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# Learner Empowerment: A Collaborative Approach to Peer-Assisted Learning in Global Languages

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## Introduction

As a public, comprehensive four-year institution in southern Massachusetts, Bridgewater State University is committed to preparing globally engaged citizens in a world that is gradually more multilingual and multicultural. The growth and expansion of the Peer-Assisted Learning (PAL) program not only suggests strong interests in acquiring skills and knowledge to actively engage in a global community, but also attests to the effects of PAL on learner empowerment.

In this increasingly globalized world, students in a myriad of majors seek competencies in foreign languages in order to be better prepared personally and professionally. Fluency in a foreign language is often touted as one of the most significant attributes in new hires (*International Business Times*, January 2011), which includes not only for-profit companies, but also non-profit organizations. By the same token, learning a foreign language can be fraught with pitfalls and difficulties. Students who are not naturally inclined to learn languages might balk at a four-semester requirement in a Global Management major, for example.

With that in mind, a Peer-Assisted Learning (PAL) program for foreign language courses was established in 2006 (focusing initially on Japanese and later Spanish) to create a more interactive learning environment inside and outside the classroom with the help of native speakers of the target language. The university already had two models of Supplemental Instruction (SI) on campus, which has been called Peer Assisted Learning or PAL. The first was piloted by the Department of Psychology in collaboration with the Academic Achievement Center (AAC) led by Dorie AuCoin. The second model, which came several years later, was initiated by STEM departments and was supported by a National Science Foundation (NSF) grant. What has been seen in departments with PAL courses is the dramatic growth in the PALs working on partnership with their faculty. This relationship changes the day-to-day dialog between students and faculty. The student becomes a much more respected member of the learning triangle and the professor, to a certain degree, releases some control of the teaching method. This is truly an example of what a partnership can be.

The Japanese PAL Program adapted this PAL leader model and was redesigned for tutors to reflect and think about their own tutoring strategies in language learning, and to engage language learners in hands-on learning. The PAL supervisor (Dorie AuCoin) and the Japanese professor (Minae Savas) have worked collaboratively with the PAL leaders to help language learners develop their learning strategies. The Chair of the Foreign Languages Department (Fernanda Ferreira) worked with the department faculty members to create and approve a new course titled Peer Tutoring in Spanish, which would be taken by PAL leaders working with a Spanish professor (Duilio Ayalamacedo). PAL leaders are further supported through completion of a comprehensive training program that focuses upon guided learning strategies that foster student initiative and mastery.

This essay reports on a study that critically examined the trajectory of the PAL program in the Foreign Languages Department, which has undertaken a series of projects to build an encouraging and non-judgmental learning environment, specifically in language learning, and to incorporate a partnership between learners, tutors, supervisors and professors.

### **Developing a Peer-Assisted Learning Program for Foreign Language Courses**

To increase opportunities for language learners to interact with native speakers of the target language, international students from Japan were first recruited to serve as tutors for Japanese courses in 2006. For the first few years, academic support for students learning elementary Japanese was primarily offered through in-class, native Japanese speaking tutors. Although students definitely needed the tutorial support, class enrollment was small and the in-class tutor met most of the students' needs. When Minae Savas, the full-time Japanese professor, was hired in 2008, course enrollment increased and more advanced levels of Japanese were offered regularly. The new professor also felt that English-speaking students would benefit from English-speaking tutors who had mastered Japanese. Thus, a partnership between the PAL supervisor, the Japanese professor and the tutors was first formed. Since then the program has continued to undergo changes that highlight the importance of learner-centered collaborative peer-assisted learning.

There were some challenges that we faced as we collaborated with both the target-language speaking tutors as well as the English-speaking tutors. We encouraged the English-speaking students and the Japanese students to cooperate with each other. The English-speaking tutors offered to help the Japanese tutors to integrate well into the class as well as the campus community; the Japanese tutors helped the English-speaking tutors to improve their Japanese language skills. With the help of student collaboration, the number of applicants for PAL positions increased; the peer-assisted learning program for foreign languages gradually improved from a 'native speakers only' program to a more inclusive learner-centered program. This expansion of the program also helped us serve the needs of growing global language learners on campus.

In 2010 the program began to provide training for learners of their target language as tutors. Students who had managed to master Japanese in previous classes were encouraged to become PAL leaders. The supervisor worked together with the PALs to help them develop their strategies while utilizing their specialized knowledge and Japanese language skills, which resulted in another partnership for the PAL leaders in addition to the Japanese professor. The PAL leaders further developed a partnership with the PAL supervisor through the Peer Tutor Training Workshops offered by the AAC. The workshops are designed for students to learn the foundation of guided learning, discovery learning, inquiry learning, and the basics of the Socratic Method of Inquiry used when guiding students to the answers of their own questions. For peer educators planning on becoming PAL leaders, it is even more important that they attend the training and learn how to not re-teach the material covered in class, how not to give students answers to their questions, how not to let students shirk from the challenge of learning difficult concepts.

It is through training that PAL leaders first begin to understand the partnership they are entering into with their faculty. Especially with Japanese PAL leaders, the professor references the training components regularly, reinforcing that PAL leaders are expected to enhance the teaching received in the classroom, not replace it. This creates the foundation for the partnership between PAL leaders and the professor. Because the PAL supervisor knows little about the Japanese language, it is easy to focus on method and allow the professor to support the content. This additional partnership gives the PAL leaders an added level of support and validation that the work they do is fostering student mastery. It also leads to many late afternoon discussions about how to approach the next challenging section of Japanese language learning. These strategy sessions add to the confidence level of PAL leaders so they feel ready to face student questions, without such confidence, even the most practiced PAL could be manipulated by a struggling student to offer more of an answer than what would normally prompt the student to do his/her own work.

The collaborative partnership has worked to strengthen the PAL leaders' sense of belonging, their sense of being a capable partner with the professor and the students. Ultimately, this gave them a heightened sense of accomplishment, growth and confidence while they worked closely with a faculty member and a college administrator. Partnership is defined here not only as

a collaborative effort, but is also embedded in a sense of respect for the professor's expertise and the supervisor's knowledge as well as the mutual respect that the professor and the supervisor have for the efforts made by the students and the PAL leaders. The partnership between the PAL leaders and the Japanese professor furthermore gave her a chance to learn from them why and where students had difficulty learning Japanese and was able to adapt her teaching methods using the PAL leaders' observations.

### **Creating a Course in Peer-Tutoring**

The success of the program in Japanese prompted the Foreign Languages Department to create a cognate course for Spanish, LASP 333 – Peer Tutoring in Spanish, which gives the same opportunities for students to interact with more advanced learners of Spanish in several challenging courses, such as LASP 200 Intermediate Spanish II and LASP 370 Advanced Spanish Grammar.

The development of this new course designated in Spanish for majors was no small feat. It required a careful examination of the models that already existed at the university. For example, there was a discussion on whether PAL leaders would be paid or if they should get college credit for assisting their peers. At the beginning, the more established model was related to "student workers," who received payment hourly for their class attendance and for scheduling out-of-class study sessions. These sessions focused on the concepts needed for language development and helping students with their homework at the AAC. The new model included a new course, which students would register for, with the help of the professor, who would vet the more gifted students. The Spanish professor teaching the course would get a full three-credit load for the first time we implemented this course, on an experimental basis. The second time around, and subsequently, the instructor received 0.33 credits per student PAL leader, to be banked for later. That is, once the professor reached three credits, he or she could take a course release.

An assessment of the PAL sessions in Spanish is captured by the very insightful comments made by one of the PAL leaders, Samantha Roman, who said: *"Being a PAL meant that I could be better integrated into the tutoring process. I could be a better tutor because I knew exactly what was happening in the class and I wasn't intimidating to the other students. I was part mentor and part tutor, which helped me develop relationships with the students so they had a comfortable learning environment. The classroom can be intimidating, so having someone on your side in the classroom to ask a question can really be comforting."*

It's clear from her words above that being a PAL leader is just as much about knowledge as it is about a positive rapport with the learners. This same student also commented on how being in this position helped her own growth: *"Since I am getting degrees in Spanish and education, it was an experience that helped me see firsthand the struggles and joys of teaching another language. I worked with diverse students and they taught me how to teach them in the best way considering their different abilities and skills. By tutoring them, my own proficiency and confidence in Spanish increased."*

The selection of PAL leaders in the Spanish program faced some of the same challenges as in the Japanese program. Native speakers, although obviously more fluent in Spanish, lacked the formal understanding of some grammatical concepts. At the same time, gifted non-native speakers were more apt to understand those concepts and served as successful PAL leaders. This change came about because of the close monitoring of the Spanish professor and his continuous assessment of PAL leaders. The selection process for PAL leaders incorporated writing tasks, so that grammatical knowledge, not just speaking abilities, became a critical characteristic of a successful PAL leaders. This move parallels what happened in the Japanese program, where the reliance on native speakers was replaced by more training from gifted non-native learners.

### **Conducting PAL Sessions**

PAL sessions function similar to Supplemental Instruction (SI) in many ways. The SI model of learning support helps students in challenging courses master content while they develop and integrate learning and study strategies (Arendale, 2004). As in the SI model, four key people are involved in the PAL program: the PAL supervisor, the faculty member, the PAL leader, and the

participating students. In the same way as the SI leader, the PAL leader primarily serves as a facilitator who helps students to integrate course content with learning and study strategies.

Unique to the Japanese PAL model as compared to other disciplines is that Japanese PALs actually engage in mini-PAL sessions during class time. These mini-sessions are directed by the professor beforehand, and initiated at her cue in class. The Japanese professor and the PAL supervisor have worked diligently over the last few years to strengthen the out-of-class PAL sessions so students see the value of working on the material frequently after instruction. Between the Japanese professor's continued support of the PAL leaders and how they help students master concepts, and the support of the PAL supervisor on how to lead students to their own learning, the PAL sessions have continued to blossom. Of particular importance to the Japanese PAL sessions is the preparation of the PAL leader in developing learning activities/strategies for students to work on in the session. An important note is that the Japanese professor and supervisor incorporated many of the veteran PAL leaders' activities/strategies and ideas when they implemented them in class. The addition, this year, of the staff meetings has enhanced the sharing of successful ideas so newer PAL leaders have the added bonus of using a "tried and true" method.

### **Conducting In-Class Tutoring**

Each PAL leader is assigned to one of the languages courses in the beginning of each semester. PAL leaders attend their assigned class regularly throughout the semester. In class while PAL leaders work closely with students as their peer learners, they also serve as role models for students to observe and emulate. PAL leaders for Japanese courses often get motivated to serve as such because they themselves have struggled as language learners and they want to help their peers. In spite of their initial struggle, they continue to work harder to master their target language. They have a strong passion for learning a language different from their own, which helps re-energize student motivation in language classes. Their commitment to helping their peers also helps build a sense of community among students. Some PAL leaders come to class early to help students prepare for class. Other PAL leaders offer PAL sessions after class to provide additional time for students to review and practice what has been covered in class. PAL leaders often share their own struggles as language learners with their peers.

PAL leaders' reports also suggest that being engaged in the classroom activities helps them integrate themselves into the class, and also to develop partnerships with the students and the professor. PAL leaders often comment that in-class tutoring provides them with great opportunities to observe the students' performance, so that they can understand what kind of help the students need from the PAL leaders.

The value of the PAL experience is expressed in a thoughtful Japanese PAL leader comment. Michael Rose said: *"Working as a PAL has been a valuable experience both as a student and a future teacher. When I began, it was my first time ever working with students in a classroom. When I had taken Japanese, I had learned it my way with my own problems and successes. Working with other students opened my mind a bit to how other people learn."*

The Japanese professor on her part strives to engage PAL leaders actively as partners in class by giving opportunities for PAL leaders to conduct mini-PAL sessions during class. While they conduct these mini-PAL sessions, they assume a leadership role as they direct small group activities, which they have designed. Flipping roles in class is challenging for both PAL leaders and the professor. However, we have observed that this practice helps foster student engagement in the classroom. To further help PAL leaders take on leadership roles, we started holding monthly PAL staff meetings.

### **PAL Staff Meetings**

PAL leaders hold monthly staff meetings. With the help of the Japanese professor and the PAL supervisor, PAL leaders take turns creating a meeting agenda, chairing a meeting, and writing the minutes. At meetings they discuss problems and concerns about their PAL sessions and their in-class tutoring. The professor and the supervisor provide them with the information, guidance, and support needed to help PAL leaders solve their problems and boost their confidence. PAL staff meetings also provide a

platform for discussion of their tutoring strategies. The senior PAL leaders often share their success stories as well as stories of failure with the new PAL leaders. The new PAL leaders often suggest innovative ideas. A new PAL leader, for example, proposed that they periodically send students PAL session invitations in Japanese via email. Another PAL leader suggested that they design a sign for Japanese PAL sessions and name tags for PAL leaders. The most senior PAL leader offered to create the sign and name tags.

The following comment from Mike Rose highlights the importance of PAL staff meetings:

*“PAL staff meetings are what really gave us that chance to work together. Everyone would come to the meetings with their own ideas and suggestions and we were able to bounce ideas off of each other about how we can better help our students...The meetings allowed us to share study strategies, tutoring strategies, bring up problems, and solve those problems. They are invaluable for getting PALs on the same page and working together.”*

Compared to the Japanese PAL sessions, the work with Spanish PAL leaders is still in its infancy. The community aspect still needs to be developed. Again, here's a comment from Samantha Roman about this missing piece: *“My only suggestion is that sometimes it felt isolating because I never met with other tutors to share ideas, etc. Maybe if I met with other tutors, it would have felt more like a community.”*

Discussing issues in person, at the monthly staff meetings, with their peer PAL leaders and the faculty/PAL supervisors helped create a sense of community among the PAL team and also served to develop PAL leader's leadership skills. Previously, much of the communication was done via email between PAL leader, supervisor, and professor. The staff meetings helped the PAL leaders and faculty supervisors communicate with each other more effectively. In essence, all these practices have worked to create a solid partnership between the four key parties working jointly during the semester. It is apparent how each member of this partnership grows as a language learner, PAL leader, professor and supervisor when discussions, idea sharing, and support happen in the group meeting setting. The development of this partnership relationship has been the richest outcome of the Japanese PAL program, and one that it is hoped will become even richer.

## **Conclusion**

Working as a team was challenging for the PAL/faculty supervisors as well as for the PAL leaders. Our experience, knowledge, skill sets, and perspectives are so diverse that we constantly have to remind ourselves to be flexible and willing to adjust our strategies. The Japanese PAL consists of students across the disciplines, so each leader has different strengths and weaknesses; they have to learn how to collaborate with each other.

The Japanese professor, especially in the beginning, struggled to find ways to bring *former* students (now PAL leaders) into equal participation in class as facilitators/leaders because in class they tend to step back into their previous role as students. Holding monthly PAL staff meetings, however, helped the PAL leaders as well as the professor to learn more about partnership. Japanese PAL staff meetings are organized by the PAL leaders with the help of the Japanese professor and the PAL supervisor. The professor and supervisor attend meetings; PAL leaders are responsible for chairing meetings and taking meeting minutes. In this arrangement PAL leaders assume the leadership while the professor/supervisor collaborate with them under their leadership. This flipped role experience helped the professor view PAL leaders as partners rather than as former students.

Of key importance to the successful partnership between PAL leaders and their professor is the understanding that the Japanese professor, the Foreign Languages Department Chair, and AAC Assistant Director can all work together to insure the continued growth and success of PAL leader experiences not only in Japanese, but also in other foreign languages, such as Spanish. Without each partner's willingness to do his/her part to make this effort flourish, and continue to strengthen, the continuation of PAL leaders in foreign languages would certainly suffer. More significantly, these unique partnership experiences would not be available to future students, PAL leaders, professors or supervisors. In sum, it is of utmost importance that everyone involved

agrees that the partnership will continue to grow and develop. With all its pitfalls, learning opportunities and self-examinations, the PAL program has been able to achieve what it set out to do: to empower students vis-à-vis learning languages and to help them in confidence and self-reliance. These added benefits were also felt by the faculty members, as they learned more about their classroom and rapport with students.

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