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THE MOTIVES AND BENEFITS OF PEER TEACHING FOR MEDICAL STUDENTS IN LANGUAGE CLASSES



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With the rapid expansion of internationalisation, the number of students enrolled at the English and German Programmes of the University of Pécs Medical School has increased dramatically. The authors decided to make use of the benefits this multicultural student population can provide in regard to

teaching Medical English or German to Hungarian students and Medical Hungarian to international students. The Department of Languages for Biomedical Purposes have been recruiting Teaching Assistants (TAs) to provide a natural language learning environment and, in addition, create a new platform for our Hungarian and international students to become acquainted with other cultures, share experience and learn from each other. The present paper seeks to summarize the findings of a questionnaire study which aims at assessing the TAs' motivations, expectations, and perceptions as well as the potential benefits of the classes, where Hungarian and international students work together. To the best of the authors' knowledge there is a lack of qualitative studies to explore the experience of peer teaching in the language classroom of the medical schools. According to our results both the international and the Hungarian TAs believed that these classes had managed to break the invisible wall between the local and the international students, improve students' teaching and communication skills and enhance their confidence in several fields. With the study we were also able to gain insights into what motivated student tutors to teach in language classes and what positive or negative experiences they had.

TEACHING ASSISTANTS; LANGUAGE LEARNING; MOTIVES; BENEFITS; PEER TEACHING

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Introduction. The present paper summarizes the motivations, experiences, benefits and shortcomings of working as a Teaching Assistant (TA) described from the perspective of its student participants at the Department of Languages for Biomedical Purposes and Communication (DLBC) at the University of Pécs Medical School (UPMS). The Department runs various EMP Courses for the Hungarian students, and Medical Hungarian courses for the international students studying at the German or English programmes. International students may enrol in elective language courses for medical purposes. These courses are offered during 4 semesters, 4 classes per week. A final exam in Medical Hungarian is a criterion requirement for their clinical courses from the third academic year. In order to take advantage of the benefits of this multicultural environment, the department recruits Hungarian and international TAs with an aim to provide a more motivating and natural language learning and socializing environment.

Few studies have considered the impact of the TA experience on TAs themselves in

the context of the foreign language classroom of medical schools. Our general objective was to provide the Hungarian and international students of the UPMS working together in the language classroom with a platform to share experience. We have been inviting Hungarian and international TAs to act as peer teachers in foreign language courses since 2015.

Relevance. Teaching Assistant (TA) students have been commonly involved in training at several medical schools all over the globe. TAs are assigned to perform a diversity of tasks and roles including tutoring, preparing quiz sections, or giving lectures [1]. The teaching assistant (TA) program, often referred to as peer teaching, has been implemented in medical education widely [2], and is regarded beneficial for all parties including students, teaching assistants and teachers [3]. "Peer teaching can be defined as an educational arrangement in which one student teaches one or more fellow students. A 'near peer teacher' – one of the most common forms of peer teaching – is a student who is more advanced, by at least one- year

distance. “ [4: 546]. The general concept of peer teaching can be categorized into different forms and manifestations [5]. Accordingly, different terminology is used for this method and there are various peer-teaching models, for example seminars, coaching, lab classes, skills training, etc. Several terms have been used in the literature, such as peer tutoring, peer supported learning, collaborative learning, or peer-assisted learning [6]. Peer Assisted Learning (PAL) is the umbrella term and refers to a method in which students learn from students [7].

By involving students in the learning and teaching process, PAL can improve motivation and class performance, and increase development of collaboration and communication skills; moreover, it has benefits for all participants including the peer tutors, the students and the teachers [8]. Studies have shown that in higher education PAL models can increase motivation and give incentive to students to put more effort in studying [4]. Peer tutors may also serve as role models for younger students and help reduce anxiety in the classroom [9]. At medical schools, PAL usually operates using third year or senior students working alone or in pairs to supervise first year or second year students [10]. This learning process can be either classroom-based or can take place in the lab or clinical settings. However, most medical students feel they lack the necessary skills to teach peers, so it is important to give them the opportunity for teaching during medical school [11;12]. In medical education, anatomy was the first field that involved students as teaching assistants in dissection classes [13]. This method has also been used to teach clinical skills, physical examination and communication skills [14]. It has been shown by previous studies that the concepts of ‘social and cognitive congruence’ play an important role in PAL [1]. These concepts mean that peer tutors and students have

similar social roles and similar background knowledge, which serves as an explanation why students communicate more informally and effectively and understand subject matters more easily [4]. Teaching with TAs can also be introduced in foreign language courses, moreover international senior students acting as tutors are especially motivating and helpful in teaching languages for medical purposes. With the involvement of international peers, we expect to increase the students’ willingness and motivation to communicate in the foreign language.

Methods. Research context. The study described was undertaken at the University of Pécs Medical School (UPMS), at the Department of Languages for Biomedical Purposes and Communication (DLBC) during the spring semester of the academic year 2019/2020. At the UPMS the TA program is referred to as “demonstrator activity” and it was launched in the year 2015 and has since been continuously developed and extended. Within the framework of the program senior medical students participate directly in the educational work of the clinics and several Basic Science Departments. The TAs aid in designing classroom tasks, giving and assessing classes and practices. The TA activity enables the students to obtain a deeper insight into a field of science and the work of instructors and at the same time promotes the acquisition of didactic thinking. TA work is also beneficial for learners who are inspired by peer teachers. In order to take advantage of the benefits of this multicultural student environment at the UPMS, several teachers of the DLBC recruit teaching assistants from the students of the Hungarian, English and German programmes. The TAs work and assist teachers in various courses for Medical Hungarian, German and English courses.

Research methodology, participants and data collection.

Initially the survey was planned to be carried out in the form of in-depth semi-structured interviews with TAs who were teaching at the DLBC. After the interviews we planned to perform a qualitative content analysis. The aim of the study was to examine how TAs experienced and evaluated their roles as peer teachers, what their motivations were and what they had gained from the experience. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic we could not carry out the interviews, therefore a questionnaire was designed by the authors of this study in English.

In the questionnaire the same questions were formulated that we planned to ask in the interviews (see Table 1). Study participation was voluntary, and the participants were informed about the purpose of the study and we granted confidentiality regarding their personal data. We invited the teachers of the DLBC to recruit TAs to answer the online questionnaire. A total of 27 students working as TAs agreed to take part in the study. The questionnaire included 22 questions altogether. The first eight questions asked about sociodemographic information, such as gender, age, nationality, studies and previous TA work experience (see Table 2). The next 14 open-ended questions were related to their motivations, perceptions, difficulties, attitudes and benefits of working as a TA. Subsequently, the answers of the participants were subjected to a qualitative content analysis. In qualitative research design, a thorough description of the data is utilized so that the researcher can “interpret a phenomenon in terms of the meanings people attach to them” and view it holistically [15: 15]. Quotations from the questionnaire (printed in italics) have been extracted to provide an in-depth understanding of the participants’ perceptions and experience to support the findings.

Table 1

Main questions of the study

- Why did you decide to become a Teaching Assistant (TA)? What were your motivations?
- Were these ideas/ expectations fulfilled?
- What were your first impressions as a TA? Did these first impressions change in any way later on? How?
- Do you think it is a good idea to ask TAs to assist in foreign language learning class? Why? Why not?
- What kind of positive experiences have you had as a TA so far? Can you share a story?
- What kind of less favourable experiences have you had as a TA so far? Can you share a story?
- What are/were the difficulties/challenges of being a demonstrator in language classes?
- What do enjoy about being a TA?
- What do you think students like and dislike about learning with TAs?
- What are the benefits of these classes to the students?
- What kind of changes did you notice in the Hungarian/International students’ attitude/motivation/ language proficiency/confidence throughout the classes in which you were working with them?
- Have these classes changed your attitude toward the different culture of the students?
- What have you gained from being a TA? What skills have you learned/improved since working as a TA?
- What are the (long-term) benefits of being a TA?

Table 2

Base-line characteristics of TAs

Gender	Female=17 (63%), male= 10 (37%)
Age	19-28 years
Study Programme of the UPMS	3 German, 11 English, 13 Hungarian
Nationalities	13 Hungarian 4 Jordanian 3 German 1 German-Hungarian 1 American 1 British 1 Canadian 1 Spanish 1 Mexican 1 Vietnamese
Experience as a TA	85% of students work as a TA for more than 1 semester

Research questions. The overarching research questions of the study can be described as:

- What motivates the participants to work as TAs?
- How their attitudes have changed during their peer teaching activities?
- What do students consider as being the benefits and shortcomings of working as a TA in teaching a foreign language for medical purposes?

Results and discussion. In the following we will describe the main categories and topics derived from the respondents' answers. We will also provide quotes from the answers of the TAs for further illustration. The study's results are discussed in immediate context of the quotations.

Personal motives for working as a TA.

Most respondents described a strong motivation to work as a TA, and five main motives could be detected. First, the TAs found it particularly rewarding to help other students.

“It seemed to me a great challenge to help teaching Medical Hungarian for students from all around the world.”

“Gaining new experience while helping my fellow students.”

“To improve my language skills and help other students.”

“I became a demonstrator because I was interested in helping the community in regard to enhancing their English language skills. I wanted to work in an educational environment where I can make a difference to students' lives and witness positive changes/impacts for others.”

They also emphasized that they wanted to gain experience in teaching *“I wanted to gain*

some teaching experience”; *“enhancing teaching and communication skills”*; *“I love to teach, to give the knowledge of mine to others.”*

Another motive many of them highlighted was that they could improve their language and communication skills:

“I wanted to interact with Hungarian students and be able to learn and improve my Hungarian skills.”

“At university ppl [people] tend to neglect practicing and improving their language skill but I didn't want to be one of them... “

The majority of the respondents mentioned the opportunity for networking with students from another culture as a key reason for becoming a TA:

“being in contact with international students”;

“I would love to make friends, learn social skills”;

“I also thought it was an excellent opportunity to get to know other students and cultures”;

“I was also motivated to get to know international students, their cultures and their difficulties.”

Finally, some of them stated that they had a previous positive experience of working with a TA as a student at the University, and these peer teachers motivated them to join the TA program later:

“I found the TAs who I met in my language classes and their work very motivating and interesting, I wanted to try myself out in this situation”;

“I had great demonstrators”.

In summary, the following main motives for working as a TA could be detected: the helping attitude of students; improvement of teaching, professional, language and communication skills; opportunity for networking, especially

with students from another culture; and previous positive experience with role model TAs.

How TAs' first impressions changed. The quotations below make it very clear that students were expecting some difficulties at the beginning, but they became more confident during their TA work. The students also mentioned the importance of the relaxed and helpful learning atmosphere. Some students mentioned that teaching was more complex than they had expected, and it required careful preparatory work.

"I expected that students and the professor were going to expect a lot from me but later I realized that they are supportive and friendly."

"I was scared at first because I didn't teach before (the idea of teaching students almost the same age of yours is challenging) but now I feel more confident and I like what I do. "

"I learned that it is way harder to prepare for a class than I thought."

Peer teaching in a foreign language class. The answers of the questionnaire revealed that peer teaching in a language for medical purposes class was a win-win situation. It is beneficial for both TAs and students, as it improves communication skills and creativity at the same time. The respondents emphasized that it was an efficient, more exciting and natural way of learning and teaching a language. There is a better understanding of students' learning needs as TAs are about the same age with the students and have the same study background. TAs can easily relate to the students in the classroom and can share their own experiences with a more informal manner than teachers.

"It is an amazing idea and opportunity. In my opinion it is a good time investment, not only students learn but also TAs."

"It is also a good point that TAs are students as well, with the same problems and with a similar situation as international students."

"I believe it is a good idea as sometimes students are more comfortable speaking to someone other than their teacher and it gives them a chance to learn through a different perspective."

They also mentioned the important aspects of working in small groups and focusing on communication rather than grammar:

"The students could practice more and talk to the demonstrators, they could get more positive feedback and learn that it is important to use the language and not just focus on the grammar."

Networking and the opportunity to break the walls between the students of the different programmes was emphasised here again:

"This helps students to merge and mix especially in between different programs."

"...helps narrowing the gap between Hungarian and international students"

Positive experiences as a TA. The TAs considered that the students were enthusiastic and positive about their presence in the classes. Making friends or networking was a key factor in this session as well. They emphasized how important it was for them to meet and socialize with other students:

"Very positive for me personally is that I made friends with some Hungarian students. Outside of the lessons, there is often not much contact with the other programs."

The TAs thought that positive feedback from the students as well as the mentor teachers were substantial factors for their enthusiasm and complacency.

"I had many positive experiences. One of my favourite is when I was a TA for first time of my life I was scared, and a person from the class said after class, I was so

cool and it's really good that I help them, and make them easier to study Hungarian. After that, when we met at school any time, we always asked each other what's going on with us, and started conversations."

"One time I made a new ice breaking game and it was so fun and entertaining and I could see that on the students faces it was so rewarding for me"

Negative experiences and dealing with classroom challenges. Some of the TAs discussed various negative aspects and challenges of teaching and mentioned specific experiences they had had during the courses. They most commonly complained about unmotivated students, who would not participate in the activities. They also mentioned that students were at different levels of language proficiency, which made teaching more challenging. Some students did not accept TAs as "teachers" and were not cooperating. However, most of the TAs did not have any negative experiences during the sessions.

"Some students aren't willing to be taught by other students 'of their same level', or they're reluctant to participate in the classes. It is hard at times to encourage them to participate in the class and to do so nicely."

Some peer tutors felt insecure about their professional knowledge or didactic methods. They emphasized that preparation was essential, but at the same time it was important to be flexible in unexpected situations. However, the TAs reported that they have gained confidence and expertise in teaching during their work.

"The study planning, new activities each week, how to make the class interesting, exciting and convince students' interests."

"Definitely building my confidence in myself and my knowledge. It is also

difficult to find a way to keep your way of explaining interesting to the students."

In summary, challenges for TAs were unmotivated students, heterogenous groups in terms of language competencies and their lack of didactic skills as well as low self-confidence at the beginning of their work at the department.

Benefits for the students . We also asked our TAs what they think student learners benefit from these sessions where peer tutors are involved in language teaching. They highlighted some important aspects of the relationship between TAs and students. First, the TAs are students as well at the same university, as a result they share the same experiences, and have similar difficulties. The respondents believed that students felt more confident to interact with peers and they also thought that students liked working with them.

"I can say that maybe students feel more confident in interacting with another student whose English is also their second language but have more experience."

They also emphasized that the presence of TAs may create a more relaxed atmosphere for learning in which the students are more confident to ask questions.

"They probably like working with their peers, they feel more relaxed."

TAs perceived that students found it an interesting and a different way of learning with peer tutors, they feel that TAs provided a productive and motivating environment for learning the foreign language or other skills. For the purpose of learning the language the opportunity to communicate with native speakers was also highlighted: *"To be able to interact with more English speakers"*.

Furthermore, several of the TAs thought that working in small groups allowed more time and opportunities for learners to practice and communicate. The students were less

anxious to ask questions and make mistakes in this environment. Besides the productive and friendly atmosphere this method enables the active participation of all students in the classroom.

What students dislike-as perceived by TAs. Some of the positive aspects were considered as negatives by a few respondents. A few of them believed that students did not like the idea that they were at the same age. They felt that students did not trust the information from peer tutors, and TAs did not have the competence to answer their questions. Some students did not like talking in front of other students and group work meant extra effort for unmotivated students.

“I think they dislike the idea that we are almost the same age”

“Being a student like them, some enjoy it, others don't.”

“Maybe, they don't think that we are professional enough to teach the subject.”

“Maybe they don't like sometimes if TAs are slower and sometimes we do not know the right answer (for example questions about their exam) and we have to get help from the teacher as well.”

The problem of unmotivated students was mentioned in several parts of the questionnaire, as learning the language—especially Medical Hungarian – is not in the focus of their studies.

Change in attitudes and the influence of TA work on personal relationships. Most of the students – both Hungarian and international—reported that they did not really have friends from the other programmes and did not socialize with the students of the Medical School studying in a different language. It is difficult to mix the different cultures that is mostly caused by the fact that they do not have a lot of platforms to meet and study together. International students often have the impression that Hungarian students are

not friendly. As a result of more interaction in TA work they learn more about the culture and realize that students are more open-minded than they thought previously. One of the reasons behind could be the students' lack of confidence to communicate in a foreign language.

“To say the truth I believed Hungarians were not too friendly or they don't like internationals but it turns out that their major and only problem is their confidence in their language skills and all it takes is to break the ice between us and show them that their language skills are good and sufficient.”

“I did enjoy the insights because it is very hard to get to know Hungarian students as a foreign student. I got very positive impressions.”

Hungarian students commonly have the same stereotypes about international students at the Medical School [16] but during their work as a TA they become more interested in and open to other cultures.

“It made me learn more about the different cultures.”

“Yes I think I am more open-minded, than the time before TA work.”

In conclusion, working as a TA can help increase intercultural competences and working as a peer tutor enables to learn about other cultures and break the invisible walls between the students of the different study programmes.

Improvement of skills and personal development. One of the main motives that TAs reported were that they could improve their own skills or even acquire new professional skills during their work. They listed the following specific skills that they have improved or learned:

- language and communication skills
- presentations skills, public speaking skills
- teaching and didactic skills
- working in a team

- problem-solving
- time management
- leadership and organizational skills
- creativity
- practical skills (taking medical history)
- socializing skills

Furthermore, the respondents were aware of their personal development in several aspects. Our results suggest that working as a TA increases self-confidence: *“Being more confident, more responsible to my work, “or “I definitely improved my ability to talk more confident in front of people”*. They mentioned other qualities such as being more responsible, or able to overcome difficulties, give positive feedback and appreciate others’ work. The TA respondents also agreed that there were long-term benefits of this work and the skills learnt would serve them in their future careers.

“Great experience, being confident and an amazing way to start your career as you are not afraid to stand and talk in front of people.”

Conclusions. With the present study we were able to gain some insight into the motivations and experiences of TAs teaching in the foreign language classes of our medical school. Due to the situation and closures caused by COVID-19, we decided to conduct a questionnaire study instead of in-depth interviews. Despite the study method we were able to obtain a lot of data as our respondents gave very detailed answers to the questions.

The respondents’ answers helped to gain a better understanding of students’ motives for teaching in the language classroom of the medical school. The main motivating factors were to simultaneously share their knowledge and help the community and improve their own skills at the same time. They found it particularly important to be able socialize with other students, especially from other cultures since they only had very limited opportunities to meet at the university.

The study revealed that peer teaching in the language for medical purposes class was beneficial for both TAs and students similarly to other research results [3][8]. The results demonstrated that the TAs greatly enjoyed working in the language classes. The presence of TAs created a more relaxed and informal atmosphere in the classroom. The concepts of social and cognitive congruence play an essential role in peer teaching in this context similarly to other settings of peer assisted learning [1] [4]. The TAs could understand the needs of students more easily and could offer help more efficiently. However, some respondents believed that students did not like to be taught by peers and felt that they were not competent enough to help them and answer their questions. It has to be mentioned that we only surveyed the peer teachers and their perceptions, there was no feedback collected from the students in the present study. The further challenges in the classroom were unmotivated students and heterogenous language competencies.

The results of the study suggest that peer teaching in the classroom of languages for medical purposes could offer a wide range of benefits for the TAs. Networking with students and teachers was an important aspect of their work as peer teachers. A lot of TAs stated that these classes helped them with understanding each other’s culture by sharing experiences, getting to know one another, and even making friends. We can also conclude that multicultural classes create a more realistic and interactive environment for language learning.

The TAs also reported to increase self-confidence and improvement in several skills, such as teaching, public speaking, language and communication skills. Thus, it would be crucial to pay attention to recruit more peer tutors and help improve these qualities. The results of our study could have implications for the training of TAs in the future.

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Чонгор А., Хамбух А., Немет Т., Хильд Г. Мотивы и преимущества взаимного обучения студентов-медиков на занятиях по иностранному языку. В связи с быстрым распространением интернационализации резко возросло количество студентов, обучающихся на английском и немецком языках на Медицинском факультете Печского университета. Авторы решили использовать преимущества этого мультикультурного студенческого сообщества для преподавания медицинского английского или немецкого языка венгерским студентам и медицинского венгерского языка иностранным студентам. Кафедра языков для биомедицинских целей набирает ассистентов преподавателей (АП), чтобы создать естественную среду изучения языка и, помимо этого, организовать новую платформу для наших венгерских и иностранных студентов для их знакомства с другими культурами, обмена опытом и взаимного обучения. Данная статья направлена на обобщение результатов анкетирования, целью которого является оценка мотивации, ожиданий и восприятия, а также потенциальных преимуществ занятий, на которых вен-

герские и иностранные студенты работают вместе. Насколько известно авторам, качественных исследований по изучению опыта взаимного обучения на занятиях по иностранному языку недостаточно. Согласно нашим результатам, как иностранные, так и венгерские АП посчитали, что эти занятия помогли сплотить местных и иностранных студентов, улучшить их преподавательские и коммуникативные навыки и приобрести крепкие знания в различных областях. С помощью этого исследования мы также смогли получить представление о том, что мотивировало АП преподавать иностранный язык на занятиях и какой положительный или отрицательный опыт они получили.

АССИСТЕНТЫ ПРЕПОДАВАТЕЛЯ; ИЗУЧЕНИЕ ЯЗЫКА; МОТИВЫ; ПРЕИМУЩЕСТВА;
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