CHORAL SPEAKING: PERCEPTIONS AND CHALLENGES IN AN ESL CONTEXT

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Abstract

Choral Speaking is known for its' numerous benefits in the enhancement of the English Language in the ESL context. However, it has been found that both – learners and teachers alike, perceive Choral Speaking to be arduous. Hence, when performances and competitions are organised, there is a dual resistance and anxiety from the learners and teachers. This study looked at perceptions and challenges on Choral Speaking, of learners from a public university, and that of teachers from secondary schools in Malaysia. Methodology comprised qualitative and quantitative methods, where questionnaires and interviews were administered to the participants. Hence, data comprised responses from these two instruments. The findings showed that though the majority of the learners and teachers perceive Choral Speaking as beneficial, the challenges identified, caused reluctance in participation. This paper provides recommendations to address these issues.

Introduction

Choral speaking is speaking in unison, usually under the direction of a leader who can be likened to the conductor of an orchestra because the performers' voices play their parts like the various instruments. Choral speaking has three main purposes which are learning, performance and enjoyment (Menken, 2006). Apart from the voice variations, Choral Speaking has expanded its boundaries to movements, such as raising eyebrows, hand gestures and swaying from side to side, among others. In some performances, props are included such as hats, sunglasses and other such items. It is these special features that help in the construction of meaning, where the written text becomes more comprehensible to the performers and to the audience.

Choral Speaking competition is organized by the Ministry of Education, Malaysia for students from primary and secondary schools. The competition aims at encouraging and increasing the use of English among students as it builds confidence and creates a platform for students to memorize, speak, render and express themselves in English (www. moe.gov.my). At university level, choral speaking competitions are carried out during Language Week and intervarsity level activities. However, based on experience and observation of the researchers - students, teachers and lecturers are reluctant to participate and involve themselves in Choral Speaking. As a result, teachers find it difficult to persuade students to take part in Choral Speaking performances, which consequently demotivates teachers to willingly volunteer to train students. Hence, this study aims to identify the reasons for their perceptions and the challenges faced and to suggest ways of motivating learners and teachers to participate in Choral Speaking.

The research questions are:
1. Why are students reluctant to participate in Choral Speaking?
2. Why are teachers reluctant to be involved in Choral Speaking?
3. How can students be motivated to participate in Choral Speaking?
4. How can teachers be motivated to be involved in Choral Speaking?

The theoretical framework guiding this study hinges on two main principles of Vygotsky's (1978)

Social Interaction Theory. Firstly, the interaction between teachers and learners has a dynamic nature and learning happens as a result of this interaction, in other words, learning occurs through social interactions. Thus, the scope of this study focuses on the situation where learners participate in a social context, which is the Choral Speaking event. The second aspect of Vygotsky's theory, which is the other hinge that holds and drives this study, is the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), the area where students develop skills which they did not have initially but with the exposure and the help of another, develop, and are then able to use these skills independently. Hence, during the Choral Speaking event, the students meet with other students and the teacher, which is a platform for social interaction. It is here that they notice the 'More Knowledgeable Other' (MKO) who display greater understanding and talents than themselves. Learners are able to do and accomplish more than they could compared to when they were alone as they filled in the ZPD with their new learnt skills from 'others'. Therefore, the social interaction forms the medium in which the ZPD is developed, aiding in extending their skills and developing higher mental functions, during the processes within the Choral Speaking event. In the context of this study, those who have a better fluency of the nuances of the language, proficiency and the talent to transform and dramatize the written words in a text, within the Choral Speaking event. Consequently, the learners gain from those with greater understanding, which include the teacher and other learners. This then, is the two-fold way in which Vygotsky's social interaction Theory drives and forms the backbone of this study. Choral Speaking is an event where social interaction is inevitable. It is in this context that the principles of the 'More Knowledgeable Other' and the 'Zone of Proximal Development' play out in extending and developing students' higher mental functions during the Choral Speaking event. This is diagrammatically represented in Figure 1.
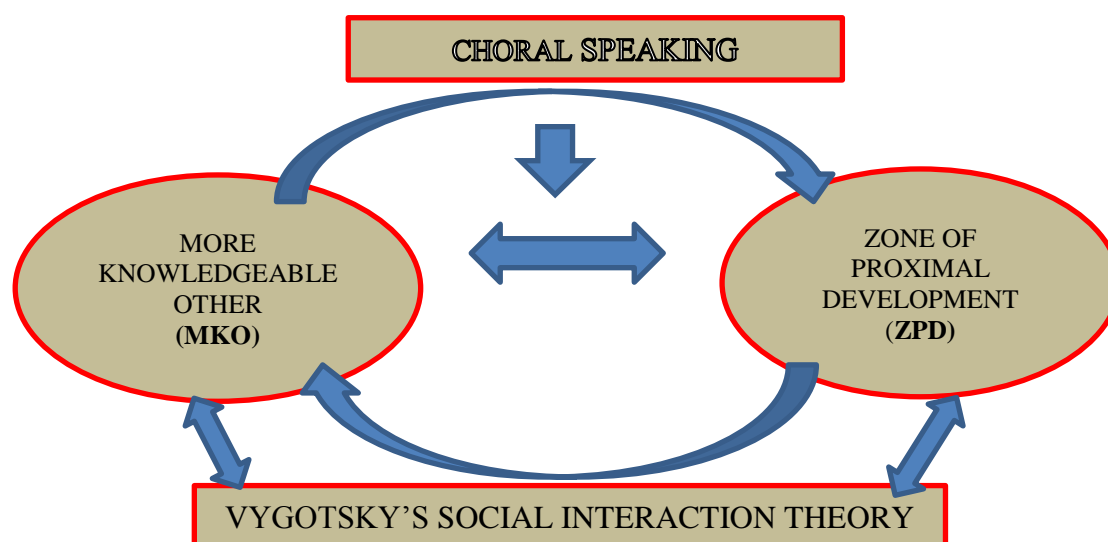

Figure 1. Theoretical Framework of the Study

Studies have shown the pedagogical benefits of reading prose or drama aloud (Dickinson & Smith, 1994; Martinez, Roser & Strecker, 1999; O'Donnell-Allen & Smagorinsky, 1998). Prescott-Griffin & Witherell (2004) posited that choral reading improved fluency, reading ability and word recognition skills. It was observed that English Language learners found Choral Speaking to be non-stressful in practicing public speaking. A more recent study by Paige (2011), showed that when students read texts aloud for 16 minutes per week, significant phonological decoding and fluency gains were made in the majority of the students. This fluent reading enables the reader to spend less time on decoding and have greater comprehension of the text (Pikulski & Chard, 2005).

Support for Choral Speaking is found in several reading theories and educational paradigms, including Dowhower (1987), Rosenblatt (1978), Samuels (1979), and Schreiber (1980). Students who are shy, or have weaker reading skills, can take part in Choral Speaking without fear of failure as their individual mispronunciations are hidden by the overriding voices of the group (Gangel, 1995; McCauley & McCauley, 1992; Paige, 2011; Trousdale & Harris, 1993). Hence, a low anxiety

environment is created as learners are given many opportunities to read on their own. Other studies include Trousdale et al. (2010), who concurred that students communicated with each other when different methods of presentation were tried out. Thus a close-knit group was formed where the learners could express their ideas and feelings freely.Choral Speaking has also been shown to boost confidence in ESL learners who are hesitant in their oral speech. Washington (1983) writes about using Choral Speaking as a way to diminish stage fright of students in his Oral Interpretation classes. As a group, individual learners tend to become more confident and competent. As a result of the knowledge gained from working with a group, individuals are better able to cope with stage fright. Gangel (1995) adds that "weaker readers" will gain confidence in their individual oral reading abilities as they are able to read along and keep up with the whole group, including the more "advanced readers". Choral Speaking has been found to enhance literary value among learners as their appreciation of poetry increases during the process (Prescott-Griffin & Witherell, 2004; Vijayarajoo, 2019). Studies also found that learners found poetry more pleasurable and non-threatening via Choral Speaking practices (Trousdale & Harris, (1993) and Shanklin, 2009). Studies have also shown that Choral Speaking helps ESL learners 'note' the nonverbal markers for intonation and emphasis, and also talk about the tone of the poem" (Hidaway, Vardell & Young, 2011, p. 798).

Methodology

This study used qualitative and quantitative methods of analysis. The first instrument used in this study was a Questionnaire followed by interview protocol. Questionnaires with 10 questions were measured on a five-point Likert scale and were distributed to both students and teachers. The responses were analysed and tabulated into graphs. Open ended interviews were also conducted with the students and teachers. The interview responses were categorised according to the research questions and analysed. Participants comprised 100 students from a local University whereby 42 were those who had prior experience in participating in a Choral Speaking competition whereas 58 have never participated in any Choral Speaking competitions. Besides that, 50 teachers who have the experience in training and conducting Choral Speaking were chosen, from 2 neighbouring schools of the university.

Result and Discussion

Table 1. Students' Questionnaire Responses

	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8	Q9	Q10
	CS is fun & enjoyable	Watching CS is entertaining & exciting	CS aids in improving English language	CS helps in improving pronunciation	CS builds self-confidence	CS production allows creativity	CS is time consuming	CS performance is worth the effort	CS requires more practice	CS is engaging & motivating
Disagree	37	5	8	7	13	23	19	14	13	13
Agree	63	95	92	93	87	77	81	86	87	87

As shown in Table 1, Question 1 responses showed that 63 students agreed that participating in Choral Speaking is fun and enjoyable while 37 disagreed. This could be because some of them had never taken part in such an activity while others felt 'safe' to stay 'on the fence' as reported later during the interview session. Question 2 responses revealed that the majority of the students enjoy watching Choral Speaking performances (95) while only 5 responded neutral to the statement. This could have been due to the fact that they could have been students who had no actual experiences in Choral Speaking. Questions 3 and 4 responses showed that the majority of the students found Choral Speaking to be a way to improve their language (92) and pronunciation (93). This further confirms that Choral Speaking is indeed a good platform in enhancing students' language proficiency. Question 5 responses showed that most of the students felt that Choral Speaking helped them in increasing their confidence (87). Thus, Choral Speaking provides avenues for students to use language confidently. Question 6 responses showed that the majority of the students felt that Choral Speaking helped them to develop their creativity (77). However, 23 did not find Choral Speaking to be helpful. This could be due to their uncertainty and indifferent stance towards Choral Speaking. Question 7 responses showed that 81 felt that the time taken for Choral Speaking activities was worth all the effort. However 19 disagreed, possibly because they could have felt that time could have been spent on other activities of

interest such as assignments, quizzes and other academic matters. Question 8 responses showed that majority of the students felt they were able to work better as a team in this activity (86). The 14 who disagreed may have preferred to work on their own and probably lacked interaction and teamwork skills. Question 9 responses showed that majority of the students (87) felt that they wanted to practice so that they can perform well during the Choral Speaking presentation. However, 13 disagreed on this matter. This corresponds with Question 7 responses whereby some students felt that they would rather spend the time doing something of their own interests rather than repeated Choral Speaking practices. Question 10 responses showed 87 found Choral Speaking to be an engaging and motivating activity while 13 disagreed. These 13 could be the same students who did not find Choral Speaking interesting. In summary, responses from the Questionnaire to students showed that they enjoy Choral Speaking and find it beneficial in many ways.

Interview responses from students were categorized under 2 factors i.e. internal and external; that help to explain student reluctance in Choral Speaking participation. Firstly, under the external factor, time posed an important emergent theme. Many respondents felt that Choral Speaking practices consumed too much time which could have been put to 'better use' i.e. sports and other academic matters. Besides that, too much time is 'wasted' in waiting for others, memorizing the script, polishing the pronunciation and intonation. Secondly, under the internal factor, the level of proficiency posed as an important theme. Many respondents felt that the others 'were better' and thus they were nervous and lacked confidence to participate. These factors contributed to their negative sense of self-esteem. It can be concluded from the responses to the interview questions that, the main concern was time and proficiency levels that hindered student participation in Choral Speaking.

Table 2. Teachers' Questionnaire Responses

	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8	Q9	Q10
	fun & enjoyable	allows creativity	aids in improving English language	enhances pronunciation	builds self-confidence	allows deeper understanding	encourages teamwork	the end product is worth the effort	challenging effort	Engaging & motivating student-activity
Disagree	42	31	6	4	10	8	11	10	2	10
Agree	8	19	44	46	40	42	39	40	48	40

As shown in Table 2, responses revealed that the majority of the teachers did not enjoy training students (42 out of 50) while only 8 responded positively to the statement. This concurs with the problem statement of the study, that teachers are reluctant to be involved in Choral Speaking. Question 2 responses showed that the teachers (31) felt that Choral Speaking allowed creativity in language learning. For instance, teachers added local and currency to the script making it enjoyable and engaging. Questions 3 and 4 responses showed that the majority of the teachers agreed that Choral Speaking allows improvement in language (44) and pronunciation (46). This further consolidates the importance of Choral Speaking in language teaching and learning. Question 5 responses showed that the majority of the teachers concurred that Choral Speaking boosts students' self-confidence (40). This confirms another benefit of Choral Speaking. Question 6 responses showed that the majority of the teachers (42) felt that Choral Speaking helped them to understand the text at a deeper level. This is because they need to revisit the script several times and make cross references to other sources on the topic. Question 7 responses showed that the majority of the teachers (39) found that Choral Speaking created opportunities for teamwork as students need to practise together. Question 8 responses showed that the majority (40) felt that the time taken in Choral Speaking practice and performance was worth all the effort. Thus a sense of satisfaction and fullness is experienced by the teachers. Question 9 responses showed that a majority of the teachers (48) felt that Choral Speaking was a challenging activity in terms of effort, initiative and time. This could be attributed to time needed for the many practices and rehearsals needed for a good performance. In addition, teachers are also involved in other academic and co-curricular matters in school. Question 10 responses showed that the majority of the teachers (40) found Choral Speaking to be an engaging and motivating student activity. This is based on the teachers' observations while conducting Choral Speaking practices, where even reluctant students showed interest and motivation to participate in

Choral Speaking performance. In summary, it can be concluded from the responses in the Questionnaire to teachers that Choral Speaking, is looked at positively although it posed challenges in terms of effort and time from the teachers.

Responses were categorized under 2 factors i.e. internal and external; that help to explain teachers' reluctance in Choral Speaking involvement. Firstly, under the external factor, time posed an important theme. Many teachers felt that Choral Speaking practices consumed too much time in terms of supervising and monitoring students in comparison to other language activities (i.e. Treasure Hunt, Quiz, Scrabble and others). In addition, a teacher's role is pivotal in Choral Speaking to ensure correct pronunciation and intonation unlike other language activities. Hence the teachers' reluctance to be involved. Secondly, under the internal factor, the level of experience and exposure posed as an important theme. Many teachers felt that they lacked the knowledge and expertise to train students. Other than that, some teachers felt that they were unable to write authentic Choral Speaking scripts. Besides that, the availability of Choral Speaking resources such as performance videos, sample scripts and guidelines are lacking. It can be concluded from the responses to the interview questions that, the main concern was time and experience that hindered teacher involvement in Choral Speaking.

Student reluctance in Choral Speaking participation is addressed in this section. To begin with, Choral Speaking is a language activity that spans over a period of time beginning from planning, repeated practices to the final performance. Students are required to put in hours of practice which include various drills (pronunciation, intonation and stress) which need to be coordinated as a group of 20 to 30 students. Hence, students find this time-consuming in comparison to other language activities (scrabble, public speaking, spelling bee and others) which are carried out on an individual basis, whereby less time is needed for coordination and preparation. To overcome this problem, students who participate in Choral Speaking should be given some incentives due to the time and effort (weightage) that they have to put in, compared to students who participate in other language activities. Presently a point system for co-curricular activities exist across the board. However, it does not take into account the 'weightage' of the different activities. Hence, it is suggested that more weightage be given considering the time and effort required for this activity. Therefore, more points should be given to Choral Speaking participation to encourage greater participation. Secondly, the issue of English Language proficiency was yet another finding that contributed to student reluctance. Students' lack of language proficiency attributed to their lack of confidence and fear in Choral Speaking participation. This finding is expected of low proficiency students who fear making mistakes. However Choral Speaking has been found to benefit such students as they perform in groups and need not feel intimidated. One way to overcome lack of confidence is to expose students to Choral Speaking in the classrooml among their peers. Besides that, students can also watch videos and witness live Choral Speaking performances. To address the issue of low language proficiency (pronunciation, intonation, stress and expressions), more drills and oratory practices should be introduced in language classrooms in a fun and non-threatening way.

The issue of teacher reluctance in Choral Speaking involvement is addressed here. To begin with, Choral Speaking training is perceived as an arduous task as it is time-consuming. Teachers are required to stay after school hours to train students and rehearse the script repeatedly. In comparison, other language activities are not as demanding of the teachers as these activities require minimal supervision and guidance from teachers where students work independently. To overcome this issue, support and appreciation should be considered by the Ministry of Education. For instance, lesser teaching hours and academic duties should be considered for teachers who have chosen to train students for Choral Speaking. Besides that, an additional allowance could be given to teachers to meet expenses such as light refreshments for the students and teachers during these extra hours of practice. In addition, teacher recognition for Choral Speaking training will also encourage teacher involvement. For example, a scoring guide should be devised where they are given more points as incentives to train students and put in extra time towards this activity. This should be translated into their Key Performance Index (KPI) that could be taken into consideration for promotions and job appraisals. Secondly, the issue of level of exposure to and experience in Choral Speaking was another finding that contributed to teacher reluctance. Teachers' lack of experience and exposure in training students

attributed to their lack of confidence in this activity. One way to overcome this issue is to organize workshops from the preliminary stages such as script writing to the final performance of Choral Speaking. These workshops should be conducted by experts in the field. Another way is to watch videos and attend Choral Speaking performances and competitions. This would give teachers a clearer picture on the conventions and a step by step guide to Choral Speaking and training.

Conclusion

It is clear that students and teachers are reluctant to participate in Choral Speaking. Time is a common factor for both the students and teachers in deterring them in Choral Speaking participation. Additionally, lack of English Language proficiency applies to students while lack of experience and exposure applies to teachers. Hence, suggestions have been outlined for both students and teachers.

Table 3. Suggestions for students & teachers

Students	• Better incentives & Recognition : more points awarded
Teachers	• Better incentives & Recognition : less academic work load, KPI scores, promotion opportunities • Choral Speaking Workshops by experts

It is hoped that more research will be conducted on a wider scale to gain richer and thicker data on the perceptions and challenges in Choral Speaking in an ESL context. This study should not be confined to languages but also extended to other content subjects such as history, science and many more.

Acknowledgement

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