



Initiating a Peer Support Centre for English Language Presentations: Issues and Challenges

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on an action research to initiate a peer support centre at the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities for enhancement of English Language presentation skills. The aim of the support centre is to create a platform for limited users of the English Language to receive additional coaching from more competent peers and senior students to carry out simple presentations and discussions in English. A group of 30 low-proficient students participated in this research with the help of 10 senior students as peer support. Peer support is well-known as a cooperative learning strategy that provides peer interaction. It also helps in the development of language. The role of peer support is to boost the mastery of English among low-proficiency students via planned activities. The peer support group received constant coaching and feedback from the team of researchers to sustain their efforts to support the students. This paper ends with the issues and challenges that were faced throughout the study in initiating a peer support centre.

Keywords: English Language, presentation skills, peer support centre, peer support group, limited users of English, interaction

INTRODUCTION

The stiff global competition and challenges in today's workplace have led to a

rising concern and urgency to question ourselves as to whether current Malaysian undergraduates are work-ready and have the extra edge to survive and succeed at the workplace. Research indicates that there is a gap between the skills requirement for entry level employment and the skills of entry-level job applicants (Isarji et al., 2008; Indra Devi, Zaini, & Pramela, 2012). Most jobs today require not only the right knowledge

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but also the much needed soft skills – fluency in language, interpersonal communication, wisdom and maturity. Employers frequently lament that poor English competency has hampered graduates’ ability to communicate effectively at the workplace (Ainol et al., 2011). They find it a challenge to hire young graduates with these qualities and more so graduates with the ability to communicate fairly well in English. With globalisation, the need for effective presentation skills has increased and the English Language is the language chosen for a wide range of purposes for various people from different nationalities (Živković, 2014).

A study conducted by Isarji et al. (2008) revealed that 54% of undergraduate students from six universities in Malaysia were limited users of English, of which 77% were limited users of spoken English and 58% of written English. At the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), a large number of undergraduate students fulfil the requirements set by the respective schools in the faculty. However, it is alarming that many of these students have only managed to obtain Band 1 or 2 in the Malaysian University English Test (MUET). MUET is a widely used benchmark in Malaysian public universities to determine students’ proficiency in English. Students who fall into Band 1 are extremely limited users of the language and are categorised as being hardly able to function in the language. Band 2 students are described as limited users of the language who lack fluency and have limited ability to function in the language.

At the tertiary level, English language classes do cater for enhancement of communication skills where topics include greetings, asking for directions, suggesting, giving opinion and other functions that enable students to role-play in simulated situations. Such practice is useful to provide students with a platform to communicate confidently. At this level too, the links between the university/college and the workplace become clearer and the need to enhance students’ presentational skills becomes more apparent and urgent. As mentioned earlier, these skills are useful for students at the university when they leave the university and enter the workforce.

Students at the tertiary level work on presentations. Prior to the presentations, the students will review and evaluate work by their peers and this is particularly beneficial for the promotion of the autonomous learner. Students may learn from each other by correcting each other in terms of errors and by solving technical problems as they work together. Collaborative learning occurs as they express themselves freely among their peers. Students need skills to prepare, organise and deliver oral presentations; this is also an effective way to make students aware of communication skills. Thus, students learn the elements of positive attitudes from their learning experience. By undergoing the learning experience, students become insightful, improving their higher-order thinking skills as preparing and making successful presentations require high quality of thought (Carroll, 2006).

Although a lot of effort has been put into these English courses, the undergraduates do not have much exposure to practise presentation skills in English as the medium of instruction is in Bahasa Malaysia (Malay Language). There is neither room nor avenue for these students to practise written or oral presentations in the English language. This is because introducing presentations in English for other core courses taught in Bahasa Malaysia is not possible at this time. However, gradual efforts have been made by some lecturers.

It is a fact that the ability to present ideas in front of an audience is a skill much needed by graduates of today. According to Huang, Eslami and Hu (2010), when graduates are unable to convey their message adequately, they may feel uncomfortable as they are using a second language and thus, they may develop language learning anxiety. Krashen (1985) points out that anxiety has an impact on learners' affective filter. This leads to a mental block that impedes learners' full use of comprehensive input. In addition, they are often found to be intimidated and feel threatened when they are required to present in English. To overcome this anxiety, social support and understanding from teachers and peers is needed as they are an important component for making students feel more comfortable, although it may not be possible to entirely eliminate anxiety altogether (Horwitz, 2008).

Huang et al. (2010) too add that peer support is essential to language learners as they may receive support from their classmates not only in the form of friendship

but also in ways that facilitate learning. In addition, many peer-assisted studies have been conducted with native English-speaking students and the results seem to support the positive impact of peer tutoring (Gersten et al., 2007).

This highlights the importance of peer tutoring. Peer tutoring has been used since the eighteenth century in the United Kingdom but in Malaysia its application is limited (Chai & Lin, 2013). Malaysian students very seldom choose to engage, question or interact actively with their peers. Although there are numerous benefits in this approach, students in Malaysia prefer a teacher-centred approach; hence, they develop behaviour that is unsuited to the demands of employment today.

In short, studies integrating peer support groups as a learning tool among a range of learning contexts have shown positive results for both the tutors/mentors and the tutees/mentees. The tutors have to understand the content taught thoroughly or master the needed skills extremely well before sharing with tutees. The experience of the tutors can also benefit the tutees greatly as the barriers that exist may be reduced compared to the anxiety they may feel with the teachers/instructors. Learning then becomes easier, free from anxiety and more autonomous as both learners and teachers become involved in the cognitive processes for their own development.

While peer support is well-known as a cooperative learning strategy that provides peer interaction, at the same time it also helps in the development of language.

Besides this, it also enables students to express themselves with greater confidence when they work in small groups. This has indeed been the impetus and primary motivation to undertake this research project.

On the other hand, Surina and Kamaruzaman (2009) have explained that the classroom context alone cannot meet students' needs as far as learning a language is concerned. They have urged that teachers should consider exploiting the application of mobile phones in improving their teaching. In fact learning often requires social interaction and creating a social learning space need not be physical and/or virtual but should transcend both and facilitate both formal and informal student-centred collaborative learning (Oldenburg, 1991) cited in Williamson & Nodder, 2002). Ehsan Soleimania et al. (2014) maintain that the positive perception of the role of Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL) is in enhancing learners' English through providing them with the opportunity to access various useful materials to carry out different activities in English, and the need or desire to communicate and interact with their friends and lecturers using English cannot be denied.

This returns to the social-constructivist view of learning (Vygotsky, 1962; 1978) that states that students need the stimulus of interaction with each other and in social groups to construct their learning. Consequently, their contact with each other outside the classroom is often where they learn the most. The importance of this type

of learning is increasingly being recognised due to the rapid advancement of technology.

THE STUDY

The aim of initiating the Student Support Centre at the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities (SSC@FSSK) is to facilitate and promote student support for improving self-confidence in language skills. To achieve this, a peer support group was trained to coach the target group of limited users of the English Language to make presentations and hold discussions in English. Planned activities were carried out weekly with the target group to prepare them for competitions organised by the research team.

METHODOLOGY

A total of 30 first-year students who were limited users of English with a MUET Band 1 or 2 who were enrolled at the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, UKM were selected to participate in this study for a semester. They were from various programmes at the faculty, which offers 12 programmes. The selection of students was based on purposive sampling. These students (mentees) were divided into groups of three members each with a student who was a proficient user of the language who had obtained a MUET Band 4 or 5 as mentor.

The 10 mentors in Year 2 were chosen based on their proficiency in English and their confidence level in presentations. They were given training on their role as peer

support by the team of researchers. Several activities were planned as intervention by the peer support and the research team. These included presentations/activities and social interactions to be carried out by the mentors with the target group. Activities also included language games and vocabulary tasks, singing and reviews of movies. In addition, mobile technology was used to connect students with their mentors and lecturers using the WhatsApp application for more interaction.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Since this study was an action research, issues that surfaced throughout the study had to be investigated at different stages of the study. The most important players in this study were the students – the mentees. Recruiting the mentees was quite an easy task at the beginning of this study. During the first few weeks of the semester, the students were very keen as they expressed the desire to improve their English language skills. They were very excited that senior students who were proficient and approachable were going to coach them. However, five weeks into the semester, the numbers had dwindled and this became a challenge as achieving the main aim of the study depended on the mentees, and thus efforts were needed by the research team to sustain their involvement. The peer support (mentors) was on constant touch with the mentees via social media and mobile phone and created a WhatsApp group to keep the students engaged. The lecturers were also members of this group help to monitor and respond to the mentees and mentors.

Assessment was another issue raised by the students. Students preferred a grade for their participation and since no grade was given for involvement they were not happy to continue. These students were also burdened with many other assignments and residential college activities.

Another issue that interfered with their participation was the need to communicate in English through digital media. These digital natives were not comfortable with using digital media/tools to communicate. They were shy or reluctant to respond to messages and share their ideas on WhatsApp. After a few face-to-face sessions with the mentees, they confessed that the reason for not responding to the texts in the WhatsApp group was because the messages had to be in English. They were apprehensive about writing in English as it might reflect their weakness in using English. The students' low proficiency in English was seen as an obstacle as they could not express themselves well although they wanted to participate in conversations. The other reason given was that they preferred not to have lecturers in the WhatsApp group. As a result, the lecturers (research team) were removed from the WhatsApp Group.

Due to this shortcoming, a new plan was executed where new students with similar English proficiency (Band I and 2) were recruited as mentees. More activities were conducted to keep the social interaction going with the peer support or mentors. They included a language camp that was organised for secondary schoolchildren. The rationale for inviting the schoolchildren was to expose the mentees to a new learning

environment where social interaction could be enhanced between them and the schoolchildren. As mentioned earlier, social learning space can be physical or virtual and it plays an important role in learning.

Several language games and activities were planned for this event to involve mentees in interaction with the schoolchildren. The camp included group performances on stage where the mentees had to take part in group work with the schoolchildren. The aim was to encourage a fun environment to motivate the learners and to reduce anxiety. Synergy was established with the university and the school as a community partner. This provided a natural environment for communication and for a different method of learning. This camp enabled learning beyond the classroom and students experienced learning without dependence on teachers and textbooks.

CONCLUSION

This study revealed that in order to initiate an effective support centre, two aspects need to be tackled. One is to motivate and sustain mentees in their involvement in activities. There is a need to strengthen the bond between mentors and mentees. The mentees were weak in the English Language whereas the mentors were proficient. Thus, the mentees faced anxiety in having to communicate with their mentors because they lacked confidence, were afraid to make errors and felt that a gap existed between them and their seniors. Bridging such a gap is the first step towards effective learning. Secondly, for instrumental motivation

there is a need to award credit hours or other benefits to encourage mentees to be more involved in peer-support activities. The administration of the university has to encourage students by acknowledging efforts to join such projects. There should also be effort from the mentors to encourage the mentees to voice out any dissatisfaction or solution to problems to allow them to be part of the decision-making process. On the whole, the effort taken by the 10 mentors as peer support was commendable as they were committed and willing at all times to keep the mentees on track. If the challenges and issues can be overcome, a peer support centre will become a reality in the near future.

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