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LANGUAGE LEARNING WITHIN AN EAP FRAMEWORK

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ABSTRACT

This paper is premised on the English for Academic Purposes approach whereby language learning is contextualised within the learners' domains of study. A study involving 20 students examined the 'discourse organization' during group presentations and other class activities. The findings of this study lend support to the EAP approach, which makes the language learning experience more relevant and meaningful, thereby increasing the learners' motivation.

Introduction

Teaching a second language is admittedly not an easy task. Language teaching could include some complex problems in the field of education, which may need an immediate remedy. One of the problems identified in the ESL classroom is lack of relevance in the language studies to the learners' life. The problem leads to low motivation due to failure in relating the language to the students' social and academic lives. The problem should not to be ignored as low motivation could seriously affect the success of language learning (Stevick 1976).

The remedy is to contextualise language learning within the learners' domains of study. Though motivation is a complex and highly individual matter, English for Academic Purpose (EAP) assumes what motivates students is relevance to target needs (Hutchinson & Waters 1987). Contextualizing language within the learners' study environment could make the language learning experience more relevant and meaningful, thereby increasing the learners' motivation to learn. The purpose of this paper is to present an action research study which investigates whether EAP could overcome the problem of low motivation.

The percentage of students' attendance for English classes is quite low compared to other subjects. Interest and enthusiasm in the target language class is usually low. When asked, the students' answers always indicate English to be of lesser importance in their lives. Their immediate environment does not require them to use English as the students prefer to communicate in their mother tongue. The problem seems to

lie in the lack of relevance of the course content to the students' lives, academically and socially. This lack of relevance brings about low motivation to learn the language.

Discourse Domain Hypothesis

Discourse domains are topic areas that are highly personal to learners, "...concerning various 'slices of life' that are important and/or necessary for these learners to talk and/or write about" (Selinker and Douglas 1985). The Discourse Domain Hypothesis claims that learners acquire a second language by first creating 'discourse domains' (or topic areas) and develop their second language structures by using these domains. A series of case studies involving interviews of nonnative graduate students on work and life domain topics have been conducted by Selinker and Douglas (1985, 1987, 1989). The subjects seemed to adopt different communicative strategies when talking in their major fields than in their own lives or culture. A learner would appear confident and competent in his work domain "but seemed less motivated to find vocabulary items in life domain talk" (Selinker & Douglas 1985).

Shaona Whyte (1994) conducted research on the Discourse Domain Hypothesis of interlanguage variation by interviewing four ESL learners on major field and neutral topics, and their performance was compared with a control group of four learners on two neutral topics. The results provide a measure of support when learners talk about their domain topics.

Research within the language for specific purposes (LSP) has also focused on the relationship between content knowledge and linguistic performance. A relevant study examines the French production of a Flemish undergraduate student in economics, who had enrolled in an LSP class. She used more complex and varied syntactic forms and was more motivated to adopt more flexible communication strategies when she talked about economics than about personal topics (Cornu & Delahaye 1987).

As this review of literature shows, it seems logical then that contextualising the students' learning within their domains of study could create relevance of the language they learn to their lives, particularly academically. From the studies cited above, speakers are more motivated to talk, to adopt flexible communicative strategies and indeed to appear competent on topics which are meaningful to them and which play a significant role in their lives.

The Study

This study aims to investigate the effectiveness of contextualising language within the learners' domain of study to increase the learners' motivation in learning English. The subjects of this study consist of 20 ESL students whose language proficiency was considerably low.

In-class Observation

Subjects were given input (reading texts) on two topics and were later required to deliver presentations on the two topics. Topic A was a general topic functioning as the control variable. In this case, texts on 'Garbage Disposal' were used and discussed. Topic B, on the other hand, was chosen from their major field. Reading texts were taken from the students' specific area of study, 'Sensors for Transducers'.

Texts on Topic A were discussed for 8 hours within a span of two weeks. The first four hours were spent on reading comprehension activities and listening activities, which function as input on the theme to the students. In the following week (the next four hours), the students were divided into four groups (five persons per group). They were asked to discuss and later deliver a presentation related to the topic, followed by a question-and-answer session. In contrast, reading activities on Topic B were given as input to the same group of students. Like the previous treatment, learners were also expected to discuss and deliver a presentation. For presentations on both topics, they were encouraged to make use of visual aids.

Analysis

According to Whyte (1994), selection of measures to test whether learners' domain topics could create interest for the learners to learn the language depends on the researchers' interpretation of the "enhanced performance" in their oral presentation and teacher's observation of learners' participation during the lesson. The research provides a close qualitative analysis of 'discourse organization' of the group presentation and the overall participation of the students in class activities.

Results and Discussion

To support the prediction of enhanced performance and active participation in language learning through the EAP approach, subjects should show better discourse organization on Topic B than Topic A. It is predicted that the presentation on the topic from the learners' major field will show evidence of better discourse organization: more planning and preparation (e.g. complex discourse structure,

appropriate technical terms), more personalization of the topic (e.g. personal interest, emotional reactions), and generally greater enthusiasm and communicative effort. A more active participation during the lesson and during the question-and-answer session with EAP is also expected. It is also predicted that the analysis of 'needs analysis' of the students would also support the need to create relevance of English Language learning to learners' lives.

The aim is to show differences in the structure of discourse across the EAP topic, and an absence of such differences in the control topic (Topic A - general topic) in their presentations. The Discourse analysis reveals that Group 1 and 2 produced more effective discourse organization on Topic B than Topic A, constructing more structured and complex discourse in the topic relevant to their major (domain). Group 3 exhibited no such variation, producing similar discourse features on both topics. The fourth group's presentation on Topic B was characterized by greater effort to answer the questions directed to them.

Group 1 and 2 showed that they had prepared the presentation through proper preparation and planning for their presentation on Topic B. They had obviously spent much time in reviewing relevant literature for the presentation. Extensive planning could be seen in their use of complex sentence structures and appropriate technical terms. During the presentation the presenters generally showed more personalization of the topic. The presenters used self-reference words like 'We' in referring to what they think which was lacking when they presented Topic A. *Self-reference indicates personal relevance of this topic to the speaker.* They struggled to answer their colleagues' questions though they had some difficulties in finding words in reference to questions from the class. Their enthusiasm when presenting the topic is strong evidence to support the prediction of this study. It was amazing to see them talking about 'how sensors work' as if they had invented the circuit! As mentioned they were encouraged to bring along visual aids. The first group did not bring any visual aids in the first presentation but brought along a model they made on how sensors work in the second presentation and they called their model a *'water detector'*. Group 2 did bring along a manila card with their points in their presentation on 'garbage disposal'. More importantly, they also brought a circuit model when presenting Topic 2, to show to the class.

Group 3 exhibited no such variation as Group 1 and Group 2 did, producing similar discourse features on both topics. They used simple words and less complex sentence structures in presenting both topics. They did not bring along any visual aids as recommended for both presentations. They did not show any sign of personalization of both topics; the members appeared indifferent and not interested. Even though Group 4, similar to Group 3, showed only little preparation and planning,

they showed better personalization when presenting the topic. Emotional expressions were obvious especially when presenting their model on how a sensor works when one claps one's hands to turn on a lamp. They even brought along a model of the sensor circuit along with a lamp. The group seemed to be more enthusiastic and excited when the class appeared curious and asked a lot of questions about how the lamp could be turned on by even a slight sound of clapping hands. The group at times could not answer the class using proper English technical terms. This is probably due to insufficient effort in reading relevant material at their preparation stage. They however managed to show effective communicative effort by, for example, drawing the symbol of a 'diode' on the board when they could not find the term to explain and by paraphrasing their friends when they could not understand the questions directed to them.

Overall presentation shows that Group 1, 2 and 4 showed better discourse organization in presentation 2, which was absent in their first presentation. Their use of more complex sentence structures and proper English technical terms by Group 1 and 2 indicate better preparation and planning. This could be an indication of their being interested in the topic and thus being motivated to read about it. This could promote language acquisition at the same time. The groups show more personalization in presenting Topic B, which indicates personal relevance to their life. Their enthusiasm and excitement are strong evidence of them being strongly motivated to talk about a topic within their domains of study which had relevance to their academic life and which they were interested in.

In terms of class participation, the students appeared indifferent when their friends presented the first topic. They seemed uninterested and were at times very playful. Not many questions were asked to the presenters during the question-and-answer session. In fact there were no questions at all asked to Group 3. However presentation on Topic B somehow aroused their curiosity. They asked many questions though they had to struggle with their sentence structures. An example:

"What you mean that do?"

The class roared with laughter at this broken English but the presenter (Group 4) tried to understand him by paraphrasing his question:

"You are asking the function of this?"

Then he went on to explain its function. Negotiation of meaning took place throughout the question-and-answer session, which could promote language acquisition. Relevance to their academic life and personal interest in the topic within their domains of study aroused their curiosity and thus motivated them to participate throughout the lesson.

Conclusion

This study provides a degree of support to the Discourse Domain Hypothesis and English for Academic Purposes, which assumes that what motivates students is relevance to target needs. By contextualising language within the learners' domains of study, we can make the language learning experience more relevant and meaningful, thereby increasing the learners' motivation to learn.

It is strongly suggested that more extensive research be conducted to investigate whether the proposed solution would really work over a longer period of time. It is feared that the sudden interest, enthusiasm and motivation are only due to an abrupt change in their English Language classroom but if given a longer period of time it may no longer work. It is also suggested that to make language learning more closely relevant to learners and more meaningful, the researcher should conduct ethnographic research to investigate language use in naturalistic situations.

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