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One Semester of Speaking Tasks – An Experimental Approach with Low Proficiency Students

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ABSTRACT

This study tested the hypothesis postulating that Malaysian undergraduate students with low proficiency would make the most rapid progress in English if all guided learning time (tutorials and lectures) in the first semester was used entirely for speaking tasks. The study took the form of a Non-Equivalent Groups design with 59 Malaysian undergraduate students in their first semester, the majority of whom had scored only Band 1 or Band 2 in the MUET exam. The students were allocated alphabetically to an experimental group of 30 students, who were taught using all of the contact hours for speaking tasks and a control group of 29 students who were taught using "as normal" method – including grammar explanation and examples; reading; writing and listening tasks. All students took a pre-test at the start of the semester and a post-test at the end of the semester, which assessed their abilities in speaking, writing, reading and listening. Since, scores did not conform to a normal distribution so the Wilcoxon Sigma rank test was used to assess the difference in the scores between the pre-test and post-test, while the ManWhitney test was used to compare the changes in the scores between the experimental and control groups. The analysis showed no significant difference between the control group and the experimental group, in terms of the changes in the scores between pre-test and post-test.

Keywords: English, Malaysian undergraduates, low proficiency, speaking tasks

INTRODUCTION

In Malaysia, children are formally taught English from the beginning of their first year of primary school, i.e. at seven years old. In addition, many begin their English learning before primary school, with up to three years in optional pre-school education.

After six years of primary school education and five years of secondary education, students will then have the option of two years of sixth form in schools or matriculation courses, which are usually for one or two years. During this time, all students who wish to enter public universities have to take the Malaysian University English Test (MUET).

Thus, by the time prospective Malaysian university students take MUET, they would have been formally taught English for at least eleven years. Although there are many students who have good level of English proficiency achieving MUET Band 3 and above, there are many students who enter university with a very low level of proficiency scoring only Band 1 or Band 2 for MUET, hereafter referred to as 'Low Proficiency' students. The Malaysian Examinations Council defines the communicative ability of someone scoring Band 1 as 'Hardly able to use the language' and Band 2 as 'Not fluent', (Malaysian Examinations Council, 2006). Further detailed descriptions of Bands 1 and 2 are shown in Table 1.

Despite exhibiting such limited ability in the language, it would seem likely that during their 11 or more years of English classes, these students must have developed some sort of latent knowledge of vocabulary and grammar.

In Malaysia, there is a great need for undergraduates to develop good oral communication skills. Undergraduates often have to make presentations in English and are expected to be able to enter into discussions in their fields using English. When they graduate, they will have to face interviews which are often carried out in English and if they get through the interview, many will have to use English in the workplaces as the language of business. In a recent newspaper article, a representative of a recruitment company stated that seven out of ten graduates failed the English language test set by their clients and this lack of English ability limits their effectiveness in the workplace (Education Not Producing Thinking Graduates, 2012). A similar sentiment was also expressed by the Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia reported in a local newspaper reiterating the

TABLE 1
Descriptions of language ability for MUET Band 1 and Band 2 scores
(Malaysian Examinations Council, 2006)

Band	User	Communicative ability	Comprehension	Task Performance
2	Limited user	Not fluent; inappropriate use of language; very frequent grammatical errors	Limited understanding of language and context	Limited ability to function in the language
1	Very limited user	Hardly able to use the language	Very limited understanding of language and context	Very limited ability to function in the language

common complaint that graduates do not have sufficient proficiency in English which affects their employability (DPM urges youth to acquire more skills, 2012). A recent study reported that Malaysian graduates must have a good command of English if they are to gain employment (Ismail, 2011).

There have been a range of studies that have shed some light into the situation of Malaysian English learners. Among others, Mathi, Jamian and Nair (2008) evaluated the vocabulary knowledge of students at one Malaysian university and reported that this was "far below the university threshold level" (p. 225). In a study into the language learning style preferences of low English proficiency students in a Malaysian university (Ahmad, 2011), all six learning styles investigated were reported as negative learning styles by the students. It was concluded that this result was due to the students' lack of interest in learning English. Thang and Alias (2006) studied the degree of autonomy among undergraduates taking English proficiency courses at three public universities in Malaysia. They reported that the majority of these students preferred a teacher-centred approach to learning and suggested that this might be "a washback effect of the 'spoon-feed' system operating in most Malaysian primary and secondary schools" (p. 14).

In another study, Malaysian low proficiency students claimed that the main factor for their low proficiency was "the element of ineffective instructional practices" with teachers following a "rule-oriented approach" and being "too syllabus and textbook oriented" (Shah, 1999, pp. 148-161). However, a study by Thang and Wong (2005) found that the majority of Malaysian ESL instructors do actually "display a preference for learner-centric teaching styles" (p. 58).

Although there have also been a number of studies on ESL teaching and learning in Malaysia, there are very few quantitative studies carried out on pedagogical approaches focused on developing oral communication ability.

In the field of second language acquisition, Long's Interaction Hypothesis proposes that learners can acquire language through the breakdowns in communication and negotiation of meaning that occur in oral interaction (Ellis, 2008). Associated with this idea is the Comprehensible Output Hypothesis put forward by Swain that the 'push' to produce language that others can understand will cause the learner to evaluate and adjust their language use (Ellis, 2008).

Based on the idea that language can be acquired through oral interaction, and assuming these Low-Proficiency students have an inactive store of language that could be activated, this study sought to answer the question "What if all of the contact hours in the first semester were used for speaking tasks alone?"

The hypothesis of this study is that for Low Proficiency Malaysian students in their first semester of university, a pedagogical approach that uses all contact hours for speaking tasks in an English course is more effective than a teaching approach that incorporates all the language skills

(reading, writing, listening and speaking), and one that includes teacher-led learning of vocabulary and grammar. The definition of 'more effective' is that students will show a significant improvement in their ability to speak in English in terms of fluency, accuracy, and vocabulary use. Furthermore, they will show as much, or maybe more, improvement in their reading, writing, and listening ability just like those students also attend a course that includes these skills in the contact hours.

To test this particular hypothesis, two groups of students were compared: an experimental group was taught using all of the contact hours in the first semester for speaking tasks. A control group was taught "normal" – lessons included grammar explanation and examples; reading; writing and listening tasks. Proficiency of the students was tested at the start (Pre-Test) and the end (Post-Test) of their first semester.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Experimental Design

This study used a Non-Equivalent Groups design with a control group and an experimental group. The experimental group was taught with all the contact hours used for speaking tasks while the control group was given "normal" lessons – including grammar explanation and examples; reading; writing and listening tasks. The participants sat for a pre-test at the start of the semester and a post-test at the end of the semester.

The Participants

A pre-existing, intact group of 59 students taking the same major made up the participants of this course. Students had been allocated to this group by their faculty. For English courses, this university has a maximum class size of 30 and the students are assigned to English course groups alphabetically with the first 30 students in one group and the remaining 29 in the second. The 30 students were designated as the experimental group and the 29 students as the control group.

In terms of the English proficiency, there were some variations between the two groups. The control group had eleven students who obtained Band 1 in MUET, seven obtained Band 2, three obtained Band 3, one obtained Band 4 and another seven whose results were unknown. The experimental group comprised of fifteen students who obtained Band 1, thirteen obtained Band 2, and two whose results were unknown.

The most significant difference between the groups was caused by an imbalance of gender: the control group was made up of 28 female students and only one male student, while the experimental group had a mixture of 14 female students and 16 male students.

The lack of homogeneity between the groups could have effects on the validity of the results; this will be discussed in the Results and Discussion section of this paper. It is crucial to note that the same English instructor taught both the control and experimental groups for the duration of this study.

Details of the Assessments

The students were tested in the first two weeks of the semester in all the four language skills (Pre-Test) and then re-tested in the final week of the semester (Post-Test).

Reading was assessed using two reading passages from a sample MUET paper and the accompanying 15 questions for each test. The reading passages were selected to ensure that the topic was of comparable level of vocabulary for the Pre- and Post-Tests.

As for the Writing tests, each student was required to write a 250-word essay on a sample MUET essay title. The essay titles were chosen so that the topics were of the equivalent level for the Pre-Test and Post-Test. The essays were marked using a marking scheme allocating 10 marks for content, 15 marks for language and 5 marks for organisation.

Meanwhile, the students' listening ability was tested using a sample IELTS listening paper comprising of 40 questions. The paper consists of four sections: in the first section, students listen to a dialogue from everyday social interaction; in the second, it is a dialogue from an academic setting; the next section is a monologue from a social setting; and the final part has a monologue from an academic setting.

In order to test Speaking, a sample IELTS speaking test was used and testing was carried out along the lines of an IELTS speaking test. This involves a single student meeting with the assessor. The first part of the test is a conversation, the next part is a two-minute monologue by the student preceded by one-minute preparation time and the final stage is an academic discussion. The speaking test was marked by using the IELTS speaking band descriptors (IELTS Partners, n.d.), and by assigning a mark to each descriptor.

Teaching Approaches

For the experimental group, all the contact hours were used for speaking tasks. The objective of each session was for the students to spend most of their time carrying out one or more spoken dialogue tasks. However, in order to facilitate effective dialogues, vocabulary and grammar necessary for the task were sometimes pre-taught and sometimes the students would listen to a dialogue as a model. Nevertheless, these activities were limited to providing support to the dialogue tasks and were given the minimum time possible in order to keep the dialogue the focus of each session. The experimental group did some writing and reading tasks, as well as grammar exercises for their self-study time outside of the contact hours.

As for the students in the control group, their class time consisted of a more balanced approach that gave time to reading, writing, listening and speaking tasks as well as explanation of grammar and grammar exercises. Although speaking tasks were included in their contact time, it was one component among the other activities.

The semester consisted of 14 weeks during which the students had 3 hours of contact time per week, with a total of 42 hours. In addition, they were assigned self-

study work that lasted about 2 hours per week.

Statistical Tools

As the sample sizes were small and the results of the pre-test, post-test and changes in scores did not conform to a normal distribution, non-parametric tests were used to assess the results. The analyses of pre-test and post-test results compared the scores for the same subject, so the Wilcoxon Sigma rank test was used as the samples are related. In order to assess the difference in changes in the scores between the two groups, the ManWhitney test was used as the samples are unrelated.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The hypothesis of this study was that for students with low English language proficiency in their first semester of university, a teaching approach that uses all the contact hours for speaking tasks in an English course is more effective than a teaching approach that incorporates all the language skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking) and includes teacher-led learning of vocabulary and grammar. In this study, effectiveness was defined as students showing a significant improvement in their ability to speak in English in terms of fluency, accuracy, and vocabulary use; as well as showing as much, or maybe more, improvement in their reading, writing, and listening abilities as those whose course included these skills in the contact hours.

The results are summarised in Table 2. The statistical analysis of the results was carried out using the Wilcoxon Sigma rank test for the comparison between the pre-test and post-test results and the Man Whitney test for comparing the changes in the scores. The results of this statistical analysis are shown in Table 3, while Table 4 displays the descriptive statistics. Nonetheless, no significant difference was found between the control group and the experimental group, in terms of the change in the scores between Pre-Test and Post-Test. This appears to support the hypothesis that students taught using all their contact hours for speaking tasks will improve in reading, writing and speaking to the same degree as those students who are taught in a class that uses contact time for reading, writing, listening tasks, and grammar exercises as well as speaking tasks. However, the results do not support the hypothesis that the experimental approach will lead to a significant improvement in speaking skills. Although there was a significant increase in the speaking ability in the experimental group, this increase was not significantly different to the increase in the control group.

Although a comparison of the changes in scores between the groups showed no significant difference, it should be noted that there were some interesting results when the groups were individually studied. The experimental group showed a significant increase in speaking test scores, although there was no improvement for those in the control group. The scores of the control group for reading rose significantly while those of the experimental group also improved, although not significantly.

TABLE 2
Summary of the results

	Reading	Writing	Listening	Speaking
Control Group change in score	Significant increase p=0.005	Significant increase p=0.000	Non-significant decrease p=0.743	No change p=1.000
Experimental Group change in score	Non-significant increase p=0.39	Significant increase p=0.007	Non-Significant decrease p=0.484	Significant increase p=0.004
Difference between groups in change of score (a)	No significant difference p=0.286	No significant difference p=0.195	No significant difference p=0.472	No significant difference p=0.071

(a) Change in scores (Post-Test – Pre-Test) for the control group in comparison to the change in scores (Post-Test – Pre-Test) for the experimental group.

TABLE 3
Statistical analysis of the results

Control Group change in score															
Reading				Writing				Listening				Speaking			
Z	p	r	sig	Z	p	r	Sig	Z	p	r	sig	Z	p	r	Sig
-2.73	0.005	0.64	*	-3.67	0.000	0.78	*	-0.35	0.743	0.08	No	-0.05	1.00	0.01	No

Experimental Group change in score															
Reading				Writing				Listening				Speaking			
Z	p	r	sig	Z	p	r	sig	Z	p	r	sig	Z	p	r	Sig
-0.88	0.39	0.18	No	-2.62	0.007	0.51	No	-0.73	0.484	0.16	No	-2.82	0.004	0.52	*

Difference between the groups in change of scores (a)															
Reading				Writing				Listening				Speaking			
Z	p	r	sig	Z	p	r	sig	Z	p	r	sig	Z	p	r	sig
-1.08	0.286	0.17	No	-1.31	0.195	0.19	No	-0.73	0.472	0.12	No	1.81	0.071	0.26	No

(a) Change in scores (Post-Test – Pre-Test) for the control group compared with the change in scores (Post-Test – Pre-Test) for the experimental group.

TABLE 4
Descriptive Statistics

	Reading		Writing		Listening		Speaking	
Control Group								
	Pre-Test	Post-Test	Pre-Test	Post-Test	Pre-Test	Post-Test	Pre-Test	Post-Test
Median	5.00	6.00	12.00	13.00	16.00	14.00	3.00	3.00
Experimental Group								
	Pre-Test	Post-Test	Pre-Test	Post-Test	Pre-Test	Post-Test	Pre-Test	Post-Test
Median	5.00	6.00	11.00	12.00	16.50	15.00	3.00	3.00
Changes in Scores (a)								
	Control	Experimental	Control	Experimental	Control	Experimental	Control	Experimental
Median	1.50	1.00	3.00	2.00	0.00	-0.50	0.00	5.00

(a) Change in scores (Post-Test – Pre-Test) for the control group compared to the change in scores (Post-Test – Pre-Test) for the experimental group.

One factor that might have affected the results was the choice of the tests used to measure students' ability. The changes in the language ability over one semester were represented by only very small changes on the MUET and IELTS scales, making marking difficult to do. Many students only improved by half a band or one band on the MUET and IELTS scales, whereas many others did not show any improvement. Alternative standard tests that measure lower levels of language ability and therefore smaller changes could have provided more conclusive results.

There are a number of extraneous factors that could have affected the results. Firstly, the groups were not homogenous; the experimental group had just over 50% male students, while the control group had only one male student. There was no significant difference between the groups in terms of the changes in the scores. It might be hypothesised that if there had been more male students in this group, the results for the control group would have been higher, which would have led to different results. However, informal observations suggest that female students are often more diligent than their male counterparts.

Secondly, although the groups could be expected to be similar as they were an original group divided into two; there was a possibility of errors due to the lack of randomness in the selection of members of the groups. This suggests possible effects of selection maturation, selection history or selection regression. However, considering the situation of these students learning English, it seems unlikely that their backgrounds have had any serious effect on the results.

Thirdly, the effects observed could be due to the comparative ineffectiveness of teaching in the contact hours for the control group rather than the effectiveness of the method used with the experimental group. In order to rule out this factor, the study would have to be repeated with a number of different teachers participating.

The thesis of this study was based on the assumption that Low Proficiency students have some latent knowledge of vocabulary and grammar. However, in carrying out this study, it was observed that the students in the experimental group often did not have a sufficient grasp of vocabulary to complete the speaking tasks. Moreover, many did not appear to know even some basic high frequency words. This lack of vocabulary was observed to be the biggest impediment to them completing the speaking tasks successfully.

Another factor to be considered is the long-term effects of this experimental approach. The students who were taught using all the contact hours for speaking tasks showed no significant difference in their abilities compared to those who had been taught in the control group; however, this was only over one semester, and there might be long-term effects observed in subsequent semesters. The students in the control group might not have shown a significant difference in their reading, writing and listening abilities as compared to those in the experimental group, but the

first semester might have laid a foundation that would enable them to make more rapid progress than the experimental group in subsequent semesters. Similarly for the experimental group, the effects of doing so much speaking might have given them a significant boost of confidence that could have led to their development of reading, writing and listening skills in subsequent semesters more rapidly than those in the control group.

It should be pointed out that even if this approach is considered effective for the first semester, it could be detrimental to the development of accurate syntax if it was to be extended beyond this period. The approach used in this study could be categorised as a communicative approach and research on communicative classrooms has shown that while the communicative approach is effective in developing fluency, it can result in a limited development of linguistic and sociolinguistic proficiency (Ellis, 2008).

CONCLUSION

Although the results are inconclusive, they do suggest that the approach of using all contact hours for speaking is at least as effective as more traditional approaches. However, various extraneous factors could have affected the results and the long-term effects on the students' language learning in subsequent semesters have not been studied.

In order to assess if this method is a practical solution to helping Low Proficiency students more accurately, future studies should be carried out with a range of classes

and a variety of teachers. Meanwhile, assessment materials more suited to students with low proficiency would probably give a clearer view of the effectiveness of this approach.

Although inconclusive, the significant improvement in speaking results and the fact that the students improved equally in other areas as those taught in a more traditional approach is good enough to suggest that this may be a promising approach to helping students with low proficiency, and thus merits further study.

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