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Language mentoring programs at RMIT University

Abstract

The current trend for larger class sizes and reduced contact hours brings challenges for tertiary language students, where smaller group tuition is more effective and regular sustained practice is essential. It is likely that these challenges contribute to the high attrition rate of beginning language students.

The benefits of peer teaching are well known and establishing peer academic mentoring programs among tertiary language students at RMIT University was seen as a possible solution to the afore-mentioned challenges. The programs consist of intermediate, advanced or native speakers of Chinese, French, Greek, Japanese and Spanish mentoring beginner students for up to two extra-curricular hours a week, assisting them with specific language- or study-related difficulties and/or providing extra practice activities related to course content.

In place since semester 2 2009 (French) and since semester 1 2011 (Chinese, Greek, Japanese and Spanish), the programs have been found to be an effective way of enhancing the language learning experience for both mentors and mentees, and the feedback received is consistently and overwhelmingly positive from all participants.
1. Introduction

Many academic mentoring programs are established to increase student engagement and/or recruitment and retention rates among certain underrepresented or first year university students (Godfrey 2008; Harper and Sawicka 2001; Jacobi 1991; Smith 2005: 1). Other programs are designed to aid students who have been identified as ‘at risk’ (for example, ethnic minorities, academically disadvantaged students, students with disabilities or of low socioeconomic status), or international students who require assistance with the language of academic study of the university (Vechter and Brierley 2009).

A review of the literature revealed abundant evidence that peer mentoring is beneficial to students’ learning, but that no previous research on tertiary language mentoring programs has been conducted, even though this is an area where retention rates are known to be particularly relevant. According to Nettelbeck et al. (2007: 14), one third of beginner level language students do not continue their language study after one semester, and a further third do not continue after their second semester. The reasons cited are varied, such as students taking one semester as an elective for interest, fun or travel purposes; having no room left in a program for further language study; being unaware of the workload and commitment required in learning another language; being unable or unwilling to put in the effort required to maintain a high grade point average; frustration at the slow progress; timetabling problems or limits on electives students are able to undertake (2007: 15). As languages at RMIT University are currently electives only (students cannot major in a language), many of the above reasons for attrition are particularly significant — but somewhat difficult to determine, as many students only intend to undertake one or two language electives.

Peer academic mentoring programs were introduced at RMIT in an attempt to reduce the attrition rate among language students, by providing an opportunity for students to increase their motivation and confidence by tutoring or being tutored, and in turn to enhance their overall learning experience. The extra weekly practice would also be of value, particularly since most language classes consist of only one 3-hour class per week. Such limited contact hours are a challenge to learning a language, where frequent exposure to, and regular practice in, the target language are essential.

It was also intended that the mentoring programs would provide opportunities for mentors to peer teach some successful language learning strategies and study habits to the beginning language students, some of whom may not have learnt a second language before. Students can find the experience of learning another language especially slow and frustrating initially. It would therefore be encouraging for these students to work with others who had gone through (and in most cases were still going through) this same process, and who identified with them and
understood their difficulties (in the case of the non-native speaker mentors at least). Some of these learning strategies would also be applicable to other areas of learning.

In addition, learning a language — especially as a beginner — can also create anxiety, since the student’s ability to communicate is essentially removed, thereby having an immediate adverse effect on confidence levels. It has been reported that at least 50% of all language learners suffer from unusually high levels of anxiety (Lanir 2010: 70). The intimidation factor is augmented by large class sizes, where a lot is at stake for students in front of so many peers. An additional benefit of the language mentoring programs would be the non-threatening and supportive learning environment with one mentor for a maximum of two mentees at once. Peer mentoring also removes the potentially intimidating ‘expert’ teacher in the formal setting of the classroom, as well as allowing the tailoring of the mentoring sessions to the mentees’ specific needs.

In the following sections, we will address the existing research on peer learning and teaching, and mentoring, before describing the establishment and organisation of the language mentoring programs at RMIT. The discussion sections will present qualitative data in the form of feedback taken from the mid-semester reflective sessions conducted with the language mentors, and from the questionnaires completed by all participants, followed by some concluding comments on the success of the program.

2. Previous research on peer learning and mentoring

While there is surprisingly little literature on mentoring for language students, the benefits of peer learning and teaching are well documented, and the old adage that one learns more by having to teach something contains more than an element of truth (cf. early important studies on learning through teaching by Annis 1983; Bargh and Schül 1980). Peer teaching provides benefits to both parties, such as a friendly and informal learning environment, regular study, expert assistance from a student who has direct experience of learning the same content, improved organisational and communication skills, learning how to give and receive feedback, and evaluating one’s own learning (Biggs and Tang 2007: 118-119; Boud 2001: 3, 8-9). Indeed, as Svinicki and McKeachie argue (2010: 192), there may be no single best method of teaching, “but the second best is students teaching other students”.

According to O’Donnell (2006: 781), theories of peer learning tend to give greater weight to either social or cognitive processes. Of most relevance to mentoring programs are the cognitive developmental perspectives of Piaget and Vygotsky, both of which are based on a constructivist approach to learning and teaching, where the learner participates actively in the learning process, using prior knowledge to construct new understandings.

Piaget (1985) believed that cognitive growth occurs as a result of interaction with the environment through the process of adaptation, followed by processes of assimilation and accommodation. New experiences are brought into one’s
way of thinking (assimilation) and low-level schemas are modified into high-level schemas (accommodation). Following such modifications, the individual seeks to restore cognitive equilibrium. Piaget believed that peers could provide important opportunities for others to experience cognitive disequilibrium (or cognitive conflict) when new information does not agree with existing knowledge, and that children are more likely to develop cognitively in contexts where peers have equal power and opportunities to influence each other (O’Donnell, Reeve and Smith 2007: 398). For Piaget then, cooperation between peers encourages discussion and exchange, and is therefore essential for the development of a critical and reflective mind.

Similarly, according to Vygotsky’s (1978) sociocultural theory, knowledge lies in the continual interaction between the individual and their environment (known as dialectical constructivism). It therefore follows that ‘an individual’s learning and achievement are mediated by supportive interactions with others’ (Scarino and Liddicoat 2009: 27). Indeed, this notion that cognitive development requires social interaction is central to Vygotsky’s well-known concept of the zone of proximal development, defined as follows (1978: 86):

the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by individual problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers.

Assistance comes from a more competent peer (or other) who can recognise the learner’s current level of proficiency, and who can provide support to the learner through appropriate scaffolding (guidance, tutelage questions, hints, etc).

This assistance and scaffolding is of course part of the process of structured tutoring, the benefits of which are also well documented (Cohen, Kulik and Kulik 1982). Students who receive one-to-one tutoring improve their understanding of the target content, report higher levels of motivation, and work faster (Slavin 1987). Tutoring also benefits the tutor (Chi et al. 2001): through planning and explaining, their own understanding of the content is consolidated.

The mentoring process can be considered a combination of peer learning and tutoring. It is no doubt for this reason that most universities now run a variety of peer academic and/or social mentoring programs, since the benefits to both parties are many. These include:

- enhanced students’ learning experience
- increased confidence and interest in learning
- students discovering different learning styles
- networking with other students
- networking with students from different cultural backgrounds
- students learning effective ways to communicate
- students learning the importance of motivation in learning
- learning to deal with unexpected questions and problems
Mentoring also plays an important role in encouraging self-directed and autonomous learning outside the classroom. While the content of the mentoring session may often be related to the course content of the mentees, it also allows them to explore the language being studied with their mentor in contexts which interest them, rather than being solely confined to a “teacher-fronted classroom in which a class of heterogeneous learners [have to] work with the same content and [be] subjected to the same procedures” (Legenhausen 2009: 378). This allows for a much richer learning experience overall, where students begin to see where the target language might be of more personal relevance, and ultimately take responsibility for their own learning and for their own needs.

Equally, the process of mentoring may increase autonomy in the mentor, as their own level of motivation increases — although our students can be considered already somewhat autonomous since they have taken responsibility for their learning by voluntarily joining the mentoring program.

3. Implementation and organisation of the mentoring programs

The language mentoring programs are established through RMIT LEAD³ (Student engagement and leadership development) under the direction of the five language coordinators. LEAD fosters student leadership development and volunteering within the university through a wide range of volunteer and leadership training programs. All student mentors are required to complete five hours training (as described below), and to undertake fifteen hours of voluntary mentoring activity. In return, they receive a Certificate of Recognition signed by the Vice Chancellor, and their contribution is recorded on their official academic transcript. Mentors are also required to reflect on their learning experience and academic outcomes through three reflective learning journals throughout the semester. Mentees are simply asked to commit to regular weekly mentoring sessions.

Participants (both mentors and mentees) are generally recruited into the program in the first two weeks of semester; recruitment is done through online learning portals, email and in the classroom. All participants are undergraduate or postgraduate students, in various years of study. Mentors are intermediate, advanced or native speakers of the language (international or exchange students who offer their services). Mentees are beginner or intermediate language students.

There is no requirement for the mentors to have attained a certain grade point average in their previous language studies; all interested parties are able to join the program. Given that one of the aims of the programs is to improve the confidence and motivation of the mentors, excluding some students would be counter-productive. While this lack of control for grades could be seen as rather risky, the benefits are considered to outweigh the risk. Indeed, the less proficient mentors benefit even more so from the revision and consolidation involved in the mentoring process. Given
that the mentors have at least one year more language study than their mentees and are generally very conscientious students (in our experience, most prefer to check with a teacher or their mentoring program coordinators before advising their mentee if they are not sure of something), the lack of minimum proficiency level has not proved problematic to date.

The only control in the case of less proficient mentors is to match them with mentees who are in their first semester of learning a language rather than in their second semester. Mentors are otherwise matched with mentees purely on the basis of their schedules; mentees sign themselves up for a particular timeslot and stay with their mentor throughout the semester. In that way, the mentees built up a strong relationship with their mentor.

In week 3 of semester, the mentors undertake one hour of training with the language coordinators on specific areas of mentoring, such as: (a) organisational aspects of the program; (b) challenges related to learning a language and possible solutions; (c) suggested study techniques; (d) potential problems; (e) the content of the mentoring sessions; and (f) useful study resources. It is explained that the content of the sessions is to be determined by the mentors and their mentees: the mentee should come with questions or activities for the mentors to assist with. The aim is for the mentor to act “as a facilitator and a catalyst for learning. The mentee is responsible for their own learning. The mentor is responsible for supporting, facilitating and learning with the learner” (Kehoe 2007: 6). However, the mentors are provided with revision activities related to the course content of the mentees as a backup if they choose. Interestingly, most mentors and mentees prefer to prepare their own sessions.

The mentors then undertake three hours of general training with LEAD in week 4 of semester. This consists of: (a) the role, benefits, and ethical considerations of being a mentor; (b) effective methods of communicating, listening and questioning; (c) working with students from different cultural backgrounds; (d) facilitating a small group; (e) diverse learning styles; (f) peer learning; and (g) reflective practice.

Timetables with mentor availabilities are provided to mentees from week 4, when they sign up for a timeslot of their choice. Some mentees join the program later in semester when they encounter language learning difficulties; this is accepted until week 7 or 8. Mentors are asked to submit online learning journals in weeks 6, 9 and 12, with reflections on the mentoring experience at each point. The fifth and final hour of training is undertaken in week 8 or 9 as a general feedback session, where the mentors are asked to reflect on the mentoring program and its benefits, and to share experiences and advice.

All participants are asked to complete a questionnaire at the end of semester. This includes likert scale and open-ended questions on the perceived benefits of the mentoring program. Mentors are asked about their increased self-confidence, and how useful they feel they have been in providing academic skills to their mentee.
Mentees are asked to comment on how useful they have found the mentoring program in terms of academic skills, whether they think it has made a difference to their grades, and how helpful they found their mentor. In addition, mentees are asked whether they intend to continue learning their chosen language at RMIT, and whether the program has influenced this decision.

4. Student feedback on the mentoring programs

Student feedback on the language mentoring programs at RMIT was collected from two different sources, and is presented here as preliminary qualitative findings at this stage. The following mentor feedback was obtained from the mid-semester reflective sessions facilitated by the program coordinators in semesters 1 and 2 2011:

1. What are you doing with your mentee?

Mentors reported carrying out a variety of activities: helping with pronunciation, written script, grammar and vocabulary; practising role plays and conversations prior to assessment; going over worksheets, workbooks, test papers; giving the mentees cultural information about the country.

2. What is the best thing about mentoring for you/the mentee?

Mentors commented on the benefits of learning more about English and the target language. Most reported that mentoring improved their overall communication and organisational skills, and as such improved their self confidence. Several mentors remarked that they were learning more about responsibility, and how to plan learning for their mentee — and in turn their own learning. Some mentors appreciated the freedom to tailor the sessions to their mentees’ needs and interests, and in some cases (where the mentor was a native speaker), the opportunity to better understand each other’s cultures and each other’s languages. Many mentors commented that they appreciated the opportunity to motivate, empower, and encourage their mentees, and found themselves more motivated, empowered and encouraged in return.

3. What isn’t working well?

One of the most common answers to this question was that some mentees often cancelled meetings, or were not punctual, or changed the meeting time. Other mentors found dealing with two mentees at once could be challenging, where mentees had different proficiency levels or needs. Several mentors commented that finding appropriate resources for their mentees was not easy, and others said that the lack of fixed venue for their mentoring sessions was a problem.
4. How did you try to solve problems?

Some mentors reported having to remain patient and encouraging when their mentees cancelled or ran late for their mentoring sessions; one even reported trying to “punish[ing their mentee] in a fun way”. Mentors in general tried hard to keep their mentees motivated by thinking of new ways of doing things every week, to make the sessions interesting and more varied. Some reported finding resources available online on the Learning Hub (Blackboard) and the internet, as well as using their old textbooks. Where mentors were unsure of the answer to a mentee’s question, some reported trying to find out the answer for the next session. To deal with the problem of venues, some mentors reported booking rooms elsewhere, such as in the library.

5. Suggestions for improvement

The mentors made a number of suggestions for improvement to the program. In terms of resources, some mentors felt that mentees should be encouraged to bring in resources of their own, and to be more pro-active in their learning. Other mentors suggested that they, as mentors, could make more use of the available resources in the library and the web to make the mentoring sessions more knowledge-supported and more creative, not just limited to the material in the textbooks. A number of mentors requested more training on coaching or teaching methods, such as how to plan, how to interact and how to explain some difficult or typical language points. Some mentors also commented that mentees should clearly know their obligations as a mentee; some reported that their mentees had unreasonable expectations and saw their mentors as teachers.

The following feedback from mentees was taken from the questionnaires from across all the language mentoring programs in semesters 1 and 2 in 2011.

The mentees commented unanimously on how helpful their mentor and the mentoring program were in providing study tools for learning their chosen language, and helping them overcome academic difficulties. An overwhelming majority were of the opinion that the mentoring program had improved their grades "a lot" or "somewhat". A number of mentees also commented that the mentoring program had motivated them to join and become involved in the various language clubs on campus.

In answer to the question “In what ways has the program helped / not helped you with your learning this semester?”, a variety of answers were received regarding progress with certain technical aspects of the language being studied. A number of general responses were also received which support the benefits of peer teaching as reported in the literature, as well as concepts from Piaget’s and Vygotsky’s respective theories of learning. These may be categorised as follows:

- Discussion and exchange assist with the development of a critical and reflective mind:
‘The mentoring programme helped me piece together concepts and rules that I didn’t understand in class. ... In one mentoring session I was able to understand a range of things that had confused me all semester, enabling me to piece together a range of concepts --- the light bulb in my head is beginning to switch on.’

‘Helped me understand the concept of structuring sentences.’

- Supportive interactions with a more capable peer lead to learning:
  ‘Helped me to improve my writing and reading which is pretty difficult for me to handle alone.’
  ‘Had plenty of time for me to practise speaking.’
  ‘Mentor was able to answer everything I had doubts about.’
  ‘My buddy and I got on well.’

- Peer teaching results increased confidence and interest in learning:
  ‘[The mentoring] makes the language more accessible for me to realistically use in life instead of just another subject.’

  This has given me more confidence overall, and now I’ve decided to continue taking French. I’m well aware that I am linguistically challenged. And had X not mentored me, I definitely would have stopped taking French at RMIT. It would have been too overwhelming.’

  ‘It has given me more confidence to consider continuing to learn the language.’

  ‘My mentor showed me things which were not in the course, so now I am pretty interested in learning more.’

The majority of the mentees met up with their mentors once or twice a week, mostly for an hour or an hour and a half each time. Most mentees were satisfied with the amount of contact with their mentor, but some expressed a desire for more contact, while acknowledging that they are not actually able to do so due to other commitments. (It is worth reiterating that languages are electives for these students, and as such are outside their main area of study and not a subject they necessarily consider related to their future career.) Some mentees, like mentors, also found the lack of designated area for the mentoring sessions problematic.

5. Discussion

All of the above feedback echoes the most commonly cited benefits of peer mentoring programs to all participants (eg. Biggs and Tang 2007; Boud 2001; Chi et al. 2001). Many studies report that mentors or tutors benefit as much as (if not more than) the students being tutored (cf. Cohen et al. 1982: 244, 246; Pascarella and Terenzini 2005: 111; Polirstock and Greer 1986). When giving explanations, mentors clarify or reorganise material in their own minds, recognise and fill in gaps and resolve
inconsistencies in their understanding, develop new perspectives, and construct elaborate conceptualisations (Webb and Farivar 1999: 119). This is certainly the case with our language mentoring programs, as the mentors commented repeatedly on the consolidation of their knowledge of the target language, and their increased awareness of learning.

Mentors also commented on encouraging learner autonomy in their mentees, which was especially important because, as Bruffee points out (1999: 100), some mentees can become overly dependent on their mentor and see them as a replacement teacher. In his study of autonomous language learning, Legenhausen (2009: 383) points out that an emphasis on an awareness of learning strategies is intended to support learner independence and promote their capacity for life-long learning.

These outcomes are important in that they reflect the objectives of the mentoring program: offering the students the opportunity to practise outside minimal contact hours; eliminating the intimidation factor of the classroom; providing repetition and consolidation of material; allowing beginner students to benefit from the study techniques and knowledge of students who have gone through the same stages in their learning; offering an opportunity for students to explore their chosen language in contexts outside of the “teacher-fronted classroom” (Legenhausen 2009: 378); increasing students’ confidence and motivation; and facilitating networking opportunities with other students. This latter benefit is particularly important today, since many students spend fewer hours on campus due to work and other commitments, thereby reducing the opportunity for networking (Krause et al. 2005).

In answer to the questions “What isn’t working?” and “What suggestions do you have to improve the mentoring program?”, the responses focussed on:

1. lack of time, lack of teaching resources, lack of teaching space
2. mentors’ responsibilities and mentoring skills
3. mentees’ punctuality and obligations

Two of these problems correlate with the literature (e.g. Godfrey 2008: 4; Quinlan 1999), in particular “no physical space or ‘home’ for the group”, and increasing workloads interfering with student commitment to the program. However, while both studies cited found that it was the mentors’ enthusiasm that waned as their workloads increased, there were very few comments to this effect from the mentors in our study. Rather, where commitment was mentioned by mentors, it was the mentees’ commitment that they found had waned during the semester.

This is an interesting difference from the literature, and one that can perhaps be explained by the fact that, as language courses are currently only electives at RMIT, it is understandable that as the pressures of course work and assessments increase during semester, the mentees choose to prioritise their main program of study. Many beginner language students at RMIT (the mentees) are unable or do not intend to continue with their language study, and therefore focus on their main field
of study. However, intermediate and advanced language students (the mentors) are often from programs which allow, and indeed encourage, more space for language electives. This means that the mentors are more committed to their language study.

While we have not yet empirically measured whether the mentoring programs have any real effect on retention rates, the questionnaire enquires about the students’ intention to continue studying the chosen language: whether they intend to continue learning the language (at RMIT or elsewhere), and if the mentoring program has affected this decision. A small number of students claim this is the case.

While no firm conclusions can be drawn from these claims, it is to be hoped that the mentoring programs will contribute to increased motivation generally among the language students and will eventually have a more positive effect on the retention rate.

Ongoing student feedback suggests that the mentoring programs are a great success, and the degree of enthusiasm and the increasing number of participants bear this out. It must be acknowledged, however, that since all the students involved are volunteers, it is likely that they already have a high level of motivation. Thus it becomes difficult to measure the success of the program in more general terms, since we cannot be sure how the less motivated students would have performed or benefitted from the mentoring. However, apart from some suggestions for minor improvements to the program, the feedback is consistently overwhelmingly positive, and all participants say they would recommend this program to others.

7. Conclusion

The academic language mentoring programs at RMIT can be considered an effective way of enhancing and diversifying the language learning experience for students. They can also be considered a partial solution to some of the factors affecting tertiary language learning today, namely larger class sizes and reduced contact hours. As well as contributing to the research in the area of tertiary language mentoring programs, it is to be hoped that these positive findings will encourage language departments at other universities to establish similar programs for their students. Such support programs help not only with the engagement and ultimately the retention of language learners, but may even encourage students to begin learning a language in the first place.

In addition, the benefits of mentoring can be applied to all areas of learning, employment and life beyond university — particularly in the case of communication skills, reflection on one’s learning, and increased autonomy. If these outcomes are attained by even a few of the students involved in the mentoring program, then it can be deemed a success. More importantly, if some of the students have also benefitted from increased confidence and self-esteem, a greater understanding of difficulties faced by international students, and more awareness of diversity and different
learning styles, they are on their way to acquiring the graduate attributes which will be an asset to them for the rest of their lives. Given the importance of graduate attributes (cf. Barrie et al. 2009), and the notorious difficulty in teaching them, if such mentoring programs help students to achieve these attributes, the benefits are extensive, far-reaching and long-lasting.

Notes

1. This article reports on the RMIT LEAD mentoring practice in RMIT Languages Discipline and adapts the theoretical framework on peer mentoring practices adopted in Mullan (2012).


5. This latter point is particularly important, given the lack of interaction between local and international students at university (Universities Australia Submission to the Senate Inquiry into the Welfare of International Students 2009: 5; cf. also Arkoudis 2010).

6. This situation will change from semester 2 2012 with the introduction of the new Diploma of Languages. This will result in more commitment from language students, and therefore mentees. We will be monitoring this as part of our future research on the language mentoring programs.

References


