

# **The Communication Behaviors of Peer Tutors on College Campuses**

Rebecca Kohlmeyer

Dr. Uttara Manohar, Communication Studies

## **ABSTRACT**

The advantages of peer tutoring have been documented in prior research (Davis, et al., 2017; Kaiden, 1994). The purpose of this research was to understand the communication behaviors in peer tutoring that students perceive as effective. Two theories, the communication accommodation theory (Giles, 2014) and the politeness theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987), were used to develop a research question to determine what tutor behaviors were perceived as effective and ineffective in facilitating learning for students. Eight undergraduate college students participated in the qualitative research method and semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant. Two themes emerged from the data. The findings revealed that participants felt learning was most effective when the tutor used positive verbal validation, initiated the conversation, and worked to eliminate a power hierarchy in the tutoring session. Ineffective communication behavior reported from participants included negative verbal communication and a lack of attention from the tutor. This research resulted in two main findings. One was that tutors should use face-saving strategies to create more effective tutoring sessions; the other was that tutors who develop a better understanding of their students' preferred tutoring styles and goals of the tutoring session are perceived as most effective.

## **THE COMMUNICATION BEHAVIORS OF PEER TUTORS ON COLLEGE CAMPUSES**

Peer tutoring was defined by Topping (1996) as "people from similar social groupings who are not professional teachers helping each other to learn and learning themselves by teaching' (pp. 322). A more modern definition of peer tutoring, as defined by Roscoe and Chi (2007) is the recruitment of one student to provide one-on-one instruction for another student, in part with given titles of parties to "tutor" and "student" roles. The tutor often finds themselves in a difficult position where they are not quite a student and not quite a teacher, but something else entirely (Abbot, et al., 2018). Traditionally, the tutor has more knowledge and expertise on the subject than the student does (Roscoe & Chi, 2007). Comprehending how peer tutors adapt their communication style to generate a more productive and satisfactory learning environment that also encourages undergraduate students to return to peer tutoring centers is beneficial to both the student, tutor, and the universities so they may keep this model going. The interaction between tutor and student can include an examination of the use of nonverbals, eye contact, upward and downward convergence, and the face-affirming or face-threatening words that the tutor uses. This research analyzed the best communication behavior to produce effective peer tutoring sessions with their students; the communication accommodation theory (Giles, 2014) was used along with the politeness theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987) to forward a communication-focused examination of this topic.

In prior research, it was demonstrated that when students attend tutoring centers at the undergraduate level, the amount of success they can achieve in those specific courses will increase (Davis, et al., 2017). The advantages of peer tutoring have already been tested, but to best benefit students who use peer tutoring centers, it is useful to understand the behaviors in tutoring that accommodate students. Research already exists to understand face-threatening behaviors and the benefits of utilizing peer tutors (Brummernhenrich & Jucks, 2016). Another study focused on repeat attendance at a college tutoring center based on performance in a given class (Kaiden, 1994). The existing research highlights the benefits of peer tutoring but more research is needed to identify effective communication practices that determine the level of satisfaction the student feels about the tutoring session. This study is also necessary for it is such an important topic. More research focusing on peer tutors is necessary because currently there is little research on the topic. By focusing on the behaviors of peer tutors more research would meet the need by giving a better understanding of peer tutoring which would benefit students, tutors, and universities (Falk-Ross & Horowitz, 2017).

The purpose of this research is to understand what communication behaviors impact students' face, either negatively or positively. The review of literature serves as an outline for the research that exists relating to this topic, it also acts as the framework for what previous research has studied and thus justifies why this study is necessary. The research question was generated to determine the most effective methods of communication during peer tutoring sessions will be introduced. The method section details how the research was gathered. The results describe what was found during the research process. And finally, the discussion section applies the results and gives them meaning.

### *Review of Literature*

This section will review relevant research pertaining to the effectiveness of peer tutoring, specifically the role of peer tutors and the benefits of peer tutoring. This will be followed by a discussion about communication accommodation processes (Giles, 2014) and politeness concerns (Brown & Levinson, 1987) in the provision of effective feedback between peer tutors and students. Encouragement in the instructional communication context and face concerns in the instructional communication context will also be examined within this review of previous literature.

**Effective peer tutoring.** To understand what peer tutoring is and how it functions as a positive tool for students, an examination of effective peer tutoring research will outline what has already been studied to create a guideline for what this study will look for in effective peer tutoring. There have been several studies done to further prove the effectiveness of peer tutoring. The following subtopics were compiled to focus on two essential parts of this research. The first is the role of peer tutors and the second is the benefits of peer tutoring.

**Role of peer tutors.** Peer tutors are students who have demonstrated excellence in a given field, however, their skills and duties excel beyond just teaching their peers. They serve as a bridge between educators and students on college campuses. Understanding their roles will aid in understanding their behavior.

Research by Abbot, Graf, and Chatfield (2018) was performed to properly comprehend the experiences of peer tutors by using both quantitative and qualitative approaches. The purpose of this study was to evaluate the expectations to which peer tutors are held by their advisors and themselves. Specifically, this research was done to "get a broad sense of the lived experiences of peer tutors." (Abbot, et al., 2018, p. 247) To determine the findings' the researchers used a case study approach. This involved sending a survey to peer tutors who specifically tutor first-year students. After 76 received the initial survey, 49 replied. Following the initial survey, the peer tutors had the option of further participating by partaking in email interviews and focus groups. The purpose of the more in-depth interview scenarios was to hopefully better understand similarities and differences in the peer tutor experiences. These findings created a list of shared codes, the codes were tutoring responsibilities, peer tutor relationship to professor, and positionality. From the codes, a relevant finding for the current research was that many peer tutors find themselves as a sort of liaison for students (Abbot, et al., 2018). In this research one peer tutor reported:

I didn't realize how big the disconnect between the professor and the freshman students can be. I remember being afraid of my professors but I didn't realize how much... Sometimes it helps if I put it in student-speak instead of professor-speak. (Abbot, et al., 2018)

The trend in research has shown that students are not necessarily comfortable with the idea of peer tutors initially. It is important to note that while peer tutors are individuals who are skillful in their specific area of study, they are also students who often endured the same feeling of uncertainty that their students have now.

In another study (Thompson & Mazer, 2009) it was found that both motivational and esteem support have lower importance logistically, but according to students, those two nurturant behaviors – specifically motivational support – are more important than the behaviors with higher importance. This further demonstrates that peer tutors are responsible for much more than helping students understand foreign material, they also encourage the students to continue participating in class and to create higher quality work (Abbot, et al., 2018).

**Benefits of peer tutoring.** Many benefits have already been proven to be true for peer tutor centers on college campuses at an undergraduate level, the following review will examine prior research that addresses the benefits of peer tutoring.

Research by Davis, Jacobs, and Linvill (2017) was performed to test two hypotheses created by the authors. The hypothesis suggests that by requiring tutoring sessions students will improve in both their public speaking skills and their grades. (Davis, et al., 2017). The research found that the students who were required to attend tutoring sessions scored significantly higher in several areas than students who did not attend tutoring sessions (Davis, et al., 2017). It makes sense then, that attending a tutoring session would improve scores and boost confidence levels for students who are unsure of material in a given subject. This study works within the context of this research as it furthers the idea that peer tutoring, when effective, improves the skills of students in a given subject.

Another study (Kaiden, 1994) was conducted with the goal of understanding if it was relevant to a student's grade whether they attended a tutoring center once versus more than once. The research found that many peer tutors must be taught beyond what is traditionally expected and develop skills on a more interpersonal level to succeed as a tutor (Kaiden, 1994). According to this research, peer tutors must develop academic skills as well as counseling skills to better connect with their students and overcome any barriers to the tutoring session (Kaiden, 1994). The idea of developing counseling skills falls in line with what was previously discussed: Peer tutors need to develop these critical skills to have a more productive and successful tutoring session that will likely result in students returning to the tutoring center. The actual results of the test did determine that 82% of students (n=65) who returned to a tutoring center more than once believe that their grade would improve by more than one letter grade (Kaiden, 1994), by examining and determining the most effective peer tutor behaviors, it can be assumed that more students would also believe that their grade would improve.

Peer tutoring is a positive resource that many individuals are lucky to benefit from but to further benefit even more students this study uses two theories to understand how communication behaviors can be adapted to fit the needs of their students best. The communication accommodation theory examines how individuals adjust and adapt their behaviors and speaking to meet the needs of the individual or individuals they are interacting with (Giles, 2014).

**Communication Accommodation in Instructional Contexts.** Communication accommodation theory (Giles, 2014) is used in the present study to comprehend how peer tutors adjust their communication to match and meet that of their students. Giles provides the framework for predicting and explaining how individuals alter their communication behaviors to fit within the context of a relationship. Since the 1980s, the communication accommodation theory has been reworked and reframed. The reframing for this particular study interprets face-to-face communication within communication accommodation theory. The theory focuses on the idea of upward and downward convergence. According to Giles (2014), "Upward convergence would be a communicative move to a more prestigious dialect or speech style... Downward convergence would, therefore, be a move whereby a speaker matches another's more parochial, colloquial, or stigmatized communication." (p. 208). This relates to peer tutoring because tutors are expected to make their students feel comfortable upon working with them and that can be done through upward and downward convergence. One downfall to the communication accommodation theory is that the level that individuals accommodate is not an agreed-upon level, it is a level that is determined based on impressions perceived by the person who is converging (Giles, 2014). While upward and downward convergence are the two ideas most relatable to this topic, the idea of speech maintenance is also applicable. Speech maintenance is when a speaker, or in this case, tutor, maintains one common speech style for all of the individuals they encounter (Giles, 2014).

Clarification and simplification of the communication accommodation theory further provide context for the usefulness and relation of this theory within the present study. This paper, presented by Gallois, Ogay, and Giles recognizes the way communication accommodation theory can be evaluated differently for different studies, and according to the authors, this is a key part of the communication accommodation theory (2005). This paper had three phases that described in detail what came before the communication accommodation theory, the details of the communication accommodation theory, and what is important to note for the future of the communication accommodation theory. For the purposes of this study, the third phase is what will be explored. The third phase of this study examines three general assumptions of the communication accommodation theory and eleven different presumptions, these assumptions and presumptions work to develop the idea that only behaviors can be discernible in a given situation. This is because any behavior in a situation will be the focal point that the ensuing interaction progresses into (Gallois, et al., 2005). The authors also address what can occur when an individual does not accommodate their communicative counterpart. This presents itself when a speaker does not make any attempts to

accommodate the person or persons they are speaking to and focus on maintaining their behavior (Gallois, et al., 2005). This can also look like overaccommodation which can present itself when a speaker uses patronizing language that stereotypes the person or persons they are speaking with (Gallois, et al., 2005). Both nonaccommodation and overaccommodation are necessary to consider regarding peer tutors because peer tutors must find a way to refrain from stereotyping or letting bias into their tutoring session, but they must have the skills to accommodate to their students so they can have a successful and personal tutoring session. Despite not relating directly to peer tutoring, this paper is useful as it addresses the struggles associated with accommodation that can influence how a tutor is perceived.

Several prior studies have used communication accommodation theory as a framework to research done between instructors and students. A previous research study used the communication accommodation theory to examine how higher education students react when their instructor used specific positive linguistic techniques and slang phrases (Mazer & Hunt, 2008). Another study done in Taiwan investigated the communication accommodation behaviors of instructors working with older adults (Chen, 2018), this research is relevant to the present study because many students may feel uncomfortable receiving feedback from an instructor who is the same age as, or younger, than them. Finally, a research study done specifically with business students in higher education used quantitative methods to determine if instructors who focus more on creating happy students instead of productive learning are harmful to the instructor-student relationship (Offstein & Chory, 2017). Each study was performed in unique ways specific to their participants but the results each had strikingly similar themes and while many important findings were reported within each study, specific findings are relevant to the current study. Chen reported that age is not necessarily as imperative to instructional communication as social and demographic background (2018). Mazer and Hunt found that when instructors correctly use positive slang appropriately and cautiously, the results can be very beneficial to students (2008). Similarly, it was determined that while downward convergence can be beneficial to some students, it is important to alter the communication and behavior to better reflect the goals of the learning experience (Offstein & Chory, 2017). With each study, a theme of understanding the student and the instructional method that will best benefit the student is highlighted. Downward convergence from communication accommodation theory, as emphasized in these studies, can be beneficial to the student so long as the instructor is intentional in how they apply it. Taking the themes from these studies and understanding them prior to conducting the present study with peer tutoring will allow insight into how students perceive certain communication accommodation when they are interacting with their peers in an environment unlike those in these studies.

Using this theory is necessary to the study because as a tutor it is necessary to understand the goals of students coming in. There is a need to have that alignment and accommodate what each student needs. Brown & Levinson take the idea of accommodating one step further to understand specific face concerns (1987).

**Politeness in Instructional Feedback.** Politeness theory, first developed by Brown and Levinson (1987), acknowledges the idea that everyone has face and that everyone's face can be threatened or reaffirmed. The idea of face comes from the sociologist Ervin Goffman, according to Brown and Levinson. To understand politeness theory, it is critical to understand that there are different kinds of face, both negative and positive (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Positive face is the desire to be sought-after by other people and the wish to gain the approval of others. Negative face is the desire for an individual's actions to be unrestricted by other individuals (Brown & Levinson, 1987). People generally do not want to engage in face-threatening acts, and as a result possess face values, which are the things that an individual determines is a positive social value. Positive social values shift from person to person. Politeness theory considers politeness as the mechanism that protects or neglects a person's face value (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Tutors have a responsibility to their students to protect their face values and stray away from face-threatening acts. A study (Kerssen-Griep, et al., 2003) revealed that students have a higher motivation to learn, are more aware and responsive in class, and have an overall better attitude about learning when they experience face support from a teacher, professor, or tutor while receiving feedback. By recognizing politeness theory and understanding students' face values, tutors can foster tutoring practices that are more likely to lead to students' successful tutoring sessions.

Politeness theory and communication accommodation theory work together to help explain the coordination between tutors and students to the topic of peer tutors. Both theories address the students' needs to be affirmed and communicated in a way that is most beneficial for them. The problem, however, is that there is no way to know what the most beneficial communication method is for each student that enters a peer tutoring center. There is some

information on the most effective way to utilize politeness theory, though. According to Duthler, online communication can seem less polite than face-to-face communication (2006). Research by Brummernhenrich and Jucks (2016) further suggests that politeness in tutoring is necessary. This study used the quantitative method to test three hypotheses that were curated to further understand face-threatening communication in online tutoring. The research found that if tutors responded with polite language when approached with face-threatening topics the students would view them as more approachable (Brummernhenrich & Jucks, 2016). This research similarly relates to the topic for this study because it focused on understanding face-threatening communication between the tutor and the student and also primarily focused on online tutoring-sessions. The current study will be focusing on face-to-face communication because of that, this article further supports the need for the current study.

***Encouragement in instructional communication context.*** A successful tutoring session and a successful peer tutor have already been explained. In order to have a positive tutoring session that encourages students to return, encouragement must be used to affirm the student. Speech maintenance is not necessarily as effective in tutoring centers because each student has unique needs that need to be met through encouragement. Agne and Muller's (2019) research utilizes the qualitative method to answer the proposed question "What discourse practices function to co-create relational identities between tutors and students in STEM peer tutoring?" The method used for this study was one that worked to make connections within communication problems and the solutions for them (Agne and Muller, 2019). Their research consisted of analyzing 10 one-hour recordings of peer-to-peer tutoring sessions. By focusing on moments that struck them as "relationally oriented" Agne and Muller (2019) were able to develop an answer to their research question. Through their study, the pair found that encouragement plays an immense role in successful tutoring sessions (Agne & Muller, 2019). Encouragement is not the same as a pep talk; it is head nods while the student is speaking to remind them that the tutor is listening, it is saying "yes" while the student is asking questions to affirm the student and let them know the tutor finds merit in their questions (Agne & Muller, 2019). This study supports the idea that students respond better when they are both accommodated and encouraged.

Agne and Muller (2019) did not use the communication accommodation theory in their research, rather the duo used the grounded practical theory (Craig & Tracy, 2014). The grounded practical theory (Craig & Tracy, 2014) is not being used for the current research, but according to the work done by Agne and Muller (2019), the theory maintains that "communication practice is the starting point for study. Communication practices are ones in which human interaction has an important role." (Craig & Tracy, 2014, p. 230). Despite not using the communication accommodation theory the results found in the research by Agne and Muller (2019) suggest that encouragement can create a more comfortable tutoring atmosphere. Those results are useful in the present study because they give a framework for how students already feel about support and encouragement.

Similarly, Bynum (2015) proposed that encouragement is crucial in order to create a proportionate representation of women in higher education. Bynum argues that encouragement is essential in "providing direction and support for women who aspire to advanced leadership positions." (Bynum, 2015, p. 69). It can be assumed then, that if encouragement from a mentor - or a tutor - can improve a woman's likelihood of pursuing higher education it is likely to encourage other students to perform better as well. This works with the present study because it supports the idea that students who are mentored or tutored with encouragement will see great benefits.

***Face concerns in instructional communication context.*** An important part of politeness theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987) is face communication. Communication behaviors that peer tutors relay to their students will either target their negative or positive face, and face-threatening communication can be detrimental to the tutoring session. By understanding the face-threatening behaviors, tutors are more capable of creating productive environments.

The research conducted by Hadden and Frisby (2019) aimed to test four hypotheses using the quantitative research method. The purpose was to examine how instructors can lower face-threatening acts and support students through interpersonal relationships. The study found that written feedback can give insight into the communication from an instructor to the student that can improve the self-efficacy of students (Hadden & Frisby, 2019). Also written by Hadden, her thesis (2017) used the qualitative method to determine whether instructional feedback can be designed to increase student efficacy for learning and give support to those feedback situations. The findings concluded that instructors should be aware of the verbal and written messages that are being sent to students and how those may influence efficacy and the emotional support that they feel they are given (Hadden, 2017). These two studies work together to suggest face-affirming behaviors that peer tutors could adopt in their tutoring sessions to

facilitate a more productive and encouraging learning environment. These studies also provide evidence that tutors learning to provide positive-face affirming feedback will certainly create more effective tutoring sessions.

A similar study (Bell, et al., 2019) investigated the relationship between students and peer tutors in a way that is similar to the proposed study. The research took six weeks to complete and focused on two peer tutors who worked primarily with first-year college students. The study surveyed the two peer tutoring sessions with students over a six-week period. Then, using the politeness theory (Brown and Levinson, 1987) the authors analyzed transcripts and notes to measure how significant politeness is during the tutoring sessions. The findings determined that negative politeness is an important tool within peer tutoring sessions, this is because, when used appropriately, it can aid in the student's recognition that they themselves are responsible for being an active participant in the tutoring session to ensure that it works effectively and that the goal of peer tutoring sessions is to learn (Bell, et al., 2019). The research found that positive politeness is fundamental to peer tutoring sessions as well due to the desire to build trust (Bell, et al., 2019). Once trust is built, the tutoring session can proceed with a high likelihood of success. These findings will be beneficial to the current study because it focuses primarily on positive politeness and negative politeness in relation to face-threatening behavior. These studies all work to demonstrate the need to understand the most universally beneficial communication behaviors in peer tutoring sessions.

Understanding how both the communication accommodation theory (Giles, 2014) and politeness theory (Brown & Levinson, 2009) were used to develop the present study and how they work within the framework of this study is essential. Similar studies have been performed using politeness theory, these studies include Bell, et al. (2019) and Brummernhenrich and Jucks (2016). And after introducing the communication accommodation theory it is apparent that upward and downward convergence were important to the present study as well. After examining further research on the topics relating to this study - effective peer tutoring, encouragement, and positive and negative face communication - it is clear that there is existing research surrounding peer tutors. While there is research that exists, the research that is lacking is equally important. The need for research to determine which communication behaviors of tutors students are most receptive to is vital to improving peer tutors throughout all universities and as a result improving the experience for students. Peer tutors also must understand how their interactions with students can promote or hurt a tutoring session. By applying the politeness theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987) along with the communication accommodation theory (Giles, 2014) it was recognized that tutors can alter their behaviors and accommodate the needs of their students. In order to determine this, the research question was proposed:

RQ: What peer tutor behaviors are perceived as effective and ineffective in facilitating learning for students?

## METHODS

The purpose of this study was to understand what peer tutor behaviors were perceived as effective and ineffective in facilitating learning for students. The following section details the specific research methods used to conduct this study and describes the participants and procedures of the study.

### *Method Description*

This study used interview-based qualitative research that was conducted both in-person and online via video. These interviews allowed the participants to recount personal experiences with peer tutoring centers and reflect on the effective and ineffective behaviors of the tutor. Qualitative research was beneficial for this study because it provided a view of human communication that was more specifically focused on the unique ways that people communicate in environments, specifically how those with personal goals and objectives used their communication to give meaning within a person's daily life. (Chesebro & Borisoff, 2007). Therefore, by using qualitative research to guide this study, participants were able to communicate their own goals for the tutoring center and describe what they consider the pragmatic objective of peer tutoring.

### *Participants*

The participants for this study were eight undergraduate students, 18 years or older, who had used the peer tutoring center on their campus within the last five months. The students used tutors from an assortment of different subjects - chemistry, accounting, physics, writing, math, biology, and computer science - and were at various points in their undergraduate careers. There were two freshmen, two sophomores, two juniors, and two seniors who participated in this study. Demographic information was not significant to this study and specifics of gender, race, or ethnicity were not considered when addressing the results. However, it can be noted that there were four female participants and four male participants. To recruit participants for this study, a sign-up was placed in the tutoring

center, advertisements were also placed on the researcher's social media platforms. Participants showed interest either by signing up in the tutoring center or by contacting the researcher upon seeing the advertisement.

### *Procedure*

Before data collection, an informed consent form and questions for the interview protocol were developed. The informed consent form was necessary to educate the participants on how the semi-structured interview process would be conducted. The interviews lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. Each interview was recorded and the participant was able to stop the recording at any time. After the interview, each was transcribed verbatim. Transcriptions and recordings were locked on a password secure device and deleted immediately following the completion of the study. The data was studied meticulously. After familiarization of the data, a thematic analysis was used to identify codes that worked to answer the research question. Those codes were then compared to identify any overlap to condense categories and develop themes. The themes were important for illustrating specific research question points (Braun & Clark, 2006).

## **RESULTS**

Each interview was conducted with the specific goal of understanding the perceived communication behaviors of peer tutors and what was most effective and ineffective. In this center, students enter the area of study seeking guidance in a specific subject. Not one single tutoring session is the same, but when considering the research question, two behavior categories appeared.

The research question was presented to determine what peer tutor behaviors are perceived as effective and ineffective in facilitating learning for students. With that question in mind, two behavior categories emerged from the data, each with themes that satisfied the research question. The two behavior categories that appeared were effective peer tutoring and ineffective peer tutoring, the following section describes each theme found within the research.

### *Effective.*

Effective communication behaviors can be subjective depending on who the tutor is and who the student is. Every participant reported specific behaviors the tutors exercised that the student perceived as more effective in facilitating their learning. These behaviors were broken into four themes: Power Hierarchy, Verbal Validation, Initiation from the Tutor, and Tutoring Techniques.

**Power hierarchy.** Five of the eight participants described experiencing a tutor who shifted the power dynamic through both nonverbal and verbal behaviors to create less of a teacher-student relationship and more of a peer relationship. Participants found it beneficial when tutors who were unfamiliar with a topic, or struggled to remember the steps to solving a problem, worked with the student to understand or remember. One participant, Derek, described this experience as follows:

When I'm struggling with a problem and then the tutor is taken back by it and they have to look back through their notes and figure it out, that makes me feel kind of validated because it affirms that it is a hard problem, it's not just that I don't understand what the concept is.

The tutor looking through their notes to help the student solve the problem was beneficial to the student because it allowed the student to view the tutor as a peer instead of a teacher who holds power over them. This nonverbal behavior validated the student's efforts. It is also something that another participant, who uses the peer tutoring center and is a peer tutor, reflected on in a different way:

A lot of students say that it makes them feel better when it takes us a couple of minutes to get it because then they know that it's not obvious and they just couldn't figure it out. And that's something I appreciate too when I ask a question and they say something like "Oh this is kind of hard" and then they take a few minutes before they get it.

In this participant's experience, the participant benefitted from the tutor expressing that what the student had presented to the tutor was difficult. Verbal behavior that eliminates the power hierarchy validates the student because it produces a dynamic that is more comfortable for the student. Another way for students to feel better about the tutoring process, was for the tutor to verbally encourage and affirm their struggles and efforts.

**Verbal validation.** All eight participants reported that when working with tutors they preferred the tutor to communicate verbally with them in an overly positive way. There were specific phrases that many participants described as being especially beneficial and that made them feel the most validated with the tutoring process. These phrases could be given to students in two ways, the first was as the student presented the problem or the topic they would like to work with the tutor on. These phrases were “Oh, I remember learning this, it’s kind of difficult, but we’ll work through it.” and “Yes it is hard, don’t believe that it’s not because it is.” The other way validation can be given is once the student shows they have grasped the concept. These comments, as reported from participants, were “It definitely seems like you’re getting it.”, “There you go, now you’ve got it!”.

According to one participant, Josh, “The positive aspects of our interactions are really along the lines of them encouraging me.” This positive encouragement and validation, both before and after the student solved the problem was one of the biggest indicators that a student would return to the tutoring center. One participant, Alex, described that this specific type of verbal validation “Makes you want to go back just because they’re being really enthusiastic about it and encouraging.” Validation, like the shifting of the power hierarchy, is only one element of effective peer tutoring. Equally important when reporting what was effective in peer tutoring was when the tutor initiated the conversation at the beginning of the tutoring session.

**Initiation from the tutor.** Half of the participants reported feeling the tutoring session was more effective if the tutor initiated communication with the student. Initiating is when the tutor approaches the student once the student enters the tutoring center. The specific tutoring center used for this study did not use appointments for many of the subjects tutors worked in. This initiation can establish a positive foundation for the tutor and the student to begin building a healthy tutoring relationship. A participant, Kelly, described it in the following way:

It just sets a positive foundation right away if they are like, “Hi I am... I’m the tutor, where can we get started, what are you stuck on?” It kind of starts your relationship and you both are working towards the same goal of helping me understand this specific thing, this subject, this lesson instead of starting and feeling disrespected and annoyed, you start out in a positive manner.

When the tutor approached the student first, the participants reported feeling less pressure about the session. One participant reported that they felt the tutor actually cared and that they had a stronger desire to help when they approached the student first. The final effective behavior from peer tutors was much more personal and less universal than the other three themes.

**Tutoring technique.** Tutoring technique preference varied from student to student, but there was overlap with several techniques that participants reported. Over half of the participants reported that they preferred when the tutor did not immediately solve the problem for them, and instead helped on an area of a problem they may have been struggling with and then continued from there. One participant, Ellen, described the way she prefers tutors to help her by saying, “I’ll do the problem on my own after they’ve pointed me in the right direction, and I’ll ask them to confirm it and they’re able to do that”.

This method of tutoring was the preferred technique by many of the participants, but because learning style is so personal, several participants had views that opposed each other. Matt, for example, stated that he preferred when the writing tutor worked piece by piece and broke it down.

The first behavior category presented what the participants viewed as effective in their sessions with peer tutors. To facilitate the best learning by the tutors, this effective behavior described by the participants is necessary to understand. Equally important is understanding what students perceive as ineffective.

#### *Ineffective.*

The goal of peer tutoring sessions is to have students leave with more knowledge than they came in with. However, a variety of things can cause peer tutoring sessions to stop progressing or cause students to be less likely to return. This behavior can present in a variety of different ways and the participants reported several experiences where tutors were not beneficial to their learning. These ineffective behavior topics included: Tutor Capabilities, Attention, and Verbal Communication.

**Tutor capabilities.** Three participants reported feeling disappointed or frustrated when the tutor was unable to help them solve a problem and did not attempt to work with them through that struggle. One participant, Carter,



stated that, "If they (the tutors) really don't know how to do a problem then it kind of just changes my mindset to 'If a tutor can't do it then nobody can do it.'"

The tutor could not control what their own capabilities were, however participants noted that it was damaging to the session when the tutor did not attempt to acknowledge their own academic downfalls. One participant reported that when a tutor was unapologetic for not understanding how to solve a complex problem, it felt very discouraging and he felt disrespected. According to one participant, the hard part should be going to the tutoring center. Another participant, Ellie, reported that:

There have been times I would go to a tutor and they wouldn't even know how to do the problem. They'd apologize and feel bad but at the same time, me and the person I went with feel like it was a waste of time. We sit there for thirty minutes waiting for the tutor to figure it out and then they can't. It's disheartening to say the least.

The communication in this specific situation was apologetic, but the student still felt that their tutoring session was not beneficial to them. According to the participants, in order to create a beneficial tutoring session the tutor must know enough of the material for the subject they tutor or be ready to learn it.

**Attention.** A large factor that determined whether a tutoring session was successful or not was the way the tutor gave their attention to the student. Seven of the eight participants mentioned that their experience with a tutor and a lack of attention was ineffective in their tutoring session. Several participants reported how they felt when tutors would work on other assignments even when students were in the tutoring center to see them. Ellie explained the tutor's lack of attention in the following way:

If you sit next to them and they don't make the effort to help you or they don't move their stuff. If they continue with what they are working on, their own homework. That uninviting behavior that makes you think "Okay I don't want to go back."

Another example that the participants recalled was when there were too many students and not enough tutors. Derek described this lack of attention as frustrating for both the students and the tutor because the tutor could not get to everyone and may feel bad. Additionally, the students were upset because they needed help and were not getting it. Tutors working on homework and ignoring students was an ineffective method of tutoring according to the participants, and tutors being overwhelmed with too many students put them in a situation that did not facilitate their learning. Tutors also communicated verbally in an ineffective manner.

**Verbal communication.** Verbal communication was one of the biggest indicators of an effective or ineffective tutoring session. For five of the eight participants, the way the tutor spoke to them during a session made a significant impact on them and impacted their tutoring session. According to Ellie:

There was this one lady. She was just sitting at the table and me and my friends would ask a question and she would squat down. She would answer our questions super fast and then jump to asking us if we get it and I'd say yes. It made me feel uncomfortable because it feels like they're uncomfortable and they don't want to be there.

Ellie's experience was not the only one of this nature. Several participants reported feeling uncomfortable when the tutor verbally expressed disregard for the student. Another participant, Matt, reported feeling that if the tutor did not have good clarity, or if the tutor was introverted, the session could end with the student feeling unsure. Another instance reported by a participant where tutors lacked effective verbal communication was when the tutor did not initiate the session and the student had to determine who the tutor was and seek them out for guidance. Kelly stated that she has experienced not knowing who the tutor was and then having to move forward without that initial verbal interaction from the tutor:

You don't even know who the tutor is, you likely have to speak up and say, "Hey who is the tutor here, I need help?" That just makes me feel like my time and questions don't matter and I've honestly left the tutor center before understanding a concept just because I'm so frustrated and disappointed in the experience.

The research question's responses created a greater understanding of how effective and ineffective behavior, both verbal and nonverbal, can impact the student's ability to learn from the tutor and have an effective peer tutoring session.

## DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to understand the specific behaviors of peer tutors that participants perceived as effective in facilitating learning and what was ineffective in facilitating learning. The implications described in this section will determine what students perceived as effective and ineffective in facilitating learning for students. This section will give meaning to the behavior categories and themes that were found, compare results of previous studies, discuss future research, analyze the scholarly and practical significance, and explore any limitations that presented themselves.

### *Implications*

The two themes from the data that satisfied this research question were effective and ineffective. For many participants, the most important thing to them that determined whether a tutoring session was successful or not was how the tutor used verbal validation to provide comfort to the student, thus offering face-saving techniques as well. The validation that tutors gave to their students was one of the most beneficial for the participant's experience. That finding aligned with several other studies that found similar data surrounding encouragement and validation, specifically Agne and Muller (2019). Agne and Muller determined that encouragement was a critical determinant in whether a tutoring session was successful or not (2019), and that was a similar finding in the present study as well. Verbal validation was discussed by each participant, so much so that the quotations used by each participant became repetitive. The primary finding from the verbal validation theme was that participants preferred when the tutor had the skills to align their goals for the session with the student's goals. The participants also preferred when the tutor expressed that they saw their student as competent, through verbal validation.

Participants also reported that when the tutor initiated the session it was easier to begin the relationship between the tutor and the student. This was effective because it limited the face threat of approaching the tutor first and took the pressure off of the student. The habits of validating a student when they do a job well done or asserting themselves as the tutor when a student walked into the center were some that many tutors could learn, it was the more nuanced skills that are not as easy to make a habit that students also noticed, and appreciated. This idea agrees with Hadden's study surrounding the awareness instructors should have to influence efficacy; tutors have a responsibility to their students to provide them with effective messages to provide a more beneficial tutoring session (2017).

For some, it was beneficial when the tutor shifted the power hierarchy to create a dynamic that eliminated a feeling of authority over the student. In some reports, the specific tutoring technique that was most beneficial for students was only giving the student small bits of information to help guide them through a problem, instead of solving the problem for the student. There was a shift in answers regarding this topic based on what tutoring subject the student attended.

Ineffective tutor behaviors fell into two categories: things that were within the tutor's control, and things that were not. Tutors are not expected to be an expert in their field of study, they are supplemental to the student's learning, but participants found it upsetting when the tutor was unable to provide guidance for them. If a tutor did not understand a topic, it became the responsibility of the student to seek out someone who did understand the topic. It can be a frustrating situation, however peer tutors are not the only source of information for a student.

It was frustrating for the participants when the tutor did not give them attention and were not occupied with other students. This was a valid frustration because when a tutor is in the tutoring center their job is to be a tutor. As tutors ignored students, it also led to students feeling no desire to return to the peer tutoring center. This lack of attention towards students can be detrimental to a peer tutoring center because if students do not want to return, then there is no need for a peer tutoring center. Another example of attention causing an ineffective tutoring session was when the tutor was met with too many students in the tutoring center. Unfortunately, while this can lead to an ineffective tutoring session, there are few things tutors can do to solve this problem. Another behavior tutors can control that was not effective in facilitating learning throughout the tutoring session was negative verbal communication. This presented itself in several different ways. In each instance the participant reported feeling

uncomfortable and frustrated. The reason students perceived this behavior as ineffective was likely because it did not meet the accommodation they were anticipating from the experience.

The findings that determined what students perceive as ineffective align with previous research findings that agree students prefer when tutors effectively use downward convergence to interact with them. Students overwhelmingly preferred when the tutor initiated the peer tutoring session. Tutors initiating communication first agreed with previous research that determined students prefer educators - tutors - who do not threaten their face value (Kerssen-Griep, et al., 2003; Brummernhenrich & Jucks, 2016). This finding was unique from previous findings as it focussed on the initial politeness established by the tutor. The findings also determined that participants were more likely to return to the tutoring center if the tutor practiced verbal affirmation and validation. Downward convergence, as described by Giles in the communication accommodation theory (2014), is important, but as Offstein & Chory found, it is more effective when tutors can alter their behavior to fit the specific needs of each student (2017).

#### *Scholarly and Practical Significance*

This research is significant to those who have previously studied the tutor and student dynamic because it presents findings that demonstrate the need for more information. The unique relationship between peer tutors and their students can be examined in greater depth to understand the best techniques for tutors to effectively work with their students. The findings of this study are beneficial to those who work within peer tutoring centers, namely tutors themselves. When peer tutors understand the communication behaviors their students perceive as effective it can lead to successful accommodation without threatening the student's face value. This is also significant for students who use the peer tutoring centers. According to the National Education Association, peer tutoring is beneficial for students of all ages because it serves as a way for students to learn from each other (National Education Association, n.d.). If peer tutors develop more effective tutoring methods, tutoring may be more appealing for students and used more frequently. Future research may be able to answer questions pertaining to the intricacies of peer relations and the unique relationship peer tutors share with their students.

#### *Future Research*

Future research could be modified to repeat this research. There are several research elements that can be shifted in the future to answer the research question given different, more specific elements. For example, there was no trend in the subjects participants used peer tutors for as it was not necessary for this study, but in the future it could be adjusted to consider how different tutoring subjects prefer the technique of the tutor. Research could also be conducted to consider how a student's years in higher education at an undergraduate level impact what the student perceives as effective. It is difficult to determine what is the preferred tutoring style for each individual student. Tutoring style is not something that can be predicted, it varies from student to student. To obtain the data that determines what tutoring style a student will perceive as most effective, an analysis in future research using quantitative data could be beneficial to develop those specific predictions.

Future research may be able to analyze specific needs students perceive as most important when attending peer tutoring sessions and compare it with the behaviors they view as simply supplementary. There were several factors that students perceived as ineffective in the tutoring session that the peer tutors were unable to control. As research on this topic continues, it would be interesting to note how those uncontrollable situations, such as the tutor's lack of knowledge on a subject and unmatched tutor to student ratio could be altered to improve the tutor and student experience.

#### *Limitations*

This study was limited due to the closure of campus as a result of COVID-19. Since participant recruitment took place primarily on campus in the peer tutoring center, recruitment was disrupted. The sample pool was also smaller than what is preferred for this study, again, due to the closure of the peer tutoring center. Students were likely less inclined to sign-up for a research study as they shifted to online learning. Additionally, only having eight participants was a limitation because there was a limited number of experiences. With more participants, results may shift to better represent the specific behaviors that are effective when working with students.

## **CONCLUSION**

Peer tutors serve a unique purpose to guide their peers, other students, through their education and facilitate an effective one-on-one instructional experience. When considering the communication accommodation theory (Giles,

2014) and the politeness theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987), the findings of this study supported previous research. Students felt a tutoring session was most effective when the tutor provided verbal validation, initiated the tutoring session, attempted to eliminate the power hierarchy, and understood the goals the student had prior to the tutoring session. Additionally, students felt a tutoring session was not effective when the tutor did not have the knowledge to help the student, when the tutor did not give enough attention to the student, and when verbal communication threatened the student's face value. Two significant findings appeared from this research. First, tutors who utilize face-saving techniques are continually perceived as more effective. This includes verbal validation and eliminating the feeling of authority between the tutor and the student. Second, students perceive a tutoring session more effective when the tutor develops a better understanding of their students preferred tutoring style. Conducting more research on peer tutor and student interactions, would contribute to understanding the best peer tutoring methods as well as the continuation of those programs. Continued research would also help to understand the intricacies of peer relationships. This research is beneficial for those who work closely with peer tutors and who seek to learn more about the peer tutor and student relationship.

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## APPENDIX

1. What is your major?
2. What year in school are you?
3. Describe how comfortable you are with visiting the peer tutoring centers on your campus.
4. How would you describe your relationship with the tutoring center on your campus?
  - a. What subject do you find yourself visiting most often?
5. What are some of the things that tutors say or do to make you feel more validated or, in other words, affirm how you feel with the tutoring process?
  - a. Do you feel these affirming acts work? Why or why not?
6. Have you ever encountered a tutor that made you feel uncomfortable or unsure?
  - a. What did that behavior look like?
7. Do you feel there are negative implications associated with using peer tutors?
  - a. Why or why not?
8. Do you personally hesitate to utilize the peer tutors on your campus for any reason? If so, why?
9. Describe some of the behaviors of mentors or professors that have done a successful job of creating a positive learning environment.
  - a. Do you feel that those behaviors are mirrored in any peer tutor you have had?
10. Describe your preferred learning style and how that reflects your ability to work with a peer tutor.
11. What are some barriers to a successful tutoring session?
  - a. Have you ever encountered any of these barriers and if so how did you overcome them?
12. Describe what a successful tutoring session looks like to you.
13. Was there anything else that you would like to add?