

IMPLEMENTING THE TOASTMASTERS TRADITION IN THE L2 CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines L2 learners' perceptions on the usefulness of the Toastmasters tradition in the speaking classroom. A typical Toastmasters meeting comprises participants making impromptu speeches, delivering prepared speeches, running the meeting, introducing people, and evaluating various participants' performance. The authors carried out a series of Toastmasters meetings in their Professional Communication Skills classes at Universiti Teknologi PETRONAS from July to December 2004. Questionnaire were distributed to 65 learners who participated in this study. The findings indicate that learners perceive the Toastmasters meetings as useful in providing them with a platform to enhance their speaking skills. The paper concludes with a discussion on the pedagogical implications of the findings.

Introduction

The origins of Toastmastering are to be found in the 19th century, when private clubs began to appoint a member to act as a Master of Ceremonies. Later, a good Toastmaster was expected to be an expert Master of Ceremonies, management specialist, events coordinator, compere, presenter, announcer and group organizer. Today, such a tradition is carried on by Toastmasters International, one of the most recognizable organizations that devotes itself to developing oral fluency.

Toastmasters International is a non-profit organization, founded by Dr. Ralph Smedly in 1924. It focuses on developing effective communication amongst its members worldwide and emphasizes learning through practice. A typical Toastmasters meeting involves participants introducing people, making impromptu speeches, delivering prepared speeches, running the meeting, telling jokes, and evaluating various participants' performance. Such activities ensure meaningful and active participation.

Chiang (2001) carried out a study on the implementation of a Toastmasters meeting in her college English classes at National Yang-Ming University. The results indicated a positive response from her students. The students were given the

opportunity to interact and converse, thereby improving their communication skills. Likewise, this paper focuses on the format of a typical Toastmasters meeting that was implemented in a Professional Communication Skills class at Universiti Teknologi PETRONAS (UTP) to assess learners' receptivity and perception on its usefulness in propelling them to acquire speaking skills.

A Description of Toastmasters Meetings

The Toastmasters meeting is a "learn-by-doing" activity in which every learner has to speak (http://www.goldengatetoastmasters.org/meeting_roles.html). The learners are first given roles for the meeting, e.g. the toastmaster or the master of ceremonies, the timekeeper, the ah-counter, the evaluators, the grammarian, the table-topic master, the speaker, the vote-counter and the joke master.

The main duty of *the Toastmaster* is to act as the host and is responsible for creating an atmosphere of interest, expectation and receptivity. Taking a role as the leader, the Toastmaster has to prepare, lead, chair and review the entire process of a meeting. The responsibilities of the other members are as follows:

- a. *The timekeeper* keeps track of time taken by each participant for the smooth running of the meetings.
- b. *The ah-counter* reminds the participants aware of their use of ah's, em's, you know's, like's, and other fillers.
- c. *The evaluator* gives an evaluation to motivate the speakers towards further improvement.
- d. *The grammarian* points out grammatical errors and inaccurate pronunciation in a constructive manner.
- e. *The table topic master* prepares the topics based on themes and provides the participants with the opportunity to practice speaking extemporaneously or "think on their feet".
- f. *The speaker* presents prepared speeches.
- g. *The vote counter* distributes ballot papers and counts the vote for an award.
- h. *The joke master* keeps the audience and the speakers relaxed.

Before implementing a Toastmasters meeting in the Professional Communication Skills classes, the lecturers briefed the learners on the roles and the meeting procedure. Handouts were distributed to present the details of each role and how a meeting should proceed. The meetings were conducted for two hours weekly throughout the semester. In these meetings every learner was given the opportunity to experience different roles.

An SLA Perspective on the Toastmasters Tradition

Verbal interaction that promotes second language acquisition (SLA) has three aspects: *input, production and feedback* (Long, 1990). Upon implementing the Toastmasters meetings in the L2 classroom, learners are provided with a variety of rich input, and which can be drawn from other learners in the meetings. When playing out their roles during the meetings, the spoken language becomes the production or the output. As pointed by Swain and Lapkin (1995), the output is seen as essential to making output more precise, coherent and accurate when learners experience communication difficulties. They further argue that the problems students encounter while producing the second language (L2) trigger cognitive processes that are part of second language learning. The third aspect of verbal interaction, feedback, refers to the reaction offered by the other learners. In the context of the Toastmasters meetings, feedback was given by the other learners playing the roles of the *evaluators, the grammarian, the ah-counters and the audience*.

The Toastmasters meetings also provide learners with opportunities for the negotiation of meaning (Pica *et al*, 1989) during the question and answer session. Research conducted by Iwashita (1993) indicates that learners modify their output in response to questions or in confirmation checks from other learners. The learners will have to modify their output, linguistically or semantically, to make it comprehensible to their audience. As reported by Nobuyushi and Ellis (1993), such interactional modifications not only improve their production results in immediate improved performance, but also gain accuracy over time. Accuracy is also promoted when *the grammarian* points out grammatical errors in the speaker's speech. Thus, although the meetings are meaning-based, which is 'communicative' in nature, they promote fluency as well as accuracy.

At the end of a Toastmasters meeting, awards are given to outstanding learners. The awards include *grammar award, best speaker award, best evaluator award, best table topic speaker award and best role player award*. Such awards are seen as a valuable motivating factor as they provide positive reinforcement to learners. Positive attitudes and motivation are indeed related to success in second language learning (Gardner, 1985). Furthermore, positive reinforcement helps learners develop correct habits, resulting in language acquisition (Skinner, 1957).

The Study

The study was conducted at UTP in Professional Communication Skills classes on a weekly basis throughout the July-December 2004 semester. At the end of the semester,

each participant filled out a questionnaire and a selected number of students were interviewed. The study addressed the following questions:

1. How receptive are learners towards the Toastmasters Meetings?
2. What are learners' perceptions of Toastmasters Meetings?

The 65 subjects were UTP technology and engineering students who were taking a Professional Communication Skills course. The course is a core paper for the technology students and an elective for the engineering students. It aims to develop students' oral communication skills and requires them to give a number of oral presentations. During each weekly oral presentation session, participants played the various roles prescribed in the Toastmasters Meetings.

A questionnaire (adapted from Chiang, 2001) was distributed to the students at the end of the semester. The 65 respondents represent about 40 percent of the total number of students (165 students) who took the course in the July 2004 semester. The SPSS was used to analyse the responses to the questionnaire.

Results and Discussion

The questionnaire focused on students' perception of the Toastmasters meetings and the results are presented below.

More than 90 percent of the students (see Table 1) felt that the meetings were useful and interesting. They believed the meetings helped them to speak out loud, build their courage, feel good, and listen to others' fascinating experiences. Krashen (1985), in his Affective-filter hypothesis, claims that a learner who is unmotivated, tense or bored will have low level of language acquisition. Thus, the learners' positive perception on Toastmasters meetings would help them acquire speaking skills and improve their ability to use the language.

The Toastmasters meetings are perceived to be fun and more than 90 percent of the students acknowledged that they got to know their friends better. The activity emphasises meaningful communication such as listening to jokes, learning more about other classmates, expressing their own opinions, and sharing experiences (Chiang 2001). This links us to the notion that if language teaching is made meaningful to the learners, it supports the learning process (see Richards and Rogers 1986).

The learners' positive response to the question of whether they would like to try different roles if given more time is indeed a good indication. As the activity was carried out for only one hour for every week of the semester, not everyone could experience all of the roles. However, the instructor made sure that everyone experienced being a speaker. Most of the learners - 86 percent - hoped to get another

Table 1: Frequency of responses to questions

| No. | Questionnaire item | Frequency (%) | |
|-----|---------------------------------------------------------|-----------------|-------|
| | | Very much agree | Agree |
| 1 | Liked the meetings | 29.2 | 63.1 |
| 2 | New, useful and interesting activity | 41.5 | 53.8 |
| 3 | Learned to speak out loud | 49.2 | 46.2 |
| 4 | Felt nervous, but built courage | 40.0 | 56.9 |
| 5 | Listened to good opinions and fascinating experiences | 32.3 | 64.6 |
| 6 | Everybody took part and did his/her best | 13.8 | 56.9 |
| 7 | Good sense of participation from everyone in the class. | 9.2 | 60.0 |
| 8 | Got to know classmates better | 32.3 | 61.5 |
| 9 | Jokes need improvement | 12.3 | 33.8 |
| 10 | Meetings can be improved | 24.6 | 55.4 |
| 11 | Hope to have another chance to join similar activities | 26.2 | 60.0 |
| 12 | Would like to try different roles | 33.8 | 63.1 |

chance to take part in similar activities (see question 11 in table 1). This clearly shows that the learners had fun in the classroom.

Most of the learners (71 percent) observed that everyone had taken part and did his/her best in the meetings. About 69 percent of them thought that they had a good sense of participation from everyone in the class. Such a response indicates that the activity attracts learners’ attention and interest, thereby resulting in a more stimulating learning environment.

It was also found that 80 percent of the learners believed that the meetings could be improved by allowing more participants to give comments and by ensuring that everybody was involved during the meetings. However, this would require the classes to be smaller in number. At the same time, 46 percent of the learners felt the jokes needed to be improved, as they felt that some of the jokes were not funny. This could be rectified by a set of guidelines from their instructors and more time for preparation.

The data also show that more than 70 percent of the participants felt that the Toastmaster meetings assisted them in learning how to speak English out loud, allowing them to listen to good opinions and fascinating experiences. Such a response is a clear indication that the Toastmasters meetings are enjoyable and help develop oral presentation skills.

Conclusion

The Toastmasters meetings are “learn-by-doing” activities in which every learner has to speak. By taking up specific roles, the learning process demonstrates active learning as opposed to a teacher-fronted approach. This experiential process of language learning helps to bring the real world into the classroom and to transform the artificial and sterile atmosphere (Kaur, 2002).

Drawing upon Krashen’s Comprehensible Input Hypothesis (1985) and Swain’s Output Hypothesis (1985), this activity promotes the development of all skills - speaking, listening, writing and reading. The learners need to read the handouts carefully to understand the ruling and roles assigned to them. As speakers they need to do some reading and outlining of the details before the presentations. As the audience, evaluators or the Toastmaster, the learners need to listen to the presentations carefully. As such, all the four skills are integrated in the activity.

The results of the study suggest that learners who experience the Toastmasters tradition perceive the activity to be fun, enjoyable and interesting. They learn how to speak English out loud, build confidence, listen to opinions and fascinating experiences, and look forward to taking part in similar activities. These perceptions lend a degree of support to the implementation of Toastmasters meetings in L2 classrooms. However, this study is only based on the perceptions of one group of learners. It is therefore suggested that more research be carried to investigate the effectiveness of such an activity.

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