

Spoken Skills, Communication Apprehension and Collaborative Learning

COMPÉTENCES ORALES, APPRÉHENSION DE COMMUNICATION ET APPRENTISSAGE EN COLLABORATION

Nazira Osman¹

Surina Nayan²

Mahani Mansor³

Anis Maesin⁴

Latisha Asmaak Shafie⁵

Abstract: The study examines the usage of collaborative learning on second language learners' spoken skills and whether it reduces learners' communication apprehension. Two groups of UiTM Perlis diploma students were divided into control and experimental groups. The experimental group was given a one-month treatment of collaborative activities. Pre-test and post-test were conducted to both groups using UiTM Speaking test format. Personal Apprehension (PRCA -24) questionnaire was also administered to both groups during the pre-test and post-test to check their level of communication apprehension. The results of the study show that there was an improvement in experimental group's spoken skills and a considerable reduction in participants' level of communicative apprehension after the treatment. The outcome of the study able to develop further understanding of what is involved in collaborative learning and works as an eye-opener to the possibilities of improving students' spoken skills via collaborative activities.

Key words: Spoken skills; Collaborative learning; Communicative apprehension; Second language learners

Résumé: L'étude examine les effets de l'apprentissage en collaboration sur les compétences orales des apprenants d'une deuxième langue et s'il réduit les appréhensions de communication des apprenants. Deux groupes d'étudiants au diplôme de l'UiTM Perlis ont été divisés en groupes de contrôle et d'expérimentation.

¹Academy of Language Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA Perlis, Malaysia. naziraosman@perlis.uitm.edu.my

²Academy of Language Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA Perlis, Malaysia. surinana@perlis.uitm.edu.my

³Academy of Language Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA Perlis, Malaysia. mahani@perlis.uitm.edu.my

⁴Academy of Language Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA Perlis, Malaysia. anismaesin@perlis.uitm.edu.my

⁵Academy of Language Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA Perlis, Malaysia. ciklatisha@perlis.uitm.edu.my

* Received 11 May 2010; accepted 24 May 2010

Le groupe expérimental a eu des activités de collaboration pendant un mois. Le pré-test et le post-test ont été réalisés par les deux groupes en utilisant le format de test oral de l'UiTM. Le questionnaire de l'appréhension personnelle (PRCA -24) a également été donné aux deux groupes au cours du pré-test et du post-test afin de vérifier leur niveau de l'appréhension de communication. Les résultats de l'étude montrent qu'il y a eu une amélioration de compétences orales dans le groupe expérimental et une réduction considérable du niveau de l'appréhension de communication des participants après le traitement. Les résultats de l'étude sont en mesure de développer une meilleure compréhension de ce qui est impliqué dans l'apprentissage en collaboration et fonctionne comme un révélateur des possibilités d'améliorer les compétences orales des élèves via les activités de collaboration.

Mots-Clés: compétences orales; apprentissage en collaboration; appréhension de communication; apprenants d'une deuxième langue

1. INTRODUCTION

When a student is asked to write an essay of 200 words in length, he/she could easily come up with one that is longer. However, when the student is asked to speak for two to three minutes on a topic in a group discussion or in front of the class, he/she may face some difficulties in expressing his/her opinions. The student may feel anxious to express his/her views verbally in contrast to writing an essay whereby he/she can eloquently express his/her views on an assigned topic. Some students' apprehension towards speaking activities in class may pose a problem for them as some course assessments require them to verbally express their opinions as for example in the MUET (Malaysian University English Test) speaking examination and a course in public speaking.

McCroskey (1977) as cited in Holbrook (1987) defines communication apprehension (CA) as "an individual level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons." The causes of the apprehension may stem from situational settings (for example, public speaking) and the individual's personality traits (shyness, quietness and reticence).

Thus, a classroom that poses less threat to students should be created in order to alleviate the students' anxiety towards speaking. Some of the collaborative activities in the classroom are aimed at getting the students to be more participative in a group discussion and making them less anxious in expressing their point of views. Collaborative learning in a classroom can be defined as classroom learning techniques which require students to work together in groups or pairs in learning tasks (Colbeck et al., 2000).

In language learning, Harmer (1991) indicates that collaborative activities enable students to optimize opportunities to interact and cooperate with one another as they work towards a common goal. Delucchi (2006) agrees that regardless of students' different language proficiencies and personalities, they seem to work better in groups because they can exchange more opinions and ideas. This is because they will feel less anxious than when they work alone. Krashen (1988) also proposes that learning English in a less apprehensive setting can result in effective learning.

The aim of this study is to discover to what extent collaborative language activities in the classroom help to enhance students' spoken skills and reduce the learners' apprehension towards speaking in a group discussion or any speaking activities inside their classroom. It is expected that learners' spoken skills will improve and level of anxiety is reduced when collaborative activities are introduced in the classroom.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Collaborative teaching and learning do play important roles in enhancing students' learning. To collaborate means to practice within a 'safe' environment which is made up of an accepting and diverse group of people who have a common interest or issue and these people need to make 'discoveries' or find possible solutions to tasks given. In conducting any collaborative classroom, lecturers should incorporate these four characteristics. They are:

- Shared knowledge among teachers and students.
- Shared authority among teachers and students.
- Teachers as mediators.
- Heterogenous groupings of students.

According to Tinzmann et al. (1990), the first two characteristics (a & b) capture the changing relationships between teachers and students, the third (c) characterizes teacher's new approaches to instruction and the last one (d) addresses the composition of a collaborative classroom. Since collaborative classroom is different from traditional classroom, it tends to be noisier. This is because students are given the space to work with their friends in completing tasks given to them. When working in group, definitely they tend to express their views and at the same time argue if they have different stands from their friends.

In learning, students should be given opportunities to explore and share their ideas with the rest of their classmates. It is fine if these students make noise provided that the noise made doesn't disturb others learning next door. Therefore, students should be exposed to working in groups collaboratively in order to enhance their speaking ability. These students should then be provided with the activities that require them to work collaboratively in groups. When these students work collaboratively in their groups, they tend to experience disagreement and conflict over certain goals, tasks and values. When they are dissatisfied about their friends' ideas, they tend to challenge them. Dirkx (1998) finds that at this stage, participation may increase dramatically and members who rarely talk before may begin to express their opinions. When this thing happens, communication takes place among them and the 'shy' participations who are reluctant to participate at the beginning of the session will be motivated to defend on their own argument and at the same time try to be more involved in the discussion.

As most of us are aware, students have different family and education background and as a result of that they will have different levels of thinking. Students who are well exposed to English language will have little problems communicating their ideas in English doing collaborative work as to those who come from rural areas with lack of exposure to the language. Since they have different types of intelligences, they should be encouraged to work collaboratively in their speaking activities.

Gardner (1998) suggests that individuals have at least seven different intelligences. One of the most important types of intelligences mentioned by Gardner (1983) as cited by Jacobs, Lee & Ng. (1997) is interpersonal intelligence. This type of intelligence is helpful in cooperative learning and working in cooperative groups. This is because it provides students with opportunities to deploy and develop this intelligence. For instance, students who are relatively low in logical-mathematical intelligence, but relatively high in interpersonal intelligence can make an important contribution to their groups by deploying their interpersonal intelligence to help the group function effectively.

M.Z. Kamsah & R. Talib (2003) on their study to the lecturers and final year engineering students at Faculty of Chemical and Natural Resources Engineering (FKKKSA) at Universiti Teknologi Malaysia Skudai, reveal that both groups agreed on the importance of group work activities in classrooms. Both groups also agreed on the effectiveness of group work on cognitive skills. They agreed on the improvement of the understanding of materials through discussions, solving assignments and increasing memory retention and thinking skills.

Lourdunathan & Menon ((2005) in their research on developing speaking skills through interaction strategy training find that cooperative learning and peer support can be used to motivate limited language

proficiency students to contribute more to the general group interaction.

All in all, successful collaborative spoken activities depend on students' ability and willingness to contribute to the activities done. If the students are reluctant to contribute to the discussion, the objective of achieving the aim in learning will not be reached. One of the reasons why students have problems in using English in their spoken activities is because they get lack of encouragement from their lecturers. Cheang (2009) finds out that the lecturers themselves may have fluency problems and as a result they don't take any initiative to start conversations in English with their students. Therefore, to ensure students get benefits from collaborative spoken activities done, more effort should be put by both lecturers and students to enhance students' learning, not just for their English subjects but for other subjects as well. This is because the medium of instruction in most universities is English.

3. METHODOLOGY

The participants of the study consisted of 56 Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Perlis campus diploma students who were pursuing Diploma in Banking and Diploma in Investment Analysis. The students were in their third semester and they were taking English for Academic Purposes (BEL311) which was a third semester English proficiency course at UiTM Perlis. The subjects were from two BEL311 classes. The first class had 28 students and it was used as the control group. The second class of another 28 students formed the experimental group. These students were from the same faculty that is Business Management. The subjects on the whole could be categorized as having intermediate English proficiency. The study is guided by the following research objectives:

To find out whether collaborative learning activities help in improving students' spoken skills

To find out whether collaborative learning activities help in reducing students' communicative apprehension

The study was quasi-experimental in nature and its design included two groups (experimental and control) and two observations (pretest and posttest). They were also given questionnaires during the two tests. All subjects follow the same curriculum prescribed for BEL311. However, the experimental group received special instruction on collaborative learning activities along with the usual course component, while the control group was exposed only to the usual course components. Among the collaborative activities carried out in the experimental group were think-pair-share, fishbowl and case study. Most of the time, the treatment required the subjects to participate in group discussions and practice their spoken skills. The researcher spent about 45 minutes two times a week for about a month with the treatment group.

The pretest was carried out in the classroom. Both the control and experimental groups were given the pretest on separate days due to different class schedule. However, they were given the same question and the same amount of time to answer the question. The subjects were required to sit in a group of three or four and discuss on an issue. They were expected to agree, disagree and came up with a group consensus. They were given five minutes to prepare and ten minutes to discuss. The posttest was also carried out in the classrooms. The students followed the same procedure as in the pretest but this time they were given a different issue to be discussed in their group. The two tests were based on BEL311 speaking test where students were graded on task fulfillment (8marks), language (8 marks) and communicative ability (4 marks). The researcher examined all the discussions and gave individual marks to each of the subjects based on UiTM BEL311 Speaking Test Scoring Guide.

The questionnaire was administered to both groups. It was adapted from McCroskey's PRCA-24 (1982). It consists of 24 questions on respondents' feelings about communicating with others in English. The questionnaire was used as an instrument for collecting data on students' communicative apprehension before and after the treatment period. The main section deals with the subjects' feelings on communicating in group discussion, participating in English class, involving in interpersonal conversation and presenting a speech.

Statistical treatments were used to analyze the data for the study. First, paired-samples test was used

to analyze the respondents' responses for the questionnaire. Second, to determine the differences in speaking skills between the experimental group and the control group, the independent t-test was used. Third, to see whether there's any improvement in students' spoken skills before and after the treatment session that is for the experimental group, the paired t-test was used on the scores gathered through UiTM BEL311 Speaking Test Scoring Guide.

4. FINDINGS

This study aims to analyze whether there is a difference between the achievement of the respondents in the pretest and the posttest of speaking of the control and experimental groups. Paired samples t-test was used to analyze the results of the tests of the two groups of respondents.

Table 1: Results of Analysis on Pretest and Posttest Scores

	Experimental group		Control group	
	Mean	Std. deviation	Mean	Std. deviation
Pretest	10.277	1.521	11.909	2.147
Posttest	12.092	1.675	12.181	1.861
	t= 7.046, Sig.= .000 ,Diff. mean= -1.814		t= .826, Sig.= .418,Diff. mean= -.272	

P<.05

The result of the test of the control group showed that $t(22)=-.826$, $p>.05$. From this, it can be concluded that there is no significant difference in the achievement of the control group for the pretest compared to the posttest. As for the experimental group, the test revealed that $t(27)=-7.046$, $p<.05$. From this result, it can be concluded that there is a significant difference in the achievement of the experimental group in the pretest as compared to the posttest, as a result of having been exposed to a series of collaborative speaking activities.

A further analysis of the mean difference showed that the mean difference of the pretest and the posttest of both groups also showed that the mean difference of the pretest and the posttest of the experimental group is bigger than the mean difference of the control groups' by 1.8. This further emphasized that the experimental group has in fact achieved better results in their speaking test after having had an exposure of collaborative speaking activities, compared to the control group which had not been exposed to such activities.

The study also aims to find out whether collaborative learning activities help in reducing students' communicative apprehension. For this purpose, two similar sets of questionnaire were given to the experimental and the control groups before they underwent the pretest and posttest. The main section of the questionnaire was used to analyze students' feelings on communicating in group discussion, participating in English class, involving in interpersonal conversation and presenting a speech. The scores were gathered and analyzed descriptively. The results of low, average and high level of apprehension was based on Norms for the PRCA-24 (McCrosky, 1982).

Table 2: Results of Analysis on Communicative Apprehension (CA) for Communicating in Group Discussion

	Experimental group		Control group		PRCA- 24 Norms	
	Mean	Std.deviation	Mean	Std.deviation	High	Low
During pretest	15.857	3.450	18.857	4.061	> 20	< 11
During posttest	16.444	3.896	17.619	4.914		

The paired samples test of the mean difference between the experimental group and the control group during pretest showed that both groups did not have significant difference in their level of communicative apprehension (CA) for communicating in group discussion. The subjects in the experimental group ($m=15.857$, $SD= 3.450$) and the subjects in the control group ($m= 18.857$, $SD= 4.061$) had average level of CA in communicating in group discussion (high= >20 , low= <11). The analysis also showed that there was no significant difference in the experimental group ($m=16.444$, $SD= 3.896$) and the control group ($m=17.619$, $SD=4.914$) level of CA during the posttest. Both groups had average level of CA during the posttest.

The findings revealed that the subjects in both groups had average level of CA in terms of communicating with other people in group discussion. Although, the experimental group received special activities on collaborative activities, they did not show improved apprehension towards group discussion and unexpectedly showed a small increase of CA during the posttest

Table 3: Results of Analysis on Communicative Apprehension (CA) for participating in English class

	Experimental group		Control group		PRCA- 24 Norms	
	Mean	Std.deviation	Mean	Std.deviation	High	Low
During pretest	17.464	3.948	19.071	3.924	> 20	< 13
During posttest	17.333	4.803	18.428	4.843		

For participating in English class, the analysis showed that during the pretest the subjects in the experimental group ($m= 17.464$, $SD=3.948$) and the subjects in the control group ($m= 19.071$, $SD= 3.924$) had average level of CA. Similar results were found when the questionnaire was administered during the posttest when the experimental group had $m= 17.333$, $SD= 4.803$ and the control group had $m=18.428$, $SD=4.843$ which indicates that both groups had average level of CA (high= >20 , low= <13).

It is indicated in this result that there is no significant improvement for the experimental group's CA for participating in group discussion although they had been exposed to collaborative learning activities in class.

Table 4: Results of Analysis on Communicative Apprehension (CA) for Interpersonal conversation

	Experimental group		Control group		PRCA- 24 Norms	
	Mean	Std.deviation	Mean	Std.deviation	High	Low
During pretest	18.250	4.248	19.642	4.011	>18	<11
During posttest	18.269	5.134	19.047	3.943		

The analysis on the students' CA for Interpersonal communication revealed that the experimental group had high level of CA (high= >18 , low= < 11) during pretest ($m=18.250$, $SD= 4.248$) and during posttest ($m=18.269$, $SD=5.134$). The subjects in the control group also had the same level of CA during pretest ($m=19.642$, $SD= 4.011$) and posttest ($m= 19.047$, $SD=3.943$).

Table 5: Results of Analysis on Communicative Apprehension (CA) for Public Speaking

	Experimental group		Control group		PRCA- 24 Norms	
	Mean	Std.deviation	Mean	Std.deviation	High	Low
During pretest	21.535	3.853	21.107	3.562	>24	<14
During posttest	20.000	4.089	20.590	3.862		

An interesting result is observed here. The finding may suggest that the students are familiar and feel comfortable when working in groups (as in many collaborative activities) rather than speaking face to

face to a new person or to be involved in personal interaction.

The last analysis on the subjects' CA is for public speaking. For this category, it was found that the subjects in the experimental group ($m=21.535$, $SD= 3.853$) and the subjects in control group ($m= 21.107$, $SD= 3.562$) had average level of CA (high= >24 , low= <14) in the pretest. During the posttest, the experimental group ($m=20.000$, $SD= 4.089$) and the control group ($m= 20.590$, $SD= 3.862$) also shared the same level of CA that was, at average level

The result of the analysis illustrates that there is no improvement in subjects' (experimental group) level of CA for public speaking although they were given special treatment on collaborative learning activities. Interestingly, however, they showed a considerable reduction during the posttest which was bigger than the reduction in the control group. It can be suggested that the students may need to be given a different kind of treatment to increase their confidence in public speaking.

Table 6: Results of Analysis on Communicative Apprehension (CA) for Total Scores

	Experimental group		Control group		PRCA- 24 Norms	
	Mean	Std.deviation	Mean	Std.deviation	High	Low
During pretest	73.107	12.620	78.678	13.485	> 80	< 50
Sig. = .116, t= 1.596						
During posttest	72.384	16.045	75.714	13.217		
Sig. = .449, t= .764						

$p<.05$

The independent t-test analysis showed that the experimental group had a mean of 73.107 ($SD= 12.620$) on the questionnaire during the pretest; the control group, on the other hand, had a mean of 78.678 ($SD= 13.485$). The results revealed that there is no statistically significant mean difference ($t= -1.596$, $p> .116$) in the CA total scores between the two groups.

Similar findings were also found during the posttest; the experimental group had a mean of 72.384 ($SD= 16.045$) and the control group had a mean of 75.714 ($SD= 13.217$). There is no statistically significant mean difference in the CA total scores between the two groups at $t= .764$ and $p> 0.449$.

Moreover, the analysis on CA total scores also revealed that both the experimental group ($m= 73.107$, $SD= 12.620$) and the control group ($m= 78.678$, $SD= 13.485$) had average level of CA (high= >80 , low= <50) during the pretest. The experimental and the control groups also had an average level of CA during the posttest at $m=72.384$, $SD= 16.045$ and $m= 75.714$, $SD= 13.217$ respectively.

The results suggest that both the experimental and control groups have no difference in their level of CA at the outset. The average level of CA among the subjects in the experimental group shows that they have a considerable amount of confidence in communication although they are at an intermediate level. The overall results also do not show any significant improvement in the CA level among the subjects in the experimental group although they have gone through the treatment. The results may be different if the participants practice more collaborative learning activities in a longer period.

5. CONCLUSION

The study was carried out to find the effects of collaborative learning activities on students' spoken skills and their communicative apprehension. The results of the study show that there is an improvement on the students' spoken skills when they scored better in their posttest after they were given exposure to a few collaborative learning activities in the class. It was observed that the students were enthusiastic, communicated more with each other and participated in the group discussion effectively. It can be assumed that the use of collaborative learning activities in the classroom can make students generate more ideas and have less stress to express themselves in the class. The subjects also looked more confident after the treatment although the results of the study revealed that their level of communicative apprehension (CA) did not have significant improvement. It is believed that with a longer period of study

and more exposure to collaborative learning activities, the students may improve their level of communicative apprehension.

REFERENCES

- Cheang Eng Kwong. (2009). Factors contributing to poor spoken English versus gender, courses and speaking English at home: Proceedings of the Conference on Language Learning and Teaching. (COLT), Universiti Teknologi MARA Kedah.
- Colbeck, C.L., Campbell, S.E., Bjorklund, S.A. (2000). Grouping in the Dark: What College Students Learn from Group Projects. *The Journal of Higher Education*, Vol 71, No.1, pp.60-83.
- Delucchi, M. (Spring 2006). The efficacy of collaborative learning groups in an undergraduate statistics Course. *College Teaching*, Vol.54, No.2, pp.244-248.
- Dirkx, J.M. (1998). Using groups effectively in collaborative learning. Retrieved May 23, 2009, from <http://C:\Documents%20and%20Settings\John\Desktop\WebPage\CLLRNG.CHP.htm>
- Gardner, H. (1998). *Frames of mind: The theory of multiple intelligences*. New York: Basic Books.
- Harmer, J. (1991). *The Practice of English Language Teaching* (new ed). UK: Longman Group UK Limited.
- Holbrook, H.T (1987). *Communication Apprehension: The Quiet Student in Your Classroom*. Eric Digest. Retrieved August 10, 2009 from <http://www.ericdigests.org/pre-926/quiet.htm>
- Jacobs, G.M., Lee, C. & Ng. m. (1997). *Cooperative learning in the thinking classroom: Research and theoretical perspectives*. Paper presented at the International Conference on Thinking, Singapore.
- Krashen, S. (1988). *Second Language Acquisition and Second Language Learning*. UK: Prentice Hall International (UK) Ltd.
- Lourdunathan, J, Menon, S. (2005). *Developing speaking skills through interaction strategy training*. Retrieved May 24, 2009, from <http://melita.org.my/et/2005/developing%20speaking%20skills%through%20interaction.pdf>
- M.B. Tinzmann et al. (1990). *What is collaborative classroom?* North Central Regional Educational Laboratory Retrieved July 30, 2009, from http://www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/rpl_esys/vollab.htm
- McCroskey, J.C. (1982). *An introduction to rhetorical communication* (4th Ed). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- M.Z.Kamsah, R. Talib (2003). *Assessing groupwork activities in Engineering Education*. Retrieved March 12, 2009. From <http://www.citl.utm.my/research/pdf/rtl05.pdf>
- Ocker, R.J. Yaverbaum, G.J. (Winter 2002). Collaborative learning environments: exploring student attitudes and satisfaction in face-to-face and synchronous computer conferencing settings. *Journal of Interactive Learning Research*, Vol.12, No.4.
- Wenzel, K.R. Watkins, D.E. (2002). Peer relationships and collaborative learning as contexts for academic enablers. *School Psychology Review*, Vol.31, No.3, pp.366.