

*The Effects of the Cross-age Peer Tutoring Program on English Learning  
Performance of Taiwanese Elementary School Students*

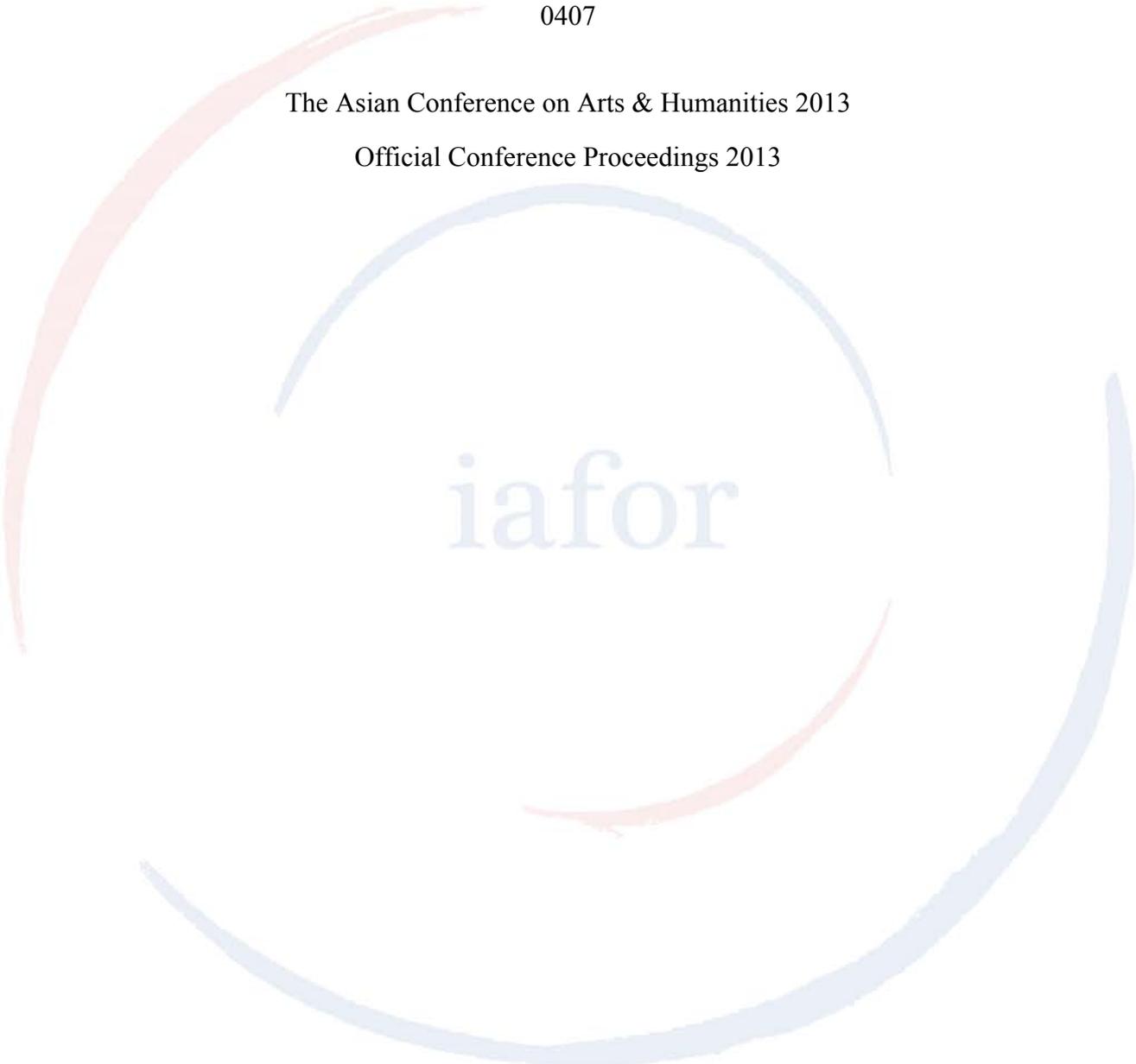
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## **INTRODUCTION**

Ever since English education launched in elementary schools in Taiwan in 1998, many instructional challenges have been in existence. One of the thorniest problems is the large number of students in an English class, leading to the difficulty meeting the individual student's need. What is more, the great gap of students' proficiency has also been a disputed point assailing teachers for years, resulting in the negative attitude toward English learning and disadvantaged English academic performance (Chen, 2006). Consequently, to overcome these long-standing problems as well as to foster students' learning efficiency, peer tutoring has been recommended by many educators in recent years. Though peer tutoring has been implemented widely by Taiwanese educators and researchers, most of the research on peer tutoring has focused on same-age peer tutoring; little has been noticed about cross-age peer tutoring in elementary schools (Chia, 2004; Chen, 2006). Cross-age peer tutoring has still been a very new issue in Taiwan. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the impacts of the cross-age peer tutoring program on the Taiwan EFL English learners' performance and attitude toward English learning, and further to probe into the feedback from the tutors and tutees to the program.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study was a quasi-experimental study, in which participants were twenty Taiwanese elementary school students, acting as ten tutees and ten tutors. The ten tutees were the 3rd-grade English low achievers who needed the remedial instruction. The ten tutors were the higher graders who performed well in English learning and volunteered to get engaged in the experiment.

Before the program, all the ten tutors were required to attend the pre-training sessions three times, 30 minutes per time at the noon breaks. The content of the pre-training involved brainstorming, teacher demonstration and tutoring skills practice, to make sure that the ten tutors could get acquainted with the tutoring skills.

During the intervention of the experiment, the ten 3rd-grade tutees received the cross-age peer tutoring program three times per week for twelve weeks, 120 minutes per week. As to the instructional activities, based on the steps suggested by Fimian, Fafard, and Howell (1984), the procedures of the cross-age peer tutoring program were designed as followings.

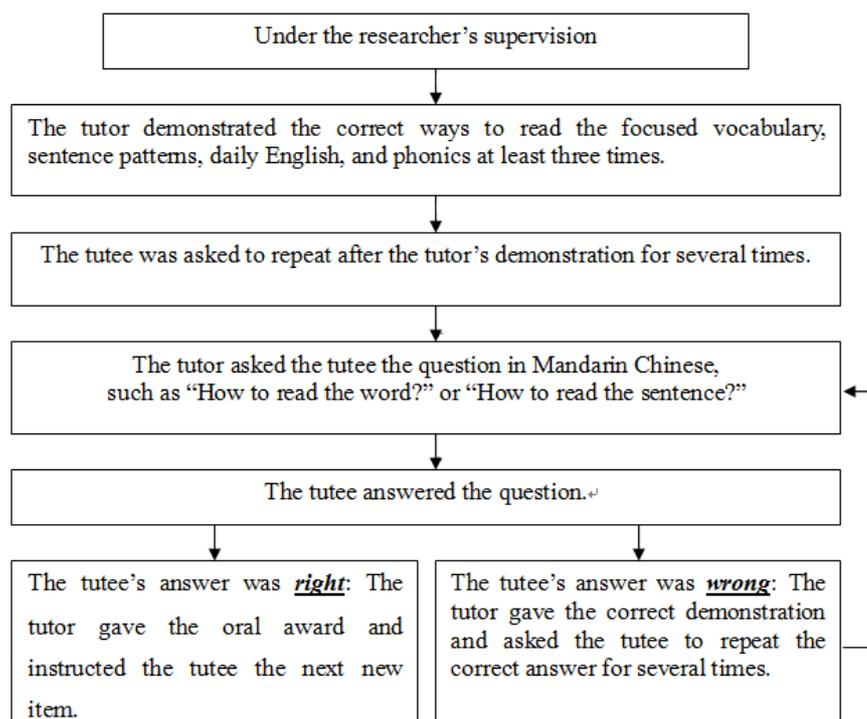


Figure 1 The procedures of the instructional activities

Throughout the program, research data were collected through the pretest and posttest of English learning performance, attitude questionnaires, and individual interviews. The English learning performance tests were standardized assessment tests designed by the Committee of English Education at Educational Bureau of Taipei City in 2003. And the attitude questionnaire was reliable and valid, in which the coefficient of internal consistency was .94 while the test-retest reliability was .70. Based on the results of the factor analysis, the total variance explained could be up to 52.93%; accordingly, the questionnaire had construct validity. Besides, all of the data were analyzed with descriptive statistics and paired-sample *t*-test to explore the effects of the cross-age peer tutoring program.

## RESULTS

### *Tutees' English Learning Performance in the Pretest and the Posttest*

After the intervention of the program, the data of the ten tutees' performance in the pretest and posttest of English learning performance was analyzed as follows.

Table 1

*Comparison between the Pretest and Posttest of English Learning Performance*

test	Mean	N	SD	df	t-value	Sig.(2-tailed)
pretest	49.10	10	17.67	9	-7.38	.000**
posttest	72.00	10	12.52	9		

*Note.* Mean scores of the pretest and posttest of English learning performance are presented in terms of the scores the ten third-grade tutees got in the English learning performance tests in which the total scores were 100.

\*\*  $p < .01$

As shown in Table 1, the results of the paired-sample *t*-test revealed that there was a significant difference between the pretests and posttests,  $p = .000$  (two-tailed). It was suggested that the cross-age tutoring program could enhance tutees' English learning performance.

### ***Tutees' Attitude toward English Learning in the Pre-and Post-questionnaires***

After the practice of the program, the statistical data of the attitude toward English learning the ten tutees possessed before and after the administration of the cross-age peer tutoring program are shown in Table 2.

Table 2

*Comparison between the Pre-and Post- attitude questionnaires*

Questionnaires	Means	N	SD	df	t-value	Sig.(2-tailed)
Pre-questionnaire	120.70	10	22.81	9	3.36	.008**
Post-questionnaire	148.40	10	18.70			

\*\*  $p < .01$

As shown in Table 2, the results of the paired-sample *t*-test revealed that there was a significant difference between the pre-and post-questionnaires,  $p = .008$  (two-tailed). It implied that the cross-age tutoring program could impose a positive effect on the tutees' overall attitude toward English learning.

### ***Tutees' Positive Response to the Cross-age Peer Tutoring Program***

After the program, all the tutees and tutors had interviews with the researcher. On the basis of the data collected throughout the interviews, all of the ten tutees expressed their preference for having cross-age tutors to help their English learning and the main reasons for their likeness were (1) the tutors' nice company, (2) the tutors' immediate assistance in English learning, (3) more concentration on learning, and (4) the extra English application. The exact ways the tutees expressed their preference for the cross-age tutors are summarized in the following excerpts.

*“The reason is that my tutor treats me very well. He is very nice and funny.”*  
(Kevin, Cindy);

*“My tutor teaches me very well; he can help me immediately. I can learn more.*  
*The tutor can*

*teach me when I have some questions I don’t know how to answer.”* (Fanny,  
Sammy, Win);

*“My tutor can make me concentrate on learning rather than on playing.”* (Win,  
Tina, James).

### ***Tutees' Favorite Issues in the Program***

Furthermore, when the tutees were asked what they liked better or what the advantages they have found in the cross-age peer tutoring program, most of them responded positively. And the most popular features that the tutees like best were (1) the increases of their English knowledge and proficiency, (2) the nice and helpful company of the tutor, and (3) the appealing activities of the program.

### ***Tutees' Disliked Issues in the Program***

In addition to the positive response, the tutees also expressed their negative opinions on the certain aspects of the program, involving that (1) They felt nervous when being asked to present in public, (2) they were distracted by the tutors occasionally, and (3) they could not handle the learning load from other subjects at the same time. The exact ways the tutees expressed their complaints are listed in the excerpts as follows.

*“My tutor asked me to pronounce the letters aloud; it makes my feel embarrassed* (Jack). *“Sometimes the tutor is lack of attention in class. Playing and rumbling among the tutors detracts me from learning. ”* (Tina); *“Sometimes I can not be here because my teacher asks me to complete unfinished homework.”* (Cindy).

### ***Tutors' Positive Response to the Cross-age Peer Tutoring Program***

As to the tutors’ comments on the cross-age peer tutoring program, similar to the tutees’ positive feedback, they were delighted to act as the tutors in the cross-age peer tutoring program and the major reasons for their fondness were (1) their personal passion for learning English, (2) the acting as a teacher, (3) the chance to help others, and (4) a sense of achievement and satisfaction. The exact ways the tutors expressed their preference for the cross-age tutors are summarized in the following excerpts.

*“Teaching others can fulfill my own learning in English. Additionally, I can review English*

*I have learned before” (Frank, Christine, Rex, Jasmine, Petty, Patricia).*

*“I can learn how to act as a teacher. I can make my tutee have more self-confidence to learn English and help my tutee not to fear to learn English.” (Brian, Greg, Will, Sonny)*

### ***Tutors' Disliked Issues in the Program***

However, despite their affection for the cross-age peer tutoring program, the tutors still expressed some complaints about (1) the tutees' occasional lack of concentration on learning tasks and (2) the tutees' silence to their instruction. The exact ways the tutors expressed their complaints are listed in the excerpts as follows.

*“My tutee sometimes distracts her concentration from learning. It is annoying that sometimes the tutee wants to play with me.” (Patricia);*

*“I find it annoying when my tutee keeps silence without answering my questions.” (Frank)*

Generally speaking, all of the tutors and tutees not merely enjoyed participating in the cross-age peer tutoring program but also were eager to return to join the program again as tutees and tutors again in the future although there were still some negative feedbacks for future studies to overcome.

## ***DISCUSSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS***

### ***Effects of the Cross-age Peer Tutoring Program on Tutees***

Based upon the analysis of the data, the principal findings suggested that cross-age peer tutoring could (1) facilitate tutees' English learning performance significantly and (2) promote tutees' English learning attitude effectively.

As to the positive effects on tutees' English learning performance, the possible reasons for this result might be that in the cross-age peer tutoring environment, each correct or incorrect response to questions made by the tutees could be given a prompt feedback from their tutors. As Behaviorists proposed, learning increases if every response the learners have made receives spontaneous feedback, and that learning is reinforced if every correct response is systematically rewarded (Goodlad & Hirst, 1989). Besides, according to *Vygotsky's theory* (Vygotsky, 1978), children' learning

takes place in the “zone of proximal development” which exists in the area between the child’s actual capability and his potential level. On account of scaffolding, children could reach their potential level with assistance of more capable tutors. Fortunately, through the scaffolding atmosphere of the cross-age peer tutoring program, tutors could have their strength for demonstrations to assist the tutees in these possible cognitive gains. Moreover, tutors’ higher status also promoted the effects of modeling to stimulate the tutees’ English learning.

As to the positive effects on tutees’ English learning attitude, the possible reasons for this result might be that tutees felt more secured in the presence of older tutors with similar cultures and experiences of learning (Goodlad & Hirst). Friendly interactions between the tutees and their older tutors could construct a friendly atmosphere of a low affective filter to help the tutees to conquer the fear of learning English. In such a nice atmosphere, the tutees did not need to face the embarrassment of incorrect response to questions in public; consequently, they could hold more positive attitude toward English learning. Up to this point, these results are consistent with Cloward’s comment in 1967 that a cross-age tutorial situation, where the emphasis was placed on interactions between peers and basic skills training, has been proven in enhancing the younger tutees to gain a substantial progress in learning.

### ***Effects of the Cross-age Peer Tutoring Program on Tutors***

In addition to the tutees, the study also found that the cross-age peer tutoring program could (1) help the tutors obtain higher attainment in their English proficiency and (2) increase the tutors’ self-concept in English learning.

The positive results agree well with Cohen’s comments that cross-age peer tutoring could contribute to organizing materials to facilitate long-term retention, as well as aiding in the formation of a more comprehensive and integrated understanding for the tutors (1986). When the older tutors struggled to express the teaching materials meaningful to their tutees, thereby provided themselves chances to reflect on their own learning and to resolve problems in new and different ways (Bruner, 1963).

Furthermore, the possible reason for the tutors’ positive responses might rest in that knowing they are making a meaningful contribution was a powerful experience for the tutors. In other words, through social tutoring and contribution to tutees’ learning, tutors’ self-esteem increased positively (Gaustad, 1993). Moreover, the results might be evident to shorten the bimodal distribution in English learning for the reason that

the older tutors, through the experiences of cross-age peer tutoring, could come to sympathize with the role of their teachers and cultivate a deeper respect for learning (Goodlad & Hirst, 1989).

### ***Suggestions for Pedagogical Implications***

On the basis of the research results, cross-age peer tutoring is highly recommended to be implemented in English remedial education, especially for the EFL low achievers. However, despite some valuable findings, there is still some negative feedback proposed from the tutors and tutees after the program. Accordingly, some suggestions for preparing an effective cross-age peer tutoring are also provided as follows.

First, tutors' teaching skills should be further reinforced before the implementation of cross-age peer tutoring; the tutors are suggested to receive the pre-training of the teaching strategies about how to elicit the shy tutees' response to questions and how to cope with the instruction of long sentence patterns and phonics. Additionally, the teacher is recommended to serve as a consulter during the process of the program, providing the tutors with the supportive resource of tutoring.

Secondly, tutors' self-constraint should be emphasized in the future program. According to the tutees' response, some of them were distracted by their tutors on rare occasion. Hence, the self-constraint of the tutors is highly recommended to be taken into consideration in the administration of the future studies.

Thirdly, cross-age peer tutoring is suggested to seek the support from other subjects' teachers. On the basis of the tutees' response, they could not handle the learning load from other subjects at the same time, resulting in their occasional absence in the program. Therefore, it is proposed for the future researchers to seek the support of the tutees' homeroom teachers to allow the tutees to attend the cross-age peer tutoring program on time without absence.

### ***Suggestions for Future Studies***

In the end, the results of the present study suggest two dimensions that might profitably be addressed by future researchers in the areas. First, it is highly proposed to investigate the comparison of cross-age tutoring and same-age tutoring in the future. Secondly, a qualitative and comprehensive investigation for a set of programs for training qualified cross-age tutors is worth further studying to seek for the proper

sequence of tutor training.

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