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ACQUISITION OF PRODUCTIVE SKILLS THROUGH VERBAL AND NON VERBAL
COMMUNICATION

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ABSTRACT

Researchers around the world would agree that it is essential to optimize the amount of time that students spend within the classroom using new methods of interaction to improve communicative competence. Students in higher education must be given an adequate number of opportunities to develop their self confidence through simulated dialogues and discussion activities within the classroom. These activities would be invaluable in assisting students to deal with real life situations at the workplace. This research paper has made a modest attempt to present the results of a mixed methods study. Students were analysed based on their performance and their responses to simulated tasks that revolved around conversations and discussions. The results denote that significant progress can occur when students are gently guided to produce the target language based on verbal and non verbal communication.

Key words: Language acquisition, Interpersonal communication, Higher Education, Productive skills, Learner autonomy, Community awareness

Introduction

Education through dialogues is conducive to opening certain spaces which allow students to share perspectives. Barton and Bagule (2017) have stated that early human beings were very keen to communicate and did so through various means such as cave paintings (p274). As this piece of research has been obviously proved, it is of paramount importance to consider the desires of modern students who wish to pursue their academic studies in a more authentic environment.

Students in higher education need to be given many opportunities to closely examine different viewpoints and formulate their own ideas regarding societal norms and conventions. At this crucial juncture, dialogues would be able to build a spirit of sharing and respect for various types of ideas. Hence, the research questions for this small scale study focused on the effect of dialogues within classroom situations and were framed as follows.

1. Can classroom dialogues relevant to a specific topic of interest develop productive skills such as writing and speaking?
2. Is it possible to develop some community awareness through classroom dialogues?

Hypothesis 1 was that it could be possible to develop productive skills through the use of classroom dialogues. Moreover, hypothesis 2 focused on the fact that it would be possible to develop some awareness regarding community issues through classroom dialogues. However, a conflicting hypothesis 3 was that awareness could be fleeting and not significant enough to change student perspectives.

Rationale for the study

It is a well known fact that conversations at the workplace are fraught with challenges and can be akin to walking on thin ice. It is an indisputable fact that technology can make life easier. Goldstein et al (2017) has suggested that a centaur machine and human collaboration can be implemented in order to enable progress in several complicated fields. However, skilled professionals at the workplace will need to disseminate their technical knowledge while trying to be creative, humane team players. Maintaining office etiquette will be a formidable job in the wake of emerging technologies. An abundance of technological devices may be helpful only to a certain extent. Hence, students in the modern era need to obtain skills that are relevant to real life situations. They will also need to know how to manage their dialogues while they multitask at a modern day workplace.

Literature Review

Dialogues in a classroom are a natural part of the learning process. However, dialogues with a purpose are a relatively new concept. Researchers have written a lot on conversation analysis, linguistics and discourse analysis. However dialogues with relevance to socio cultural factors need deeper analysis as these could influence the thought process of students in a positive way.

According to Shor and Freire (1987), Dialogue is not only a means to change social interactions within the classroom, it also assists in building some awareness about relationships within society. It is a way to examine critical issues in a mutual learning atmosphere. These researchers focus on the fact that problems may arise in an academic environment where the continuous outpourings of a teacher may silence and alienate learners. (p.11)

On the other hand, Alexander(2008) has highlighted the fact that teaching through dialogues can enable students to learn how to discuss , reason , explain and argue while trying to follow the trajectory of higher order skills that is pivotal for thinking and articulation.

In addition, Nystrond et al.(2003) advocates dialogues and says that they legitimize contributions from various parties in a classroom and foster direct participation. Learning progress is apparent through pedagogy that is centered around dialogues and the evidence is noticeable according to Rojas – Drummond et al.(2010) Meanwhile, Flitton and Warwick (2012) have emphasized that while students collaborate, they also seek to understand other points of view. In this intentional process, students learn how to build their own ideas while allowing other opinions to modify their pre existing viewpoints. This could be an accurate analysis as the classroom atmosphere is non threatening; students can concentrate on input and output rather than classroom dynamics.

Nevertheless, Kitchenham et al.(2015) mentions that dialogues can categorise knowledge in a manner that brings out a broader investigation of a subject matter. It is also interesting to note that a United Kingdom trial that involved 5000 students (EEF, 2017) clearly indicated that it is possible to achieve a positive effect in English language acquisition with the progress being equal to two more months of teaching intervention.

Methodology

The study was carried out in a private university that had accredited programs and the focus was a General Education course that was an offshoot and a part of a mandatory program. Students from various colleges were enrolled on a course entitled “Communication Skills” which is an English language course that comes under general education. The course accommodated students from the College of Engineering, College of Architecture and Design as well as students from the College of Business.

The study was conducted on two sections of the same course. While one of the courses was offered in the morning, the other was offered in the evening to a set of students from a similar educational background. The morning section was considered as the experimental group while the evening section was the control group. Students in the evening section were working students with time constraints and hence it was not feasible to conduct an additional activity along with a tightly knit syllabus. It must be noted that the syllabus was delivered in its entirety to both the sections. However, additional activities were carried out in the morning section as students had a more relaxed mindset and were willing to participate in the research study. They were informed at the beginning of the course that they would be a part of a research study. A total of 25 students were taken into consideration from each section as irregular students were considered as outliers. So, on the whole the study was carried out on two groups comprising of 50 students.

The pre test involved a student presentation and written correspondence in the form of an email towards the beginning of the semester. The post test involved a final student presentation at the end of the semester along with written correspondence in the form of an email.

It is imperative to note that three additional activities were carried out in the experimental classroom. While the control group was taught how to work on written correspondence with detailed explanations and practice sessions, the experimental group was given a chance to complete a relevant dialogue along with classroom explanations and practice. In addition, the students in the experimental group were given a chance to discuss the difference between effective and ineffective emails.

However, the activity that seemed to have been most effective in producing the target language was a role play session where students in the experimental group were divided into teams and asked to construct a dramatic play on the topic of "Road Safety". Students had to discuss the plot and prepare the script. Each one of them had to take on a role, learn his/ her respective dialogue and rehearse it with the team. Then, they had to present it along with props such as posters or power point slides in the background. This was a classroom activity that involved a lot of planning and discussion. Students had to consider problems that could crop up while doing their team presentations and improve their voice quality due to the spirit of competition. In addition, students chose to use non verbal techniques in the form of body language to support verbal communication

Findings:

While the control group was taught how to do presentations and work on written correspondence in the traditional way through teacher talk and examples, the experimental group was exposed to additional activities in the classroom. Therefore, there were significant differences in the findings. The results were as follows.

Results of the Pre test

Respondents	Average scores for written correspondence/ 10	Average scores for presentations / 10	Total Scores /20
Control Group 1 (n=25)	3%	4%	7%
Experimental Group 2 (n=25)	3.5%	3.5%	7%

The pre test revealed that although there were minimal differences in the average writing and speech scores of the control group and experimental group, the total scores were similar as they were from similar academic backgrounds.

The results of the post test displayed remarkable differences and can be examined below.

Results of the Post test

Respondents	Average scores for written correspondence/ 10	Average scores for presentations / 10	Total Scores /20
Control Group 1 (n=25)	6.5%	6.5%	13%
Experimental Group 2 (n=25)	8.5%	8.5%	17%

The results of Group2 or the experimental section displayed a significant rise in performance. It was evident that students in the experimental group had shown considerable improvement in comparison to the control group. This was very noticeable through their spoken communication.

Discussion

This study was carried out during a period of one semester with the involvement of two sections of the same course and showed some surprising results. It was obvious that students who learn in a more natural environment could benefit enormously through the ensuing interaction with their peers. The study was very encouraging as it showed that authentic intervention strategies can make a difference in enhancing the skills of students.

Hypothesis 1 that productive skills could be developed through classroom dialogues was proved to be accurate. In addition, hypothesis 2 on enhancing community awareness was also proved to be a valid point. The theme of "Road Safety" was a topic that revolved around community awareness. Students in the experimental group had a chance to carry out some research on traffic rules, interview rash as well as cautious drivers and talk to pedestrians about road signals and zebra crossings. They had opportunities to discuss accidental collisions and this built a strong sense of community awareness within them.

Hypothesis 3 that the attitude of community awareness would only have a fleeting effect was proved incorrect as the students displayed a high degree of responsible mannerisms. Students in the experimental group took the initiative to interact with a number of people within their own communities, collected information about driving habits and shared their research findings about traffic regulations. Hence a strong sense of community awareness was noticed through their pro active behavior patterns.

Conclusion

The experimental study certainly transformed the classroom atmosphere. Students were very enthusiastic and displayed a high level of participation. While being a part of the role play sessions, they did not feel that the topic was cumbersome. The study was successful in achieving learner autonomy. It was very helpful in motivating students and fostered student engagement. Almost all the students felt that they were in an inclusive learning atmosphere and none of them felt left out. As a result, they managed to acquire a high degree of confidence along with spoken and written communication skills. Future researchers could take variables of gender, age and nationality into consideration and conduct research studies on socio cultural issues.

On the whole, simulated dialogues on topics of social importance can be perceived as an attempt to build some community awareness and enhance the productive skills of spoken and written communication. Interpersonal relationships can be built within the classroom and give rise to productive dialogues in real world situations.

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