

PEER MENTORING: A PROPOSED MODEL TO IMPROVE THE ENGLISH STUDENTS' SPEAKING ABILITY AT IAIN TULUNGAGUNG

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Abstract: In business and human resource management, mentoring has been acknowledged as an effective way to develop career and achievement. This may be true to English teaching. Mentoring can be used as an alternative strategy to help students improve their language proficiency. English Department of IAIN Tulungagung possesses unique characteristic since it is a non-Islamic study which is run by an Islamic institute. Its unique characteristic lies on the number of the Islamic content courses, of which proportion is much bigger comparing to the same kinds of department which is run by non-Islamic universities. This causes to the less credit of English skill and content courses offered to the students. To meet the students' need of a good proficiency at English skills, especially speaking, any effort must be conducted. One of the proposed alternatives is conducting a peer mentoring. This article proposes and discusses a model of peer mentoring program to improve the English students' speaking ability. The peer mentoring model is selected since it gives fruitful benefits to the junior students as the mentees, the senior students as the mentors, and the faculty members or the English department lecturers as the supervisors.

Keywords: Peer Mentoring, English Speaking Ability

A debate on how to improve the English students' speaking ability has emerged at IAIN Tulungagung for a couple of months. The main concern of the faculty members is how to improve the English students' proficiency of the four language skills, especially speaking which has been set up as the main priority for this coming semester. From the prior analysis, at least there are three conditions which become the reason why a peer mentoring program is urgent and strategic to be proposed. The first reason is the curriculum load of the English department. The second is the students' low speaking proficiency, and the third is the insufficient English exposure at the campus.

Comparing to the English Departments of universities run under the Ministry of Education and Culture, from the perspective of the curriculum, the curriculum structure of the English Department of IAIN Tulungagung does not accommodate adequate offer of English skills. Let's see the contrast with the English Department of State University of Malang, for example, which offers 64 credits of English language skill courses (62.75%) out of 146 credits (The Regulation of Dean of Faculty of Letters number 7/2013). On the contrary, the English Department of IAIN Tulungagung only offers 36 credits of English language skill courses (24%) out of 150 credits. Meanwhile, the English speaking courses are offered only for 9 credits (6%) out of 150 credits (The Academic Guideline of IAIN Tulungagung 2014). The structure of the curriculum of English Department of IAIN Tulungagung has been so dense that there is no more provided space to add more credits of English language skill courses although the posture of the curriculum is not ideal due to policy reasons.

The second reason is the students' low speaking proficiency. The result of the placement test administered to the first semester students confirms this finding. Based on the result of the interview, from 175 students, only 20 students (1.14%) are considered having good verbal command in English. This test result surely challenges the faculty members to provide creative and effective learning strategies to meet the academic standard of the English student proficiency.

Further, it can be identified that the English exposure needed by the English students is not sufficiently developed. My observation shows that there is no official intention and effort as well as autonomous effort from the students to develop English speaking milieu. The observation confirms the finding that there is no independent study groups such as discussion groups and debate clubs actively operate in the last two months. Other media of English exposure such as wall bulletin, English pamphlet, and free English leaflet even cannot be found.

Considering those conditions which potentially become the barriers in accelerating the students' mastery of English skills, especially English speaking ability, a peer mentoring model is proposed. Zeind et al (2005) reports the protégés increase in self-perceived abilities in all areas addressed. Both protégés and mentors can benefit from mentoring relationship. The mentoring programs are important for achievement of academic and institutional goals. In addition, Wilkins (2008) found that 100% of the mentors and 98.58% of the mentees reported that mentoring was a good experience for them. Of the mentee respondents, 87.32% indicated that being involved with mentoring improved their attitude about coming to school; 88.55% of mentors and 80.28% of mentees reported growth in self-confidence. This article is intended to propose a peer mentoring model employed for English speaking skill improvement at university setting, which utilizes the finding of the above researches as the basis of the argument for initiating the mentoring program at English Department of IAIN Tulungagung.

DEFINING MENTORING

To provide a definition of mentoring in relation to teaching speaking, some definitions are reviewed here. Black (1998) and Tentoni (1995) in Black, Suarez, and Medina (2004) define mentoring as a nurturing, complex, long term,

developmental process, in which a more skilled and experienced person serves as a role model. Teacher, sponsor, and coach who encourages, counsels, befriends a less skilled person for the purpose of promoting the latter's professional and/or personal development. In addition, Lishchinky (2009) states that definitions of mentoring are very diverse, with the most popular focusing on professional development. Fields (1991) in Zeind et al (2005) describes mentoring as a relationship in which an individual who is senior in term of experience (mentor) undertakes the role as a teacher, an advisor, a model with a less experienced individual (protégé/mentee). In addition, Wilkins (2008) defines peer mentoring as a mentoring of which the mentors are the students who mentor the younger students in their schools (e.g., high school seniors who work with high school freshmen are considered peer mentors).

In this article, operationally peer mentoring is defined as a process of psychological and English teaching and learning relationship at academic setting which conducted by senior students (in term of their English proficiency and semester) to the freshmen under supervision of the faculty members.

The purposes of the proposed mentoring program as adapted from the definitions above are that (1) the mentoring program is intended to promote the students' proficiency improvement in English speaking, (2) both the senior and freshmen students will be encouraged and motivated to learn English speaking collaboratively, (3) it will develop a supportive and accommodative atmosphere in the academic milieu, and (4) this proposed mentoring program can be used as a pilot project for a sustainable intra-curricular learning activities in addition to the existing scheduled-curricular learning activities.

THE BENEFIT OF PEER MENTORING

The establishment of peer mentoring program will give some benefits either to the mentees, the mentors, or the faculty members, which cannot be gained through a formal teaching learning process at the class.

For The Mentees

The first benefit is psychological feeling of being accepted. Mentoring relationship is different from formal teaching relationship. In mentoring, the relationship developed is more a psychological relationship. Both the mentors and the mentees will try to maintain a good and mutual psychological relationship. The psychological feeling of being accepted by the surrounding, in turn will grow into positive emotions which support the learning process.

Second, there will be positive role modeling in learning English. The mentees will learn a lot from the mentors, from whom the English speaking skill and the learning experiences are transferred. In learning English, good modeling is important. The relationship with the mentors will produce some inspiration in how to learn to speak in English. The mentees, therefore, will be able to adopt, adapt, even, develop the mentors' successful strategies in learning how to speak in English fluently and accurately.

The third benefit is sociability and interpersonal support in learning. The ultimate purpose of learning a language is for communicative purposes. As communication involves two parties, the communicant and the communicator,

therefore, the sociability and interpersonal supports from the peers, mates, and the learning communities play important role in learning English. In the mentoring program, the mentees will meet sociable partners. They will work cooperatively and collaboratively to gain their common objective of learning English speaking.

For The Mentors

The benefit of the peer mentoring for the mentors is that they will be able to improve their self-esteem and self-efficacy. Self-esteem is defined as sense of personal worth and ability that is fundamental to an individual identity (Merriam-Webster dictionary.com). The self-esteem is important in the students' professional development since low self-esteem leads to the development of personality that excessively craves approval and affection and exhibits an extreme desire for personal achievement (Merriam-Webster dictionary.com). While self-efficacy is defined as people's judgments of their capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performance. It is concerned not with the skills one has but with the judgments of what one can do whatever skills one possesses (Bandura, 1995 in Wilkins, 2008). The mentors will improve their self-esteem and self-efficacy when they see their ideas, advice, and training put into effect and achieving the expected result.

The second benefit achieved by the mentors is that they can also serve as the teaching apprentices. In this position, a mentor will be able to update ideas and techniques of teaching (Kay and Hinds, 2009). The mentors will study the syllabus of the English speaking practices, how to put a certain teaching and learning strategies in practice, how to overcome the learners' problem, and how to deal with and maintain the psychological relationship with the mentees. Those experiences are completely needed someday when the mentors perform the professional duties as teachers at formal institutions such as schools and training agencies.

For The Faculty Members

The faculty members or the lecturers also get benefit from the mentoring program. The noticeable benefit is academic efficiency in term of the achievement of the learning objectives, especially for English skills. In the past, the responsibility to help the students achieve the learning objectives was on the teachers. Today, that view has changed. The responsibility has distributed to the peers, the parents at home, as well as the community. The mentoring program will give opportunity for the mentors to share the responsibility to help the junior students achieve the intended learning objectives.

Besides, mentoring will also make possible for the mentees to help themselves achieve the learning objectives. During the mentoring process, the mentees self-assess and learn to identify their own learning problems and the learning problems which have been experienced by their mentors, and to try out any possible strategies to solve the problems. If the mentees are able to find out the solution of their own problems, the teaching and learning process at the formal classes will be more efficient.

THE PROPOSED PRACTICES OF PEER MENTORING

To establish the peer mentoring program, some aspects such as the committee, the objective and the learning materials, the mentor selection, and the scheduling should be taken into consideration.

The Mentoring Committee

The formation of a committee is a key step to achieving the goals of this mentoring program. The mentoring committee is elected from the representatives of the faculty members or the lecturers. This committee is in charge of planning, implementing, and evaluating the mentoring program. The planning stage involves the selection of supervisors, mentors, designing the learning objectives and material, and setting the time schedule. The implementing stage involves training for the supervisor and the mentors, and controlling the implementation of the mentoring program. The evaluation deals with two aspects: first the running of the mentoring program, and second the English speaking proficiency of the mentees (and the mentors if needed).

The Objective and Learning Materials

The objective of the mentoring program can be formulated on the basis of the objectives of the Speaking courses. The committee may select from the curriculum which Speaking course and which competences to be achieved through the mentoring program. From the selected competences, then, the learning materials and media are developed.

Referring to the curriculum of English Department of IAIN Tulungagung, the mentoring program can be tried out to the first semester students on Speaking for Daily Communication Course. The objective of the mentoring program can be formulated in line with the objective of the course that the students are able to actively and accurately conduct communication for daily purpose such as communication at the market, on the phone, at the bus station, at the gas station, at café, etc.

Selection of the Mentors

The mentors for this program can be selected based the criteria simplified from Gray (2001) below:

Table 1. The Criteria of Mentors

Understanding and knowledge
- Understanding of the difficulties of learning a language
- Understanding of the difficulties of teaching a language
- Understanding of students' common mistakes and of appropriate correction strategies
- Understanding of the role and nature of grammar
- Good knowledge of ICT and the potential of <i>realia</i>
Abilities
- Language expertise / good language skills
- Good accent and intonation
- Sound grammar usage
- The ability to adapt the language level to the learners

- The ability to make connection for the students

Behavior in the classroom

- A variety of teaching techniques and strategies
- Clear objectives and targets
- Being a resources
- Flexible
- Confidence

Personal

- Ideas for learning strategies
- Good imagination
- Recent language learning experience themselves
- Resilience
- Good organizational skills

THE ASSESSMENT OF PEER MENTORING

The improvement or the progress obtained by both the mentors and the mentees, after a certain period of mentoring program, can be assessed using the following assessment.

Feedback

There are various forms of feedbacks which can be used in assessing the improvement obtained both by the mentors and the mentees. Fish (1995) in Gray (2001) describes feedback as 'critique', 'reflective', and 'self-assessment'. The 'critique' mode of the feedback will provide the personal judgments and possible improvements in a general appreciation of the mentoring program. The 'critique' can be used as the basis of the discussion among the committee, the mentors, and the mentees for the sake of the betterment of the on- going program as well as the program in future.

The 'reflective' mode of the feedback will make possible for the mentors and the mentees to 'dialog' to themselves. The mentors can reflect themselves in regard to how they experience the mentoring process, what the psychological satisfaction they achieved, how they get along or develop relationship with the mentees, how they feel the improvement of their speaking skills. To the mentees, they can answer the same questions as their self-reflection.

Both the mentors and the mentees are also encouraged towards self-assessment at certain interval, for example monthly, during the mentoring program since the self-assessment will enable them to take a responsibility for their own personal and academic development. The self-assessment can be done by asking the students to write narrative journals. The narrative journals are recommended because the mentors and the mentees are expected to feel free to express and share their subjective feeling in relation to how they get improved in English speaking skill from time to time. Besides, the ability to express feeling narratively can also indicate that they have been successful in overcoming one of the psychological barriers in communicating ideas –feeling of unease and awkwardness.

Table 2. The Mentors and Mentees Feedback

Name of Mentor/Mentee:.....
 Group :.....
 Date :.....
 Direction : - Answer the following question based on what you feel or what you experience
 - There is no correct or incorrect answers to these questions
 - Any subjective responds to these questions are welcome

1. What do you experience in the mentoring program?

2. How do you develop and keep the relationship with your mentors or mentees?

3. What psychological satisfaction can you achieved after joining the mentoring? Explain.

4. Do think that you get improvement in your Speaking skill? How do you get improved? Explain clearly.

Formal Assessment

Since one of the intended purposes of the peer mentoring program is to promote the students’ proficiency improvement in English speaking, in addition to the feedback, therefore, it is necessary to conduct a formal assessment. The objective of the assessment is to measure to what extent the objective of the teaching English speaking skill can be achieved by the mentees. The formal assessment can be done in the form of oral interviews and or performance test. The oral interview can be used not only to measure the mentee’s ability in speaking but also to discuss the running of the mentoring program from the perspective of the mentees in addition to their written feedback.

Oral interviews can be conducted with individuals or pairs at all levels of language proficiency and require no preparation on the part of the students (O’Malley and Pierce, 1996). In a classroom setting, the oral interviews can be done in the form of discussions or conversations with the supervisor or lecturer and with other students –mentors and mentees under supervision of the lecturers.

To prepare to interview the mentees individually, the committee should prepare a list of guiding questions or tasks. The questions or tasks must reflect or be appropriate to the objectives of the English speaking practices, the language proficiency and developmental levels of the mentees. In conducting the oral interview individually, it must be checked for sure that the mentees understand the questions or the tasks being asked to perform and the criteria of evaluation.

To prepare the oral interviews with pairs of students –mentors and mentees under supervision of the lecturers-, the committee should share the lists of guiding questions or tasks with the mentors and let them interview the mentees. This form of oral interviews gives opportunity to assess both the

mentors and the mentees in a single session. Whether it needs to assess the mentors depends on the policy of the committee.

To rate the oral interview, the lecturer may use a holistic or analytic rating scale (a rubric) or a checklist of language skills (O'Malley and Pierce, 1996). Wherever possible, it is advisable not to rate the mentees during individual interviews; it can be disconcerting for some students. Rate the mentees as soon as possible after the interview (O'Malley and Pierce, 1996). For the second form of the oral interviews, the rate taking can be conducted during the interview.

CONCLUSION

From the explanation and discussion above, it can be concluded that peer mentoring is a promising strategy to help the mentees improve themselves. Some research has shown that mentoring has been employed and obtained its success in the field of business, human resource management, psychology and counseling, and education. As a matter of fact, language teaching and learning may also take benefit from the mentoring practice. Since through a peer mentoring process the junior students will get the intensive guidance and practice from the more skilled senior students, therefore the peer mentoring program is worth practicable.

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