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# 語文與國際研究

*Languages and International Studies*



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WENZAO URSULINE UNIVERSITY OF LANGUAGES

# 語文與國際研究

## Languages and International Studies

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## **Effects of Peer Tutoring on Writing in English in the Second-Language Environment: A Hong Kong Case**

**Bertha Du-Babcock\* Yao Yao\*\***

### **Abstract**

Academic English skills have been challenging for many students in English-medium universities in Hong Kong. Thus, the high demand for writing assistance has made peer tutoring an essential alternative to make up for the inadequate teaching resources. Extensive research on the language use (using both first language L1 and second language L2) in peer tutoring has laid a solid foundation in improving English writing and communication skills, yet limited empirical studies are available to examine the effects of peer tutoring in an English-medium (L2 only) context. The present study analyzes the effects of a writing consultation project to complement the existing English writing support services offered on English-medium university campuses. The study employs a triangulated approach in which a 360-degree monitoring and evaluation mechanism was set up to regulate the progress and effectiveness of the project at different implementation stages. Findings demonstrate that peer tutors play a key intermediary role between tutees and course teachers, suggesting that the project not only met the writing needs of non-native English-speaking students, but also fostered tutors' whole personal growth and enhanced the meaningful use of their linguistic knowledge.

*Keywords:* Peer Tutoring, Peer Feedback, English as a Second Language, Second-Language Writing, English for Specific Purposes, Action Research

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## **Introduction**

In this ever-changing global environment, English as a lingua franca for business communication plays a major and necessary role in today's world of business and higher education. The increasing communicative needs of this globalized business world entail the development of English for Business Communication (EBC) programs in various universities and institutions (Bhatia & Bremner, 2012), aiming to equip graduates with good command of English communication skills in business and professional contexts. In today's intercultural workplace environment, effective business English writing is most often singled out as a core requirement (Jones, 2011), and English is in fact used much more for writing than it is for speaking in second-language (L2) business contexts (Evans, 2010) and Evans (2010, P164) concluded that "spoken English was perceived to play a less important role in professional communication than written English in the Hong Kong workplaces".

Composing business and professional documents in English is often a challenging activity for many students, as it integrates the competence of language for general purposes and language for professional purposes into the competence of composing professional genres (Du-Babcock, 2007). Although core English courses and supplementary English writing support services have been provided to assist students in developing their English writing skills by university departments or English language centres (e.g., Lee, 2016; Xiao, 2001), the demand for business writing assistance remains high and critical. Manpower allocated to the English disciplinary writing (eg., business and engineering) support services is often limited and support from academic departments to help students is found to be insufficient (Hyland, 2013).

Teacher feedback is a widely adopted strategy in the writing classroom and university English support services. However, peer feedback is found to be an effective alternative method (Yang, Badger, & Zhen, 2006, Huisman, Saab, Van Driel, & Van Den Broek, 2018) that teaches students to develop strategies in revising their work (Paulus, 1999). Peer feedback, which is a form of peer tutoring defined as "a network of learning support systems among peers to facilitate learning" (Loke, Chow, Wong, & Kuan, 2002, p.2), brings benefits to students who provide and receive feedback. Previous studies have investigated three crucial aspects in relation to peer feedback in L2 writing: (a) a focus on peer feedback (e.g. content or grammar issues), (b) evaluation of language use in peer feedback (L1 or L2), and (c) identifying types of peer feedback (e.g., oral or written). Yu's (2015) study suggested that in L2 contexts, peer tutors tended to use L1 when giving comments relating to content and organization and L2 for feedback on language (Yu & Hu, 2017). There are almost none, if any, studies concerning peer feedback practices using only L2 (English in this case) in L2 writing contexts. That is, the impact of using only L2 on the quality and efficiency of peer feedback has not been fully explored.

Reviewing studies from the past two decades on peer feedback in L2 writing, Yu and Lee (2016) identified two major unsolved issues. First, the benefit of peer review to the feedback givers (or the tutors) remains underexplored (Rouhi & Azizian, 2013). Studies on tutors (e.g., Berggren, 2015) tended to focus on improving L2 writing skills, with little discussion on communication and professional skills, which are essential to students who are likely to face future communication situations. Second, in comparison with

undergraduate peer tutoring, the effects of postgraduate peer tutoring are also underexplored. Yu and Lee (2016) pointed out that postgraduate students are different from undergraduates in their English proficiency levels, learning experiences and personal beliefs. Therefore, postgraduate peer tutors may show differences in their peer feedback practices, such as the types of feedback given and the perceived benefits received. Consequently, it is worthwhile to examine whether there are differences between postgraduate and undergraduate peer tutoring.

To fill these identified research gaps, the present study investigates the overall effectiveness of a peer tutoring project and perceived differences in receiving consultations from undergraduate tutors compared to postgraduate tutors. In contrast to general writing in English, English for discipline specific writing consultations may inform different features of peer feedback from those identified in previous studies. Consequently, the purpose of our research is twofold: (1) to explore the perceived overall effectiveness of L2 peer tutoring by tutors and tutees and (2) to investigate whether tutees perceive feedback is given in different ways by undergraduate and postgraduate student tutors. To achieve the research purpose, three research questions are put forward.

RQ1: How do tutees perceive the effectiveness of L2 peer tutoring project?

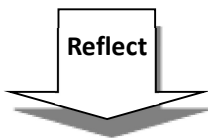
RQ2: What are the tutees' perceptions of the differences in L2 peer tutoring given by undergraduate and postgraduate tutors in enhancing tutees' writing and communication skills?

RQ3: How do tutors perceive their effectiveness when providing L2 peer tutoring?

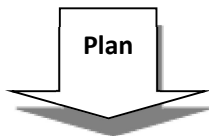
In this paper, we first describe the theoretical base of the project design. We then describe the research method used to collect quantitative and qualitative data. Third, we analyze the effectiveness of the project. We conclude the paper by discussing the implications, limitations, and future research.

### **Theoretical Base of the Project Design**

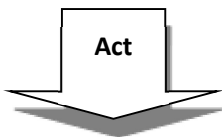
The underlying theory for the design of the peer tutoring project is based on a five-stage Action Research Spiral model (Lewin, 1946/1988) that reflects the action learning process. Activities that are relevant to the project design are described below.



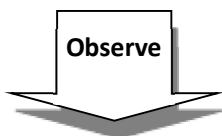
In the reflection stage we identified the learning difficulties of L2 learners of English. There is a growing recognition that peer tutoring benefits both tutees and tutors in their learning of English. Through tutoring the peers, tutors can be consciously aware of the common mistakes that L2 learners make. These “hands-on” tutoring experiences can be linked to their L2 learning and in turn enhance their L2 proficiency. For tutees, peer tutoring provides them a conducive, non-threatening environment. To ensure the success of the peer tutoring Project, pre-service training, monitoring, and evaluation mechanism were in place to raise student motivation and involvement by incorporating the peer tutoring into an English writing curriculum.



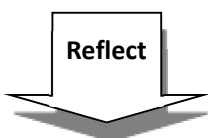
The plan stage addressed the preparatory stage to conceptualize the overall project design to ensure the successful running of the project. During the planning stage, a committee consisting of principal investigators of the three universities was formed to design the tutoring program (e.g., tutor selection process and hiring policy), develop tutor training materials, and evaluation mechanism.



The action stage involved the actual operation of the project. The major activity embedded in the action stage was the monitoring of the peer tutoring process among three parties, namely tutor-tutees, tutors-mentors, and tutors-investigators. To ensure a smooth process, an experienced assistant was hired to assist the project committee, maintain instant communication, and provide feedback to student tutors and investigators. At mid-course, the assistant and investigators met to hold monthly meetings, share good practices, and resolved any issues that had arisen.



The observation stage measured the effectiveness of the project. Multiple evaluation mechanisms were used from differing perspectives during the action stages of the project. The evaluation aimed at uncovering general and specific problems and making suggestions for improvement. Mechanisms used for evaluating the effectiveness of the Project included tutee questionnaires, tutor’s self-reflections, and focus-group discussions.



In the reflection stage, tutors digested and processed their experience after they had successfully completed their semester’s peer tutoring. The tutors reflected critically on their successes, failures, and ways of improving. Upon collecting the focus-group discussions and self-reflection essays, data was analysed, and the investigators held meetings to discuss the “hiccups” regarding how the project was running and to find ways of improving it. This stage of the reflection indicates the beginning of the second/new cycles of the project.

## **Research Method**

A triangulated approach was employed for the data collection, including end-of-consultation online questionnaires, audio recordings, comments of student writings, consultation notes, end-of-consultation interviews, focus group discussions, and self-reflection essays. This mixed-method approach (Creswell, 2014) offers multifaceted while complementary outlook on issues pertaining to the practice of peer tutoring in L2 writing consultations. Such a triangulated approach enhances the reliability and validity of the research findings and thereby contributes to the current peer tutoring research.

## **Research Site**

The present study was joint inter-universities collaboration and was funded by University Grants Committee (UGC) in Hong Kong Special Administrative Region. For this article, we only analyze the data collected at the authors' former working institution. The University offers two Gateway English courses (equivalent to GE courses in the US and Taiwan) offering University English to all of the undergraduate students and one discipline-specific course entitled *English for Business Communication* offered to the students of College of Business or *English for Science and Engineering* for students of College of Science and Engineering. These two courses, although different in syllabus design, both aim to provide students with prerequisite communication skills (e.g., writing emails and business plans) essential in business and professional contexts.

## **Participating Student Tutors**

The project employed a team of undergraduate and postgraduate student tutors on a semester basis. These student-tutors were selected based on their performance in a written test and a follow-up interview. Each tutor provided four to six 30-minute face-to-face consultation sessions per week to students/tutees who took either discipline specific course (i.e., English for Business Communication or English for Science and Engineering course) or students who took University English. The consultations were audio recorded with the tutee's consent.

Over a two-year period, 30 student tutors were recruited and half of them were postgraduate students from the College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences. These postgraduate tutors were experienced tutors with at least one-year teaching experience before joining the project. The remaining undergraduate tutors were junior or senior undergraduate students from diverse disciplinary backgrounds such as Business, Engineering, and Law.

## **Data Collection**

The peer consultations started two weeks after the semester started, usually when students needed to prepare for their first writing assignment. The data were collected from both tutees and student tutors, including online questionnaires, comments on student writing, consultation notes, audio recordings of end-of-consultation interviews, focus group discussions and self-reflection essays.

To ensure instant feedback, tutees were required to fill in an online questionnaire and take a short 5-minute interview after each consultation, commenting on the effectiveness of the consultation. Quantitative data contained the 5-point Likert scale questionnaire statements that captured tutees' perceptions of overall consultation effectiveness. Focus-group interviews were also organized at the end of the semester, allowing tutees to share their experience of receiving feedback from tutors. The focus-group discussion helped reveal and explain the nuances of the research topic that the findings from the quantitative data do not provide.

The second set of the data derived from student tutors and is qualitative in nature. Tutors were required to keep consultation notes after each consultation in reporting their experience of giving feedback such as what tutees' needs were met or not, and any other important information that they considered necessary to report. Tutors also needed to submit their comments on tutees' writing and in the recorded consultations. Moreover, at the end of the semester, tutors attended focus-group interviews to further discuss their peer-feedback practices including training experiences, support received, challenges encountered, personal gains, and suggestions on project improvement. Finally, they submitted an 800-word self-reflection essay to conclude their tutoring experience.

### **Data Analysis**

For the questionnaires, the data analyses included descriptive, correlation, and comparison analysis. Descriptive analysis reported the mean values of the variables measured in questionnaires. Comparisons were made to investigate the perceived differences of feedback given both by undergraduate and postgraduate tutors.

Qualitative data includes tutees' assignment comments, consultation notes, recorded focus-group interviews and end-of-consultation interviews, consultation recordings, and self-reflection essays. Qualitative analysis aims to triangulate, supplement, and explain the consistency of the quantitative findings. Content analysis was applied to interviews, consultation notes, and self-reflection essays to investigate participants' perceptions and experiences of peer feedback. All the recordings were transcribed verbatim and coded. The researchers selectively cross-checked the recordings to enhance the accuracy of data analysis and the validity of the findings.

### **Description of the Peer Tutoring Project**

To enhance students' L2 writing ability, the design of the peer tutoring project adopted a multi-level approach by integrating classroom learning with peer tutoring activities. This project attempted not only to promote closer ties with classroom learning, but also to enhance students' L2 writing competence, and thereby increase their confidence in using English as a medium of communication.

The project was implemented in three stages; namely the preparatory stage, implementation stage, and post-debriefing/reflection stage. In the next section, we describe the development of the project and highlight activities embedded in these three stages.



### **Stage 1: The Preparatory Stage**

The preparatory stage is the key to the success of the project. Activities involved in the preparatory stage consisted of (1) recruiting key personnel, (2) providing pre-service training and (3) promoting the project.

#### **Recruiting key personnel**

**Assistant Research Officer.** To ensure the smooth running of the project, we employed a full-time assistant research officer with five-year university-level English for Business Communication teaching experience and relevant educational background. The Assistant Research Officer assisted the project leader and the co-leaders to organize training workshops, develop training materials, design a student tutor manual, organize training materials, and collected self-reflection essays.

**Technical Officer.** To enhance efficient communication among the three participating universities and the communication between tutors, tutees, and investigators, a technical officer was employed to create and maintain the online platform. The major role of the technical officer was to design, develop, and manage an e-teaching-and-learning platform for training and communication purposes, and an online appointment system for student-tutor consultations.

**Student Tutors.** Student tutors were the “blood and soul” of the key operating team. As the peer tutoring service was opened up to all students, the need to recruit qualified tutors from various disciplines in both undergraduate and postgraduate programs became critical. To succeed, the project team came up with different recruiting methods. The investigators of the project team made announcements using their own university’s email mass mailing system, distributing the invitation flyer to all junior-year, senior-year and postgraduate students, including both master degree and PhD students. Recruitment posters were also posted around campus buildings and in departmental offices. In addition, the investigators also invited faculty members to recommend Junior-Year (Year 3) or Senior-Year (Year 4) students, postgraduates and non-local exchange students for the project.

Interested candidates were requested to submit their curriculum vistas and writing samples. Shortlisted applicants were invited to take the written test to assess candidates’ overall English proficiency in their reading comprehension and writing ability. Applicants who passed the online writing and language awareness assessments were shortlisted for interviews. Once the student tutors were selected, they needed to attend a five-day pre-service training session.

#### **Providing pre-service training**

Selected tutors were required to receive five-day pre-service training. The pre-service training formally introduced selected student tutors to the project. The workshop was designed to provide tutors with a valuable opportunity to learn theory and hands-on peer tutoring technique in relation to English language and writing. The essence of the training included: peer students’ language needs, interactional features of one-on-one face-to-face consultations, communication and questioning skills, approaches to L2 writing instruction

and the potential challenges. Authentic tutor-tutee dialogue was provided for discussion. Simulated role play was also arranged for participant practice and self-reflection.

Details of the five-day pre-service training activities are discussed in the next section. These workshop activities aimed to help tutors prepare themselves cognitively and effectively when conducting peer tutoring in maximizing their English-communication abilities and peer tutoring strategies.

On Day 1, the contents of the training activities introduced the project and tutor roles. Tutors were well informed of the characteristics of a tutor-centered tutorial and a tutee centered one. At the project introduction, the focus was on the concept and effects of peer tutoring. To counter the misconception that a tutor's role is to proofread or edit a tutee's work, tutors were reminded of the role they should play when providing the peer tutoring. To make the tutor's role clear, from the outset the tutors were reminded that they were readers, peers, mentors, but not proofreaders or editors.

On Day 2, the training focused on the principles of basic business communication and the guiding skills of conducting peer tutoring. Upon frontloading the relevant principles and theory, the trainer suggested ways for tutors to find out the tutees' needs by using open-ended questions to probe and seek clarifications, to give both positive and negative feedback, and to make an action plan with their tutees. The trainer also guided the tutor trainees in how to address errors related to higher-order issues (e.g., ideas, organization, and audience) and lower-order issues (e.g., choice of words, grammar, and referencing) of tutees' writing. To ensure authenticity, writing samples were selected from tutee assignments from a variety of disciplines.

On Day 3/4, tutors picked either day to practice what they learned from the previous two training days. In each role-play pair, two writing texts were provided so that each tutor could play roles as a tutor and as a tutee. Upon finishing their consultation practice, trainees needed to self-reflect on what went well, what did not go well, and how to improve on their roles. Based on observation, the trainer gave comments, suggestions, and evaluation on the trainees' performances.

Day 5 concluded the training program whereby the trainer reviewed important tutoring strategies, discussed professionalism with trainees in terms of basic work ethics, and presented how to use the booking platform and deal with possible issues that may occur, like last-minute bookings.

### **Promoting the peer tutoring project**

The success of the project largely depends on the number of the students who received the peer tutoring services. Throughout the preparatory stage, various promotional activities were adopted to reach as many students at the university as possible. Methods of promoting the peer tutoring project included using different communication channels. The first method used was the mass email sent to undergraduate and graduate students informing them of the Government-funded free consultation project to enhance their English communication efficacy. To ensure the visibility of the project, flyers were also posted on campus bulletin boards. Additionally, the student tutors took the initiative to contact classroom teachers, requesting a 5 to 10-minute introduction for the peer tutoring services to their peers.

## **Stage 2: Implementation Stage**

Once the project started running, tutors and tutees remained in close contact, such as reminding tutees to upload their work/assignment for discussion during the consultation period. To ensure that the tutors were well prepared for the 30-minute lesson and to provide effective peer tutoring, tutees were required to submit their work a day ahead.

Tutors were also required to submit consultation notes, peer tutoring feedback and interviews on the peer tutoring. The consultation notes and peer tutoring interview audiotapes were regularly checked by the investigators to spot issues for discussion in monthly meetings. The tutee's evaluation questionnaire was also collected right after the peer tutoring consultation.

At the mid-course of the project, the investigator of each participating university met with tutors to discuss issues that had come up during the tuition period. After meeting with the tutors, the investigators from three universities met to report and share the issues encountered and the feedback gathered from the tutors. The purpose of the mid-term informal evaluation was to identify possible "hiccups" before the issues became serious and unmanageable.

## **Stage 3: Post Debriefing/Reflection Stage**

Debriefing and reflection activities are an essential component of project-based learning activities and have proved to be the most meaningful in terms of learning (Du-Babcock & Babcock, 2000). Through debriefing and reflecting on peer tutoring experiences, tutors were able to recognize, describe, and understand the pedagogic effectiveness of their peer tutoring activities.

The post debriefing stage consisted of two activities. First, tutors submitted self-reflective essays highlighting their overall peer tutoring activities. Second, tutors took part in focus-group discussions. The debriefing session with tutors allowed them to go back to their "safety zone". Such debriefing activities provided an opportunity for tutors to reflect on their peer tutoring experiences and to share their experience with other tutors and the investigator.

## **Evaluation of Effectiveness of the Peer Tutoring Project**

In this section, we report the findings that examine the effectiveness of the project from the views of tutees who used the peer tutoring services and tutors who provided the peer tutoring services. In doing so, we first report the quantitative analysis of the end-of-consultation questionnaires completed by tutees to examine the effectiveness of the project (Research Question 1), supplemented with qualitative open-ended questionnaire comments. Research Question 2 investigates the perception differences in L2 peer tutoring given by undergraduate student tutors as compared to postgraduate tutors. To delve into the nuances and gain a deeper understanding of the effectiveness of the project overall, Research Question 3 reports the findings of the qualitative views from tutors' self-reflection essays.

Research Question 1 examines how tutees perceive the effectiveness of the L2 peer tutoring project. To examine the overall effectiveness of the project and the performance of tutors, tutees filled in a questionnaire to capture their overall perceived effectiveness of the peer tutoring. The mean scores of the six items were calculated to reflect the effectiveness of the project.

Table 1 lists the mean scores of six items that reflected tutees' overall impression of the project effectiveness and the tutor's linguistic ability. Results show that in a 5-point Likert scale, the mean scores of all six items ranging from 4.44 to 4.60, indicating that tutees felt the project was effective in all aspects.

**Table 1**

*Mean Scores of Tutee's Perceived Effectiveness on the Project*

<b>Questionnaire Statements</b>	<b>Mean</b>
1. Tutor understood my needs	4.49
2. Tutor gave me useful advice to improve my writing	4.51
3. Tutor was able to support me to become a better writer on my own	4.51
4. Location and the room	4.44
5. Online booking system	4.51
6. Tutor had adequate linguistic knowledge	4.60

To capture the nuances of tutees' perception on the overall project effectiveness, we also report tutees' qualitative reflections derived from the open-ended comments emphasizing the consistency between quantitative measure of the tutees' perception on project effectiveness and their qualitative statements.

### **Tutees Commenting on Whether Tutors Understood Their Needs (Questionnaire Statement 1)**

The high mean score ( $x = 4.49$  on a 5-point Likert Scale) indicated that tutees felt that tutors were able to meet both their general academic and discipline-specific needs. In Hong Kong, all undergraduate students were required to take University English (similar to Freshmen English or Expository Writing) and discipline specific English, such as *English for Business Communication* for College of Business students, or *English for Science and Engineering* for College of Science and Engineering students. In this connection, qualified tutors should not only possess general academic English ability to deal with general academic English, but also be equipped with adequate professional genres so as to provide consultations that deal with discipline specific courses.

Comments corresponding to the questionnaire statement 1 are summarized in the next. Most comments by tutees were that: “[In the consultations], tutors not only pointed out my grammatical problems, they also emphasized other aspects of the writing elements, such as the logical development of the overall organization, paragraph development and, coherence. As for the discipline specific needs, tutees commented that “My tutor knows a lot about skills

and knowledge of business communication such as writing CV, emails, business plan, and preparing for job interviews.”

### **Tutees Commenting on Whether Tutors Provide Useful Advice (Questionnaire Statement 2) and Support Tutees to Become Better Writers (Questionnaire Statement 3)**

In general, tutees felt that tutors provided useful feedback ( $X = 4.51$ ) and supported them to become better writers ( $X = 4.51$ ). Comments made by tutees can be categorized into four aspects. The most frequently mentioned comments were that tutors provided practical, sustainable guidance, rather than providing a one-off solution. Tutees commented, “Tutor helped identify types of grammatical errors that often occurred in the writing, and [consequently] I became more writer consciousness and learner independent.” The second frequently mentioned comments related to language awareness when composing messages. A sample of these comments includes: “Tutors help me to really understand what the problems are. Through the consultations, I not only improved my writing assignment grades, but also was able to learn to reflect the writing issues and became aware of the grammatical issues and paragraph development. Because of this, I [have] become a [conscious] and better writer.”

### **Tutees Commenting on Their Perception of Tutors’ Linguistic Knowledge (Questionnaire Statement 6)**

To capture tutees’ perception of tutors’ qualifications, the questionnaire statement 6 asked about tutees’ perception of tutors’ linguistic knowledge. The highest mean score ( $X = 4.60$ ) among the six questionnaire statements strongly reflected that the tutees perceived that the tutors’ demonstrated high linguistic competence. An unusual case shared by one tutor illustrated that tutees perceived that tutors do possess high, professional linguistic knowledge. One tutor reflected that “once a year-4 undergraduate student sought my help to refine her manuscript and eventually the manuscript was published after several rounds of consultations. The tutee wrote me a thank-you note complimenting my linguistic and professional knowledge”.

The composition of the student tutors in the present study differs from most of the peer tutoring studies in which most tutors came from similar degree programs, namely undergraduate programs. In our case, half of the tutors came from postgraduate programs including master’s and PhD program students. Research Question 2 investigates whether there are perception based differences among tutees when their consultations were conducted with their peers, when compared with tutors working in higher degree programs. To answer Research Question 2, the comparison was made to compare the peer tutoring conducted by undergraduate tutors with postgraduate tutors.

**Table 2**

*A Comparison of Perceived Questionnaire Statements between Undergraduate and Postgraduate Tutors*

<i>Questionnaire Statement</i>	<i>Mean Score</i>		<i>P Value</i>
	<i>UG</i>	<i>PG</i>	
1. Tutor understood my needs	4.458	4.542	.025*
2. Tutor gave me useful advice to improve my writing	4.466	4.544	.032*
3. Tutor was able to support me to become a better writer on my own	4.475	4.574	.003**
4. Location and the room	4.446	4.517	.023**
5. Online booking system	4.525	4.574	.12
6. Tutor had adequate linguistic knowledge	4.37	4.455	.037*

Keys: UG-Undergraduate; PG-Postgraduate; \* at 0.05 significant level; \*\* at 0.01 significant level

Table 2 compares the differences between undergraduate and postgraduate tutors. The results show that tutees valued more the consultations that were conducted by postgraduate tutors in that tutees felt that postgraduate tutors were more likely than undergraduate tutors to understand their needs, give them useful advice, and support them to become better writers. Above all, tutees also felt that postgraduate tutors possessed more adequate linguistic knowledge than their undergraduate tutors. In all, the greater maturity of academic and life experience, as well as specialized discipline knowledge made postgraduate tutors highly valued.

Research Question 3 examines how tutors perceive the effectiveness of providing L2 peer tutoring. To answer Research Question 3, the qualitative reflections of tutors' end-of-semester self-reflection essays were analyzed. In the first part of the reflection, tutors described a consultation experience that was deemed to be successful in addition to unsuccessful scenarios. The second part of the reflection described their general observations on a mentor-mentee role play exercise. The third part of the reflection enabled tutors to comment on (a) whether they changed their tutoring approach in the span of the semester and reasons for that change, (b) how their advising techniques/communication skills have improved throughout the semester, and (c) whether there are any unfulfilled expectations and personal gains.

The purpose of asking tutors to describe successful and unsuccessful scenarios enabled them to self-reflect on good practices that can be shared with other tutors. Likewise, it is equally important for tutors to reflect on their unsuccessful peer tutoring by describing how they dealt with it and what they could have done differently or better. In the next section, we provide two examples that describe both successful and unsuccessful scenarios.

The first example is a successful scenario. This scenario reveals the importance of the tutor possessing professional genres to provide comments on an engineering report. In this case, the tutor was a PhD student from the Humanities and Social Sciences field, and the tutee was a Science major student. The tutor's reflection is as follows:

Although the paper was in the field of engineering that I had no knowledge of, I tried to read the paper several times and looked carefully about language as he [tutee] requested. I was able to identify some linguistic problems such as repetition and grammar mistakes. I discussed these problems with the tutee and he was able to see some problems like repetition in his second time of consultation.

[When] I saw [came across] some odd expressions, but [was] not sure if they were commonly used in [the] engineering [field], I checked with the tutee first and then double checked the expressions online. Some expressions that he [the tutee] was sure about turned out to be Chinglish as no one used them [such kind of expressions] according to Google scholar search. He mentioned that his supervisor used that expression, but his supervisor is an EFL learner. To further support his writing, I introduced an engineering corpus website to him and showed him how to use the website.

The second example is an unsuccessful scenario. This unsuccessful scenario was shared by most of the tutors reflecting the situation that tutees came without preparation and no documents were uploaded before the scheduled consultation time. The following unsuccessful scenario goes like:

Once a tutee booked a slot, yet she did not upload anything beforehand. When she came, she took out her laptop and showed me what she was working on. It was a personal statement, and she was applying for a Masters degree Program in the USA...I was a bit frustrated at first when I had to read her personal statement on the spot. I knew neither her major nor the particular program she was applying for, so I asked her to explain to me a few things, such as her academic and research interests, and what she expected to gain from the program. [In so doing], by then, 20 minutes – gone.

By the end of that session, we were not able to finish the personal statement. Nevertheless, I numbered [a few] suggestions for him to improve. Although it was far from being complete, at least we achieved something.

. . . It was frustrating to me, but I am sure that it was equally frustrating to the tutee as well, because she was also trying hard to work on it. Under this situation, we as tutors could focus more on the few things that can be done to help the tutee improve her work, to make the best use of the consultation session.

### **Comments on Mentor-Mentee Role Play Exercise**

The second part of the reflection elicited comments on the general observations from the mentor-mentee role-play exercise. The purposes of this role-play enabled novice tutors to receive comments from more experienced tutors to learn from it. In this mentor-mentee role play exercise, the mentors (experienced tutors) were paired up with mentees (newly employed novice tutors). In doing the role play, the mentors played tutee roles; whereas the novice tutors acted in tutor roles and conducted a 30-minute consultation mimicking the real consultations that individuals would do in the peer tutoring. To foster a positive synergy, after the role-play exercise, mentors were requested to provide mentees with oral feedback, and both mentors and mentees needed to submit written reports. While the mentor provided a short report commenting on the mentee's tutoring techniques and improvements in the effectiveness of peer consultation, the mentees in their short reports commented on what they learned from these role-play exercises and what changes they would make after the role-play exercise.

In the following section, we provide excerpts to represent the mentor-mentee views on their role play exercises.

### **Reflections of Mentors in Role Play Exercise**

All of the mentors thought that mentees were good tutors and were qualified to conduct peer tutoring. One mentor commented, "One thing that I liked very much about both of my mentees' tutoring styles was their interactive peer tutoring technique. Acting as a tutor, my mentee asked me questions to elicit answers from me (as a tutee) instead of telling me explicitly what could be improved with my essay." This kind of interactive style fits into the tutee-centered peer tutoring technique that was stressed in the training. This active interaction enabled tutees to realize what went wrong in their writings.

Another mentor shared his role-play exercise and commented, "I observed two mentees' performances. Generally, both are good tutors who provide many useful suggestions and comments on the [given] writing pieces. Both mentees were able to identify and explain major issues clearly. They also answered my questions patiently. Most importantly, they were able to explain those identified grammatical points with plain language, which was very helpful."

The third mentor thought the benefit was mutual and commented, "The role-play experience I had with the mentee was beneficial for me, too." I played the role of a tutee. In order for me to know whether the mentee had a similar or different consultation style as I did in conducting the consultation, I used a student's argumentative essay assignment as role-play material. The material was the one consultation I did a few days ago. In doing so, I would be able to see if the mentee and I had a similar or different consultation style in terms of giving comments, interpreting comments to the tutee and interacting with the tutee." She further commented:



In giving comments, the mentee showed a good knowledge of language use and essay writing. We both [mentor and mentee] basically have consistent comments, except that the mentee paid more attention to the student's word choice problem while I cared about the grammatical accuracy.

For interpreting comments, the mentee demonstrated a good mastery of the professional knowledge to explain her comments clearly. She used simple and understandable language to do the interpretation rather than using technical linguistic terms. [I observed that] sometimes she [the mentee] wrote some words on the paper if I didn't seem to understand her well. When interpreting the essay structure, she drew the diagram on the paper to illustrate the organization of the essay for which I think it is effective.

As for interacting with tutees, the mentee demonstrated competent communication skills during the role-play consultation. She asked open rather than close-ended questions to me, as the tutee, and tried to encourage me to do self-thinking first rather than simply giving me the answers. If she found me having difficulty in answering her questions, she would provide several options for me to choose from. In all, the mentee demonstrated outstanding knowledge and skills in conducting the consultation. One minor issue for the mentee to improve is paying attention to the run-on sentences, especially when 'however' is used.

### **Reflections of Mentees on Role-Play Exercise**

This section provides the mentees' reflections on their role-play exercise. One mentee reflected on his role-play experience and shared the tutoring strategies he used during the role play and commented,

In preparing the role-play exercise, I came up with several strategies to be incorporated when I conducted a simulated tutoring exercise with my mentor. There are four strategies I used to ensure the success of peer tutoring. The first strategy is probing the questions to elicit the answers from tutees. The second strategy was paying attention to the organization, logical development, and paragraph coherence instead of emphasizing the local development of ideas at the expense of understanding the theme or the significant statements. The third and foremost strategy was creating a relaxing atmosphere and making the tutees feel that the tutor is a helper (facilitator), instead of a lecturer. The fourth strategy is to provide tutees with the possible solutions to the problems rather than proofreading the assignments.

Comments shared by other mentees are as follows:

My mentor conducted a student-led tutoring session which is different from mine. He often asked probing questions that required the tutee to interact. . . . after the role-play session, I tried to incorporate more probing questions into my tutoring. However,

I realized that responses could only be elicited if tutees were well prepared for the session.

I learned a lot from the mentor-mentee role-play exercise as I got a glimpse of how my mentor structured her tutoring sessions. It was eye-opening to see how much more efficient and structured the session conducted by my mentor was than mine. Through this role-play exercise, I was able to take this structure and apply it to my tutoring sessions.

In the third part of the reflection essay, tutors were asked whether they had additional comments to share. Comments made by the tutors are as follows.

### **Pre-service Training Enhancing Their Communication and Tutoring Skills**

All of the tutors expressed that the pre-service training enhanced their communication style and tutoring skills. Particularly, the language awareness training made them aware of the language structure and patterns when composing messages. One tutor commented, “This peer tutoring program [changed] my misconceptions that tutoring is like spoon-feeding and cramming.” [After taking part in the Program, I reckoned that “Providing peer tutoring is not merely about proofreading, editing, or ‘ghost-writing’”. Another tutor commented that “Teaching is a kind of two-way communication. It is more than just speaking and listening; therefore, building good rapport and providing sensible feedback is critical.”

### **Development of Professional Skills**

Several tutors commented that “through providing peer tutoring, we learned and gradually improved our teaching and communication skills.” One tutor commented, “I kept the consultation tutee-focused by probing the mistakes or illogical development with questions, rather than pointing out the mistakes immediately to the tutees as I did.” Another tutor commented that tutees came with “varying degree of language skills, different personality traits, so I learned to look for recognizable non-verbal behavior, remain open, and ensure tutees were learning in a conducive and supportive non-threatening environment.”

### **Building Bonds between Tutors and Tutees**

Building close bonds with tutees do help reduce tutees’ anxiety level. One tutor commented that “. . . it is vital to establish a closed relationship with tutees. By establishing it [the close relationship] early on, I was able to gain tutee’s trust and further improve tutee’s writing.” Another tutor also commented that “. . . tutoring is not just about helping tutees improve their work, it’s also about communicating with them and building a bond with them.”

### **Tutoring as a Reflective Practice and More**

There is a famous Chinese proverb that teaching and learning are always coming hand in hand. Teaching is not just a one-way method of passing knowledge to learners; it also provides teachers with opportunities to reflect and learn from it. One tutor commented that

“after taking part in the peer tutoring program, I have become more aware of my way of communication in my daily life - to become a good listener that “talked less, observed more, and enjoyed other people’s opinions.” In turn, “I became more patient and tolerant with tutees who need additional time to express their thoughts.” Another tutor commented that “. . . The Project “raised not only tutees’ attention to some common problems they had never noticed before, but also enabled me as a tutor to enhance my metalinguistic awareness in my writing.”

### **Conclusion**

Research on the effects of peer tutoring and peer feedback in L2 writing has been extensively studied (see Yu & Lee, 2016 for review). Yet, little research has been done to examine the second-language use (English in this case) in an English-as-a-second-language (ESL) peer tutoring environment where tutors were either ESL or EFL speakers. To enhance tutors’ English language skills and tutoring strategies, all newly employed tutors received a pre-service training and were assigned experienced tutors to work with as their mentors.

To examine the effectiveness of the peer tutoring, both quantitative and qualitative measures were employed as a mixed research methodology. The high mean scores of the tutee’s questionnaire statement demonstrated that the peer tutoring program achieved all of its objectives.

The qualitative findings of the tutees’ open-ended comments and focus-group discussion suggest that tutees undergo changes in their writing and language use because of their peer tutoring and that this project had a significant impact on enhancing their L2 writing competence and English communication skills. The participating tutees found the tutoring experience helped them receive not only higher marks, but also enabled them to become aware of language use and language structures when they composed messages. Our study supports the findings of previous studies (see Yu & Lee, 2014; Zhao, 2014) that peer feedback can facilitate students’ L2 writing process and development.

We also found that advanced L2 learners/users (postgraduate tutors) can scaffold students’ writing more effectively, as they have both proficient linguistic skills and professional knowledge to help students improve L2 writing skills, particularly in the writing of professional documents like cover letters. This finding confirms that postgraduate peer tutors may show differences in their peer feedback than their undergraduate counterparts (Yu & Lee, 2016) and suggests that the postgraduate tutor plays a more influential role in peer tutoring.

Moreover, we paid particular attention to an underexplored topic, the benefits of peer tutoring to tutors (Rouhi & Azizian, 2013). Our findings show that peer tutoring do not only help improve tutors’ L2 writing skills (Berggren, 2015), but also enhance their communication and professional skills. More importantly, the skills they practiced and developed from the peer tutoring experience are believed to benefit their personal growth and prepare them for their future career.

In sum, in every way, the students increased their confidence levels in using English, demonstrated a greater awareness of L2 use, were able to identify and explain the language differences and grammatical errors they made, and learned to apply language learning

strategies to become better writers. By the same token, tutors also found that their peer tutoring experience was not only rewarding, but also enabled them to become more aware of their own writing.

### **Implications for Practitioners and Researchers**

Findings of the present study have both pedagogical and research implications for L2 writing. Regarding the pedagogical implications, peer tutoring enhances students' learning efficacy and effectiveness where the peer tutoring provides a conducive, non-threatening learning environment and reinforces tutees' L2 communication and writing skills. Also, the pre-service training on theories in relation to L2 writing, peer teaching strategies, and language awareness facilitates tutors' abilities in conducting peer tutoring. As for the research implication, given the little empirical research that has systematically examined the impact of peer tutoring on improving tutees' L2 proficiency, the findings of the present study can be reassuring and can shed light on exploring the impact of L2 writing in a longitudinal research project. Pedagogical research like this can lead to theory development that is specifically geared toward L2 writing by ESL/EFL students.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

Although the present study presents meaningful findings and practical implications for L2 writing, some limitations should be considered when interpreting the results. First, the tutee's questionnaire was required to be completed right after the consultation period. This type of instant feedback may not truly reflect long-term effects. Second, tutees were taken from a homogeneous group, most were Hong Kong students, and a small percentage were non-native English-speaking international exchange students from other Asian countries. Third, all tutors were ESL speakers, which differs from most peer tutoring programs in Western countries, such as the United States. The results may not apply to a different population in a specific cultural environment like this. Fourth, the lack of rigorous control in the research could be problematic. For instance, the measurement of project effectiveness was mainly based on tutees' perception.

The current study describes and examines the effects of peer tutoring on second-language writing. Although the results of the study have revealed desirable outcomes, the measurements were taken shortly after the consultation was over. It can be arguable whether this impact is permanent. If peer tutoring programs become a trend to promote the enhancement of language competence for second or foreign language learners in their L2 writing, a better understanding of the long-term impact on the tutee's second-language writing is essential. In this connection, only a longitudinal research design can address the concerns of the long-term effect. In doing so, future research on the long-term impact of peer tutoring on second-language writing programs may need to consider using longitudinal, ethnographic research methods to trace the changes towards second language acquisition over a period of an academic year, two academic years, or perhaps even for a more extended period.

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