

Engaging Summer School Programme's Participants in Reflective Learning

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Abstract

Experiencing studying in one's home country might be different from experiencing it in a host country. Hence, to help Japanese students who participate in the two-week Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM) ESL summer school programme achieve their goals to better communicate in English and to experience an academic life in UTM, many in-class and out-of-class activities and tasks were conducted and organized for them. One of the out-of-class task was the half-day classroom visit designed based on the foundation of reflective learning where the participants had to attend their UTM buddies classes. While in the classrooms, they were encouraged to participate in the class activities. They were also required to write their own reflections on the visit in their journals. Once the task was completed, they were required to share their experience in a group discussion activity. From the analysis of both their written and oral reflections, it was found that many of the participants claimed that there were differences between the Japanese and UTM classrooms with regard to the teaching methods and the UTM students' classroom behaviour. These findings revealed that the specifically designed half-day classroom visit had stimulated the participants to recognize their personal values, to build their confidence and to maximize their learning experience. The aim of this paper is, therefore, to share the summer school participants' reflections on their experiences undergoing the half-day classroom situation in UTM.

Keywords: Reflective learning, ESL; summer school; buddy system; classroom visit.

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Education nowadays has gone global, and students are no longer confined to a classroom or a university in a single country. The present learning scenario is no longer limited to a specific venue but is now extended beyond borders of countries. Another current key concept for learning is globalization, which entails internationalization. In recent years, the internationalization policy has been strongly emphasized in Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM), one of the research universities in Malaysia. This policy has resulted in students' mobility programmes to be categorized as inbound or outbound programmes. In the context of language use, there is a need to learn the English language in order to be part of the present education environmental ecosystem, and thus, UTM has embarked on an inbound Summer School programme which immerses students with English as a Foreign Language (EFL) background to an English as a Second Language (ESL) setting.

As an inbound programme, the summer school programme has been conducted for students from the Shibaura Institute of Technology (SIT), Japan. Since its inception, UTM has been hosting students from the institute twice a year which is in September and February. The programme called the *Oral Communication for Future Professionals: Exploring the World of Engineering and Science through English* focuses on small talks, cultural sharing sessions (both Japanese and Malaysians), group discussions, journal writings and oral presentations.

This summer school programme has benefited students from Japan as well as Malaysia. It has a highly interactive learning environment created through the buddy system whereby each Japanese student is paired with a local UTM student to assist them with the English Language learning. One of the programme's immersion activities is where the Japanese students have to attend at least a class in UTM with their buddies. The aim is to help the Japanese students communicate in English and experience the UTM academic life. After the classroom visit activity, which was designed based on the foundation of reflective learning, the Japanese students are asked to reflect on their experiences in writing and orally. From the analysis of the reflections, there were remarks in terms of the differences between the Japanese and UTM teaching methods and students' classroom behavior, the difficulties faced by the Japanese students due to their limited English language proficiency, as well as the opportunity given to them to use English in the classes they visited, and the lessons learnt from their experiences in UTM classes. The aim of this paper is, thus, to share the summer school students' reflections based on their experiences undergoing a half-day classroom situation in UTM.

2.0 REFLECTIVE LEARNING

Reflective learning (RL) has been termed by Boyd and Fale (1983, p.100) as, "...the process of internally examining and exploring an issue of concern, triggered by an experience, which creates and clarifies meaning in terms of self and which results in a change of conceptual perspective...this process is central to experiential learning process." RL in the academic context, according to Moon (2004, p.83), "...is likely to involve a conscious and stated purpose for the reflection, with an outcome that is specified in terms of learning, action or clarification.

The academic reflection may be preceded by a description of the purpose and/or the subject matter of the reflection. The process and outcome of the reflective work is most likely to be in a represented (e.g. written) form and to be seen by others and to be assessed. These factors can affect its nature and quality.” In short, based on these definitions, RL involves process and outcome.

RL has been actually used in the academic setting for quite some time; it has been used largely in the field of education since a few decades ago (Fullana et al., 2016). Pioneered by Dewey, other proponents of reflective learning include Moon, Gibbs, Kolb, Schon, etc. Meanwhile, originating from Dewey’s ideas, RL puts emphasis on the learning process and its outcome comes from the reflective work which is usually in writing for others to see and assess (Black & Plowright, 2010).

There are four main models that are always mentioned in RL. The first one is by Gibb’s (1988). In Gibb’s model, there are six phases involved: (1) Description; (2) Feelings; (3) Evaluation; (4) Analysis; (5) Conclusion; (6) Action Plan. In the *description* stage, the learners have to describe events occurred to them. The second stage involves *feelings* where they have to describe their thoughts and feelings about their learning experience. The third stage involves *evaluation* of the learning situation. The learners have to decide whether the situation was favourable or unfavourable for them and they also have to analyse the learning *situation*; this activity is called the *analysis* stage. At this analysis stage, learners have to make sense of the learning situation. The next stage is the *concluding stage* where the learners have to conclude on other things that they could have undertaken. Finally, the *action plan stage* is their future course of action (University of Aberdeen, 2012).

Another model involving RL is John’s model (University of Aberdeen, 2012). It is similar to Gibb’s. Here it involves: (1) Description of experience; (2) Reflection; (3) Influencing factors; (4) Ability to deal with the situation; (5) Learning (Kahar et al., 2016). Similarly, in Kolb’s Experiential Learning model, learners will go through four cyclical stages namely, concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation (Kolb, 1976). Employing reflective observation, learners will reflect upon, draw conclusions, make generalization, and do hypothesis testing in separate situations (University of Aberdeen, 2012).

Schon’s model, on the other hand, has two parts namely; *reflection-action* and *reflection-on-action* (University of Aberdeen, 2012). For *reflection-in-action*, learners will think ahead, analyze, experience, and critically respond, while for *reflection-on-action*, learners will think through situation, discussion, and write reflective journal (University of Aberdeen, 2012). In Moon’s model of RL, reflective writing (RW) was encouraged because this can become the source of recorded experience. Moon’s four types of reflection involve: (1) Descriptive; (2) Descriptive account with some reflection; (3) Dialogic reflection; (4) Critical reflection (Fullana et al., 2016).

There are a number of studies in higher education involving RL. Works by Fullana et al. include investigating the perceptions of students who took part in RL experiences. Using thematic content analysis as data gathering, findings by Fullana et al. showed that RL helps the students to know themselves better, promotes their learning and motivates them to learn. The work by Fernandez-Pena et al (2016) supported Fullana et al.’s findings. Fernandez-Pena et al. used the self-reported learning questionnaire supported by focus group discussion as well as content analysis for data analysis. The findings revealed that learners were not only giving positive feedback towards RL and stating that RL helps them to understand better what they learn, but they were also found to be able to reflect on their process of learning; i.e. fully maximizing their potentials and searching for continuous improvement. Apart from this, the study by Yeoh and Sethela (2015) pointed out that RL has been incorporated in a diverse learning constructivism theories such as Kolb’s Experiential Learning Theory as well as Gardner’s Multiple Intelligences, and they stressed the importance of RL in linking theory and practice in order to provide meaningful learning. Ahmad and Lutters (2011), on the other hand, emphasized that RL as one of the important learning skills that should be acquired by students while Kin and Kwok (2012) in their educational tour of study emphasised on reflections as a method of learning. These studies also emphasized the functions of journal as an integral source of data collection. As a matter of fact, writing journals and reflections in English language classroom have generally been used to promote students’ learning besides enhancing classroom teaching and assessment (Allan & Driscoll, 2014). In the field of EFL specifically, RL has been adopted to improve learners’ language proficiency skills. An exemplary study investigating RL in finding out whether journal writing has any effect on learners’ speaking and motivation in language learning is the work by Bagheri and Pourgharib (2014). In their study, they discovered by employing journal writing, it does not only help students to express thoughts and opinions as well as enhance growth and learning, but it also promotes active learning.

Reflective reports were also used for scaffolding purposes in EFL collaborative oral presentation (Nguyen, 2013). In this study, the reflective reports were used to gain insights into learners’ scaffolding. Using content analysis as a means of data analysis, the researcher found six categories of peer scaffolding behaviours among the learners. Mynard (20007) and Aydin (2014) have also used reflections in blog writing to encourage learners to express their thoughts and to promote language learning. Kamberi (2013), on the other hand, studied the area of autonomous and self-directed learning in an EFL course in Macedonia and he employed written journals as a source of data and used content analysis for data analysis. In Japan, studies employing reflective written journal relating to language anxiety among Japanese learners and their preparation for oral presentations were also carried out (Leichsenring, 2010a & 2010b). From all these studies, reflective written journal was found to be the most popular data gathering for RL. To sum up, RL is a learning model which bridges experiences and learners’ knowledge so as to promote learning; in the context of this paper, it is EFL learning.

■3.0 METHODOLOGY

The study adopted the qualitative data collection method. The participants for this study were 25 Japanese undergraduates; i.e. 21 males and 4 females students who participated in the two-week ESL summer school programme held in UTM. Their field of study were engineering and science while their English language proficiency level was low intermediate. The aim of the programme was to immerse the participants in the English language learning while carrying out activities, lessons and excursions. One of the task given was to visit to classes in UTM. The participants were to follow and attend their UTM buddies’ classes for half-a-day. While in class, they were encouraged to participate in classroom activities, to make notes on the lesson, and to observe the classroom environment. At the end of the visit, the participants of this particular program were asked to give both written and verbal reflections on the given task; i.e. ‘Half-day in my life as a UTM student’.

Two instruments were used to gather data for this study. One was the Open-Ended Reflective Questionnaire and the second was the Journal entry. The questionnaire is for the participants to reflect on their experience and observation done of the classroom visit. Once the questionnaire was completed, participants were asked to share their experience with their peers who visited different classes. In addition,

the participants were to write in their journal about the classroom visit based on the following questions: (1) Which class did you attend? (2) What was the lesson taught in the class you attended? (3) What language was used in the teaching and learning process? (4) What were some of the activities that the lecturer and students did in class? (5) In what ways were the class you attended in UTM and in Japan similar or different?

The journal was collected from each participant at the end of the day for analysis purposes. Data from both instruments were analysed using the thematic content analysis approach.

■4.0 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section discusses the findings from the data obtained from the 25 participants. The following sub-sections are themes emerging from the data analysis. Overall, from the analysis of the participants' both oral and written reflections, the findings showed that many of the participants stated there were differences between the Japanese and UTM classrooms in terms of the teaching methods and students' classroom behaviour. Based on the participants' reflections, the findings indicate that the principles of reflective learning had stimulated them in recognising their personal values so well as building their confidence and maximizing their learning experience. The responses made by the participants can be divided into several different groups; namely, differences between the Japanese and UTM classrooms with regard to the teaching methods and students' classroom behaviour, difficulties faced due to their limited language proficiency, opportunity to use the English language, learning environment, and lessons learnt from the experience.

Differences with Regard To The Teaching Method And Students' Classroom Behavior

An emerging prominent theme found in the data was the teaching method employed by the UTM's lecturers in the classroom where it emphasized on interaction between lecturers and students. Most of the participants highlighted how the situation was different from what they are experiencing back in Japan. Table 1 shows some of the responses given by the participants.

Table 1 Participants' responses on teaching method employed in classroom – emphasis on interaction between lecturer and students

Important Theme	Participant and Source	Responses
Interaction between Lecturer and Students in Classroom	Participant 3 (From Open-ended Reflective Questionnaire)	“One of the differences between the Malaysian students and the Japanese students are in terms of responding to the lecturers' questions. The Malaysian students are more responsive as compared to the Japanese students. The Malaysian students are also highly motivated. I would love to emulate the motivations of the Malaysian students. Another difference between Malaysian and Japanese students is in the form of the relationship between the lecturers and the students. In Malaysia, the relationship is really close. This is a very good example which should be followed by others. All in all, the experience was very valuable for me.”
	Participant 1 (From Open-ended Reflective Questionnaire)	“I thought there were similarities and differences between UTM students and SIT students. The form of the class that I participated was so similar to Japanese class. But the in-class discussion is something that we rarely see in Japan. Due to this, I didn't know what to say.”
	Participant 2 (From Open-ended Reflective Questionnaire)	“...I do think that the UTM students are more active than the SIT students in the classroom. The UTM students also showed greater grasp on the subject during class.”

Based on Table 1 above, participant 3 stated that the Malaysian students' motivation was better than the Japanese students. It was also stated that the relationship between the lecturers and the students was closer in Malaysia as compared to in Japan. On the other hand, participant 1 also said that the in-class discussion conducted in UTM was something rarely found at SIT. Apart from that, participant 2 described the difference between the SIT and UTM students in terms of their learning activeness and ability to grasp the subject being taught in the classroom. These data show that there are differences in the method of teaching between both universities. In UTM, it was found that many lecturers were employing learner-centered approach where the focus was more on the students; this indirectly encouraged students to participate actively in the class. Doing group work, as stated in the responses, encourages the students to express their ideas at ease and at the same time, forms a bond between students and their lecturers. On the contrary, the findings revealed that participants felt that in Japanese university, a more conventional method of teaching was used where teaching methods followed their cultural values based on Confucianism teaching in which students must listen to the teacher without questions. There is also power distance between students and lecturers where in their home country, higher power distance is visible as opposed to a Malaysian classroom. Furthermore, participants said that at their home university, they could not enjoy the freedom of expression in classroom as what they had experienced in UTM classroom.

Difficulties Faced Due to Limited Language Proficiency

Another important theme highlighted in the participants' responses was the difficulties they faced due to their limited language proficiency. Many of the participants reflected on their lack of understanding of the lesson conveyed in the UTM classroom. The following excerpts describe their reflections.

Participant 1 (from the Open-Ended Questionnaire) found it difficult to understand the lecture:

“It was difficult for me to understand. This is because of the utterances of the language which was too quick for me apart from my lack of vocabulary depth of the English language. Due to this also I couldn’t attend many of the classes that I would like to because I would not be able to participate in those classes.”

Participant 2 (from the Open-Ended Questionnaire) also expressed the same concern:

“The lecturer in the class that I attended used English as means for communication. I could hear the conversations clearly but had a difficult time understanding those conversations.”

Similarly, Participant 3 expressed his grievances:

“I think ‘Half-day in my life as a utm student’ is interesting because of the opportunity to attend a class that uses the English language only for communication which is also rarely conducted in Japan. The experience was unforgettable for me. However, I had a hard time understanding the lesson since the teacher speaks English in a fast manner. It was difficult for me since I have rather low proficiency in the English language. That being said, I still find the activity as interesting.”

In addition, Participant 18 (from the Journal Entry) found difficulties in answering questions:

“Teacher ask me to answer question in front of everybody. But, I couldn’t answer. Then, UTM student and teacher helped me to be able to answer it.”

Participant 12 (from the Journal Entry) on the other hand, stated that his conflicting confidence in using English:

“I didn’t have any confident in my English, but I have little confident in using English.”

Other thoughts expressed by Participant 10, 13, and 15 (from the Journal Entry) showed their disappointments:

Participant 13 (From Journal Entry)

“If I can speak and listen English very well, I would become able to understand each other. In addition, I might make new friends with our classmate and be interested in the new field. English is very very difficult for me...”

Participant 10 (From Journal Entry)

“Next class is computer science and subject is software engineering. This class topic is Requirements Engineering & Software Modelling. This class teacher used English only, but it is difficult so I couldn’t understand. I was disappointed.”

Participant 15 (From Journal Entry)

“Second class is Robot Technology Automation. The contents is spot welding. I was surprised that the teacher could speak Japanese a little. I was very interested in the class because I liked the car. But, it’s difficult for me to understand the class. My buddy taught me how to spell which I didn’t know. I was happy. I want to work the car company in the future.”

From the above findings, it can be concluded that many of the participants had difficulties in understanding the lectures in UTM classroom not only due to their poor language proficiency but also due to their inability to understand the accents and utterances used by the lecturers, and their own lack of in-depth vocabulary. Their inability to communicate orally in the English language had also hindered them from taking part in the classroom discussion. As a result, they just remained quiet or only answered questions by saying “Yes” or “No”. Nevertheless, they were fortunate to have their buddies who were with them during the lectures; their buddies had helped simplify questions or long sentences into shorts sentences or word-level so that they could understand what was required from them.

Opportunity to Use the English Language

Despite the difficulties faced by the participants due to their limited language proficiency, the participants were happy to be given the opportunity to use the English language. The participants expressed the joy of attending the classes in UTM which were conducted in the English language as a means for communication. Table 2 below displays some of the responses.

Table 2 Opportunity to use english

Important Theme	Participant and Source	Responses
Opportunity to Use English	Participant 3 (From Open-Ended Questionnaire)	“In my opinion, it is good since it gave me the opportunity to use the English language more often that leads to mastering the language. I think it was very exciting and interesting.”
	Participant 6 (From Journal Entry)	“After the lunch, we discuss about the class that we took first period in English. It was very precious experience for me to take the UTM class in English.”
	Participant 10 (From Journal Entry)	“So, I learn UTM more interesting. So, I felt that I am now more confident in using English because I have spoken English since one weeks ago and I think I can talk with UTM students.”
	Participant 7 (From Journal Entry)	“...I can talk with buddies about anything in life,...”
	Participant 11 (From Journal Entry)	“Second, I attended the class of group work. In the class, we did group work with the students of UTM. It was so fun, and I think SIT should have the class like that.”

In Table 2 above, participant 3 felt that the activity in the class he/she visited was something that allows the mastering of the English language. In addition, the participant's reflected that the classroom activity provided opportunities for students to use the English language more often than usual; the participant stated he/she was given an opportunity to express his/her ideas together with their fellow UTM buddies during group work or question-answer sessions. In contrast to their home university, participant 11 stated that the teaching approach employed by lecturers in UTM allows the participants to work in groups and this approach was seldom found in classes in their home university. The participants found this method of learning interesting and they felt more confident in speaking using the English language with other students. This finding is in line with the previous study conducted by Kahar et al. (2016); i.e. by providing a platform for learners to practice their target language (e.g. English language) and giving them a lot of opportunities to do so, it elevates their confidence to a level where they are able to use the language independently.

5.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

From this study, it was found that the SIT students gave different views when they were asked to reflect on one of the immersion activity that they participated in during the two-week summer school programme. One of the positive reflections given by the SIT students is the UTM students' classroom behavior. The SIT students commented that the Malaysian students were active, highly motivated and had close relationship with their lecturers.

Another positive reflection given is the opportunity to use the English language in the UTM classrooms. The SIT students stated that the learning situation in UTM is more student-centered where there are plenty of interactions between lecturers and students and this learning situation is actually quite different from the ones they are used to in their home country. The SIT students stated they had more opportunity to use the English language in the UTM classrooms.

Besides the positive reflections, the SIT students also expressed the difficulties they faced with the learning situation in UTM. Many of the SIT students claimed that their poor English language proficiency had hindered them from understanding the lectures in the UTM classes. Nevertheless, with the help of the UTM students, some SIT students stated that they managed to overcome their language difficulties and were able to participate in the UTM classes.

In summary, the study showed that the SIT students were able to reflect on their UTM summer school English language learning program. These reflections are, thus, evidences that RL is useful for EFL learning process where learners would not only absorb the learning inputs but they could participate actively in the learning process and reflect on their learning experiences.

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