PEER LEARNING FOR INCLUSIVE GROWTH: A CROSS-NATIONAL STUDY OF THAILAND AND INDONESIA

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A B S T R A C T S

Peer learning has been widely recognized as an effective strategy in inclusive education, promoting student collaboration, enhancing academic outcomes, and addressing diverse learning needs. However, a significant gap remains in understanding how peer learning is implemented across different institutional and national contexts, especially in inclusive settings. While prior studies have addressed peer learning in general, few have compared its practical application across countries with distinct educational systems. This study investigates how peer learning is enacted in inclusive classrooms in Thailand and Indonesia, focusing on teachers' beliefs, instructional strategies, and challenges encountered during implementation. Employing a qualitative research design, data were gathered through interviews and classroom observations to explore authentic classroom practices. The findings reveal both shared patterns and contextual differences in the use of peer learning, shaped by each country's institutional structures and education policies. While initial student collaboration varied, many learners demonstrated increased participation and interaction over time. This study addresses the lack of cross-national research on inclusive peer learning and offers insights that may support educators, researchers, and policymakers in designing more responsive and culturally informed frameworks for peer learning in diverse, inclusive classrooms.

INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education has emerged as a key approach in ensuring that all students, regardless of their backgrounds, abilities, or learning needs, have equal access to quality education (UNESCO, 2005). Several scholars have categorized inclusive education into four main approaches: fundamental inclusion, classroom-based inclusion, general inclusion, and content-based inclusion. These models reflect the diversity of inclusion practices based on the specific social and educational contexts of each region. Holmqvist and Lelinge (2020) emphasize the essential role of teachers in implementing inclusive education, particularly in

the classroom, where direct interactions between students and educators become the core of inclusive practices.

The role of teachers in inclusive education is multifaceted, extending beyond academic instruction to fostering equitable participation in both social and learning activities (Florian & Linklater, 2010). Tomlinson (2014) further asserts that students' learning experiences are deeply influenced by the teaching strategies employed. A pedagogical commitment to inclusion, as proposed by Black-Hawkins and Florian (2012), involves teaching all students those with and without learning difficulties in the same environment through adaptable instructional methods. Phytanza et al. (2023) support this view by noting that inclusive education requires the integration of students with diverse abilities in regular classrooms, where teachers adjust their strategies to meet varied learning needs.

One widely applied strategy within inclusive education is peer learning, in which students support each other in the learning process. Toulia et al. (2021) describe peer learning as promoting cooperative relationships through methods such as cross-age and same-age tutoring. This approach strengthens academic performance while fostering social support and inclusion. In the context of English language learning, peer learning enhances not only students' communication skills but also their confidence, critical thinking, and collaboration (Nurkholis, 2023; Putri, Prastiwi & Hidayani, 2024). Moreover, Chun & Cennamo (2022) and Liao & Wu (2022) highlight peer learning as a student-centered model that transforms passive learners into active participants through dialogue and cooperation.

Despite its advantages, peer learning also presents challenges. ESL student tutors often face communication barriers, confidence issues, and classroom management difficulties (Chai, 2013; Sukmojati et al., 2023; Rahmat & Jon, 2023). These barriers reveal the necessity of teacher support, structured training, and proper adaptation of peer learning strategies to specific contexts.

The practical implementation of inclusive education varies across countries. In Thailand, inclusive education has been supported by government policy since the 1990s, with legislation in 2008 reinforcing the integration of students with special needs in mainstream schools (Vorapanya & Dunlap, 2016). In Indonesia, a similar movement began with the Ministry of Education Regulation No. 70 of 2009, promoting inclusive classrooms where all students, including those with learning delays, learn together and receive differentiated instruction (Putranto et al., 2022).

Drawing from this context, the researcher participated in a one-month international community service program (Kuliah Kerja Nyata – KKN) in Thailand, teaching English at Prix Municipality School, Sadao. Observations during this program showed that peer tutoring was frequently used to support students in inclusive classrooms. Similarly, the researcher gained comparable experience at SMPN 2 Narmada, Indonesia, engaging in peer learning practices during inclusive English lessons. These experiences revealed a strong reliance on peer learning in both settings, yet the implementation strategies varied depending on the country's educational framework.

Although existing literature provides a strong theoretical foundation for peer learning in inclusive education, a comparative analysis of how peer learning is implemented in different national contexts specifically between Thailand and Indonesia is still limited. Moreover, there is a need to understand how teachers perceive its effectiveness, the strategies they apply, and the challenges they face in diverse educational settings.

Peer learning in English language education is an essential strategy that enhances student In light of this gap, this study aims to investigate teachers' beliefs about peer learning in inclusive education, explore how the strategy is implemented in inclusive classrooms in Thailand and Indonesia, and identify the challenges teachers face in applying it. By addressing these objectives, this research is expected to contribute both theoretically and practically.

Theoretically, it enriches the understanding of inclusive education practices in two countries with different educational backgrounds. Practically, the findings can serve as a reference for educators to enhance the effective implementation of peer learning, thereby supporting better academic and social outcomes for all students in an inclusive learning environment.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research adopts a qualitative comparative approach to explore the implementation of peer learning in inclusive education settings in Thailand and Indonesia. This approach enables an in-depth understanding of how educational practices differ across social and cultural contexts. Thailand and Indonesia were selected not only based on the researcher's direct teaching experience but also due to their ongoing efforts to promote inclusive education through national policies. The study uses case studies at two secondary schools Prix Municipality School in Thailand and SMPN 2 Narmada in Indonesia selected through purposive sampling due to their active implementation of inclusive practices and peer learning strategies.

Participants, consisting of English teachers and students from grades 8 and 9, were selected using purposive sampling based on their direct involvement in inclusive classrooms and peer learning activities. To ensure ethical integrity, all participants were informed about the purpose and scope of the study. Written consent was obtained prior to data collection, and participants were assured of confidentiality and their right to withdraw at any stage. The study also adheres to ethical research guidelines, including voluntary participation and the protection of participants' identities.

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative comparative approach, which is suitable for exploring the in-depth experiences, perceptions, and contextual factors that influence educational practices. A comparative case study design was selected to examine peer learning within inclusive education settings in Thailand and Indonesia. This design allows for a detailed exploration of both the similarities and differences in how peer learning is implemented across distinct cultural and institutional contexts. The cases were selected purposively Prix Municipality School in Thailand and SMPN 2 Narmada in Indonesia due to their known engagement with inclusive education and the application of peer learning strategies.

The central variable of this study is peer learning, which is analyzed through interconnected aspects such as teaching strategies, student engagement, implementation challenges, and learning outcomes in inclusive classrooms. Additionally, the study considers teacher beliefs and perceptions as influential elements that shape the way peer learning is practiced in both settings. The comparative analysis focuses on identifying how peer learning is understood and enacted in each context, highlighting the role of teachers' attitudes in guiding instructional choices and classroom dynamics.

To guide the comparison, the study looks into how teachers perceive the effectiveness of peer learning, how it is implemented in daily teaching practices, how students participate and respond to peer activities, and what outcomes and obstacles emerge in each country. These thematic insights are examined across the two cases to uncover meaningful patterns. While the data will be thematically analyzed within each case, cross-case comparison will be used to draw contrasts and parallels that deepen the understanding of peer learning in inclusive settings. The relationship between teacher beliefs and peer learning strategies is given particular attention, as it provides a foundation for interpreting the variations in practice between the two countries.

Subject

This study focuses on the practice of peer learning among 8th and 9th-grade students, with classes consisting of 20–30 students and conducted by four teachers within the context of inclusive education in Thailand and Indonesia. Two teachers from each country were selected as research participants. The selection was purposive, based on the teachers' years of experience teaching English and their active involvement in implementing peer learning strategies. The teachers were chosen from Prix Municipality School in Thailand and SMPN 2 Narmada in Indonesia. These schools were selected not only because of the researcher's access and familiarity particularly as an alumnus of SMPN 2 Narmada but also due to their long-standing application of peer learning practices. Peer learning has been formally implemented at SMPN 2 Narmada since 2016, while in Thailand, the researcher participated in a one-month teaching experience using peer learning methods. It is important to note that this study involved only teacher interviews; no formal interviews or observations were conducted with students. Ethical considerations were taken into account, with informed consent obtained from all participating teachers. Although the selected schools may not represent national trends, they provide rich, context-specific insights into the implementation of peer learning in inclusive settings.

Instruments

To ensure comprehensive data collection, this study employs multiple qualitative techniques, including semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. Semi-structured interviews are conducted with selected teachers to explore their perceptions, the challenges they face, and the perceived benefits of implementing peer learning within inclusive classrooms. Sample interview questions include: "How do you implement peer learning in your classroom?", "What challenges do you face in managing peer learning groups?", and "How do you perceive the effectiveness of peer learning for students with diverse needs?" The interview guide ensures consistency while allowing flexibility for follow-up questions based on participants' responses.

Classroom observations are also conducted to analyze how peer learning is practiced in real time, including student interactions, teacher facilitation, and inclusive strategies. Observations are recorded using open-ended field notes rather than structured checklists, in order to capture detailed, nuanced data on peer learning dynamics and contextual variables. In addition, document analysis is performed by reviewing lesson plans, instructional materials, and teaching journals provided by the teachers. These documents are analyzed thematically to identify how peer learning is structured, the roles assigned to students, and the degree to which inclusivity is embedded in planning. This triangulation of interview, observation, and document data contributes to the credibility and depth of the study's findings.

Data Analysis

This study follows the thematic analysis approach as outlined by Naeem et al. (2023) to systematically analyze qualitative data. The process involves six phases: familiarization with the data through repeated reading of interview transcripts, observation notes, and documents; identification of significant keywords related to peer learning and inclusive education; coding the data by labeling meaningful units; and developing broader themes by clustering related codes under categories such as "benefits," "challenges," and "teacher strategies." These themes are not predefined but instead emerge inductively from the data, allowing for authentic representation of participants' perspectives. The researcher further engages in conceptualization by examining relationships between keywords, codes, and themes, leading to the development of a conceptual model that visually represents how these elements interact within the educational contexts of Thailand and Indonesia.

To ensure reliability and validity, the study incorporates several strategies. Although only one primary researcher conducted the coding, peer debriefing was used to discuss emerging themes with academic supervisors. Member-checking was conducted by sharing summarized interpretations with participating teachers to confirm accuracy and credibility of the findings. Triangulation was also applied through the use of multiple data sources—interviews, observations, and document analysis—which strengthens the study's rigor and minimizes potential researcher bias. These measures collectively enhance the trustworthiness and depth of the research findings.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION
Research Findings
Teachers Believe About Peer Learning in Inclusive Education in Thailand And Indonesia.
1. Teachers' positive belief about peer learning in inclusive classroom

Based on interviews conducted with teachers in Thailand, peer learning is perceived as a key strategy in supporting inclusive education. Teachers noted that this method is particularly effective in bridging the academic gap between advanced learners and those with learning difficulties. One teacher shared a case of a previously shy student who, after participating in peer learning for one semester, became more confident and active in class discussions. The student not only engaged in group activities but also showed improvement in individual performance.

> "My students like English subject. They are happy to learn English and try to speak English with me. There is high academic achievement in English subject. O-NET (Ordinary National Educational Test) results increased from last year. But it does not rule out the possibility that there are students who are still embarrassed to talk or ask me about material that they do not understand, so this peer learning is very helpful for them to dare to ask their friends. In one semester I saw their confidence in learning English increase." (T1)

Teachers believe peer learning aligns with inclusive education principles, offering every student an opportunity to grow regardless of their background or learning pace. One teacher stated:

> "I am sure they get better and they understand the lesson easily. Because once a month I give a semi-written test and there is always improvement, and their daily tasks increase." (T2)

These testimonies demonstrate that peer learning enhances both comprehension and participation, leading to academic improvements. Classroom observations confirmed these findings. In classes of 20–23 students, teachers grouped students heterogeneously and appointed high-achieving students as peer tutors. These tutors facilitated discussions using simplified language to help less confident students engage. This method increased student interaction, test scores, and willingness to ask questions. Clear teacher guidance, structured grouping, and ongoing support ensured peer learning's success in fostering an inclusive and interactive classroom.

In Indonesia, teachers similarly expressed positive views regarding peer learning. They stated that this method promotes collaboration, empathy, and communication among students. Advanced learners help their peers while enhancing their own skills. Students also tend to feel more comfortable asking peers for help, which reduces feelings of inadequacy and increases confidence. Additionally, peer learning enhances vocabulary and speaking skills through regular English interactions.

> "This school has been holding peer learning since 2016, namely peer tutoring, which is routinely carried out at school until now, and also in class usually in study groups as peer learning." (T1)

Peer learning is practiced in both large and small group settings. In large groups, selected students act as peer teachers, helping their classmates expand vocabulary and speak confidently. In smaller groups, students support one another through collaborative learning.

> "I implement peer learning to help each other." (T2)

Teachers emphasized that peer learning supports inclusive education by encouraging participation from students of diverse backgrounds and abilities. Observations in Indonesian classrooms, typically comprising 25–30 students, confirmed the effective application of peer learning. Mixed-ability groups were formed, with peer mentors rotating leadership roles. These practices boosted engagement, encouraged discussion, and improved students' confidence in expressing themselves.

2. Teachers' Role in Encouraging Peer Learning

Teachers play a central role in implementing peer learning strategies in inclusive classrooms. Interview results revealed that they not only guide and mentor peer tutors but also ensure they are well-prepared to support their classmates. Teachers create an encouraging environment where students are motivated to collaborate.

> "Before smart students explain to their friends, I'm sure that they understand or sometimes they can ask the teacher." (T1)

Teachers carefully select peer tutors based on academic achievement, communication skills, and leadership qualities. One teacher explained:

> "I ever give them work in group, but in I group mix both of them—quick and slow students. I use friend helps friend methods or peer learning." (T2)

Observations further illustrated the proactive role of teachers in organizing peer learning. They structured small, mixed-ability groups and provided explicit guidance to tutors, helping them break down complex material. Teachers also gave periodic feedback and ensured clarity and engagement during group work. These efforts highlighted the teacher's essential role as both facilitator and strategist.

At SMPN 2 Narmada, teachers believe peer learning enhances English proficiency, self-confidence, and group collaboration. They adapt their teaching to student needs, recognizing that not all learners progress at the same pace.

> "In each group, I make sure there is at least one student who learns the material more quickly." (T1)

This method allows fast learners to assist others while reinforcing their own understanding. For students who struggle, teachers provide individualized support:

> "I explain to them many times and give them the opportunity to ask questions, and for students who are slow in understanding the lesson, I will approach their seat and explain individually." (T2)

Teachers at SMPN 2 Narmada also train peer tutors in lesson delivery, feedback, and interaction skills. In large groups, peer tutors focus on vocabulary, expressions, and conversation practice. In smaller groups, students are randomly grouped, with at least one

skilled tutor per group. Teachers monitor discussions and provide support when needed, demonstrating their strategic role in facilitating effective peer learning.

The Implementation of Peer Learning in Thailand and Indonesia

1. Mixed Grouping

In both Thailand and Indonesia, heterogeneous grouping of students is a key strategy in the implementation of peer learning. Teachers in Thailand reported that combining students based on their ability levels and individual characteristics helps enhance social interaction and classroom participation. Teachers also often mix English and Thai in their instruction to ensure students' understanding.

> "I mix Thai and English in class. I want to use full English, but sometimes students don't understand my instructions." (T1)

Teachers intentionally place students with varying levels of ability into the same group and give them opportunities to speak in front of the class. This strategy not only promotes active participation but also trains students in presentation skills and boosts their confidence.

> "When I mix students, I expect them to speak in front of the class. It's one of my strategies to involve everyone." (T2)

Observations revealed that teachers divided the class of 20–23 students into four to five groups, with each group led by a peer tutor. These tutors played an active role in guiding discussions, simplifying learning materials, and encouraging their group members to ask and answer questions.

2. Micro Teaching

In Indonesia, teachers also used a combination of Bahasa Indonesia and English depending on the students' proficiency level. After delivering the lesson, teachers identified students who quickly grasped the material and appointed them as peer tutors. This strategy ensures that the tutors have mastered the content before assisting others.

> "After delivering the lesson, I ask questions. Those who understand quickly usually finish their tasks first. I then use them to help their friends." (T1)

At SMPN 2 Narmada, peer learning is implemented in two formats: large group and small group. In the large group format, students from grades 8 and 9 act as peer tutors and teach vocabulary or expressions in English. In the small group format, students are randomly assigned to teams and work together to discuss or practice conversations under the guidance of peer tutors.

The Challenges of Peer Learning in Thailand And Indonesia

1. Nosy Classroom Atmosphere

On the other hand, the implementation of peer learning also encounters challenges related to classroom dynamics. One the teachers noted,

> "Students sometimes do not respect their peers, but so far, this has been very rare. When I ask them to respect their classmates, they listen" (T1).

Meanwhile, another teacher observed,

> "Sometimes, the classroom becomes noisier because they are freer to discuss, and occasionally, they even play around. However, for me, that is something

that always happens, even outside of peer learning. But their tasks are always completed" (T2).

Observational findings also highlight specific challenges in peer learning. Some students tend to rely too heavily on more capable peers, resulting in only one or two students actively completing tasks. Additionally, students with lower proficiency often feel hesitant to speak or present in front of the class. However, assigning specific roles in group presentations helps mitigate these issues by encouraging all students to participate, fostering a more inclusive learning environment.

Despite challenges such as varying student abilities, lack of motivation, classroom noise, and dependence on stronger peers, peer learning remains an effective strategy. Its flexibility, combined with teacher guidance and student collaboration, helps address these obstacles. This reinforces the potential of peer learning in creating a supportive and engaging learning atmosphere.

2. Lack of Contribution

The implementation of peer learning in Indonesia presents unique challenges, particularly due to the dual system used in classrooms, large groups and small groups. Regarding peer learning, one teacher shared their experience with challenges that arise in large-group settings.

> "In large groups, they usually do not respect their peers who act as tutors in class. Sometimes they don't listen, and some even leave the class when vocabulary activities begin. However, as teachers, we always monitor the class and walk around, listening to reports from the tutors. To ensure they stay on track, we usually give punishment to students who skip or disrupt the session" (T1)

This illustrates the difficulty of managing a larger group of students, where some may disengage by either disrupting the class or leaving when they find the material uninteresting. Despite these challenges, the teacher works hard to ensure engagement by providing supervision and enforcing rules to keep students accountable. The teacher further commented,

> "On the other hand, in small groups or when they are in groups, I can monitor everyone, so all students are involved in the discussion. Although there are still one or two students who cause disruptions, it is easier to handle" (T1)

This shows that smaller groups may provide more opportunities for active participation and make it easier for teachers to manage disruptions. The benefits of small-group settings seem evident, as students can be more closely supervised, and everyone has a chance to contribute to the discussion.

Similarly, another teacher reflected on the challenges of peer learning in large groups, stating,

> "So far, I still notice that some students are reluctant to join the class or peer learning in large groups. They sometimes leave the class even when it is their turn to be a peer tutor. I collaborate with other teachers to monitor all the classes and make sure everyone is in the class. However, it is not uncommon for them to get noisy or distracted. In small groups, I can monitor them, but sometimes some students in the group do not receive help from their peers" (T2).

Observations in large groups revealed that while most students followed peer tutors' instructions, some hesitated to take notes, were reluctant to read vocabulary aloud, or became distracted. In these cases, peer tutors encouraged focus and participation. In small groups, most

students were engaged, but some relied too much on their more capable peers, creating an imbalance. When this happened, peer tutors reported it to the teacher, who provided guidance to ensure equal participation.

Discussion

Peer learning in Thailand and Indonesia has shown notable improvements in students' academic, social, and linguistic development by fostering collaboration and inclusivity. In Thailand, teachers observed that peer learning boosted student confidence and helped bridge learning gaps. These observations align with Vygotsky's scaffolding theory and studies by Nardacchione, Giuliana, and Peconio (2022), which emphasize peer support in enhancing understanding. Similarly, at SMPN 2 Narmada, peer learning was found to strengthen communication and engagement, supporting Njonge's (2023) assertion. Rahmadhanty also highlighted the teacher's crucial role in structuring interactions. However, unlike many studies that uniformly praise peer learning, field observations in Indonesia revealed a more nuanced reality: while peer learning fostered engagement among some students, others especially those with lower confidence, tended to remain passive without consistent teacher facilitation. This indicates a tension between theoretical ideals and practical challenges in implementation.

The implementation of peer learning in both countries shares a commitment to inclusivity and student collaboration, yet diverges in strategy. In Thailand, mixed-ability group discussions highlighted by Rahmat and Jon (2023) balance language proficiencies and promote dialogue, with student leaders playing a motivational role. Indonesia, meanwhile, employs both large and small peer-led groups, encouraging vertical learning across grade levels. A notable distinction lies in classroom language practices. As Puasa et al. (2017) explain, code-switching between Thai-English in Thailand and English-Indonesian in Indonesia plays a pivotal role in comprehension. However, while code-switching aids understanding, it can also unintentionally reinforce reliance on the dominant local language, potentially limiting English exposure particularly in rural Indonesian settings.

Despite its benefits, peer learning in both contexts faces significant challenges. These include classroom management difficulties, uneven participation, and over-reliance on more capable students (Sukmojati et al., 2023). In Thailand, varied language proficiencies and low English motivation require creative strategies to engage learners such as project-based tasks and visual aids. In Indonesia, managing large groups often leads to discipline issues, while smaller groups demand close teacher oversight. These realities suggest that successful peer learning depends not only on student interaction but also on active and consistent teacher facilitation. Suhandra and Ariawan (2023) emphasize the importance of teacher training in classroom management and inclusive pedagogy to ensure equitable participation.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that peer learning holds strong potential in fostering academic, social, and language development in inclusive education settings. Teachers in both Thailand and Indonesia believe that peer learning supports diverse student needs and enhances collaboration and classroom engagement. Teachers play a vital role as facilitators, adapting strategies to suit students' varying backgrounds and motivations.

Despite contextual differences such as the use of bilingual interaction and mixed-ability groups in Thailand, and inter-grade peer tutoring at SMPN 2 Narmada in Indonesia—the shared values of inclusivity, collaboration, and student empowerment remain central. However, challenges persist, including classroom noise, student dependency on stronger peers, and low participation. These issues require creative and structured teaching approaches.

To strengthen peer learning, schools should provide ongoing teacher training, adopt it in educational policies, apply structured group strategies, and ensure resource support. Regular evaluation is also essential to measure its effectiveness and adaptability.

Future research should explore peer learning in under-resourced areas, its long-term impact on students of varying abilities, and cross-cultural perspectives across Southeast Asia to deepen regional insights into inclusive practices.

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