Language mentoring programs at RMIT University

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Introduction

- **What** are the language mentoring programs at RMIT: an overview

- **Why** a mentoring program:
  - Challenges in language teaching at university
  - Documented benefits of peer learning and teaching

- **How**: Logistics of mentoring program
  - Engaging the University
  - Engaging the Students
  - Procedures and Processes

- **Outcomes**:
  - Feedback from mentors
  - Feedback from mentees

- **Conclusion**
Intermediate, advanced, or native speaker students of Chinese, French, Greek, Japanese and Spanish at RMIT mentor beginner students for up to two extra-curricular hours a week, assisting with specific language or study related difficulties and/or providing extra practice activities related to course content.

“The mentor acts 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)
Why a mentoring program (1) : Challenges in language teaching at university

- Current trend for larger class sizes
- Reduced contact hours
- Attrition (one third of beginner level university language students do not continue their language study after one semester, and a further third do not continue after their second semester)

Report to the Council of the Australian Academy of the Humanities (2008: 14)
Why a mentoring program (2): Documented benefits of peer learning and teaching

- Very little literature on mentoring for language students

- Benefits of peer learning and teaching in general well documented:
  (Annis 1983; Bargh and Schul 1980; Biggs and Tang 2007; Boud 2001; Chi, Siler, Jeong, Yamauchi and Hausmann 2001; Scarino and Liddicoat 2009; Slavin 1987)

- We learn best when we have to teach something
  No single best method of teaching, “but the second best is students teaching other students.”

  (Svinicki and McKeachie 2010: 192)
Why a mentoring program (2): Documented benefits of peer learning and teaching (Cont.)

Benefits to all students:

- Regular study
- Enhanced students’ learning experience
- Increased confidence and interest in learning
- Discovering different learning styles
- Networking with students from different cultural backgrounds
- Learning effective ways to communicate
- Realising importance of motivation in learning
- Increased autonomy in language learning
Additional benefits to mentees:

- Sessions tailored to mentees’ specific needs
- Assistance from student with direct experience of learning the same content
- Removes “expert” teacher and formal setting of classroom
- One on one explanations
- Friendly and informal (non-threatening) learning environment*

*at least 50% of all language learners suffer from unusually high levels of anxiety (Lanir 2010: 70)
Additional benefits to mentors:

- Revision and consolidation
- Improved organizational and communication skills
- Learning how to give and receive feedback
- Learning how to evaluate their own learning
- Learning to deal with unexpected questions and problems
- Reaffirms own level of language proficiency

How: Logistics of mentoring program (1): Engaging the University

- RMIT LEAD (Student engagement and leadership development)

- Students who volunteer for 15 hours and complete five hours of training in an RMIT LEAD accredited volunteer program get a certificate signed by the Vice Chancellor and their contribution recorded on their official academic transcript.

- Mentoring program design based on Brown et al. (2008) and Falchikov (2001: 135-141)
How: Logistics of mentoring program (2): Engaging the Students

Participants:

- **Mentors**: intermediate / advanced students / native speakers (local or exchange students; language assistants)

- **Mentees**: beginner students

- **All students**: undergraduate / postgraduate; any year of study; volunteers; no minimum level of proficiency required
### How: Logistics of mentoring program (3): Procedures and Processes

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Summary of Outcomes

- Feedback overwhelmingly positive
- Some suggestions for minor improvements, but all participants say they would recommend this program to others
- Enthusiasm of mentors (increasing numbers)
- Some mentees go on to become mentors – in their target or native language
- Some students continue to mentor despite not being enrolled in a language course
- Two mentors won RMIT Student Life Awards in 2010 for their contribution to the French mentoring program
- Learning diaries far exceeded requirements (some students wrote diaries after each mentoring session, spent a lot of time reflecting on process; some students found process so useful they volunteered additional entries on own learning)
- Achieved aims of restoring confidence and increasing motivation among students
Outcomes (1): Feedback from mentors

- Consolidating their own learning:

  ‘I was again amazed at how much repetition does for my current study and how it enforces me to go back and re-learn/research old material.’

- Increasing their awareness of learning:

  ‘Mentoring has forced me to think about how I learn and what methods have helped me most.’
Outcomes (1): Feedback from mentors (Cont.)

- Increased confidence:

  ‘I was surprised as to how far I have come and gained some confidence in my own ability.’

  ‘I think it’s been good for the mentees to have a session where they can ask questions in a small and reasonably relaxed environment and come away from it hopefully feeling more confident in their abilities. I think this has helped me too, as mentoring other people has consolidated what I know and I think helped to make me feel more confident about my abilities.’
Outcomes (1): Feedback from mentors (Cont.)

- Encouraging learner autonomy in the mentee:
  
  ‘I tried to establish a friendly relationship with my mentees rather than that of a ‘teacher’ - this meant that there was a general understanding that I did not know everything and that they were responsible for their own learning rather than them relying upon me. I tried to be there just for guidance and for anything they needed clarification of.’

- Motivation:

  ‘I also recently realised that watching French beginners and asking them why they chose to study French has made me excited to continue studying French’.
Outcomes (1): Feedback from mentors (Cont.)

Problems:

- Time (with mentees; lack of preparation time for mentoring)
- Two mentees at once could be problematic
- Mentee (lack of) commitment to the program
- Language barrier with international students
Outcomes (2): Feedback from mentees

Benefits:

- ‘It has helped me to clearly understand the content of the course. The information that was learned in class was successfully backed up by the mentoring.’
- ‘It has improved my grammar rules and motivation to learn.
- ‘It was helpful to have things explained in my native language.’
- ‘It was good to be able to work through things I didn’t understand one on one.’
- ‘Because mentors are like us, it’s easier to communicate with them.’
- ‘Good for building strong friendships with classmates and creating “study buddies”.’
- ‘Seeing other students struggling with the same things I struggle with made me feel more comfortable about the difficulties I have.’
Has the mentoring made a difference to your wanting to continue learning the target language? If so, why?

‘The contact between student and tutor was very rewarding and helpful.’

‘[The mentoring] makes learning more fun.’

‘Because I feel like I have support in the sometimes daunting task of learning another language; also it makes me feel that I am not as dumb as I sometimes think!’
Language mentoring programs an effective way of enhancing and diversifying the language learning experience for students.

Partial solution to some of the challenges affecting language learning today.

Such programs help with engagement and retention of language learners, and may even encourage students to begin learning a language.

Benefits of mentoring can be applied to all areas of learning.
“There is now a good deal of research evidence to suggest that the more time and effort students invest in the learning process and the more intensely they engage in their own education, the greater will be their growth and their achievement, their satisfaction with their educational experiences, and their persistence in college, and the more likely they are to continue their learning.”

(Study Group on the Conditions of Excellence in American Higher Education 1984: 17)
“A brilliant initiative with effective outcomes that plays as much a role in aiding the mentees, as it allows for personal reflection of knowledge and further education in the mentor.”

(Mentor)
French mentors semester 2 2009 L-R: Andy Mitchell, Anna Nottle, Cassie Oaten, Kate Lowsby, Beate Stavik, Madeleine Cleary, Jan Kilicaslan (front row), Susan Cash (back row), Caitlin Caruana, Sarah Doyle (front row), Catherine Pelling
Second year International Studies students Catherine Pelling and Caitlin Caruana receive LEAD Student Life Awards for their commitment to the peer academic mentoring program.
References

1


Appendix 1

1 hour training session with French coordinator

(a) organisational aspects of the program (where to meet etc)
(b) activities to determine learning styles
(c) challenges related to learning a language and possible solutions
(d) suggested study techniques
(e) potential problems
(f) the content of the mentoring sessions
(g) useful study resources
3 hour training session by RMIT LEAD:

(a) 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
(g) reflective practice