

Interaction in a Constructivist Classroom in a Malaysian Undergraduate ESL Setting

LAURA CHRIST DASS

*MARA University of Technology
Malaysia*

PETER FERGUSON

*The University of Melbourne
Australia*

ABSTRACT

This paper reports findings from a study on interactions (both verbal and non-verbal) in Malaysian higher education ESL classrooms. It explores how social constructivist-based learning may be implemented within three classrooms under study where it was also explicitly being trialled. Particular attention was given to the role played by the teacher and students in terms of co-constructing knowledge. The study used qualitative methods and data were collected in the form of interviews (student and teacher participants), video recordings of classes in session and researcher's field notes obtained through observation. However, for the purpose of this paper, these three types of data obtained from a single lesson were considered for analysis. Pre and post-interviews were held with the teacher and selected students after the video recording of a lesson. Findings suggested that the pedagogy implemented closely followed a collaborative learning model and had a positive impact on relationships between students and students/teacher within the classroom. Although some students exhibited reluctance to participate in this style of learning, generally both the teacher and the students were positive about the pedagogical approach and its impact on learning.

Key words: Pedagogy, ESL, culture, classroom discourse, interaction

Background

In recent years, one of the major issues in education relates to how much power or control should be given by teachers to learners in their classrooms. Power-sharing or learner-centred education arise from key influences such as Bruner (1956, 1966), who argued that there exists a relationship between language and cognitive development and thereby advocated the autonomy of self-reward. If the student is to move effectively to a more central role within the teaching and learning process, pedagogies are needed to provide insight into how students are processing knowledge and ideas (Visible Thinking PZ, n.d.). The study reported in this paper was inspired by the ideas developed by the Harvard Graduate School of Education through their Project Zero research initiatives. This project, which began in 1967, has conducted major research into the way students learn (Visible Thinking PZ, n.d.). One of the key research associates within this project whose work has been drawn upon to inform this study is Ritchhart (2009). His research has a particular focus on understanding, supporting, and aiming to enhance thoughtful learning environments in order to encourage powerful learning relationships between students and teachers. His work and that of Project Zero more generally draw upon social constructivist theory and its implications for classroom practice. Ritchhart's research specifically focuses on "making thinking visible" within the classroom. One critical component of Ritchhart's considerations of classroom practice is the various manifestations of interaction. His focus is pedagogical rather than linguistic in nature and considers both verbal and non-verbal interactions (Visible Thinking PZ, n.d.).

Currently there is a shift in Malaysian classrooms, as elsewhere, away from traditional teacher-centred transmission models to more student-centred ones (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2009). Such pedagogies are largely unfamiliar to both teachers and learners within Malaysian contexts. The aim of this study was to consider such learning approaches under trial within Malaysian higher education classrooms.

Research Questions

Project Zero, through its many studies, has identified certain constructivist classroom practices, termed the 'best classroom practices', to be those that promote a culture of thinking. The researchers aimed to find out whether the interactions that take place in the classroom help students in their learning from their perspective, through creating such a classroom culture. It also investigated this from their teacher's perspective. The aim of this study was to consider such learning approaches under trial within Malaysian higher education classrooms. The focus is on both the observable pedagogical interactions as well as the not directly observable, it is in respect to these aspects that the notion of 'visible thinking' informs the study design. Interactions were observed and recoded, described and analysed in respect to the classroom practice. These interactions were then considered in conjunction with pre and post interviews of participants (teacher and students) to gain greater insight into the impact on learning. Interaction has been selected as the main focus because:-

- a) there are clear theoretical links with social constructivist theory.
- b) it is one of the major visible thinking characteristics identified by Ritchhart (2009).
- c) the study is within the contexts of ESL learning, where interaction has particular importance.

The questions that the research attempted to answer were:

- i. How does the initial attempt to establish social constructivist practices manifest itself within a class where it had not been trialled before?
- ii. How does the teacher and students respond to this new pedagogical approach both in terms of classroom behaviours and attitudes to learning?

Social interaction and mediated learning are central to Vygotskian theory, particularly with respect to the role played by adults in instructing and guiding learners, which helps develop the language of learning and which in turn enables the latter to acquire knowledge voluntarily (Moll, 1990). Vygotsky also suggested that there exists a strong link between formal learning (one that takes place in school - such as learning scientific concepts) and informal learning (one that takes place in the home). He further emphasized that an effective link should be formed between the two in order for learning to be perceived as significant, relevant and of practical value by the learner (Moll, 1990).

A prerequisite to developing learning that engages everyday life is the interdependence between teachers, students and peers where the three must interact in order to share ideas and experiences and solve problems (Moll 1990; John-Steiner & Mahn 1996). Vygotsky, in describing the zone of proximal development, suggested that learners should be challenged to undertake tasks that appear to be beyond their current level of development. These seemingly difficult tasks can be completed with assistance and guidance from teachers and peers and in time the necessary skills required to perform the tasks could be internalized, leading to the ability to carry out tasks independently (Vygotsky, 1978).

The move from teacher-centred to student-centred pedagogical approaches is a trend in evidence in many countries (Ministry of Education, N.Z., 2007; Ministry of Education, Malaysia, 2009). These trends result in changes in the focus of instruction from a transmission curriculum to a transactional curriculum. The constructivist model very much informs this shift. In the curricular and pedagogical traditions of many countries, including Malaysia, a teacher transmits information to students who passively listen and supposedly acquire facts, whereas in the transactional curriculum, students are actually involved in learning to reach new understandings. A constructivist approach requires teachers to follow a pedagogy which provides learners with the opportunity to (i) interact with sensory data; and (ii) construct their own world (Hein, 1991).

Vygotsky (1978) proposed that in social interaction between an adult (teacher, parent) and child (learner), scaffolding takes place when the adult provides guidance to the child according to his or her needs (Storch 2007). Storch (2007) adds that scaffolding also occurs when learners interact with each other, either in pairs or groups, in a collaborative effort to resolve a language related problem. Collaborative dialogue, according to Swain (2000, p.102), is 'dialogue in which speakers are engaged in problem solving and knowledge building'. However, not all group work results in collaboration (Donato, 1988,1994, 2000; Storch, 2002, 2005), as the basis of scaffolding includes the existence of learning opportunities that enables the language learners to co-construct new knowledge (Storch 2007).

The importance of language has been spoken about by many a researchers for a long time. Vygotsky simply puts it this way, “Children solve practical tasks with the help of their speech as well as with their eyes and hands’ (1978, p.26). Conversations with people in their surroundings have been observed by Bruner and other developmental psychologists to help form young children’s personal growth (1990). Halliday (1993) establishes that for children, language learning lays the very foundation for all kinds of learning to occur. In his words, “When children learn language...they are learning the foundations of learning itself”(pp. 93–116). Resonating this, Alexander (2006), argues that the case for pedagogical talk which he terms as ‘pedagogical dialogue’ is based on both research evidence and logic. According to him learning that involves learners’ attention and captures their interest and has two way interactions rather than just one, is more likely to bring greater benefits to learners. The task of learning to talk effectively is a difficult and lengthy process which requires teachers to help learners realize the kind of talk that is relevant to benefit most from the classroom (Wegerif & Dawes, 2004).

There are a number of aspects that point towards the necessity for a research of this manner. Firstly the Malaysian policy context which implies that there is indeed a need for a shift in the present teaching and learning practice in education to address the poor English language outcome in the country. The second most important rationalization is research such as Project Zero which highlights the importance of classroom interaction in student learning. Others include the important role of interaction in ESL learning in particular as suggested by research done by Lightbrown (2003), Woolf and Quinn (2007), Nabei (2002) and Storch (2007). There is a lack of research within the Malaysian context in this particular area of constructive pedagogy.

Given the above scenario, the study hoped to shed some light on how learning takes place against the backdrop of a Malaysian classroom culture. The results of the study could help transform Malaysian education more effectively by strengthening the shift towards more student-centred pedagogies with a resultant positive impact on learning.

Methodology

This study is predominantly a qualitative inquiry. Denzin and Lincoln (2003) state that in qualitative research, researchers put great emphasis on the socially constructed nature of inquiry that is value-laden. They add that the richness of the data that emerges through such study of life experiences of the subjects cannot be experimentally examined or measured. This is part of a larger doctoral research that involved three teachers and their respective classes. Data was gathered from three lessons under each teacher. However, for the purpose of this paper, only findings from one lesson of one of the teachers referred to as Teacher B is reported.

Ethnographic research

An ethnographic approach was employed in this study as the main aim of the study was to discover and describe the behaviour and culture of a particular group of people within a specific operational context. The particular group under study in this study is a class of

undergraduate ESL students and their teacher at a university in Malaysia. The manner in which they interact with each other in the classroom, both verbally and non-verbally, and how its role, in terms of impact on learning, was perceived by students and the teacher was looked at within this micro culture. Anthropologists Ruesch & Bateson (1951) and Hall (1959) have clearly stated that in describing the patterns of communication within a culture, one cannot but describe the patterns of the culture as well. By acquiring a deep understanding of the human beings under investigation, ethnography becomes a valuable tool in helping to meet the needs of these groups of people which might never have been known otherwise (Spradley, 1979). In this study the ethnographic approach brings to the surface elements of the culture of the ESL classroom related to the interactions that take place within the classroom. This is then used to help identify the role played by those interactions in learning within the classroom pedagogy.

An ethnographic approach is appropriate for this study as the purpose is to describe and interpret how a cultural group (Creswell, 2007), in this case a group of Malaysian ESL undergraduate learners and their teachers', work. Their attitude, beliefs, and language could be studied as any group that has been together for prolonged periods would share a discernible pattern of behaviour or commonly known as a culture sharing group. The focus activity in this study is the patterns of interaction taking place within the Malaysian ESL undergraduate classroom; what members of this culture do as a group; what they make and use as artefacts (non-verbal interaction) and say (verbal-interaction). Data gathered from the many sources were then collated and analysed to provide rich descriptions of the culture-sharing group, to find emerging themes from the group and interpret them (Wolcott, 1994). The key element of the ethnographic approach is in describing the social setting, interpreting and making sense of the findings which will be presented in a narrative presentation (Creswell, 2007).

The research design

Data collected take the form of video data, classroom observation by the researchers and interviews with the teacher and student participants. The three forms of data on the various manifestations of verbal and non-verbal communication in an ESL classroom inform the study. Detailed field notes were taken during this overall process. The subject students were studying in the class observed is called *Business and Professional Communication* (code BEL 482).

The teacher was interviewed once before video-recording of the lesson began and again after the lesson was filmed. All student participants took part either in a pre-interview session or filled in a pre-interview questionnaire as part of the pre interview process to get an idea of their expectations of the lessons. The student participants were selected based on their English language proficiency and were categorized into three groups i.e. good, average and below average in their English language ability. A small part of the IELTS practice test was administered for this purpose. Selected student participants were interviewed again after the filming in a post-interview session. At the university where the study was located, all undergraduate degree students took at least two out of twelve available English courses of two credit hours each as a compulsory requirement for graduation. Study participants were taking this course as their second English language paper.

Data analysis and findings

This section provides a summary of findings from one lesson followed by a discussion in the order the findings are listed. It then concludes with a summary of the analysis informed by the same data set.

Classroom video and observation

The following provides a summary of account of the first of a series of three lessons of Teacher B's class. In this two hour lesson, students were assigned a group task of forming a company, appointing office bearers and discussing entire meeting procedure with a focus on two special businesses. Each group consisted of at least six members, making four groups all together. The lesson began with the teacher explaining for the first ten to twelve minutes how each item in the agenda was to be discussed, with students listening attentively, settling in and taking out their books at the same time. There was almost no peer interaction at this stage except for occasional verbal exchanges with students who walked into the class late and were settling down. The teacher asked a rhetorical question, "*What do you discuss under 'minutes of previous meeting'?*" to which students did not reply. Clearly the teacher did not expect them to as she continued explaining it without hesitation. The teacher used only the English language and incorporated a lot of hand gestures when talking. Students' facial expressions suggested that they understood the teacher. Some students took down notes while others just listened. No questions were asked up to this point. After the initial briefing, the teacher gave instructions on group formation, and she asked the class, "*Any questions before you start?*" to which there was no response from the class.

The intended pedagogy employed by the teacher had clear characteristics of a collaborative learning model. Specific elements of social learning theory were drawn upon in this lesson, represented through the notion of role play and shared meaning apart from the explicit instruction provided and opportunities created for dialogue with the teacher. Cooperative learning theory suggests that classroom space and arrangement play important roles in facilitating learning (Johnson, 1979). The classroom under investigation looked too small to accommodate a class of twenty eight students; there were five rows of tables, with five tables joined together on each row, an arrangement suited for the traditional pedagogical models. There was not enough space for rearrangement of furniture to allow appropriate interaction patterns. It is worthy of note that despite the class being congested, no one sat on the seats closest to the camera, a sign that students were generally not very keen to be close to the camera.

Students started forming their groups by moving around the class. At this point there was a lot of verbal interaction but mostly in the Malay language. There was some furniture noise as students moved chairs around and adjusted tables, and within three minutes students were settled into their respective groups. They were to remain in these same groups for the rest of the semester. These groups were of mixed gender though some groups had more members of one gender compared to others. One classroom phenomenon observed in Teacher B's lesson, was that students were more at ease when interacting with the teacher at group level compared to class level. Sitting facing each other, group members began their discussion which went on for the next thirty minutes. The teacher walked around from one group to another, explaining and answering questions. Students were generally in a positive mood,

looking happy to be in discussion groups with occasional jokes being heard from time to time, and there was also some cross group interaction.

Students were generally focused on task throughout with some students within the groups being more focused than others. This was interpreted from their non-verbal interaction such as writing continuously, as well as being very actively involved during the discussion or otherwise. After some twenty minutes into the discussion the noise level of the class rose from time to time with the nature of the noise indicating that students were drifting in and out of task. Some of this noise consisted of jokes and laughter. The teacher attempted to use modelling techniques throughout, not only of her behaviour but also that of students so as to allow peer model to take place. The teacher selected a group which had more able students in terms of language ability to model the meeting procedure to the rest of class. At one point the teacher walked over to group three, asking them to do a presentation by giving them a choice of moving to the front of the class or to present from where they are seated. They chose the second option. During the presentation, the teacher sat at the back of the classroom watching and interrupting once, while other groups listened, though some group members were still focused on their own tasks. Once the presentation was over, the teacher moved to the group to give some explanation at group level before proceeding to the front of the class to explain at class level. From time to time the teacher interrupted to correct students on the procedures involved and language used so as to meet the requirements of a formal meeting. However, most of the teacher's feedback was related to task interpretation rather than cognitive learning.

In the last ten to eleven minutes of class, while the teacher, using a lot of hand gestures, summed up the lesson for the day, not many students were seen to be attentive as some were still focused on their work. No one asked the teacher any questions during this time. There was some noise in the classroom and students were beginning to interact among themselves. When teacher started talking about the upcoming assessment, the class became much more attentive. One student raised his hand to ask the teacher a question about the assessment to which the teacher offered further explanation. This is a clear indication that students were very interested in the assessment more than other aspects of the lesson. In her comments at the end of the presentation, the teacher gave clear explanations on what was expected in a formal meeting discussion and where the students' attempts had fallen short, providing examples to further illustrate her point.

Post class interview of the teacher

In the post-interview, the teacher said the purpose of the lesson was for students to conduct the meeting according to the agenda planned and to use the language of the meeting. Overall she felt the objective of the lesson was achieved for the dominant students, while for the quieter ones the achievement was less. The teacher and the chairperson had played a key role in encouraging the quiet students to talk, the teacher explained:

...the lecturer needs to monitor them, you know like interrupt them when they think you know that one person is doing the most of the talking, ... the role of the chairperson, they should at least encourage , encourage others to speak.

The teacher felt that initially during the lesson teacher talk was important after which group activities were necessary in order for students to benefit most. Teacher B used this pedagogical strategy to accomplish the task set. This strategy was also observed across other classroom situations and teachers. However there was little or no indication of any reference made to gain insight into how students' constructed meaning through classroom interaction throughout the classes. Some of the hindrances mentioned by Teacher B in using an interactive approach in an English classroom included students going off track when not observed; falling back to Malay terms in the discussion; or not all of the group members being involved in the group work due to various reasons such as their own emotional condition.

Post class interviews of students

In this first post class interview session, student participants were interviewed to gather information on their perception of the effectiveness of the lesson and what they thought the role of interaction in enhancing their learning was. As way of organizing the data, each paragraph cites responses from two to three participants.

Student participants Salmah, Beth and Nora found the classroom interaction beneficial because they could exchange ideas with peers and teachers as well as improve relationships with friends. Salmah, being the most proficient speaker among the three, said, "...we can sit together in a group and at the same time we can brainstorm each other's ideas for the meeting." She was very actively involved in the discussion, and consulted the teacher for clarification and reassurance. Meanwhile Beth and Nora being below average in their language proficiency or ability were rather quiet in the group. Beth said she was short of ideas, but was trying to speak. She explained: "*Maybe I am, sometimes I want to improve myself to communicate with each other but sometimes it moves very slowly.*"

Nora, on the other hand, had a slightly different reason for her lack of involvement, she admitted that she lacked confidence:

Because saya ada masalah untuk bercakap lancar dalam bahasa Inggeris, bila nak bercakap dalam bahasa Inggeris, saya perlukan masa so dia akan jadi macam teragak-gagak. Satu confident level saya tak tinggi, satu anxiety level saya tinggi...(Because, I have problems speaking smoothly in English, when I want to speak in English, I need time so it will be jerky. My confidence level is not high whereas my anxiety level is high).

Both found the most interesting part of the lesson to be the group discussion where they could share and compare ideas and expand knowledge. This is an interesting though not a surprising finding, that all three students including those who were not able to fully participate in the lesson due to proficiency issues, welcomed this unconventional pedagogical approach and found the notion of shared learning embedded in it beneficial. Exactly how they gained in their learning and were able to expand their knowledge is not clear. Therefore, it is not certain if the perceived learning outcome was merely task-related or at a deeper cognitive level. Though the role of confidence and language proficiency was expressed by a majority of students with perceived weaknesses, the social learning strategies with their prospect of enabling students to gain multiple perspectives was viewed positively. Opening up opportunities for dialogue is one of the key elements of social constructivist theory, the very

start for constructivist learning to happen (Ginsburg & Opper, 1988). For students such as Beth and Nora, opportunities for exchange of questions, explanations and feedback between them and the teacher occurred at a more personal level while for the more outspoken students', dialogue was at class level.

Beth said her ideal learning environment was when the teacher gave short notes using power point. If she faced difficulties in understanding the lesson, she would seek help from friends before asking the teacher. However her lack of proficiency in the English language made her worried and depressed when approaching a teacher, as such she would choose to approach a teacher personally. Both Beth and Nora would discuss problems with friends first before consulting teacher, Nora said she would ask the teacher questions about homework or classroom assignments in class but outside of class she preferred to refer to friends. In order to help her overcome her problems in communicating in the English language, Beth tried to speak in English with friends at home, but when it got difficult she would revert to Malay language.

Dibah stated that she was quiet in the group because she did not really understand the rules in the agenda, the reason being teacher was very fast in her explanation while she was slow in understanding. When asked why she didn't ask the teacher for clarification she recalled, "*Saya tak faham, tapi saya tak tahu apa saya nak tanya.* (I didn't understand, but I didn't know what to ask)."

Wong, meanwhile, said that although he understood English, he was not good at participating in conversations and therefore did not take part in classroom discussions. When he needed to know something in class, he would ask his friends who might forward his question to the teacher.

An improved and less formal student teacher and peer relationship was also perceived to be an outcome in this changed pedagogical approach. Salmah acknowledged the importance of interacting with peers when she said, "*As a student, peers are also important, because they are the same level as me so the way they think is the same as mine*". For her the best learning environment would be where there was two-way interaction because she was able to give her opinion to the teacher and the teacher provides feedback in a relaxed environment. She compared this to the more normal one-way interaction which she felt was boring and resulted in students not asking many questions.

Salmah said, when she faced difficulties with work she would seek a teachers help, in her words:

...I always get my guidance from my teachers ...I think I need their guidance because I think how smart I can be and how successful I am in doing that particular assignment, I think I need some help as well so that I will not make mistakes...

Students expressed satisfaction with the interactive pedagogical approach although it was very new to them. They perceived it to bring about a sense of enjoyment apart from resulting in help in the construction of meaning. There were some obvious examples of instances where cognitive learning, beyond task completion, had been perceived to have occurred. Student participants Dibah and Jack expressed their satisfaction with the classroom interaction because they felt good to be able to interact with friends, learn how to

communicate using the right language in a meeting and be able to use the guidelines given to write the minutes. Here is how Jack reported his contentment with the lesson:

The lecturer actually makes us like...in group work so that we can get used to the meeting atmosphere by giving some tasks, build our own organization....she is a good lecturer actually. She gives us a lot of guidelines.

Dibah found the most interesting part of the lesson to be that she learnt that meetings have an agenda, which she was not aware of earlier. Leong felt that he benefited from the classroom interaction because he was exposed to an actual meeting for the first time. Students felt the need for the teacher to establish the right atmosphere to encourage students to participate. Dibah felt that learning was most effective when the teacher was understanding and did not make students afraid of asking questions, she liked both one-way and two-way interactions. Though she was not very confident of her English language, she would ask the teacher questions in front of the class if she needed to. Jack on the other hand, despite being very interested in talking and being involved in discussions, said that insecurity about his English grammar sometimes stopped him from asking questions aloud in class. Jack loved the role of CEO he played in class because it made him feel so powerful. He asked questions in class if the lesson was interesting which in turn was dependent on the lecturer, he explained:

...it depends on the lecturer, sometimes the lecturer is a bit boring, they don't have any approach...I might lose my focus around after 30 minutes...they have to be creative, they have to have many approach...for e.g. by using examples from life experience and audiovisual.

Shaun and Aminah preferred to clarify doubts by asking friends first and the teacher later as friends were closer to them, they would ask questions in front of the class if there was a need and the situation permitted them to do so, for example, Shaun says, *"If the situation is good, I'm comfortable with the lecturer, I will directly ask the lecturer"*. Aminah agreed with this, saying, *"I want to improve my language. I make myself more confident to speak in English. I must be brave to do so"*. Shaun further added that, to create a suitable learning environment, the lecturer must be knowledgeable, have a sense of humour and at the same time be strict, he cited his secondary school science teacher as an exemplary teacher who made a difficult subject easy to learn by using games in his teaching.

Wong said although he understood the purpose of the lesson, he could not understand the procedure involved. On whether he asked the teacher questions, his reply was, *"Just a couple of times, but not too much"*. When it came to clarifying doubts in class or participating in classroom discussion the two participants differed from each other. Leong would consult the teacher first before talking to peers and had no problems taking part in classroom level discussion or in asking questions aloud in class.

Shaun and Aminah thought they benefitted from the classroom interaction because they were able to work with peers, able to improve language skills and knew the thoughts of peers which gave them confidence to speak to others. Both participants liked the group discussion because they didn't feel shy during discussion or feel tense. Shaun described it as, *"...enjoyable. Previously we don't do that kind of exercise (referring to group discussion) yesterday class was the first time"*.

Aminah opined that two to three-way interaction was less boring compared to one way interaction because they could communicate better and were clearer on the task. She said,

...I like most for the yesterday's session. They have two way communication and we can have more like reading books, bringing other sources or we can search the internet or can watch the movie for the enjoying the lesson, maybe we can ...through song...

(Note: This student indicated her preference for doing activities together with peers).

She also recalled how her secondary school teacher used movies, theatre and songs in teaching English to expand their vocabulary. Shaun felt that a balance is needed between one way and two way interaction; first there should be theory through lecture followed by group discussion.

Despite the change in the teacher's role as facilitator and moderator within this social learning pedagogy compared to the more central position held by the teacher in a traditional setting, the role of the teacher was perceived by students as important to enable learning. Some insight was provided on the impact this social learning pedagogy had on learning, Sue, a highly confident speaker of the English language clearly articulated that peer learning worked best for her though it was not a norm practiced in classrooms. Many others agreed that the best part of the lesson was the interaction. They liked it when they were able to apply the communication skills that they had learnt in other English classes. Many participants admitted that they would consult friends first if they had problems before seeking out the teacher because it was easier to meet friends compared to teacher who came from another faculty. One problem was the small size of the classroom which caused some interruption during group discussion. A bigger classroom could better enable group discussion to take place.

One student, Sue, explained:

I think one-way lecturer to student interaction is very dull...well they definitely should make two-way interaction, so we feel that we are part of the lecture. I think we should ...put the chairs in a circle and then we can interact with everyone at the same time, if you get what I mean.

She viewed the lesson as the best she has had so far, the discussion was very helpful because friends helped to explain what was unclear, enabling everyone in the group to get an idea. Also the classroom activity prevented them from feeling sleepy as they often do due to the many classes they have to attend every day. Some students pointed to the development of appropriate language skills to function in an authentic situation and shared learning as some of the affective learning outcomes of this social learning pedagogy.

Generally, this constructivist learning strategy was well received by students, many describe broader learning through interaction with the teacher and peers, and this was true even among those who had issues with confidence and language proficiency. Another interesting claim is that the notion of shared learning was perceived as necessary by students of higher proficiency and ability to co-construct meaning. For many, learning in this social learning

environment had brought about learning benefits that surpassed language skills practice to a higher order cognitive and conceptual learning outcome.

Discussion

Part A

The first part of the discussion analyses the finding from various aspects such as the physical environment of the classroom, the nature of the task, the role of teacher and students as well as the role of language and communication.

The nature of the task was generally an interactive, collaborative activity which required students to engage in group work. The physical environment of the class was a hindrance for comfortable group discussion as groups were seated very close to each other and looked quite cramped. This also contributed to the noise level of the classes being higher, and acted as a barrier for teacher-student interaction. According to the Vygotskian perspective, one of the major roles of the teacher is to arrange an educative exchange of ideas among learners. (Donato, 1994, 2000). This was indeed displayed by the teacher, when she offered explicit explanation of what was expected of the students in the first part of the lesson before assuming the role of facilitator. This then enabled the students to model to each other different ways of thinking through group discussion. Beyond the expectation of co-constructing meaning and a shared goal, the teacher intended for the students to learn the inter-relationship between language and its application within a highly authentic context. She also made an effort to model peer behaviour of a more able group to the rest of the class, opening up a valuable chance for the lesser able students to learn from the 'more able other'.

Apart from the social learning pedagogies represented through the role played by the teacher as mentioned above, there are also other aspects of the role of a constructivist teacher one familiar with theory might expect, not evident in the class above. Such things included: initiative on the part of the teacher to delve deeper into the thinking of her students to comprehend their understanding; or to ensure heterogeneity in groups to enable peer scaffolding; or to make thinking visible; or to connect the lesson to learners' prior knowledge. The focus was almost totally on collaborative group interaction. The role of the students in this class activity was a sharp contrast to what they were more accustomed to in a transmission model of learning. In this collaborative learning model, students played a central role in their learning while the teacher's role moved from information delivery to learning facilitator.

In the initial part of the lesson, when task instructions were outlined, students still listened to the teacher talk, paying attention to the modelling of language skills and the language use in context by the teacher. Students, then having been given the task requirement, became the central focus within the class and their learning through a mix of peer interaction and student-teacher interaction. Unlike in the earlier transmission context students were expected to initiate these interactions rather than just respond. In this interactive pedagogy, the activity of the students was foregrounded where learning opportunities prevailed in the form of shared learning, negotiated meaning and cooperation in arriving at a consensus to the existing problem. The reaction of the students towards this role shift was largely a positive one across the group. Many saw this as a good opportunity to practice their English language skills and

improve communication skills. One student cited this lesson as the best she had had so far because the discussion with peers helped her clarify doubts.

The role of language and communication was either to provide instructions on group formation for carrying out of tasks or explanation of the task itself or generally exchanges between students and the teacher or amongst peers to clarify doubts related to task or upcoming test. The teacher positioned herself in front of the classroom when giving instructions to which students responded either by looking at the teacher in attention or taking down notes. The role of the language here was to provide information to aid students' understanding of the task and was very much about transmission of information still. In loud and clear voices, the general tone of the teacher was friendly with a lot of hand gestures used to provide emphasis.

Once instructions were clear, the role of communication between teacher and students shifted to facilitating group formation. There was increased interaction between teacher and students with this shift in role which was represented by a shift in the teacher's physical position, from in front of the class to one moving closer to them and making herself available to take on questions at individual or group level.

Many students found the peer group interaction played an important role in presenting them a chance to practice and improve their English language skills as well as the skills essential to function in a particular context. Within the groups however, the nature of the communication varied amongst individual students. Students with higher confidence and language proficiency levels tended to be more involved in the group discussions providing greater input compared to their less proficient and confident counterparts. For them language took on the role of providing ideas, information and leading the discussion as well as encouraging their quieter peers to participate. For those who were less proficient in the English language, communication served as provider of input as they listen to their 'more able' peers. Many commented that they found this listening role very helpful. The teacher attempted to utilize language to model language skills and the inter relationship between language and context to her students (this was a pre-determined goal), and explicitly communicated peer modelling in her class.

Discussion

Part B

There are various categories of descriptors identified in this second part of the discussion, each entailing a group of observed manifestations. In this section, the different categories are discussed.

Classroom organization and environment

Research proposes that an effective teacher needs to have characteristics such as good pedagogical skills, establishes good relationships and mutual trust with students by welcoming their ideas, being respectful of all students and upholding equal status for all. It is also recommended that teachers should accept alternative answers by students and at the same time encourage comparisons and justification. The responses from students along with

observations by the authors in a Malaysian ESL classroom are subdivided into several categories.

In describing the physical environment of their classroom, students from Teacher B class felt that her classroom was too small to enable group discussion to take place comfortably. The size of the classrooms also caused very loud background noise during discussion, causing further difficulties for students to hear each other.

Probing into the students' relationship dimensions and perceptions of their teacher's characteristics revealed many facets. Students in particular commented that their teacher needed to improve in a few areas such as teacher should speak in a loud and clear voice, repeat or recap some of the information she provided to the class and be friendly towards students. A student pointed this out clearly when she said that she would ask teacher questions in class if the situation was good and if she was comfortable with the teacher, giving an inkling that it was not always so. It was also noticed that there was an increased amount of interaction between teacher and students when the teacher moved beside groups. Hence, the students cited good teacher-student and peer relationships as main attributes for classroom participation to occur.

How much risk students were willing to take when putting forward ideas or questions depended very much on the amount of trust they had of their teacher and peers. Many students mentioned that they would seek peers out for help first before consulting the teacher as they could seek clarification. A few students voiced their liking for an environment where students were at ease and teacher was understanding and friendly. There were also a number of students who did ask questions at class level even though they were aware of their language limitations or lacked confidence. They mentioned that they overcame this restriction because they wanted to learn. Apart from a few risk takers who asked the teacher questions boldly in class, students in general preferred to discuss their doubts with peers in their own groups or take the opportunity to ask questions when the teacher moved closer to them.

Seeking teachers and students' opinions on their preferred method of learning between teacher centred time and student centred time, the general preference was for a mix of one and two-way classroom interaction. During the initial stages of the lesson, one-way interaction was felt needed to give instructions and clarify tasks. This was then followed by group discussions to enact the task itself. Classroom pedagogy was very much teacher driven with students attempting to accomplish the task set by the teacher. Students generally preferred a classroom climate that was interactive and relaxed, where they could exchange ideas with peers and the teacher. They appreciated the teacher walking around the classroom to approach students, and making an effort to get to know them.

Curriculum linking, transparency of intentions and promotion of metacognitive dimensions

Research suggests that teachers should display an effort to link curriculum, make clear the intention of the lesson and promote metacognitive dimensions, all of which may take the following forms. Teachers should lay down the ground rules that formal language is used for oral as well as written communication and explain the learning value of participating in conversations of various kinds and its reasons. Students need help to set the rules for

‘Exploratory Talk’ so that group members would be encouraged to talk, give opinions due consideration, disputes should be allowed and all members should be involved in the final decision making. In terms of clarity of tasks, priorities and intentions, students responded that the teacher generally began by giving instructions on task accomplishment and group formations at class level. This was normally followed by group level instruction after which each group was assigned a situation to work on. The teacher then prioritized aspects of the task and its requirements such as use of language, formal or informal, group formation and roles played by different committee members. However, explanation for why they should be involved or the value of being a role player within the group discussion was not made explicit to students in the class studied.

Goals set were made clear whereby, the teacher claimed that the purpose of the lesson to conduct a meeting was achieved though it was better for dominant students but less so for the quieter ones. The aim of the course was to expose them to the processes of conducting a meeting, to grasp the idea of writing notices, agendas and minutes of meetings. Many students stated that their expectations of the course to improve their level of confidence and communicate in English had been achieved to a certain degree. All of the teacher’s intentions were very much aligned to the expectations of the course which did not go beyond task accomplishment. Thus, it is not surprising that the teacher did not require students to delve deeper into issues beyond the call of the task.

Teachers need to enable students to step inside the role of a character or object and to assume that role so that they could then speak or write from the point of view of the chosen character. In this aspect of personalising learning/differentiation, students mentioned that the interactive pedagogy and the exposure to actual meeting had enabled them to learn skills to participate in formal and informal meetings for example, learning the proper meeting terms, ways to conduct a good meeting and the roles of different committee members. They said new learning had taken place for them in terms of gaining knowledge on the preparation of a report, about agenda and minutes of meetings and use of tenses. Students generally expressed satisfaction with their learning experience in the course, with more than one student citing the experience of being asked to step inside different roles when they were assigned roles in a formal conversation as a valuable one which they did not normally get. Here, although the teacher merely intended completion of the task without offering further information on the benefits of student involvement in the interactive lesson, many students were aware of this learning happening for them.

Students should be taught to connect their minds and thoughts to questions, reasons, discover new ideas, analyse problems, come up with hypothesis, discuss, defend and argue possible solutions. They should also be equipped to examine, probe, and assess ideas put before them. Many students liked to be involved for various reasons, for example students cited they learnt a lot from being involved, it improved their communication skills, they also liked teachers who encouraged them to participate, they liked to make their friends talk, could ask questions on the spot, were able to focus longer on the task without feeling sleepy and everyone had an opportunity to talk. Students suggested that the course could be improved if group presentations were done in front of the class so as to involve everyone besides hearing the teacher’s comments only because it would help them learn from peers’ mistakes. It is clear that the effort to involve students in learning was well received by these learners.

It is also very important that students are able to connect their learning to prior knowledge, facilitate making connections between ideas and to lay the foundation for self-regulated investigation as well as help promote creative thinking in selecting a good option and perspective taking before coming to a judgement. Students' responded how well the lesson enabled to them to make connections between ideas and contexts as follows. A few other students mentioned that learning meeting processes was important for their future, for example, they would need skills to conduct meetings once they were with an organization in the outside the classroom. Students themselves were able to see the connection between the lesson and their future careers; they liked the two way communication and mentioned that they would make an effort to participate in the lesson even though they were not confident of their English language. They believed that this was an opportunity for them to learn useful skills such as arguing, interrupting and asking questions, all of which could be applied in the future. Some students demonstrated an awareness of the importance of learning these skills for the future and suggested having more practice on conducting meetings and writing the minutes of meeting so as to increase students' exposure to the minutes of meeting.

Apart from the these, the literature recommends that students take on different intellectual roles such as assisting peers in need, coaching peers when instructed by teacher, provide constructive criticism of each other's' work and collaborate in learning activities. It is important for learners to build up thoughtful interpretations by encouraging reasoning with evidence and appreciate the deeper complexities of situations that may appear black and white on the surface. This in turn helps in developing learners' understanding of a complex topic over a period of time and to monitor their progress of a topic over time, that is, days or weeks. Students in this study reacted positively to independence in learning. They like activities such as group discussions because they could exchange ideas, clarify doubts and share information and they were actively involved in the discussions. A number of students did homework individually, and if they encountered problems, they surfed the net to find answers. Many mentioned that they would normally discuss problems with homework amongst friends as they were easier to approach. Help from the teacher was sort as a last resort. Although the approachability of the teacher was in part a factor, this is clear evidence that students were aware of the beneficial role played by peers in their learning and the independence peer group discussions allowed.

The key indicator of the suitability of this collaborative pedagogy can be obtained through investigating the emotional dimensions of the students. Observation of the video recordings indicates that students were happy and generally in a positive mood. Students agreed that the best part of the lesson was when they could discuss with group members, they found the lesson exciting and didn't feel shy or tense during the discussions. Many students found the lesson enjoyable for reasons such as students enjoyed speaking English, which was an opportunity that only presented itself in an English classroom. It was also an opportunity to connect and make friends they wouldn't otherwise have made. Apart from contributing to their learning, the interactive pedagogy also had an obvious positive emotional dimension for these groups of students.

Scaffolding, discourse and language use

Research suggests that teachers should display an effort to promote scaffolding, proper discourse and language use which could be manifested in the following ways.

Teacher re-voicing by repeating students' ideas, summarizing and reformulating points put forward by students to the class is encouraged. By repeating the points in teacher's own words, the teacher adds strength to students' suggestions and gives clear indication that the suggestions are welcomed. The teacher mentioned during interviews that some of the factors that affected the motivation level of the students in these lessons included the prompting they got from their teacher or peers, their own proficiency level in the English language and how much weight this subject contributed towards their degree. Student participants meanwhile mentioned that the presence of sufficient group members during discussion, the opportunity to interact with the teacher and peers at group level and the interest shown by the teacher in their work enhanced their enthusiasm in class.

That the teacher provides constructive feedback to students' answers and promotes deeper thinking is viewed necessary. The teacher did not give an overall summary or reformulate points. Neither was there any effort to build common knowledge at the end of the lesson by the teachers. Students suggested that the teacher should monitor group performance from the start to the end of the meeting in order to note the mistakes and highlight them so that students are made aware of their mistakes. The students preferred an interactive pedagogy to teacher centred learning because the act of the teacher going around from group to group providing feedback helped in their learning.

Teachers should encourage students to get to the gist of a matter and explain them using verbal or non-verbal communication, for example, colour, symbol etc. In this study, as far as the teachers' efforts to offer explanations including clarification and essence of ideas were concerned, the students had the following comments. They mentioned that an interactive classroom prevented them from feeling sleepy although they had many hours of classes every day. One student expressed that the lesson was the best so far because the discussion was very helpful where friends explained what was unclear and this enabled everyone in the group to get a clearer idea. It also gave them a chance to seek help from the teacher. A few students expressed the need for the teacher to give more examples and exercises to make the lessons clearer to them.

The literature presents another important suggestion pertaining to the role of the teacher whereby teachers are urged to organize opportunities for talk, social interaction gives the opportunity to weaker students to learn expert strategies from their peers who are able to share hidden thought processes. Communal interactions on the other hand enable students to exchange ideas thus allowing for an information loaded environment for learning to happen. In reporting on their language comprehension and production, student participants said that interaction improved their English language communication skills, their ability to use the right language in a formal meeting and to follow the guidelines given to write the minutes of meetings. They were also able to apply the communications skills they learnt here in other English classes.

Many students in this study also admitted that they often code switched during discussion and when talking to the teacher (researcher observation also confirms this phenomenon). Students revealed that they benefitted from the chance to present in class because it enabled them to learn from their mistakes, while the informal discussion was a good practice for them in vocabulary and grammar. The discussion amongst peers also helped to polish up communication skills, aided in overcoming shyness when speaking in English and brought

forth a lot of different ideas from different people which served to widen their knowledge. It was also helpful in answering the test questions that followed in class. When they had questions, the students verbalized that they would normally employ various methods of seeking clarification of their doubts in class. The most common manner was asking peers or asking the teacher personally, even if they had no problems asking aloud in class or if language was not an issue for them. The reasons expressed for this included a lack of confidence in their questions or in their English language, ability to ask more questions or get a clearer answer from teacher this way or not wanting to disrupt the lesson that was in progress. Sometimes the high level of noise in the class prevented them from asking questions aloud, and it was easier to share ideas with the teacher and peers when discussed at this level. There were however, some students who preferred to consult the teacher first before talking to peers. They did this by taking part in discussions and asking questions at a class level. These students stated reasons for this such as their peers might be unsure of the right answer while teacher provided accurate answers. Yet another student mentioned that he did not like to participate in classroom discussions, as such he asked his friends questions which might be forwarded by them to the teacher. The researcher's observation revealed that the questions exchanged between the teacher and students and amongst peers were mainly to clarify doubts related to the task at hand with almost no question related to learning beyond the requirement of the task.

Teachers should encourage peer listening by modelling careful listening of students' voices. Peer discourse was viewed positively by many of the student participants in this study. According to them, this provided the opportunity to learn and seek clarification from others. It helped them in their learning of English and building up of confidence in speaking English. The classroom discussion helped them to remember information better compared to reading individually and remain focus for a longer period of time and it also enabled them to talk freely without being observed by the teacher. One student claimed that he learnt best by observing friends who were excellent in English during discussion. Another student exclaimed that the lesson was the most productive in the semester because it was the first time there was interaction amongst students; usually it was just between lecturer and students. Researcher observations showed that although there the teacher was aware of the advantages of peer interaction and learning, she did not make any attempt to have mixed ability groups that facilitated weaker students to learn from their more capable peers.

Promotion of options

Previous research recommends that teachers demonstrate an attempt to promote various options to their students, which requires the following skills to be taught to them. Activities that could be carried out in class include training students to acquire skills to recognize situations that need more thought, to foreground extraordinary features of ordinary things that are creative and apply creativity in the options prevalent before them and in decision making. Students agreed that the teacher generally encouraged them to look at issues from various perspectives and that the teacher listed down the ideas brainstormed on the board during class discussions. The researcher's observation showed that the different roles students assumed required them to think from different angles, but there was very little conscious effort on the part of the teacher to encourage students to explain or defend their stance.

Other important activities that can be derived from previous studies provide that the ones that could be conducted in the classroom are those that could push students to discover the

different perspectives around an issue, and to challenge them to think from the perspectives of different people and in different points in time. This study shows that exploration of different perspectives and personas is generally well-liked by these students. This gave them the opportunity to explore each other's opinions on an issue by sharing ideas, learn through the ideas of others, peer correct, discuss directly with peers and clarify information with the teacher and expand knowledge. One student said she liked the lessons as she could interact with others and share her opinion. She believed that this helped her to learn vocabulary, grammar and sentence structures. Another student said that through interaction, her group was able to imagine situations in a company which in turn encouraged creativity. She added that the course could be improved further if students were allowed to join different groups as they could learn more from different people that way. It should be noted here, that students not only cited the various learning opportunities that group interaction presented them with, but were also able to suggest how classroom interaction could be organized so as to benefit them further. This is an indication that students were aware of the advantages interactions afforded in their learning. In this instance it was gaining input on the different perspectives related to an issue and also the sensitivity to how they could benefit further from it.

Strategy, task selection and implementation

Findings from previous research suggest that the teacher also exhibits ways to promote the following through appropriate strategy or task selection for implementation in her classroom. Attention should be paid by teachers to the wait time, the kind of questions asked should be fewer of higher cognitive level, students' mistakes should be corrected and their opinion developed. Teachers should also be innovative enough so as to be open to unconventional methods of sharing in the classroom. Student participants' responses to the relevance of classroom activities to priorities were, that teacher generally gave them thinking time in class and valued their opinion but admitted that the teacher couldn't give too much time to any one student as there were many others. A few students mentioned that this didn't happen all the time and were aware of the reasons for it, for example, one student said it was because she took too long a time to come up with the answer. Students also noticed that the teacher generally valued their opinions and when an opinion was rejected, it was done politely with justification. Finally, literature recommends that teachers ask authentic questions to encourage students to think for themselves and ask questions. In addressing the issue of the authenticity of the task provided, students in this study expressed the need to be exposed to authentic situations. They indicated that the lesson could be improved by having video presentations of sample meetings or providing them with interesting materials, for example, headlines of newspapers or slide shows of meetings. Students added that this would enable them to get useful information pertaining to meetings such as the seating arrangements of different committee members and appropriate table shape and size for a meeting. It was felt that this would make the lesson more interesting besides helping students learn from examples of real life meetings.

Conclusion

Some key elements of constructivist pedagogy such as collaborative learning, situated learning and modelling techniques drawn upon in this lesson set it apart from the traditional learning approach these students were familiar with which focuses on individual learning and is largely decontextualized.

In this initial attempt at implementing social constructivist practices in the classroom, some elements of social constructivism were clearly present while others were not. For example, the teacher did not explore the students' existing knowledge on the topic or question students on their thinking on the current topic, or link this knowledge to situations outside the classroom as the theory would recommend. All of the observation suggested that the teacher was not fully aware of the learning opportunities afforded through interactive pedagogies to enable students to co-construct meaning and to arrive at shared learning. However the teacher did attempt to bring the lesson further than just practice of English language skills, to extend understanding of the use of the language to a deeper conceptual level within authentic situations. The key intention and focus of Teacher B in this lesson was the development of appropriate language skills for the purpose of task completion as spelt out in the course outline.

Generally, this interactive approach was well received by students, many describing broader learning through interaction with teacher and peers. This was true even among those who had issues with confidence and language proficiency. Another interesting claim was that the notion of shared learning was perceived to be important by students of higher proficiency and ability to co-construct meaning. For many, learning in this social learning environment brought about learning benefits that surpassed language skills practice to a higher order cognitive and conceptual learning outcome. This investigation provides clear evidence, at least within this setting, that Malaysian students who were traditionally predisposed to transmission learning pedagogies believed that social learning strategies had value as a teaching and learning approach for them, in many instances it was perceived to provide greater benefits than the former learning models.

The students perceived positively the new pedagogical approach that they had experienced for the first time in this class (as a whole class approach) in terms of gaining new knowledge, serving a good emotional and social dimension for them. However, there is evidence to show that many students, though were presented with the opportunity were still very reluctant to take advantage of it to engage in a dialogue with teacher and peers at whole class level. Just as the constructive pedagogy recommends, greater interaction did take place.

The teacher attempted to conduct the lesson using an interactive pedagogy, and to a certain degree accomplished what she had set out to do. Clearly the lesson was not intended for learning beyond task accomplishment as stipulated in the course outline. Therefore, many elements expected of a constructive approach such as learning for understanding, connecting classroom knowledge to daily life outside the classroom or to the previous lesson or peer learning from the more able 'other' were absent in many of the classrooms. This is hardly a surprising finding given that the teacher has had her training and skills developed around a teacher-centred pedagogy. The only experience of an interactive pedagogy for the teacher was at the level of theory.

This scenario depicts the disparity between theory and practice of the constructivist pedagogy, which could be overcome if the right interpretation of the social constructive pedagogy at the level of course design is made. Equally important for a new pedagogy to be introduced successfully is the need for teachers to be equipped with the skills required to implement it as lack of it may cause them to retreat to the old approach which they have become confident in and are more comfortable with.

In spite of the many limitations in several areas, it can be concluded that with greater effort on the part of the different parties involved in education towards overcoming the obstacles, this new learning model can have a place within a cultural setting such as this one.

Limitations of the study and recommendations for further research

As much as this study is able to contribute to the gap in literature in terms of lack of classroom research involving higher education and studies into the transferability of social constructivist learning models there are areas which stand to benefit from further research. The main limitation of the study was the scale. Although findings within this setting were very clear it is not possible to generalise beyond these specific settings to any degree.

This study explored the perceptions of students and teacher on how the changed classroom pedagogy impacted upon their learning. Though it was perceived positively by both the parties investigated, its actual implication on learning could be further verified. Impact of the constructive approach on test results also remain an empirical question which if researched could potentially yield interesting results.

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