Do peer tutors help teach ESL students to learn

English as a second language more successfully?

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April 7, 2011

Abstract

This research study tries to understand the information processing model and social learning theory in regards to teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) to Spanish speakers by using peer teaching methods. This study will examine each theory's concepts and frameworks to better comprehend what teaching methods support English language learning. By studying how humans learn and remember, teachers can get a better grasp on how to improve teaching techniques and displaying information to students. By studying the social learning theory it shows that people learn from each other, including such notions as observational learning, imitation, and modeling. Used in conjunction with each other, these theories help explain how people learn and give insight to the best method to teach ESL to Spanish speakers. The research question is: "Do peer tutors help teach English as a second language to foreign language speakers more successfully?"

Key Words: information processing theory, social learning theory, coding, self- modification, behaviors, socialization, reinforcement, memory, improvement, peer-tutoring

Introduction

Research regarding teaching English as a second language is important because as the nation is growing more multicultural, there is a need to teach English more effectively so these students can proceed to learn math, science, history, ect. As English becomes a student's new first language it is the building block for learning all new things in an educational institution. By examining: "Do peer tutors help teach English as a second language to foreign language speakers more successfully?" we may find a more suitable way to teach ESL. Learning and teaching English as a second language is difficult, as everyone learns and teaches it differently. This is to be gained by evaluating classroom observations focused on teaching English to non-native speakers, and will determine if peer tutoring is capable in supplementing different methods of teaching English. It would benefit instructors and students to discover what teaching aids work best for retaining information that is taught. This would enable children to learn more, quickly, and effectively. In order to teach more effectively, it must be understood how student learn and retain information. Peer Tutoring aims to improve the language and achievement of English language learners by pairing or grouping students to work on a task. The students may be grouped by age or ability (English-only, bilingual, or limited English proficient) or the groups may be mixed. Peer tutoring typically consists of two students assuming the roles of tutor and tutee, or "coach and player" roles. (WWC, ELL 2007).

The information processing theory and social learning theory are quite different but can be used with each other to implement the best application of new skills and knowledge by understanding how information is gained and processed. The information processing theory explains how people are introduced to new data and the steps the brains take to retain that

information for future use. When the information is retained then when a similar problem occurs, they can use the recently learned facts to process new solutions. The social learning theory is very important, especially in the ESL field. Many foreign language speakers cannot communicate well with people, but they can imitate and learn from them-best known in a peer-tutor relationship.

Key terms:

The information processing theory proposes that people's mind works somewhat like a computer through which it uses strategies and logical rules for storing and retrieving information. This theory contains four main beliefs: encoding new information in the brain, generalization of that knowledge, self-modification to incorporate learned information, and task analysis to understand the problem more quickly and the best way to solve it. While using the information processing theory the system uses a specific path to become gained knowledge in the brain. First the information is perceived and may be stored, the mind processing the data and stores it fleetingly, it is then moved into short term memory, lastly stored in long term memory so that it can be later retrieved. The social learning theory assumes that people can learn by observing and can occur without a change in behavior. Many educators use this method to teach students in lieu of using other more knowledgeable students to lead the way. The social learning theory leans basically on the fact that the best way to learn is by imitation which eventually affects a person's behavior and cognition. Certain mental behaviors need to change in order to learn, by imitating others on can surmise the best way to solve a problem and therefore changing the way their brain perceives that problem in the future. By learning in these small steps, students build knowledge to help tackle larger, more difficult problems in the future. This process of socialization is important to students and their cognition. By using peer-tutoring much more can be learned and

possibly at a more comfortable pace for students, as opposed to state mandated speeds. Reinforcement of these teaching methods leads to improvement for the students, especially those learning a second language; by using peer tutors English as a Second Language (ESL) students can learn at the appropriate level. By using the two theories coordinating a teaching plan, students will have a much more successful rate of learning and understanding.

Learning theories

In using the social learning and information processing theories hand in hand students have more than one type of cognition process occurring and a better chance that the newly learned information will be retained. Learning English is not easy, especially for adults, but by using reinforcement of learned data and peer tutoring students will be able to retain more information. 'Research shows that peer and community tutoring empower students in a way that straight classroom instruction cannot. Peer and community tutoring can be used to reinforce individual, as well as collective learning, and at the same time fulfill the community service requirement. It appears that even developmental learners have a great deal to gain from peer and/or community tutoring. In many cases, even the most reluctant developmental learners take charge of their learning and practically overnight become better learners,' Baitinger (2005). With this information on adult learners, a more solid plan for teaching coursework can be administered for more effective teaching. Peer learning is effective and proves to put many students as ease with learning a difficult subject, like English as a foreign language speaker. Probably the most important challenge that ESL programs face, and that ESL professionals perceive, is devising ways to help more students increase their English proficiency by more levels, and to do so as fast

as possible, Chisman (2007). Every ESL instructor faces the challenge of trying to teach English language learners at such a level that life skills can be taught as well. Despite every effort, Chisman's study indicates that only long term ESL learning environments prove to be as useful and advance learning knowledge.

From the study performed by Cichon (1993) to assess the affect of tutors on ESL students, the difficulty of tutoring pairs was named and the pairs were unevenly matched with others of different English language abilities. A possible solution suggested by Cichon was to pair tutors and tutees with similar abilities, such as a master matrix of student's levels and tutor schedules to see if a better combination emerges, recognizing there is no possibility of getting every pair perfectly matched. Using this study to correlate the social learning theory into curriculum, the tutees said in a survey that they learned better with the tutor's guidance, helping them learn faster and more confidently. The learned information also is stored after imitation and makes a stronger cognitive connection as a building block for future knowledge. Storing the new information into temporary brain storage then over time and repetition moving it to long tern memory are the basics of how this tutoring program works for ESL students. As social learning experts have proven again and again, learning can be more productive if there is clarity about which role models to emulate, Ganis (2009). The social learning theory is only as good as the people involved, as to say more knowledgeable and patient tutors make better examples to emulate rather than impatient and not well informed tutors. Instructors interested in implementing an ESL peer tutor program should screen the tutors carefully and make reward systems to encourage ESL students. The previous research studies have found that small rewards are effective in promoting better scores and tutors have a positive effect on ESL student's cognition.

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A research study by Hirsch (1998) involving adult ESL learners found that peer assisted adult advanced ESL students in English language content courses in improving their comprehension of course material. The peer tutors used the following methods to help instruct the ESL students: learning logs, pupil-driven writing assignments, discussion groups, and reading course material aloud. With this learning system of instruction, the information processing theory is used by affecting how humans thing, reason, and learn. . Slate (1998) gives several concepts that can be utilized in specific ways to promote better cognition they are: attention, active learning, and meaningfulness, organization, advanced organizers, memory aids, over-learning, and automaticity. By using these concepts they can be incorporated into the information processing and social learning theories to work in harmony producing a better learning guide for teaching English. With many different forms of teaching aids, each student will find his or her best method for learning. Each person learns differently, especially ESL students in varying age groups so teaching from a different perspective occasionally will appeal to more English language learners. Because English is the dominant language of the U. S., virtually all immigrants with limited English proficiency realize that this places them at a severe disadvantage. Most immigrants with limited English ability are employed in low wage jobs, and their opportunities for advancement are severely limited. In large numbers, they enroll in ESL programs wherever they can find them. More than 1.2 million per year turn to the publicly funded adult ESL programs offered by community colleges and other adult education providers. The success of these programs is of great national importance, Soares (2004). It is imperative that instructors and cognitive theorist study what it takes to teach and learn a new language to better serve these students. Peer tutors are an excellent way to guide new language learners in the right path, by providing an example of what to emulate as well as a willing partner and

culture exhibit. In a research study conducted by Szpara in 1994, the writing skills of English language learners were coached by peer tutors to determine their affect, if any on the tutor's affect on the ESL students. The recognition, understanding, and practice of cross cultural communication has involved developing the tutors' awareness in three areas: (a) awareness of their own attitudes and values and those of the writers, (b) awareness of different culturally based writing styles, and (c) awareness of forms of non verbal communication in different cultures, Szpara (1994). These studies have shown that peer tutoring works by using the information processing theory and social learning theory to reinstate the newly gained knowledge into long term memory and reinforce learned tactics and behaviors from other students. Peer tutoring does work, but carefully selected tutors are the key. This peer tutoring approach provides students with increased opportunities to practice reading skills by asking questions and receiving immediate feedback from a peer tutor. Pairs of students take turns tutoring each other to reinforce concepts and skills initially taught by the teacher. The teacher creates age-appropriate peer teaching materials for the peer tutors; these materials take into account tutees' language skills and disabilities (WWC, 2007).

Conclusion

The research concludes that social learning is one of the most effective teaching methods to be used. It is yet to be told whether the brain goes through the same processes to learn English as do traditional subjects for native speakers. This study provides insight into how to teach using peer tutors in order to best instruct English Language Learners and understand the cognitive thought process. It is key in gaining knowledge as to how taught information moves from just that to long term memory. The peer tutor concept has positive effects on general reading

achievement in elementary school and improves the learner's grade by seventeen percent by using this method about thirty minutes per day (WWC, 2007). There was statistically significant difference favoring the peer response group on the number of words written and number of ideas presented in student compositions, (WWC, ELL 2007). Although peer tutoring is a great support system for ELLs, a solid curriculum and reiteration of material information is essential, and a well thought out tutor selection plan. Within all the research studies reviewed, it is conclusive that peer tutoring has a positive impact on the cognitive learning abilities of English language learners. When peer tutors are used, the tutees have a live example to emulate and behavior to observe which helps to understand the language and culture more so than a textbook could display. By using peer tutors, the information processing theory is used to reiterate newly gained information into long tern memory and is the building blocks for future knowledge. The social learning theory is clearly a classic output in the form of peer tutors; learn by watching and eventually the behavior changes and the cognitive learning has taken place. In concluding, peer tutoring does help to teach English to foreign language speakers, although more and conclusive research should be conducted for measurable certainty.

Biblical implications

By upholding Christian principles, educators have a responsibility to teach students not only core subjects but (Van Brummelen p.88), "the ultimate basics deal with how we respond in our everyday lives to God's call to obedience." Organizing curriculum is much more than teaching the compulsory subjects of school, it's also a continuation of our faith and to guide others. Teaching English as a second language introduces educators to the under-served community more often than not. This is a great opportunity for instructors to reach out and provide support in every way you are able. By using peer tutors, you are giving other students

and members of the community an opportunity to reach out and help others in need. English language learners are at a disadvantage in every aspect of American life if they cannot read, speak, or write the language. Many Americans do not know what it is like to struggle in a situation similar to this. Leviticus 19:34 says, "The alien living with you must be treated as one of your native-born. Love him as yourself, for you were aliens in Egypt. I am the LORD your God." As Christians, we are to help our neighbor; by being responsible citizens we are to help others in hardships. It is important to remember that we are God's children and we are to treat each other as we would like to be treated- with kindness and respect. As we teach foreign speakers English, we also teach them responsibility, to be amiable, open-minded, and trustworthy. The best way to teach others is to lead by example. While being Christian leaders and educators, it is important to remember that we are representing Christians to those who may not believe; so we must be a superior example. To live by God's word and spread His word is imperative; we are charged with no greater task than this.

Applications and Recommendations

With the results of the research suggesting that social learning theory plays a large part in learning a foreign language applications; the recommendations would be that all ESL classes enlist the help of native English speakers as peer tutors. Tutorials and similar-aged peer sharing could be instituted so that ESL students could have a vivid example of what they are being taught as well as American culture and behavior. In a high school setting, some students have a non-credit class called teacher's aide, which is a free hour for students caught up on their work to help teachers or coaches, ect. These (exemplary) students could spend the hour in ESL class, helping fellow students with pronunciation and grammar. Over time the information is absorbed, coded, and stored in the brain for future use-thereby using the information processing theory.

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Using repetition and with the help of tutors to reinforce the new information, the English language learners are able to retain more data for future use. By using traditional English speaking students to guide the ESL students, they are providing an example to imitate and clear concise illustrations to learn from. Many classrooms are twenty students to one teacher, with the peer tutor program, a more personal relationship can begin with students, understanding which students require more help. The age, grade, and linguistic abilities of the tutors should also be recorded so they may be more aptly paired with ELLs and their specific situations. Within this realm a selection process should be created based on the needs of each school and classroom to ensure the best possible outcomes. This research opens new doors to learning how English Language Learners process information into memory and its use in cognitive thoughts.

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