

LANGUAGE CLASS MANAGEMENT FOR EFFECTIVE LEARNING

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Abstract

Teaching English language to undergraduates in Universiti Teknologi MARA has always been a challenging and inspiring experience for language lecturers who are constantly reviewing and improving teaching techniques. In recent semesters, undergraduate English language courses have been concentrating on English for specific purposes (ESP) and one of them is the BEL492 Presentation Skills. The course which usually takes fourteen weeks to complete has been coupled by constraints of evaluations, number of students in a group and number of teaching hours per week. Considering these limitations, teaching-learning process has to be wisely and strategically arranged in order to optimise the learning process. To assist English teachers in meeting these challenges, this paper explores the notion of learner autonomy that moves the focus from teaching to learning, affording maximum possible exposure to the students, encouraging team work through peer support and cooperation, all of which can be manifested by students taking charge of their learning themselves with the constant facilitation by the lecturer. This paper also shares some workable techniques that could be applied in order to enhance effective acquisition of presentation skills amongst tertiary students.

Keywords: language, teaching, learning, management, techniques.

1. INTRODUCTION

English language courses in Universiti Teknologi MARA, Malaysia are offered to the undergraduates despite some of them having gone through three basic mainstream English courses in their diploma years. The components taught at diploma level encompass reading, speaking, listening and writing (Lim et al., 1999). Upon admission into their undergraduate programmes, UiTM students take several English language courses that are tailored for specific purposes and one of them is called BEL492 Presentation Skills (Akademi Pengajian Bahasa, 2008).

The course which usually takes fourteen weeks to complete has to include three separate continuous evaluations which are conducted throughout the semester. The recommended textbook for this course, written by Stephen E. Lucas (2007), entitled 'The Art of Public Speaking', proposes nine areas or relevant elements of presentation skills. All these areas are to be covered within the seemingly short fourteen weeks of lecture. The scheme of work dictates that the teaching of these inputs must be done in three weeks, with

each session per week lasts for only two hours. Coupled with time constraints as language lecturers have to rush to the next class in perhaps a different venue or faculty, they are also expected to undertake steps to evaluate students' performance for their on-going assessments. On the one hand, language lecturers need to find effective ways to face challenges in terms of time constraint in completing the syllabus within the specified time while simultaneously conduct three different continuous assessments for each individual student in the group.

On the other, logistics can also be an obstacle to effective teaching and learning process, that is, the number of students in a group or class may not favour the English lecturer's attempt to have effective time management. Although the syllabi for many English language courses have specified '20' students as 'the' number required for each group of students, very rarely this stipulation is fulfilled, particularly in large faculties with a great number of student intake. While the maximum student registration is fixed at 35, there are however, special cases where the number of students in a group exceeds 35. Table 1 illustrates this dilemma faced by English lecturers attached with the Faculty of Business Management, where student registration for BEL492, picked at random, exceeds the magic number of 35 in the current semester.

TABLE 1 - A RANDOM SELECTION OF BEL492 GROUPS AND ENROLMENT AT FACULTY OF BUSINESS MANAGEMENT FOR SEMESTER JULY-NOVEMBER 2008

No.	Group	No. of Students
1	BM2163B	33
2	BM2203A	40
3	BM2203C	36
4	BM2213B	43
5	BM2223A	39
6	BM2223B	38
7	BM2243A	37

Considering all the constraints discussed earlier, the teaching-learning process has to be cleverly planned in order to optimise the learning process. To assist in meeting these challenges, this paper explores the notion of learner's autonomy in language learning that moves the focus from teaching to learning by affording maximum possible exposure to the students, encouraging team work through peer support and cooperation, and most importantly optimising the time constraint for this course.

2. LEARNER AUTONOMY IN LANGUAGE LEARNING

Learner autonomy is a term that ties closely to education with reference to human cognitive aspects and the ability to be self-governing in the learning process. This phrase was first coined by Henri Holec in 1981 and since then, learner autonomy has been an important area of concern in the field of language learning. According to Reinders (2000), this trend has been so significant due to two main reasons: first, there are changes in the goals of language learning and secondly, the insights into the process of language learning

have also changed. Society has posed its demands on education and has influenced its shape. In addition, Reinders (2000) also stresses the significant impact of research in fields such as psychology, cognitive psychology, sociology, and linguistics that have contributed to language learning.

The definition of learner autonomy varies according to which field or school of thought we want to subscribe to. Learner autonomy can be defined as: the ability to take charge of one's own learning (Holec, 1981), a matter of learner's psychological relation to the process and content of learning (Little, 1991), a situation in which the learner is totally responsible for all the decisions concerned with his or her learning and the implementation of those decisions (Dickinson, 1987) and also, a recognition of the rights of learners within an educational system (Benson and Voller, 1997). Apart from the definitions above, Little (2000) combines his previous definition with that of Holec's, in an interesting aspect of learner autonomy as:

Autonomy in language learning depends on the development and exercise of a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision making and independent action; autonomous learners assume responsibility for determining the purpose, content, rhythm, and method of their learning, monitoring its progress and evaluating its outcomes.

As with many other new terms, learner autonomy has attracted extensive responses. Benson (2006) argues that in the theoretical literature which has been published over the last decades, learner autonomy is seen as a more complex concept as there may be different levels of autonomy and different ways of representing autonomy that have been explored. However, the concept of autonomy has also been challenged by a number of writers who have attempted to reconstruct its relevance to language teaching and learning in innovative ways. According to Reinders (2000), the term has been controversial in the field of education because it requires radical change and differentiation in the roles of both teachers and learners as both parties seem to defend their status quo.

Even for many experts, the term learner autonomy remains unclear in terms of its determination. Some scholars even suggest that discussing the concept is irrelevant and produced no significant impact either in psychology or language education. However, Benson (2006) believes that this term can change, if not improve, the system of language education and cognitive learning, provided that there are certain principles to distinguish the core of learner autonomy such as the following:

- a. Autonomy means moving the focus from teaching to learning
- b. Autonomy affords maximum possible influence to the learners
- c. Autonomy encourages peer support and cooperation
- d. Autonomy means making use of self/peer assessment
- e. Autonomy requires and ensures 100 percent differentiation

- f. Autonomy can only be practised with student logbooks which are a documentation of learning and a tool of reflection
- g. The role of the teacher as supporting scaffolding and creating room for the development of autonomy is very demanding and very important
- h. Autonomy means empowering students

Furthermore, as some experts disagree with the importance of learner's autonomy, others just realise how this concept may able to change the education system especially in language learning. At universities, where school leavers pursue their further education, andragogy replaces pedagogy. Adult learners learn differently from children and thus, as far as tertiary education is concerned, more responsibility in learning helps the adult learners to be directly involved (Holec, 1981). Furthermore, adult education should become an instrument for arousing an increasing sense of awareness and liberation in man, and in some cases, an instrument for changing the environment itself. From the idea of man as "product of his society", one moves to the idea of man as "producer of his society".

The education system and the language learning system have not improved much in the recent years. Some would say that it has been transformed into a feudal system, where students just nod and agree in silence with what the lecturer says to them. It is also an interesting fact that although the statement by Jane above was published for the first time in 1977, not all scholars expressed their concern about the issue. Perhaps at that time the situation was not conducive enough for them to criticise, not until the society itself has changed. Only in recent years, after a lot of improvement in science and technology that people began to question the roles of teacher and learner. Nonetheless, the statement above puts emphasis on learner autonomy in bringing back the original purpose of education especially in language learning and higher education system.

The need for learner autonomy has been realised by Van Ek in 1975. He states that the society does not have enough resources to provide the level of personal instruction needed by all its members in every level of learning. Alternate approaches to upkeep the learning process has to be executed for learning to take place. These approaches may include those listed in the following paragraph. In this way, the individuals must be able to provide for their own learning needs if they are to acquire the knowledge and skills they want (Crabbe, 1999).

Learning autonomy process can be done both inside and outside the classroom. Benson (2006) states several approaches for outside class learning autonomy process:

- a. Self access
- b. CALL
- c. Distance learning
- d. Tandem learning

- e. Study abroad
- f. Out-of-class learning
- g. Self-instruction

In response to learner autonomy and learning autonomy process, academicians realise that the current model in higher education should change as well. In the conventional perspective, teachers are at the centre of learning with students acting as receptors in the learning process. Academicians have proposed the term student-centred learning since the 1980s to denote the change in higher education institution. Although the pace is slow, the change has taken place in the academia since then. For example, Barr and Tagg (1995) wrote in the mid-1990s that:

A paradigm shift is taking hold of American higher education. In it, at the briefest form, the paradigm that has governed our colleges is this: A college is an institution that exists to provide instruction. Subtly or profoundly we are shifting to a new paradigm: A college is an institution that exists to produce learning. This shift changes everything. It is both needed and wanted.

In essence, the aim of student-centred learning is to provide an environment where students can consciously decide their motivation and action in the learning process without so much influence from the lecturer's instruction.

3. TEACHING TECHNIQUES IN BEL492

In his discussion on the analysis of learner's needs, Little (2000) states that student-centred learning that encourages learner autonomy fulfils the requirement which arises from the use of language form in a multitude of situations that may occur in the social context of the individuals and groups. As the speaking component proposed in this BEL 492 course intends to train the learners in presentation skills, the lessons that take place put great emphasis in the practical aspect of presentation skills from the very beginning of the course and throughout the fourteen weeks of each semester.

There are several workable techniques that have provided self-learning opportunities for degree students at the Faculty of Business Management. To cover all the chapters in Lucas (2004) would be a mammoth task for a busy lecturer or instructor. Coupled with having to give the lecture from 4.00 to 6.00 p.m. after the students have attended and listened to content subject lectures, the English lecturer might have to end up with having students nodding off, not in agreement with him or her, but in fatigue and sleepiness. Therefore, the job (of understanding the principles and art in public speaking) is delegated to the students in an attempt to encourage learner autonomy and active learner participation in learning.

Through the following activities which allow them to take charge of their learning in the BEL 492 Presentation Skills course, students practise directly what they have proposed in their presentations.

4. LESSON OUTLINE

- 1) In a class of 40, the lecturer/instructor divides the students into several groups of 3 or 4 or 5, depending on how much the course is expected to cover.
- 2) Each group is then assigned one topic area or theme that the course needs to cover.
- 3) The topic areas are as in Table 2 below.
- 4) Based on the lesson themes identified by the instructor, the groups are instructed to prepare power point slides, handouts and relevant materials throughout the week. These materials are to be dispensed to every other group in the following class.
 - For power point slides, the learner will utilise them on the LCD.
 - The group has to make and distribute copies of their presentation to the entire class.
 - Relevant materials are to be vetted by the language lecturer before being used.
- 5) For 8 weeks, each group takes turn to present the chapters that they have been assigned to. In sharing with other students what they have read, each student is given the opportunity to practise public speaking/effective presentation strategies before he or she is assessed by the lecturer in the second half of the semester.

Table 2 below indicates the complete lesson themes that need to be covered in the first half of the semester. For this course on presentation skills, there are eight lesson themes. Each group presents one theme. The themes are sufficient to accommodate the number of small groups formed in a big class of 40. The table below shows a sample of the distribution of assignments for one class comprising 8 groups of 5 students.

TABLE 2 - THE LESSON THEMES DISTRIBUTED TO EACH GROUP IN A CLASS OF 40 STUDENTS

No.	Lesson Theme	Group Leader
1	Principles of Speech Communication	A
2	Informative Speech	B
3	Researching topic and collecting materials	C
4	Determining presentation aims and structure	D
5	Preparing the presentation	E
6	Preparation Outline	F
7	Elements of an effective presentation	G
8	Determining and designing visual aids	H

On presentation day a group is called to the front to start presenting on the lesson theme that they have been asked to prepare. The learning experience includes:

1. Teamwork begins early in the course
2. The preparation gives them the opportunity to explore the lesson theme extensively as each person is required to refer to at least three references

3. The students are exposed to the presentation practice using their class lesson to share what they have understood with all their classmates
4. The students gain the opportunity to explore hands-on practice in preparing the PowerPoint slides which are used to complement their presentation.

Each group is given about 10-15 minutes to present the topic area to the audience who are their peers. From this practical aspect, the language learners acquire the experience of presenting a complete work using thematic topics of the lessons. After each presentation, the learners are given debriefing on each of their presentation in terms of their strengths and weakness in relation to their power point slides, grammar, presentation styles and skills.

Such exercise does not mean the lecturer/instructor leaves the classroom without teaching or doing anything. The lecturer in fact, takes on where the group has left off or out. The lecturer indeed adds on to what the group has presented. This approach in increasing learner autonomy has indeed helped reduce the burden faced by the English lecturer, who might have to face a classroom full of wandering or sleepy minds at 5 p.m, particularly on a hot or rainy afternoon.

5. LEARNER FEEDBACK

An evaluation form to find out the effect of increasing learner autonomy in a BEL 492 course class was distributed to the learners. The results are shown in Table 3. The findings from the simple evaluation form indicate learners' opinion on the lesson technique.

TABLE 3 - FEEDBACK FROM STUDENTS

Question	Students' opinion on the lesson technique	YES %	NO %
1	I work with my team well.	98	2
2	I like the lesson theme given to my team.	98	2
3	The preparation of this exercise teaches me a lot about the lesson theme.	100	0
4	My lecturer has been helpful in guiding my team member prepare the presentation.	100	0
5	I am able to present the lesson theme using the power point slides, handouts and related materials effectively.	96	4
6	I am able to catch the attention of my audience.	78	22
7	My audience finds my presentation interesting.	82	18
8	I am confident with my presentation.	63	37
9	I am nervous during the presentation.	98	2
10	I am able to share useful information in the handouts with my audience.	100	0
11	I am able to compile all related materials and handouts in my course portfolio.	88	12
12	I found this approach in learning how to present a speech effective.	100	0

The above evaluation was conducted on the seventh of the fourteen weeks of July-November 2008 semester to discover the students' opinion of the learner-centred approach that was used during the second until the

fifth week of class. A total of 51 students took part in this evaluation exercise. The above feedback provided an indication that almost all students favour this student-centred approach. Indeed, learner autonomy must be encouraged in a language course as 100% of the students agreed that they found this approach in learning how to present a speech effective.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The presentation exercise has been skilfully crafted by the lecturer, not only to minimise the lecturer's workload, but also to encourage learner autonomy. Covertly, the language learners undergo hands-on training in presentation skills; they get to learn to present before they finally present their chosen topics as part of their assessments. Feedback from the language lecturer helps them to improve their presentation skills.

From the preparation stage until the presentation exercise of the lesson, in which students have to conduct a search of materials, data and information, and extract pertinent elements to be collated in their power point slides, the exercise has successfully trained the students to expect what they need to do in preparing for their own presentations. Indeed, such autonomous learning process has given the students a rich learning experience and discovery. They have a directed purpose in reading not only the prescribed textbook, but also other materials that are relevant and interesting. For each lesson taught in the Presentation Skills course, the students have to read beforehand and conduct research with their group members, creating opportunity for them to work in a team and providing them a positive learning experience that gives them a sense of accomplishment. By doing so, the students are taking charge of their learning as they learn not only individually, but also with other group members.

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