

Establishing Effective Learning Activities to Facilitate Undergraduate Professional Interaction Course

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Abstract

English for Professional Interaction is a course that was designed to prepare final year undergraduates for communicative demands in the workplace. As communication is an essential element in professional socialization, undergraduates preparing to complete their tertiary education are required to do this course to develop their interpersonal skills through communicative language activities modelled on situations in the workplace. However, novice language teachers who lack workplace-based inter-professional practice, face challenges not only in developing teaching content, but also in aligning teaching materials with workplace contexts. This paper explores the utility of developing a variety of methods and materials drawn primarily from sources for improving core interpersonal skills alongside communicative proficiency to help novice ESL teachers/facilitators. Novice ESL teachers refer to teachers in service with less than 5 years of teaching experience. Taking a conceptual approach, it provides insights for content development and illuminates the importance of bridging the gap between university-based inter-professional education and workplace-based inter-professional practical experience for L2 novice teachers. Obliquely, it helps L2 undergraduates develop real value for language and proper outlook on communication.

Keywords: *interaction, professional, conceptual, workplace-based, undergraduates*

INTRODUCTION

English for Professional Interaction is a course that was designed to prepare final year undergraduates for communicative demands in the workplace. At the end of the course, students should be able to:

1. Demonstrate social skills when maintaining interactions in the workplace.
2. Explain verbally critical incidents concerning interpersonal communication issues in the workplace and communicate ideas through clearly written email.
3. Display positive values and attitudes during professional interaction in the workplace.

(Akademi Pengajian Bahasa, 2017, p.1)

As communication is an essential element in professional socialization, undergraduates preparing to complete their tertiary education are required to do this course to develop their interpersonal skills through communicative language activities modelled in the workplace. The aim is to equip students with the communicative skills necessary to function in the workplace. This is a fundamental skill for graduates to have as it determines their employability. Dass (2013) aptly points this out in her study when she wrote that as the world becomes more globalized, there is a much greater need now than ever before for global citizens to master the English language as it has become an important world language and acquisition of it means easier access to the advancement in various fields such as business and science. She posits in another research that the shift towards student-centred pedagogies would have a more positive impact on learning (Dass & Ferguson, 2012). It is this realisation that has prompted many language faculties in the local universities in the country to develop courses such as this. Hence, the course description reads:

“This course aims to equip students with core communication skills for both interpersonal and workplace communication which include verbal and non-verbal communication skills, conversational skills, listening skills, clarifying skills and reflection skills. By introducing students to language functions essential for developing core communication skills, the course is designed to develop their interaction skills specifically in the areas of working in groups and teams, questioning and negotiating, problem solving and decision making in a wide range of professional tasks and interpersonal contexts.”

(Akademi Pengajian Bahasa, 2017, p.1)

PROBLEM STATEMENT

As much as the undergraduates are to be taught the different principles of professional interaction, the nature of their future positions can determine the content of these discourses. However, novice ESL teachers themselves may lack workplace-based inter-professional practice (Ward et al., 2017). They face challenges not only in developing teaching content, but also in aligning teaching materials with workplace-based contexts (Walsh, 2006). For this matter, it is beneficial to explore the teaching-learning process of this course.

The objectives of the study include the following:

1. To provide insights for content development of the Professional Interaction course.
2. To illuminate the importance of bridging the gap between university-based inter-professional education and workplace-based inter-professional practical experience for novice ESL teachers/facilitators.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This paper explores the utility of developing a variety of methods and materials drawn primarily from literature on teaching strategies and communication needs in the workplace that could assist novice ESL teachers/facilitators in delivering the course more effectively. The following paragraphs will further review some studies on workplace communication, English proficiency and effective teaching strategies.

Recent studies have identified good communication skills as an essential requirement in the workplace. Workplace communication has been given much emphasis in research and this is evidenced by an increasing number of studies in this area (Lam, Cheng & Khong, 2014). Lam et al. (2014) further note that the globalised workplace of today, which is intercultural and multilingual, making good communication skills a fundamental requirement for all workers. Communication skills as a whole are also commonly known as soft skills, which have been interpreted as intangible traits, attitudes and behaviours that could be used to improve one's job performance and aid career advancement (Robles, 2012; Parsons, 2008).

It has been generally agreed that effective communication skills in a workplace include good oral communication, writing skills and interpersonal skills or soft skills. In her study conducted among 104 Silicon Valley employers, Stevens (2005) discovered that employers were dissatisfied with oral and written communication skills in new employees and suggested that students receive better training in these areas. The employers also highlighted the need for students to acquire skills in using electronic media and in interpersonal skills such as 'self-expression and promoting a positive self-image'. (p. 2). The acknowledgement of the importance of communication skills at work seems to have increased in the past 20 years. Among the notable attributes pointed out by these studies are oral communication skills, problem-solving capability, motivation, ability to follow instructions, listening and conversational skills (Maes et al, 1997, cited in Stevens, 2005). More recently, Robles (2012) surveyed the critical soft skills (communication skills) sought after by executives in the business field. The findings showed that integrity and communication (defined as oral and writing skills) were the top two skills, followed by courtesy, responsibility and interpersonal skills.

The ability to communicate well in English is a highly valued skill in workplaces globally. In the Malaysian context, communication in English at workplaces, especially in the privatesector, is a vital requirement. Most business institutions and multinationals perceive communication in English as an important skill (Kassim & Ali, 2010). Crosling & Ward (2002) furthermore observed that low English proficiency and a deficiency in oral communication skills would be an obstacle for graduates to be employed. In this respect, they recommend that additional English classes be provided for them. As such, there has been an increase in the demand for adequate training in English communication skills for prospective employees of workplaces where English is the predominant language used. Dass (2013) points out that there have been great efforts undertaken by the government to tackle the decline in English language proficiency among Malaysian graduates from local universities, who are facing a high unemployment rate due to their lack of competence in the English language. The researcher adds that studies conducted show that the most frequently cited reason by employers for their unwillingness to employ these graduates is their lack of the minimum language skill necessary, to function in the English language. Thus, the role is of the language instructor in tertiary is undeniable.

Just like other fresh graduates, novice ESL teachers in tertiary education who lack workplace based inter-professional practice face challenges not only in developing teaching content but also in integrating interpersonal skills into their classroom practice. Therefore, novice language teachers who are trained in pedagogy as their subject matter, similarly, require training in communication skills that would prepare them to be integrated in their workplaces. Cooper and Rixon (2010) contend that any newly qualified facilitator or employee would struggle to become established in the culture within any organization. Hence in the university too, such novices must be trained to enable them to create a balance in their operational duties and professional development to impart knowledge.

Undeniably, novice English language teachers, instructors or facilitators in tertiary institutions in Malaysia experience a major transition from the educational institution to the real classroom. They also face a further challenge when they need to impart communication and interpersonal skills as they may not be cognizant of the of the attributes required of graduates in the real workplace. Nevertheless, there is a substantial body of literature that highlights these needs in studies and reviews of employer needs and the importance of interpersonal communication, which could provide insights and strategies for novice facilitators (Harvey, 2000; Bell, 2010; Ward et al, 2017) .

In terms of pedagogy, there are two main fields of English Language Teaching (ELT) that merge the teaching of English and communication skills: Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and English for Specific Purposes (ESP). In the 1970s, the concept of communicative language teaching (CLT) was introduced (Savignon, 2003). In this approach the focus is put on the learner's communicative needs. Two principles of CLT that would be relevant for facilitators as underlined by Berns (1990, p. 4) are:

1. Language is based on the view that language is communication. Language is seen as a social tool for making meaning by users, either orally or in writing.
2. Language use is recognised as serving the ideational, interpersonal and textual functions and is related to the development of the learner's competence in each.

The other area of language research that is relevant to the teaching of communicative skills would be English for Specific Purposes or ESP. It focuses on the development of specific skills and language needs of a learner for an occupation or activity (Stevens, 1988). Anthony (1997) added that ESP courses are designed with the idea of using English for real communication. Using ESP as a basis, communication-based content can be developed for various disciplines including business, science and pharmacy as seen in the works of Graham & Beardsley (1986), Mercer-Mapstone & Kuchel (2016) and Devimeenakshi & Tyagi (2013).

There are clearly sufficient pedagogical resources for the novice facilitators to base their teaching of interpersonal skills and workplace interaction upon. It is also vital that teachers exploit technology and the internet to deliver this course as they have now become an integral part of higher education The following section discusses how facilitators may design materials and plan their teaching in order to be aligned with the learning outcomes of the course.

CONTENT DEVELOPMENT

Principles and Teaching Strategies

Activities provided for undergraduates during their courses need to be tailored to various workplace expectations. However, it is not uncommon to find that some facilitators lack the work experience in industrial and corporate sectors as they have been immersed in the academic culture. In overcoming this gap between facilitator experience and industrial requirement for communicative skills, there are some principles that facilitators need to adhere to, so that teaching and learning becomes an effective experience for learners. These principles include:-

1. Developing effective educational course content that are engaging and customising it to the students' needs.
2. Understanding that decisions affecting the success of a course take place well before the first day of class.
3. Ensuring careful planning is done at the course design stage as this not only makes teaching easier and more enjoyable but also facilitates student learning.
4. Implementing the course design on a day-to-day level once planning is complete.

In the initial preparation of materials or content, facilitators of the English for Professional Interaction (EPI) could apply the principles of ESP which requires the determination of the learner's needs. This begins with the identification of the target group's demographic, English proficiency, attitude and motivation towards taking this course (Harvey & Horzella, 1977). Other factors to consider would be the performance expected of the students, the time available for course completion and the position of English in the local culture. Secondly, lecturers should design teaching materials in relation to the formal and functional role of the target language as specified in the syllabus. Here, the facilitators could align the course learning objectives with the sequence of the course outline when preparing their material. For example, topic 3.0, 'Language forms and functions for informal workplace interaction' could be aligned with the objective of 'demonstrate social skills when maintaining interactions in the workplace', using the role-play method. (Course Information APB, UiTM 2017).

With regards to the principles 2 and 3 mentioned above, the facilitators could first consider the basic teaching approaches suggested by Killen (2012) as summarised below:

Lecture or Direct Instruction

It is traditionally the use of straightforward, explicit teaching techniques, usually to teach a specific skill. A common approach is a teacher-directed method, which sees the teacher or lecturer standing in front of a classroom and presenting the information.

Discussion

This is a straightforward activity of having a conversation for the purpose of understanding or debating a subject or an issue.

Small Group Work

In class activity, it helps to involve students in their own learning, make course topics come alive, deepens students' knowledge about a topic, and can develop particular skills.

Cooperative Learning

In this learning platform, the learners are accountable to others as well as taking responsibility to the members in the group. It is useful to have heterogeneous grouping which create richness in contents presented. Social skills can be taught directly with positive interdependency.

Problem Solving

An activity to help student evaluate a problem and to make decisions. It requires analytical and critical thinking skills.

Student Research

Students are involved in a systematic investigative process employed to increase or revise current knowledge by discovering new facts. The significance leads to solving problems or developing new processes, products or techniques.

Role Play

Communication involves the way one interacts with customers and business associates. Using role play can teach future employees proper communication techniques.

Case Study

It is an account of an activity, event or problem that contains a real or hypothetical situation. This includes the complexities one would encounter in the workplace. Case studies are used to help one see how the complexities of real-life influence decisions.

Student Writing

An academic activity that explores the thinking and writing skills that help students improve their language interaction using some practical approaches.

Successful Approaches to Teaching of Workplace Communication and Interaction

Beyond this, several practitioners have researched and reported their experience with novel teaching paradigms and approaches for delivering communication skills courses to prepare undergraduates for the workplace. The highlights of their work are summarised below.

i) Learner-Centered Teaching

Smart et al, (2012) examined the use of inductive instruction with a student-centered approach in a college-level business communication course. The topic chosen was 'Introduction of Communication' which was traditionally conducted in a teacher-centered lecture mode. When the delivery mode was changed to bring in more participation from the students, the researchers noted that students were engaged in meaningful conversations about communicative practices and stated that they had a better understanding of communication as a whole. Smart et al (2012) concluded that this approach had resulted in an enhanced teaching and learning environment where both instructor and students are 'empowered to question and to make meaning' (p.402). A study by Dass (2013) shows students welcomed the relatively new experience provided by this more interactive student centred pedagogy. They generally found it beneficial in their learning and enhanced their understanding. Teachers also expressed support for this model of learning, but differed in their approach at the level of implementation and the degree to which they were able to sustain the model within their classes. This interactive model of teaching, which differed vastly from the transmission model they had been accustomed to, posed challenges at varying degrees for the teachers.

ii) Role-playing to enhance oral communication skills

Graham & Breadsley (1986) conducted a study on an experimental course in communication for non-native English speaking pharmacy students. Basing their course design on ESP and content-area ESL, the course was taught by ESL teachers and pharmacy lecturers. The teachers showed videotaped dialogues, acted out simulated situations and provided students with common expressions, idioms and relevant language features that would be commonly used by pharmacists when dealing with customers. Overall, they found that students performed better on a Speaking Proficiency test at the end of the experiment as compared to before the study. A research on classroom learning by Dass (2013) had many student participants in the lesson admitting that the only lively part of the lesson that day was the role play enacted by a few students from teacher prepared text.

iii) Cooperative learning

To enhance interpersonal skills and communication skills among undergraduate accounting students, Ballantine & McCourt Larres (2009) compared the effects of simple group work and cooperative learning using two cohorts of final year accounting students. While simple group formation does not involve any planned structure or instruction, cooperative learning groups are structured so that they achieve five criteria: positive interdependence, individual accountability, face-to-face interaction, the development of interpersonal small group skills and group processing. All these are achieved through guidance of the instructor. Their findings showed that the cooperative learning group developed better verbal communication skills, listening skills and tolerance skills among accounting students.

Dass (2013) concludes that it is the role of the teacher to facilitate collaborative learning with appropriate questioning techniques that will encourage higher achieving students to think aloud and talk about how they derived at a conclusion or answer. She explains that the description of their ideas and positions to the weaker students offers rich conceptual clarification which in turn pushes them to analyse their own thinking. As such, teachers with practical classroom approaches will be able to utilise this approach to produce a steady learning outcome for learners of different abilities.

It is thus recommended that the L2 novice facilitators for EPI do their research and preparation not only by going through the course outline but by actively reviewing past studies such as those mentioned above to gain more insights into lesson design and approaches that they might use in the classroom.

CONCLUSION

Taking a conceptual approach, the strategies of teaching and learning as reviewed in this paper can provide insights for novice ESL teachers in the content development. With this fundamental knowledge, the facilitators under study would be better prepared to design various activities catered for interpersonal communication and interaction in their classrooms. Hence, with this understanding it highlights the importance of bridging the gap between university-based inter-professional education and workplace-based inter-professional practical experience for L2 novice facilitators who are appointed to teach the course. Not only do the strategies benefit the facilitators for content development, but they also help the undergraduates develop real value for language and proper outlook on communication.

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