

DEVELOPING ENGLISH COMMUNICATION SKILLS THROUGH SELF-PRACTICE METHOD

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ABSTRACT

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Today, the English language is widely used throughout the world both as a medium for written and oral communications. It is one of the official subjects in our country's formal educational system. There are various ways and methods in acquiring English language: through natural development as a mother tongue, formal classroom lectures and self-development learning. However, specifically for the oral communication, the only way to acquire is to speak and continue to practice the language. Hence, this research study is to experiment a self-practice method that may provide an effective way for students to develop their English oral communication skill successfully. The self-practice method is done in a small group among close friends to enable students to learn more comfortably, and confidently. The results of the experiment showed the self-practice method may be effective if the program is assessed academically with lecturer-facilitator support.

Keywords: *Communication skill, close friends, facilitator*

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1. Introduction

The English language which was the *lingua franca* of the British commonwealth countries in the past is now becoming more important in the global scene. This is due to the rapid progress of globalization where goods, services, information, and people are moving freely across borders. The process of globalization that increases the interaction among nations required constant communication to get things done. One of the common languages to enable easier communication is English. Hence, the demand for knowledge workers to be proficient in English language particularly oral communication skill (including speaking, listening and thinking herein refer as communication skills) is on the rise throughout the world. The demand continued to increase due to the growing exposure of e-commerce to the global environment where English is the main medium of communication. This phenomenon is also felt among the Malaysian society as Malaysia is riding on the globalization tide. In Malaysia, the English language is part of the school syllabus in primary, secondary and tertiary level. Basically, most Malaysian who has gone through the formal education system has at least acquired some basic foundations of the English language. This group can be classified as English literate. However, most of this English literate youth are having difficulties when communicating in English at work or in public. One of the main reasons is the lack of oral practice in the language. It seems that many young Malaysians today, especially the undergraduate students (who are the focus group of this paper) can write better than they speak. The implication is that, educators must improve their English communication ability in line with their written standard. The authors opined that there is no benefit to keep on providing English courses or seminars to improve the undergraduate students' English standard without continuous development in oral communication. Hence, oral communication in English needs to be enhanced to the level of written English in order to fully develop an undergraduate student's overall English communication skills.

In view of the urgent need for students to improve their English communication skills, the authors designed a self-practice method that provides an opportunity for them to communicate in English. A self-practice method is suggested in order to achieve learning and cost effectiveness. Communication skills can only be acquired through practice. Hence, it would be more practical to learn through practice rather than attending lectures trying to understand theories. The underlying objective of this action research is to experiment the effectiveness of the proposed methodology and provide a platform for undergraduate students to practise their spoken English in the process.

2. The program

In education, there are various methods of learning that can develop students' knowledge. Some of the most common ones are lecture, demonstration, discussion, active-participatory method, open learning [eg. distance/e-learning] (Tony, 1991). However, the recent emerging trend of shifting teaching techniques oriented towards learning methodology focus has gathered increasing momentum. One of the effective learning methods which is suitable for students in developing their English is Experiential Learning method. It allows experiencing, and reflection (Kolb et al., 1974). Leslie echoed similar comment that individual learning started from experiencing something by action and feeling (Leslie, 1996), while Tony argued that "feelings are part of any experience which if explored and analysed, can help increase self-insight" (Tony, 1991). Another researcher who supported experiential learning that can help solve real life or work-related problems is Revan (1983). Most importantly, Blanchard et al. (2004) claimed that experiential learning enables learners to practise their newly found skill. Lo

(2005) summed up that “Preparation and Persistent Practice Produce Positive Performance” (Lo, 2005)

The commencement of a program required a small group of students who are interested to develop their English communication skills. The group size ranges from 10-15 persons who are well acquainted and close to each other. The group is formed through students’ own-initiative after being briefed on the objectives and structure of the program. There is no limit for the number of groups running concurrently and each group is encouraged to practise 2 hours per week for at least three months. During the practice sessions, each member of the group will have the chance to communicate through various role plays. A group’s participant-facilitator is appointed for every session to conduct the program. According to Tony, the greater the involvement of learners in the learning process, the greater the learning (Tony, 1991). It is advisable to have a third party facilitator, preferably a lecturer to facilitate the program in order to provide better guidance. However, the program required students’ independent learning because it is common for students to chitchat and communicate with each other on informal matters without the presence of a lecturer. The students are allowed to be flexible on the program structure and employs creativity to make the program more interesting and fun. Ultimately, the students are expected to develop their communication skills as well as building their self-confidence and interpersonal skills through regular interaction (Please refer details of program in Appendix I).

3. Methodology

This experimental study involved group interview, discussion, feedbacks and performance observation during the workshop practice. There is no statistical tool applied to test the results as the experiment is a real time “ask-response” development process. A sample of 200 students from marketing program was targeted. Sometime in June 2004, the students were informed through poster advertisements, flyers distributed in class and direct announcement of the program. A number of students took the initiative to form their groups with a total of 7 groups ranging from 10 -15 members per group reaching up to 17 participants. The total number of students participated is 94 which is about 47% of the targeted sample. All the participants possessed SPM certificate with at least a pass in the English language. Most groups comprise of male and female except Group 4 with 100% male participants, Group 6 with 14 female participants (Please refer details in Table 1).

Table 1: Demographic results

	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4	Group 5	Group 6	Group 7
Gender:							
Male	7	9	12	15	3	0	5
Female	3	6	5	0	7	14	8
Total	10	15	17	15	10	14	13
Ethnic group							
Bumiputra (indigenous)	4	15	0	15	9	14	0
Chinese	6	0	17	0	0	0	13
Indian	0	0	0	0	1	0	0

Total	10	15	17	15	10	14	13
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The group leaders were interviewed during the process of forming their groups. Three structured questions were posed during the interview which lasted about one hour. The responded answers were recorded on the spot as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Questions asked

Question 1	What initiate you to join this self-practice program?
Answer	All the group leaders answered that they wanted to learn and improve their English communication skills.
Question 2	Do you speak English in your daily life?
Answer	More than 70% said seldom except 30% responded that they only speak to lecturers and friends who don't understand their respective mother tongue.
Question 3	Why don't you speak and communicate in English with friends?
Answer	All of them gave similar answers related to shyness, afraid to make mistake, and be ridiculed at and lack of confidence.

Based on the seven selected groups and the abovementioned three preliminary questions feedback, the experiment was carried out with the following assumptions:

1. The students prefer to learn in small group among close friends; and
2. The students feel more comfortable by learning in a less intimidated environment with less pressure.

Prior to the commencement of the project, all the groups were briefed on the objectives, structures, benefits and ultimate success goals. They were also given a motivating & briefing session to take off their self-practice learning smoothly.

4. Results

Most of the groups practised successfully and enjoyably for the first and second sessions, and according to the structure. The group leaders were once again interviewed immediately for their progress, which was reported in Table 3.

Table 3: Questions asked

Question 1	How do you find by learning in a small group among close friends?
Answer	60% of them responded that they felt more comfortable, less nervous and not afraid to make mistake while 40% still felt a bit nervous and afraid to make mistake due to some un familiar members in the group.
Question 2	What do you experience from this program so far?
Answer	85% of them said it could develop one's confidence in speaking especially in front of people but not in improving English standard. The remaining 15% commented it couldn't improve their English.
Question 3	What do you think of the effectiveness of the self-practice method?
Answer	40% responded that it required self-initiative which is challenging. 60% just said it was fun and without pressure from academic peers.

After the first two sessions, all the groups were left to on their own. The authors only communicated with the group via sms, handphone, or surprise visit when they sought for

helps. Unfortunately, most of the groups started to slow down when left alone without the authors' presence. It was also partly due to the students' tight schedule in preparing for the year-end examination. Two groups had conducted the sessions for four times, three groups practised three times and the other two groups literally stopped after the second time. Please refer Table 4.

Table 4: Progress report

	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4	Group 5	Group 6	Group 7
No. of session Conducted.	4	4	2	3	2	3	3

In view of the slow down, the authors interviewed the group leaders again based on the questions as shown in Table 5.

Table 5: Questions asked

Question 1	Why do you stop from practising?
Answer	85% of the group leaders said most of their members were busy with their academic assignments. 15% responded that his group members were losing interest.
Question 2	Why don't you make time to practise?
Answer	All of them replied that this program is not their priority in their curriculum. It doesn't really compel them to continue.
Question 3	What can make you continue to come and practise in the program?
Answer	100% responded that if it were assessed under the curriculum with marks as well as to be facilitated by lecturers.

5. Discussion

This experimental study generated some positive results as expected. It proved that the students learned more comfortably in small group together with close friends. It reduced intimidation, shyness, and nervousness. In the process, they became more confident in learning which in turn gradually improved their speaking and communication abilities. However, the challenging part may be the general English enhancement as there was no English instructor present to correct the mistakes made by the students. Nevertheless, learning English theory is not the purpose of this program. Its objective is to develop students' oral communication ability. Majority of the students who participated in this experimental research give the feedback that self-practice method is quite challenging (though they took the initiative) because it requires self-motivation. Most of them still can't reinforce the learning activity toward their ultimate goals perhaps due to their commitment level. Nevertheless, they confessed that if the program is assessed under their academic curriculum they will be more committed to it. They also requested a lecturer-facilitator to guide them to keep them going. In other words, the discontinuation of the program doesn't reflect the failure of the self-practice method but merely lack of motivation. The two motivational factors as identified are official assessment of the program and availability of lecturer-facilitator support. Hence, to a certain extent, the

experimental study proved that the students could develop their English communication skills through the self-practice method.

6. Limitations

This voluntary project is initiated by the authors to help marketing students. However, due to zero budget and shortage of manpower, the research project was conducted in a small scale and resource-constraints. The authors are aware that the sample may not be reflective of the total population and the methodology may be too simple but the experimental study allows immediate real life experience feedback from the participants and most important it does serve as a platform for actual practicing.

7. Conclusion

To sum up, this research study provides a fundamental basis for us to explore further to solve the English communication problem of young Malaysians. It is suggested that:

1. To continue the group experiment study by establishing more groups especially with different ethnic backgrounds; and
2. To conduct detail empirical study on student's behaviour and attitude towards self-practice or self-learning method.

The authors believe that the abovementioned follow-through researches' outcome would not only develop an effective self-practice method English communication program but it could be used as a guide for other similar skills building program as well.

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APPENDIX I

SAMPLE

Session Activities

<i>Time</i>	<i>Activity</i>	<i>Role Player</i>
10.00 am	MC Introduction.	To be appointed.
10.00 – 10.20 am	Roundtable Speaking. Eg. Reading, Story telling, Jokes sharing. Exchange of new words.	Each member must make one contribution by speaking.
10.20 – 10.45 am	Role Play Conversation. Eg. Drama in the market, office, shopping complex etc.	All members must form 2-3 persons sub-group to practice the drama conversation.
10.45 – 11.00 am	Break.	Rest.
11.00 – 11.10 am	Times Lingual Exploration.	All members to learn from audio-visual system.
11.10 – 11.30 am	Discussion forum.	All members to discuss & exchange view and ideas.
11.30 am	Announcement/End.	Plan for next meeting.

(Adopted from Lo, B. (2005). *Communicator's circle – The easy and effective method to improve your speaking skills*, 1st Edition, Malaysia: Wealth Life Resources).