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## **THE EFFECTIVENESS OF PEER-TUTORING IN IMPROVING PRONUNCIATION AND FLUENCY OF TOURISM STUDENTS**

The present paper is aimed at exploring the effectiveness of a cross-year individual peer-tutoring program in improving pronunciation and fluency of ten students from a Technical Degree Program (TSU) in Specialized Tourism Services who attended a series of language tutoring sessions provided by a sophomore of Modern Languages majoring in English teaching. Data come from different sources (audio files, observation, questionnaire, written reflection) and involve all the participants (researcher, tutor, tutees) for triangulation.

The research findings showed benefits to all parties involved. The students improved their oral sub-skills, the student-teacher's instruction was effective and also helped the tutees to become aware of their learning process, feel more self-confident and less anxious at the moment of speaking. Such evidence also denotes that the tutor enhanced her teaching skills by acting as advisor as well, confirming the assumptions the author of the present study made when reviewing the literature.

**Keywords:** action research, advising, peer-tutoring, pronunciation, fluency

### **1. Introduction**

Los Cabos (Mexico) is a particular geographic area in which natural resources and climate conditions have driven a massive development in tourism until making it the main economic activity of the whole region. Moreover, it is a bilingual territory, with a large community of foreign residents and entrepreneurs who have started their own businesses where local workforce is employed. The labor market is very selective and penalizes non-English speakers in case of positions involving customer care and assistance to foreign visitors.

In this context, college students of a two-year Technical Degree Program aiming to become "Specialized Tourism Service Providers" may struggle a lot to find a job if they are not fluent or intelligible enough in English. Therefore, it is mandatory for these learners to ameliorate their oral production, especially two basic speaking sub-skills in which they are particularly weak: pronunciation and fluency. Indeed, the students make efforts in practicing by their own, but what they most importantly need is feedback and guidance in articulating sounds. They need the support of a tutor in the comfort of a one-to-one setting.

The idea of a tutorship program was inspired by another exigency involving the Modern Languages sophomores who have to fulfill the mandatory work service “internship” required by the Mexican education system, as well as their teaching practicum established in their degree curriculum. Therefore, the needs of different stakeholders were matched in the research question “Can an online peer-tutoring program improve the pronunciation and fluency of the students of the Technical Degree Program in Tourism?”

### **1.1 Significance of the study**

Tutoring in higher education is widely used in many different forms that have proved to be effective in improving academic achievement and self-confidence, lowering the dropout rate (Topping 1996: 326–327) and reducing tutee’s anxiety (Topping 1996: 328, Stigmar 2016: 133). Topping (1996: 327–329) states that one of the most effective methods of peer-tutoring in higher education is the so-called “Cross-year Small-group” model, in which upper year students provide tutoring to small groups of lower year peers. This is the model used in the present action research but on an individual basis instead of by groups.

A considerable amount of evidence suggests that both tutor and tutee benefit from the practice (Topping 1996: 326, Mynard and Almarzouqi 2006: 14, Stigmar 2016: 132). Authors concur that the key point is to understand what happens in the relationship between the tutor and the tutee thanks to the scaffolding process that characterizes the practice. Dzubak (2009: 2) states that there are three basic reasons why tutoring proves to be effective. First, the face-to-face interaction that personalizes the session, second the immediate feedback provided and, finally, the active role of the tutees in their own learning process. The implicit advantage of scaffolding is that students acquire self-confidence and their motivation increases as they become more conscious of how their cognitive and affective characteristics influence their learning process (Kato and Sugawara 2009: 473).

Hence, the significance of the study was to investigate the impact of one-to-one peer tutoring in enhancing pronunciation and fluency. At the same time, the objective was also to offer additional instruction time and guidance in developing speaking abilities that might be hampered in the virtual classroom imposed by the pandemic. As a matter of fact, spoken interaction during videoconferences is hindered by technical issues, like faulty Internet connection, bad sound reproduction, background noise, delay in answering that make the students feel uncomfortable and unwilling to participate in conversation. Consequently, they get impatient during the activities, their annoyance and anxiety rise while motivation and attendance drop.

## **2. Research Methodology**

### **2.1 Participants and duration**

The peer-tutoring project was presented to a group of ten vocational tourism students as an opportunity to review homework and assignments, solve doubts about grammar, syntax, use of vocabulary, etc. and above all to rehearse role-plays and speeches so to improve pronunciation, intonation and fluency before being formally evaluated.

The tutor is a 21-year-old student of Modern Languages, majoring in English teaching. She is a candidate for the Cambridge English C1 exam, has experience in one-to-one and small group lessons and demonstrates a caring, patient and positive attitude. Nonetheless, she needed support in finding the most efficient and effective ways of teaching pronunciation in videoconferencing and was provided with techniques to guide her to transpose the physicality of pronunciation onto an online environment and to make the movement of her mouth, tongue and lips visible on screen, as suggested by Hancock (2020).

On the one hand, the author of the present study was confident that the tutor would be able to put the theory into practice when scaffolding students in ameliorating their speaking skills. On the other hand, it was also expected that the tutor, close in age and experience to her peers, would serve as an advisor in supporting her tutees to regain trust in themselves, lower their anxiety and boost their motivation to succeed in language learning.

The peer-tutoring program lasted the whole semester and provided different kinds of support (grammar explanations, extra activities for vocabulary and syntax, role plays rehearsals, homework, etc.) and although oral production skills had been treated on a regular basis, the action research on pronunciation and fluency was conducted during the last four weeks, that is in May 2021.

## **2.2 Method and Data Collection Techniques**

The study was carried out through *action research*, methodology widely used in education in which the teachers themselves, and not external investigators, study and reflect on their own practice to improve their skills and strategies. As clearly stated by McNiff et al. (2003: 16) “Action research begins with practitioners becoming aware of what is important to them - their values - and how they might act in the direction of those values”. All the time, educators are called to make decisions about goals, needs, techniques, strategies, textbooks, activities, contents, contexts, evaluation and action research helps them in analyzing their past and present decisions before taking new ones. The focus is not on the problem and neither on the solution; it is, instead, on the changes that teachers can make to better cater for their learners (Ferrance 2000: 2). The study was conducted in collaboration with the student-tutor.

Research data for the project were gathered from different sources (audios, observation, questionnaire, tutor’s reflection) involving all the participants (researcher, tutor, students) for triangulation and to the aim of achieving a higher level of reliability (Wallace 1998: 36). Both a quantitative and qualitative approach were used.

**Audios.** To collect quantitative baseline data, the students recorded an audio in which they were reading a welcome speech to a boat tour. This procedure allowed to gather objective, empirical data that could be measured (Wallace 1998: 39) though an appropriate tool to find out evidence of the learners’ abilities before and after the treatment. The sample of each student’s performance was forwarded to the author of the present study and the tutor who separately evaluated it to avoid bias

and ensure a fair judgment. Then, both compared their analysis and reached a consensus on the phonological issues to treat. After four weeks of tutoring, the students recorded a second audio of the same text that was evaluated in accordance with the same criteria to detect the improvement achieved.

**Observation.** During the sessions, the tutor made the tutees practice as long as necessary and monitored individual advancement on a Student Profile. The instrument was designed to take note of improvement in six areas: Pronunciation and Fluency, Use of Vocabulary, Use of Grammar, Use of Functional Language, Interaction and Attitude/Behavior. To this research purposes, only the Progress Sheet related to Pronunciation and Fluency was taken into consideration for a wider perspective on the progress obtained. This information was cross-checked with the post-tutoring audio for a more reliable treatment of the data gathered.

**Questionnaire.** At the end of the semester, the students were given a questionnaire administrated by Google Forms to collect qualitative data about their own perceptions and feelings about the experience, its efficacy, and the tutor's performance and attitude. Due to ethical and validity reasons, the survey was anonymous.

**Tutor's final reflection.** Introspective data were collected from the tutor who wrote a reflection about her experience as a pre-service teacher engaged in this particular practicum. The objective here was twofold: 1) to compare the tutor's and the tutees' perception of the whole process; 2) to make the tutor familiar with the self-analysis of her performance and behavior when teaching.

### **3. Results**

The project was planned and implemented in four stages that produced distinct outcomes to analyze.

#### **3.1 Pre-Tutoring Stage**

The students recorded themselves when reading a semi-authentic welcome speech to a boat tour (45 seconds in length), task that resembles a real job-related situation. The pre-tutoring audios were found to have a duration range between 1:35 and 0:59 minutes depending on each student's pace. The samples were sent to both the teacher and the tutor who evaluated each student's pronunciation/intonation and fluency before treatment (pre-tutoring). The assessment was carried out by means of a criterion-based rubric adapted from the EuroExamSpeaking Mark Scheme based on the B1 descriptors of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages and featuring a rating scale from 1 to 4 (see Appendix 1). The teacher and the tutor compared their evaluation, reached a consensus on the phonological issues to treat and those were noted in the Progress Sheet section of the Student Profile.

#### **3.2 Treatment**

The learners were guided to improve their performance during the tutoring sessions. The tutor made reference to phonetics principles, described and modeled how to pronounce correctly and also suggested several learning strategies. She supported the participants by scaffolding their attempts, providing practice as long as necessary and monitoring their progress in the Student Profile.

### 3.3 Post-Tutoring Stage

The students were told to record the second audio once they had felt satisfied with their performance. The post-treatment audios had a duration range between 1:20 and 0:56 minutes and were delivered after three to four weeks after the first audio. Again, the teacher and the tutor separately assessed the new samples by means of the same rubric; then discussed and agreed on the improvement observed. When examining the rubrics one by one, it was evident at first sight that all the students had scored higher in the post-test on both sub-skills although at different levels. Therefore, it could be inferred that the tutoring program produced the outcome expected.

A closer examination revealed that 50 percent of the tutees (Student 3, 5, 6, 8 and 9) reached the maximum score achievable (4/4) in both pronunciation and fluency. Pronunciation showed a general moderate improvement of one level, with a more remarkable increase of two levels (from 2 to 4) for Student 7, who also scored high in fluency (from 1 to 3). As far as fluency is concerned, the progress was noticeable and significant in a few cases (Student 1, 7, 9, 10). It was also observed that the duration of the post-tutoring audio was always shorter than the pre-tutoring one, indicating that the reading was performed at a faster rate, with only one exception (Student 4).

The results are shown in the following summary chart (see Table 1) that displays the scores obtained in each sub-skill – Pronunciation and Fluency – before (Pre) and after (Post) the practice with the tutor (being 4/4 the maximum score achievable) and the length in minutes of the pre- and post-tutoring audio.

*Table 1*

	Pronunciation		Fluency		Length in minutes	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
Student 1	2/4	3/4	2/4	4/4	1:29	1:10
Student 2	2/4	3/4	2/4	3/4	1:30	1:06
Student 3	3/4	4/4	4/4	4/4	1:09	0:58
Student 4	2/4	3/4	3/4	3/4	1:09	1:15
Student 5	3/4	4/4	4/4	4/4	0:59	0:56
Student 6	3/4	4/4	3/4	4/4	1:21	1:02
Student 7	2/4	4/4	1/4	3/4	1:35	1:09
Student 8	3/4	4/4	4/4	4/4	1:10	1:10
Student 9	3/4	4/4	2/4	4/4	1:30	1:07
Student 10	3/4	3/4	1/4	4/4	1:34	1:20

**Table 1.** Audio Assessment Pre- and Post-Tutoring - Summary Chart

The teacher also detected individual advancement by cross-checking individual audios against each participant's progress sheet compiled by the tutor. This procedure consisted in verifying whether the individual, specific phonological issues previously detected had been redeemed in the post-tutoring audio, denoting therefore the effectiveness of the treatment. Hence, from the analysis of both sets of quantitative data collected, evidence arises that the tutoring program was effective in enhancing the participants' pronunciation and fluency.

Table 2 presents a summary of each tutee's main achievements observed.

*Table 2*

Student 1	Better articulation of words and [h] sound; less exaggerated intonation
Student 2	Correct pronunciation of diphthongs [aʊ], [eə]; [k] is now silent before [n]
Student 3	Better intonation and improved connected speech
Student 4	Improved pronunciation of whole words; [r] sounds less strong
Student 5	Difference between [ʃ] and [tʃ] is now evident
Student 6	Improved vowel sounds; better intonation and minor pauses
Student 7	[θ] and [ð] sounds, diphthongs and vowels are now intelligible
Student 8	Better intonation; word stress corrected
Student 9	Improved vowel sounds and connected speech
Student 10	Whole words are now pronounced; [θ] and [ð] sounds improved

**Table 2.** Tutee's major achievements in oral sub-skills after tutoring

### 3.4 Program Evaluation Survey

At the end of the four weeks dedicated to the project, information about the students' own perception of the experience was gathered by means of a Google Forms survey. The tutoring program evaluation, conducted by means of a 12-item questionnaire, was intended to find out whether the participants considered that their speaking abilities had improved, how they felt during the tutoring session and how they evaluated the tutor's preparation and performance.

As expected, the results were encouraging. Nine tutees totally agreed and one agreed that their pronunciation has improved. The same positive opinion was expressed about the enhancement of their speech rate, where four participants totally agreed and six agreed that they have enhanced their fluency when using English. In their comments, the students attributed their improved performance to repetition, continuous feedback, use of recommended learning strategies and extra-practice. What is more, all students – seven totally and three simply – agreed that tutoring might help improve their English in general and 100 per cent would recommend

the program to other schoolmates. Asked about the affective factors, 40 per cent of the group totally agreed and 50 per cent agreed that tutoring has increased their self-confidence in dealing with language learning, while one student was not sure about it. As far as motivation to English learning is concerned, four students totally agreed and other four agreed on the impacting role played by tutoring; two students did not take a stand.

It can be assumed that such positive feelings might have been instilled by the attitude of the tutor, who was described as amiable, punctual, patient, helpful, available at request, always ready to explain things and clear doubts, able to give useful tips and simplify things. The tutor's knowledge and her teaching style were evaluated as excellent by 60 per cent and very good by 40 per cent of the tutees; her treatment to the students, excellent by 70 per cent, very good by 20 per cent and good by 10 per cent. Finally, the medium seems not to be a decisive factor because 60 per cent of the participants are keen on both modalities, 30 per cent prefer video-conferencing and 10 per cent the traditional face-to-face live setting.

#### **4. Discussion**

In view of the outcomes of data analysis, it can be claimed that the study has produced the expected results outlined in the research question. Similarly to what was proposed by Brown (2012: 21) in a research project in which the students had to record themselves to self-assess their own pronunciation, the use of audio recordings in this study helped the learners become aware of their weaknesses, which were then treated with a personalized scheme of remedial work with fruitful results. The additional, individual and purposeful instruction under the guidance of a skilled peer-tutor improved the students' pronunciation as demonstrated by the higher scores obtained in the post-tutoring evaluation and the cross-checking with the progress recorded in the Student Profile. The advancement in fluency has been even more noticeable and could be detected through the rubric-based assessment and the reduced length of the second audio recording.

Student 1, 7, 9 and 10 showed a significant enhancement of their speech rate that might be attributed to the safe environment of the one-to-one setting that lowered the anxiety of Student 7, 9 and 10 at the moment of speaking. The remarkable performance of Student 1, instead, might be due to the great motivation and interest of this learner, who is constantly looking for personal attention to maximize her learning. All in all, treating speaking sub-skills on an individual basis has proved effective to redeem phonological issues, mitigate anxiety and also nurture motivation, as confirmed by the tutees themselves in the evaluation survey.

As documented in the data analysis, the tutor not only succeeded in scaffolding the tutees when focusing on language issues, but was also managed to assist them in discovering how their own cognitive and affective characteristics intervene in their language acquisition. Therefore, the tutor crossed "the narrow line between language support, general learning support, and emotional support" (Reinders 2007: 87) and played the role of advisor as well, as she herself writes "I felt a constant interchange of being a tutor and advisor".

This draws a parallel with what Sánchez (2020: 88–89) affirms about the efficiency of using a collaborative learning approach to improve students' English proficiency in higher education institutions and how this can turn into an enriching experience at academic and affective level. Nonetheless, a significant difference with this Sanchez's study is that the tutors were mature students, who were provided with materials and activities to use during the sessions while in the present project the tutor, being a pre-service teacher, was let free to choose the materials she considered appropriate.

The tutor's self-reflection testifies that the experience "has been highly beneficial. I was able to develop the essentials for my self-growth as a person and as a future teacher". She mentions having learnt how to focus on specific aspects of the language to be taught, and to get out of her comfort zone. She had to develop commitment, communication and determination, but also empathy, flexibility and tolerance. When observing the positive results, she realized she had really made a change, she had done something worthwhile to help other people, as likewise stated by Mynard and Almarzouqi (2006: 17).

### **5. Conclusion**

The findings of the study revealed that the program was beneficial for all parties involved. The students' speaking sub-skills were assessed before and after a series of individual tutoring sessions delivered through videoconferencing and showed improvement. Moreover, the intimate setting generated a trustful relationship between the peers that led the tutees to ask for advice about learning strategies to maximize results. The tutor had to use her expertise as language educator to best cater for the students' needs, thus enhancing her teaching skills and acting as advisor.

In conclusion, the experience was rewarding and advantageous to the tutor and the tutees, as research claims, and of course to the author of the present study, who will make some changes in her teaching practice. First, pronunciation issues will be treated in a more private form using videoconferencing that has proven to be helpful in the development of speaking skills (Loranc-Paszylk 2015: 195–197, Vurdien 2019: 283) and accepted by the learners. Anyway, it has to be mentioned that, unlike the findings of the above cited works, the tourism students welcome videoconferencing for one-to-one attention on specific individual issues and needs while they prefer the traditional brick-and-mortar classroom for group lessons. Second, the use of digital resources to practice and improve speaking sub-sills will be further implemented to foster learner's autonomy.

Nonetheless, some limitations of the study have to be mentioned. To start with, the project was conducted on a small number of participants, with no control group and for a short period of time. Also, it was limited to the speaking sub-skills of pronunciation and fluency and does not show clear evidence of academic success. Since this research could only explore the general effectiveness of Cross-year Small-group peer-tutoring (Topping 1996: 327–329), further studies on a larger scale are needed to verify whether the effective results of language tutoring/advising are long-lasting and may lead to higher academic achievement as a matter of fact.



Moreover, it would be advisable to work with other teachers to investigate the advantages of tutoring/advising program related to other subjects and rely on last-year students as tutors/advisors. The latter should be carefully chosen, trained and monitored during the whole program. In the case of language student-teachers, the recommendation is to treat them as partners and not subordinates, letting them free to propose their ideas, techniques and materials in a collaborative alliance.

Lastly, this research project has turned out to be a win-win situation from which all the parties involved have benefitted in some way. Consequently, it is the author's intention to establish a permanent language "cross-year individual or small-group peer-tutoring/ advising program" on a voluntary basis. It will also be suggested that colleagues from other divisions offer similar initiatives to undergraduates in need of improving their performance and learning strategies to reach their global academic success.

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**Appendix 1**  
**Criterion-based Rubric to Evaluate Speaking Sample**

**Student Name:**

**Task: Boat Tour Welcome Speech**

**PRE-TUTORING**

Criterion-based Rubric to Evaluate Speaking Sample (B1)				
	1	2	3	4
<b>Pronunciation &amp; Intonation</b>	Mispronunciations and inability to produce certain sounds significantly impedes communication of the message.	Noticeable pronunciation difficulties may sometimes impede communication of the message.	Pronunciation may place some small strain on the listener, but is typically clear and intelligible.	Pronunciation is clearly intelligible with appropriate intonation. Occasional mispronunciations put some strain on the listener but rarely impede communication.
<b>Fluency</b>	Significant hesitation. Jumpiness causes great strain on the listener.	Keeps going comprehensibly in spite of frequent hesitation that causes some strain on the listener.	Many small difficulties or gaps that do not severely impede understanding.	Hesitations not too long or uncomfortable. Can effectively maintain flow of speech.

**Task: Boat Tour Welcome Speech**

**POST-TUTORING**

Criterion-based Rubric to Evaluate Speaking Sample				
	1	2	3	4
<b>Pronunciation &amp; Intonation</b>	Mispronunciations and inability to produce certain sounds significantly impedes communication of the message.	Noticeable pronunciation difficulties may sometimes impede communication of the message.	Pronunciation may place some small strain on the listener, but is typically clear and intelligible.	Pronunciation is clearly intelligible with appropriate intonation. Occasional mispronunciations put some strain on the listener but rarely impede communication.
<b>Fluency</b>	Significant hesitation. Jumpiness causes great strain on the listener.	Keeps going comprehensibly in spite of frequent hesitation that causes some strain on the listener.	Many small difficulties or gaps that do not severely impede understanding.	Hesitations not too long or uncomfortable. Can effectively maintain flow of speech.

Adapted from the Euro Exam Speaking Mark Scheme.

[http://www.euroexam.com/sites/network/files/file/download/Marking\\_Criteria/mc\\_level\\_b1\\_speaking.pdf](http://www.euroexam.com/sites/network/files/file/download/Marking_Criteria/mc_level_b1_speaking.pdf) (accessed on May 15, 2021)