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The Effects of University Conversation Groups on English Language Learners

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Running head: EFFECTS OF UNIVERSITY CONVERSATION GROUPS

The Effects of University Conversation Groups on English Language Learners

Candice Dunston

Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Arts in Education

California State University, Monterey Bay
May 2017

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EFFECTS OF UNIVERSITY CONVERSATION GROUPS

The Effects of University Conversation Groups on English Language Learners

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EFFECTS OF UNIVERSITY CONVERSATION GROUPS

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the benefits of a peer-led conversation group for English Language Learner (ELL) university students. Class discussions and interaction among classmates are common requirements in US university classrooms, yet ELL students experience many obstacles with oral communication. Prior research has revealed peer strategies as one way ELL students can improve oral communication. This study evaluated how peer-led conversation groups affect self-efficacy and investigated how ELL students could benefit from these groups by using a convergent mixed methods design. A self-efficacy pre-test and post-test was used, and the groups were observed for five weeks. Participants were given short questionnaires, and data sources were reviewed by independent researchers to triangulate findings and to provide additional reliability. Only four participants completed the pre-test and post-test, and the results did not support the hypothesis. However, open and axial coding of the qualitative data revealed three main themes of benefits to the participants, and these findings suggest conducting future qualitative research for ELL oral communication and peer-led conversation groups.

Keywords: English language learners (ELLs), English as a second language, self-efficacy, peer-led groups

EFFECTS OF UNIVERSITY CONVERSATION GROUPS

Table of Contents

| | |
|------------------------------|-----|
| Abstract..... | iii |
| Literature Review..... | 1 |
| Methods..... | 10 |
| Research Question | 10 |
| Hypothesis..... | 10 |
| Research Design..... | 11 |
| Setting & Participants | 12 |
| Data Sources | 13 |
| Procedures..... | 15 |
| Ethical Considerations | 16 |
| Proposed Data Analyses | 17 |
| Results..... | 17 |
| Discussion..... | 23 |
| References..... | 30 |
| Appendix A..... | 34 |
| Appendix B..... | 35 |
| Appendix C..... | 37 |

The Effects of University Conversation Groups on English Language Learners

Literature Review

The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE; 2008), explains that English Language Learners (ELL) are those whose original language is not English, and therefore, those who have specific educational needs with content instruction done in English. English as a Second Language (ESL) is a type of instruction that supports ELLs (NCTE, 2008). ELLs and international students can experience obstacles with their secondary language in college such as difficulties with reading, writing, listening to lectures, and participating in class discussions (Duff, 2001; Ferris & Tagg, 1996; Kim, 2006; Wang, Singh, Bird, & Ives, 2008). In addition to language barriers, many ELL students need to orient to a new country or unfamiliar culture while pursuing their secondary or tertiary education (Duff, 2001; Wang et al., 2008). These are just some of the educational challenges that can impact ELLs success in college; however, one of the main obstacles many ELL students face involves difficulties regarding oral communication (Duff, 2001; Ferris & Tagg, 1996; Kim, 2006; Wang et al., 2008).

ELL Students and Obstacles in Communication

Oral communication (i.e., listening and speaking) is an integral part of the college system in the United States (US), therefore, when ELL students face obstacles in communication they are less likely to be successful. Moreover, oral communication and language barriers have been found to be a common concern for ELL students and their instructors (Duff, 2001; Wang et al., 2008). Specifically, ELL students' proficiency with oral communication impacts how well they understand instruction and interact with others in class. Duff (2001) has found that both ELL students and native English speakers often do not understand each other during interactions, in part because ELL students often struggle with listening skills. In particular, ELL students report

having difficulty comprehending what is spoken in class by both instructors and classmates because they are processing the meaning of words and sentences during conversation (Duff, 2001; Wang et al., 2008). Research has shown that ELLs have had difficulty remembering the meaning of words as they are spoken in real time (Goh, 2000). Also, when ELLs process the meaning of what is spoken, they often forget what they have heard prior to the sentence they are currently processing (Goh, 2000). Conversely, when ELLs are processing a sentence, they also have the tendency to miss what is spoken afterwards (Goh, 2000). Given the complications that ELLs can have with listening, these students often miss important information spoken during class and fall behind in the instruction.

The level of ELL students' speaking skills is another component to oral communication that affects class performance. Not only have instructors expressed concern that ELL students are often inarticulate in class when asked to answer questions or participate in discussions (Duff, 2001; Ferris & Tagg, 1996), but also, ELL students have reported that whole class discussion is one of their most difficult tasks (Kim, 2006). Additionally, ELL students have expressed concern over not mastering creative language skills needed for discussing open-ended topics in class (versus needing only memorized skills for simple interactions such as ordering at a restaurant; Ostler, 1980). When faced with deficits in speaking and interacting in class, ELL students will not perform well in class activities requiring interaction, and they will not effectively demonstrate to their professors what they have learned.

In addition to listening and speaking skills, background knowledge of popular culture and current events can strongly influence an ELL's oral communication skills, since local events, cultural topics, or slang terms are often mentioned in conversations and discussions. If an ELL student is unfamiliar with this information, he/she will not be able to understand nor contribute to

that part of the conversation. In 2001, Duff conducted a study with two tenth grade social studies classrooms to examine the impact of social and cultural aspects of learning for ELL secondary students. Findings revealed that lack of background knowledge about the popular culture and current events hindered the ELL students' comprehension of what was covered in class, their ability to speak about their perspectives in class discussions, and their performance in other class activities such as group assignments, debates, and re-enactments of historical events (Duff, 2001). Thus, being unfamiliar with popular culture or current events has impacted ELL students' achievement in class.

ELL students' communication skills are not only affected by linguistic skills and acculturation levels, but they are also impacted by students' beliefs and feelings about learning English. Positive traits such as metacognitive regulation (i.e., a student's plan of action and skill in self-regulation used to manage their learning and accomplishments) and self-efficacy (i.e., a person's belief about his/her ability to arrange for and act on what is needed to meet future goals) are important for a student's success and academic achievement in college (Bandura, 1995; Chemers, Hu, & Garcia, 2001; De Backer, Van Keer, & Valcke, 2015). If a student lacks either of these traits, he/she will be less likely to take an active role in his/her education and persevere through the higher demands of college. This can apply to ELL students, especially because they are facing the demands of learning in a non-native language in addition to usual college demands. Although there has not been much research on ELL university students, self-efficacy has had an impact on the success of first-year US college students (Chemers et al., 2001).

Self-efficacy is important because it influences the amount of effort and participation a person contributes to the achievement of a specific task (Bandura, 1995). Hence, how effective a person believes one can be at a specific task will in turn impact how well one will perform at that

task. Further, Bandura (1986) describes how self-efficacy beliefs are the driving force behind one's motivation, confidence level, and ability to perform well. Thus, even if a situation is extremely difficult, self-efficacy beliefs will influence motivation, confidence, and ability above and beyond a person's actual ability level. In relation to learning, students with higher self-efficacy have higher motivation, confidence levels, and set higher goals for themselves than their lower self-efficacy counterparts. Thus, if ELLs have higher self-efficacy, they are more likely to engage in speaking/conversations in the classroom. In addition, Pappamihiel (2002) has inferred that some ELL students who have done well in ESL classes have experienced language anxiety because of lower perceptions of self-efficacy when encountering the listening and speaking skills required in the mainstream (English-speaking) classroom. Therefore, with the demands of orienting to a university in a new country, the success of ELLs could be influenced by their self-efficacy.

Language anxiety can also be a factor influencing an ELL's perspective on communicating in English and participating in US classrooms. Some ELL students have even reported that they have been teased by peers for their grammar and pronunciation and have been afraid to share their knowledge and perspectives during class discussions (Duff, 2001). In addition, when university professors have been surveyed, most respondents have reported shyness with speaking in class as an obstacle for the ELL students they have taught (Ferris & Tagg, 1996). When experiencing language anxiety, ELL students have often resorted to staying silent in class and not responding to questions or participating in discussions (Kondo & Ying-Ling, 2004; Pappamihiel, 2002). Therefore, an ELL student's level of confidence can impact communication skills which are needed in US and other English-speaking classrooms.

Importance of Communication

Although many ELL students struggle with it, communication continues to be an important factor in US classrooms in public schools and higher education. This is especially true as common classroom activities involve interaction with instructors and classmates. Although the most common tasks in classrooms of the US and other English-speaking countries have been group discussion and interpersonal interaction (Duff, 2001; Ferris & Tagg, 1996; Kim, 2006; Ostler, 1980; Wang et al., 2008), these types of activities require simultaneous use of both listening and speaking skills. Research has shown that often, ELLs have not participated actively in group discussions and interpersonal interactions, and as a result, have not performed well with participating in class, working with peers, or working in small groups (Duff, 2001; Ferris & Tagg, 1996). Studies have also revealed that ELL students often will not participate in class discussion due to difficulties with comprehending what is said, speaking on the topic, and experiencing apprehension regarding these language skills (Duff, 2001; Ferris & Tagg, 1996; Kondo & Ying-Ling, 2004; Pappamihiel, 2002). Consequently, a lack of strong listening and speaking skills required for active participation in class can hinder an ELL student's academic achievement. Professors have recommended that ELL students have more encouragement and practice interacting with native English speakers to prepare them for the interaction required in US classrooms (Ferris & Tagg, 1996). Therefore, it is important for ELL students to have strong oral communication skills to participate in discussions and other interactive tasks that have been common in US classrooms.

Little research is available regarding tasks requiring only listening skills for university classes in the US or other English-speaking countries. The research found does not show that listening skills have been as significant of a concern as other communication skills (Ferris &

Tagg, 1996; Kim, 2006; Ostler, 1980). However, one listening skill reported to be a concern by both professors and ELL students is the level of listening comprehension needed for taking thorough lecture notes (Ferris & Tagg, 1996; Kim, 2006; Ostler, 1980). Despite the limited concern surrounding listening skills, listening comprehension and note-taking are still important skills that are needed for success in academics.

As with research on tasks requiring only listening skills, little has been mentioned about tasks requiring only speaking skills. What is known, however, is that ELL students have expressed concern about needing stronger speaking skills for asking questions during lectures (Ostler, 1980) and for oral presentations (Duff, 2001; Ferris & Tagg, 1996). Although these are only two tasks that have been mentioned in studies, they are important since ELL students need to ask questions to fully understand instruction and students need to perform well with public speaking to get a good grade on an oral presentation. Accordingly, strong speaking skills, in addition to effective listening and interacting skills, are required for participation in U. S. classrooms, both in public schools and in higher education.

Strategies Helping ELL Students with Communication

With the importance of oral communication skills, strategies in improving these skills among ELL students have been evaluated in research. One such way is by using technology tools for learning vocabulary (e.g., electronic dictionaries and internet sites; Kasapoglu-Akyol, 2010). Another strategy used for improving listening skills is watching television with captioning and listening to the radio (Kasapoglu-Akyol, 2010). Technology use has also been shown to improve speaking skills. For example, ELL students have used a digital camera and Media Player with a cellphone to record themselves and watch their lips while speaking (Kasapoglu-Akyol, 2010). Outside of the realm of technology, another approach with

communication has been through teaching ELL students oral communication strategies such as paraphrasing, self-correcting, and requesting clarification (Lam, 2010).

Despite the research on basic listening and speaking strategies, there exists limited research on strategies for teaching ELL students background information on popular culture and current events. One researcher has attempted teaching background information before class discussions; however, it has not provided ELL students with all the information they have needed (Duff, 2001). Instead, ELL students have sought out peers to help them learn about the culture and local events after class (Duff, 2001). In addition, listening to the radio and watching television with captioning has been used as a strategy for listening skills and it may also expose ELLs to popular culture and current events (Kasapoglu-Akyol, 2010). Furthermore, ELL students have also mentioned utilizing their university's academic and language support programs to help them transition to the new teaching approaches and learning environments in a new country (Wang et al., 2008). Therefore, strategies have been used for teaching ELLs about local culture and current events, with ELLs preferring some strategies over others.

Strategies that address language anxiety. Since language anxiety involves ELL students' beliefs or feelings about the language they are learning, addressing it may require strategies that are different from usual instruction. Some ELL students have sought counseling as a strategy for coping in a new and unfamiliar learning environment (Wang et al., 2008). Another strategy was letting students remain silent in class for an initial stage of time so they process the language more than speak it (Pappamihel, 2002). Finally, ELL students have reported their own use of strategies such as preparing for class, using relaxation techniques, thinking positively, and finding peers who were also struggling but coping well (Kondo & Ying-Ling, 2004). What is especially notable is that one strategy has involved seeking out peers for

help (Kondo & Ying-Ling, 2004). In this case, peer strategies could be used to improve communication skills for ELLs.

Peer Strategies for Communication

Implementation of peer strategies has allowed ELL students to be successful, as students have reported using peer strategies as one of their preferred resources for learning local culture and language (Duff, 2001; Wang et al., 2008). One strategy involving peers, and led by student organizations, has been orientation programs which have provided information and training on the local campus culture and learning environment (Wang et al., 2008). Orientation programs have also helped the students meet new people and make social connections with other students (Wang et al., 2008). Another peer strategy has been a “buddy” system that has helped students with language, culture, and meeting new friends (Wang et al., 2008). With these examples of ELL students seeking peers as a source of help, examining other peer strategies appears to be worthwhile.

There is not much research on peer groups as a strategy for teaching oral communication skills. However, there has been a teacher-led peer group in which ELLs learned interaction strategies such as: checking for understanding, asking for assistance, continuing a conversation, asking for information, and paraphrasing (Bejarano, Levine, Olshtain, & Steiner, 1997). ELLs learning and practicing these interactive skills have improved their performance in discussions and other interactive tasks (Bejarano et al., 1997). Improving ELLs discussion and interaction skills can help prepare them for participation in US classrooms.

Peer tutoring is another strategy involving peers, yet it has had little research regarding ELL students. ELL students have been involved in trained peer tutoring and have had an increase in the quality of their revisions on writing assignments (Min, 2006). In non-ELL

students, peer tutoring has been found to increase skills in metacognitive regulation and critical thinking (De Backer et al., 2015; Quitadamo, Brahler, & Crouch, 2009). Unfortunately, there has not been much research available about the benefits of peer work on oral communication for ELL students. Furthermore, there has not been any research on ELL college students participating in peer-led groups for communication, though research on other peer strategies and groups is promising.

Gaps in the Research

There is a paucity of literature surrounding ELL university students and oral communication skills; though, what has been found has shown similarities across studies. Still, there have been limitations within some of the studies. Some studies have had a small sample size and cannot be generalized to the entire ELL population; however, their results have pointed to a need for more research on ELL students' experiences in English-speaking countries and the strategies they find useful in learning English (Kasapoglu-Akyol, 2010; Wang et al., 2008). Further, the setting for one study was a single university, so caution is needed when interpreting or generalizing the results; despite this, it has had similarities with other studies and has demonstrated the need for communication skills required for class discussion in some US and/or higher education classrooms (Ostler, 1980). Some studies have had a relatively low response rate. Yet, their results have added to the pool of research indicating an emphasis of class discussion and active communication in US university classes as well as the need for ELL students to have the skills required for these activities (Ferris & Tagg, 1996; Kim, 2006). Furthermore, there has not been much research on language anxiety and the self-efficacy of ELLs in the past thirteen years. Research is lacking studies on peer work on oral communication and peer-led groups for communication, as well, yet research on other peer strategies and groups

shows potential. Therefore, the purpose of this study has been to examine the benefits of a peer-led conversation group for ELL college students, including the group's impact on self-efficacy.

Methods

This study examined ELL college students participating in two peer-led conversation groups as they practiced their communication skills in English. This study concentrated on the benefits the students gained from attending these groups. Research has shown the benefits of peer strategies and peer groups with ELL students' communication skills (Bejarano et al., 1997; Duff, 2001; Kondo & Ying-Ling, 2004; Wang et al., 2008). Though research involving peer tutoring has not specifically focused on the communication skills of ELL students, studies with ELL and non-ELL students has shown positive impacts on other skills (Min, 2006; De Backer et al., 2015; Quitadamo et al., 2009). Therefore, examining the benefits of peer-led conversation groups was a worthwhile investigation.

Research Question

Two research questions were examined in this study. One question was quantitative, and the other question was qualitative.

Quantitative. Does a peer-led conversation group improve ELL college students' self-efficacy for speaking English in various settings?

Qualitative. How do ELL college students benefit from peer-led conversation groups?

Hypothesis

Although research could not be found pertaining to peer-led conversation groups for ELL students, based on research regarding the benefits of peer tutoring, it was expected that a peer group would give positive results (De Backer et al., 2015; Quitadamo et al., 2009). Therefore,

the hypothesis was that a peer-led conversation group would improve ELL college students' self-efficacy in speaking English.

Research Design

This study used a convergent mixed methods design. The goal was triangulation of the findings as opposed to starting with one method to guide the research of the other.

Quantitative. The quantitative design was a non-experimental descriptive design. Based on the sample size as well as the intervention involving a resource already in place for ELL students, there was no control group, and therefore, an experimental design lacked compatibility with the setting.

Independent variable. The independent variable was two peer-led ESL conversation groups which took place at a state university. Although research on this specific type of peer work could not be found, this intervention was based on the benefits of peer work found in other studies (De Backer et al., 2015; Quitadamo et al., 2009). A peer tutor who was native to or proficient in English led each group. Participants provided input and determined what the groups would practice (e.g., using English at a party with friends, going to a restaurant, talking with a professor). The groups discussed and participated in activities related to the requested themes. Anxiety could be a factor impacting ELL students' ability to learn a language (Kondo & Ying-Ling, 2004; Pappamihiel, 2002). Therefore, the groups had an informal nature to reduce any potential anxiety and to encourage participation with the reassurance that additional tasks and requirements added to a student's course-load would not be a possibility or concern.

Dependent variable. The dependent variable examined was self-efficacy: a person's belief about his/her ability to make plans and take actions for the requirements of future achievements (Bandura, 1995; Chemers et al., 2001; Idrus & Salleh, 2008). Operationally, self-

efficacy was measured by the Perceived Self-Efficacy Level in English Language Oral Communication Ability Survey (Idrus & Salleh, 2008; Idrus & Sivapalan, 2010).

Qualitative data sources. The qualitative design was a single case study design. The ESL conversation groups were examined as a single entity within its natural setting in order to identify the benefits of this program.

Data sources. The qualitative design involved collecting data using observations and exit surveys with questions regarding the benefits of the ELL groups.

Setting & Participants

The setting of this study was two peer-led ESL conversation groups which were part of the cooperative learning department at a California State University. The groups were open to all students at the university and offered specifically to all of those who were ELLs, though the groups during the time of the study only consisted of students in the study abroad program. Based on the university's Enrollment Census (2015), 63% of the university students were female and 37% were male. Also, 7% were African American, 6% were Asian American, 36% were Latino, 1% were Native American, 1% were Pacific Islanders, 7% were two or more races, 35% were white, and 6% were other or declined to state their ethnicity. In addition, 2% of the students at the university were from other countries.

The participants were ELL university students coming to the conversation groups for help with using English language in various social and cultural settings and situations. With the study as a convergent mixed methods design, sampling was based on the qualitative single case nature of the study. Participants were selected based on convenience and on the criteria that they were ELLs and that they were attending the conversational groups for practice and help. The total of the two groups consisted of one male and seven females. The ethnicity of the groups included

one Caucasian/European, one Latin American, and six Asian participants. Seven of the participants were between the ages of seventeen to twenty-five years old, and one of the participants was between the ages of twenty-five and thirty years old. Though a total of eight ELL students participated in the groups over time, a core group of five students attended three or more weeks, and four of these students completed the pre-test and post-test. The most consistent participants who attended every week were Sue (attending the Monday meetings) and John (attending the Tuesday meetings), resulting in more data collection for these students. Connie attended the Monday meetings for four of the weeks. Jane and Kim attended the Tuesday meetings for three of the weeks. There was also an intermittent group of three students who only attended one or two weeks, and they all attended the Tuesday meetings. Mary was present for two weeks, and two participants, Ellen and Laura, were present for only one week. Due to their low rate of attendance, less data were collected on the intermittent participants.

Data Sources

Quantitative. A pre-test/post-test was given in the study using the Perceived Self-Efficacy Level in English Language Oral Communication Ability Survey (Idrus & Salleh, 2008; Idrus & Sivapalan, 2010). This scale was a survey with 24 items, and it addressed three aspects of self-efficacy: ability, activity perception, and aspiration. Three of the questions in the survey were adapted to fit the needs of the participants (see Appendix A). The students' perceived ability was regarding how they felt about being able to speak English in specific situations and in general, such as learning or using new words or skills (e.g., "I am good at learning speaking skills"). Their activity perception involved how they felt about using English in academic activities such as oral presentations and in-class discussions (e.g., "I do not find oral presentations difficult to do"). Questions about the students' aspirations were regarding their

hopes and future goals with speaking English, such as year-long and lifelong goals as well as expected benefits with learning English (e.g., “One of my main aims is to improve my speaking ability in English by next year”). The survey was a Likert scale numbered from one to five, with “1” for “Strongly Agree” and “5” for “Strongly Disagree”. A lower score in the survey indicated higher self-efficacy, and a higher score indicated lower self-efficacy. The survey took 15 minutes to complete. The authors of the scale established validity by adapting a pre-evaluated and verified scale (Bandura, 1990; Mikulecky, Lloyd, & Huang, 1996). The reliability of the scale was high with all three subscales having an alpha level of 0.82 or higher.

Qualitative. The qualitative design used multiple sources of data to triangulate findings. The data sources were also reviewed by independent researchers for additional reliability.

Observations. Two standard observation forms were used for collecting data from five weeks of group meetings (see Appendix B). The first one was adapted from an example of a note-taking form (Chandler, Reynolds, Palmer, & Hutchinson, 2008). The second one was developed and used by the department where the conversation groups took place. The researcher attended each of the two groups as a non-participating observer and collected the data on the form. Group activities and themes, participants, peer leaders, and any significant quotes or moments were described.

Exit surveys. A half-sheet of paper containing one or two questions about the student’s feelings regarding communicating in English and the benefits of the group was given to the participants three times throughout the duration of the study (see Appendix C). A sample of a question asked was: “What do you think has helped you the most in the ESL conversation group?” The first exit survey was labeled with the day of the group, and there was no space for a name and last initial, though the names and initials were written on each exit survey. The next

two exit surveys were given spaces to write in the name and initial (or student ID) and the date. In addition to the label change, two of the three participants who answered the first exit survey rated their listening skills between eighty to one hundred percent, so the questions about listening skills were replaced with a question about confidence in speaking skills. The exit surveys were given at the last ten minutes of each group for the first two exit surveys, and they were given the last fifteen minutes of each group for the third exit survey. The reasoning for this change was that participants were commonly writing one-phrase answers, and the change was a strategy to give them time to write more if they needed it. The exit surveys were designed to be a short and less-intrusive means of gathering data for the participants' perspectives.

Procedures

Although, the ESL conversation groups began meeting the same week that classes started, the number of participants was low until the fourth week of classes. Therefore, data collection began in the fourth week of the Spring 2017 semester. Also, based on history, the number of participants was expected to decrease as midterms approached and students became busier. Because of this, the study of the intervention ended after the eighth week of the spring semester. This was a total of five weeks of data collection (i.e., five each of Monday and Tuesday group meetings).

The groups met between forty-five minutes to one hour per day on Monday and Tuesday evenings, and they were led by a peer who either was a native English speaker or was proficient in English. The ELL students chose a topic or situation to learn more about or practice, such as what to say when meeting with a professor. The groups were designed to be informal to be less intimidating for the ELL students. This was a beneficial approach considering the impact that language anxiety could have on students (Kondo & Ying-Ling, 2004; Pappamihel, 2002).

The survey was given to participants in the first fifteen minutes of each conversation group for the pre-test and post-test (Idrus & Salleh, 2008; Idrus & Sivapalan, 2010). Participants were asked to complete the survey as a pre-test in the fourth week of the spring semester and a post-test in the eighth week of the spring semester, though one participant not present at that time completed the post-test in the eleventh week. Results were analyzed to determine if self-efficacy increased between the pre-test and post-test (Idrus & Salleh, 2008; Idrus & Sivapalan, 2010). Observation forms were completed by the author of the study as a non-participant observer. Exit surveys were given to students to complete three weeks during the study, and these were collected from the students. Results of the observation and exit surveys were analyzed for common themes, and all data sources were compared in order to triangulate findings.

Ethical Considerations

Confidentiality was kept and participants were kept anonymous in observations. Names were needed initially for the survey and exit surveys in order to compare the data on each, however, participants were kept confidential in reporting the findings by identification with a number or pseudonym. The participants were not harmed in the study. The researcher was not affiliated with the university department responsible for the conversation group, so conflict of interest was not a concern.

Validity threats. Although the author of this study was not affiliated with the department offering the conversation group, there was a desire for the conversation group to succeed. Given this possibility for researcher bias, external reviewers were involved in reviewing the collected data to address this possible threat. Different data sources were triangulated to ensure no biases were present.

Data Analyses

Quantitative. After the pre-tests and post-tests were scored, the means scores were calculated and compared. In addition, the mean for each of the three subscales (ability, activity perception, and aspiration) were calculated and compared for the overall scale.

Qualitative. After data from the observations and exit surveys were collected, the researcher used open coding followed by axial coding to establish common themes (Creswell, 2014). Recurring themes and similar data from each data source were analyzed and reported for the purpose of triangulating findings. Independent researchers also reviewed the data sources to provide additional reliability.

Results

Eight participants attended the groups during the five weeks of data collection, and of the eight, six participants completed the pre-test and attended two or more of the groups. Some weeks had fewer participants, including the fifth week of data collection, in which only three participants attended and completed the post-test. Three weeks later, one more participant from the original six completed the post-test. The participants who completed both tests were from the core group and attended three to five meetings.

Quantitative Results

Only four participants (all from the core group) completed the pre-test and the post-test ($n = 4$), and their pre-test scores already indicated moderate to high self-efficacy. No significant changes occurred between the pre-test and post-test scores (see Table 1).

Table 1

Mean Scores and Standard Deviations for Pre-test and Post-test

| Dimension | Pre-test | Post-test |
|---------------------|----------|-----------|
| | Mean | Mean |
| Ability | 2.61 | 2.59 |
| Activity Perception | 2.57 | 2.82 |
| Aspiration | 1.50 | 1.79 |
| Total | 2.32 | 2.46 |

Note: The scale ranges from 1-5, (1) strongly agree to (5) strongly disagree.

Lower scores indicate higher self-efficacy, and higher scores indicate lower self-efficacy.

Qualitative Findings

The observation data were analyzed with open coding followed by axial coding. Data from the exit surveys were used to triangulate the findings. Three main themes were found, (a) dispositions and engagement, (b) American culture topics, and (c) English Language explanations.

Dispositions and engagement. Dispositions and engagement is defined as the nonverbal language of the participants as well as the level of participation within the groups. Overall tutors and participants appeared relaxed, as everyone had a calm demeanor, sat upright or leaned forward on the table, and smiled throughout each meeting. The tutor and participants would occasionally laugh during parts of the conversation; for example, laughing at an example of Zumba on You-tube or at Saint Patrick's Day Traditions such as dying food items green. Laura reflected these dispositions in her response to a question on the exit survey about what helped most: "I felt comfortable and took a lot of information what I wanted to get." Six of the eight participants reported an increase in confidence on the exit surveys. John attended all Tuesday

meetings and responded to a question regarding how the group has helped him most: “[It helped] boost my confidence.”

In addition to demonstrating positive dispositions, participants appeared consistently engaged. Specifically, participants and the tutor would face each other and maintain eye contact throughout the conversations each week. During the first two weeks, participants most often gave one sentence responses and questions as the tutors spoke more to provide explanations. By the fifth week, participants were contributing more to the conversations, sharing their experiences and speaking in paragraphs more often. Two respondents indicated participating in conversations as one of their goals on the exit surveys, including Connie, who answered, “I hope to acquire new knowledge and get used to listen and talk in English in ESL conversation group. And I can try to talk in English.” Six of the eight participants were present on the fourth week to respond if their goals were met, and four of them said they were. Sue wrote, “Not 100%, but almost,” and Connie wrote, “I don’t think so because I cannot talk fluently yet.” This response may have been due to the short time-span of data collection, as more time would be needed to master fluency with speaking in English. Jane expressed that what helped most was “talking with other group members,” which reflected her interest in being engaged with conversations.

American culture. American culture was discussed the most in the conversation groups, including six subcategories: (1) US travel, sites, and attractions, (2) US government and systems, (3) US holidays, (4) US dorm and college life, (5) US current events and social issues, and (6) miscellaneous topics such as American foods, songs, and movies. The participants would ask questions involving the topics and the tutors would explain them. Though the participants did not write about specific subcategories of American culture on the exit surveys, they did mention American culture in general. Two participants included learning American culture in their goals

for the group, and two wrote how learning about American culture helped them. Ellen wrote: “I have a chance to talk about American culture and it makes me get confident of using English.”

Jane wrote: “It was helpful to understand ‘culture’ of US.”

US travel and attractions. US travel, sites, and attractions were a common topic during the five weeks. Students would ask for travel advice or recommendations, mentioning upcoming trips, or sharing their experience from a recent trip. An example of one of these questions was John saying, “I’m going to New York in April to a workshop. I have no idea where to go or how to plan.” Other advice asked by participants involved how to find cheaper plane tickets, what to put in checked versus carry-on baggage, what to see in other US locations, and how to complete arrangements through Airbnb.com.

US holidays. US holidays were prominently discussed, especially since two holidays occurred during the five weeks of data collection. Specifically, the Tuesday group had a Valentine’s Day discussion and a Saint Patrick’s Day discussion throughout two of their meetings. Other holiday topics discussed were Christmas, President’s Day, Cesar Chavez Day, and the number of national holidays the US had in contrast to the number of holidays the participants’ countries had.

US government and systems. US government and systems were often discussed, which included the following topics: income for foreigners, medical school, healthcare, health insurance, homeless veterans, welfare, and job benefits. Connie asked how she could get paid for work she had done at a high school, and the tutor provided advice. John asked about the requirements to become a doctor and about the cost of healthcare in the US, and the tutor explained both. Initiating a discussion on injured and homeless veterans, John asked, “They don’t have insurance for people from the military?” The tutor explained the process for injured

veterans and how some could be overlooked in the system. When discussing jobs, Sue asked, “You can take welfare?” The tutor then defined welfare and explained that a person with a job would receive benefits, instead.

American dorm and college life. Discussions about American dorm and college life included room changes, residential assistants, roommates, bus systems, and professors (how to ask questions in class and how to contact them). Jane asked, “Is it okay to ask a question during a lecture?” Laura shared, “I recently moved to East Campus, very cool . . . but the bus is a problem.” The tutor would respond with explanations and advice for each question.

US current events. US current events and social issues were discussed. For example, Sue expressed frustration with showing up for a class that had been canceled due to rain, and she asked, “When rainy season end?” The tutor explained the prior drought and the unusual amount of rain causing problems in California. A tutor described different ways people become homeless and ways they get help after John asked, “What causes homeless problem in the city?” Finally, initiating a discussion on American gangs and safety, John also mentioned an American friend who recommended that he not wear his sports jacket because he could be mistaken for a gang member.

Miscellaneous topics. Regarding the last subcategory for American culture, the following miscellaneous topics were discussed: foods, songs, movies, and recreation. The participants asked about American foods and shared their experiences of eating American food, hearing American songs, and seeing American movies. During a conversation about recreation, Connie and Sue asked what Zumba was; the tutor described and discussed it.

English Language explanations. The third main theme, English Language explanations, consisted of three subcategories: translation, grammar, and visual cues. Three of

the participants wrote about their interest in learning more English on the exit surveys, and two of those participants commented on it on two different exit surveys. Kim wrote that one of her goals was to “learn new words . . . increase my vocabulary.” When asked what has helped her socialize and interact with American friends, Connie wrote: “Knowledge of English for conversation with American friends.” Again, in response to what has helped her the most overall, Connie wrote: “To know new English words and expression.” Sue wrote, “to understand words/phrase which American students often use,” regarding what helped her with socializing and interacting with American friends.

Of the three subcategories, translations were requested the most by the participants during the conversations. Snacks provided to the participants and conversations about local restaurants often resulted in participants asking about foods. During a conversation about a restaurant entrée with egg, Sue asked, “What is meaning of yolk?” The tutor then explained egg yolk and egg white. A second category of translations involved body parts that Connie and Sue were learning for their voice class, as Sue said, “larynx, diafrog?” The tutor then defined the word diaphragm in addition to writing the spelling on the board and discussing “ph” and the silent “g.” In some meetings, a participant or the tutor would have a cold, and participants asked for translations of words related to health such as a runny nose, a stuffy nose, and Kleenex. Other single-word translations included defining miscellaneous words such as “vegan,” “versatile,” and “puddle.” Translations more complex than single words were also given. Jane asked, “How do you usually call professor?” The tutor discussed different ways to address the professor, including a professor with a Ph.D. Sue said, “Can I ask about an assignment? About—I can’t understand?” It involved an article about Syrian refugees, and the tutor explained it to her and recommended how she could discuss it in class.

In addition to translations, participants had questions about grammar including sentence structure, use of prepositions, and common words used in conversation. Sue asked: “What difference is—I always say, ‘Where are you living in?’ or ‘Where are you living?’ Can I say this? Or ‘Where do you live?’” This led to a discussion about prepositions and sentences used to ask or state where someone lives or works. Another example was a conversation on phrases describing cold symptoms which started with Sue asking, “Running nose? Or nose running?”

Finally, English Language was explained through visual cues including: pointing at objects, viewing pictures and videos as examples, writing words and phrases on a whiteboard, and reviewing handouts. When defining an object in the room, the tutor would point to it and say its name, and in turn, participants would point to an object when asking the English name for it. When examples were not available in the room, pictures and videos were searched on a smartphone or computer. One example was a You-tube video of Zumba shown on a computer. Tutors would use the whiteboard to write spellings of words, examples of sentences and phrases, and lists of American names and places. For facilitating two discussions about holidays, one tutor provided a handout for each which included facts, questions, and pictures about the current holiday.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to determine if peer-led conversation groups would improve self-efficacy for ELL college students and to examine how the students benefited from the groups. With no significant change in mean scores, the results from the pre-test and post-test could not support the hypothesis that the conversation groups would improve the ELL students’ self-efficacy. However, only four participants completed the tests, and the pre-test scores (between 1 to 3 points) indicated that the participants already had moderate to high self-efficacy.

Furthermore, other factors could explain different reasons for the quantitative results, and the qualitative findings revealed an increase in components to self-efficacy such as improved confidence and engagement among the participants. Moreover, the participants also benefited from learning more about American culture and receiving English Language explanations. The increase in confidence and other skills for the participants was consistent with the research showing the potential of peer-tutoring or peer-led groups (De Backer et al., 2015; Min, 2006; Quitadamo, 2009).

Self-efficacy, dispositions, and engagement

Considering the quantitative results, the participants may have shown more progress on the post-test if they had started with scores reflecting lower self-efficacy. Even for the participants scoring closer to moderate self-efficacy (3 points), the pre-test and post-test were only five weeks apart, and more time may have been needed for students to show more progress. Further, only two of the respondents attended every week, which could explain less progress for those who missed one or two weeks. One notable qualitative finding is that John, who had scores on both tests indicating a high self-efficacy (1.63 and 1.46 on the pre- and post-test respectively), was observed attending one meeting each week. It is possible that his high attendance rate was a manifestation of higher self-efficacy. Finally, extraneous variables may have impacted the students with moderate self-efficacy, such as their reactions to circumstances with their classes, campus experiences, or personal lives.

Given self-efficacy's impact on a person's participation and effort (Bandura, 1995), the participants' attendance and engagement with the groups reflected their moderate to high self-efficacy in the pre-tests. Perhaps a student with low self-efficacy may have been less likely to attend the group since it was voluntary. In 1977, Bandura first conceptualized self-efficacy and

then investigated these beliefs further, illustrating four sources of experience that affect a person's self-efficacy (Morris, 2010). In accordance with the social cognitive framework, self-efficacy is influenced by four sources: mastery experiences (one's own experiences), vicarious experiences (seeing social models), verbal persuasions (hearing social cues), and physiological state (a person's emotional state; Bandura, 1977; Morris, 2010).

Regarding the four sources of self-efficacy, if participants had experienced prior successes by persevering through obstacles, they would have had a more consistent, higher self-efficacy, but if they had easier successes in their country followed by failure or harder obstacles in America, they could have been less likely to experience an increase in self-efficacy. If the participants had witnessed other international classmates facing difficulties or failures, their self-efficacy could have been impacted as well. Based on the qualitative findings, the participants did express gains in confidence from attending the groups; however, the level of support from peers, instructors, or other people they encountered outside the group could have influenced them positively or negatively based on how much or how little encouragement they received. If a participant was having difficulty coping with a high amount of stress in his/her life, this could have in turn affected his/her self-efficacy. In conclusion, the possibility of these factors impacting the participants outside the group could have contributed to the difficulty of measuring self-efficacy over a span of only five weeks.

Along with the pre-test indicating the students already had moderate to high self-efficacy, the qualitative findings of the participants' positive dispositions and engagement showed improvements that could have addressed self-efficacy and language anxiety. Along with self-efficacy, language anxiety could have impacted the participants. Language anxiety had been

identified as an obstacle to ELL students' success with oral communication skills (Kondo & Ying-Ling, 2004; Pappamihel, 2002).

Although no change in self-efficacy was shown from pre-test to post-test and language anxiety was not specifically mentioned, the participants demonstrated lower confidence before attending the groups given their reports of increased confidence on the exit surveys. For example, John had written, "[It helped] boost my confidence." Another indication of improved dispositions that could address self-efficacy and language anxiety was the increase in the participants' level of participation in the conversations over the course of the five weeks. The participants' increasing level of speaking in the groups also paralleled prior research of professors reporting shyness from ELL students and recommending practice with native English speakers (Ferris & Tagg, 1996). Furthermore, the calm demeanor of the participants at each meeting and one participant's report of feeling comfortable indicated that the informal nature of the groups may have averted potential language anxiety that otherwise could have been experienced within the groups. The participants' increase in confidence and level of participation reflected prior research on peer strategies and peer-tutoring addressing language anxiety and other learning beliefs such as metacognitive regulation (De Backer et al., 2015; Kondo & Ying-Ling, 2004; Wang et al., 2008).

American Culture

For American culture, the six topics discussed in the groups, along with the participants' comments about it in the exit surveys, revealed their need to gain more of this background knowledge. Ellen's comment on American culture exemplified this need, "I have a chance to talk about American culture and it makes me get confident of using English." This comment also signified an increase in confidence when discussing American culture, so this may have

reflected self-efficacy and language anxiety, as well. The common theme of American culture was consistent with research on other ELL students needing to know more about a country's culture and using peer strategies to learn about it (Duff, 2001; Wang et al., 2008).

Within the theme of American culture, the subcategory of US dorm and campus culture connected with prior research showing ELL students experiencing obstacles with the culture of a university and using peer strategies for help (Wang et al., 2008). Jane asking, "Is it okay to ask a question during a lecture?" related to Kim's (2006) findings that ELL students were having difficulty asking questions in class. Laura's comment, "I recently moved to East Campus . . . but the bus is a problem" reflected prior research on obstacles with campus culture and ELL students seeking peer support such as orientation programs to acclimate (Wang et al., 2008).

English Language Explanations

In addition to American culture, the importance of learning translations, grammar, and other explanations of the English language was apparent in the observations and responses on exit surveys. For example, Sue commented, "to understand words/phrase which American students often use," when asked what helped her most for interacting with American friends. With learning grammar and American expressions, the participants gained confidence both inside and outside the group for having everyday conversations with American peers. Therefore, this could have contributed to the participants' self-efficacy. Further, Connie's score of moderate self-efficacy on the pre-test subscale for ability (3.18) was reflected in her asking for help with translations and grammar in the groups. Moreover, Sue scoring close to moderate self-efficacy on the pre-test subscale for activity perception (2.71) may have manifested in her asking for clarification on the class assignment about Syrian refugees and getting help with how to discuss it in class.

Finally, the overall theme of English Language explanations was congruent with the research showing speaking and conversational skills as an area of need for ELL students (Duff, 2001; Ferris & Tagg, 1996; Kim, 2006; Ostler, 1980; Wang et al., 2008). The benefits of the participants asking for information, receiving explanations including visual cues, and practicing conversations in English could also be compared to benefits ELL students have gained with other oral communication strategies including peer groups (Bejarano et al., 1997; Kasapoglu-Akyol, 2010; Lam, 2010).

Limitations

Several limitations exist which may have influenced the results of this study. One feature of the group that impacted the data collection is that participants were not required to attend each week. Though this was an essential feature of the groups to keep the structure informal and non-intimidating, it resulted in a fluctuation in the number of participants. Six students, two in the Monday group and four in the Tuesday group, were present for the pre-test and two or more of the meetings; however, only four of these participants completed the post-test. In addition to the low response rate on the post-test, this was a small sample size, so caution should be used when generalizing results. Further, the study was five weeks long, which may have been too short of a timeframe to measure progress.

Future Research

Despite the limitations of this study, the findings showed ways in which the peer-led conversation groups benefited ELL students. Along with the findings from past research on ELL and non-ELL peer-led groups (De Backer et al., 2015; Min, 2006; Quitadamo, 2009), the results of this study have suggested the value of further research on peer-led groups for university ELL students. However, considering this study's limitations, different approaches in the timespan and

design would be recommended. First, conducting the research for a full semester or academic year would be recommended. Second, with more time allotted for data collection, a qualitative design (as compared with a mixed methods design) would be recommended. An in-depth qualitative study would allow the researcher to gain a better understanding of the diversity of perspectives and experiences presented in a university level peer-led ELL group.

As observations and participants' comments have shown, oral communication skills are important for ELL college students, and a peer-led conversation group can help with some of the obstacles these students face. It is important for oral communication to be examined further, along with strategies for improving this skill for ELL students. Although research has been limited in this area, the results have indicated a need for more research in the future.

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Appendix A

Perceived Self-Efficacy Level in English Language Oral Communication Ability Survey

Instructions: Please indicate the degree of your agreement (using the scales provided) to each of the statements below. There are no right or wrong answers:

1 = Strongly Agree (SA)

2 = Agree (A)

3 = Slightly Agree (S)

4 = Disagree (D)

5 = Strongly Disagree (SD)

| NO | ITEMS | SA | A | S | D | SD |
|----|--|----|---|---|---|----|
| 1 | I do a good job of participating in class discussion conducted fully in English. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 2 | I am good at learning speaking skills. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 3 | I have no problem with learning speaking skills. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 4 | I do not have any problem speaking in English when I should. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 5 | I can motivate myself to speak English. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 6 | I can speak well, fully in English with my ESL tutor. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 7 | I am good at communicating with the international students. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 8 | I can learn and use new English words in my conversation easily. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 9 | I am able to keep speaking in English even when my friends tease me. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 10 | When I decide to say something in English, I go ahead and do it. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 11 | It is not difficult for me to concentrate while speaking in English with others. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 12 | I enjoy having group discussions in class when they are done fully in English. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 13 | I do not find oral presentations difficult to do. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 14 | I enjoy communicating with others in English. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 15 | I enjoy speaking in English with anybody except my American friends. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 16 | I enjoy speaking in English with my American friends. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 17 | I like doing individual oral presentations in class (in English). | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 18 | Doing group oral presentations in English is enjoyable. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 19 | I can speak English well when there are others who encourage me. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 20 | One of my main aims is to improve my speaking ability in English by next year. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 21 | Speaking well in English is one of my goals in life. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 22 | I would like to speak good English just like other students who are good English speakers. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 23 | I would like to be a fluent speaker to enhance my confidence level. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 24 | I would like to be a fluent English speaker so that I will be respected by my friends. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

(Idrus & Salleh, 2008; Idrus & Sivapalan, 2010).

Appendix B

Observation Forms

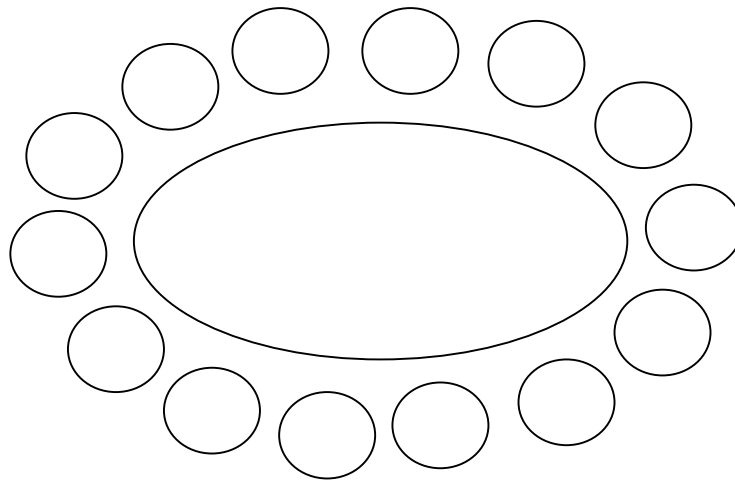
Note taker form

Note-taker Initials: |_|_|_| Date: |_|_|/|_|_|/|_|_| Time start ___:___ end ___:___

Meeting place description: *detail and description, e.g. size and accessibility, and how this could affect the discussion; interruptions during the discussion*

Participants: *how many of those invited participated, description of demographics if not formally collecting this data*

Seating diagram:



Group dynamics: *general description – level of participation, dominant and passive participants, interest level, boredom, anxiety – and how these relate to the different topics discussed*

(Chandler, Reynolds, Palmer, & Hutchinson, 2008).

| Time | Tutor | Tutee(s) | Observer comments, questions and suggestions |
|-------------|-------------------------------|------------------------------|---|
| | Actions and activities | Actions and responses | |
| | | | |

Appendix C

Exit Ticket #1: Monday Group

- When I'm in a conversation with native English speakers, I understand ____% of what they are saying.
- When I'm listening to a lecture in English, I understand ____% of what is said in the lecture.
- When I'm talking to my professor in English, I understand ____% of what the professor is saying.
- Some benefits I hope to get from coming to the ESL conversation group are:

First name & last initial (or Otter ID#): _____ Date _____

- I feel ____% confident speaking in a conversation with native English speakers.
- List any ways the ESL conversation group has helped you socialize or interact with American students.

- List any ways this group has helped you talk to your professors.

First name & last initial (or Otter ID#): _____ Date _____

- I feel ____% confident speaking in a conversation with native English speakers.
- What do you think has helped you the most in the ESL conversation group?

- Do you feel like you have met the goals you had from coming to the ESL conversation group?
