Enhancing Students’ English Language Oral Communication through an Immersion Programme

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Abstract. As part of its internationalisation policy, the Language Academy of Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM) offers an inbound immersion Summer School Programme called Oral Communication for Future Professionals twice a year to international students. The participants of this programme include students not only from countries like Japan and China but also the local UTM students. The UTM students will act as the ‘host’ or learning buddies to the ‘guest’ students while they are attending the summer school programme in UTM. This paper aims to share the experience of the UTM buddies in assisting their international friends improve their oral communication skills. Data relating to the UTM students’ experiences were gathered from their reflections through journal writing and open-ended reflective questionnaire. The findings showed that majority of the UTM students who became buddies for this programme expressed their gratitude to be given the opportunity to interact orally using English with speakers of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) as chances to converse in English were often not possible with other UTM local students. Apart from that, the UTM students also stated that they had learnt to accommodate speakers of different proficiency level and eliminate language anxiety within themselves. The findings have shed light that through the immersion programme, not only the ‘guest’ students benefitted from the learning process but also the ‘host’ students. To conclude, it is recommended that more students be exposed to immersion programmes such as this in future.

Keywords: English, Immersion Programme, Summer School, EFL, Oral Communication

1 Introduction

As part of its internationalisation policy, the Language Academy of Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM) offers an inbound immersion Summer School Programme called Oral Communication for Future Professionals twice a year to international students. The participants of this programme include students not only from countries like Japan and China but also the local UTM students. The UTM students will act as the ‘host’ or learning buddies to the ‘guest’ students while they are attending the summer school programme in UTM. This paper aims to share the experience of the UTM buddies in assisting their international friends improve their oral communication skills.

2 Oral Communication Skills for ESL / EFL Learners

Oral communication skills are fundamental for ESL and EFL learners. Various research have studied the importance of oral communication skills and ways for improvement. For instance, Lau et al. (2016) stress the necessity of oral communication skills for ESL speakers to sustain significance with the global environment. These skills can be learned formally in the
classroom or informally through social interaction with other speakers. In this study, the interactions are between the UTM buddies and their guests. As stated by Somsai and Intaraprasert (2011), language learners can significantly enhance their communicative competence by developing their ability to use communication strategies (CSs) or other strategies to cope with face-to-face oral communication problems. Despite its importance, there are many factors that hinder L2 speakers from using the target language. In this section, reviews of language anxiety and strategies to improve ESL/EFL learners’ oral communication skills are presented.

2.1 Language anxiety

Language anxiety was popularly introduced by Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986). They studied three major factors that activate speaking anxiety, namely communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation and test anxiety (Toubot et al., 2017). With regards to learning a second or foreign language, Tanveer (2007; Hashemi, 2011) referred anxiety as second or foreign language anxiety. Among factors that caused language anxiety are, as outlined by Hashemi (2011), intrinsic motivators and extrinsic motivators. The intrinsic motivators come from the learner’s ‘own self’ which include learner’s: (1) perception about himself/herself; (2) perception about others; (3) target language communication situations; (4) beliefs about L2/FL learning; and (5) insufficient command of the target language. On the contrary, extrinsic motivators involve factors outside the learner. For instance, different social and cultural environments, social status of the speaker and the interlocuter, power relation and gender. Being aware of these factors would help ESL/EFL teachers to guide their students on how to overcome their fears in using the target language (L2).

2.2 Improving oral communication skills

In order to achieve effective communication, Hymes (1971) and Canale and Swain (1980) posit that speakers must possess communicative competence. There are several factors that influence the speaking competence of learners namely, cognitive, linguistic and affective (Derakhsan, et al., 2016). Lau et al. (2016) suggest that social interaction is one of the strategies to help improve learners’ English language oral communication skills. They also suggest that through the communication with other speakers, it enables ESL speakers to improve their fluency of spoken English as well as their vocabulary level. Some examples of activities which are found in universities in Malaysia include Global Outreach Programmes and Students Exchange Programmes. Additionally, Somsai and Intaraprasert (2011) found 24 coping strategies of ESL learners in which the primary two are: (1) strategies for conveying a message to the interlocutor; and 2) strategies for understanding the message. Nteli & Zafiri (2017) found that immersion programme is useful to improve English language oral skills.

3 Methodology

Twenty-nine UTM buddies were involved in the study. They comprised of 22 males and 7 females. They came from various faculties such as engineering, science and education. Some of these buddies were senior buddies, which meant that they had been involved in the summer school programme with Language Academy for a number of times while several others were
new buddies. Data relating to the UTM students’ experiences were gathered from their reflections through journal writing and open-ended reflective questionnaire. The questionnaire was distributed at the end of the programme. On the other hand, the buddies were asked to write their journal daily. Once the programme completed, they would hand in their journals to the summer school organizing team. This paper will only focus on the: (1) main reasons the UTM buddies joined the programme; (2) impact of the programme on their confidence to speak in English; and (3) impact of the programme on their views of people from different language ability and cultural background.

4 Findings and Discussion

Based on the findings, there were seven primary reasons why the UTM buddies joined the summer school programme. They stated that the programme offers them opportunities:
(a) to gain new experience interacting with foreigners;
(b) to enhance their English language oral communication skills;
(c) to make new friends locally and internationally;
(d) to widen networking;
(e) to know other people’s culture;
(f) to improve self-confidence and self-esteem; and
(g) to improve soft skills.

In terms of the impact of the programme on their confidence level in speaking English, the findings revealed that all the participants had shown improvement compared to before. Furthermore, in relation to the impact of the programme on their views of people from different language ability and cultural background, most of them found the experience interacting with the foreign students as unique and interesting. It also broadened their way of thinking in perceiving different cultures. Furthermore, the programme had trained them to accommodate learners of different language ability. Even though they were dealing with the students from the lowest proficiency of English in Asia (Roger, n.d.) and many of them were incompetent speakers (Cutrone, 2014), they were able to ‘scaffold’ the ‘host’ learners in the immersion programme as in line with the earlier research by Kahar et al. (2015). The UTM buddies stated they were also able to eliminate the language anxiety within themselves. The findings of this study have shed light that through the immersion programme, not only the ‘guest’ students benefitted from the learning process but also the ‘host’ students.

5 Conclusions and Recommendations

Meeting and communicating with people of different cultures is not easy. The study has shown that by exposing the ‘host’ students to different groups of ESL/EFL learners, they could improve themselves tremendously in terms of their oral communication skills as well their confidence level to speak the target language (L2). To conclude, it is recommended that more students be exposed to immersion programmes such as this in future.

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References


