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Team Project Facilitates Language Learning

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Abstract

This study focuses on a classroom device used - a project-based approach – that integrates language and soft skills simultaneously. The participants for this study are 60 students of foundation (engineering). This study is descriptive and exploratory in nature which the researcher wants to explore whether team project activity can promote the frequent use of English language, practice learners’ strategies, and boost learners’ self-confidence. It adopts a quantitative method by gauging students’ feedback through administering questionnaire. The analysis will look into the percentage of agreement towards the advantages of the team project as a classroom device to promote communicative skills among students.

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Keywords: Team project; Communicative competence; Self-confidence; Collaborative learning; Language learning strategies

1. Introduction

All second language learners deserve to be given opportunity and responsibility to groom their language performance. The opportunity that language instructors can provide must be practical and valid with what the syllabus requires. The learners should be exposed to authentic and integrative learning in order to encourage them to bring in their knowledge learnt in the real situation. Meaningful learning requires learners to relate new knowledge (concepts and propositions) to what they already know (Ausubel, 1960). With sufficient exposure of English skills and chances for them to practice, they will increase their self-confidence in using English language.

This study is mainly focusing how team project assignment helps students in developing their language skills and also cultivating essential soft skills. The project assignment is a classroom device that enables learners to work collaboratively, think critically and perform confidently. The medium of communication must only be in English language. The learners use English to voice out their ideas during brainstorming sessions and presentations.

To be specific, the team project assignment has three phases. The instructor allocates ample time for them to first discuss in group. They brainstorm a variety of ideas and select them based on consensus. After that, the learners must write mini proposals that explain the information about the project. At the final stage, the groups will present their projects to the panel (language instructor) and their classmates. The detailed instruction rubrics are provided black and white to the learners.

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2. Statement of problems

There are many aspects of skills that university students are lack of. However, the key problem this paper addresses is the language proficiency. Even though, in Malaysia, the learners have gone eleven (11) years of schooling time which taught English as their second language but they leave schools with low language proficiency level. It might due to the lack of contact hours for English during their school time. As Kennedy (1973) says, the amount of exposure to the target language that a second language learner receives in class is certainly generally much less than the amount he receives in acquiring the first language.

These students are then expected to further the tertiary education in universities or colleges. They may have difficulties in assimilating themselves with the medium of communication in their courses. Thus, these students cannot demonstrate good communication skills as they do not have basic linguistic competence to begin speaking (Gaudart, 2003).

Besides, most instructors are not willing to provide interesting and stimulating tasks to activate speaking among the learners. Many language instructors believe in spontaneous method as this due their time management problem or the massiveness of syllabus to be covered. These may demotivate the language learners to learn language effectively as the language items are presented in isolation. There is no link between the syllabus, learners’ schemata and the real situation. The learners are exhausted for a meaningless learning.

Graduates who have know-how of their areas and generic skills are highly demanded by industries. If the learners do not have sufficient know-how of their subject matter and possess low communicative skills, they are hardly to be employed by any company.

As a result, employability rate for graduates are lessened for those who neglect the importance of oral communication particularly in English. According to the Minister of Higher Education Malaysia, Y.B Dato’ Seri Mohamed Khaled Nordin in his speech entitled, ‘Enhancing Graduate Employability: Issues, Concerns and the Way Forward’:

…it the issue of graduate employability has always been associated with graduate marketability and competency. Among the ongoing debate on graduate employability is the lack of certain decisive factors that fail to meet the demands of employers. There are three key competencies: 1. self-image or grooming, 2. effective communication skills and 3. English proficiency that many graduates fail to prove during the interview sessions which hinder them from getting any job.

(Y.B Dato’ Seri Mohamed Khaled Nordin, 2009).

Thus, to find a practical solution to cure these negative elements in the university students, language instructors can integrate their language lessons with project-based learning. The approach encompasses a holistic application of communication, language, as well as creative and critical thinking.

3. Significance of study

The study is carried out to look at the capability of a classroom device – team project assignment – initiated by the researcher to primarily develop English language communicative skills among learners. The communicative skills must be developed and ‘drilled’ so that learners are familiar with English linguistic forms and functions.

It is also one of the integrated teaching tools in triggering learners’ critical and creative thinking skills. These skills are crucial as most of them will further engineering courses and become engineers. Professional engineers should be equipped with significant thinking styles. The construct of thinking style expands the notion of what people prefer to do – how they capitalize on the abilities they have (Sternberg, 1999).

The feedback obtained from this study is highly advantageous for language instructors. It helps the instructors to evaluate the degree of learner participation in collaborative learning environment. It also provide information if the learners have practice their soft skills in proper ways or not. There are several variables related to soft skills in this study namely, interpersonal skills, learning strategies, and personality factors.
The study can significantly contribute to a catalog of teaching methods that suitable for university students who are preparing themselves for the real world. These students will possess high self-assured if they are well equipped with proper language and basic communication skills to perform excellently and assimilate in learning society. Therefore, the feedback from students regarding the team project assignment is vital for improvement of the instructor’s pedagogy and knowledge.

4. Objectives of the study

The objectives of the study are to:

1. Examine whether team project assignment helps students increase the use of English language in their daily speaking.
2. Explore whether team project activity helps students increase their self-confidence.
3. Investigate whether team project activity drive students to practise learning strategies.

5. Limitations of study

There are several limitations that faced by the researcher throughout the process of carrying out this study. To begin with, the researcher used sample of convenient as her study sample. There were only sixty (60) participants who responded to the questionnaire administered. The team projects cannot be conducted in a large group of student per class. Hence, it is inappropriate to generalize that this study will produce the result of the whole population of UNITEN students. Secondly, the study cannot determine the real effects on students in terms of speaking skills, self-confidence and learners’ strategies as the instrument used is merely a self-report questionnaire. The students might have developed their own language competence by not depending on the team project assignment. There may be other intervening factors that help student develop their communicative skills. The other limitation is the team project assignment is just an initiative made compulsory by the instructor (researcher), it is not stated in the syllabus and therefore, it is time consuming.

6. Literature review

6.1 Communicative Language Teaching Today

The Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach in the 21st century is potential to provide remedy for developing communicative competence compared to earlier methods that have the same objective. Teaching students how to use the language is considered to be at least as important as learning the language itself. Brown (1994:77) aptly describes the "march" towards CLT:

"Beyond grammatical discourse elements in communication, we are probing the nature of social, cultural, and pragmatic features of language. We are exploring pedagogical means for 'real-life' communication in the classroom. We are trying to get our learners to develop linguistic fluency, not just the accuracy that has so consumed our historical journey. We are equipping our students with tools for generating unrehearsed language performance 'out there' when they leave the womb of our classrooms. We are concerned with how to facilitate lifelong language learning among our students, not just with the immediate classroom task. We are looking at learners as partners in a cooperative venture. And our classroom practices seek to draw on whatever intrinsically sparks learners to reach their fullest potential."

The CLT approach has been a trend in the teaching arena. According to Jacobs and Farrell (2003), the shift towards CLT marks a paradigm shift in our views about teachers, learning and teaching. The core aspects of this shift is it focuses on the role of the learners rather than external stimuli the learners are receiving from their environment. This shift is generally known as teacher-centred instruction to learner-centredness. Besides, it emphasizes more on the learning process rather than the product produced by the learners and this is known as from product-oriented to process-oriented. The focus of learning is more to social nature rather students as separate, decontextualised
individuals. The diversity in learners is not impediments but as resources to be recognized, catered to and appreciated. A part from the CLT approach promotes holistic learning as the learners are able to connect schools with the world beyond. It helps the learners to understand the purpose of learning and importance of meanings rather than drills. It also stresses that learning is a lifelong process rather than prepare them for the examination.

6.2 Fashioning a Collaborative Learning Environment

Collaborative learning offers an environment to liven up and supplement the learning practices. Establishing interactive classmates into an educational system creates more practical social contexts, thereby increasing the effectiveness of the language teaching. Such an environment would uphold the language learners’ interests and provide more natural learning surroundings (Vivekanandan, 1996).

In language learning classrooms, collaborative learning can be a supporting means for the instructors in order to create a rich and meaningful learning process. Collaborative learning has a major role in constructive cognitive development (Piaget1928, Piaget1932). This theory is reliable with other well-known learning theories (Vygotsky, 1978, Fox & Karen, Thomas & Funaro, 1990) in highlighting the significance of collaboration.

There are several principles that language instructors should know in establishing collaborative learning atmosphere. According to Whipple, (1987), firstly, both facilitators and learners become active participants in the educational process. Secondly, the hierarchy between facilitators and learners is eliminated. Next, a sense of community is created. Finally, knowledge is created, not transferred. These principles are the guidelines for the instructors to adapt collaborative learning approach in their language classes.

There are various approaches to collaborative learning. A set of hypotheses about the learning process (Smith and MacGregor, 1992) underlies them all:

1. Learning is an active process whereby students assimilate the information and relate this new knowledge to a framework of prior knowledge.
2. Learning requires a challenge that opens the door for the learner to actively engage his/her peers, and to process and synthesize information rather than simply memorize and regurgitate it.
3. Learners benefit when exposed to diverse viewpoints from people with varied backgrounds.
4. Learning flourishes in a social environment where conversation between learners takes place. During this intellectual gymnastics, the learner creates a framework and meaning to the discourse.
5. In the collaborative learning environment, the learners are challenged both socially and emotionally as they listen to different perspectives, and are required to articulate and defend their ideas. In so doing, the learners begin to create their own unique conceptual frameworks and not rely solely on an expert's or a text's framework.

In fact, the learners will start assessing themselves with one another the group and this encourages reflective learning which really helps them build their characters, knowledge and values. In a collaborative learning setting, learners have the chance to converse with peers, express and support ideas, exchange diverse beliefs, question other conceptual frameworks, and be actively engaged (Cooper and Robinson, 1997).

Collaborative Learning emphasizes on experiential learning and student-centered learning that are based on the work of the philosopher, Dewey, and the social psychologists, Piaget and Vygotsky. Critical thinking, as a form of education, and problem-centered learning have also contributed to Collaborative Learning (MacGregor 1990; Sheridan 1989).

Collaborative learning assumes that knowledge is socially, rather than individually, constructed by communities of individuals and that the shaping and testing of ideas is a process in which anyone can participate (MacGregor 1990; Novotny, Seifert, and Werner 1991). Furthermore, it stresses the importance of common inquiry in learning, a process through which learners begin to experience knowledge as something that is created rather than something that is transmitted from the facilitator or teacher to the learner (Sheridan 1989).

Collaborative Learning addresses the issue of how authority is distributed and experienced in the learning setting (Bruffee 1987). The preeminent idea behind Collaborative Learning is that learning is significantly enhanced when knowledge that is created and transmitted is shaped by the activities and perspectives of the group, so the facilitator's role as an authority and source of knowledge is reduced (Romer 1985).
6.3 Communicative Activities

According to Wan (1990), the term 'Communicative activities' refers to the techniques which are employed in the communicative method in language teaching. Activities such as games, exercises, practices and projects are teaching devices in which English language becomes the vehicle throughout the activities. In addition to that, the learners involve in completing their tasks with the use of English language help from the instructors. The language-using activities for communication are not restricted to conversation and may involve listening, speaking, reading, writing or an integration of two or more skills (Wan, 1990).

Communicative activities have the following characteristics:

1. They are purposeful. They are beyond strictly practising particular structures.
2. They are interactive. The activities are often conducted with others and often involve some form of discussion.
3. Authentic materials are used. The situations in which the learners have to use language should be as realistic as possible. The language models given should be authentic.
4. They are based on the information gap principle.

6.4 The Team Project

6.4.1 Criteria for Authentic Project-Based Learning

Designing a task for learner assignment must encompass the learning outcome of the lesson. The team project conducted by the researcher is strictly followed the guidelines suggested by Kraft (2005). The guidelines for evaluating the effectiveness of problem- and project-based learning in a language classroom are as follows:

1. Allows for a variety of learning styles.
2. "Real" world oriented - learning has value beyond the demonstrated competence of the learner.
3. Risk-free environment - provides positive feedback and allow choice.
4. Encourages the use of higher order thinking skills and learning concepts as well as basic facts.
5. Utilizes hands-on approaches.
6. Provides for in-depth understanding.
7. Accessible for all learners.
8. Utilizes various modes of communication.
9. Assessment is congruent with instruction, i.e. performance-based.
10. Students are responsible for their own learning.
11. Students have ownership of their learning within the curriculum.
12. Projects promote meaningful learning, connecting new learning to students' past performances.
13. Learning utilizes real time data - investigating data and drawing conclusions.
14. The learning process is valued as well as the learning project.
15. Learning cuts across curricular areas - multidisciplinary in nature.
16. Teacher is a facilitator of learning.
17. Student self-assessment of learning is encouraged.

The team project assignment carried out the researcher is dependent on learners’ learning styles. The choices are freely made by the learners whether to invent or modify any existing gadgets, appliances, machines, systems to assist humans’ daily life. This aspect is directly related to the learners ‘real world’ as future engineers. The collaborative mode is adopted in the class. It means the learners must work in team. The degree English usage while discussions will be evaluated by the instructors. They are required to practice higher, creative and critical thinking skills at their current level (tertiary level).

Besides, the task is every ones’ responsibility and each learner should contribute thoughts and solutions upon completing the project. The emphasis of ‘research’ is placed greater while designing and preparing for the project. The source of information like the Internet is highly encouraged and is the most accessible source among the
learners. Meanwhile, the learners can consult the instructor to get suggestions and advice. Here, the instructor becomes a facilitator.

In the project presentation stage, the risk-free and non-threatening environment should be created. At this stage, the language performance of the learners will be assessed. The learners are expected to present the projects with fluency, accuracy and clarity. The products or projects presented by the learners are displayed in their classrooms as appreciation.

6.4.2 Team Projects Facilitate Communicative Ability

One of the most important aims in teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) is to develop communicative ability. To do this, learners should be taught knowledge of linguistics forms, meanings, and functions (Larsen-Freeman, 2000). Besides, communicative language teaching pays systematic attention to functional as well as structural aspects of language. In other words, the synergy between both knowledge and performance can be practiced by students simultaneously if they involve in communicative language teaching classrooms (CLT).

In this study, the classroom device used is a project-based approach which requires students to establish groups with members who they are comfortable with. The instructor will then provide a task such as inventing or modifying a simple machine, product, gadget, system or even robot. The tasks should be tailored according to the students’ field of study. In this case, the samples of this study are engineering students, and the tasks provided were related to their technical areas. This activity helped them to use English language frequently not only in the classroom but also outside as they met for discussion or completion the task.

The collaborative learning climate based on project based activity put learners in control as they formulate their own designs and experiments, and work on projects that they care about personally (Resnick and Ocko 1991). Project learning also encourages pupils to work in teams (Barak & Maymon, 1998; Barak, Maymon, & Harel, 1998; Denton, 1994). In this way, pupils combine "hands-on" activities with what Papert (1980) has termed "heads-in" activities.

6.4.3 Team Projects Enhance Self-Confidence and Teamwork

Normally, students feel anxious and nervous when it comes to communicative activity in language classroom. To help eliminate these unhealthy feelings, socio-affective strategy is needed. Socio-affective strategy is a combination of both social strategies and affective areas. According to Oxford (1990), affective strategies enable learners to control feelings, motivations, and attitudes related to language learning. Meanwhile, social strategies facilitate interaction with others, often in a discourse situation.

Thus, team project is the best classroom device to practice socio-affective strategies with students as it provide with tasks to be solved, require high team work, activate creative thinking skills and involve the presentation the product using English language. All movements and achievement of the team will be based on their cooperation and interpersonal skills. This gradually develops confidence in students and prepares them for their bachelor’s degree level. After all, the ultimate goal of language learning strategies is to guide students to become better, autonomous, and confident learners (Chamot, 1999).

In completing a team project assignment, cooperation is very important. According to cooperation is the key to successful education. Cooperative learning strategies have been shown to improve academic performance (Slavin, 1987), lead to great motivation toward learning (Garibaldi, 1979), to increase time on task (Cohen & Benton, 1988), to improve self-esteem (Johnson & Johnson, 1989), and to lead to more positive social behaviors (Lloyd, et.al, 1988). For ELL students especially, cooperative learning promotes language acquisition by providing comprehensible input in developmentally appropriate ways and in a supportive and motivating environment. (Kagan, 1995).

6.4.4 Team Projects Incorporate Language Learning Strategies

Team project activity provides opportunity to the learners to practice their learning strategies. Learning strategies are crucial in constructing learners’ new knowledge and expanding their competence. Learning strategies can be defined as behaviours of a learner that are intended to influence how the learner processes information (Weinstein and Mayer, 1986). Clearly, learning strategies are involved in all learning, regardless of the content and context.
Learning strategies are thus used in learning and teaching math, science, history, languages and other subjects, both in classroom settings and more informal learning environments (Lessard-Clouston, 1997).

In this paper, the researcher believes that a communicative activity is a process in familiarizing language learners with the common functions of language and building their self-confidence to utter their own sentences. In addition to that, it is believed that throughout the communicative activities, the learners employ several strategies to accomplish their tasks. The common strategies identified are socio-affective strategies. These strategies are the widely practiced by the learners as they involve oral communication with other people surrounding them. They normally ask their friends, teachers, parents, seniors to help them with the tasks. They also like to assimilate with the other group or culture in order to practice their communicative skills. In other words they like to involve or invite other people to assist them in language learning.

Thus, language learning strategies play a role upon completing learners’ project works. Language learning strategies are the often-conscious steps or behaviours used by language learners to enhance the acquisition, storage, retention, recall, and use of new information (Rigney, 1978; Oxford, 1990).

6. Conceptual Framework

Based on figure 1.0 above, the framework illustrates the team project represents a classroom device to gradually generate two supporting outputs – language learning strategies and self-confidence. They are called supporting outputs because of their helping functions in improving communicative ability. With the presence language learning strategies and confidence in students, they can start communicating freely, frequently and effectively. That is why these supporting outputs are crucial in promoting speaking skill. In this study, the researcher puts the frequent use of language as the major output to be generated at the end of the activity. Students are expected to be able to speak up and present their projects in front of other groups as they have equipped themselves with the common language functions for practical purposes. The experience gained throughout discussion or collaborative learning should transferred or shown in their presentation.
8. Methodology

8.1 Study design

This study is descriptive in nature and can be categorized as an exploratory study which the researcher wants to explore whether team project activity can increase the use of English language among learners, practice language learning strategies and enhance learners’ self-confidence. This study adopted a quantitative method by gauging students’ feedback through administering questionnaire. There were sixty (60) participants selected to respond to the questionnaire.

8.2 Data analysis

The data collected from the questionnaire was then analysed using SPSS. The analysis will look into the percentage of agreement towards the advantages of team project as a classroom device to increase the use of English language and facilitate language learning among language learners. Specifically, the data was interpreted based on comparisons between the percentage of agreement on team project to increase English language use, practice language learning strategies, and boost self-confidence.

9. Study Findings

9.1 Team Project Promotes the Frequent Use of English Language

This study looks into the feedback from students pertaining to the efficiency of team project in improving students’ speaking ability. Referring to the tables illustrated in the findings part, the students had specified three (3) levels of agreement i.e. strongly agree, agree and uncertain. This shows that the students had positive attitude and judgments towards the use of team project as a teaching technique in classroom.

The students strongly agreed that the team projects helped them practice speaking in English language frequently with percentage of 58.3%. There are 20 students who had the same opinion that team project can facilitate language learning better. However, 8.3% of students were uncertain that team project can help them in practising the language frequently. 93.4% from the respondents agreed that team projects helped them improve their speaking ability. This might be due to the task-based activity that requires discussions, brainstorming, and also presentations of students’ projects. Only 6.7% of students were unsure whether team project can improve their speaking ability. 66.7% of students strongly agreed that team project assignments gave them an opportunity to practise speaking with their classmate inside or outside classroom. 26.7% of students agreed that team project gave a chance to practice speaking and 6.7% of students were uncertain that team project gave opportunity for them to practice English language. 73.3% of students strongly agreed that team projects could activate their thinking skills to devise strategies upon completing the task. It is followed by 18.3% of the students agreed that team projects helped them practise learning strategies and 8.3% were unsure that team project could drive them to practice learning strategies. Based on the percentage, the majority of students strongly agreed that the team project activity could accelerate them in searching for strategies to complete the assignment. Students’ socio-affective strategy was investigated. 91.7% of the students admitted that they involved in group discussions in order to complete the task given. only 8.3% did not fully engage in group discussions. 75. % of students strongly agreed that team projects could train them to think creative and critical. 16.7% of them were positive towards the use of team projects can enhance creative and critical thinking skills. Only 8.3% were uncertain that team projects could activate creative thinking skills. Therefore, these show that most of the students agreed that team projects promote creative and critical thinking.

9.2 Team Projects Boost Self-Confidence and Cooperation

Students’ responses were very encouraging as they chose only two (2) levels of agreement i.e. agree and strongly agree to the statement that team project can boost students’ self-confidence. 78.3% strongly agreed with the statement while 21.7% agreed that the activity could increase their self-confidence to communicate in English language. Thus, these percentages prove that team projects could boost students’ self-confidence towards speaking skill. 78.3% of students strongly agreed that strong team work was built through the team project assignments.
16.7% agreed that team work plays a role to build individual’s self-confidence. Only 5% of students were unsure whether team projects could increase team work spirit among them. Overall, most of the students felt comfortable, secured and confident when work collaboratively. Thus, they would manage to complete the communicative task effectively. 7.5% of students strongly agreed that they could give effective presentations when they are in groups. This might due to having supportive friends who indirectly increase their confidence level and security. Therefore, they felt satisfied with their presentations of the projects. Besides, 21.7% agreed that they could present effectively with their team and only 3% of students were uncertain whether they could present effectively or not.

10. Conclusion

The application of the team project as one of classroom devices to develop communicative skills, learners’ strategies and self-confidence is recommended to all language instructors. The team projects are task-based activities done collaboratively and encompass various skills from fundamental to higher levels. The students will be motivated to work with friends and nurture enthusiasm towards the task and are willing to present the task to other groups. From here, the students actually create a very healthy competitive atmosphere as they will give the best during the presentation.

The team project activity is derived from socioaffective aspect in language learning strategies and adapting a project-based approach as a vehicle to encourage communicative ability throughout the process of completing it. According to Chou (2004) socioaffective strategies can be considered as an effective approach to accelerate Asian learners’ speaking competence as well as their learning motivation. Moreover, socioaffective strategies should be fully integrated into classroom contexts and everyday learning (Chou 2004).

This paper covers the feedback from UNITEN foundation students towards the application of the team project as an effective classroom device to improve communicative competence, integrate learning strategies and boost self-confidence among students. Most of the students showed positive attitude and interest towards the use of the team project as a teaching technique to promote communicative competence. Thus, it is hoped that this handy and enriching classroom device can be adapted by all language instructors who believe in their students’ potential in mastery of oral communication skills in English language.

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