

Peer Coaching as Preparation for Study Abroad among Japanese University Students

日本人大学生の留学準備としての Peer Coaching

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Key words:

相互指導、留学、大学生、言語学習

peer coaching, study abroad, university students, language learning

Abstract

This study describes the peer-coaching component of a semester-long class at a university in Tokyo, Japan. Students engaged in peer coaching prior to studying abroad in an effort to improve confidence and preparedness. Students were given instruction on how to conduct peer coaching that focused on three key elements: mirroring, asking questions, and moving toward action. Once familiar with peer coaching methodology, students engaged in twenty-minute peer coaching sessions seven times during the semester. The impact of peer coaching on participating students is presented in the form of qualitative feedback. Students' reports indicate several ways in which they benefited from peer coaching.

1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to describe a peer coaching component (PC) of a study abroad preparation course. PC was designed to help a group of university students in Japan feel more confident and prepared before studying abroad. The objective of this exploratory study was to investigate how basic coaching techniques might be taught to university students and whether these techniques could be used to develop confidence and preparedness through in-class peer coaching sessions and consequent actions taken by students outside the classroom.

2. Background

2. 1. Peer Coaching in Education

In the 1980s, the term peer coaching began being used to describe a way for teachers to support other teachers, particularly when implementing new strategies encountered in trainings (Showers & Joyce, 1996). Showers and Joyce reported that, prior to the advent of peer coaching, the rate of implementation for new classroom strategies was quite low. They write about the power of peer coaching to radically increase the likelihood that teachers will implement new programs in their classrooms.

2. 2. Coaching for Students

A number of universities in the United States have hired outside assistance to provide professional coaching for a particular segment of their student populations. The primary benefit of such a coaching program for the university is increased student retention. Northeastern University, for instance, reported that students with coaches returned for a second year 15% more often than students without coaches (Schworm, 2007).

Campbell and Gardner (2005) examined the impact of professional life coaching on students in their final year of high school. Their findings suggested that students who received coaching enjoyed a higher degree of motivation and a greater ability to set goals for themselves. Green, Grant and Rynsaardt (2007) showed that female high school students who met with teachers trained in coaching techniques gained in measures of cognitive hardiness and hope.

2. 3. Peer Coaching for Students

Ladyshefsky (2006) found peer coaching to be highly beneficial to a group of postgraduate business students as they developed managerial skills related to both their

workplaces and academic studies. Short, Kinman and Baker (2010) conducted a study indicating that third-year university students who participated in a peer-coaching program demonstrated a greater ability to manage stress than a control group during a particularly demanding exam period. Students were taught coaching techniques and engaged in five peer-coaching sessions prior to taking their exams. Whereas the stress levels of the control group rose, those of participants in peer coaching held steady.

2. 4. Definitions of Coaching

Because the word coaching is used in a myriad of contexts, it is useful to establish some definitions that apply to PC. Grant (2001) distinguished coaching from a number of other helping relationships, including therapy, mentoring and training. He then presented the following definition:

Personal or life coaching is a solution-focused, results-oriented systematic process in which the coach facilitates the enhancement of the coachee's life experience and performance in various domains (as determined by the coachee), and fosters the self-directed learning and personal growth of the coachee. (p. 8)

The following definition, from a person-centered approach to coaching, is also useful in relation to PC:

Coaching psychology aims to facilitate optimal functioning, to help people discover what they want in life, and to help people generate their own solutions for how to achieve what they want. (Joseph, 2005, p.3)

PC defines coaching in a similar manner, as will be seen below, by emphasizing that the coachee, not the coach, determines the areas of focus and that movement toward solutions to challenges is essential. It should be noted here that, while sharing these general concepts with life coaching, PC is much more focused and limited in its scope.

3. Procedure

3. 1. Teaching Context

PC was implemented in two different classes, once in 2009 and once in 2010. There were 16 students in each class. This paper will describe both years. PC was part of a semester-long study abroad preparation course at Rikkyo University in Tokyo, Japan. The

class, which met for 90 minutes twice a week, was designed to help second-year College of Intercultural Communication students prepare to study abroad in English-speaking countries by focusing on developing listening skills. In class, students watched short academic lectures on DVD and then engaged in a variety of comprehension and discussion activities based on the lecture content. The course and coaching sessions were conducted in English. All students were native speakers of Japanese whose English levels ranged from intermediate to advanced-intermediate. Though data was not gathered from participants in this study regarding anxiety related to studying abroad, there is indication that College of Intercultural Communication students have experienced some degree of anxiety prior to departure. Areas of concern included, for example, making friends, communicating with host families and understanding the culture of the host country (Schnickel, Martin & Maruyama, 2009, p. 111).

3. 2. Peer Coaching Sessions

Students had seven coaching sessions with the same partner during the semester. On occasion, absences made it necessary to pair students differently or even to have them work as a triad. To the greatest extent possible, they were paired based on their study abroad destinations. For instance, if two students planned to go to Portland, Oregon, in the United States, they might be asked to work together as peer coaches. The rationale was that students attending the same study abroad school or schools in the same country or region might enjoy an additional benefit, such as sharing knowledge about a university or region; however, this geographic pairing was in no way essential to the full PC experience, and not all students were paired in this manner.

3. 3. Introducing Peer Coaching to Japanese University Students

Students were introduced to PC early in the semester by listening to a description of the general concept of coaching and by examining some typical outcomes that might benefit them: receiving individualized attention, creating time in a busy schedule to focus on study abroad, taking positive steps outside the classroom to become more prepared, and feeling more confident about study abroad. Students then received a two-page handout describing PC and its key features. Here is the introductory paragraph:

Once a week, you will have a peer-coaching meeting with one of your classmates. In these meetings, you will discuss your upcoming study-abroad programs. More specifically, you will work together to ensure that you are as prepared and confident as possible. Together you can look for ways to address questions, concerns or worries that you might have about your time in another country and culture.

After understanding the basic idea of PC, students read the definition of PC that applied to the work they would do in class:

In this context, *coaching* is a way of working with people that helps them accomplish goals; however, the coach does not tell the coachee (the person receiving coaching) what to do or how to do it. Instead, the coach recognizes that each coachee is the expert on his or her own life and that the best solution to any problem will most likely come from within the coachee.

3. 4. Key Features of Peer Coaching

With this established, students became familiar with the three key features of PC: mirroring, asking questions and moving toward action, as described below.

3. 4. 1. Mirroring

In the work of Carl Rogers, "reflection" or "reflective listening" is a essential component. When reflecting, the therapist attempts to accurately restate or reformulate what the client has said, being attentive both to meaning and emotion. In 1986, Rogers noted that he preferred the terms "Testing Understandings" or "Checking Perceptions" to the term "Reflection of Feeling," which had become associated with his work (as cited in Kirschenbaum & Henderson, 1989, p. 128). The reason for this preference is that the first two terms provide the questioner with a purpose whereas the latter term suggests only an act without an explicit motivation. Whitmore (2002) describes the importance of mirroring, which he terms "reflecting back," in the coaching process (p. 50). In PC, students were made aware of dual purposes for mirroring: confirming the accuracy of the coach's understanding of the coachee's utterance and allowing the coachee to see himself or herself from a different perspective – as if in a mirror.

Costa and Garmston (2003) suggest that "authentic paraphrasing" (mirroring) creates neurological and chemical responses in the brain that allow for deeper mental processing. They state that authentic paraphrasing effectively tells the brain that it is in a safe environment and that no survival reaction is needed.

About *mirroring*, students read:

A coach can help the coachee by acting as a mirror, by reflecting images and perceptions back to the coachee. This serves two important purposes: 1) the coachee can see himself or herself more clearly; 2) the coach can make sure she or he understands the coachee.

3. 4. 2. Asking Questions

Whitmore (2002) has stressed the importance of asking appropriate questions in the coaching process, noting that, "asking closed questions saves people from having to think. Asking open questions causes them to think for themselves" (p. 44). For Whitmore, this "thinking for oneself" leads ideally to awareness and responsibility, two essential components in his approach to coaching. Though not referring specifically to asking questions, Rogers (1961) has described a personal belief about the nature of true learning: "I have come to feel that the only learning which significantly influences behavior is self discovered, self-appropriated learning" (p. 176). In PC, it was suggested that asking good questions might lead the coachee to new levels of self awareness and self discovery, which might in turn lead to a greater degree of personal responsibility about preparing to study abroad.

About *asking questions*, students read:

When a coach is truly interested in helping the coachee explore a situation, she will become curious and ask good questions to help both the coachee and herself understand the situation better.

3. 4. 3. Moving Toward Action

With Rogers's statement in mind, it might be said that the goal of each PC session was to acquire some degree of self-discovered learning, which would influence behavior in a positive manner. In PC, changes in behavior often included taking steps to become more prepared for studying abroad or, more subtly, thinking about and seeing oneself as more capable of having a successful study abroad experience. Whitmore (2002) has stressed the importance of following the coaching process through to the execution of a specific action determined by the coachee: "The purpose of the final phase of the coaching sequence is to convert a discussion into a decision. It is the construction of an action plan to meet a requirement that has been clearly specified" (p. 88). Without an action component, students might engage exclusively in theoretical or hypothetical discussions about studying abroad. Grant (2003) has shown that excessive self-reflection may in fact work against the accomplishment of goals (p. 260). Thus, in designing PC, it was thought that the action component had the potential to transform what might otherwise remain merely an interesting classroom activity into an experience with a deeper and more far-reaching impact on the lives of participating students.

About *moving toward action*, students read:

The coach always wants to help the coachee accomplish goals, solve problems and

increase confidence. However, again, the coach avoids telling the coachee what to do. Asking questions is a useful way to find the most effective course of action.

3. 4. 4. Simplicity of the PC Concept

In presenting PC to students, the intention was to create a description that they could grasp easily and utilize quickly – to present a set of simple, actionable guidelines that would become transparent, enabling students to do the work without feeling concerned about whether or not they were doing it correctly. At the same time, it seemed desirable to have guidelines that would allow students to quickly demonstrate and confirm to themselves and to the instructor that they were engaged in coaching as defined in the context of the class.

3. 5. Sample Peer Coaching Session

To ensure they had grasped the concept of PC, students were asked to read and discuss the fictional PC session presented below. This admittedly simplistic and unrealistic dialogue was created to ensure that students using their second language could easily grasp the three key elements of PC.

1. Coach: So, what's on your mind today?
2. Coachee: Well, I'm really nervous about a test I have next week. I can't sleep or eat.
3. Coach: Wow, you can't eat? It sounds like you're having a really hard time.
4. Coachee: Yeah, I am.
5. Coach: Do you usually get this nervous before a test?
6. Coachee: No. This is really strange. I don't know what's going on.
7. Coach: Hmmm... That's interesting. It seems like there's something different about this one. What do you think it is?
8. Coachee: Good question. I haven't really thought about it. *(pause)* Wait... I think I know why! My new girlfriend is in the class, too, and I guess I don't want her to think I'm stupid.
9. Coach: So in other words, you're afraid she'll lose interest in you if you don't do well on the test?
10. Coachee: Yes, I think that's right. *(pause)* Wow, I'm really surprised by that.
11. Coach: So what do you think you want to do about it?
12. Coachee: Actually, I have a great idea already. I'm going to suggest that we study together. I'm sure that will help me relax. And also, she and I will both be ready for the test!

13. Coach: Sounds like a great idea!

After reading this, students responded to the following questions: 1) *Was the coach a good listener? Why or why not?* 2) *Did the coach tell the coachee what to do?* 3) *Can you find an example of mirroring?* 4) *Can you find a sentence that indicates the coach was curious?* 5) *Is the coachee going to take action to solve the problem? Explain.*

Having discussed their answers to the questions, students engaged in a group discussion with the instructor to ensure the entire class understood the material. They easily arrived at the intended answers:

- 1) Yes, the coach was a good listener because she demonstrated empathy (turn 3), because she was able to mirror effectively (turn 9), and because she seemed curious about and interested in the coachee's situation (turn 7).
- 2) No, the coach didn't tell the coachee what to do. The coach asked the coachee what he thought would be an appropriate course of action (turn 11).
- 3) Yes, the coach demonstrated mirroring in turn 9.
- 4) Yes, the coach demonstrated curiosity in turn 7.
- 5) Yes, the coachee was going to study for the test with his girlfriend.

3. 6. Peer Coaching: Classroom Procedure

With a basic understanding of PC in mind, students had their first meeting. As in all subsequent PC sessions, students acted both as coach for 10 minutes and as coachee for 10 minutes. In coaching logs, students recorded the topic of each session when in the role of coachee and any actions they took or planned to take in response to a PC session. At the end of the semester, all students would have a complete record of the topics they covered and the actions they took as a result of meeting with their coaches.

PC was the last activity of the class, so there was usually a brief transition period, during which students rearranged themselves in the room. Once students were seated with their PC partners, the instructor guided them to decide who would act as coach first and then asked them to begin. About two minutes before the end of each ten-minute session, the instructor informed them of the time remaining. When the time had elapsed, students were asked to make a smooth transition, meaning, if they were still engaged in an important discussion, they could continue for a few more minutes; if they were ready, students were to exchange roles: coach became coachee and vice versa.

In order to determine how students were experiencing PC, they were asked to submit brief reports. In 2009, students submitted these reports once at midterm and once at the end of the semester. In 2010, students submitted reports at the end of the

semester only. Students also submitted their coaching logs. In addition to collecting students' written work, the instructor observed each PC session, walking around the classroom as students worked. During these times, the instructor did not interfere in students' discussions.

4. Results

The comments presented here have been taken from students' final writing assignments, for which they were to describe the benefits of PC. Though students agreed to have their comments used in this study, it should be noted that the primary objective in giving this assignment was not data collection but rather student learning. It was believed that the benefits of PC would more likely seem real if students took stock of their feelings about the experience. It should also be noted that students did not have a chance to comment on any perceived negative aspects of PC.

Feedback was collected, and salient comments were extracted in order to look for thematic groupings. The following themes emerged: Confidence, Shared Worries, Action and Preparedness, Understanding the Coaching Process, and Improved Language Skills. These categories were not mutually exclusive. Some degree of overlap was often present, such as when a student reported gains in confidence related to improved language skills. For this reason, the percentages below are not precise; rather, they serve to provide a general sense of the data.

4. 1. Confidence

In some instances, a simple shift in perception about study abroad seemed to have taken place. Some students reported that they began looking forward to positive aspects of study abroad rather than dwelling on their concerns. Grant (2003) points to the importance of distinguishing between "self-focused rumination" and movement toward a goal or solution (p. 260). In the cases presented below, working with a coach appeared to have helped students move beyond limiting patterns of worry or shame. Approximately 30% of students reported gains in confidence; this includes the category of *Shared Worries* below.

The first benefit is that my coach encouraged me every time I told her my uneasiness about study abroad. Thanks to her, I [began] looking forward to going to [my study abroad country] , and I began to think about study abroad from [the] positive side. I really care about correctness when I speak English, so I'm ashamed of speaking up in front of people. I talked about that with my [peer coach] . [While] I talked about

my opinion, I felt that I became more ashamed of speaking English if I keep caring about correctness and I refused to [say] my opinion in English in front of people. I noticed that by myself. After that, I tried not to care about correctness, and I tried to think that saying my opinion was a very good action.... In class, I spoke up my opinion. Last week, my friend told me that [he noticed that I'd spoken up in class] because I could not speak up my opinion in the first semester. But now I often try to speak up and my pronunciation is better.

Is it possible to put a space here? These are two separate people.

From peer coaching, two things that I received as benefits were enjoying talking with my classmates in English and importance of not being ashamed. We talked about personal problems about study abroad. It gave me reality and also fun in the conversation. I often laughed. In addition, I don't like to speak in front of many people in English because I don't have much confidence in it. The communication of one-to-one didn't give me any stress. It was very comfortable for me.

4. 2. Shared Worries

Students gained confidence in another distinctive way. In a number of cases, students reported feeling less worried when they realized that their PC partner shared the same worries.

One benefit from peer coaching was that what I worried about was same with other students. I felt that many students worried about the same thing, and then I could feel easy by sharing our feeling.

When I find my friend has the same worries [that I have] , I become better and relieved. So I think both listening to friend's worries and telling my worries are very important and effective.

I was very nervous about studying abroad, especially about lifestyle in foreign country. However, thanks to peer coaching, I could share these worries. That [made] me composed. I [was] able to think calmly.

4. 3. Action and Preparedness

Moving toward action was one of the main components of PC. It was believed that emphasizing the importance of taking action outside the classroom was more likely to result in truer feelings of confidence and preparedness. This aligns with Grant's suggestion (2003) that coaching remain "a results-orientated solution-focused process" (p. 262). All

students who participated in PC reported taking actions as a result of meeting with their peer coaches.

[My coach and I] talked about preparation of English skills for study abroad. We talked about what we should do now. Our discussion result is we have to learn daily English. We do not know English vocabulary for using in daily life. We noticed that when we are sick, we cannot explain our symptoms completely. This is a big problem, so I decided to study English for daily life. After our peer coaching, I went to a bookstore and bought a book for learning that.

I prepared many things [owing to] peer coaching. For example, I made a credit card, and installed Skype on my computer in order to contact with my family or friends from [my study abroad] country. Moreover, I decided to bring souvenirs for my host family.... To prepare for study abroad like this makes me excited and happy.

I worried whether I could catch what American people say because [they] speak English very fast. To solve the problem, I decided to practice listening much harder than ever. So recently, I always listen to English on podcasts in the train on the way home.

4. 4. Understanding the Coaching Process

A number of comments indicated that students did indeed understand the coaching process. Though not specifically requested, these were welcome confirmations. Ladyshevsky (2006) found that the success of a peer-coaching program was based to an extent on participants' understanding of coaching processes and techniques as well as commitment to the coaching relationship. The comments below are included as an indication that students' understanding of PC accords with its design and purpose. More than 20% of students included comments reflecting an understanding of the coaching process.

From peer coaching, I have recognized that giving advice is easy, but reaching self solution needs listening hard to what my coachee says. Because we coaches cannot give advice, we have to think so much [about the coachee] and give a question which leads to self solution. It was [a big responsibility] for coaches to do peer coaching, but when my coachee could solve the problem I also [was pleased] because both of us made an effort to reach an answer.

Through peer coaching, I could learn how to reduce someone's anxieties and also understand it is so important and effective to tell my worries to a friend who is in the same position. I had thought give some advice will be helpful to reduce someone's worries and to solve his or her problem, but in peer coaching we don't say our opinion at all and just try to let him or her find their own answer. This way was very new for me and a little difficult. However, now I think this way makes [the coachee] happy because they can find their own answer by themselves so they can get satisfaction. I think this kind of experiences cheers them up and [creates] a sense of competence.

[With peer coaching,] I can think about things in more detail. If I only think about the question by myself...I couldn't find the solution just because I don't know how to think about it or where to start thinking.... [My coach] could give me some signal to let me know how I can think about the question.

4. 5. Improved Language Skills

As a language activity, PC aligns well with the principles of the communicative approach to language learning as put forward by Mitchell (1994), particularly those related to the centrality of the needs and interests of learners as well as the importance learner responsibility plays in language acquisition (p.39). Improving English skills was not a primary goal of PC though it is a favorable byproduct that, based on student feedback, seems to stem from the fact that working as a pair, as opposed to a group, absolutely requires participation. Moreover, the mirroring component of PC, again based on student feedback, requires careful listening and skillful language use. More than 15% of students reported benefits related to English-language use.

[One benefit of coaching] is the skill of [maintaining] conversation improved because when I start peer coaching, we must talk with my partner at least 10 or 15 minutes. [Maintaining] conversation is not so easy, but when I have many chances to do peer coaching, I got used to [it].

Last year, I couldn't speak English fluently at all, and I knew it, so I didn't speak actively. I always received others' opinions and responded to others' questions. But in peer coaching, I have to speak [even] if I cannot speak English well. And I also [have to] think what kind of question I will give to the coachee. It is not easy for me because I had left [this] role to others. Through peer coaching, I could [develop] my speed of reaction, I think.

[One benefit] is that we can improve speaking skill. In peer coaching, the coachee explains what he is worried about, and the coach tells what the coachee said in other words. So [we] can practice speaking what [the coachee] wants to say.

5. Discussion

It might be asked whether PC is overly simple. On the surface, it may appear that students merely talk together for 20 minutes a week. Indeed, one reason for conducting this exploratory study was to determine if a method as simple as PC could deliver benefits to students planning to study abroad. It is worth mentioning again that PC required only a modest investment of time. In the context of a course with 39 contact hours, the time devoted to PC was the bulk of a ninety-minute class for the introduction and, subsequently, seven twenty-minute sessions for the coaching work.

Based on the feedback presented above, it seems that peer coaching, in an uncomplicated form, can be a viable way to help students prepare to study abroad by taking action and shifting attitudes. PC served to keep study abroad centered in students' fields of vision throughout the semester and supported them in taking simple actions, such as conducting research about their study abroad schools or purchasing items they will need in a timely manner. Beyond such routine tasks, many students took actions tailored to their own lives. These included learning to do housework, reducing dependency on an electronic dictionary, and locating a dance school in the study abroad location.

In addition to these specific actions, and in some cases because of them, some students experienced a less tangible shift in attitude, reporting that they were able to look forward to studying abroad whereas before they had focused more on their fears. Many students simply felt relieved to know that their fears and anxieties about studying abroad were shared by their peers.

Questions might also arise about the abilities of students who have not studied abroad to identify the most important aspects of preparation on which to focus. PC is not and should not be considered a stand-alone predeparture training. It works as one mechanism in a larger community, the College of Intercultural Communication, committed to helping students succeed abroad. PC can provide students with the impetus to seek out other resources within the community. Based on PC sessions, some students decided to visit the department's study abroad office. Others sought the counsel of older students who had already returned from a semester abroad, a type of relationship Murphey (2001) describes as near peer role models.

The following student comment demonstrates how PC can serve as a staging area for

students to plan new community connections:

[Another benefit of peer coaching is that I realized] there were many people who [can] help us. Many other students asked to their seniors and teachers...when they have a question and something worried about studying abroad.... I also want to have advice from seniors and teachers.

Peer coaching could be used to support students in a variety of ways. It might be particularly useful for students facing a significant event, such as studying abroad. Instructor observation indicated that students were highly likely to remain focused on topics related to studying abroad while engaged in PC. Furthermore, the emergence of shared worries as a solid theme in students' comments suggests areas for further inquiry. Specifically, it would be interesting to explore the impact of PC on students who are facing similar transitions or events, such as moving from high school to university or from university to the workforce. As mentioned, Campbell and Gardner (2005) demonstrated that coaching (though not peer coaching) had significant benefits for high school students in their final years. Short, Kinman and Baker (2010) presented evidence that peer coaching helped university students, all in a tense pre-exam period, manage stress. Perhaps, preparing to study abroad, coping with the stresses of a final year of school and preparing for an exam period are circumstances that predispose students to realizing benefits from some form of coaching.

6. Conclusion

At this point, there is only predeparture data from students participating in PC. To develop a complete picture of the impact of PC, it will be necessary to conduct interviews with students who participated in PC after their return from studying abroad. However, it is clear that the 32 students who participated in PC benefitted from it both in terms of the stated goal of PC, preparing to study abroad, and in developing English-language skills.

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