An Action Research Project to Explore Peer Mentoring to Enable CPD

Monishita Hajra Pande

ABSTRACT

Action research allows teachers to explore their immediate contexts and make on the spot modifications to address pedagogic issues. It is one of the ways to assist the teacher to engage with Continuing Professional Development (CPD). In this paper, I will discuss an action research project undertaken over a span of four semesters to assist students to increase their proficiency in English in order to improve their reading and writing skills. This project was implemented by student mentors, who worked with the students to create a space of mutual trust, where peer learning was encouraged to help them cope with their English language needs. This is in line with Vygotsky's idea of sociocultural theory, Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and more-enabled peers, which proposes to maximize learning through collaboration and social relationships. In this article, I will report on the "Language Buddy Scheme" launched by Ambedkar University, Delhi (AUD), to support this exploration and discuss how it has triggered initiatives at the institutional level to support the teachers' CPD activities.

Key words: Action research, CPD, peer learning, peer mentoring, ZPD

INTRODUCTION

Action research is a powerful tool which allows teachers to engage in questions emerging from their everyday practice. Reflective practices allow teachers to systematically evaluate and reconsider their actions in light of classroom events, which are dynamic and ever-changing. Action research allows teachers to engage in CPD activities within their own micro-contexts, and has the potential to bring about changes in institutional and classroom practices.

As an undergraduate English language teacher at AUD, I had minimal opportunities for discussions around language pedagogy and practices. However, my classroom concerns made me stop and reflect on what I was doing and I realized that I needed to take charge of improving my classroom practices.

Although AUD is an English medium university, the administration acknowledges the need to put certain enabling mechanisms in place to assist students struggling with language to smoothly make a transition to the English medium of instruction. Students entering the university at the undergraduate level (UG) have to take an English Proficiency Test (EPT), and based on their performance, they are assigned English language courses to address their language needs. The students identified as basic users of English are part of the English Proficiency Course (EPC).

While these students begin to familiarize themselves with English through a wide range of activities and tasks in their EPC class, the language demands of other courses keep growing exponentially. The course transaction in their discipline areas takes place in English, where they have to deal with complex texts and are expected to write term papers and reports which require academic writing skills of a higher order.

CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

As a teacher of EPC, I faced a number of challenges. The large class size made it difficult for me to focus on a process approach to writing and to provide individual attention to students struggling with English across the curriculum. I managed to do speaking and listening activities in my class through pair and group work, but reading and writing suffered. As part of the EPC course, students worked on a writing portfolio, in which they were encouraged to work on multiple drafts and engage in discussions and feedback. To make this more effective, I realized that I needed to adopt a different strategy as it became impossible for one teacher to work on multiple drafts of 50 students in a semester which is essentially only 14 weeks long. Adding to this, were the students' concerns relating to their other course assignments and reading texts.

My initial exploration began with a simple question arising from my classroom experience: "how can I help my students to read and write better and continue with a process writing approach despite the large class size?"

In order to address this problem, I experimented with peer mentoring for two semesters by engaging post graduate (PG) students to work closely with the UG students. While this worked to some extent, it became difficult to sustain primarily for two reasons. Firstly, PG students had demanding schedules which kept them

busy with assignments, dissertations, field work and internships. Secondly, they felt distanced from first year UG students and the interaction was hierarchy-driven and not a friendly space for peer support.

Based on the feedback received from the students, I tried to make changes in the interaction to make it more effective. In the third semester, I identified student volunteers from second year UG courses to do the mentoring. At this stage, the student volunteers were not selected on the basis of any specific criteria, nor were they briefed for this type of work. However, I had made the following observations based on the first three semesters of informal peer mentoring:

The pairing of second or third year UG students with first year UG students seemed to work better than with PG students as they have similar time tables. More importantly, there is better collaboration between the two due to a smaller age gap. Further, there is also a possibility of friendship and mutual learning as compared to a teacher-student relationship.

Pairing a second/third year UG student (mentor) with a group of first year students (who are transitioning from Hindi to English), belonging to the same discipline major, works better due to similar interests in terms of their subject content.

Initially, this peer mentoring needs to be part of EPC so that students begin to explore this way of learning. Gradually it needs to be a voluntary choice to encourage learner autonomy and to allow the peer mentoring space to evolve on its own.

Formalizing this form of peer mentoring may allow better monitoring, place a greater degree of accountability; incentivising this by giving the mentors a certificate, a short training and a token amount of money may be a way to strengthen this.

There is a need to explore what goes on in these peer learning sessions. What strategies do the students use? How do they negotiate this space for peer learning? What kind of support do they need to make their learning better?

In July 2017, after receiving feedback from the students, the university made the first formal attempt to explore this form of peer mentoring. Based on the experiences of the first three semesters, the university agreed to formalize this mentoring in the form of "Language Buddy Scheme". This formalization has helped me immensely in my efforts to continue my questioning and learning about the peer mentoring model. It has even helped my own learning about the processes involved in reading and writing by engaging with questions around writing pedagogy and reading strategies. In this paper, I will report on the action

research project that was initiated to assess the "Language Buddy Scheme" launched in July 2017 at AUD and which has also contributed to my CPD.

ACTION RESEARCH AND CONTINUING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT (CPD)

Action research, also termed as Participatory Action Research (PAR), is an approach which is used for improving conditions and practices in a variety of professional spheres. The main aim of action research is to bring about a change in specific contexts. Meyer (2000), comments that the strength of action research lies in the fact that it is geared to find solutions to practical problems, and has the ability to empower practitioners, as it encourages them to engage with research and subsequent development or implementation activities.

Action research enables practitioners to seek ways in which they can improve classroom practices. To quote Koshy (2010),

> Action research is a method used for improving practice. It involves action, evaluation, and critical reflection and—based on the evidence gathered—changes in practice are then implemented. It is participative and collaborative, situation and context specific, develops reflection based on interpretations made by the participants. It results in creation of knowledge through problem solving, if the solution to the problem leads to the improvement of practice. In action research, findings will emerge as action develops but these are not conclusive or absolute (p.1).

Action research generates knowledge based on enquiries carried out within specific and often practical contexts. It aims at creating situations to learn through action, which then leads to personal or professional development. Kemmis and McTaggart (2000) state that action research involves a spiral of self-reflective cycles of: planning a change, acting and observing the process and consequences of the change, reflecting on these processes and consequences and then replanning, acting and observing, reflecting and this goes on in a cyclic fashion.

Day and Sachs (2004) define Continuing Professional Development as "all the activities in which teachers engage during the course of a career which are designed to enhance their work" (p.3). Moreover, CPD can be employer driven (planned and designed to implement specific programmes to increase accountability), or profession-generated which focuses on more immediate, specific and localized concerns emerging from the teachers' classroom situations (Bolam & McMahon, 2004). Fullan (2007) argues that professional learning has the potential to address teachers' everyday working conditions, and can also have implications on more

generalizable standards of practice in the institution.

Drawing from the principles of action research and the features of CPD activities, I will attempt to demonstrate how an action research project can lead to deliberations on institutional practices and create opportunities for CPD. AUD took the initiative to offer a faculty development programme of 16 hours duration on reading strategies and writing pedagogy under the title "Practical Pedagogies". These workshops were conducted by Dr. Ananya Dasgupta, a practitioner of CPD, who engages with questions of reading and writing in higher education—a domain which needs to be investigated by teachers across disciplines. As part of this CPD initiative, 14 teachers took part in these workshops (February to March 2017 and July to August 2017), where they shared ideas on task creation and elicitation strategies to engage students with texts, and gave feedback on writing drafts. My experiences in these workshops strongly influenced my own teaching of reading and writing, and preparing the student-mentors for the same.

While the initial exploration began with a simple question arising from my classroom experience, it led to an institutional level initiative to facilitate CPD activities. As pointed out earlier, CPD activities can be employer driven or profession-generated and these two do not necessarily oppose each other.

UNDERLYING THEORETICAL ASSUMPTIONS

The idea of involving more-enabled peers for learning is drawn from Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory. While the mentors working with first year students have better English language proficiency, they may also have something to learn from their peers (1st year students) who have ideas in another language. Vygotsky (1978) highlights the importance of "mediated activity" (p.1), in the development of higher psychological functions. Although he identifies both physical and psychological tools as mediational means, for him psychological tools, particularly language, are of primary concern (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996). De Valenzuela (2006) writes that the main aspect of socio-cultural theory is its emphasis on social processes (rather than individual) as being primary in the development of higher mental functions. Vygotsky (1962) comments that it is not possible to separate development from its social and cultural contexts.

Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)

Vygotsky (1962) defined ZPD as "the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peer" (p. 86). In other words, ZPD describes the

current level of development of the learner as well as the next level attainable through mediational tools in the presence of a more capable adult or peer facilitation. It promotes the idea of learning together in collaboration, and that collaborative effort helps learners to learn new concepts and skills.

SCAFFOLDING AND ZPD

Theorists and researchers claim that socio-cultural theory of the mind and the concept of ZPD form the basis of the idea of scaffolding (Berk, 2002; Wells, 1998). Lave and Wenger (1991) emphasize that ZPD views teacher/more-enabled peer and learner collaboration as a bilateral process which is different from the term "scaffolding". It fails to capture a two-way interaction and refers to a one-way construction of scaffolding by the more-enabled peer/teacher (Daniels 2001). Stone (1998) argues that the metaphor of "scaffolding" may suggest that teacher-learner interaction is one-sided or adult-driven, and points out that a number of theorists have questioned it.

In this study, I found that the peer-mentoring model promotes a bilateral exchange of ideas and learning and is not one-sided in nature. The more-enabled peer (or mentor) has more English language proficiency but the peer learning space throws up opportunities for exchange of knowledge and ideas supporting a bilingual/multilingual atmosphere. Language learning happens as part of this exchange. The name "Language Buddy Scheme" reflects this idea that it aims at promoting bilateral exchange and learning by breaking hierarchies and power relations.

PHASES OF THE ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT

Preliminary Exploration (2015-2017)

In this phase, I tried to experiment with peer mentoring informally by getting senior students to mentor first year undergraduate students. These experiments were followed by getting the mentors to reflect, collect feedback, and write reports for institutional level discussions to raise awareness.

Formal Exploration through Action Research Project

a)   Selection of Mentors

In July 2017, AUD announced the "Language Buddy Scheme" in which second and third year UG students had to work collaboratively with first year UG students on reading and writing assignments. At this stage, new members joined the English language team at AUD and so I could work with two of my colleagues on this project. We received 75 applications

out of which 45 students were interviewed. Their English language skills, motivation, attitude towards language learning, experiences in learning English were taken into consideration in the interview process. Finally, 25 students were selected for the programme and they attended a one-week orientation programme in the last week of July 2017.

b)   Preparation to take up Peer Mentoring

An orientation programme was carried out which focused on understanding the participants' beliefs, assumptions and attitudes about learning English. Questions were also raised around language learning and the sensitivities involved in working on English language skills in a country such as India. Activities were conducted to discuss ways to break stereotypes and to celebrate multicultural environment.

The orientation also focused on discussions around reading and writing strategies in a workshop mode in which students reflected on their own writing assignments to explore writing skills and strategies. The sessions focused on grammar, error correction, giving feedback and the use of technology to facilitate independent learning. At the end of each day of the five-day orientation programme, participants filled a reflective grid which generated discussions and ideas for subsequent peer mentoring sessions.

The sessions were planned in a way which demonstrated what the student-mentors are expected to do in their peer mentoring. The sessions included activities, learning by doing, pair and group work, how to break the ice, and arriving at commonly agreed principles. All of this was expected to have direct implications on peer mentoring.

This orientation programme was a team effort and allowed us to reflect on our own expectations from our students and course objectives.

c)   Planning Activities for the Semester

After the orientation week, we planned activities for the upcoming semester (August-November 2017). Out of the 25 mentors, I worked closely with 10 mentors (second year UG students) and 40 first year UG students. Each mentor was assigned 4 mentees, preferably from their own major discipline. The mentors were expected to:

- work on writing a portfolio, which is an integral part of the EPC course;
- discuss reading texts and assignments from other courses;

- try to inculcate the habit of leisure reading, explain how to learn using smart phones, watch videos and movies together;

- screen movies and conduct language game sessions to bring students together and make language learning fun.

d)   Monitoring Progress throughout the Semester

I monitored the peer mentoring sessions closely throughout the semester (July-November 2017). I used the following methods to collect data:

- the mentor and the mentees were asked to maintain a record of each session; students were encouraged to engage in reflective writing using a grid;

- informal discussions and interviews were held with both mentors and mentees;

- drafts of writing assignments as well as exam papers of the mentees

- were discussed;

- a questionnaire was designed to probe into the processes involved in the peer mentoring sessions;

- group meetings were held with mentors throughout the semester to collect feedback and engage in reflective conversations;

- a reflective journal was maintained to record my experience of working with students on writing a portfolio.

DATA ANALYSIS, INTERPRETATION AND IMPLICATIONS

The reflective grids, informal discussions and group meetings threw up interesting things for discussion. Some mentors found it challenging to engage in reflective writing, which led to verbal interactions and probing. The grids also highlighted other challenges faced by the mentors. For instance, some mentees were not regular or motivated and this had implications on their engagement in the classroom. We tried to explore different ways to motivate them.

In some cases, the mentors did not engage in discussions around writing assignments; instead it was more of "correcting" mistakes and returning the drafts. This led to discussions around how this strategy does not promote learning and thinking. Such mentors were encouraged to use strategies such as brainstorming, pre-writing, questioning, etc. This allowed me to reflect on how the dialogic nature of a discussion helps to create knowledge and hence promotes learning. This also allowed me to examine my own elicitation and questioning strategies.

In a few reading sessions, simple translation activity was carried out. This resulted in a discussion around translation as a strategy and how it should be used judiciously. This prompted me to reflect on the bilingual strategies that I use in my class. Some mentees felt that they now had a friend with whom they could discuss their language problems without feeling scared, self-conscious or ashamed. They added that the mentoring sessions had done much more than simply providing assistance with English; they had also helped them in dealing with the overwhelming challenges of university life. All of this gave me valuable insights into the problems faced by my students in the language classroom.

The drafts of the writing assignments were also an indicator of what kind of feedback transpired in these sessions. While some mentors asked open-ended, probing questions, a few others failed to do so. These mentors were asked to reflect on their strategies of giving feedback. I was also motivated to work on my strategies to give learner feedback. Writing portfolio grades and performance in writing tasks for summative exams had a positive correlation. Students who got high grades on writing portfolio did better in the writing task in the final exam than the ones who did poorly on the writing portfolio. This allowed me to work closely with students who had performed poorly in the writing task.

The questionnaire probed into the strategies used by the students during the mentoring sessions. Some of these strategies were as follows:

- Watching online videos/tutorials on a topic before reading a difficult text;

- Reading the title, sub-headings, topic sentences and key words before a detailed reading;

- Guessing the meaning of unfamiliar words using a range of strategies;

- Identifying sections of a text that need to be focused on for a writing task;

- Looking at the organization of paragraphs; reflecting on the main ideas and supporting details;

- Understanding the question given in the writing assignment by listing possible topics and sub-topics;

- Brainstorming for ideas first in Hindi, then writing them down using both Hindi and English and then working on a draft in English;

- Making a personal list of technical words with meanings in Hindi/English.

These strategies allowed me to reflect on the question of learner autonomy. When students are allowed to learn together, they explore interesting ways to learn. This has led me to make space in my course to promote independent learning

and learner autonomy by encouraging students to use technology to manage their learning.

This action research project on peer mentoring has led me to work on a course titled "Approaches and Theories of Language Learning", for the final year UG students pursuing B.A. English. This course aims to introduce students to theories and approaches to language teaching and learning, and involve them in micro teaching situations where they can explore different pedagogic strategies. The students of this course will be expected to be involved in a practicum in which they will be part of the EPC course and classroom teaching. This will prepare them for school teaching as many of our UG students enter the school system after completing their degree. These students will also be a potential target group for professional courses aimed at training teachers in English Language Teaching (ELT).AUD is also planning to launch a three month certificate course on the teaching of English.

CONCLUSIONS

While this action research project has thrown light on the peer mentoring initiative formalized by AUD, it has also led to my own professional development. It has allowed me to reflect on my teaching as well as identify my areas of improvement. On the one hand, peer mentoring has maximized peer support and promoted students from different socio-economic backgrounds to come together in a non-threatening space of mutual trust and respect. A lot of things explored in this project have informed my own classroom practices. It is clear that CPD is most effective when initiated by the teacher as motivation plays an important role. This project demonstrates how teacher-initiated action research can lead to interventions at the institutional level and enhance classroom practices emerging from on the spot evaluation and reflection.

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Monishita H. Pande teaches at the Centre for English Language Education, Ambedkar University, Delhi. Her research interests include English language teacher education, multilingual education and learner autonomy.

monishita@aud.ac.in