

## Tutors' and Tutees' Behaviors, Attitudes, and Perspectives Regarding EFL Peer Tutoring in Higher Education in Mexico

Comportamientos, actitudes y perspectivas de tutores y tutorados hacia la tutoría entre pares en un contexto de inglés como lengua extranjera en educación superior en México

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This article reports on the findings of a mixed methods research study on tutors' and tutees' behaviors and attitudes during the tutoring sessions and their perceptions about English language peer tutoring at a bilingual, international, and sustainable university in central Mexico. Observation, peer assessment, and semistructured interviews results suggest that tutees and tutors asked and answered questions and had a positive attitude towards error correction in almost all the sessions. Likewise, they reveal that participants clarified doubts, seemed motivated, motivated their peers, and had a constructive attitude towards teaching and learning from a peer most of the time during the tutoring. Furthermore, results indicate that the participants were positive about the experience, the sessions, their peers, and the influence in their learning.

*Keywords:* English language learning, higher education, peer tutoring

Este artículo reporta los resultados de una investigación de métodos mixtos sobre el comportamiento y la actitud de tutores y tutorados durante las sesiones de tutoría y sus percepciones sobre la tutoría entre pares para el aprendizaje del idioma inglés en una universidad tecnológica bilingüe, internacional y sustentable en el centro de México. Los resultados obtenidos mediante observaciones, evaluación de pares y entrevistas semiestructuradas sugieren que los tutorados y tutores realizaron y respondieron preguntas y estuvieron dispuestos a corregir errores en casi todas las sesiones, así como, que los participantes aclararon dudas, parecían motivados, motivaron a sus compañeros y tuvieron una actitud positiva hacia la enseñanza y aprendizaje entre pares, la mayor parte del tiempo durante las tutorías. Además, los resultados indican que los participantes apreciaron positivamente la experiencia, las sesiones, a sus compañeros y la influencia en su aprendizaje.

*Palabras clave:* aprendizaje del inglés, educación superior, tutoría entre pares

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This article is based on the master's thesis completed by Sanchez-Aguilar (2020).

How to cite this article (APA, 7<sup>th</sup> ed.): Sanchez-Aguilar, J. (2021). Tutors' and tutees' behaviors, attitudes, and perspectives regarding EFL peer tutoring in higher education in Mexico. *Profile: Issues in Teachers' Professional Development*, 23(2), 167–182. <https://doi.org/10.15446/profile.v23n2.87744>

This article was received on May 28, 2020 and accepted on March 9, 2021.

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## Introduction

The language education field has taken on a significant change to a more learner-centered approach in order to better promote the varied dimensions of learning (Matukhin & Bolgova, 2015). Teaching and learning a second language should not always follow a linear approach, with the teacher at one end and the student at the other. LoCastro (2003) highlights that other learners are one of the main sources of information that language learners are exposed to. Vygotsky claims that learning is socially and culturally promoted and constructed among students, and between teacher and students (as cited in Razia, 2012).

Learning in collaboration is not a new idea, and the concept of tutoring is probably as old as civilization itself, yet it was not until the 1700s when it began to be used academically (Topping as cited in Kalkowski, 1995). In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, British educational reformer Joseph Lancaster empowered the initiative of developing children's tutoring skills by allowing them to become involved in his "monitorial system"; a controversial and revolutionary yet cost-cutting system that helped many poor children to learn to read and write and to be able to monitor other kids after that (Aldrich, 1998). Peer tutoring is now one way cooperative learning is used in the education field since it is recommended by UNESCO as a highly effective practice for inclusive teaching (Duran, 2006).

There has been a significant increase of peer tutoring programs in higher education worldwide (Chen & Liu, 2011). According to Topping (1996), this is due to the need to address low academic performance and to the cost-effectiveness of the peer tutoring strategies. This study aimed to investigate the participants' behaviors and attitudes in an English as a foreign language (EFL) peer tutoring experience in higher education and to explore the impact of peer tutoring on students' English learning and socio-effective outcomes. For this purpose, the following research questions are addressed:

1. What are the tutors' and tutees' behaviors and attitudes during the tutoring sessions?
2. What are the tutors and tutees' perceptions about English language teaching (ELT) peer tutoring?

## Literature Review

The definition of peer tutoring has evolved as more approaches and perspectives have emerged. According to Topping (1996), "archaic definitions of peer tutoring perceived the tutor as a surrogate teacher, in a linear model of the transmission of knowledge, from teacher to tutor to tutee" (p. 322). Similarly, Damon and Phelps (as cited in Kalkowski, 1995) claim that a succinct definition of peer tutoring involves an expert child instructing another novice child. However, the notion of experts and novices has been discussed in today's educational contexts. Thus, more recent studies relate peer tutoring to mutual help. In his notion of learning by teaching, Topping (2005) highlights that peer tutoring "involves people from similar social groupings who are not professional teachers helping each other to learn and learning themselves by doing so" (p. 631). From the point of view of Chen and Liu (2011), peer tutoring "is a kind of peer-mediated, peer-assisted learning, employing problem solving and systematic teaching strategies to help the disabled student" (p. 2). For Duran et al. (2015) peer tutoring is a way of learning among students, usually organized in pairs in which the tutor learns by offering pedagogic help to the tutee who learns through the adjusted and permanent help provided by the tutor.

## Types of Peer Tutoring

Peer tutoring encompasses a variety of approaches or models and these will be explored in the following sections.

### Cross Age Tutoring

This approach is characterized by joining students of different ages. Robinson et al. (2005) mention that this form of peer tutoring "involves students at different

grade level[s], with the older student acting as a tutor for the younger student(s)" (p. 329). Similarly, cross age tutoring often involves dyads where tutors are entitled and expected to organize work, ask questions, encourage interactions, and facilitate better study habits (Hott & Walker, 2012). During cross age tutoring the position of tutor and tutee do not change, with the tutor usually having higher skill levels.

#### **Peer Assisted Learning**

According to the University of the West of England in Bristol (n.d.), peer assisted learning (PAL) is an educational assistance scheme where students are trained to assist other students, an activity which provides opportunities for lower year students to consolidate their own understanding of the discipline within a collaborative environment and supports students with their transition to university. A main characteristic of PAL is that learners can function as tutors or tutees at different times since the pairs or teams typically work at the same proficiency level (Hott & Walker, 2012).

#### **Cooperative Learning**

Topping (2005) refers to cooperative learning as a working together activity within a small group that "is likely to involve the specification of goals, tasks, resources, roles and rewards by the teacher, who facilitates or more firmly guides the interactive process" (p. 632). Topping also points out that cooperative learning "often requires training to ensure equal participation and simultaneous interaction, synergy and added value" (p. 632). According to Yusnani (2018), cooperative learning aims to transform classroom activities into academic and social learning experiences to direct students' diversities towards cognitive, behavioral, and social interdependence.

#### **Reciprocal Peer Tutoring**

Falchikov (2001) describes reciprocal peer tutoring (RPT) as a form of peer tutoring where

randomly selected pairs of students test each other in preparation for a class test. RPT enables each student to play the role of the tutor and tutee, and thus reap the benefits derived from teaching, and being taught by another student. (p. 20)

For Hott and Walker (2012) RPT utilizes a format that encourages teaching materials and evaluation of peers.

#### **Academic, Social, and Affective Benefits of Peer Tutoring**

Research on peer tutoring techniques suggests significant improvements in academic achievement in the targeted area and cognitive gains for both tutors and tutees (Duran, 2016; Falchikov, 2001; Kalkowski, 1995; Nguyen, 2013; Topping, 2005). Similarly, Green (2011), regarding the pedagogical advantages of collaborative learning techniques, refers to improved performance and increase in student retention which refers to the successful completion of tasks and/or students' engagement in their studies. Kalkowski (1995), in her descriptive analysis of research findings, suggests that tutors and tutees have reported the benefits of tutoring in mathematics, language arts, reading, and sciences. Falchikov (2001) identified academic outcomes such as better performance, and metacognitive awareness such as learning how to learn. Likewise, Nguyen (2013) claims that peer tutoring as a supplement to traditional instruction promotes higher-order thinking since it encompasses "explaining concepts in detail, high level questioning, and the use [of] supportive communication skills" (p. 3). Comfort and McMahon (2014) analyzed the effect of peer tutoring on academic achievement. They demonstrated that the peer tutored group achieved significantly higher grades in comparison to those who were not peer tutored for both tutees and tutors.

The benefits of peer tutoring in the education field are not limited to the academic aspect. Many positive outcomes have been documented on the social and affective sides. Kalkowski (1995) highlights

improvements in self-esteem, social skills, attitude towards school, and school attendance. Compiling some studies and their sources, Vincent (1999) enlists common effects found in peer tutoring programs on the tutor and the learner including higher academic achievement and improvements on motivation, use of instructional time, self-direction and independence, attitude towards tutored subject area, and increased self-confidence. Topping (2005) indicates that affective changes in attitude to school, the teachers, the subject, the peer, and the self might be found in peer tutoring programs. According to Falchikov (2001), the different peer tutoring approaches appear to have non-academic benefits in terms of affect, motivation, cooperation, and confidence. While examining the benefits of peer tutoring based on existing research, Nguyen (2013) suggests that the gains of peer tutoring strategies are also reflected in positive effects on social, self-control, and behavioral outcomes. Also, that “training students in peer tutoring strategies can help students take responsibility for their learning and academic failures” (p. 3). According to a manual for the implementation of peer tutoring by the Ministry of Public Education in Mexico (Secretaría de Educación Pública, 2014), peer tutoring improves attitude and readiness toward learning, fosters the tutor and tutee personal development, and helps to strengthen the learners’ identity.

### Related Research

While the literature on peer tutoring in the classroom is quite broad, research on this strategy in the field of foreign language in higher education is not extensive. In a program conducted at a university in Japan, Bradford-Watts (2011) concluded that despite the obstacles encountered, students are able to learn and share what they have learned with their peers and that they can also develop interesting and interactive classes for their peers. Through participant observation and interviews in a case study in Malaysia, Sharif et al. (2012) suggest that the nature of the activities used

in peer tutoring, which are not threatening and are less intimidating compared to the more rigid class environment, can encourage students to put the language into practice. In an action research study in Colombia, Viáfara and Ariza (2008) explored students’ and teachers’ perceptions in order to uncover the limitations of an existing peer tutoring program. They found that the main issues were teachers’ and students’ lack of time, lack of trust among teachers and students, students’ fear, and students’ uncertainty about the aspects to work on. Huerta et al. (2010) implemented a peer tutoring program in Oaxaca, Mexico, highlighting the encouragement of students’ participation in their learning, the increase of tutors’ teaching skills, and more opportunities for the tutors to improve their level of English; the authors concluded that the participants’ and the teachers’ self-esteem was benefited.

Studies on the behaviors and attitudes of participants towards peer tutoring in higher education are scarce. McKellar (1986) studied behaviors used in peer tutoring while learning Esperanto and examined the relationship of those behaviors to the degree of learning achieved. She revealed that tutors’ most frequent verbal behavior was “reading information from the study guide with minimal alteration or rewording” (p. 165). This author also found that it was common for tutors to give tutees incorrect information regarding rules, pronunciation, and vocabulary. Regarding tutees, she found that their most frequent verbal behavior was to say words or sentences at the tutors’ request and that “the only behavior predictive of tutee test scores was the tutee’s asking for clarification of information” (p. 166) given that the more tutees asked for clarification, the higher their scores was.

Madaio et al. (2017) investigated the extent in which interpersonal closeness among participants affected “tutors’ use of indirectness with feedback and instructions and the impact of those uses on tutees’ problem-solving” (p. 1). They found that friend tutors use less indirect instructions and less positive feedback

to their tutees compared to stranger tutors. However, it was stranger tutees who succeeded more at solving problems. In a similar study in which Madaio et al. (2018) examined the impact that rapport, self-efficacy, and prior knowledge have on the teaching and learning process and outcomes of peer tutoring; they found that tutors in high-rapport pairs offered more help and encouraged more their tutees to explain their problem-solving reasoning process than low-rapport pairs.

The research on peer tutoring for English learning over the last decades has contributed to better understanding of learning-by-teaching. The evidence suggests that peer tutoring schemes today can be structured to provide benefits to all participants in a number of important areas such as academic improvement, self-esteem, and confidence. Yet, more research is needed on EFL peer tutoring in the Latin American contexts.

### Method

To explore participants' behaviors, attitudes, and perceptions during and towards a peer tutoring experience, a mixed methods research approach was employed in this study. According to Creswell and Plano Clark (2007), mixed methods research design involves philosophical assumptions that guide the collection and analysis of qualitative and quantitative data. For these authors the "premise is that the use of quantitative and qualitative approaches in combination provides a better understanding of research problems than either approach alone" (p. 5). Integrating quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis in this study would provide deeper answers to the research questions and thus a richer picture of the EFL peer tutoring experience.

### Setting

The research took place at a bilingual, international, and sustainable university in a semirural area in central Mexico. This institution belongs to the bilingual, interna-

tional and sustainable (BIS) model in higher education. The Ministry of Public Education in Mexico describes the BIS as a cutting-edge model in higher education in Mexico since it responds to international trends and is unique in Latin America. BIS universities follow a bilingual pedagogical scheme where courses are mostly offered in the foreign language. This implies that the beginning students are immersed in an intensive English program in which they have five-hour English classes daily for about four months during their first semester and continue reinforcing their language training throughout the entire career. This study was developed with the help of participants from the immersion course of this university.

### Participants

Seven tutees and five tutors participated in the research: two trios (one tutor, two tutees) and three dyads. The participants were seven women and five men with ages from 18 to 23 years. The peer tutors were students from the third or Quarter 3 semester who were selected by the institution, specifically by the English coordinator based on their English language proficiency level, their interpersonal abilities, and their interest and agreement in becoming tutors. Tutees were students from the immersion course or Quarter 0 in which students do not take any content class and thus are grouped by their language level rather than their area of interest. They were selected by their immersion English teachers on their low level and low performance of English, and their interest in participating in the program.

### Procedure

The research followed three stages. The first stage focused on exploring the participants' initial opinions about peer tutoring. This diagnostic phase contributed to direct the tutorial sessions based on students' perceptions; the outcomes obtained gave insights to better understand what the other instruments should explore. The model of peer tutoring employed in the study was

cross age. The outcomes obtained during this stage as well as results from previous studies in the field led to integrating the guidelines, approaches, materials, and tutors' training preparation for the tutoring sessions. Since this study is part of a broader research on the impact of peer tutoring among university students learning EFL, only the implications of Stage 2 and 3 are addressed in this paper.

In Stage 2, the tutor-tutee working teams and pairs were formed and schedules for the tutoring sessions were arranged. The tutoring sessions were arranged in two different schedules due to the tutors' classes and school activities. After the peer tutoring organization was established, participants' behaviors and attitudes were observed and documented while they worked and socialized. The observations were carried out semi-structured, implementing an observation checklist and note instrument (see Appendix) during the tutoring sessions. Creswell (2003) claims that observations, whether unstructured or semistructured, allow the researcher to take notes on the behavior and activities of participants. Black (2003) states that when observing activities of individuals, a checklist can provide the researcher with the guidance required to ensure the obtainment of pertinent events and ignore irrelevant ones.

The data from the observations were supplemented by tutors' and tutees' assessment of their peers to obtain information on the participants' behaviors and attitude during the tutoring sessions. To this end, a peer assessment instrument was developed and provided for the participants at the end of the sessions. In both cases, a Likert scale was used for the assessment of tutors and tutees. Due to unexpected school activities, some participants had seven sessions while others had six, from which it was possible to observe five. Meetings between tutors and tutees were held once a week for one hour.

In Stage 3 a semistructured interview was used to investigate students' perceptions towards peer language

learning. Turner (2010) considers that interviews provide in-depth information on perspectives and experiences. Participants were interviewed after the implementation of all the sessions. Both the tutors and tutees were presented with a consent form before their first tutoring sessions to inform them about the observations and interviews.

### Data Analysis

From the five observed sessions of the five working teams, a total of 20 peer tutoring interactions were analyzed. It is worth saying that *interaction* refers to the peer tutoring sessions the teams had. To analyze and describe the data gathered through observations, certain steps were followed. Firstly, the observation checklist data were analyzed to obtain frequency of the behavior of tutors and tutees during the tutoring sessions. Secondly, the data gathered in the observation notes were scrutinized to find major themes.

Regarding the participants' assessment data, the process of data analysis was ongoing as the tutors' and tutees' assessments were collected and analyzed after each session. As there were pairs as well as trios participating in the peer tutoring sessions, a total of 40 evaluations of tutors were collected and analyzed, and a total of 28 assessments of tutees were collected and analyzed.

Regarding the semistructured interviews, 11 were conducted in Spanish from which a total of 135.48 minutes were transcribed. Then transcripts were classified and summarized according to tutors' and tutees' perceptions about peer tutoring for English language learning.

### Results and Discussion

The findings are presented with reference to the research questions of the study: tutors' and tutees' behaviors and attitudes during the tutoring sessions and participants' perceptions about ELT peer tutoring.

### Participants' Behaviors and Attitudes

Tutors' and tutees' behaviors and attitudes during the tutoring sessions are first presented and discussed in terms of observation data. Then, the findings from the peer assessment instrument are offered and discussed.

Table 1 presents the results obtained during the tutoring sessions and through the observation checklist and notes data. Tutors and tutees asked and answered questions in 20 interactions. During the observations, correction occurred in 19 out of the 20 interactions in which participants showed a positive attitude towards errors. Positive attitudes in this study refers to participants being kind when correcting and being corrected as well as comfortable in accepting mistakes and a willingness to correct them. It was also found that both tutors and tutees clarified doubts and showed motivation in 18 of the sessions. Participants had a positive attitude towards peer tutoring in 17 out of the 20 interactions. For tutees, it was found that they were interested in the activities in 17 interactions while tutors showed understanding of the content in 17 of the 20 interactions. Motivation and attitudes towards peer tutoring are not observable per se. The actions that were observed to interpret as motivation were tutors' motivating and encouraging words to their peers and tutees' expressions

of coziness and contentment when praised or motivated. Regarding positive attitudes towards peer tutoring, it was based on participants' friendly relationship, good rapport, and initiative to extend their session as well as tutors' preparation and tutees' attention and comfort to learn from their peers.

The findings from the observations suggest that tutors were constantly encouraging their tutees to ask them questions, a gesture which gave the tutees the confidence to solve their doubts in all the sessions. Although tutors appeared to ask more questions than tutees, tutees looked comfortable asking questions in relation to the topics and clarification of instructions. These findings are in line with Duran's (2016) argument that in learning-by-teaching techniques, tutors ask questions to introduce the topic and to direct tutees' train of thoughts. Correction occurred in 19 out of the 20 sessions in which participants showed a positive attitude towards errors. It was observed that tutors tried to make their peers identify and correct their mistakes, and when correcting they were kind and patient; furthermore, tutees were not bothered by the corrections and in fact took their peers' advice. Topping (2000) points out that peer tutoring can be effective in different ways, including more questioning, more modeling, and more self-correction.

**Table 1.** Behaviors and Attitudes During the Tutoring Sessions

| Element<br>Team                                     | Asking and answering questions | Positive attitude towards errors | Clarification of doubts | Motivation in the team | Positive attitude towards tutoring | Tutees' interest in the activity | Tutors' understanding of the content |
|---|--------------------------------|----------------------------------|-------------------------|------------------------|------------------------------------|----------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| No. of sessions in which the elements were observed |                                |                                  |                         |                        |                                    |                                  |                                      |
| Trio 1  | 5                              | 5                                | 5                       | 5                      | 5                                  | 5                                | 5                                    |
| Trio 2  | 5                              | 4                                | 5                       | 5                      | 5                                  | 4                                | 5                                    |
| Pair 1  | 2                              | 2                                | 2                       | 0                      | 0                                  | 1                                | 2                                    |
| Pair 2  | 4                              | 4                                | 3                       | 4                      | 4                                  | 4                                | 2                                    |
| Pair 3  | 4                              | 4                                | 3                       | 4                      | 3                                  | 3                                | 3                                    |
| <b>Total</b>  | <b>20</b>                      | <b>19</b>                        | <b>18</b>               | <b>18</b>              | <b>17</b>                          | <b>17</b>                        | <b>17</b>                            |

Clarification of doubts occurred in most of the interactions in which tutors provided explanation of the topics and modeled the activities for their tutees; the tutors also clarified their tutees' doubts regarding vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar, and instructions for activities. Clarification of doubts was observable not only from tutors to tutees; for example, in the trios, tutees also provided explanations and examples to other tutees for better understanding of instructions, syntax, and pronunciation. Likewise, the results indicated that motivation was observable in most of the interactions. During the sessions, tutors often motivated and encouraged their peers to learn and use the language while others praised and acknowledged their tutees' improvement. Topping (2005) claims that tutors' enthusiasm and competence can influence tutees' confidence and that reciprocal responsibility can help motivation in the pair. Similarly, Topping (2000) states that in peer tutoring techniques, both the tutor and tutee can learn to give and receive praise.

The results also show that participants had a positive attitude towards the tutoring in most of the interactions. Tutors seemed to enjoy teaching their peers; for example, most of them shared a learning technique or some advice about learning English with their peer tutees, and occasionally spent more than the allotted time. Tutees seemed comfortable learning from their peers and paid attention to their explanations, advice, and comments. Both tutors and tutees created a good relationship with team peers and even with tutors and tutees from other

teams. These outcomes are aligned with Almassaad and Alotaibi's (2012) claim that students can accept peer tutoring for learning processes. Finally, it was revealed that tutors showed understanding of the content in a similar number of interactions as tutees showed interest in the activity. In this regard, it was observed that tutors were familiar with the content of the session in most of the interactions despite facing occasional issues with vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar. Most of the time tutees seemed engaged in the activities and appeared to enjoy the games, especially in the trios. However, in some sessions two tutors were found to have difficulties in understanding the content of the lesson, particularly when they did not review the topic and content before the tutorial session. Results in this regard suggest that tutors' understanding of the content influenced tutees' interest in the activity. In the next section the results from the participants' assessment will be provided in Tables 2 and 3.

Table 2 presents the assessment of tutors in terms of behaviors and attitudes. The outcomes indicate that tutees perceived that their tutors gave them confidence to ask them questions most of the time. Similarly, tutees considered that their tutors usually helped them clarify their doubts, encouraged and motivated them to learn, helped them identify errors, knew the content of the lesson, and showed a positive attitude towards teaching.

Table 3 reveals that tutors perceived that their tutees responded positively to correction most of the time and usually responded to the help they provided

**Table 2.** Behaviors and Attitude: Assessment of Tutors

| Your tutor....                             | Always     | Almost always | Sometimes | Almost never | Never |
|--|------------|---------------|-----------|--------------|-------|
| Gives you confidence to ask them questions | 38 (95%)   | 2 (5%)        |           |              |       |
| Helps you clarify doubts                   | 34 (85%)   | 6 (15%)       |           |              |       |
| Encourages and motivates you               | 32 (80%)   | 5 (12.5%)     | 3 (7.5%)  |              |       |
| Helps you identify errors                  | 36 (90%)   | 4 (10%)       |           |              |       |
| Knows the content of the session           | 31 (77.5%) | 8 (20%)       | 1 (2.5%)  |              |       |
| Shows a positive attitude towards teaching | 37 (92.5%) | 3 (7.5%)      |           |              |       |



**Table 3.** Behaviors and Attitudes: Assessment of Tutees

| Your tutee(s)....                          | Always            | Almost always | Sometimes | Almost never | Never |
|--|-------------------|---------------|-----------|--------------|-------|
| Asks questions                             | 14 (50%)          | 5 (17.9%)     | 7 (25%)   | 2 (7.1%)     |       |
| Responds to the help you provide them      | 20 (71.4%)        | 5 (17.9%)     | 3 (10.7%) |              |       |
| Seems motivated                            | 16 (57.1%)        | 5 (17.9%)     | 6 (21.4%) | 1 (3.6%)     |       |
| Responds positively to corrections         | <b>25 (89.3%)</b> | 3 (10.7%)     |           |              |       |
| Shows interest in the activity             | 18 (64.3%)        | 3 (10.7%)     | 6 (21.4%) | 1 (3.6%)     |       |
| Shows a positive attitude towards learning | 20 (71.4%)        | 6 (21.4%)     | 2 (7.1%)  |              |       |

and showed a positive attitude towards peer learning. It was also found they considered that tutees often showed interest in the activity, seemed motivated, and asked questions.

The main findings from Table 2 indicate that tutees perceived that tutors gave them confidence to ask questions in almost all the sessions. Also, that tutees perceived that their peers showed a positive attitude in the sessions and helped them to identify their errors most of the time they worked together. The main discoveries from Table 3 show that tutors considered that their peers responded positively to corrections most of the time. The findings from Tables 2 and 3 are similar to the ones obtained from the observation data in relation to confidence provided by the tutors for tutees to ask questions and a positive stance towards errors as the most recurring behavior and attitude of participants during the tutoring sessions. These results are also in line with those in Table 1 in the observations in relation to clarification of doubts, positive attitudes towards teaching and learning, and tutors' understanding of session content.

### Participants' Perceptions of EFL Peer Tutoring

In this section participants' perceptions about peer tutoring in English language learning are presented and discussed in two categories: Tutees' Perceptions and Tutors' Perceptions.

### Tutees' Perceptions

**Thoughts and Experience.** Tutees were asked about their thoughts concerning peer tutoring after being tutored by their peers. All of them mentioned help, support, and clarification of doubts: "help and also support because I mean, it strengthens your knowledge" (Tutee-M); "support in doubts, in topics that were not clear to me in class" (Tutee-s).

When asked to share their experience of peer tutoring, all tutees expressed liking it and said they would recommend peer tutoring for language learning to other students: "I liked it and I would like to repeat the experience again if possible" (Tutee-c); "I would recommend it... we as beginners we like these types of support to improve the language" (Tutee-s).

The data from the participants show that they conceived peer tutoring as highly supportive in solving their doubts. So, they perceived it as an experience where the topics already studied in class, questions and doubts were explained in detail.

**Feelings During the Sessions.** All participants reported positive feelings during the tutorial sessions: "With confidence also I feel that there is trust because if I was wrong, well there was no problem" (Tutee-M); "above all, I felt a lot of confidence" (Tutee-A).

<sup>1</sup> Tutees were interviewed in Spanish. Their answers have been translated for publication purposes.

The results indicate that six tutees felt confident and comfortable during the sessions as they received individual attention and support from someone who was more at their level in comparison to a teacher. Their opinions suggest that in tutoring sessions, tutees seem to be under less pressure of committing mistakes and that they are more open to learning as a result.

**Being Helped by a Peer.** When exploring tutees' feelings about being helped by a classmate, they reported feeling good, motivated, and relaxed: "Well, it makes me feel more motivated to continue, that I can improve more, they give me confidence as well" (Tutee-E). "I felt good because I had never had a tutor before, it was good because we understood each other better than with an adult" (Tutee-C).

Tutees' words show that they do not feel intimidated by their peers and that students can enjoy being involved in peer tutoring interactions.

**The Influence of Peer Tutoring in Their Learning.** Participants were questioned about their perceptions on the influence of peer tutoring in their learning of English: "It helped me more in, in pronunciation. It helped me in grammar, in how to structure sentences" (Tutee-E). "In vocabulary and pronunciation" (Tutee-M). "Some words I didn't know how to pronounce, and she explained me how to pronounce...also in grammar, how to structure" (Tutee-Y).

Tutees' answers indicate that peer tutoring influenced their English learning especially in pronunciation and grammar topics. Also, improvement was perceived by some tutees in writing, listening, and vocabulary. These outcomes support Nguyen's (2013) conclusion that peer tutoring is an effective strategy to promote academic success. The findings also lend support to Topping's (1996) acknowledgement of the effectiveness of peer tutoring techniques in higher education for students' academic gains.

**Affective and Social Gains.** Other than non-academic benefits, participants reported positive influence, mainly in their confidence, but they also

reported benefits in motivation and communication, and to a lesser degree, in socialization improvement: "Also promoting confidence because well, I barely speak with people and that I was helped, it also did me good" (Tutee-C); "you learn to socialize more, and it makes you learn faster by being with a person who perhaps understands you better than a teacher" (Tutee-S).

The outcomes in this study support Falchikov's (2001) claim that peer tutoring provides confidence, affection, and motivation. They also support Nguyen's (2013) and Rubio's (2009) arguments that peer tutoring helps to develop and improve social skills.

**Opinions About the Tutors and Suggestions for the Program.** Tutees were also asked to give their opinions about their tutors and all of them provided positive comments, such as: "She came and yet she had classes all day, she came with a good attitude" (Tutee-M); "sometimes she had doubts about the topic" (Tutee-S); "very sociable and motivating" (Tutee-E); "she taught us with kindness" (Tutee-Y); "her way of teaching was excellent" (Tutee-A).

The above participants highlighted their tutors' positive attitude and abilities to teach and share. However, two tutees added some lack of content understanding from their tutors: "Sometimes she had doubts about the topic" (Tutee-S); "with some things she also got confused" (Tutee-E). These findings are similar to those obtained through observations and peer assessments in the sense that two tutors showed some lack of understanding in some topics and their tutees could notice it.

Tutees were also asked to give comments and suggestions to improve the program. They all recommended having more sessions while one tutee added the inclusion of readings and listening activities. No other comment was given for improvement of the tutoring. However, they suggested that future tutees have a positive attitude in the sessions, be committed to learn, and be disciplined and constant.

### Tutors' Perceptions

This section provides tutors' perceptions of their EFL peer tutoring experience.

**Thoughts and Experience.** Tutors were asked about their thoughts concerning peer tutoring and their experience tutoring their classmates. Two participants mentioned the following: "a way to support each other" (Tutor-κ);<sup>2</sup> "communication among friends" (Tutor-Ν).

After the experience, the tutors had different definitions of peer tutoring which were highly related to their own experience tutoring their peers. For instance, half of the tutors defined it as mutual learning and support as they explained that peer tutoring helped tutors and tutees to recall topics and practice the language. Another tutor described it as communication among friends, giving her perception of her and her tutees as not being acquainted and being distracted as a result. Another participant defined it as mere clarification of doubts since she expressed her tutee needed a lot of help and that she was not really prepared for that and it got her confused as a result.

When asked about their experience as tutors their opinions varied. They mentioned liking tutees' interest in learning, finding it difficult at the beginning, rewarding, and being double-edged: "It was rewarding because there was an improvement indeed" (Tutor-L); "Yes, I think I would help [future tutors] a lot and at the same time it would help students from Quarter ο" (Tutor-Ν).

Despite the differences, all the participants agreed they would recommend other students to act as tutor as they perceived it to be beneficial for both tutees and tutors and as an aid for teachers not only for language learning but for learning other subjects as well.

**Feelings During the Sessions.** When exploring tutors' feelings during the sessions, they mostly reported feeling good about teaching their peers: "I felt very excited. When I taught a new topic and they understood

it and they did the exercises well...it feels great that they do learn and that you can share what you know with someone else" (Tutor-κ). "I was nervous at the beginning but, I felt good in the next sessions" (Tutor-R).

These results indicate that despite feeling nervous or frightened at the beginning, tutors enjoyed the tutorial sessions with their peers as they got to know each other better and developed confidence working together and became more self-confident in their tutoring skills after some time.

**Feelings About Helping Others.** Tutors were also asked about their feelings about helping their peers. Most of them expressed feeling good, excited, and happy to help their classmates in their learning (see the previous excerpt by Tutor-κ); "for me it's super cool, it makes me feel good morally and as a person to contribute with something" (Tutor-L).

The tutors' comments reveal that they felt excited and fulfilled to be part of their peers' learning. Topping (2005) argues that peer tutoring influences the development of a cultural norm of helping and caring.

**The Influence of Peer Tutoring in Their Peers' Learning.** Most tutors considered the tutorial sessions helped their tutees to improve their pronunciation while the rest considered the tutoring influenced their tutee's grammar advancement: "I think they did improve a lot in their pronunciation" (Tutor-κ). These findings echo tutees' perceptions on improved pronunciation and grammar topics as the items most influenced by the peer tutoring experience.

**Gains for Tutors.** All the tutors mentioned acting as tutors for their peers helped them to recall and practice grammar topics and clarify doubts to themselves: "I feel it did help me a lot to practice again topics that I had not seen in a long time" (Tutor-κ); "when communicating, it helped me because I am not as shy as before to express myself in English" (Tutor-R).

These outcomes support Viáfara's (2014) findings that peer tutoring helps tutors to increase their knowledge of English. Additionally, some of the participants

<sup>2</sup> Tutors were interviewed in Spanish. Their answers have been translated for publication purposes.

mentioned improved communication skills as well, which lend support to Sharif et al.'s (2012) conclusion that the benefits of peer tutoring are transferable to social and communication skills outcomes also for tutors.

**Opinions About the Tutees and Suggestions for the Program.** When asked about their opinions concerning their tutees, four participants had different thoughts: “They were very eager to learn, and that was quite motivating for me” (Tutor-κ); “they showed a lot of interest and that encouraged me to continue teaching them” (Tutor-Ν); “I feel he needed to study more” (Tutor-Λ); “nervousness doesn’t help her...she would get distracted” (Tutor-Ρ).

The findings revealed that half of the tutors perceived a lot of interest in their tutees and felt more motivated to teach them as a result, while the others expected more engagement and participation from their peers for more improvement and a more suitable experience. Interestingly, the tutors who emphasized tutees’ weaknesses were the ones perceived by their tutees as showing some lack of content understanding. Topping (2005) claims that “the helper’s modelling of enthusiasm, competence and the possibility of success can influence the self-confidence of the helped, while a sense of loyalty and accountability to each other might help to keep the pair motivated and on-task” (p. 637). It is possible that tutees’ engagement was influenced by their tutors’ doubts and that tutors’ perceptions of tutees was influenced by both tutees’ engagement and tutors’ teaching skills.

Similar to tutees, when asked to give comments to enhance the tutoring sessions, all tutors suggested longer sessions as they would need more time to accomplish their teaching goals. Tutors’ and tutees’ recommendations indicate that more tutoring time would have been of greater benefit for both participants.

Despite the limited number of sessions and tutors’ issues with vocabulary, pronunciation, instructions, and grammar, the findings from the observations, peer assessment, and interviews reveal that apart from

providing learning opportunities for both tutors and tutees, the peer tutoring experience encouraged self-confidence, fostered good relations among students, and influenced participants’ learning engagement. Therefore, structured and organized peer tutoring can be a good strategy to support English language learning in higher education in Mexico, particularly at BIS universities.

## Conclusions

This study explored the behaviors and attitudes of tutors and tutees during cross-age tutoring sessions and their perceptions about peer tutoring for English learning at a BIS university in Mexico by means of observation, peer assessment, and interviews. Results from observation and peer assessment indicate that tutees and tutors showed positive behaviors and attitudes during the tutoring sessions and that those behaviors and attitudes significantly contributed to a favorable teaching–learning experience. The findings from the interviews showed that both tutors and tutees perceived peer tutoring for English learning as a rewarding learning experience at academic and affective level.

A number of conclusions can be drawn from these results. First, it appears that peer tutoring positively influenced participants’ confidence and social and communication skills as it seemed to reduce the distance between students, promoting interaction among them. This highlights the importance of non-academic skills at any educational level as the study revealed that achieving learning outcomes was related to improvements in affective and social skills. Secondly, the results suggest that the peer tutoring experience fostered a non-threatening atmosphere where posing and asking questions, clarifying doubts, and self-correcting became easier. This indicates that by including peer tutoring strategies in the classroom, teachers can take advantage of students’ pedagogical skills to provide more learning opportunities and to improve students’ English language self-perception.

These findings provided evidence of the effectiveness of peer tutoring in an EFL setting. Yet, there are a number of limitations to consider. For instance, organizing and structuring the tutoring sessions in this study were time-consuming. Similarly, this study was limited by the number of training sessions tutors had, which highlights the importance of tutors' training for a successful implementation. For peer tutoring effectiveness to be maximized, I recommend that tutors and tutees possess interest and engagement in working with their peers as well as tutors' adequate tutoring and language skills. Another constraint was the number of sessions, which were relatively few. Further research may benefit from a larger number of participants and sessions. Another possibility of further research that would contribute to a fuller understanding of ELT peer tutoring in BIS and higher education contexts would be to examine ELT peer tutoring at different proficiency levels or by incorporating a different model, such as PAL, to focus on the impact on tests. Additionally, comparing the performance among trios and pairs and its influence on students' behavior, attitude, and academic improvement may be of benefit.

In English language learning, it is desirable to increase competence, while reducing language anxiety, in ways that promote self-confidence and communication skills among students. This may be effective by increasing the use of peer tutoring techniques in the classroom. I believe that the use of peer tutoring techniques in higher education can be particularly beneficial in large classrooms with no possibility of personalized attention or individual support, especially for those students with learning disadvantages.

The results in this study contribute to a better understanding of students' behaviors and attitudes in collaborative learning strategies and their pedagogical implications for teachers and students. However, research is still needed on peer tutoring for English learning in Mexico and other countries of Latin America, particularly on the topic covered in this paper, that is, students' behaviors and attitudes towards peer learning.

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## Appendix: Observation Checklist and Note Instrument

| Elements                            | Trio 1 | Trio 2 | Pair 1 | Pair 2 | Pair 3 | Notes |
|-------------------------------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|-------|
| 1. Asking and answering questions   |        |        |        |        |        |       |
| 2. Clarification of doubts          |        |        |        |        |        |       |
| 3. Motivation in the team           |        |        |        |        |        |       |
| 4. Positive attitude towards errors |        |        |        |        |        |       |
| 5. Understanding of the content     |        |        |        |        |        |       |
| 6. Interest in the activity         |        |        |        |        |        |       |
| 7. Positive attitude                |        |        |        |        |        |       |