

The Application of PAL to English Exercise Classes in Senior High Schools

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Abstract: The implementation of Peer-assisted Learning (hereinafter referred to as PAL) in English exercise classes aims at improving students' learning effects through converting the traditional teaching and learning ways. In this research, the results show that after employing PAL, students can develop good learning habits to promote their English learning. Their attitudes towards English exercise classes are positive. They can form an active mutual-aid spirit, especially help-seeking awareness and mutual help ability. What is more, their competence of language use is improved at last. In short, PAL can be successfully applied to English exercise classes to improve students' learning.

1. Introduction

As the essential component of senior English course, exercise classes are indispensable and important for students to review and consolidate language points, and improve their competence of language use. Hence, PAL is applied to exercise classes. The implementation of Peer-Assisted Learning (hereinafter referred to as PAL) in English exercise classes aims at improving students' learning effects through converting the traditional teaching and learning ways.

2. Overview of PAL

2.1 A Brief History of PAL

PAL first appeared as a technical term in the paper created by Alexander, L.T. etc. in 1974. However, the ideological origin of PAL could be traced back to Ancient Greek Period. Sokrates (469 B.C.-399 B.C.), Platon (427 B.C.-347 B.C.), Aristoteles, (384 B.C.-322 B.C.) and their colleagues develop their debating in form of peer learning. In late 18th century, "monitorial system", a method of Youth Teaching Youth, was put forward by Andrew Bell and Joseph Lancaster to make up the shortage of teachers and funds. To some extent, "monitorial system" is the rudiment of PAL (Wang T. Y., Xia Z. L. & Zhu M. Y., 2005: 42-59 & 152-153).

2.2 Theoretical Studies of PAL

Hitherto, many scholars have concluded the basic theoretical construction and the application of PAL from several aspects.

2.2.1 Definition

In 1998, from the perspective of students' learning activity, English Professor Topping and American Doctor Ehly gave a definition of PAL:

PAL is the acquisition of knowledge and skill through active helping and supporting among status equals or matched companions. PAL is people from similar social grouping, who are not professional teachers, helping each other to learn and by so doing, learning themselves. (18)

It is clearly to see that "PAL has a broad connotation, including peer tutoring, peer modeling, peer education, peer counseling, peer monitoring, and peer assessment" Zuo H. & Huang F. Q., 2008: 17).

2.2.2 Ways of Pairing

In PAL, most frequent used ways of pairing are Class-Wide Peer Tutoring (CWPT) and Reciprocal Peer Tutoring (RPT). According to Class-Wide Peer Tutoring, students in class are all paired based on teaching objects and these pairs can be divided into two big groups to compete between them (Greenwood, C., 1997: 54).

In order to help students with low academic achievements, Reciprocal Peer Tutoring emphasizes that learning must follow a fixed structure. After being paired, all students must attend an introductory conference to discuss how to help each other and then teamwork is assigned including setting common target and discussing the way of cooperation. Finally, learning can be developed with the guidance of mutual help plan.

2.2.3 Implementation Procedures

The basic implementation steps of PAL are summarized in the following fig. 1:

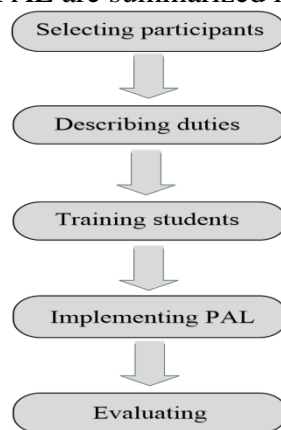


Fig. 1 Implementation steps of PAL

3. The implementation of PAL

3.1 Research Questions

There are two specific research questions are presented as follows:

- (1) What are the problems of students' learning in traditional exercise classes?
- (2) What are the effects of implementing PAL in exercise classes on students' spirit of mutual assistance, learning attitudes, learning habits and students' competence of language using?

3.2 Subjects

Participants involved in the research are 63 students in Class S Grade One in No.1 middle school Tianshui. During educational practice, it is the class that is taught by researcher. Before the research, the conventional teaching method was adopted in it. From April to June 2015, PAL was applied to exercise classes by researcher.

3.3 Instruments

3.3.1 Questionnaires

(1) Pre-questionnaire

The questionnaire (I) includes 16 items from 6 dimensions: classroom teaching (Questions 1, 2 & 3), students' mutual-aid spirit (Questions 4, 5 & 6), students' attitudes towards exercise classes (Questions 7, 8 & 9), students' learning habits (Questions 10, 11 & 12), students' competence of knowledge use (Questions 13, 14) and students' expectations (Questions 15 & 16).

(2) Post-questionnaire

Questionnaire (II) is used for investigating students' spirit of mutual assistance, learning attitudes and habits, language use competence after the implementation of PAL in English exercise classes.

3.3.2 Tests

Pre- and post-test papers are used to make a comparison to certify students' competence improvements of language use. The pre-and post-test papers are all edited by English teachers from Grade one.

3.4 Procedures

On the basis of the research design, the application of PAL has been carried out in senior English exercise classes for three months. The process includes preparations for the research, classroom teaching and assessment of teaching effects.

3.4.1 Mutual-aid Group Building

Based on the features of PAL, the first thing—building a mutually beneficial learning community in form of paring must be taken into consideration to promote students' sociality development. In class, a suitable companion is the precondition of developing PAL activity. Teachers must highly trust students and pair them reasonably to provide opportunities for bringing the superiority of student-student interaction into full play. In learning activity, students in one mutual-help group are mentor and mentee respectively and the role of each other can be exchanged at any time.

Before building the mutual-aid groups, 63 students in the class are divided into several groups by their headteacher on the basis of their scores of Senior High School Entrance Examination. There are 11 groups altogether, including 10 groups with 6 students of each and one group with 3 students is an exception. Students of high-, medium- and low-achieving are distributed into each group equally. However, if these 63 students are repaired with each other, there are almost 30 groups in the class. Obviously, the quantity of groups is excessive. Hence, without disturbing the previous forms of each group and influencing the teaching order, students' pairing is carried out, which is explained in detail as follows: on the basis of the previous grouping, a continue pairing for the 6 people in one big group is put into practice in accordance with students' English proficiency,

learning ability, character and communicative ability and so on. At last, one big group with six students contains three small mutual-aid groups with two students of each. The rest group with three people isn't paired any more that these three students learn together in the activity. The big groups are numbered from 1 to 11 and each small group names A, B and C. Headman of each big group is elected by group members, who takes responsibility of assisting teacher to take charge of their group members' behaviors in PAL activity (See fig. 2).

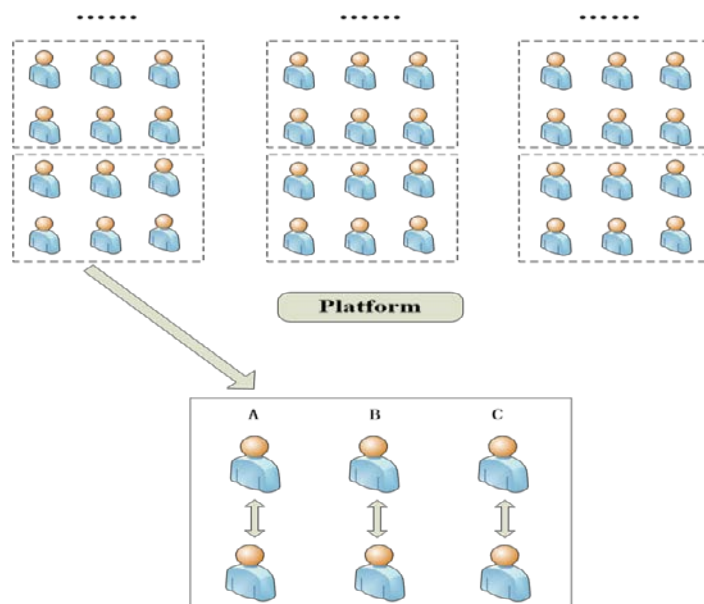


Fig. 2 Way of Grouping

3.4.2 Students Training

At the very start, teacher announces the requirements: (1) in mutual-aid groups, students must show their respect to partners and treat them equally, although their learning proficiency is different. (2) Students must express their opinions bravely, handle divergence of views appropriately and learn empathy with others to promote group unity. The task assigned by teacher must be finished carefully without shielding and monopolizing between group members. (3) Before PAL activity, students must think questions on their feet and have their own understanding towards the problems. Thinking independently is the foundation of cooperation. (4) Cooperation not only refers to discussing and participating energetically, but also indicates that students could learn from the companion with patient listening. (5) The PAL groups are the communities for English learning. Group members need to unite together and are responsible for each other to fulfill their common goals. Teachers should check and evaluate the result of group activity as a whole. (6) Students must clearly know their roles in PAL. The big group leaders are the assistants to help teacher manage students' activity, whose main duties are supervising and urging learners to develop the activity from the aspects of their thoughts, behaviors, discipline and learning. Group members must comply with and report to the leaders in time. In small groups with two students, mentors have the responsibility to teach mentees well. And, mentees should listen to mentors' carefully.

Next, how to help peer is the core in PAL and directly influences the quality and effects of PAL. The pre-investigation finds that most students have difficulties in explaining exercises to peers though they could answer the questions themselves. Therefore, the way of thinking and problem-solving skills for diverse types of exercises are instructed via setting an example by teachers and imitating by students more than once. After making the agreement, teacher make a

summary on how to explain questions and students know the way to teach their peers.

3.4.3 Classroom Teaching

(1) Pre-class

Before class, teacher assigns exercises and requires students to finish them individually. Meanwhile, students are asked to review related language points for adequate preparation of the coming class.

(2) While-class

In class, both teacher and students must do their own things carefully.

On one hand, teacher always does the following things: declare answers of these exercises assigned before class and count the wrong questions. Briefly introduce the way of developing PAL activity and the skills of explaining exercises. Monitor students' activity and instruct them timely when the problems happened. Ask each group leader to speak out their problems, then, others answer them if they know how to do. Teacher makes supplements at last. Help students summarize the learning points with these exercises. Present the new exercises designed with the language points to make a consolidation.

On the other hand, students must work at these exercises arranged by teacher individually before class. In class, students must do the things step by step based on the teacher's guidance.

(3) Post-class

After class, constant evaluation is done by teacher and students. For one thing, students with their companion in one group evaluate their performance in PAL activity altogether to monitor and reflect their behaviors by themselves. For another thing, teacher reflects the effect of class teaching and each group's learning through class observation in order that the problems could be found out in time and solutions are proposed to adjust the latter classes. What the teacher notices most is that the assessment is taken to the mutual-aid groups as a whole.

As the most critical stage of the whole research, the classroom teaching process is summarized after the implementation as follows:

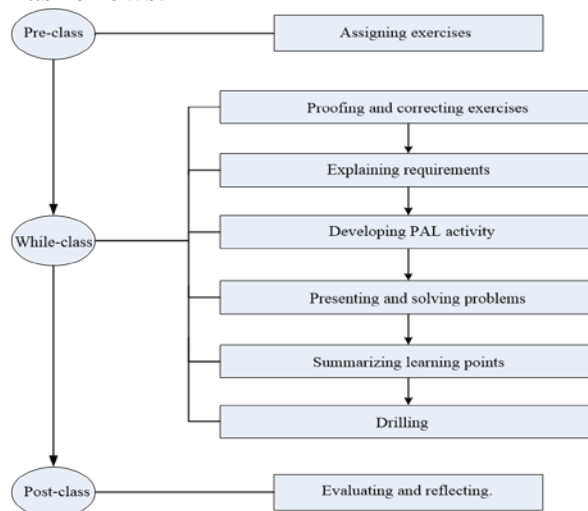


Fig. 3 Teaching process of PAL

4. Conclusions

This research provides a new method for senior English exercise classes. During the implementation, most students hold positive attitudes towards PAL. Classroom atmosphere is relaxed and joyful. The research objects of improving students' learning on the aspects of

mutual-aid spirit, attitudes, learning habits as well as language use are basically fulfilled. It is proved that PAL can be successfully applied to English exercise classes and can be consulted by senior English teachers to put into effect in English exercise classes teaching.

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