Parlez-vous français? Peer academic mentoring: a case study among language students

Kerry Mullan

‘A brilliant initiative with effective outcomes that plays as much a role in aiding the mentees, as it allows for personal reflection of knowledge and further education in the mentor.’

(Parlez-vous français? mentor 2009)

Abstract

The current trend for larger class sizes and reduced contact hours bring challenges for tertiary language students, where smaller group tuition is more effective, and regular sustained practice is essential. It is possible that these challenges contribute to the high attrition rate of beginning language students.

The benefits of peer teaching are well known and establishing a peer academic mentoring program among tertiary students of French at RMIT University was seen as a possible solution to the afore-mentioned challenges. The aim of this study was to evaluate the pilot mentoring program established in semester 2 2009 as a community of practice.

The program consisted of thirteen intermediate students of French mentoring twenty-two beginner students for up to two extra-curricular hours a week, assisting with specific language or study related difficulties and/or providing extra practice activities related to course content.

As anticipated, this program was an effective way of enhancing the language learning experience for both mentors and mentees. The feedback received was overwhelmingly positive, and the success of this pilot program has led to it being established on an ongoing basis at RMIT, and to four other language mentoring programs being established in 2011.
Introduction

The most significant factor in student academic success is student involvement fostered by student/staff interactions and student/student interactions.4

Many academic mentoring programs are established to increase student engagement and recruitment and retention rates among certain underrepresented and first year university students.5 Other programs are designed to aid students who have been identified as ‘at risk’ (for example ethnic minorities, academically disadvantaged students, students with disabilities or of low socioeconomic status), or international students who require assistance with the language of academic study of the university.6

A review of the literature revealed no previous research on peer academic mentoring programs in languages at tertiary level, yet this is an area where retention rates are known to be particularly problematic. According to the Report to the Council of the Australian Academy of the Humanities, one third of beginner level language students do not continue their language study after one semester, and a further third do not continue after their second semester.7 The reasons cited are varied, such as students taking one semester as an elective for interest, fun or travel purposes; having no room left in a program for further language study; being unaware of the workload and commitment required in learning another language; being unable or unwilling to put in the effort required to maintain a high grade point average; frustration at the slow progress; timetabling problems or limits on electives students are able to undertake.8 As languages at the university discussed here are currently electives only (students cannot major in a language), many of the above reasons for attrition are particularly significant—and somewhat difficult to determine, as many students only intend to undertake one or two language electives.

The motivation for this mentoring program came from an intermediate level French class taught by myself in semester 1 2009, where the students had varying levels of proficiency (from the ‘appropriate’ competency—approximately seventy-five hours of previous French study—up to native speaker ability). Mixed proficiency levels and student diversity are common in language classes, and this was managed to a large extent by encouraging peer support and adapting the learning and teaching activities where possible. However, the range of abilities was somewhat greater than usual, and I was aware (and subsequently informed) that some of the less proficient students felt inadequate, and consequently lost some of their confidence and motivation, all factors likely to contribute to attrition.

A peer academic mentoring program was an opportunity for these students to regain their motivation and confidence by tutoring lower proficiency French students. It was therefore decided to recruit the post-intermediate French 4 students to mentor the beginning French 1 and 2 students,9 as this would be beneficial to all. The French 4 students would increase their
motivation by mentoring beginner students, who in turn would benefit academically from the peer teaching. In addition, the extra weekly practice would be of value to all, particularly since French 1 and 2 consist of only one three-hour class per week. Such limited contact hours are a challenge to learning a language, where frequent exposure to, and practice in, the target language are essential.

It was expected that this mentoring program would be an effective way of enhancing the students’ motivation and overall learning experience. In particular it would provide opportunities for French 4 students to peer teach some successful language learning strategies and study habits to the beginning French students, who may not have learnt a second language before. Students can find the experience of learning another language especially slow and frustrating initially. It would therefore be encouraging for these students to work with others who had gone through (and in some cases were still going through) this same process, and who therefore identified with them and understood their difficulties. These learning strategies might also be applicable to other areas of learning.

In addition, learning a language can be somewhat intimidating, since the student’s ability to communicate is effectively removed, thereby having an immediate adverse effect on confidence levels. It has been reported that at least fifty per cent of all language learners suffer from unusually high levels of anxiety.\textsuperscript{10} This intimidation factor is enhanced by the current trend for larger class sizes, where a lot is at stake for students making mistakes in front of so many peers. An additional benefit of mentoring programs is the non-threatening and supportive learning environment with one mentor to a maximum of four mentees at one time in this case. Peer mentoring also removes the potentially intimidating ‘expert’ teacher in the formal setting of the classroom, as well as allowing the tailoring of the mentoring sessions to the mentees’ specific needs.

The primary aim of this project was to investigate the academic and social benefits to the participants of this program, as perceived by the participants themselves. It was hoped that the pilot program would provide a community of practice among the students, as defined by Wenger as ‘groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly’.\textsuperscript{11} It was hoped that this might also ultimately result in an increased retention rate of beginning French students at RMIT. The study also intends to contribute to the lack of published research into tertiary academic mentoring programs for language students. It is hoped that the description of the program and the benefits to the participants will encourage the establishment of similar programs, in both the tertiary and secondary sector.

In the following sections, I will address the existing research on peer learning and teaching, and mentoring, before describing the establishment and organization of the pilot program. The results and discussion section
will address the quantitative and qualitative findings of the pre- and post-questionnaires completed by the participants, followed by some future considerations and concluding comments on the success of the program.

**Literature Review**

The mentor acts as a facilitator and a catalyst for learning. The mentee is responsible for their own learning. The mentor is responsible for supporting, facilitating and learning with the learner.  

While there is surprisingly little relevant literature on mentoring for language students, the benefits of peer learning and teaching are well documented, and the old adage that one learns more by having to teach something is both well known and not a little true. Peer teaching provides benefits to both parties, such as a friendly and informal learning environment, regular study, expert assistance from a student who has direct experience of learning the same content, improved organizational and communication skills, learning how to give and receive feedback, and evaluating one’s own learning. Indeed, as Svinicki and McKeachie argue, there may be no single method best method of teaching, ‘but the second best is students teaching other students’.  

According to O’Donnell, theories of peer learning tend to give greater weight to either social or cognitive processes. Of most relevance to this mentoring program are the cognitive developmental perspectives of Piaget and Vygotsky, both of which are based on a constructivist approach to learning and teaching, where the learner participates actively in the learning process, using prior knowledge to construct new understandings.

Piaget believed that cognitive growth occurs as a result of interaction with the environment through the process of adaptation, followed by processes of assimilation and accommodation. New experiences are brought into one’s way of thinking (assimilation) and low-level schemas are modified into high-level schemas (accommodation). Following such modifications, the individual seeks to restore cognitive equilibrium. Piaget believed that peers could provide important opportunities for others to experience cognitive disequilibrium (or cognitive conflict) when new information does not agree with existing knowledge, and that children are more likely to develop cognitively in contexts where peers have equal power and opportunities to influence each other. For Piaget then, cooperation between peers encourages discussion and exchange, and is therefore essential for the development of a critical and reflective mind.

Similarly, according to Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory, knowledge lies in the continual interaction between the individual and their environment (known as dialectical constructivism). It therefore follows that ‘an individual’s learning and achievement are mediated by supportive interactions with others’. Indeed, this notion that cognitive development
requires social interaction is central to Vygotsky’s well known concept of the zone of proximal development, defined as ‘the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by individual problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers’. Assistance comes from a more competent peer or other who can recognize the learner’s current level of proficiency, and who can provide support to the learner through appropriate scaffolding (guidance, tutelage questions, hints). Peers may need assistance themselves in how to provide the correct level of help to a learner however.

This assistance and scaffolding is of course part of the process of structured tutoring, the benefits of which are also well documented. Students who receive one-to-one tutoring improve their understanding of the target content, report higher levels of motivation, and work faster. Tutoring also benefits the tutor: through planning and explaining, their own understanding of the content is consolidated.

The mentoring process can be considered a combination of peer learning and tutoring. It is no doubt for this reason that most universities now run a variety of peer academic and/or social mentoring programs, since the benefits to both parties of peer learning and tutoring are well known. These include:

- enhanced students’ learning experience
- increased confidence and interest in learning;
- students discovering different learning styles;
- networking with other students;
- networking with students from different cultural backgrounds;
- students learning effective ways to communicate;
- students learning the importance of motivation in learning;
- learning to deal with unexpected questions and problems.

Mentoring also plays an important role in encouraging self-directed and autonomous learning outside the classroom. While the content of the mentoring session may often be related to the course content of the mentees, here it also allows them to explore French with their mentor in contexts which interest them, rather than being solely confined to a ‘teacher-fronted classroom in which a class of heterogeneous learners [have to] work with the same content and [be] subjected to the same procedures’. This allows for a much richer learning experience overall, where students begin to see where the target language might be of more personal relevance, and ultimately take responsibility for their own learning and for their own needs. Equally, the process of mentoring may increase autonomy in the mentor, as their own
level of motivation increases—although the students are already somewhat autonomous since they have already taken responsibility for their learning by voluntarily joining the mentoring program.

**Methods**

The mentor program was set up through RMIT LEAD (Student Engagement and Leadership Development)\(^{26}\) with my involvement, as coordinator of French Studies. LEAD fosters student leadership development and volunteering within the university through a wide range of volunteer and leadership training programs. All student mentors are required to complete five hours training, and to undertake fifteen hours of voluntary mentoring activity. Suggestions for mentoring programs in Brown et al. and Goodlad proved helpful in designing the current one.\(^{27}\) Mentors in the French program were also required to reflect on their learning experience and academic outcomes through a reflective learning journal, which formed part of their assessment for the semester. Mentees were simply asked to commit to regular weekly mentoring sessions.

Participants in the program were recruited in the first few weeks of semester. Fourteen mentors originally signed up for the program (of which twelve completed the required number of hours). Forty-five mentees originally signed up for the program, but only twenty-two participated regularly and completed the final questionnaire.

Participants were undergraduate or postgraduate students, in various years of study. There was no requirement for the mentors to have attained a certain grade point average in their previous studies of French; all interested parties were able to join the program. Given that one of the aims was to improve the confidence and motivation of the mentors, excluding some of them would have been counter productive. While this lack of control for grades could be seen as taking a risk, the benefits were considered to outweigh the risk. Indeed, the less proficient mentors would benefit even more from the revision and consolidation involved in the mentoring process.

The only control in the case of less proficient mentors was to match them with French 1 rather than French 2 mentees. Mentors were matched with mentees on the basis of their schedules; mentees signed themselves up and stayed with a mentor throughout the semester. In that way, the mentees built up a strong relationship with their mentor. French 1 and 2 mentees were not combined in the same mentoring session.

The mentors undertook three hours of training with LEAD. This consisted of (a) the role, benefits, and ethical considerations of being a mentor; (b) effective methods of communicating, listening and questioning; (c) working with students from different cultural backgrounds; (d) facilitating a small group; (e) diverse learning styles; (f) peer learning; and (g) reflective practice.\(^{28}\)
The mentors then undertook a further two hours of training with me on more specific areas such as (a) organizational aspects of the program; (b) activities to determine learning styles; (c) challenges related to learning a language and possible solutions; (d) suggested study techniques; (e) potential problems; (f) the content of the mentoring sessions; and (g) useful study resources. It was explained that the content of the sessions was to be determined by the mentors and their mentees; the mentee would come with questions or activities for the mentors to assist with, and/or the mentors would be provided with revision activities related to the course content of the mentees. (Interestingly, most mentors and mentees preferred to prepare their own sessions.)

For the purposes of the research project, pre- and post-questionnaires were administered to all students. These included Likert items and open-ended questions referring to the anticipated and perceived benefits of the mentoring program. Mentors were asked about their own improved social skills and increased self confidence, and how useful they felt they had been in providing academic skills to their mentee. Mentees were asked to comment on how useful they had found the mentoring program in terms of academic skills, whether they thought it has made a difference to their grades, and how helpful they had found their mentor. In addition, mentees were asked whether they intended to continue learning French at RMIT, and whether the program had influenced this decision.

The main difficulties with evaluating the academic success of any mentoring program are problems of measurement, sample size and validity. Smith points out that internal and external validity are common methodological problems with measuring the academic effects of mentoring. It is difficult to empirically prove the correlation between mentoring and academic success since many mentoring programs suffer from such limitations as small sample sizes, lack of diversity in the student population, and lack of multiple research sites. It must be acknowledged that the same empirical limitations apply here, and that the following results and discussion must be considered with this in mind.

**Results**

Since less than half the original mentees completed the final questionnaire, the quantitative results of their pre-questionnaire have been excluded as it is not possible to determine any correlation between the two. Some qualitative comments from these initial questionnaires have been included however. All quantitative results discussed in this report therefore come from the pre- and post-questionnaires completed by thirteen and ten mentors respectively, and the post-questionnaire only from twenty-two mentees.
Mentors

We will first examine the results from the pre-questionnaire completed by the mentors. This was a very brief questionnaire, designed to ascertain the anticipated benefits of the program, and is included here primarily by way of comparison with the perceived benefits the mentors felt had been gained at the end of the program.

**Table 1: Anticipated benefits of the mentoring program—Mentor (n=13)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How much do you think being a mentor will help you:</th>
<th>Very helpful</th>
<th>Somewhat helpful</th>
<th>Somewhat unhelpful</th>
<th>Very unhelpful</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(a) Improve communication skills?</td>
<td>9 (69%)</td>
<td>4 (31%)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(b) Improve your social skills?</td>
<td>2 (15.5%)</td>
<td>9 (69%)</td>
<td>2 (15.5%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(c) Improve your employment skills?</td>
<td>5 (38%)</td>
<td>8 (62%)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(d) Improve your self confidence?</td>
<td>4 (31%)</td>
<td>9 (69%)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As can be seen, the mentors approached the program believing that overall it would be very or somewhat helpful to them in the areas of communication, social and employment skills and self-confidence.

It is significant that the benefits the students expected to gain from the program correlate with those reported in the literature. In answer to the open-ended question ‘In what other ways do you anticipate that the program might help you?’ almost all the mentors responded that they anticipated some or all of the following benefits (number of comments in brackets):

- revision and consolidation of things previously learnt (11);
- help identify own areas needing improvement (1);
- time-management, communication, and group skills (3);
- learning about different cultures, learning styles, and study techniques (5);
- gaining confidence (1);
- regular French practice (2).

They made some insightful observations:

‘I’m hoping that it will consolidate my own knowledge of French. I find that I learn best when I explain something; and you can never stop learning with a language, even when studying just the basics.’
‘Appreciating different learning techniques which we can apply to our own studying.’

‘Hopefully it will help my ability to learn, once I’ve experienced what it is like to teach.’

The latter two comments are particularly significant. Scarino and Liddicoat also highlight the importance of students reflecting on and understanding how they learn since, as they point out, this awareness is integral to learning.31

Turning to the actual benefits of the program, it is interesting to compare the results in Table 2 regarding how useful the mentors thought they had been, with the results from the mentees themselves (Table 4). Only forty per cent of the mentors thought they had been very useful to their mentees, whereas ninety-five per cent of the mentees thought that their mentor had been very useful. It seems that the mentors did not realize the extent of their influence on the mentees.

Table 2: Academic benefits of the mentoring program—Mentor (n=10)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How useful do you think you have been to your mentee:</th>
<th>Very helpful</th>
<th>Somewhat helpful</th>
<th>Not very useful</th>
<th>Not useful at all</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(a) Overall in being a mentor?</td>
<td>4 (40%)</td>
<td>6 (60%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(b) In helping to provide useful study tools for learning a language?</td>
<td>3 (30%)</td>
<td>7 (70%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(c) In helping them overcome any academic difficulties?</td>
<td>3 (30%)</td>
<td>7 (70%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(d) In helping them with any other difficulties which may have arisen? (Please describe difficulties.)</td>
<td>2 (22%)</td>
<td>7 (78%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The results from Table 1 correlate with the actual benefits the mentors felt they had received (see Table 3 below), although it can be seen that there was a slight shift to ‘somewhat helpful’ from the anticipated ‘very helpful’ in the case of all questions except improvement of self-confidence, which increased. This illustrates that the mentors did not find the mentoring as helpful as they anticipated in these areas. It is also possible that some of these differences could be attributed to three of the original respondents not completing the final questionnaire; however, as all questionnaires were anonymous, this cannot be determined.
Table 3: Social benefits of the mentoring program—Mentor (n=10)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How do you think being a mentor has helped you:</th>
<th>Very helpful</th>
<th>Somewhat helpful</th>
<th>Somewhat unhelpful</th>
<th>Very unhelpful</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(a) Improve communication skills?</td>
<td>5 (50%)</td>
<td>5 (50%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(b) Improve your social skills?</td>
<td>1 (10%)</td>
<td>9 (90%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(c) Improve your employment skills?</td>
<td>2 (22%)</td>
<td>7 (78%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(d) Improve your self confidence?</td>
<td>4 (44%)</td>
<td>5 (56%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Many studies on mentoring and tutoring report that mentors or tutors benefit as much as (if not more than) the mentees or students being tutored. When giving explanations, students clarify or reorganize material in their own minds, recognize and fill in gaps and resolve inconsistencies in their understanding, develop new perspectives, and construct elaborate conceptualizations.

The mentors reflected on areas such as:

- consolidating their own learning:
  
  ‘I was again amazed at how much repetition does for my current study and how it enforces me to go back and re-learn/research old material.’

- increasing their awareness of learning:
  
  ‘Mentoring has forced me to think about how I learn and what methods have helped me most.’

- their increased confidence:
  
  ‘I was surprised as to how far I have come from French 1 and gained some confidence in my own ability.’

This latter area was particularly significant, since this was one of the main aims of establishing the program. Another student linked the informal environment with increased confidence:

‘I think it’s been good for the mentees to have a session where they can ask questions in a small and reasonably relaxed environment and come away from it hopefully feeling more confident in their abilities. I think this has helped me too, as mentoring other people has consolidated what I know and I think helped to make me feel more confident about my abilities.’
One mentor commented on trying to encourage learner autonomy in their mentees:

‘I tried to establish a friendly relationship with my mentees rather than that of a ‘teacher’ – this meant that there was a general understanding that I did not know everything and that they were responsible for their own learning rather than them relying upon me. I tried to be there just for guidance and for anything they needed clarification of.’

This is important, because as Bruffee points out, some mentees can become overly dependent on their mentor and see them as a replacement teacher. In addition to the above positive outcomes (all of which correspond with those listed in Biggs and Tang, and Boud), mentors usually also develop a more positive attitude to what they are teaching. One of the mentors made the following observation:

‘I also recently realized that watching French beginners and asking them why they chose to study French has made me excited to continue studying French’.

In answer to the question ‘In what ways has the program helped / not helped you with your own learning this semester?’ the following reaffirming comments were received (number of comments in brackets):

- revision / consolidation of own knowledge of French (9);
- established own strengths and weaknesses in French (1);
- gained confidence by realizing how much already known (1);
- gained experience in approaching problems (1);
- learning to explain things in several different ways until understood (1).

While these comments do not directly pertain to the students’ learning, they are also worth including here:

- gained experience in counselling / helping students (1);
- enjoyed mixing with international students (1).

The latter remark is a particularly important and relevant finding, given the well known lack of interaction between local and international students at university. ‘Literature and survey feedback suggests that engagement between international and local students is not occurring on campuses at levels hoped for’. Another mentor remarked that ‘the process has also taught me some tricks in relating to those of other cultures, and some of the hardships faced by international students’.

In answer to the question ‘Were there any problems experienced during the program?’ the following comments were made:

- ime (with mentees; lack of preparation time for mentoring) (4);
- more than two mentees at once could be problematic (1);
• mentee (lack of) commitment to the program; some mentees did not keep their appointments with their mentors and did not contact them (3);
• language barrier with international students (1).

The following suggestions for improvement were received:
• smaller groups of mentees (1);
• an initial session with all mentors and mentees together to clarify the program and emphasize the necessity of regular commitment (1);
• a follow up meeting during the semester to address any issues and exchange thoughts / ideas (2);
• start the mentoring earlier in semester (1);
• provide a designated area for the mentoring sessions (2).

Two of these problems correlate with the literature, in particular ‘no physical space or ‘home’ for the group’, and increasing workloads interfering. However, while both studies found that it was the mentors’ enthusiasm that waned as their workloads increased, there were no comments to this effect. Rather, it was the mentors who found that the mentees’ commitment waned as their workloads increased.

Mentees
As mentioned, only some qualitative comments from the pre-questionnaires have been included here. Since less than half the original mentees completed the post-questionnaire, it is not possible to accurately compare the two sets of quantitative data. In answer to the question ‘In what other ways do you anticipate that the program might help you?’ the following comments were received. These show that the students approached this program enthusiastically with clear and realistic expectations:
• learning some study skills from students who have gone through the basics of learning French (5);
• meeting with someone more expert in a casual way (3);
• providing more opportunity to practise French (10);
• gaining confidence through practice in a small group (7);
• providing a chance to go over work not fully understood in class (7);
• providing a chance to learn about and discuss aspects of French culture (7);
• meeting other students with similar interests (5);
• ‘understanding how much work there is ahead of me if I wish to continue learning French’ (1).

One mentee added this insightful comment: ‘learning with someone is much better than learning by ourselves’.
It is significant that some of the benefits the mentees expected to gain from the program correlate with the findings of actual benefits. Overall, ninety-five per cent of the mentees found the program useful in providing study tools for learning a language, and helping them overcome academic difficulties, and ninety-one per cent thought that the mentoring program had improved their grades a lot or somewhat.

Table 4: Academic benefits of the mentoring program—Mentee (n=22)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Very useful</th>
<th>Somewhat useful</th>
<th>Not very useful</th>
<th>Not useful at all</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How useful has the mentoring program been in providing useful study tools for learning a language?</td>
<td>17 (77%)</td>
<td>4 (18%)</td>
<td>1 (5%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How useful has the mentoring program been in helping you overcome any academic difficulties?</td>
<td>17 (77%)</td>
<td>5 (23%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How useful has the mentoring program been in helping you overcome any other difficulties which may have arisen? (Please describe difficulties.)</td>
<td>13 (62%)</td>
<td>6 (29%)</td>
<td>1 (4.5%)</td>
<td>1 (4.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My grades improved a lot</td>
<td>5 (23%)</td>
<td>15 (68%)</td>
<td>2 (9%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My grades improved somewhat</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My grades were not affected at all</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My grades decreased</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you think the mentoring program has affected your grades this semester? If so, to what extent?</td>
<td>5 (23%)</td>
<td>15 (68%)</td>
<td>2 (9%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How helpful was your mentor?</td>
<td>21 (95%)</td>
<td>1 (5%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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</table>

The majority of the mentees met up with their mentors once or twice a week, mostly for an hour or an hour and a half each time. Seventy-three per cent of the mentees were very satisfied with the amount of contact with their mentor, but some expressed a desire for more contact, while acknowledging that they were not actually able to do so due to other commitments. (It is worth reiterating that French is an elective for these students, and as such is outside their main area of study and not a subject they necessarily consider related to their future career.)
Table 5: Mentor-mentee contact during the mentoring program—Mentee (n=22)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How satisfied are you about the amount of contact between you and your mentor?</th>
<th>Very satisfied</th>
<th>Somewhat satisfied</th>
<th>Somewhat unsatisfied</th>
<th>Very unsatisfied</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>16</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(73%)</td>
<td>(27%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How many times did you meet with your mentor?</th>
<th>1 time per week</th>
<th>1-2 times per week</th>
<th>Every 2 weeks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>15</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(71%)</td>
<td>(19%)</td>
<td>(10%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>For how long each time?</th>
<th>1 hour</th>
<th>1.5 hours</th>
<th>2 hours</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>17</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(81%)</td>
<td>(9.5%)</td>
<td>(9.5%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In answer to the question ‘In what ways has the program helped / not helped you with your learning this semester?’, a variety of answers was received regarding progress with certain technical aspects of the French language, but also some general responses which support the benefits of peer teaching as reported in the literature, as well as Piaget’s and Vygotsky’s respective theories of learning:

- it has helped me to clearly understand the content of the course. The information that was learned in class was successfully backed up by the mentoring (3);
- it has improved my grammar rules and motivation to learn (1);
- it was great to go through problems with a mentor and my group—[and work towards] solving them (1);
- help boost confidence (1);
- it was good to be able to work through things I didn’t understand one on one (6);
- because mentors are like us, it’s easier to communicate with them (2);
- good for building strong friendships with classmates and creating ‘study buddies’ (1);
- a great way to boost learning (1);
- seeing other students struggling with the same things I struggle with made me feel more comfortable about the difficulties I have (1);
These comments are valuable in that they reflect the objectives of the mentoring program: offering the students more chance to practise outside of minimal contact hours; eliminating the intimidation factor of the classroom; providing repetition and consolidation of material; benefitting from the study techniques and knowledge of students who have gone through the same stages in their learning; offering the chance to explore French in contexts outside of the ‘teacher-fronted classroom’; increasing confidence and motivation; and networking with other students. This latter benefit is particularly important today, since many students spend fewer hours on campus due to work and other commitments, thereby reducing the opportunity for networking.

Only three affirmative responses were received in answer to the question ‘Were there any problems experienced during the program?’. Two related to time and one regarding mixing French 1 and 2 mentees in the same session.

The mentees made the following suggestions for improvement to the program (the last two correspond with some mentors’ suggestions):

• mentees should prepare questions to bring to the session to maximize learning time (1);
• try to ensure that the level of proficiency and therefore the needs of the mentees in one group are similar (2);
• option to go to other mentees’ sessions when unable to attend one’s own (1);
• having permanent groups of mentees for the whole program (1);
• smaller groups of mentees (1);
• start the mentoring earlier in semester (1);
• provide a designated area for the mentoring sessions (1).

Concerning the secondary aim of this project, it was not possible to empirically determine the effect on retention rates for beginning French students since the questionnaires were anonymous, but student intention to continue with French was ascertained by including a question to this effect on the final student questionnaire. Of the twenty-two mentees questioned, sixteen (seventy-three per cent) reported that they intended to continue learning French, while two (nine per cent) said they would not as they had finished their studies, and four (eighteen per cent) were still unsure.
Table 6: Effect of the mentoring program on retention rates—Mentee (n=22)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Not sure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Do you intend to continue learning French?</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(73%)</td>
<td>(9%)</td>
<td></td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you intend to continue learning French at [this university]?</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(41%)</td>
<td>(41%)</td>
<td></td>
<td>(18%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has being part of this mentoring program affected your response to questions 11 and 12? (If so, how?)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(25%)</td>
<td>(75%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is difficult to correlate this number to the official figure of one third of beginning students who do not continue learning a language however, since the mentees may not be representative of the majority of this cohort of students. It must be acknowledged that while this mentoring program can be said to have been a great success for the participants, since the students involved were all volunteers, it is likely that the mentees had a higher level of motivation than the other students, and that this was a reason for their involvement in the program. Thus it becomes difficult to measure the success of the program in more general terms, since we cannot be sure how the less motivated students would have performed or benefitted from the mentoring.

Indeed, when asked whether being part of this mentoring program had affected their response to the question of continuing to study French, twelve students said no, six did not answer, and only four students said the mentoring had made a difference. Of those students who said that the mentoring had not affected their response, two commented that this was because they were already interested in learning French, thereby supporting the likelihood that the most motivated students signed up for the mentoring.

Of the four mentees who said that the mentoring had made a difference to their wanting to continue learning French, the following reasons were given:

‘The contact between student and tutor was very rewarding and helpful.’

‘[The mentoring] makes learning more fun.’

‘Because I feel like I have support in the sometimes daunting task of learning another language; also it makes me feel that I am not as dumb as I sometimes think!’

While no firm conclusions can be drawn from four mentees claiming that the mentoring had encouraged them to change their mind and continue learning the language, it is to be hoped that the establishment of the mentor program as an ongoing feature at RMIT may contribute to increased motivation generally among the French students and eventually have a more positive effect on the retention rate.
Discussion

On many levels the pilot mentoring program can be considered a success. The degree of enthusiasm of the mentors was truly inspiring. Not only did thirteen of the total twenty-one French 4 students volunteer to be mentors, but the frequency, quality and length of their learning diaries far exceeded requirements and expectations. Some students wrote diaries after each mentoring session, which meant they spent a lot of time reflecting on the process, and sharing their thoughts. This also allowed me to respond promptly to any questions they had, or problems they were experiencing. All students wrote lengthy learning diaries, and over forty entries in total were submitted throughout the semester.

Two students found the process of writing a mentoring learning diary so useful that they volunteered additional entries on their own learning, even though this was not required. In his study of autonomous language learning, Legenhausen points out that an emphasis on an awareness of learning strategies is intended to support learner independence and promote their capacity for life-long learning. One student commented that:

‘[e]xploring different learning and teaching styles is also a useful product of mentoring. Each individual learns and communicates differently, so I am able to gain insight in this area, whilst offering a range of study techniques to my mentees.’

Despite the empirical limitations referred to earlier, since the main aims of this project were not to measure the academic success of the mentor program insofar as student grades are concerned, but to assess the overall benefits of such a program from the point of view of the participants, and to restore confidence and increase motivation among the students of French, the project can be deemed an overwhelming success. The mentoring program was an effective way of enhancing the language learning experience for all participants and creating an effective community of learning. Apart from some suggestions for minor improvements to the program, the feedback was overwhelmingly positive, and all participants said they would recommend this program to others.

As a result of this project, an improved version of the mentoring program has been successfully established on an ongoing basis, and has been used as a model for similar mentoring programs implemented in 2011 for Chinese, Greek, Japanese and Spanish students. Where possible, the suggestions for improvement received from the students in the pilot program have been taken into consideration: reducing mentees to a maximum of two per mentor; and dividing the initial mentor training session of two hours into a one hour session, followed by a further one hour feedback session part way through semester to share experiences. Experienced mentors are invited to all of these sessions to share their knowledge and experiences with the new mentors. This has proved to be a valuable addition to the training program.
Numbers of participants remain consistent at approximately twelve mentors and twenty-five mentees per semester. Several mentees have gone on to become mentors, including one French mentee who became a mentor in her native language Chinese.

**Future considerations**

Some significant areas for further research have arisen from this study. Firstly, more studies need to be conducted on tertiary language learning mentoring programs to increase the validity of the existing research. This could be achieved by conducting comparative studies into similar mentoring programs, for example with a French mentoring program at another institution and/or the mentoring programs currently being established at this university. Re-enrolment of mentees in the language learning programs could also be followed up, to provide quantifiable data on the effect of mentoring on retention rates. Empirically determining the academic benefits of mentoring programs will remain a challenge for the reasons stated earlier, however: even with a control group, it is difficult to accurately measure comparative academic achievement, but with careful study design, an attempt could be made to address this.

In terms of improving the design of the mentoring program, one could consider the possibility of the mentors coming into the classroom to work with the mentees. However, while this would solve the problem of venues and timetabling, it may not be as conducive to establishing relationships between the mentors and mentees, as the same students may not always work together. Working with different students each week has other advantages, but if one of the aims of the mentoring program is to build students’ confidence, this is best achieved by ensuring students feel comfortable with each other by getting to know each other better each week. There are a number of other factors to be taken into consideration with this classroom approach. As well as not allowing for the more personal nature of the mentor-mentee relationship and the freedom of content of the mentoring session, the formality of the classroom and the presence of the teacher may also be negative factors. In addition, while this method would ensure that all students benefit from the mentoring process, it may be the case that the students who do not want or need mentoring (because of higher proficiency levels for example) become bored and see this use of class time as unnecessary and a waste of time. It would perhaps be unfair to impose such unmotivated students on the mentors. On the other hand, this could allow the teacher time to instead work with these students at a more advanced pace or provide them with extra activities. Alternatively, these students could themselves mentor some of their peers, although this might in turn be seen as an acknowledgement of these students’ higher proficiency, and may even be resented by some students, thereby creating other problems.
Finally, the already limited class time would be further reduced, although one could also argue that such consolidation and revision would ensure a deeper learning takes place, and the class could advance at the ‘usual’ pace. The in-class mentoring could effectively replace the usual revision done by the teacher, thereby not reducing ‘new content time’. The advantage of one extra practice session a week would be removed with this method however, and that is a considerable negative factor to take into account.

**Conclusion**

Pay to be a tutor not to be tutored!46

The *Parlez-vous français?* French academic mentoring program can be seen as an effective way of enhancing and diversifying the language learning experience for students. It can also be considered a partial solution to some of the factors affecting tertiary language learning today, namely larger class sizes and reduced contact hours—as well as several other factors which have been found to contribute to the high attrition rate of beginning language students at university.

As well as contributing to the research in the area of tertiary language mentoring programs, it is to be hoped that the positive findings of this study will encourage language departments at other universities—and secondary schools—to establish such programs for their students. Such support programs help not only with the engagement and ultimately the retention of language learners, but may even encourage students to begin learning a language in the first place. The Australian and Victorian governments are currently placing a high priority on language learning for primary and secondary school students, as evidenced by several recent publications.47 According to the Victorian Languages Strategy Discussion Paper, Australian secondary students spend less time learning a second language than their counterparts in other OECD countries, and the majority of Victorian students do not continue to study a language through to VCE.48 Lo Bianco and Slaughter outline the many reasons for this high attrition rate among language learning at school: one of these is the time constraints faced by schools, with many subjects vying for limited contact hours.49 Even primary schools are dealing with what is known as ‘the crowded curriculum’.50 Language mentoring programs such as this may offer a partial solution.

The benefits of mentoring can be applied to all areas of learning, and indeed employment and life beyond the university—particularly in the case of communication skills, reflection on one’s learning, and increased autonomy. In addition, the findings of this study reiterate the importance for all learners of revision and consolidation, peer learning and teaching, the act of explaining, and a relaxed learning environment. Jacobi suggests that mentoring can be viewed as a vehicle for promoting involvement in learning,51 and according to Astin,52 the extent of student involvement in the educational process can predict academic achievement. Following the
analysis of a wide array of empirical research on higher education in the United States, the Study Group on the Conditions of Excellence in American Higher Education concluded that:

There is now a good deal of research evidence to suggest that the more time and effort students invest in the learning process and the more intensely they engage in their own education, the greater will be their growth and their achievement, their satisfaction with their educational experiences, and their persistence in college, and the more likely they are to continue their learning.\textsuperscript{53}

This conclusion remains relevant today, and if these outcomes are attained by even a few of the students involved in the Parlez-vous français? mentoring program, then it can be deemed a success. More importantly, if some of the students have also benefitted from a new-found autonomy in learning, increased confidence and self-esteem, a greater understanding of difficulties faced by international students, and more awareness of diversity and different learning styles, they are on their way to acquiring the graduate attributes\textsuperscript{54} which will be an asset to them for the rest of their lives. Indeed, if the following comment from one of our mentors is reflective of the quality of some of the students we are sending into the world as today’s graduates, we can be truly proud:

‘Giving service to others without a monetary reward gives us an opportunity to give for the sake of giving. We learn to practice a form of altruism, which is a valuable characteristic. Although self interest is involved in the volunteering process, mentors take time out for the benefit of the mentees also. In an individualistic country, it is good for young people to serve others (without pay) and learn the value of selfless giving.’

Given the importance of graduate attributes,\textsuperscript{55} and the notorious difficulty in teaching them, if such programs help students to achieve these attributes, the benefits will be extensive, far-reaching and long-lasting.

\textit{Kerry Mullan is lecturer and coordinator of French Studies in the Language Discipline, RMIT University. Her book Expressing opinions in French and Australian English discourse: A semantic and interactional analysis was published by John Benjamins in 2010.}

\textbf{Endnotes}

1. I would like to formally acknowledge the assistance of the following people in the establishment and organization of the Parlez-vous français? French academic mentoring program: Kylie Budge (Senior Advisor, Learning and Teaching, DSC); Alison Brown, Judith Haskins and Denya Lanzini (Student Services); LEAD Student Leadership Development. I would also like to thank Dr Christine Asmar (University of Melbourne), Dr Shanthi Robertson, Professor Michael Singh and two anonymous reviewers for providing valuable advice on earlier versions of this paper.


8. Idem p.15. General attrition at university is a vast area and involves many other factors, (cf. L. Willcoxson, ‘Factors affecting intention to leave in the first, second and third year of university studies: a semester-by-semester investigation’, *Higher Education Research and Development*, vol. 29, no. 6, 2010, pp. 623–39), but we will limit the present discussion to the attrition of language learners.

9. The number corresponds to the semester of French studies the students are undertaking (commencing at French 1 for complete beginners).


32. Some students did not answer every question in the final questionnaires.


38. No focus groups were held as it was not possible to find a suitable time for a sufficient number of participants. However, halfway through the semester, with the mentors’ permission I collated all the useful tips and comments received from them in their learning diaries, and shared them with the whole group as a way of exchanging thoughts and ideas.


43. The fourth student’s comments related to the teaching of the class, and were not relevant to the mentoring program.

44. Three of these students continued to be involved in the mentoring programs in 2010, despite not being enrolled in a French course at the time; two of these went on to win RMIT Student Life Awards in 2010 for their contribution to the program.


50. Idem, p. 47.


