



Peer Tutoring Strategy from the Student Support Program (PAE) of the Institución Universitaria Colombo Americana (ÚNICA)

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Abstract

The peer tutoring strategy has become one of the principal academic alternatives for universities to stop dropout rates and support their learning process and achieve success in their academic performances. The present qualitative study focuses on evaluating the effect of the peer tutoring component in the Student Support Program (PAE) at Institución Universitaria Colombo Americana (ÚNICA) based on the perceptions of former tutors and tutees about their pedagogical and communicative competence after having participated in this program. Data was collected through questionnaires, interviews, and a focus group, and analyzed using reflective thematic analysis, validated through data triangulation.

Keywords: evaluation of peer tutoring, collaborative learning, peer support, communicative development, pedagogical development.

Resumen

La estrategia de tutoría entre pares se ha convertido en una de las principales alternativas académicas de las universidades para frenar los índices de deserción, apoyar su proceso de aprendizaje y alcanzar el éxito en su desempeño académico. El presente estudio cualitativo se enfoca en evaluar el efecto del componente de tutoría entre pares en el Programa de Apoyo Estudiantil (PAE) de la Institución Universitaria Colombo Americana (ÚNICA) a partir de las percepciones de ex tutores y tutorados sobre su competencia pedagógica y comunicativa luego de haber participado en este programa. Los datos fueron recolectados a través de



cuestionarios, entrevistas y un grupo focal, y analizados usando análisis temático reflexivo, validados mediante triangulación de datos.

Palabras clave: evaluación de tutoría entre pares, aprendizaje colaborativo, apoyo entre pares, desarrollo comunicativo, desarrollo pedagógico.

Introduction

Students' academic success and the efficiency of their learning processes are among the top priorities of higher education institutions, particularly as they adjust to university life (Espinoza et al., 2019; Jiménez, 2015; Klug & Peralta, 2019). It can be especially difficult for first-year students to adjust to the responsibilities of higher education and new levels of independence, so it's critical to put methods in place that ensure success, progress, and permanence (Meer et al., 2018). In this regard, educational institutions must offer support systems that benefit teachers, students, and other parties interested in the quality of education (Almulla, 2018; Arrand, 2014; Lamas, 2015).

Peer tutoring is considered a highly important strategy for students participating in it, as it has been shown to promote academic success, mutual support among peers, and reciprocal learning (Ali et al., 2015; Bowman et al., 2016; Clerici & Lucca, 2020; Topping, 2015). For this reason, the strategy has been implemented in the Student Support Program (PAE) of the Colombo-American University Institution (ÚNICA), which focuses on helping first- and second-semester university students. The tutoring plan seeks to guide and reinforce students' learning processes through tutor-tutee interaction, while also responding to issues of desertion and academic performance.

The tutoring model at ÚNICA assigns two roles: tutors, who offer guidance in areas of academic need, and tutees, who benefit from the support. This interaction not only helps address academic difficulties but also creates opportunities for both roles to develop complementary skills. While tutees improve their communicative and academic competences, tutors gain pedagogical experience and strengthen their own knowledge through collaborative feedback (Benoit, 2021; Marieswari & Prema, 2016; Newton & Ender, 2010). Therefore, during second language learning,



peer tutoring serves as a bridge to foster and reinforce second language learning, improving the communicative and pedagogical skills of the parties involved in the interaction facilitated by the tutoring (Ali et al., 2015; Thurston et al., 2021)

It is important to mention that peer tutoring in ÚNICA is still not as well known as it should be, despite the importance of its application. In this sense, there is little data on its true impact and the exact benefits of its structured application. To address this gap, the present study evaluates the peer tutoring component of the PAE by analyzing the perceptions of six former tutors and six former tutees, for which the present study aims to reinforce peer tutoring as a valuable strategy for institutions committed to delivering high-quality education (Klug & Peralta, 2019; Obaya & Vargas, 2014).

To address the need for greater clarity regarding this component, the present working paper specifically examines peer tutoring as a pedagogical and support strategy within the PAE. The study seeks to determine how peer mentoring functions in practice, what pedagogical and communicative benefits participants perceive, and to what extent the strategy contributes to academic retention and early teacher development. In this sense, the phenomenon under study is the structured implementation of peer tutoring in a bilingual teacher-education program, focusing on the interactions, roles, and learning gains reported by both tutors and tutees. The population involved includes former tutors and tutees from the BA in Bilingualism with Emphasis on Spanish and English at ÚNICA, who participated in the program between 2019 and 2022.

General Objective

This study aims to evaluate the peer tutoring strategy implemented in the Student Support Program (PAE) of ÚNICA, by examining how this mentoring approach influences the development of pedagogical and communicative skills among participating tutors and tutees.



Specific Objectives

- To uncover former tutors' and tutees' perceptions of their communicative skills development in English after participating in the peer tutoring program.
- To identify former tutors' and tutees' perceptions regarding the pedagogical skills they developed through their participation in the peer tutoring program.

Theoretical framework

Peer tutoring, also referred to in the literature as peer mentoring or peer-assisted learning, is defined as an instructional strategy in which students support one another by assuming complementary roles, one acting as tutor and the other as tutee, to promote academic, social, and communicative development (Topping, 1996; Newton & Ender, 2010). This strategy is grounded in collaborative learning principles, where knowledge is constructed through interaction, mediation, and shared responsibility for learning outcomes. Peer tutoring differs from traditional remedial support because it leverages the proximity in age, experience, and academic trajectory of participants, creating a learning environment perceived as more accessible, less intimidating, and highly adaptable to individual needs (Arrand, 2014; Clerici & Lucca, 2020).

In the context of the present research, peer tutoring is the central phenomenon under analysis. The strategy is applied within the PAE at ÚNICA as an institutional response to academic challenges faced by first-semester and second-semester students, including adaptation difficulties, language mastery demands, and risks of academic dropout. The relevance of peer mentoring for this study lies in its dual purpose: (1) strengthening the communicative competence of tutees, especially in the English language, and (2) fostering the pedagogical development of tutors, who are pre-service teachers in training. Because the BA in Bilingualism seeks to develop reflective, competent, and communicatively proficient educators, peer tutoring becomes a natural extension of the curriculum by providing early,



authentic teaching practice aligned with institutional goals.

Finally, the strategy is examined in relation to a specific population: six former tutors and six former tutees from the BA program who participated in the PAE between 2019 and 2022. Their perceptions provide insight into how peer mentoring operates as an academic and professional development mechanism within a bilingual teacher-education context.

The present research is grounded in several core concepts that guide both the theoretical background and the analysis of participants' perceptions. First, peer tutoring refers to a structured learning interaction in which one student with greater mastery in a given subject supports another student who requires guidance (Topping, 1996; Newton & Ender, 2010). In this research, peer tutoring is examined as the central pedagogical strategy implemented in the PAE, focusing on how tutors and tutees experience this role-based interaction.

Collaborative learning is understood as the process in which knowledge is constructed jointly through cooperation, shared responsibility, and dialogue among peers (Duran et al., 2019; Stigmar, 2016). In relation to this study, collaborative learning serves as the foundation for understanding how tutor-tutee interactions promote mutual development and influence students' academic and communicative performance.

The term peer support refers to emotional, academic, and motivational assistance provided by students to one another within learning environments (Almulla, 2018; Sánchez-Aguilar, 2021). This study considers peer support as a key component of the PAE, particularly in how it contributes to reducing anxiety, increasing confidence, and fostering a safe space for learning.

Communicative development in second language learning encompasses gains in fluency, accuracy, sociolinguistic appropriateness, and the use of strategic competence (Canale & Swain, 1980; Bachman, 1990). In this research, communicative development specifically refers to how former tutees and tutors perceive improvements in their English-language skills as a result of participating in tutoring sessions.

Finally, pedagogical development refers to the growth of teaching-related skills



such as lesson planning, explanation of content, feedback provision, and classroom management (Suciu & Mata, 2011; Mirzagitova & Akhmetov, 2015). For this research, pedagogical development is explored through tutors' reflections on how the tutoring experience allowed them to apply theoretical knowledge and begin shaping their professional teacher identity.

The first stages of teacher training are decisive in shaping professional identity and developing the skills required for a successful career. During this formative period, future educators transition from being learners to teachers, establishing the foundation of their pedagogical practice. While some students take on tutoring roles, others may require additional support to adapt to these responsibilities. The primary goal of ÚNICA's early childhood education program is to prepare bilingual educators who can meet the demands of the Colombian education system. This means providing future teachers with a strong foundation in pedagogy, development in the teaching field, practical methods for learning, and improving professional motivation.

In this instance, peer tutoring becomes a valuable resource that enables more advanced students to support less advanced students in their academic and professional progress. This process strengthens collaborative learning communities, where knowledge is exchanged through peer mediation, or what are interactions where more experienced students mentor their colleagues from lower semesters. According to Caires and Almeida (2005), the teaching experience in the early years of learning helps students better understand educational systems and encourages reflection on their motivation and role as teachers, prior to their professional careers. Aspiring educators who participate in peer tutoring not only improve their own understanding but also help establish excellent teaching methods. Likewise, peer tutoring is very important for the development of communication skills, especially in learning new languages. In this sense, the ability to use language effectively in different social situations must be determined. This ability includes sociolinguistic, pragmatic, and strategic elements, in addition to correct grammar. This is known as communicative competence (Canale and Swain, 1980; Hymes, 1972). This ability is fostered through active participation, when



students apply their knowledge in real-life communication contexts (Alsup et al., 2008; Saleh, 2013).

Grammatical and sociolinguistic elements are combined in Canale and Swain's (1980) proposal, which also highlights strategic competence: the ability to communicate despite difficulties. Bachman (1990) later refined this notion by differentiating between pragmatic competence, which encompasses both illocutionary and sociolinguistic skills, and organizational competence, which is the knowledge necessary to carry on a clear and coherent conversation. While the latter focuses on the appropriateness of language use in specific contexts, the former involves recognizing communicative functions such as requests or commands.

The interaction between tutor and student in peer tutoring sessions helps develop these skills. Students improve their language and social skills by practicing genuine communication, negotiating meanings, and learning effective ways to express themselves (Geeslin & Long, 2014). For those who aspire to become language teachers, who must develop advanced communication skills to demonstrate successful language use in the classroom, these experiences are highly relevant. In another aspect, pedagogical competence, which refers to the skills, attitudes, and knowledge that enable teachers to design, implement, and assess relevant learning experiences, is a fundamental concept in this study. This encompasses not only subject matter knowledge but also the ability to adjust teaching methods, address students' needs, and foster social change and professional development (Mirzagitova and Akhmetov, 2015; Suciu and Mata, 2011).

Lukianchuk et al. (2021) argue that pedagogical competence includes several aspects, such as content mastery, teaching methodologies, critical reasoning, and continuing professional development. This skill is cultivated in preservice teachers through practice, reflection, and exchange with mentors and colleagues. On the other hand, Hidayat and Azisah (2016) point out that pedagogical competence involves understanding students' developmental stages and selecting appropriate teaching techniques for each phase.

Indeed, peer support enhances teaching skills by allowing tutors to apply their



theoretical knowledge in real-life situations. To obtain relevant data about the educational process, they design learning activities, explain concepts, and provide feedback. At the same time, students gain greater independence, study methods, and personalized guidance. Through this interaction, peer support acts as an educational laboratory that enhances classroom teaching, preparing future teachers to face the challenges of the educational field.

The significance of peer mentoring in teacher training relates to the initial preparation of language teachers, as well as to communication and pedagogical skills as a whole. Pedagogical skills provide educators with the necessary tools to guide the learning process, while communication skills ensure effective language use, and initial training lays the foundation for professional identity. By creating collaborative spaces in which students assume the roles of both teacher and student, the application of peer mentoring at ÚNICA encompasses these aspects. Thus, it promotes not only academic performance but also the professional advancement of future bilingual teachers.

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative approach to analyze the effects of the peer tutoring program in the Student Support Program (SSP) at the Colombo American University (UNICA). Although quantitative information about tutoring sessions, including the number of participants, subjects covered, and tutors participating, is provided by institutional reports, participant opinions regarding the program's overall impact, utility, and efficacy are not included. In this way, a qualitative method facilitates a deeper exploration of students' experiences and perceptions of peer tutoring (Hollstein, 2011).

According to Johnson and Christensen (2014), qualitative research seeks to understand events from the perspective of those involved in their natural setting. In this case, information was obtained through surveys, document reviews, an online discussion forum, and semi-structured interviews with mentors, students, and the former program director. This approach ensured data triangulation and provided diverse perspectives. According to Creswell (2009), the analysis was not



limited to specific relationships but encompassed broader themes, seeking to describe how peer mentoring enhances mentors' pedagogical abilities and the development of students' communication skills.

The research focuses on an interpretive framework that attempts to understand social events through the experiences and perspectives of participants (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Thanh and Thanh, 2015). An *emic* perspective was also used, which accepts that interactions between tutors and students are fluid and subjective (Markee, 2013). This approach highlights the importance of participants' opinions in shaping the context of the tutoring process.

The research design was based on program evaluation, since the peer tutoring initiative, despite being part of the PAE for over a decade, had not previously been assessed in terms of its outcomes. Program evaluation seeks to determine the worth of a program to guide its improvement and document its contributions. In this sense, the evaluation of peer tutoring at ÚNICA serves both formative (improving the program) and summative (assessing its effectiveness) purposes (Posavac, 2015).

This study used Stufflebeam's (2003) CIPP paradigm (Context, Input, Process, Product), which prioritizes program improvement above validation alone. The model facilitated an analysis of the program's context within the BA in Bilingualism with an emphasis on Spanish and English, the resources involved, and the processes described in institutional documents such as the PAE guidelines (2012) and tutoring reports from 2019 to 2022. Participant feedback was also analyzed to identify the program's strengths and weaknesses and to offer recommendations for its optimization. By presenting the results to program coordinators, the evaluation aims to support decision-making and encourage ongoing improvement of peer mentoring at ÚNICA (Stufflebeam, 1983). The context of the study is the BA in Bilingualism with Emphasis on Spanish and English at Institución Universitaria Colombo Americana (ÚNICA), the participants were 6 former tutors and tutees from the program of peer tutoring, the study includes a qualitative inductive paradigm with an *emic* perspective. Finally, the instruments used were 6 semi-structured interviews, 1 focus group, and 12 questionnaires, which were



analyzed using the reflexive thematic analysis previously mentioned.

The analysis will be organized following Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis, moving through phases of familiarization, coding, theme generation, theme revision, and theme definition. Data collected from interviews, questionnaires, and the focus group will be coded inductively to identify recurrent perceptions related to pedagogical and communicative development. These codes will then be grouped into broader thematic categories that allow interpretation of how participants experienced the peer tutoring strategy in the PAE.

Population

The population of the study consisted of twelve former participants of the Peer Tutoring Program in the PAE at ÚNICA: six former tutors and six former tutees. All participants were students enrolled in the BA in Bilingualism with Emphasis on Spanish and English and had taken part in the peer tutoring program between 2019 and 2022. Their academic level ranged from second to sixth semester at the time of their participation, which is significant because students at these stages are either beginning their teacher-training process or consolidating their pedagogical identity. This population was selected intentionally, since former tutors were able to reflect on their early pedagogical development, and former tutees could provide insight into communicative and academic support received through the program. Their firsthand experience made them the most relevant group for evaluating the peer tutoring strategy.

Instruments and Data Collection Procedures

Three instruments were used to gather data: questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and a focus group. Each instrument was applied following procedures designed to obtain in-depth perceptions from participants.

Questionnaires

The study used open-ended questionnaires administered online through Google Forms. These questionnaires were designed to gather initial perceptions about participants' experiences in the tutoring process, particularly regarding communicative and pedagogical skills. Participants completed the questionnaire



individually and anonymously. The criteria for including questionnaire data were: (1) student's participation in the PAE program, and (2) completion of all open-ended prompts.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Six semi-structured interviews were conducted—one with each tutor and tutee—to explore their experiences in more depth. The semi-structured format allowed the researcher to follow a guiding script while also giving participants freedom to elaborate on their perceptions. Interviews were carried out via video call, recorded with participants' consent, and lasted between 25 and 45 minutes. Interview questions addressed areas such as the tutor–tutee interaction, perceived learning gains, challenges, and suggestions for improving the program.

Focus Group

A focus group was held with a mixed group of former tutors and tutees to facilitate discussion and identify shared themes across experiences. The focus group followed an open-ended protocol and lasted approximately 60 minutes. This instrument allowed participants to react to each other's comments and co-construct meanings related to the peer tutoring experience.

Document Analysis

Document review was conducted using institutional materials relevant to the PAE. The documents selected included: The PAE Guidelines (2012), tutoring reports from 2019 to 2022, internal records of tutoring sessions (attendance, session descriptions, areas of support). These documents were selected because they describe the structure, purpose, and functioning of the program, allowing the researcher to contextualize participants' perceptions. Document analysis followed a content-analysis approach, focusing on identifying descriptions of the tutoring model, roles, procedures, and institutional expectations.

Data Analysis Procedure

Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) Reflexive Thematic Analysis, following six recursive phases: familiarization, coding, theme generation, theme revision, theme definition, and reporting. This approach was selected because it allows the researcher to identify patterns of meaning constructed through



participants' reflections about their experience in the peer tutoring program.

Coding Process

After transcribing interviews and the focus group, as well as reviewing questionnaire responses, the researcher conducted an inductive line-by-line coding process. Codes were created to capture meaningful units in participants' discourse, such as statements describing learning gains, challenges, emotions, reflections on roles, or attitudes toward the program.

Examples of initial codes included

- Improved confidence in English.
- Learning by teaching.
- Empathy with peers.
- Difficulty managing time.
- Feeling supported.
- Clarifying grammar for others helps me learn.
- Safe environment for speaking.

These initial codes were then grouped into broader categories to identify recurring ideas across participants.

Theme Development

From the categories, four overarching themes emerged:

Growth in Pedagogical Competence: E.g., developing explanation strategies, patience, planning skills, tutoring as early teaching practice.

Strengthening of Communicative Skills in English: E.g., increased fluency, improved grammar awareness, reduced anxiety, more confidence speaking.

Peer Support as an Emotional and Academic Aid: E.g., feeling understood, reduced fear of mistakes, collaborative problem-solving.

Operational Challenges and Improvement Needs of the Program: E.g., scheduling issues, lack of training, need for clearer guidelines.

Each theme was constructed by grouping codes that consistently appeared across tutors' and tutees' responses.

Establishing Logical Flow



To ensure coherence in the discussion of findings, each theme was supported by:

- Direct quotes from participants that illustrate the pattern.
- Descriptions that contextualize the meaning of the quotes.
- Interpretation linking the theme to the theoretical framework and literature.
- Explanation of its impact in the context of the BA in Bilingualism and the PAE program.

This thematic organization creates a clear and logical flow between raw data, coded patterns, and final interpretations, allowing the findings to reflect the complexity of participants' perceptions while connecting them to the broader purpose of the research.

This research was conducted and concluded during the 2023 academic year. Data collection took place between February and November 2023, during which the researcher administered the open-ended questionnaires, conducted six semi-structured interviews and one focus group, and reviewed institutional documents produced between 2019 and 2022. All data were analyzed prior to developing the results and conclusions presented in this working paper. For this reason, the use of the past tense reflects that the research process, from data collection to analysis, was fully completed before the writing of this report.

Conclusions

The findings of this study indicate that peer tutoring in the PAE program contributes significantly to the pedagogical and communicative development of participating students. These conclusions were derived from the themes identified through reflexive thematic analysis of interviews, questionnaires, and the focus group.

First, participants consistently reported improvements in several pedagogical skills such as listening, patience, punctuality, and the ability to explain and clarify ideas. These competencies emerged as recurrent codes in tutors' narratives throughout the interviews, where they described adapting explanations to tutees' needs, managing time when planning sessions, and learning to listen actively to identify



areas of confusion. For example, tutors repeatedly mentioned that preparing explanations forced them to reorganize content and anticipate difficulties, which strengthened their instructional strategies. These data-based patterns support the conclusion that tutoring functions as an early teaching practice that promotes pedagogical growth.

Second, the data showed that the peer tutoring program supported the communicative development of tutees not only through interaction but also through structured academic support. Questionnaire responses revealed that students improved their accuracy in grammar points previously misunderstood, gained confidence when speaking in English, and reduced anxiety related to making mistakes. In interviews, tutees highlighted that having a peer explain content in simpler terms or provide personalized examples helped them internalize forms and functions of English more effectively. Additionally, the collaborative environment of tutoring sessions—characterized by reduced pressure, opportunities for repeated practice, and feedback from someone who had faced similar learning challenges—was frequently mentioned as a factor that facilitated communicative progress. These perspectives illustrate how the program offers students a safe and personalized space to practice English, clarify content, and refine their oral expression.

Third, the study demonstrated that tutoring fosters reciprocal learning. Tutors reported that teaching others helped them reinforce their own communicative and academic competence, while tutees expressed that the collaborative dynamic encouraged mutual support and trust. This shared construction of knowledge was especially evident in the focus group discussions, where both groups described tutoring as a cooperative rather than hierarchical process.

Overall, the conclusions reflect a direct connection between the themes identified in the data analysis and the experiences expressed by tutors and tutees. By grounding the findings in participants' perceptions and the patterns that emerged from the qualitative analysis, this study confirms the value of peer tutoring as a strategy that enhances professional, academic, and communicative development within the BA in Bilingualism at ÚNICA.



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