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The Power of Peers : NPRMs in the EFL Classroom

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The Power of Peers: NPRMs in the EFL Classroom

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Abstract

Peer teaching is a reciprocal style of learning that traditionally involves older students passing knowledge to younger less capable peers. Utilising this teaching method in the EFL classroom has the potential to bridge the gap between students and materials, increase collaborative learning, and promote active learning. The aim of this paper is to report on a classroom project in which near peer role models (NPRMs) assisted in the teaching of critical incidents within a unit on intercultural communication. Results from an open-ended questionnaire and observations from the facilitator indicated participation of the NPRMs resulted in a more effective and desirable mode of delivery than the more traditional method of studying critical incidents from a textbook.

Keywords: Near peer role models, peer teaching, intercultural competence, critical incidents, study abroad

1. Introduction

Japanese students turning to classmates for help or clarification during English class is a common occurrence. One of the reasons this happens is that peers with greater proficiency are often sought out by less capable students. Another reason is students often feel closer to, and more comfortable with, their peers than a teacher. With greater focus now placed on sending Japanese students to study abroad (MEXT, 2011), it has become necessary for universities to devote time preparing students for such endeavours. To ensure students gain the most from their study abroad experiences, preparation must be focused not only on language competency but also on the development of intercultural competence. By tapping into students' tendency to seek help from peers, the study abroad preparation process, in terms of increasing intercultural competence, can potentially be enhanced through the implementation of peer teaching from older, more experienced peers. Students who have returned from study abroad programmes are valuable classroom human resources who can share personal experiences with intercultural misunderstandings and impress upon younger

students the importance of developing their intercultural competency. Frisch and Kristahn (2015) believe that the reflection process after studying or living abroad is as valuable as the time abroad itself. Class visits from students who have returned from studying abroad, and after having had sufficient time to reflect on their experiences with critical incidents, can be a valuable source of training for students currently in the study abroad preparation process.

2. Near peer role models as peer teachers

Peer teaching or peer tutoring is a “well-established practice” in which older more experienced peers adopt a limited role as a teacher (Boud, 2001). Near peer role models (NPRMs) are peers of a similar age, social or professional standing, and background who are more experienced or more proficient. As a result, these peers are often admired and respected by less experienced and proficient students (Murphey and Arao, 2001). NPRMs have been used in EFL classrooms because of their effectiveness in increasing self-efficacy in terms of ability to achieve language-learning goals. Bandura’s (1977; 1986) social learning theory and Vygotsky’s (1930s/1978) zone of proximal development support the theory of NPRMs as potential learning resources. The central belief stemming from research on NPRMs is that, exposure to such peers can create a desire among younger students to emulate them and the NPRMs can be inspirational role models to those younger peers.

Murphey and Arao (2001) and Murphey and Murakami (1998) conducted studies in which Japanese students watched short video clips of older students speaking in English about the importance of achieving English skills and not being discouraged when they make mistakes. The participants in these studies reported positive belief changes in their own ability to achieve the English level displayed by the NPRMs and aspirations to emulate the models. The premise is that the abilities displayed by the NPRMs appear to be more attainable to younger peers than a Japanese teacher, and certainly a foreign native English-speaking teacher.

Ruddick and Nadasdy (2013) directed an experiment in which NPRMs acted as peer teachers to address the problem of the addition of unnecessary vowel endings (rounding off) to English words among Japanese university students. NPRMs visited classes and demonstrated pronunciation of English words without rounding off. This research concluded that students who were exposed to the NPRMs were less likely to round off English words than their counterparts who were not peer taught by NPRMs.

Lingley (2015; 2016) conducted two action research projects using NPRMs in the EFL classroom. The first project sought to increase motivation and decrease anxiety associated with studying abroad. Second-year university students who were potential study abroad candidates were exposed to NPRMs via online video calls from study abroad locations. The NPRMs presented short reports of study-abroad life while outlining both the positives and negatives. Participants self-reported their motivation and anxiety levels in pre and post call questionnaires in relation to study abroad and the results indicated positive changes. In the second project, NPRMs acted as leaders within online groups to support, educate, and motivate younger students as they went through the study abroad preparation procedures. Responses from open-ended questionnaires suggested that exposure to NPRMs increased knowledge and reduced anxiety associated with study abroad.

The project described here is focused on the potential for NPRMs to aid younger students in a specific pragmatic L2 learning process. By acting as peer teachers, the NPRM-led classes sought to increase intercultural competence through a critical incidents approach of sharing their personal experiences with misunderstandings while abroad. This teaching method also cultivated future NPRMs, thus aiding the cyclical nature of the project.

3. Intercultural competence

Intercultural competence, as defined by Bennett, Bennett, and Allen (2003) is the ability to move beyond ethnocentric viewpoints in order to gain an appreciation for other cultures, while also demonstrating appropriate behaviour in one or more other cultures. Byram's (1997) five dimensions of intercultural competence are indicators to measure the extent of one's level of intercultural competence. This study focused on improving two of the dimensions: interpreting events from other cultures and developing the ability to both explain and relate them to one's own culture (*savoir comprendre*); and *savoir apprendre*, or the ability to use acquired knowledge of another culture and its practices and later draw on that knowledge to negotiate interactions with people from other cultures.

One effective method that can be employed to increase intercultural competence and awareness in the EFL classroom is having students examine both similarities and differences between their own culture and other cultures. Critical incidents, as defined by Chen and Starosta (1998) are short stories, often real-world examples, that demonstrate situations in which a misunderstanding or conflict occurs when people from different cultural backgrounds

interact. While these critical incidents can sometimes be humorous and harmless, some incidents have the potential to cause serious conflict between interlocutors. Utilising critical incidents has become a common method for increasing intercultural competence (See: Brislin, 1993; Cushner and Brislin, 1996; and Arthur, 2001). The underlying belief is the use of critical incidents in the EFL classroom has the potential to raise participant's awareness of how culture can affect their behaviour in intercultural situations. This approach to teaching also increases knowledge and understanding of how those from other cultural backgrounds behave, thus heightening cultural sensitivity among participants.

4. Context

At the time of writing, data were collected from 93 (76 female and 17 male) second-year university students who have participated in the critical incidents approach classes with NPRMs. The participants were all English majors at Kansai Gaidai University. The participants were taking compulsory English within a general English skills program where they received 720 hours of classroom instruction over the first two years from two native English-speaking instructors. Classes were streamed based on the paper-based TOEFL test administered by the university. The average TOEFL score range of the participants in this study was 480-550, indicating considerable variation in English ability.

Since as Harmer (2007) argues, language educators should be facilitators who promote learning through group work, it was felt the author should maintain a role on the periphery but make comments and give direction to both the NPRMs and the students when necessary. As facilitator, assistance was given to the NPRMs prior to class visits in order to ensure their reporting of critical incidents followed a pedagogically-sound teaching style. The facilitator also offered guidance during the classes to ensure that the participants did not fall into any "traps" that Guest (2002) cautions. Specifically, students were instructed about stereotyping and oversimplification. The facilitator also conducted interviews and administered questionnaires during the project.

Interviews with students who had returned from studying abroad revealed that a majority reported difficulties in relation to cultural differences with both student peers and professors. In most instances, this was the result of limited intercultural training. When questioned further about this, the majority of the interviewees expressed regret about these misunderstandings. It was felt that more preparation in terms of knowledge of one's own

culture as well as other cultures would aid the participants in being better prepared to cope with potential cultural clashes while abroad.

The aims that guided the project were to investigate the effectiveness of a critical incidents approach using NPRMs sharing their real experiences, and to determine if students preferred this method to a more traditional teaching style. The second aim was to explore the potential of peer teaching as a method to address specific needs related to studying abroad. As Hargreaves (2010) asserts, the relationship between peers is often based on trust and mutual cooperation, and it was believed that these attributes would enable the NPRMs to more effectively increase interest in the subject material as the participants might feel less connection to impersonal incidents from a textbook.

5. Rationale

Interviews with students who returned from study abroad trips revealed that a majority reported “problems” with both students and professors. Typically, these difficulties were rooted in cultural differences and expectations stemming from their varying backgrounds. Further questioning showed that many of the interviewees believed if they had been better prepared for potential cultural differences, these situations could have been prevented. The central problem that led to this teaching method was a deficiency in cultural awareness preparation prior to departure. It was decided that if students were better prepared to deal with cultural misunderstandings, the result would be more successful study abroad experiences. In order to achieve greater levels of preparedness, it was decided to use peers who had experienced critical incidents while abroad and were therefore in a position to teach participants about the importance of increasing their intercultural competence prior to their departure. A further aim of this action research project was to assess the effectiveness of using NPRMs to aid in the teaching of critical incidents.

5. Method

Lustig and Koester (2003) point out that many variables exist in any intercultural encounter, and as such, there is no one set of skills that will fully prepare intercultural practitioners to navigate all situations. The project was undertaken with the concession that attaining intercultural competence is an ongoing journey as part of a life-long process.

In spite of this concession, it was felt that employing a critical incidents approach would increase awareness that the possibility of cultural misunderstandings exists and also enable students to increase their knowledge of how to approach such situations. By increasing awareness and knowledge, it was hoped that students would be better prepared to negotiate such misunderstandings while studying abroad.

During the spring semester, students were exposed to two classes that employed a critical incidents approach to teaching. During the first class, students were given examples of critical incidents (see Appendix) from a text and asked to complete a four-step task. The first step was to discuss the incident they read within a small group of four or five members to ensure everyone understood what occurred. The second step was to brainstorm possible reasons as to why the misunderstanding occurred. During this step, students were instructed to think about the situation from the perspective of each of the characters present in the incident. During the third step, students discussed the best possible solutions or approaches to solving the misunderstanding. Finally, they were instructed to compare the situation with Japanese cultural norms and practices. The second class followed the same procedure as the first with one difference: instead of using critical incidents from a textbook, the students listened to stories (for an example, see Appendix) from NPRMs about their own experiences with critical incidents while studying abroad. For the classes where NPRMs visited, the fourth step of the procedure was altered to include a comparative component. The groups listened to the NPRM's conclusion of how they approached the problem and compared their own solutions or approaches with the NPRM's story.

For this action research project, a comparison of the two classes was conducted based on results from an open-ended questionnaire and the observations from the facilitator. In both classes, students followed a similar four-step task based on the critical incident. This task approach was designed with Byram's (1997) model of intercultural competence used as a backdrop. Specifically, the task attempted to first improve the participants' ability to interpret a document or event from another culture, to explain it and relate it to documents or events from their own, or *savoir comprendre*. It was believed that improving this ability would lead the participants to improve their *savoir apprendre* - "ability to acquire new knowledge of a culture and cultural practices and the ability to operate knowledge, attitudes and skills under the constraints of real-time communication and interaction" (Byram, p. 61)) that the participants will most certainly need to draw on while living and studying abroad.

6. Results

Overall, the results of the questionnaire indicate that students held positive beliefs about the inclusion of NPRMs in the classroom. A majority (73%) of students reported feeling a closer connection with the subject material when NPRMs joined the class as opposed to the more traditional method of undertaking a critical incidents approach from a textbook, as conveyed by this comment: “The class with older students made me understand I should learn more about culture problems.” This suggests that the potential exists for NPRMs to enhance task-based learning activities in cases where they have direct experiences with the subject material. After reflecting on the lessons with NPRMs, the second most reported comment was an admission of limited knowledge of other cultures. For example, one student reported, “After studying the story of the older student, I understood I must learn more about other cultures so I can communicate and make friends with them.” The third most common comment from the questionnaire was related to the necessity to understand one’s own culture. Almost half of the respondents mentioned this, as highlighted by this comment: “I now realise we (Japanese students) must understand more about Japanese culture so we can make smooth relationships with foreign people.”

From a facilitator point of view, it was noted that on the days when NPRMs visited the classroom, the students seemed more engaged in the material, made more effort to complete the assigned tasks, and collaborated well with group members. This indicated a higher level of active learning was taking place. There was also a higher level of excitement than in classes where a more traditional approach to studying critical incidents was used. This observation is supported by the comment: “I really enjoyed the classes with older students because they made the topic more exciting and interesting.” Comments from participants and observations from the facilitator suggest that during class visits by the NPRMs, there was a higher degree of active learning among the participants.

Some of the negative comments (9%) from the questionnaire expressed doubts about the benefits of classes with NPRMs. One respondent stated, “I believe the class was not good because we should use more time to study the textbook.” Another student stated, “The class was interesting but I want to focus more on improving my English skill, not learning about culture”. These comments illustrate that, for some students, language competence is more desirable than cultural competence. This preference might be connected to future plans, as all of the negative comments about the classes with NPRMs were from students who were

not planning to study abroad.

7. Limitations

As this endeavour was an action research project, a more detailed project designed to measure the effectiveness of NPRMs to enhance EFL classrooms with peer teaching needs to be conducted. This could be achieved with more rigorous and detailed data collection so as to ensure the results could be generalised to the wider student population at Kansai Gaidai University and beyond. Although this project seems to indicate that NPRMs, through peer teaching, resulted in students increasing their intercultural competence, a follow-up project to investigate how exposure to peer teaching with NPRMs affected the participants while they were abroad would be necessary to definitively determine that this project was successful. A further limitation is there was no later investigation to test the long-term effects of the classes with NPRMs.

A further research project that seeks to measure the influence of NPRMs on participants outside the classroom would be an effective way to help illuminate the scope of influence NPRMs have on younger students. Finally, a comparison of study abroad practitioners who experienced learning about critical incidents with NPRMs and those who did not is a possible future research project with the potential to further test the effectiveness of NPRMs as peer teachers.

8. Conclusion

This paper has highlighted an action research project designed to explore the potential of NPRMs as peer teachers who can aid in the task of increasing younger students' intercultural competence. As a result of an earlier study (Lingley, 2015) with NPRMs in the classroom that illustrated their effectiveness in making a positive impact on younger, less experienced students and from information gathered during interviews with study abroad returnees, it was decided to investigate their potential as peer teachers to increase intercultural competence. Two classes were planned - both utilising a critical incidents approach - but one was led by NPRMs (telling their stories of critical incidents), and the other utilised the more common method of using critical incidents from a book.

Results from an open-ended questionnaire indicate that the participants overwhelmingly

prefer the class led by NPRMs. Specifically, participants reported feeling a closer connection to the material (critical incidents) during the class led by NPRMs. This suggests that the NPRMs were better able to show participants the importance of studying critical incidents, outlining the probability of their experiencing such incidents, and increasing their intercultural competence. Participants also reported a realisation that their understanding of both foreign cultures and Japanese culture was lacking. These results indicate that the classes were effective in increasing two dimensions (*savoir comprendre* and *savoir apprendre*) of Byram's (1997) model of intercultural competence. Improving intercultural competence by training students to recognise and interpret misunderstandings and also providing them with the knowledge and ability to successfully navigate such incidents should result in more successful and rewarding study abroad experiences.

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Appendix

Example of critical incident (From text)

"In Italy, it is quite common among males to kiss each other on both cheeks, especially on birthdays or other celebrations and when we meet again after a long time. While in England, I wanted to wish an English friend a merry Christmas and approached in order to kiss him. He backed off horrified."

Example of critical incident (From NPRM)

“While I was studying in the United States I made friends with two classmates who were from Saudi Arabia. We often ate lunch together and sometimes went shopping. I really liked both of them because they were so kind and friendly to me. One day our friendship changed for the worse. While taking a test in class I noticed they were cheating by telling answers to each other. I was shocked and disappointed and didn’t know what to do. When the test finished they asked me to go to lunch, like we did after our class every day, as if nothing had happened. I said I had another plan and couldn’t go even though I was free.”

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