

LEARNING AMONG OLDER ADULTS: THE POTENTIAL OF PEER TUTORING

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Abstract

Peer tutoring is a cooperative learning method based on linking people with similar characteristics or situations who help each other in order to learn. Cooperative learning is understood as an inclusive educational methodology that turns difference and heterogeneity into a positive element of learning. It consists of organising the group into small working groups or stable pairs over time, where all participants become active agents in their learning process and take responsibility for both their own process and that of their peers. The classroom becomes a meaningful learning space that favours the integration of knowledge and the development of competences that are not strictly instructional. The benefits of peer tutoring are manifold, although Topping (2000) highlights two: the bonding that is established between the participants and the continuous interaction over time that facilitates a relationship, knowledge and mutual help. However, this method is rarely applied in the older adult population. For this reason, this paper presents an educational experience where peer tutoring was implemented in older adults to promote memory knowledge and optimise their training process. The design and implementation of the educational project is explained, providing the data collected from the evaluation process, in order to identify the benefits of peer tutoring. The participants were twenty-nine older adults from the city of Barcelona, three of whom were tutors. The sample was selected using inclusion and exclusion criteria. The twenty-six participants were distributed in three groups. The three tutors had no previous teaching experience. The data collection instruments were different for each agent. Being, in the case of the students, a survey and a discussion group. For the tutors, a participant observation and a survey. The results establish that peer mentoring in older adults has benefits. In per regarding the mentees, it favours a greater knowledge and, consequently, a greater perception of memory functioning. Per concerning the tutors, a greater feeling of help and social usefulness. The overall evaluation of the experience was positive; 9.08 for the tutors and 9.53 for the tutees. In conclusion, peer tutoring is a good learning method for older adults.

Keywords: *Peer mentoring, learning, benefits, mentoring, mentoree, mentored.*

1. Introduction

Memory is a cognitive domain of concern for the older adult population. Cognitive training programs aimed at the older adult population, without pathology and from an educational and preventive perspective, are oriented to work on metamemory and to provide strategies and techniques that favour learning and cognitive work (Calatayud et al., 2018; Pérez et al., 2015). A significant percentage of older adults participate in these programs with the aim of optimizing this domain and consequently improving their cognitive health (Sánchez & Fernández, 2021).

The increase of older people, the concern about memory as the person ages and the increase in demands from that social group to participate in memory training programs raised the need for innovative changes to respond to such demands. In turn, the needs were reinforced by social policies aimed at the empowerment of this group and the need to place the elderly person at the centre of the intervention (Vidal-Martí, 2020; 2023).

This scenario led to the creation of an intervention project, within the framework of a memory training program, with the aim of responding to these needs and promoting the active role of the elderly (Vidal-Martí, 2012; 2022). A project was designed and implemented in which the older adult had a greater role and helped other people, to train and promote memory training.

Peer tutoring was chosen because it is a collaborative learning method, in which members help each other in their learning process in order to acquire the established competencies (Fernández-Barros et al., 2023). Peer tutoring is understood as a cooperative learning method in which there are two differentiated roles; the tutor and the tutored (Topping, 2000; Topping & Ehly, 1998).

In this experience, the same age typology was used, in which the tutor is an older adult person and the tutored as well. Before starting the experience, the tutors participated in training and, later, with the support of a professional, they designed the educational intervention: objectives, contents, activities (individual, group and reinforcement) and evaluation criteria (criteria and instruments).

2. Design

The design of this study is descriptive, qualitative and cross-sectional.

3. Objectives

The objectives of this study were twofold. The first focused on describing the design and implementation of peer tutoring for older adults and the second on the benefits of the experience.

4. Methods

4.1. Participants

The initial sample consisted of 32 participants, 3 of whom were excluded because they did not complete the project. The sample was selected using inclusion and exclusion criteria. The inclusion criteria were three: being over 60 years of age, having participated in a memory training project taught by a professional, and explicit willingness to participate.

The exclusion criteria were two: having a cognitive impairment and having a disease that would disable the person to participate in the experience. Each participant underwent a neuropsychological assessment and an in-depth interview to identify possible exclusion criteria.

The sociodemographic characteristics of the 29 participants were that 75.86% were women and 24.14% men. The mean age was 74.7 years, ranging from 62 to 77 years. There were twenty-six participants, distributed in three groups: one of eight and two of nine, and three tutors. The participants, who assumed the role of tutor, were two women and one man, two with a high school education and one with a university education. The three tutors had no previous teaching experience.

4.2. Data collection

There were two data collection techniques: a survey and a discussion group. The first was instrumented by means of a questionnaire.

The questionnaire was structured in two distinct parts. The first focused on the overall assessment of the experience and the second, more specific, consisted of eight closed questions.

Using a Likert-type scale, the participants were asked to respond to these questions, establishing a value of 1 to not at all in agreement and 10 totally in agreement.

The eight items surveyed by means of closed questions were: content, methodology, organization, facilities, duration, schedule, number of sessions and materials. The questionnaire was administered to the students during the last session of the project and to the tutors at the end of their work.

The focus group was made up of ten tutees, two tutors and one professional from the organization. All participated on a voluntary basis. It was constituted following the premises of Krueger (1991). It lasted about two hours and focused on learning about the benefits at the educational level in greater detail.

4.3. Procedure

The project was presented to potential candidates, who were older adults who had previously attended a memory training program taught by a professional. Following the presentation, the selection of the potential tutors and mentees began. First, the tutors were selected and, later on, the mentees.

At the same time as the selection of the tutors, the training of them was carried out. It consisted of a training based on three blocks: peer tutoring, group dynamization and memory training.

Once the training was completed, working sessions were established to design the planning in a consensual manner. In turn, two follow-up meetings were established for the tutors while the project was being implemented; however, only one was held and it dealt with anecdotal issues.

Data collection and processing was carried out taking into consideration all ethical aspects.

5. Discussion

One objective of this work was to make visible the experience of peer tutoring in older adults in a non-academic context, in order to further reinforce the active participation of the participants and facilitate their memory training.

Few experiences of implementation of peer tutoring in older adults were found in the literature review. The references found focus their subject matter on learning technological tools in a recurrent manner (Freddolino et al., 2010; Pihlainen et al., 2021; Woodward et al., 2013). The only common criterion identified in the papers was age; however, comparison on the basis of this variable made little sense and did not provide any complementary data.

Based on the experience, commenting that both the tutees and the tutors valued its implementation positively. The experience was positively evaluated by the two agents who participated. The scores obtained were higher than 7 out of 10 in both roles and in all items, with the exception of organizational issues, in which tutors and mentees differed.

A second objective was to learn about the benefits of peer tutoring. Four aspects were identified, with two tutors and mentees agreeing.

The first was the sharing of experiences, experiences and concerns about memory. Both tutors and mentees commented that this benefit was present throughout the project. Tutors expressed that sharing helped them to understand the discomfort of memory loss; and mentees to understand that cognitive changes are part of the cognitive aging process. They added that having moments to share throughout the project contributed to increase the perception of receiving support and consequently favoured greater peer support in their learning process. This process of approaching the other person, and not focusing on oneself, was highlighted as a positive element. This issue is relevant in the ageing process to reinforce generativity and the sense of one's own existence.

A second benefit is that the experience facilitated the learning process (Duran, 2006; Margüello et al., 2024). In this work, the data obtained do not allow for a clear positioning, although in the focus group tutors and tutees clearly stated that peer tutoring had helped to acquire concepts and knowledge for memory training. Therefore, although no reliable data are available, there is a perception that the method facilitated the learning process.

A benefit expressed only by the tutors was the attention to diversity. The tutors affirmed that the methodology helped the learning process, because in both individual and group activities, the cultural, learning and motivational differences among the students were visualized. The group work favoured mutual help among the students and, consequently, reinforced the achievement and encouraged the learning process as a group. Different research supports this same benefit (Heredia & Duran, 2013, Molina et al., 2019).

A benefit identified by the mentees is that peer tutoring provided positive effects different from other learning methods. The favourable climate of communication, a greater perception of help, accompaniment and interest in sharing would explain that people of different ages helped each other to train their memory. Peer tutoring allowed those being tutored to have a tutor as a reference person, who was close, interacted as an equal, guided and made the learning process possible, both for those who had difficulties and those who did not.

6. Conclusions

This work shows that peer tutoring is a good method for promoting educational experiences in older adults. The good assessment of the tutors and the tutees and the benefits provided by peer tutoring allow us to affirm that this method is optimal to facilitate memory training and to be applied in this age group.

However, the author of this paper is aware of possible limitations. In future experiences it will be important to expand the instruments to collect information that will make it possible to know the degree of learning with greater precision. In the questionnaire as well as in the discussion group, both the tutors and the students affirmed that the experience had facilitated learning. However, these statements could not be contrasted with data extracted from the techniques and call into question their suitability.

In short, peer tutoring in older adults is a good educational method to favour memory training.

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