

TUTOPAR-LLE: an Experiment in Peer Tutoring

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Abstract - Re-structuring of undergraduate courses in conformity with the requisites of 'Bologna' has meant, among other things, a change in the access requirements for the two foreign language courses of the Institute of Arts and Humanities. Students may now enrol to study German, French or Spanish having no previous knowledge of these languages. The subsequent and inevitable disparity in the language levels of first year students has been problematic for language teachers. 'Bologna' also entailed an emphasis on student-led rather than teacher-led education.

With this in mind, one attempt to overcome the problematic of disparate language competence in the European Languages and Literatures undergraduate course has been through the implementation of the peer tutoring programme 'Tutopar-LLE', (two editions completed). It also aims at reducing problems of university adaptation and increasing study efficiency. This presentation will use questionnaires and personal interviews to examine the tutor programme from various perspectives (tutor, tutee, language coordinator), while showing how experience gained from a previous tutor programme, TUTUM, helped shape it.

Key words - peer tutoring, Tutopar

1. Introduction

1.1 Contextualization

Minho University does not have a coordinated university-wide tutor policy at the present moment. Each course subject has its prescribed number of tutorial hours, following the dictates of 'Bologna', but there is no instruction on how the course/ subject teacher should conduct the tutorial. Indeed, conflicting practice means some tutorials are officially scheduled on course time-tables while others are not, some teachers leave it up to students to attend on a voluntary basis, while others see small groups at a time on a compulsory basis. It is up to individual course directors/ teachers to provide help with study skills and subject content when and where they see fit.

A few schemes are being/ have been implemented on a university level, for example the TUTUM project. A few words will be said about this project for it served as inspiration for Tutopar-LLE.

1.2 'TUTUM, a Minho University Tutor Programme' – a precursor

The general goal for TUTUM was the promotion of autonomous learning by first year students with the aim of reducing the course dropout rate. Regarding specific goals, these were quite ambitious. Students completing the programme should have been able to work in a group; organize and participate effectively in formal meetings; plan their work; find information (libraries, websites etc);

identify personal attitudes and competencies; elaborate diagrams; understand the argumentative construction of a discourse; use adequate reading strategies; summarize content; evaluate a text; relate information from different texts; develop writing sub-processes; produce texts in accordance with objectives and contexts; produce oral presentations according to specific objectives and contexts. Basic learning competences rather than specific course content were trained. Topics addressed were: basic learning competencies; working in groups; time planning; and communication competencies (reading, writing, speaking, listening, taking notes). Transversality and a strong tutor/ student relationship were targeted.

After a general appeal to course directors for a show of interest, TUTUM had the voluntary participation of first year students from the following courses: Biological Engineering, Optometrics and Vision Sciences, Physics, European Languages and Literatures, Chemistry and Education. Seven tutors, all lecturers from a variety of departments, had been prepared by attendance at a five-day workshop run by a foreign, invited professor who was specialized in tutoring. The Course Directors of the aforementioned undergraduate courses collaborated by making common time available on student timetables so as to enable heterogeneous tutor groups to function. A weekly two-hour session was anticipated during the whole academic year, the original conception being for the course to run from September 2006 – May 2007.

Due to non-academic distractions, problems of timetabling (partly real partly imagined), and, and despite promotion by course directors, the first-year students did not adhere to the programme in the numbers envisaged. Twenty-six students showed initial interest. Despite the decision taken in December to use a project as a vehicle for teaching the study skills, only four students were still participating actively at the beginning of the second term. The project had been welcomed by the students. The decision was then taken to terminate the programme prematurely, especially as the reduced participation made the planned project unworkable. Statistical analysis was compromised from the beginning, allowing only qualitative analysis to be made.

TUTUM, innovative in the University of Minho in regard to its heterogeneous mix of students and its entirely non-course based curricula, despite early termination due to insufficient tutees at the beginning of the second term (half way through the programme), positively helped the students who took part (information obtained from diagnostic and formative tests). Students had good self-esteem and regarded themselves as good students. The difficulties inherent in its voluntary nature, the great number of hours involved, and the non-perception by most first year students of their study skill deficiencies were all believed to have negatively affected the project.

2. Objectives of TUTOPR-LLE

TUTOPAR-LLE has much more restricted objectives than TUTUM, involves fewer hours and relies on peer tutoring. Like TUTUM, it relies on voluntary participation, although financial rewards were given to tutors (1st and 2nd editions) and overseeing language teachers (1st edition). TUTOPAR-LLE aims to help first year students¹ of the undergraduate European Languages and Literatures (LLE)

course a) improve their foreign language competencies, b) reduce their problems of university adaptation and c) enhance good study techniques.

The fact that peer tutoring has been shown to be successful, together with a lack of teachers willing and able to tutor on a voluntary basis, led to the use of LLE student volunteers as tutors. By focusing on improving linguistic competence in the chosen languages of study - English, German, French, Spanish or Portuguese, as well as on effective study techniques, it was hoped to lessen the gap between the weaker and stronger students, facilitate the transition from school to university, and decrease the dropout rate.

3. Structure

The project has the following structure: Director (LLE course director); coordinator; one language teacher responsible for each language (a total of five teachers responsible for English, German, French, Spanish or Portuguese); a tutor/student per language from the LLE course, preferably from the third (final) year, or from a Master's course of the Institute of Arts and Humanities; a maximum of six students/tutees per language divided into two groups of between one and three students.

4. Functioning

Language teachers were approached by the coordinator and asked to take part in the project as Responsible Language Teachers (RLTs). A small financial reward was offered in the first edition but cutbacks deemed this impossible for the second. Nevertheless, the teachers agreed to participate in both editions.

On the advice of some course teachers, language and non-language, one student from each language was invited by the RLTs to take part in the project as tutor. The criteria for selection were language competence and having the necessary characteristics of a good tutor. These are considered to be not only intelligence, but also a desire to help others, empathy, patience, availability, an open mind, an ability to take the initiative, insight, enthusiasm, confidence and punctuality. One tutor took part in both editions.

After an initial publicity drive via pamphlets and inter-personal contact, individual students from the first year LLE course deemed suitable candidates for the programme by their language teachers, were approached. Most did not avail themselves of the opportunities offered, stating lack of time and availability or other reasons. It was the consensus among teachers that most first years did not consider themselves as needing tutoring at that stage (first term, first year). Due to the relatively poor take up, the project was extended to second and third years and to the Applied Languages undergraduate course, (these students had shared language classes with the LLE students). Both tutors and tutees signed an agreement which stated the responsibilities of both parties.

The project was scheduled to last for eight weeks, beginning four weeks after the start of term. Tutors gave four hours of tutoring a week to two separate groups of tutees. Thus, tutees received two

hours tutoring per week. In the first edition, French and Portuguese tutors tutored only one group during the first term and then another during the second. This was due to the initial difficulty in getting tutee volunteers. The same happened in the second edition for German. Portuguese and French did not take part in this edition². Spanish, on the other hand, at the request of the tutees, continued in the second term on an unofficial basis. There were nineteen tutees in all in the first edition, and twenty-two in the second.

During the first edition, tutors availed themselves of a mini computer for session preparation etc. They were allowed to keep this on the successful conclusion of the project (improved language competence shown by a formative test). The mini-computer was substituted in the second edition by a small financial reward. Support material and photocopying facilities were also available to tutors. RLTs helped tutors with session preparation where necessary. Presence sheets were used for each session as tutees were 'obliged' to attend at least 75% of sessions. Summaries were submitted by the tutors to their RLT.

5. Evaluation

The Project was evaluated on the basis of a questionnaire to the tutees and to the RLTs, session summaries and direct observation of selected tutor sessions by the RLT.

The relationship of the RLT and his / her tutor was crucial, for it provided backup and confidence to the latter, allowing for an improvement of the tutor's own foreign language skills. The tutor was able to put into practice her own knowledge of language, none were native speakers, and to enhance other skills such as class planning (through periodic meetings with their RLT). This led in turn to greater autonomy. It must be stressed that it is essential to choose tutors with the right profile, and indeed the RLTs managed to do so.

Both editions show positive language acquisition results on the part of the tutees. The sessions were so successful that most tutees commented that one semester was insufficient and showed a desire to continue (this in fact happened on an unofficial basis with Spanish, second edition).

6. Conclusion

6.1 Testimony

To show that the programme has been rewarding for the tutors as well as for the tutees, Ana Carvalho, English tutor in the second edition, relates her experience in the following way:

"When one is invited to become a tutor, questions concerning one's abilities, skills and even ability to contemplate the idea of passing one's knowledge to another arise rapidly. During the rather short period of time that the tutor and the tutee(s) meet, it becomes crucial to grasp the tutee's biggest needs, while attempting to address those same difficulties with precise exercises. It is hoped that, regardless of the fact that these

exercises may seem rather simple for the regular language learner, they will erase any doubt that the student may have on that same subject.

The key to a great peer-to-peer learning experience seems to lie in the ability of the tutee to acknowledge his/her weaker points and not exactly in the tutor's teaching skills, which eventually come from the tutees' needs.

As the tutee learns to approach the tutor as the source of knowledge previously acquired by studying on the same course, the tutor also learns how to adapt him/herself to the tutee's needs, allowing the learning process to be profitable for both parts involved. A responsive, self aware and, in a way, self sufficient tutee, will definitely be the main provider of the tutor's work, as the former becomes more independent while making of the latter an improved communicator, speaker and even learner. This is done by acknowledging his/her ability to pass on information, by learning from the preparation that is required for each session and, eventually, by the realization of a more personal goal which may contribute to validating the tutor's effort and dedication: the improvement of the tutee's sense of autonomy and the development of self-regulated learning skills." (Carvalho, unpublished)

Peer tutoring through Tutopar-LLE had the advantage of allowing a closer approximation between tutor and tutee, and as first years were involved, tutors were able to clarify doubts and assist with the school/university adjustment process. Tutopar helped tutees acquire the necessary tools (for example regarding study methods and academic work) for a successful academic career. This shows a probable long lasting effect, although it is impossible to state whether the tools will continue to be used in the future. The sharing of common experiences and the cooperation of peers fostered mutual responsibility and team spirit, for the tutors, being of the same undergraduate course, could share experiences and knowledge way beyond that of the primary objectives of language competence, university adaptation and study skills.

The experience gained through the implementation of the programme TUTUM helped the coordinator of Tutopar-LLE identify difficulties inherent in voluntary tutor schemes. Timetabling and duration (number of hours / weeks) are particularly crucial. The experience of peer tutoring through the programme Tutopar-LLE, being restricted to one course and involving only sixteen hours of tutoring, went some way in alleviating foreseen problems. Eight weeks, however, was deemed insufficient time by many tutees, a fact which contrasts with the perceived excessive session time of TUTUM. There were no problems of absenteeism in Tutopar-LLE, the small number of tutees per group allowing for flexibility regarding rescheduling of sessions when necessary.

The major problem has been enticing students to volunteer as tutees, a difficulty which will hopefully be amended by beginning the programme in the second term rather than the first. The students will be more fully aware of their strengths and weaknesses by that time. A third edition has been proposed but cutbacks may well dictate that if it goes ahead rewards will be limited to certificates and Diploma Supplements.

End Notes

1. Priority was given to first year students from the undergraduate European Languages and Literatures course, albeit students from other courses could participate
2. French and German have a reduced number of first year students – around six each. Portuguese, however, has around thirty (as a major and minor language). There was an administrative problem with French in the second edition, making it impossible to be included. It was agreed that Portuguese would not take part in the second edition but Spanish would have double the number of students and tutors. The enthusiasm of the Spanish students contrasts with the lack of enthusiasm of the Portuguese. Perhaps the latter felt they did not need help with their native tongue?.