

LET'S TALK AND LET'S GO GLOBAL: THE IMPACT ON STUDENTS' ENGLISH LANGUAGE COMMUNICATION SKILLS
(*LET'S TALK AND LET'S GO GLOBAL: IMPAK TERHADAP KEMAHIRAN BERKOMUNIKASI BAHASA INGGERIS PELAJAR*)

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Abstract: English proficiency is still a problem among school students in Malaysia. It can affect the aspiration of Malaysia to become a developed country by 2020. Government since then has taken many efforts to overcome it. Despite of that, it should not a single handed effort by government as other parties can contribute towards the solution of the problem. Hence, Universiti Malaysia Terengganu has stepped up a gear and come up with a programme, Let's Talk and Let's Go Global which directed its focus on communication skills of students. Therefore, 260 Form Four students from 13 schools around Kuala Terengganu district were chosen as pioneers. This programme ran for six months, from July to December 2013. It adopted several methods in order to facilitate the learning process. In the meanwhile, data of students' involvement and performance were collected throughout the duration. In general, there were major improvements in term of students' communication skills. Thus, it is recommended that it should be continued in the future.

KEYWORDS: Communicative, communication skills, enhancing, Let's Talk.

Abstrak: Kecekapan dalam penggunaan Bahasa Inggeris masih menjadi suatu permasalahan dalam kalangan pelajar di Malaysia. Perkara ini mampu menggugat aspirasi Malaysia dalam menuju ke arah sebuah negara membangun menjelang tahun 2020. Justeru, pelbagai langkah telah diambil oleh pihak kerajaan untuk mengatasi masalah ini. Namun begitu, langkah penyelesaian tidak seharusnya diletakkan di bahu pihak kerajaan semata-mata. Oleh itu, Universiti Malaysia Terengganu telah mengambil satu inisiatif bagi membantu pihak kerajaan dalam menangani masalah ini dengan melancarkan program "Let's Talk and Let's Go Global" yang memberi tumpuan kepada kemahiran berkomunikasi para pelajar. Sejumlah 260 orang pelajar dari 13 sekolah sekitar daerah Kuala Terengganu telah dipilih sebagai perintis bagi program yang dijalankan ini. Program ini berjalan selama 6 bulan iaitu dari bulan Julai sehingga Disember 2013. Ia telah mengguna pakai beberapa kaedah yang mampu untuk memudahkan proses pembelajaran. Sepanjang program ini berlangsung, data berkaitan penglibatan pelajar dan prestasi yang ditunjukkan dikutip. Hasil daripada pelaksanaan program ini secara keseluruhannya menunjukkan peningkatan yang ketara dalam konteks kemahiran berkomunikasi para pelajar. Oleh itu, program ini dicadangkan untuk terus dilaksanakan pada masa akan datang.

KATA KUNCI: Komunikatif, kemahiran berkomunikasi, meningkatkan, Let's Talk.

Introduction

Education is one of the key sectors which is focused by every government. In order for a country to achieve a developed status, this area must not be overlooked because it provides the

nation with human resources who are capable to build it. In Malaysia context, this aspect is very crucial since in few years time, it must meet the target of becoming a developed country as envisioned by the former Prime Minister of

Malaysia, Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad in his plan blueprint of Vision 2020.

Yet, it does not help effort as latest result of test conducted by Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) in 2012 ranked Malaysia at second bottom place among South East Asian countries, slightly better than neighbouring Indonesia but lagging behind more impoverished Thailand and Vietnam (Zachau, 2013). Therefore, the government has to buck up and find ways to tackle it including English language quality of the students. In order for Malaysia to elevate its status to global level, good English command possessed by its citizen is highly important and to achieve the objective, the move should begin at schools.

Currently, English proficiency level among Malaysian students is still at acceptable level. According to Deputy Prime Minister who is also Education Minister, Tan Sri Dato' Haji Muhyiddin Yassin, the preliminary report by the Cambridge English Language Assessment stated that in general, proficiency level of English among students, from primary school to pre-university level, so far is encouraging. On a similar note, he admitted that there are so much more to be improved. For instance, English overall grades for 2013 *Ujian Penilaian Sekolah Rendah* has showed notable decrease. Only 74.4% of the 356,334 government school pupils scored a minimum grade C compared with 77.3% last year, while the percentage of those who obtained A had dropped from 17.6 % last year to 17.4% this year as reported by Deputy Minister of Education, Datuk Mary Yap Kain Ching.

The Malaysian government is very much aware of the importance of mastering English and how critical the situation is. It has taken several steps for years to arrest the problem of English proficiency. In 2000, MUET (Malaysia University English Test) was introduced for the pre-university students with the aim to prepare and enhance their English mastery before they continue education at tertiary level. Another significant yet controversial step was the implementation of teaching of Science and

Mathematics in English for secondary school students (Pawanchek, 2006). This change of policy was hoped to be able to help the students to increase their English proficiency and mastery of Science and Mathematics as at the later stage, most knowledge of both subjects are only available in English.

After general election in 2013, there was some major reshuffle in Malaysian ministry cabinet. One of them was the merging between two separate Ministry of Education and Higher Learning. With this, the administration of schools and higher learning institutions come under one umbrella. Thus, one of the initiatives mooted by the Minister of Education II, Dato' Seri Idris Jusoh was the transfer of knowledge process from varsities to schools. Universiti Malaysia Terengganu (UMT) was the first varsity which took the first step by organising Let's Talk and Let's Go Global, a programme which was developed to assist schools to increase English proficiency among students.

Methodology

Let's Talk and Let's Go Global was launched by Dato' Seri Idris bin Jusoh on 22nd June 2013 at Universiti Malaysia Terengganu. It involved 260 students of Form Four students from 13 schools within Kuala Terengganu district. The selection was done through State Education Department with schools' recommendation and students who were chosen were supposed to have medium proficiency of English.

This programme adopted multi-pronged approach as it used several platforms as mode of learning namely classroom lessons, Facebook interaction, online learning portal, e-mailing and English language slot on local radio station. For lessons, a module was created with different themes for every meeting. The meetings were conducted in six months duration, twice a month on Saturday for two hours per meeting. The activities were based on the theme determined for each lesson and some of them are moral values, patriotism, and unity and so on. Next platform is through Facebook page in which an official Facebook group for the programme

was created and all participants and instructors too involved as members. Students were free to interact with each other using online postings or chat (in English) and sometimes activity instructions were included too. The other way to engage students in learning was through online learning portal. An interactive website was published at www.letstalkletsgoglobal.umt.edu.my and only participants were allowed to access it as they have been provided with password. There were many activities prepared for them such as social expression, song lyrics, idiom and proverbs etc. Students also can interact with other participants and instructors through e-mail as their e-mail address have been collected at the beginning of the programme. Last but not least, the programme, through its coordinator, Assoc. Prof. Dr. Noraien Mansor, was given a one hour slot on local Terengganu FM radio station every Saturday from 12 to 1 pm. The students and other callers interacted with her over the phone on different topics every week.

Along the way, the data on students' participation and performance have been collected. Their interaction in various platforms such as Facebook, online learning portal and phone calls were taken into account. Their performance has also been measured through pre and post-test in order to gauge the effectiveness of the programme. Later, the data were compiled and analysed for research purposes.

Research Findings

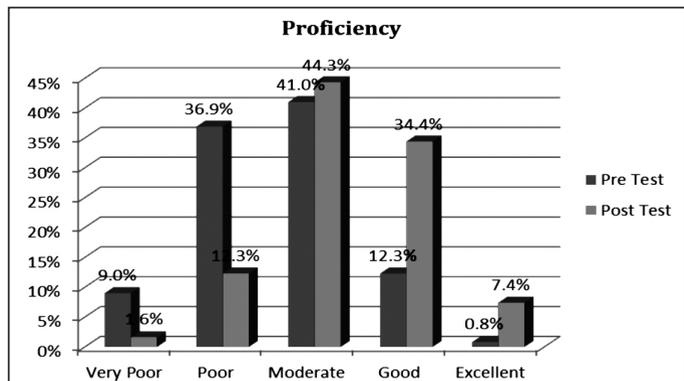
There are many approaches which can be utilised to teach English and this programme adopted Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) method as its foundation. It tried to move away from traditional grammar oriented method. According to Ahmed and Rao (2013), CLT approach is now being applied in many non-native countries where English has a foreign language (FL) orientation. Therefore, the main objective of this programme is to enhance English language communication skills of the

students. The skills include verbal and non-verbal and writing skills. Hence, bulks of the activity comprised mostly group, pair and individual presentations, impromptu speeches, online interactions and phone calls. Based on the obtained data, it can be said that the programme has achieved its objectives.

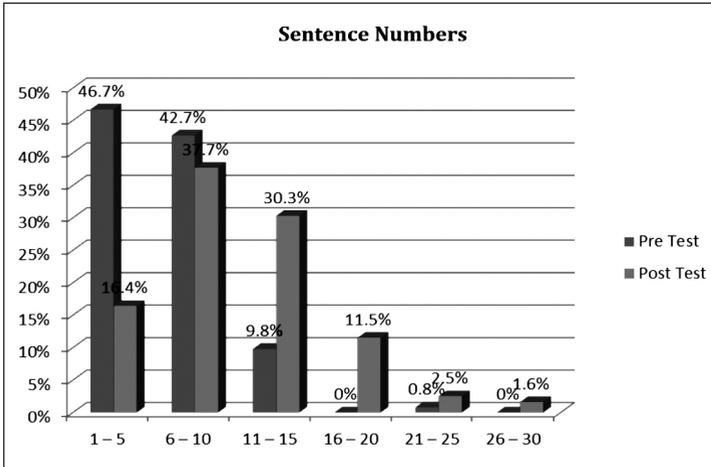
The most significant impact can be seen in the improvement of their proficiency. This item was measured through pre and post-test. Students were tested on their speaking skills through impromptu speech task because according to Harper (2005), for all the time, the main focus of CLT are speaking skills. Out of 260 participants, 169 took the pre-test while 152 took the post-test and 122 have taken both. We can observe in the graph that there were positive results before and after the post-tests from the increase in the good evaluations and decrease of the poor evaluations.

Other notable impact on their speaking skills is their ability to carry on talking has improved tremendously after the programme. During the pre-test, some students have been observed to be unable to develop reasonable numbers of sentence. They just stood quietly after mumbling few words and rushed back to their place after their time was over. Yet, during the post-test, the opposite happened as they successfully developed more sentences and attitude also changed as they took their time to complete the speeches.

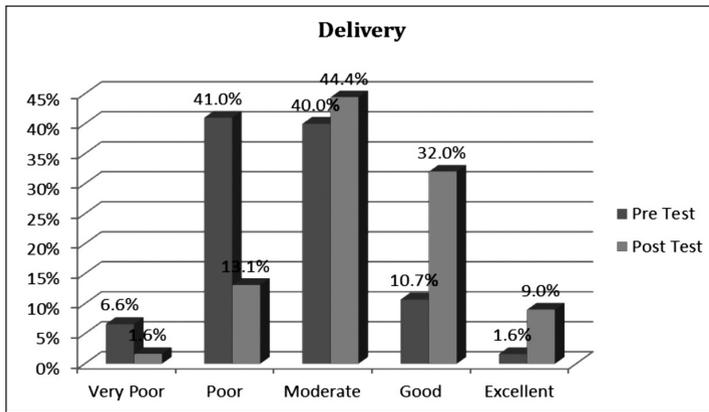
Delivery in the speech is more about ones using non verbal communication such as



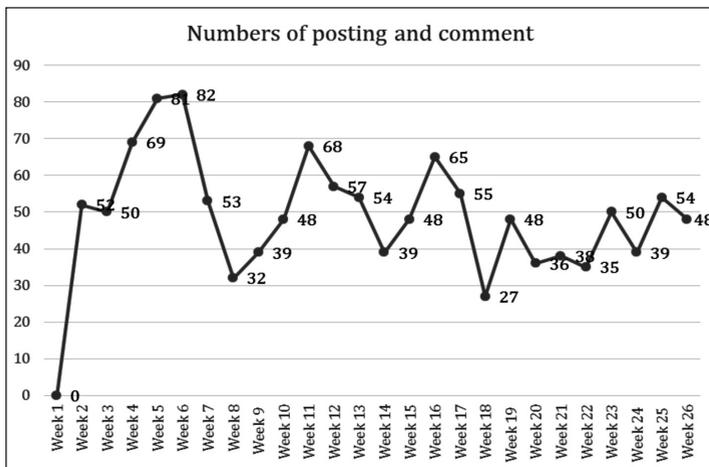
Graph 1: Proficiency Component.



Graph 2: Sentence Numbers.



Graph 3: Delivery Component.



Graph 4: Facebook Postings and Comments.

voices and body language. It has been noted that delivery component of the participants has increased its quality when compared after the post test. Delivery will only improve if the students gained the confidence to speak. Based on the interviews after the programme with participants from two involved schools, most of them admitted that their confidence level to communicate in English was taken to a higher level since they joined it. The instructors also observed some students who were very quiet and kept to themselves at the beginning but gradually towards the end, they started to speak up and participated actively in class activities.

One unique feature of this programme is the integration of social media in English learning and it was clear choice that Facebook was used as one of the communication platforms among students and participants. This is due to the popularity of this medium, and according to Facebook (2013), there are 1.23 billion monthly active users as of December 31, 2013. Here, students are required to sign up for Facebook account and request to be added to Let's Talk Let's Go Global Facebook group. Their involvement in Facebook in term of postings and comments were monitored and analysed as in the graph.

We can observe that numbers of posting and comment would peak after the class session. It showed that they have exploited Facebook as a tool for them to discuss and communicate anything pertaining to the lessons. In fact, Hayashi (2011) concluded in her study that it is possible that Facebook in classroom encouraged the introverted students to become more motivated and speak to other classmates and students too began to express their opinion and extended reasoning in face-to-face interaction and written tasks.

The pinnacle activity of this programme was the inter-school drama competition. Each school was required to stage a 20 minute drama performance which include moral values and lessons. Out of 13 participating schools, three schools have been selected to fill the first, second and third place. Yet, all schools managed to deliver successful performances and they seemed to be enjoying the activity immensely. All participants worked very hard and despite some hiccups and stutters, they have made all instructors proud of their commitment to master English through drama. Indeed, drama can benefit the students because it gives a context for listening and meaningful language production, forcing the learners to use their language resources and, thus, enhancing their linguistic abilities (Chauhan, 2004).

Conclusion

Though this programme only ran for six months, from the results obtained, they all pointed out that the students have benefited a lot especially in term of their communication skills because after the programme, there are some improvements of English command. The data that have been collected are the proofs of the success in achieving the objectives. Students who were met for interview most gave their thumbs up to this programme. However, it is not fair to claim that it has successfully achieved

100% success rate because there are always room for improvements. Hopefully with more support from various parties such as parents, schools, universities and government, Let's Talk and Let's Go Global programme can be expanded to a bigger scale and reach out to more students as there have been requests for it to be implemented in other schools.

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