Introducing de Bono into the ESL Classroom:
An innovative practice to enhance presentation skills

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Introduction

It is clearly not new information that with the advent of the "information age" comes a pressing need for organisations to recruit knowledge workers who can contribute productively and effectively to the success of the organisation. Due to this demand, institutions of higher learning, namely universities, are now faced with the challenges of preparing and producing graduates with personal and intellectual attributes that are desirable to the prospective employers in the industry (Harvey 1999; Koo et al. 2008; Rajendran 2008). Whilst undeniably the most sought after skills in the current *"intensely competitive marketplace"* (Koo et al. 2008, 2), higher order thinking, language and communication skills are also paradoxically the most lacking skills in graduates. Thus, the demand for these skills has prompted the call for further reforms to the Malaysian higher education system (MoHE 2007; MoHE 2009).

Within the realms of the ESL classroom at the tertiary education level, there has been a growing interest to integrate thinking and language skills into the ESL curriculum, as acquiring these skills early in students' academic pathway is central to success not only within the programme, but also beyond- in the working world. The aims for this are twofold: firstly, to create a community of thinkers among language learners and secondly, to immerse students in a task-based-language-learning atmosphere where students are taught how to use the language skills acquired in various contexts. In designing the curriculum for the English for Academic and Professional Communication (ENG1050), an ESP subject offered to semester one Communication students, our objective was to enable students to transcend

1

language skills and engage in critical, out-of-the-box thinking both in writing and oral presentations. Accordingly, Edward de Bono's Six Thinking Hats, a methodology that advocates parallel thinking, was incorporated into the ESP subject. This paper discusses how the incorporation of de Bono's Six Hats into the ENG1050 curriculum for an *oral presentation* assignment, introduced students to creative and critical thinking skills and assisted them to view particular concepts from different angles and directions to derive analyses, syntheses and eventually, effective conclusions. Analysis of students' presentations supported by video recordings of the sessions demonstrated the benefits of such a curriculum.

Teaching Critical and Creative Thinking Skills

Creative and critical thinking are two important dimensions of thinking that are *interwoven* (Paul & Elder 2008, 4), complementary (Forrester 2008, 100) and are in *continual transaction* with each other (Lipman 2003, 197). According to Paul and Elder (2008, 4), "*it is the nature of the mind to create thoughts, though the quality of that creation varies enormously from person to person, as well as from thought to thought. Achieving quality requires standards of quality – and hence, criticality*". In the same manner, de Bono (2000, 6) suggests that as the world changes and becomes increasingly competitive, our thought process should not be confined to the "what is" (judging our way forward), but it should also involve the "what can be" (designing our way forward). Hence, the move to cultivate both creative and critical thinking skills among students in schools, particularly at tertiary level, is imperative. There are generally two approaches to teaching thinking skills – one that advocates thinking skills be taught as a standalone subject (de Bono 1987, 217) while the other, contends that it is more effective to embed thinking skills in specific subjects (Ennis 1987, 40; Halpern 1987, 69; McTighe 1987, 25; Swartz 1985, 111). The latter approach seems to gain far more acceptance and recognition among educators, with the possible reason

that thinking allows students to reflect on what they have learned and thus, increases their understanding and acquisition of the knowledge taught.

In the former approach, de Bono (1987, 217) feels that teaching thinking within a subject area is ineffective because *"attending to content distracts from attending to the thinking tools being used"*. As the originator of various thinking tools, one being the Six Thinking Hats which was applied in the ENG1050 subject, he argues that these thinking tools are transferable across academic disciplines and to real-life situations. We offer to shed some light to this contention, in which we found that by infusing de Bono's Six Thinking Hats to the teaching of ENG1050, our students' thinking skills and their abilities to acquire and apply language knowledge and concepts in the given oral presentation assignment have improved. Our findings also show that thinking is instrumental to the acquisition of knowledge, concepts and skills required by the subject taught (McTighe 1987, 25).

Incorporating the Six Thinking Hats into ENG1050

The Six Thinking Hats consist of six colours, each representing different modes of thinking. The White Hat looks for facts and figures; the Red Hat prompts discussions through inferences and intuitions; the Black Hat is about being cautious and critical; the Yellow Hat encourages constructive thinking; the Green Hat develops creative thinking and the Blue Hat looks at the overview of a particular matter at hand. According to de Bono (2000, 18), the hats can be used in a systematic (see Figure 1) or non-systematic manner, sometimes not requiring every hat to be used. Hence, when students write a synthesis essay for example, they can apply the White Hat, Blue Hat and Black Hat making *"informed critical judgments"* as Swartz (1985, 113) suggests, about the accuracy and relevance of the information to their essay topics and outlines. On the other hand, the same hats can also be used in oral

presentations possibly with the addition of the Green Hat which help students develop their abilities to engage in effective discussions, arguments and reasoning.

The Six Thinking Hats tool was originally taught as a standalone subject known as the *Innovation Thinking Skills* (COM1034) before it was embedded into ENG1050. COM1034 was designed to train students to 'think out of the box', and to be innovative and creative in problem-solving, creating new products, or handling any day-to-day activities. The coursework for COM1034 included testing students' understanding and application of the tools through *presentation* of business proposals. Similarly in the previous approach to teaching ENG1050, students were also given a *presentation* assignment (public speaking) in which they were requested to develop speech outlines on any chosen topics. However, the in the presentation assignment for COM1034, students were not applying the 'Hats' in the development and presentation of the business proposal. Whilst for ENG1050, students were found to be focusing solely on the techniques of public speaking and merely recalling the speech outline prepared. The presentations for both subjects were also found to be less engaging with the audience, who were hardly involved in the critique session following each presentation. In view of this, we have decided to incorporate the Six Thinking Hats into ENG1050, with the objective of helping students acquire, apply and improve thinking skills in their oral presentations and written communication skills, both in academic and professional contexts. Our study shows that the comparison of both the approaches offers contrasting results in which, students who were exposed to the use of the Six Thinking Hats in specific content areas were more competent and confident in their conceptualization and presentation of ideas.
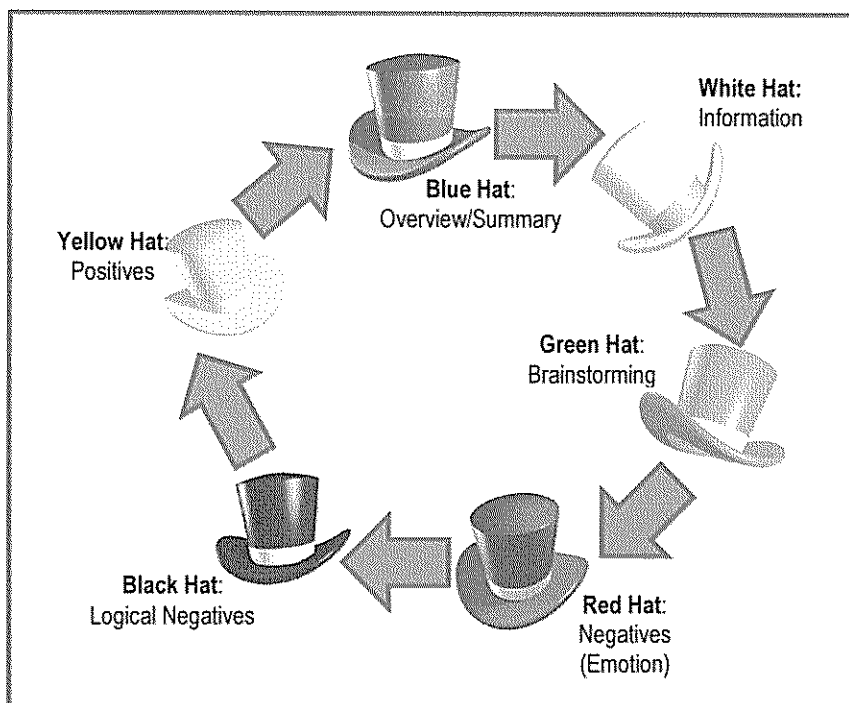
Figure 1: Parallel Thinking: A Systematic Use of the Six Thinking Hats

The Study

Thirty students, who were enrolled in the English for Academic and Professional Communication (ENG 1050) course, participated in this study. The students were given an oral presentation assignment where they were asked to work in groups to develop a product or concept and to present it to a professional audience. When each group presented, the remaining groups played the role of professional audiences to critique and evaluate the products or concepts presented. Prior to the execution of the oral presentation assignment, the students were given lectures on de Bono's Six Thinking Hats and were briefed on the tasks that they have to complete as part of the assignment (cf: Appendix 1 – Oral Presentation Assignment Brief). The application of the de Bono Six Thinking Hats was evident in the following tasks (see Table 1) that were included for the oral presentation assignment (cf: "*Required Elements*" section in Appendix 1).

Table 1: Application of de Bono's Six Thinking Hats in the Oral Presentation Assignment

Tasks	Application of de Bono's Six Thinking Hats in Tasks
Group discussions to develop a product or concept, create speech outlines and select visual aids to sell their products or concepts effectively.	**White Hat**: Look for facts and information about the product or concept to be produced **Black Hat**: Critique and filter irrelevant information/ideas and point out any possible problems with the ideas presented **Yellow Hat**: Provide positive and constructive feedback to ideas given by their group members **Green Hat**: Brainstorm for ideas on the types of product or concept and the speech outline to sell the product or concept **Red Hat**: Differentiate feedback that are based on logic or emotions, or make hunches about specific ideas given by their group members **Blue Hat**: Organize thoughts and ideas that were given by each group member and to control the discussion as to ensure it stays focused on the topic of discussion
Presentation of the products or concepts to the audience to gain their acceptance/buy-ins towards the products or concepts.	**White Hat**: Ensure that accurate facts or information are presented about the products or concepts **Green Hat**: Think of creative ways to communicate ideas and to persuade the audience to accept the products or concepts **Yellow Hat**: Provide constructive or positive information about the products or concepts presented **Red Hat**: Use emotions in speeches to engage with the audience during the presentation of the products or concepts
Play the role of the professional audience to critique and evaluate the products or concepts presented.	**Black Hat**: Critically evaluate the advantages and/or disadvantages of the products or concepts by asking relevant questions to obtain accurate information before making informed decisions to purchase them **Red Hat**: Use emotions or make guesses that prompt for further constructive discussion about the products or concepts **White Hat**: Ask relevant questions to obtain facts or accurate information about the products or concepts

Tasks	Application of de Bono's Six Thinking Hats in Tasks
	presented
Responding to critiques and questions from the professional audience	**Black Hat**: Critically evaluate the critiques or questions from the audience in order to provide accurate and acceptable answers **Yellow Hat**: Develop ideas to spur constructive discussions with the audience and to encourage the audience to ask questions in order to understand the audiences' needs and requirements towards the products or concepts presented. **Green Hat**: Answer critiques or questions in a creative manner to persuade the audience to accept the products or concepts presented.

For this assignment, the students were assessed based on their abilities to communicate ideas fluently with appropriate language and intonation; to convey to the audience the soundness of the product or concept; to demonstrate innovation or creativity in their presentation; to critique the content presented and to answer questions accurately and confidently. Video recordings of the group presentations and the critique sessions were made to provide further insights into the study.

Findings and Conclusion

Our study has shown that the approach of incorporating thinking skills in a content-area subject resulted in a conducive teaching and learning environment, one that was active, alive and robust with ideas and participation. It also further helped in reducing eliminating deep-rooted fears (within students) of presentations and contributing in discussions, as students were more focused on the 'what' rather than on the 'how'. It was also found that students have a more concrete experience with de Bono's framework, coupled with a clear insight into the technicalities of using de Bono's Six Thinking Hats in carrying out the tasks.

They were observed to be sensitive to their thinking where they consciously put on black or yellow hats when providing feedback on the product/ concept as well as the overall presentation. In addition, it was also evident that the learning outcomes for the oral presentation assignment were successfully achieved with the students being more aware of their thinking and more competent and confident in the delivery of their presentations.

To conclude, the inclusion of de Bono's creative and critical thinking skills into the ESP curriculum had indeed helped students acquire oral skills more naturally as they were more focused on the 'what' than on the 'how' of oral presentations. The pedagogical implications of this research can help both curriculum designers as well as educators enhance the language learning experience of students. As with any endeavour to create a positive student-centred curriculum that would benefit *all* stakeholders- the students, the University as well as future employers, there is a necessity to consider the different contexts of language competency as well as the various institutional environments.

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Appendix 1

SUNWAY UNIVERSITY
Faculty of Arts
Dept. of Communication & Liberal Arts

ENGLISH FOR ACADEMIC AND PROFESSIONAL COMMUNICATION: ENG 1050

Oral Presentation (10%)

Question:

Present a concept you wish to promote to a professional audience

OR a product you want to sell to a professional audience

Note:

This is a GROUP assignment. Ensure you have a clearly defined topic. Each group will have 20 minutes in the spotlight, where you will "sell" your idea/product to your audience. Expect to lead a Q & A (critique) session post-presentation. Please note that you should have read, understood and be able to apply De Bono's Six Thinking Hats for this assignment.

Criteria:

- Innovation and Creativity
- The effectiveness of communicating the idea
- Clarity of speech
- Correct language and intonation
- Soundness of the idea/ product/ project
- Ability and confidence in responding to questions

Required Elements:

1. General Purpose
2. Specific Purpose
3. Thesis Statement/Central Idea
4. Outline of major ideas: (This should be the most significant portion of your speech plan.)
    a. Remember to limit the number of main ideas that you attempt to share to **THREE**.
    b. List the major ideas you will include in your presentation. List the ideas and evidence that will support your main points. Be clear, concise, and complete.
    c. Assessment **questions (Again, these are for your guidance):** Is there enough evidence? Is there balance between each major idea? Is the logic of your presentation evident? Have you made your ideas accessible to your audience (will they understand them)? Are you able to convince your audience? If the answer to any of these questions is "no," you still have work to do.
5. Visual aid(s):
    a. Identify and justify each audio/visual aid you have chosen.
        - What point(s) will this aid help to explain?
        - What is the purpose of your aid?

Presentation Schedule: Week 10 (4/6/2012 – 8/6/2012) – Presentation week (There will be presentations on Tuesday, 5/6/2012 as well)