#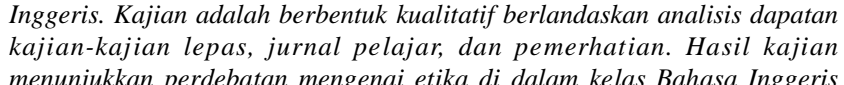 Ethical vignettes in ESL classrooms: the contribution of consensual small group decision making activity & a glimpse into reality

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ABSTRAK

Perbahasan isu nilai dan etika di dalam kelas Bahasa Inggeris merupakan satu aktiviti yang sesuai dilaksanakan sebagai aktiviti kumpulan. Ianya dapat mendedahkan pelajar kepada realiti kehidupan yang banyak berlandaskan etika dan nilai yang dilambangkan dalam peraturan, visi dan perlakuan seharian. Kertas ini memperakui kepentingan etika demi membentuk hidup yang lebih teratur dan menjurus perbincangan kepada cabaran mahasiswa masakini. Persoalan kajian adalah, bagaimanakah perdebatan mengenai etika dapat memberi faedah kepada pengajaran-pembelajaran Bahasa Inggeris. Kajian adalah berbentuk kualitatif berlandaskan analisis dapatan kajian-kajian lepas, jurnal pelajar, dan pemerhatian. Hasil kajian menunjukkan perdebatan mengenai etika di dalam kelas Bahasa Inggeris memberi banyak kebaikan kepada para pelajar.

INTRODUCTION

To facilitate both routine and non-routine decision making, an organization will typically have a set of guidelines in the form of policies and procedures for employees to follow. These policies should be the result of careful consideration of the mission, vision, and values of the organization. Most importantly, these statements guide groups and individuals in making better-informed and ethical decisions. Ethics is "a system of principles, a guide to human behavior, that helps to distinguish between good and bad, or between right and wrong" (Phatak & Habib 1998: 101).

When our undergraduates enter the workplace, they will also learn about the mission statement and code of ethics practiced in the organization. This will be able to guide them in their activities, as well as ethical decisions. Nevertheless, as much as there seems to be a solution to approximately any existent problem, some gray areas still emerge which require discretion, discussion

and further reference. In this predicament, employees may be trapped in the web of conflicting moral philosophies, individual pursuits, and organizational jurisdiction. Some ethical dilemmas may be appealing that sway employees to opt for an easier wrong than a difficult right.

This paper will shed some light on this predicament where individuals will have to argue in defense of an ethical stance facing an ethical dilemma. It acknowledges the primacy of ethics in ensuring order and system in our lives and brings the discussion closer to the knowledge paradigm of undergraduates, who are indeed facing the harsh reality of employability and work.

HANDLING ETHICAL DECISIONS

At this juncture, it is common debate that when we deal with people (human), there's no escape but to deliberate on ethics. In reality, ethics shape rules, visions, and practice. In our everyday encounter with individuals and groups, organizations make crucial and critical decisions, which may involve technology, resource allocation or personnel or clients. In cases where decisions involve people, they will also contain some ethical component (Ross, Ross & McClung 2006).

Cottone (2001) advances a social constructivism model to ethical decision making. From this perspective, decisions always occur in interaction. He mentioned that social constructivism "implies that what is real is not objective fact; rather, what is real evolves through interpersonal interaction and agreement as to what is fact". In his model, a decision maker is no longer seen as a "psychological entity making the decision alone or within some social context. Instead, the social constructivism perspective places the decision in the social context itself, not in the head of the decision maker; decision making becomes an interpersonal process of "negotiating," "consensualizing," and "arbitrating". Decision making becomes a purely social interpretation of the decision making process.

In theory, when an employee faces a difficult decision, he will refer to the mission of the organization for some guidance. This guide embodies the organization's mission, vision, and also common values. According to Ross, Ross & Mc Clung (2006: 194), "The development of the mission will incorporate the primary ethics of key employees. For a hospital, one key group of employees is the medical professionals". The same goes with all professions and organizations. An understanding of complex interactions of factors as well as individuals trying to solve an ethical dilemma can enhance the effectiveness of the final decision.

   In this era of globalization where many multi-national companies have sprouted at any nook and corner of the world, organizations and business face more challenging ethical dilemmas pertaining to cultural understanding, legal and acceptable perspectives and practices. Phatak & Habib (1998: 106) suggested that "decisions that meet the test of benefits to society, individual freedom, individual justice, and cultural norms are considered ethical". According to them, "one way to resolve such dilemmas is to combine all four philosophical approaches into one unifying eclectic decision-making framework". In their work on integrating four moral philosophies into the decision tree framework, they have deliberated over four types of moral philosophies which are most relevant to business ethics. They are teleology, deontology - the theory of rights, theory of justice, and cultural relativism.

CONNECTING ETHICS & THE INDIVIDUALS

Ford & Richardson (1994) concluded that the empirical literature on ethics have concentrated on individual factors that are uniquely associated to the individual decision makers like variables as a result of birth (nationality, sex, gender, etc.) and those resulting from human development and socialization process (personality, attitudes, values, education, religion, employment, etc.). They added that, "these factors, then, represent the sum total of the life experiences and circumstances of birth that a particular individual brings to the decision making process" (p. 206).

   The individual, most of the time, will react to the organizational ethical climate. An example taken from Ross, Ross & Mc Clung (2006: 196) is job reinforcement. An organization may provide typical extrinsic rewards like awards and verbal compliments and thanks. Here, the employee will tend to repeat the idea. Nevertheless, if the employee's decision is "chewed out" by the supervisor, he will quickly learn and not repeat the mistake. In this light, "the organizational culture is partially set by how behavior is extrinsically rewarded. This, in turn, influences the ethical climate".

   Considering the complexities of today's multi-faceted problem, solutions, and contributing factors, the traditional view of hierarchical decision making with an absolute individual at the apex of decision making process may not be commonplace anymore. More and more organizations are involving the employees at various levels to be responsible for decision making.

   To illustrate, Ross, Ross & Mc Clung (2006: 197) wrote that in today's medical practice, "there are typically multiple decision makers, as teams of doctors and nurses strive to provide the best patient care…If a specific decision cannot be reached by the team, then the conflict is resolved by the "attending physician",

after considering all input from everyone involved and after attempting to reach a group consensus".

Phatak & Habib (1998: 113) also cautioned that moral philosophies, decision tree framework or any other strategies may present the criteria for making ethical decisions; nevertheless, the individual will face the ultimate challenge to evaluate his values and beliefs to finally decide what makes an action ethical or unethical. It is in this light that companies and organizations provide training to managers and employees that include case studies and exercises and decision making.

In fact, universities acting as the platform for practice as well as training ground for professionalism provide opportunities for exposure and understanding of ethical considerations in everyday and work life. According to Kienzler (2001), teaching process assumes an arrangement of environments which allow learners to interact and study how to learn. This is like a simulation, task-based pedagogical approach which situates learners in a predetermined context.

In this study, for instance, the participants are placed in a small group decision making context, deliberating an ethical dilemma. A decision making activitiy follows the critical thinking pedagogy that "privileges certain environmental traits which encourage ethical thoughts and behaviour" which enhances the pedagogy. Kienzler enlisted four significant aspects of critical thinking that promote ethical thought and behavior. They are identifying and questioning assumptions, seeking a multiplicity of voices and alternatives on a subject, making connections, and fostering active involvement.

It is important to note that experience can enhance understanding as well as appreciation of ethical practices and beliefs. Phatak & Habib (1998) prescribed that "...managers must go through a formal training program that teaches and indoctrinates them in the ethical principles of the company" to align the individuals' values and norms with company's expectations. They quoted that "Levi Strauss & Company held training sessions for 100 in-country managers who would be accountable for enforcing the company's ethical and socially responsible global sourcing guidelines in the plants of the company's 700 contract manufacturers worldwide".

In line with this connection, this paper sets the ethical inquiry within a group of undergraduates in a tertiary educational setting. It supports that ethics education, exposure and deliberations should start from tertiary level, while the future and budding talents are building on perspectives, values and behaviour.

METHODOLOGY

This is a qualitative study conducted among a group of undergraduates at Universiti Tenaga Nasional. Data is collected using qualitative techniques and analyzed using the constant comparative data analysis methodology. A total of thirty undergraduates were invited to volunteer in a group decision making activity. They were selected from the researcher's TECB 213 classes which is a course on Technical Communication. In the course, they are exposed to group meetings, group business project preparation and presentations, as well as real-life discussions on employability and ethics. The groups are made of five members with representation of at least two out of three main ethnic groups in Malaysia. Whenever possible, the groups would involve both male and female representatives. The participants agreed to be videotaped during their group decision making and they had to complete a journal entry at the end of discussion. The ethical dilemma which is chosen as vignette is adapted from a business scenario which appeared in the Journal of Business Ethics, 2007. The study seeks to answer the research question: How can deliberation of ethical dilemma via ethical decision making vignettes contribute to ESL practice?

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

The results offer interesting findings that promote exposure and practice to ethical dilemma among ESL undergraduates. This section will discuss two major overriding themes garnered from data analysis.

THE VIGILANT DECISION PROCESS

Analysis of the data collected via observation, transcription of group discussions, as well as reflective journaling, captures a rather serious engagement with the decision making process. The results depict that the participants were very careful in deliberating over the ethical dilemma. This observation is supportive and accommodating in promoting initiatives to introduce ethical group decision making in ESL classrooms.

Ford & Richardson (1994) commented that the focus of ethical students in future may benefit from "studies examining the decision processes of students"(p.219). Their reaction is very apt since future work life of our undergraduates will invite interpersonal contacts and conflicts, which may also inflict ethical decisions. In these situations, they need to understand that all individuals within the teams at work are as significant particularly in decision

making. For this reason, it is important that ESL class in tandem with other content courses, prepare them for the future by giving them adequate exposure to ethical decision making encounters, which is followed by further explanation and discussion on common strategies and problems.

As seen in this study, it can be observed that as the participants prepared their presentation of either preliminary proposals or debates later on in the process, they also carefully developed points, arguments and were even sensitive to the reception and rejection of other group members. In other words, the participants actually immersed themselves in the demanding process of consensual small group decision making, showing their ability, enthusiasm and seriousness in undergoing the experience. Some instances can be illustrated in the following quotes:

> "I tried to present my points / ideas to the members. However, some of the points may be sensitive which may offense them".

> "I will seek for any particular opening to counter with in other members point / speech. The countering will be supported by strong reasons and facts. And I believe that with these strong reasons will be able to tackle the points and convince them that their points are wrong and finally they will agree with me".

> "…amazing. We always have a one sided or even few sided way of looking at things. But in reality, it's not enough to solve an ethical dilemma. I tought I had the best answer to the problem, but by the group discussion, we are better enlightened. I believe we have gotten a solution if we are ever stuck in an ethical dilemma, have a group discussion".

It is also interesting to note that some participants went to extent of employing specific strategies to best handle the arguments during the 'conflict phase'. As mentioned by Fisher (198: 144), decision making is not easy because there is no single best answer. Hence, "It is reasonable to conclude that groups do not make decisions. Decisions emerge from group interaction." On this note, it's worth noticing some strategies used by the participants in order to convince their group members in the debates throughout the group interaction process as illustrated below:

"I manipulate their thinking by giving out the pro's and con's of my decision proposal and along the way agreeing with them on their opinion. At the same time I add my opinion or views on their opinion but to the benefit of my decision or opinion".

"I enjoyed the discussion as I learnt the method of persuasion. I could see the reaction of others. I like to see how people react in such a manner. I managed to build up my confidence, improve my speaking abilities, etc."

"I think you have to interrupt the person who's against you and make your statement clearly and with higher voice tone if necessary to convince them. But do not make them feel offended with your voice tone. Other than that, prepare your facts and make sure you are clear about it. Means, if people question you, you must be able to answer with conviction".

"…rationalizing. If you look at a problem from all aspects, it will be easy to agree. I believe we were on equal wavelength as understanding each other's ideas were easy, that's important. If you don't agree on someone's idea, just go about why it's not right in a passive manner. People get defensive when you "attack" their points. Ethics couldn't be played because the risk was too much".

In short, ESL students are serious in deliberating ethical dilemma which may contribute tremendously in ESL practice, immersing themselves not only in the orientation phase of group decision making but also the 'conflict', 'emergence' and 'reinforcement' phase. All these phases require much thinking, interaction as well as cooperation among group members - essential skills that persist in ESL classrooms.

PARTICIPATION, INTERACTION & EXPERIENCE

This study also shows that the use of an ethical dilemma in the context of consensual small group decision making activity can promote interaction and generate new enriching experience. Both of these elements are critical and often emphasized in ESL classrooms. As mentioned by Patrick et al. (2005), "interaction encourages students to integrate information, explain it to others in their own

words, consider different perspectives and opinions, evaluate conflicting ideas, and identify and rectify inadequacies or misconceptions".

Particularly in the 'conflict phase' of the group decision making activity, the participants had to be active and critical. Fisher (1981: 146) explained that at this stage, group members have to "provide data and evidence to substantiate their beliefs and engage in full-fledged debate with other members…". In this study, none of the participants were 'mugwumps' that are characterized by "dissent, controversy, social conflict, and innovative deviance…in that they do not participate in the debate over ideas and opinions". The results actually show that the participants engaged themselves in active group interaction and also see the benefit of the involvement as illustrated in the following quotes:

> "I've gain more experience in group decision making and was able to communicate and express my opinion and thoughts in a professional way. This activity taught me how to make decision with a small group of people".

> "I have experienced a 'real' small group discussion which involved arguments and opinion sharing. I have got the chance to express my opinions freely towards an argumentative topic".

> "It's a good experience. It's not often you get such opportunity to have this kind of discussion where you really can present your ideas and really listen to other people's ideas. To reach an agreement, you must convince other people to agree with you. Therefore, I do feel good, having a chance to participate in this discussion".

> "I enjoyed with this discussion. I can come up with a lot of idea to speak, but sometime I forgot the word in English".

> "I had a great and wonderful experience working with my group mates. I realized that everyone has their own point of views and it is good to actually work in a group because it facilitates more ideas to be generated and allows constructive criticisms. All of us show be able to give and provide feedbacks in order to come to a excellent conclusion".

On this note, it is almost acceptable that ESL classrooms at all levels also adhere to the rule of active learning which provides ample opportunity for learners to practice the English language in a simulated learning environment. The participants in this study went through a simulated ethical decision making deliberation where they presented their individual, preliminary proposals, debated for or against the decision proposals and finally reached a consensus on the group's final decision.

The experience garnered via involvement in the group decision making process fulfils the schematic presentation of the cone of learning where participating by doing is active learning and provides the base and foundation to the cone of learning (Figure 1).
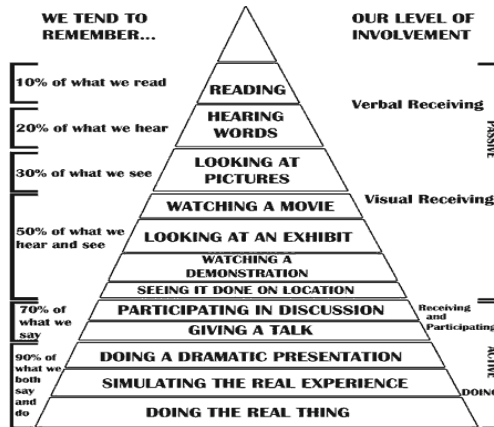

FIGURE 1: The cone of learning

Furthermore, the participants in this study also find their experience very enriching and educational. This can be seen from their reflection on experience gathered through the activity, as depicted in the following quotes:

> "Points which are never thought by myself being present by the members. It is a brainstorming activity, which is good to find ideas/solutions for a problem".

> "After learning some methods in ITCB 213 class for the group meeting, I did learn a lot on the way to conduct the meeting and learn the way on how one should make

themselves involved in a meeting. I gain lots of experience to argue with my group members and learn how to make up my mind to get / make a decision and to get a good solution. It was really a new experience for me which will help me in my future. All my group members did their job well and everyone came up with good ideas. This situation also gave me a clear picture on how to solve this kind of problem if it occur in future".

"At first I'm really nervous because all the group members very fluent in English. They also have many brilliant idea. After a few minutes the discussion start, I become more brave to throw out my ideas".

"It is a fun and educational experience. It has made me to think out of the box. It has thought me to be more confident with my ideas and also my English".

"This is the first time I'm involve in the consensual small group decision making. It's a new experience for me. I really enjoyed this meeting. Thanks to Puan Zuraidah for giving me this opportunity to join this discussion".

CONCLUSION

In short, using the ethical dilemma in consensual small group decision making is an apt choice to encourage our ESL learners to take the onus to present their ideas and later defend them with cogent reasons. The task itself embodies a real dilemma as individuals (undergraduates between 20-23 years old) may already have strong principals as well as ethical foundations. In building defense and keeping to the rule of consensus, they will be able to understand the importance of debates and confronting conflicts in a team setting. Furthermore, with dynamic group interaction and persuasive communication via influence strategies and tactics, learners will realize that any preliminary decision can be contested and abandoned, or supported and accepted as the final decision.

ESL practitioners are not new to conducting group discussion activities in their classrooms. A major concern usually resides on the choice of task for different groups of students with varying levels of proficiency, abilities, as well as objectives. In this study, the task used in the group discussion requires the participants to deliberate on an ethical dilemma, and reach a consensus as their

final group decision.

　　　　　Finally, consensual small group decision making activity using an ethical dilemma may appear intimidating at the beginning, but the final benefits will outweigh the frequent challenges of nervousness, resistance and apprehension. In fact, one of the participants noted that perhaps, at the start, he was "…scared and nervous. I was nervous as this is my first time experience and did not really know how it work. A little scared because the ideas were not too strong and concrete" But he later concluded with a realization that "It will be a lifetime experience and I'm glad to be a part of this group decision making".

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