

## **Development of English Grammar and Writing Skills Based on Participation in a Peer-assisted Learning Center**

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### **Abstract**

In an effort to address undergraduate students' insufficient English writing skills in Thailand, this study incorporated a peer-assisted learning (PAL) center to develop their English grammar and writing skills. This mixed-method (both quantitative and qualitative), quasi-experimental study was done at an international college in Thailand, where the control and experimental groups consisted of 36 and 30 research participants respectively. An additional 30 participants functioned as student-peer mentors (SPMs), providing peer feedback to those students in the experimental group. From the research findings, it was concluded that integrating a PAL center as part of an English course's curriculum can significantly improve student writing skills. However, the participants' English grammar skills did not improve. With universities incorporating more and more academic projects or other courses of actions in order to augment student skills in various areas, PAL centers could be utilized to develop student writing skills. The research implications for this study provide a framework on how further studies might be built.

**Keywords:** *Peer-assisted learning, English grammar development, writing efficiency*

### **Introduction**

Writing is a complicated talent to hone for both those learning English as their mother tongue, as well as for English as a Second Language (ESL) learners (Nuruzzaman et al., 2018). Educators are presently confronted with how to best teach undergraduate students to write productively (Schicker, 2018), because writing in English language studies is a key element in education (Sevcikova, 2018). Nowhere is this more evident than in Thailand. Recently the Ministry of Education passed regulations stipulating that in order for a student to receive their undergraduate degree, they must first achieve a B1 (intermediate) Common European Framework (CEFR) English level. Since passing this provision, various educators in Thailand have questioning how this task can be achieved on a broad spectrum.

One of the seven key elements in writing is grammar skills; this is a key element that makes writing so complicated (Nuruzzaman et al., 2018). Educators should teach English grammar in a manner that allows people to convey information orally or in writing, and in terms of how receivers can be anticipated to decipher the expressed information (Al-Mekhlafi & Nagaratnam, 2011). To investigate this belief, a study was conducted by Collins and Norris (2017). They found that student writing skills improved after even a short amount of instruction on grammar skills was imparted. Hence, teachers should pay attention to grammar in education (Farangi et al., 2017). It is a vital element that aids in the development of the four fundamental English language usage skills: speaking, reading, listening, and writing (Rakhmawati & Nirmalawati, 2017).

It is not an easy task to comprehend why educators do not inculcate these much required academic writing skills to their students (Hinkel, 2001). Perhaps a fundamental reason is that teachers cannot simultaneously perform all the necessary roles demanded of them. Thus, student peer-mentors (SPMs) stationed inside a peer-assisted learning (PAL) center can help supplement the material their underclassmen are taught in their English classes by giving them advice on how to improve their grammar and writing skills. SPMs are qualified in a particular area, and they can aid students in their academic development (Pinion & Hinsel, 2019). Moreover, feedback given to peers by peers can be a fundamental aspect of writing pedagogy (Kunwongse, 2013). Maheady (1998) has asserted that PAL scenarios are the most suitable option as a substitute to self-study. Further, as Oliverio (2015) has indicated, the fundamental subject matter of Dewey's *Experience and Education*

is alive and well today. The communal aspect of a PAL scenario satisfies this, as it advocates genuine language acquisition, people skills, and creates meaningful relationships with fellow students. These factors are all vital to the augmentation of the productive exchange of information and/or ideas (Foot & Howe, 1998).

Prior studies dealing with PAL, which entails students learning from their peers, have focused primarily in areas dealing with medical and dental students (e.g., Bennett et al., 2018; Roberts et al., 2018), rather than ESL students. In terms of PAL, the literature is insufficient when dealing with ESL classroom environments. Thus, there is an incomplete view on how PAL can cultivate either English grammar or writing skills. An influential factor in this study was Rensing et al.'s (2016) study wherein a board game-based PAL study was utilized that encompassed a 6-step process: (a) idea generation, (b) drafting, (c) reading, (d) editing, (e) best copy, and (f) evaluating. The present study did not utilize board games; however, it was centrally based on this 6-step process. As already established, ample PAL research completed in fields associated with medical and dental students has already been done. However, PAL entails a seamless relationship between formal and informal learning environments, and there is incomplete data on PAL when integrating it with ESL learning.

The purpose of this study was to answer the following research questions:

1. Did the English academic writing skills of participants (dependent variable) of a PAL center (independent variable) develop significantly more than those of participants in the control group?
2. Did the English grammar skills of participants (dependent variable) of a PAL center (independent variable) develop significantly more than those of participants in the control group?
3. How did participants and SPMs respond to the PAL center (based on results of the participant focus group)?

More specifically, this research had three objectives:

1. To examine whether student involvement in a PAL center could help develop academic writing skills of undergraduate students in an international college in Thailand.
2. To examine whether student involvement in a PAL center could help develop the English grammar skills of undergraduate students in an international college in Thailand.
3. To analyze the response of the participants and SPMs to the PAL center where the 10-week study took place.

Knowledge produced from this study potentially should enable teachers to successfully establish a PAL center at their schools and integrate it into their ESL learning environment.

The remainder of this article is arranged as follows: First, a conceptual framework is established supporting the participants' involvement in the PAL center. Next, the methodology utilized to gauge the hypothesized effects of study is explained. The findings of the study are then given, followed by a conclusion and directions for future research.

## **Review of Literature**

### ***Theoretical Framework***

The theoretical framework for this study is based on the two key elements listed below:

#### ***Collaborative Learning Theory***

Being a by-product of behaviorism and modern cognitive psychology (Wang, 2011), the formulation of Collaborative Learning Theory (CLT) had very prominent psychologists involved in its establishment, such as Vygotsky, Piaget and John Dewey (Alzahrani, 2016). CLT permits learners to be dynamic and to formulate and decipher their own information acquisition process (Usta & Ayas, 2018). It encourages students to combine information they have with newly acquired information by means of inquiring, scrutinizing, and deciphering (Çimer & Coskun, 2018).

### *Peer Feedback*

Peer feedback (PF) allows students to better comprehend and adapt their written compositions (Saeed et al., 2018), as PF is “a learning strategy in which learners work together and comment on one another’s work or performance and provide feedback on strengths, weaknesses, and suggestions for improvement” (Loan, 2017, p. 253). In short, PF is yet another resource available to educators for their students to utilize in both formal and informal settings.

### ***Previous PAL Studies***

As previously mentioned, there has been ample research done in the area of medical and dental fields that has produced fruitful results (e.g., Bennett et al., 2018; Roberts et al., 2018). According to a study involving medical students, Usman & Jamil (2019) concluded that PAL schemes can be beneficial for both students and SPMS. For students, 65–75% of them found that the PAL scheme was more advantageous than typical classroom learning, whereas 62% of the SPMS believed that their mentoring responsibilities were positive. Furthermore, 70–80% of the SPMS came to the conclusion that, as a result of mentoring students in the program, they had developed a belief in their teaching abilities.

Although limited, there have been a few studies in ESL that have produced interesting results. Puranik and colleagues (2017) came to the conclusion that improvements in English writing skills could be obtained by utilizing a PAL scheme. The group receiving the PAL treatment showed significantly improved English writing skills over the control group. In a separate study, Moebius (2015) came to the conclusion that a PAL center writing program could be beneficial in preparing students for college level writing.

### ***PAL Benefits and Limitations***

There are various benefits to a PAL (Bennett et al., 2018). According to Sevenhuysen et al. (2016), there is ample proof that PAL programs can develop knowledge, belief in oneself, and communication skills, although proactive planning, backing, and assistance is vital in order to reach these goals. In addition, Jellison and colleagues (2017) stated that PAL fosters the elements of collaboration, assistance and education—all elements that result in an environment of acceptance across various borders with constructive and enjoyable outcomes.

Conversely, PAL also can have some limitations. According to McMaster et al. (2006), PAL is not beneficial for everyone. Furthermore, as Bugaj et al. (2019) mentioned, there are size limitations in such an approach, due to the number of students who can be involved in a PAL at one time.

## **Methods**

### ***Participants***

The study was conducted at an international college in Pathum Thani, Thailand. The participants were 66 first and second-year students enrolled in an intermediate English course with a Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) level of B1 or equivalent. The study also included 30 SPMS registered in an advanced English course with a CEFR level of B2 or equivalent.

### ***Procedures***

After receiving ethical approval for this study, the researcher first held mandatory training for all the peer-mentors. As mentioned in the introduction section, this study utilized a quasi-experimental mixed methodology. In order to limit bias, the researcher was not the teacher of the participating students. Therefore, it was decided to make use of two already separated groups of students for the purposes of the study: 30 participants were placed in the experimental group, and 36 students were assigned as the control group. The two groups then completed a sample International English Language Testing System (IELTS) pre-test. The study content for the two groups of students was identical; the only difference was that the experimental group was tasked with attending a PAL center for a 10-week program. During the 10-week treatment stage, each participant was paired up with an

SPM, and for each session they went through the 6-step process outlined in the introduction section: (a) idea generation, (b) drafting, (c) reading, (d) editing, (e) best copy, and (f) evaluating. This process was repeated until the SPM believed the participant's writing was at a satisfactory level (CEFR B2 level). After the completion of the 10-week program, both groups were required to complete a sample IELTS post-test.

Finally, 13 participants were randomly selected (through a lottery system) to participate in a 2-hour focus group. Seven were students who came to the PAL center to receive help with their English grammar and writing skills, and six were SPMs. The difference in the number of students and SPMs in the focus group reflected the total distribution of the participants of the study: 66 students (an aggregate of the control and experimental groups) and 30 SPMs. The focus group questions were divided as follows: (a) analysis of the participants' feedback to the university's Seamless Language Center, (b) benefits of the PAL center, (c) disadvantages of the PAL center, (d) potential improvements that could affect the PAL center, and (e) analysis of the participants' recommendations for the PAL center. The participant focus group responses were video-recorded, and the information was transcribed later. These results were kept confidential, and only the researcher had access to them.

### **Research Instruments**

The instruments used to collect data in this study consisted of the following items: (a) sample IELTS writing pre- and post-tests (Kaplan, 2016), (b) grammar pre- and post-tests (Hopkins & Cullen, 2006), and (c) a student focus group.

### **Results**

#### **Analysis of the Sample IELTS Writing Tests**

All the participants of the study took a sample IELTS pre-test prior to the collection of any data. These tests were analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS). The results revealed that both the IELTS pre-test ( $p = .079$ ) and the grammar pre-test ( $p = .207$ ) scores were not significantly different. This finding indicated that both the control and the experimental groups had comparable English grammar and writing skills at the study's outset.

After completion of the treatment and the 10-week study, all participants took a sample IELTS post-test. Subsequently, the quantitative data from the sample IELTS post-tests were analyzed using SPSS. The results are shown in Table 1. The control group showed a mean score lower than the experimental group; the difference was significant at the .01 level. This indicated that the experimental group's academic English writing skills were superior to those of the control group.

**Table 1.** Development of Participant Writing Skills

Group	<i>N</i>	Mean	Std. Deviation	<i>p</i> -value
1	36	5.78	1.22	.01
2	30	7.25	0.86	

#### **Analysis of Grammar Tests**

In a similar manner, all participants took a grammar post-test after the treatment was completed. The quantitative data from the grammar post-tests were then analyzed using SPSS. The results of the analysis are presented in Table 2. The mean score of the control group was close to, but lower than, that of the experimental group. However, analysis showed that the difference was not statistically different.

**Table 2.** The Development of Participant Grammar Skills

Group	<i>N</i>	Mean	Std. Deviation	<i>p</i> -value
1	33	38.91	7.05	.71
2	29	39.62	8.01	

### **Focus Group**

Five questions were posed to members of the focus group. Their responses are presented under the headings highlighted in the Methods section.

#### *Feedback on Appropriateness*

After careful analysis of the participant feedback regarding the PAL center, three main points were raised by study participants: (a) helpfulness of the SPMs, (b) new experiences, and (c) felt improvement or gained knowledge.

Of the participants in the focus group, 92% stated that the SPMs were helpful. In the case of this study, the mentors were certainly qualified people, but they were also senior students who had developed advanced English language skills and had already successfully passed the required English courses in which the participants were enrolled. In terms of the SPMs being helpful, the dominant theme brought up by the focus group pertained to the element of collaborative learning. A few students stated that working one-on-one with their SPM was a refreshing experience, one in which they could always learn something new, and through which they could develop skills such as accurate pronunciation.

The second topic discussed by 54% of the focus group participants pertained to the ability to engage in new academic experiences on campus. Participants conveyed their feelings of pleasure in shared learning in the context of an enjoyable environment. All of these factors are basic elements of CLT—being able to synthesize one's existing knowledge with the awareness that it is newly attained in order to gain a better understanding of a particular topic. Another participant asserted that the ability to practice English grammar and writing skills were the benefits received from attending the PAL center. Finally, a few students were complementary about the creation of a socio-cultural experience in a favorable environment which resulted in the ability to develop new friendships both with SPMs and with classmates.

The final topic that was discussed by 38% of focus group participants was the acquisition of knowledge or self-improvement. A few participants stated that they felt their English grammar and pronunciation had improved, and this cognition was in line with the study's theoretical framework, which was based on the belief that peer feedback is a vital element. Another student claimed an exponential overall improvement in English skills. While the present study focused only on grammar and writing, it is understandable that other areas of English abilities could be augmented via interactions between participants and the SPMs because of the efficacy of PF. Lastly, a few other participants felt their writing skills had developed and, as stated earlier, experimental group participants were able to improve their academic English writing skills significantly more than those in the control group.

#### *Benefits of the PAL Center*

A substantial 46% of the focus group claimed that working collaboratively with their SPM or working in a social constructivist environment with their classmates at the center helped to better their pronunciation, writing, or grammar skills. A significant 31% of the focus group believed that PF provided a great advantage to them, which is in line with Kunwongse's (2013) assertion. As also stated earlier, 15% of the focus group claimed an increased awareness of deficiencies in their overall English skills. Finally, a focus group SPM claimed that being a mentor also aided in the development of their English skills. SPMs who were able to realize their own English deficiencies were able to improve them through the act of mentoring under-classmen.

#### *Disadvantages of the PAL Center*

Not all feedback regarding the SPMs was positive. A couple of participants, while acknowledging the benefits of the study, were critical of some SPMs. The main complaint was that some participants were more proficient in English than some SPMs. Another area of dissatisfaction related to the lack of motivation of a few SPMs. Instead of a particular SPM approaching a participant, the participant had to approach the SPM. Another participant claimed that the assigned SPM corrected mistakes, but was unable to explain the rationale when asked for more information about the error.

Another reported disadvantage indicated by a few focus group members was the atmosphere of the PAL center. Since some participants had created socio-cultural bonds, they apparently decided to ignore scheduled times to come to the PAL center, and would arrive with their friends. Although this experience may have created a bond for the participants, it created a problem for the SPMs, as one SPM would often have to simultaneously handle five or six participants alone.

#### *Improvements Sought by Participants*

All the focus group members wanted a few of the SPMs to improve. [This deficiency could result from the fact that mentoring at the PAL center was a requirement for the English reading and writing course in which the upper-classmen were enrolled at the time.] In short, the focus group believed that SPMs should have been uniformly energetic and friendly.

#### *Participant Recommendations for the Seamless Language Center*

All the students were clear in asserting that they would recommend the PAL center to their fellow classmates. There were two main reasons attributed to their recommendation of the PAL center to their friends: 92% of the focus group members claimed that the PAL center was beneficial to the development of their English language skills, whether reading, writing, listening, or speaking; and 23% believed the PAL center to be an excellent place to develop friendships outside of the classroom, thus creating socio-cultural relationships.

### **Discussion**

In response to the research questions posed, this study found that academic English writing skills can be improved significantly through utilization of a PAL center. This finding is congruent with studies indicating that a PAL center writing program can be beneficial for underperforming students (Aprizawati & Satria, 2016). Peer feedback can be used as a fundamental aspect of writing improvement. A number of benefits can be gained by using this approach. These include improved abilities to revise work, development of abilities to focus on a global level in writing as against a more restricted level, provided a greater awareness of the need to write to a specific audience, and boosted confidence (Kunwongse, 2013). The addition of a peer feedback module to teacher feedback has been shown, in a Taiwanese study, to improve student performance not only in content, but also in organization, grammar, and style (Tai et al., 2015).

The PAL center used in this study integrated the formal classroom language learning environment with an informal language learning environment. Overall, this framework was shown to be beneficial in the development of the academic English writing skills of participating students. Although the methodology was successful, the participant focus group promoted the idea of using more technology in the PAL center at the conclusion of the study.

The betterment of grammar skills was included in the agenda for this study on the basis that grammar is an integral aspect of the writing process. The study's results suggested that the experimental group's grammar skills developed more than those of the control group; however, this improvement was not statistically significant. According to the public version of the official IELTS rubric (British Council, n.d.), grammar is a part of the assessment, but so are three additional factors: task achievement, coherence and cohesion, and lexical resources. Given this information, perhaps all four components should be analyzed in future PAL writing studies. This would involve using a different experimental format.

Other benefits might also be anticipated. It is almost inevitable that English pronunciation skills could develop in a PAL center as the participants and the SPMs are required to work collaboratively to develop an essay outline. Participating in a PAL environment allowed students to be more reflective with regard to their English language skills, and made them reassess specific areas of improvement. Last but not least, by working in a social constructivist environment within a PAL center, the participants forged socio-cultural bonds and developed friendships with their SPMs, as predicted by Kunwongse (2013). In arranging the mentoring schedule, the researcher made every effort to create a one-on-one plan between participants and SPMs. However, toward the end of the study, a lot of

participants ignored their schedules and took to arriving as a group at the PAL center after their classes had ended. This behavior signaled that the semi-synchronization of formal and informal learning environments augmented the ability of students to develop peer relationships.

The reactions recorded by the learning participants and the SPMs to the PAL center were positive overall. Nevertheless, the parity of desired qualities in all SPMs is a common factor that needs the most attention. Prior to collecting data, the researcher conducted a training program for all the SPMs to clarify their duties, expectations, and the roles they should play in the mentoring of underclassmen. In addition, it was also evident that some SPMs did not possess the English abilities needed to mentor participants with an intermediate level of English proficiency, even though they had successfully completed all the necessary English courses.

### **Recommendations**

The participant focus group results made it amply clear that more attention must be focused on the actual training of SPMs. Moreover, it is highly recommended that all SPMs in future studies should be required to take an English proficiency test to ensure a CEFR score of B2 or higher. Finally, instead of the researcher working directly with 30 SPMs, it is highly advisable to institute a student management team to oversee the day-to-day operations of the PAL center. In this scenario, the researcher would work directly with the student management team, the student management team would work directly with the SPMs, and the SPMs would work directly with the study participants.

It may be worthwhile for future studies to assimilate technology into the mix to create a foundation of connectivity between the two (formal and informal) learning environments. A truly seamless language learning experience can be envisioned in such a scenario. Seamless learning is an emerging, yet promising, field that entails the development of knowledge within the aggregate of four distinct elements: environment, time, technology, and a communal atmosphere (Looi et al., 2019). Fundamentally, a seamless learning environment should integrate formal and informal language learning environments, and provide a smooth transition between the two (Wong & Looi, 2019). Wong and Looi (2019) propose ten characteristics for utilizing technology in such unified learning methodologies to facilitate a harmonious transition within a mobile seamless learning framework. According to these scholars, the learning environment must: (a) consist of both formal and informal learning, (b) embrace personalized and social learning, (c) be able to be utilized across time, (d) be able to be utilized across locations, (e) be capable of providing ubiquitous knowledge access, (f) utilize both physical and digital worlds, (g) offer a combined use of multiple device types, (h) allow for the continuous switching between multiple learning tasks, (i) allow knowledge synthesis for better understanding, and (j) be able to accommodate multiple pedagogical or learning activity models. If adopted, such a framework would allow educators better access to track the progress of the writing skills of their students, and teachers could then take proactive steps to achieve further enhancement of their students' skills.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The findings of the study were based on the utilization of a PAL center at an international college in Thailand, and certain limitations must be acknowledged. First, the facilities within the PAL center were limited in size. Thus, the physical space itself restricted the number of students that could be allowed to be accommodated at the center. Second, the absence of a student management team for the PAL center made the day-to-day operations of the center somewhat problematic. Lastly, only 66 students participated in this study, and only 30 participants utilized the PAL center.

### **Conclusion**

An increasing number of educational institutions across the world are looking for ways to curtail costs even as they raise their academic standards. Thus, educators are always searching for innovative techniques, strategies, methods, and approaches that are suitable to the needs of their students. Such innovative means are highly desired in Thailand, where higher educational institutions face declining

enrolment rates because birth rates are declining and many students choose to study abroad. To cut costs, therefore, many universities are reconsidering blended learning, flipped classrooms, and other such innovative options. The findings of this study underscore the benefits of establishing a PAL center at educational institutions. Thus, they also provide another distinct path through which higher educational institutions can align formal and informal language learning environments, and facilitate a seamless transition between the two contexts.

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