

TEACHING SPEAKING SKILLS THROUGH GROUP WORK ACTIVITIES: A CASE STUDY IN SMK DAMAI JAYA

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ABSTRACT: This study generally attempted to look at some issues of students' speaking in an ESL classroom. Students' perspectives with regards to their involvement in oral group activities were identified. Besides, the potential implications of group work activities on the students' individual performance in speaking assessment were also determined. To achieve these objectives, 33 Form 2 students of SMK Damai Jaya were involved. The data were obtained through the analysis of students' questionnaire, interviews with three language teachers as well as the observations in class during group work activities. The findings show students' positive attitude towards group work activities in class. This contributes to a significant increase in students' participation in their groups. The general results obtained also indicate some improvements in students' speaking when they are assessed individually. Hence, group work activities could have significant pedagogical implications and could be a practical technique if they are carefully planned to teach speaking skills among the students.

ABSTRAK: Secara umumnya, kajian ini bertujuan mengkaji isu-isu yang melibatkan kemahiran bertutur (speaking skills) di dalam kelas Bahasa Inggeris. Pandangan para pelajar terhadap penglibatan mereka dalam kerja berkumpulan secara lisan juga dikaji. Selain itu, kesan penggunaan kerja secara berkumpulan terhadap kemajuan pelajar dalam ujian lisan secara individu dapat diperolehi. Untuk mencapai objektif ini, 33 orang pelajar daripada Tingkatan 2ES1 di SMK Damai Jaya telah terlibat dalam kajian ini. Data diperolehi daripada analisis soal selidik oleh pelajar, sesi temubual dengan tiga orang guru bahasa Inggeris dan pemerhatian di dalam kelas sewaktu kerja berkumpulan turut dijalankan. Keputusan kajian telah menunjukkan bahawa para pelajar mempunyai sikap yang positif terhadap penggunaan kerja berkumpulan di dalam kelas yang telah membawa peningkatan kepada penglibatan aktif mereka dalam kerja berkumpulan. Keputusan keseluruhan juga telah menunjukkan peningkatan dalam prestasi kemahiran bertutur apabila mereka dinilai secara individu. Justeru, kerja berkumpulan merupakan satu teknik pengajaran yang berkesan dalam pengajaran kemahiran bertutur jika ianya dirancang dengan kemas, rapi dan terancang.

Keyword: ESL, pedagogical

INTRODUCTION

The importance and role of English cannot be denied as it is used widely in the world of ICT, as well as in educational field and everyday's real life situation. One needs to be competent in English language and well-versed in spoken English with the corresponding spread of English as a world language. In Malaysian context, the purpose of English language instruction is to prepare the learners for effective and efficient communication in English in their social and professional situations (Citravelu, 2005).

Statement of Problem

The ability of students to be able to communicate naturally in English is one of the long term goals that language teachers would like to achieve in class. According to Bygate (1987), the problem in teaching a foreign language or a second language is to prepare the students to use the language. Indeed, it is a demanding task for language teachers to provide sufficient inputs for students to be competent speakers of

English. Usually, students feel insecure about their level of English and they face problems communicating as well as expressing themselves in the target language. As a result, they rather remain silent as they are in fear of making mistakes and do not show active participation in speaking lessons.

In addition, language teachers at schools do not give full attention on speaking activities due to some constraints. They are required to complete the KBSM syllabus by following the yearly plan, prepare materials for lessons, be involved in non-academic duties, etc. Moreover, some ESL teachers prefer individual and pair work in class due to the fixed seating arrangement. Thus, emphasis should be given to address this problem as speaking is an important element in mastering English language.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study are:

1. to examine the issues of students' speaking in an ESL classroom.
2. to identify the students' perspectives with regards to their involvement in oral group activities.
3. to determine the potential implication of group work activities on the students' individual performance in speaking assessment.

Significance of the Study

This study helps to determine the effectiveness of using group work in teaching speaking in ESL classroom. It provides language teachers with the rationale to carry out oral group work activities in class to improve students' speaking skills. This study also gives suggestion to ESL teachers to develop successful oral group activities as they can identify the major problems faced by their students. Thus, teachers are conscious with the advantages of group work in teaching and learning process.

In addition, the students will appreciate and work with the strengths of others. This will increase learning, planning and discussion skills and eventually improve their speaking capabilities. The students will be involved as participants and decision-makers in oral group work activities. Besides, the value of group work in ESL classroom will be determined. Hence, this study is helpful to provide knowledge on ways to develop natural ways in speaking activities.

Scope of the Study

This study investigated the issues and problems that arise from an ESL speaking class. This study included 33 Form 2 students of SMK Damai Jaya. Only Form 2 students were chosen as respondents because other students of examination classes focused more on the aspects tested in their PMR examination. The data were collected using questionnaires, observation as well as interview. For the purpose of this study, only spoken language was investigated. Observations were done in one of the language classes in Form 2 when group work activities were carried out. Also, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the language teachers of the school who conducted group work in speaking activities.

METHODOLOGY

Respondents of the Study

The respondents of the study consisted of thirty three Form Two students of SMK Damai Jaya. Thirty three sets of questionnaires were distributed to the students after three oral group work activities were conducted in their class. The students were observed as participants in the speaking activities that involve

their engagement in group work. The research also focused on three English teachers with at least five years of teaching experience in that respective school to obtain their opinions regarding speaking activities and the use of group work in their classes. In addition, those teachers were responsible in assessing the students' achievement in speaking.

Research Instruments

In this study, both qualitative and quantitative research methodology were utilised. There were three research instruments - questionnaire, observation and interview.

Questionnaire

For the purpose of data collection, a set of questionnaire with 25 Likert-scale questions was designed. This questionnaire was designed to gather the students' opinion on the group work activities to improve their speaking skills. The first section required the respondents to fill in the details pertaining to their personal background. This was followed by Section B, where the students were required to answer the questions by circling the appropriate scales to determine their awareness in the participation in group discussions. Lastly, Section C consisted of an open-ended question which required the students to give their personal opinion regarding the group work activities. The questionnaires were distributed to the students who participated in oral group activities on 25 February 2009, after three speaking activities were conducted in the class. By using questionnaire, the privacy of the respondents was protected and the students were able to provide an honest response to facilitate the study. Also, time was arranged efficiently when questionnaire was used as the respondents intended for the study could be reached without difficulty. The questionnaire was prepared in Malay language so that the students could respond based on their understanding of the statements. This was based on the researcher's past experience during the practical training in teaching Form Two classes in that respective school. Most of the time, the researcher had to repeat the instructions in Malay language so that every student can understand before starting their activities. Thus, the reliability of the instrument was increased as the students could provide feedbacks or responses as accurately as possible.

Observation

Observation was another research instrument to examine the students' participation in group work activities. Since different students engaged in group work activities in various ways, it was difficult to capture the situation through questionnaires and interviews. Therefore, observations provided immediate information needed in the study and the students' behaviours while engaging in the activities was observed. Three observations were conducted, in which the researcher focused on students' communication in English, team working, interaction among the group members, their enthusiasm as well as motivation when working in groups. The target students were observed in three different observations with forty minutes for each session which included brainstorming, group discussion as well as competitive games. The overall participation in each session of the group was recorded in the observation sheet and the involvements in the three sessions were compared.

Semi-structured Interview

In addition, interviews were conducted with three English teachers after the group work activities were carried out in class. The interviews were semi-structured, whereby ten questions were prepared before the interview and some additional questions were asked on the spot. The researcher prepared ten relevant questions to gather information and support the results obtained from the questionnaires and observations. According to Moser and Kalton (1971), interview is described as a means of eliciting relevant information and personal opinion from the respondents. The advantages of interviews include the ability to examine

the teachers' responses, take notes of their ideas and investigate their feelings about teaching speaking using group work activities.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Generally, the findings show the desired results with regards to the issues in speaking activities among students in Form 2ES1 of SMK Damai Jaya. Some of the issues identified include the students' proficiency of spoken language that hindered their participation in class, their inability to practice the language outside the class, teachers' inconsistency in conducting speaking activities in class, etc. The students' perspectives with regards to the involvement in the oral group activities were identified, which include students' enthusiasm and motivation, contribution, sense of belonging as well as the importance of peer correction among group members. Also, there was a positive implication on the use of group work activities whereby the students showed improvements in their individual performance in speaking assessment.

Besides, all the teachers from the interviews sessions agreed with the use of group work in teaching speaking. According to them, it was more student-centred and effective in getting every student to be involved in the tasks. Through the observation, students' engagement in the group work was observed and a few elements were generally recorded - their ability to communicate in English, team working, interaction among members, enthusiasm as well as students' motivation in the group work activities. The functionality of the group work in polishing their speaking skills was determined in the three classroom observations.

From the three observations conducted, it was found out that the students felt free to express themselves when interacting in smaller groups. In other words, group work helped to reduce students' anxiety to speak up in front of the class. Hence, the best time to overcome the speaking problems is through the practice in group work. This finding resembled the idea of Harmer (1985) who stresses that group work is an attractive idea to increase the amount of students' talking time. Students use the language to communicate with each other and more importantly, to cooperate among themselves.

In order to get every student participating in the group work, it is essential that the activities should be appropriate to students' level and could interest them to participate. Therefore, making the students interested in the activity is one step ahead of conducting a successful language learning activity. In smaller groups, students learn to ask and receive help from the members. Students who contribute to the groups found the activity rewarding when their suggestions are valued and their contribution is linked to the success of the whole group.

Hence, with all the preparations, confidence and good implementation, all the anticipation in speaking classes would become a reality as students can see the relevance and importance of group work activities to improve their speaking. The implementation of speaking activities through group work provides noticeable interaction in the group as the students gain confidence to overcome the fear in speaking activities.

Having stated the findings above, there were nevertheless a few limitations of the study. Firstly, this study was carried out only in SMK Damai Jaya; the result collected was only valid for that respective school. To make the research findings more reliable, more responses from students of that school should be collected. In addition, English teachers always conducted individual or pair work activities due to the fixed seating arrangement in the classroom. The students might be unfamiliar with the use of group work in class. They might not realize the benefits of using group work to improve their speaking ability and thus, did not show enthusiasm in participating in the group work activities.

Also, due to time constraint, only three observations were made. In the three group work activities, the researcher remained as an observer while the students were engaging in the activities. The researcher might not have ample time to record the behaviours of all the students when they were engaged in the speaking tasks in their groups. Besides, the development of speaking skills demands longer time to assess; however the period allocated to carry out the research in school was only three months.

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