshops and saw it beneficial to their future careers. Juan commented:

*“I feel good. It’s a good place to start outside of the classroom as a teacher...It has really changed my perspective on teaching...I was worried that I wouldn’t enjoy it at all....I now know that I could definitely be a teacher at some point in my life.”*

Such perspectives were shared amongst other WPS but also with some feelings of nervousness. All mentioned this starting point and how it changed over time, for example David said: *“I’m not going to lie. At the beginning I got very nervous...now after a month and half a feel more confident.”* Also, Arturo mentioned broader benefits as he stated: *“I now don’t feel nervous in front of a group of people here. It helps me at school where I have to give presentations and now I’m not as scared as I was before.”* Two students were also self-reflective about the process as can be seen in Juan’s comment: *“it gives you a lot of security and makes you reflect upon your own language level.”* Laura provided example as she stated that *“it has opened my eyes...(to think) that I’m an advanced English student...well, no”* Overall, these main aspects demonstrate some general benefits reaped from their experiences.

In terms of the learners interviewed, five responded positively to workshops with WPS, two were indifferent, and one was negative. Positive comments all related to the proximity of age between themselves and the WPS – an area which will be dealt with in later sections. The negative experiences related to the perceived lack of English knowledge and the nervousness of the WPS during the workshops. This is exemplified by Isabel who stated that *“they (WPS) are sometimes unsure, they forget words, and at times they are very nervous.”* Ironically, many learners who praised WPS workshops emphasised that they were very pleased with the WPS level of English, as noted by Diana who stated: *“There aren’t any disadvantages. Both have very good knowledge and explain all problems. But you feel more comfortable with them.”* It is evident therefore that a perception of nervousness was common, yet there was an overall sense of satisfaction with the workshops.

### **Age, Power and Knowledge**

In considering *why* these results came about, focus was placed on the reoccurring themes of age, power, and knowledge that came out of the interviews. This focus takes into account the need to recognise the role of power relations and social politics within L2

learning environments (Auerbach, 1995; Oral, 2013; Pennycook, 2000). To date there has been little investigation into this area in SALCs. Thus, by shedding light on these sociolinguistic aspects, it is possible to consider the role age plays in developing interpersonal relationships in the learning environment; the (de)centralisation of power within workshops due to how the identity of the ‘teacher’ is constructed; and the dialectical relationship of power and knowledge which shapes the conversation workshop. Through this analysis, the benefits of peer-learning through student-run workshops become explicit along with important considerations for the future.

### *Age*

The importance most interviewees placed on age provides an insight into the value they give to peer-interaction. While research has looked at age in terms of how it affects language acquisition (Birdsong, 1999), little is written about its social function in learning environments. For example, Oral (2013) uses a Foucauldian analysis to discuss power relations in a primary school classroom, yet does not mention the relationship between power and age. In the present research, when follow-up questions probed the topic of age, only the negative response and the two neutral responses stated it was unimportant, with Gregorio stating: *“I haven’t really noticed any difference. Both teachers teach well – both the young teacher and the older teacher.”* Instead the majority recognised the importance of age with the follow comments:

*“You feel more confident because they are from my generation. So with an adult one feels more nervous because they impose with their age more than someone your age.”* (Isabel)

*“As one who is close to them in age, I feel more comfortable...you feel that they are not going to get angry at you...If you get something wrong there is not a problem which is the same as with other teachers but they can intimidate you a bit more.”* (Miguel)

*“The disadvantage that teachers have is that generally they are a bit older, so students tend to feel more timid or scared to ask questions...The advantage with us work placement students is that we try to create a more familiar environment for them that isn’t so formal...occasionally we tell a few jokes.”* (David)



These responses recognise the importance that age has upon learners' levels of confidence and their abilities to work well together. The positive impacts of peer-to-peer contact relate to the positive way in which feedback is received (Everhard, 2015b). One can note the learners' increased confidence which leads to more questions and a lack of fear when feedback comes from a peer. As students with such a low English competency, learners also note how they can become intimidated leading to nervousness. The comments demonstrate the effectiveness of workshops in allowing students to feel comfortable as they facilitate a unique relationship that is intrinsic to peer-learning. This relationship is further encapsulated in the following interviewee comment:

*“They are nearly my age. They don't look as old. You know they are your teachers, but you don't see them as your teachers because they are nearly your age. It's like asking for help from a friend. You see them as friends. They are like friends. You ask them for help, they explain to you and well, everything is relaxed. But if you ask for help from a teacher you have to be more attentive...and behave more seriously because they are a teacher. I feel freer with a student because I say what I can and they correct me but I don't feel like I'm being corrected. You feel like they are helping you.”* (Gerardo)

Gerardo refers to a level of friendship which is contrasted to relationships in which one has to 'behave more seriously.' With the proximity of age facilitating the relationship, the regular role of an English adviser is transcended. Hughes et al. (2011) describe a space in Japan which is designed for voluntary interaction in English and which helps students “engage in target-language conversation and build friendships through the medium of English, and while an advisor is on hand to provide help if it is needed, the focus of students' attention is on each other, not on the advisor” (p. 284). In this example the adviser observes and is still present, yet with WPS at the SALC there is a genuine instructional interaction taking place in which a unique relationship exists. A happy medium between friend and teacher is constructed in a familiar, relaxed environment which is important in producing a stress-free space. This notion also comes out through the following thoughtful interviewee response:

*“I feel good with them because there is a level of trust because I make errors and they make errors...This way both of us are learning. I practice and he or she also*

*needs practice. If I were put with a regular teacher, there would only be benefits for me.” (Isabel)*

From this response a level of inter-peer care is evident, as is an understanding of the position of the “teacher.” This pragmatic outlook suggests an affective relationship which is not common with regular student/teacher interaction. The WPS David further recognises this in the statement *“I try to be students’ friend,”* which can be contrasted to traditional teacher/student relationships.

### **Power**

The comments above from learners and students related to age can be seen as indicating how power relations are constructed by students, which in turn provides insight into how conversation workshops can be organised effectively. The focus on age merely reflects students’ perception of power and its conflicting discourses which are brought into play by student-run workshops. These discourses are best exemplified by WPS as they reflect upon their personal experiences.

David implies how power relations are decentralised as a result of how the teacher is referred to. He states: *“I always say to the kids don’t call me “professor,” call me by my name.”* From personal experience within Mexico, the construction of asymmetrical power relations is prevalent from the usage of the formal tense to explicitly refer to qualified teachers as “teacher,” “professor” or “doctor.” While there is some resistance to the hierarchy that is created by such language, in my personal experience this is by far the exception. Thus by refusing to reproduce such power relations a more egalitarian environment can be constructed within the learning space.

Similar issues of formality and superiority which are associated with teachers are effectively discussed by another interviewee:

*“With a teacher things are more formal...they don’t see us like teachers ...I feel that they aren’t as pressured and are more relaxed...The students do see you as a teacher but they don’t treat you like somebody superior and that’s why they ask more questions.” (Laura)*

According to Laura, greater formality is intrinsic to regular teacher/student dynamics. Such a critique is not new and various studies account for this relationship (Ellis,

1994; Lin, 2008; Oral, 2013). This was shown earlier when discussing the importance of age, yet it is necessary to understand how it intersects with power. The construction of what is “formal” is essentially decided through the social construction of learning spaces which is (un)intentionally done when a regular teacher enters the space and begins to interact with learners. The process takes place through the identification of the “superior” subject within the learning space. As described by Buzzelli and Johnson (2002), there exists “institutional power vested in the teacher to tell students what to do” (p. 56). When this institutional power is actively resisted by the superior subject (teacher) it is possible to construct more inclusive spaces.

While the desirability of such a process could be strongly argued, it was surprising to note that Veronica, a WPS, seemed content with its reproduction. She firstly stated that: *“we forget things; become nervous because we don’t have practice...we may fail with the student-teacher dynamic.”* She explained what student-teacher dynamic meant as she said in the workshops she would *“put into practice everything I’ve seen in class: the teacher must have a firm voice, not demonstrate nervousness, if there is a problem; resolve it... We are taught how a teacher should control their students.”* From her comments it is evident that Veronica was not so interested in trying *“to be students’ friend”* like David, but rather following the traditionalist teacher hierarchy taught in her degree. To some extent this is not surprising, as documented by Lin (2008); the rigid control expected of a teacher defines many teacher/student interactions in a classroom. This raises questions over content taught and demonstrates the complexity of students’ perspectives. What WPS consider as the “correct” approach with learners may not produce the familiar, relaxed environment referred to above, but rather environments that are more traditional in nature, with a top-down hierarchical dynamic.

### ***Knowledge***

As discussed by Michel Foucault (1980), there exists a dialectical relationship between power and knowledge. Through the interviews in this research, knowledge that is manifested by WPS is perceived as deficient in comparison to that of a regular adviser. This was a common self-perception as demonstrated by David who stated that *“teachers...have the ability to resolve unexpected situations, or more knowledge and better understanding of*

*the topic.*” This is complemented by Laura who confessed that *“I have limited knowledge and a teacher with more experience can solve any problem in comparison to me.”* Such experiences were also noted by learners in relation to WPS like: *“They don’t know how to respond to all potential problems’* (Miguel) or: *“They are sometimes unsure, they forget words, and at times they are very nervous.”* (Isabel)

It is evident from these comments that some of the learners perceive themselves to be lacking in knowledge, which is to be expected. This lack of knowledge perhaps produces the aforementioned nervousness experienced by WPS. However, not all learners responded this way, as three interviewees responded that WPS were (practically) the same as regular advisers in terms of knowledge. This can perhaps be attributed to the process in peer-learning described by Hargreaves (2010) in which peers “construct or co-construct knowledge” (p. 107). Through the co-construction of knowledge, learners are more amenable to teacher errors as they are more involved in the learning process. Also, the importance of age and its perceived intricate relationship with knowledge leaves open the possibility of a *perceived* lack of knowledge because of WPS young appearance. Overall, while knowledge is seen to be lacking, undoubtedly social constructions of the teacher and student play an important role in this process. Additional research is required to explore this area further.

### **Recommendations and Conclusion**

Essentially, from the relationship between age, power and knowledge, it certainly appears that student-run workshops have an overwhelmingly positive impact. The advantage of being a similar age is a key aspect in peer-learning which has clear benefits. This is intrinsically-linked with the decentralisation of power which WPS manifest in their interactions with learners. The perceived lack of knowledge is not necessarily a negative point, as it can be argued that it is exactly for this reason that students feel more comfortable. The breaking down of socially-constructed power/knowledge hierarchies is crucial in this process. As discussed earlier by the learner Isabel, the fact that both WPS and learners make errors actually provides an element of commonality in their experiences which strengthens their mutual relationship.

This study demonstrates the pedagogical benefits in breaking down power hierarchies. It is implicit from most WPS and learner experiences that maintaining hierarchical relations does not produce a more effective learning environment. We can see that the inclusion of WPS is a great example of how such relations of power can be decentralised. Breaking down these hierarchies has created a more comfortable environment in which peer-learning allows students to freely express themselves without feeling intimidated or obligated.

I would strongly recommend the expansion of the role of WPS in SALCs whether it be in the form of incorporating WPS and more advanced students into SALCs as described by Acuña González et al. (2015); or exploring skill areas than speaking, as demonstrated by Everhard (2015a). However, with greater WPS involvement there would need to be a greater level of care and support from English advisers. What is highly evident throughout this study is the lack of understanding of the nuanced differences between an English adviser in a SALC and a classroom-based English teacher. This suggests a current lack of understanding from the WPS who are the responsibility of the centre.

Beyond this research project, it would be useful to further explore peer support in SALCs. Sociolinguistic issues such as the social construction of the English teacher/adviser's identity and the impact of age on SALC environments would also be pertinent areas of study. In general, more research in the area would contribute to processes of democratisation within SALCs and leave the door open for greater peer-learning opportunities.

### **Notes on the Contributor**

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*Appendix A*  
*Interview Questions*

*Learner Interview Questions*

1. How do you feel in conversation workshops?
2. How have you felt with the work placement students?
3. What are the advantages and disadvantages of working with work placement students in comparison to working with regular advisers?
4. Is there anything else you would like to add about the teachers, work placement students, or conversation workshops?

*Work placement student Questions*

1. How do you feel as a teacher in conversation workshops?
2. What are the advantages and disadvantages of working with work placement students in comparison to working with regular advisers?
3. What do you feel this experience has given you?
4. Is there anything else you would like to add about your experience or conversation workshops?



*Appendix B*  
*Names and Gender of WPS and Learners Interviewed*

<b>Work Placement Students</b>	<b>Gender</b>
Juan	male
David	male
Laura	female
Veronica	female
Roberto	male

<b>Learners</b>	<b>Gender</b>
Andrea	female
Diana	female
Gerardo	male
Isabel	female
Gregorio	male
Jacobo	male
Miguel	male
Tania	female