

ESP Project Work: Preparing Learners for the Workplace

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Bio Data

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Abstract

Language acquisition is believed to be most effectively facilitated if it is embedded within the learners' field of study or work. This paper describes a learner-centred activity which aims to help learners develop qualities of confidence, initiative and responsibility through interacting with practitioners at the workplace. This activity is one of the activities conducted in an English for Specific Purposes programme of Universiti Teknologi Malaysia which adopts an enculturation approach in the curriculum of the English language training programme. Data were gathered from 170 Civil Engineering undergraduates through questionnaires on their viewpoints regarding the activity and the programme as a whole. Overall findings of the study indicate positive perception of the learners towards the activity which had helped them increased their knowledge in Civil Engineering and become better learners of the English language through the interaction with practitioners in the workplace.

Keywords: ESP, project wok, learner-centred, interaction, workplace

1 Introduction

Language learning should not be restricted to only textbook and classroom activities. It is believed that language acquisition would be most effectively facilitated if it could be embedded with the learners' field of study or work. Through appropriate pedagogy for learning, the more the learners are exposed to real world tasks, the better language users they will become. Real world tasks as defined by Nunan (1989) are those which "require learners to approximate, in class, the sorts of behaviours required of them in the world beyond the classroom" (p. 40).

This paper however, will go further, beyond the classroom and into the real world of the target profession and explore what opportunities can be tapped in developing learners' L2 proficiency through interaction with professionals in the workplace. As has aptly been outlined by Ellis (2005) as Principle 8 - The opportunity to interact in the L2 is central to developing L2 proficiency. This paper will describe a learner-centred activity which delves into new roles for the teachers and learners in the language acquisition process. The activity concerned is a project work related to the professional field the learners will be joining upon graduation.

By carrying out such projects learners indirectly develop qualities of confidence, initiative and responsibility through interacting with experts and practitioners in the professional field. This is not merely simulation or role play, but 'real play' (to borrow Dorothy Cheung's terminology. See Cheung, 1997) or work-embedded activities that

arise out of the learner's overall training to be an effective member of the target community.

The activity is one of the activities carried out in an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) programme in Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM). The ESP programme was designed to cater specifically for undergraduates from the Faculty of Civil Engineering and is known as the English for Civil Engineering (ECE) programme.

2 Background of the English for Civil Engineering (ECE) programme

The Department of Modern Languages of UTM adopted the enculturation approach in the curriculum of the English language training programme for its Civil Engineering undergraduates. The adoption of such an approach entails 'embedding' the communication training of Civil Engineering undergraduates within their immediate academic environment. However, since the undergraduates' academic environment is embedded within the larger social environment of the chosen professional field, communication training should also take into consideration the wider professional context of Civil Engineering. The programme therefore views training of Civil Engineering undergraduates as a process of enculturation into the professional community of civil engineers. The three-semester programme which is integrated with the Civil Engineering curriculum should be viewed as one continuous, coherent training scheme that takes students through a stepped progression from the ability to extract information for academic purposes to the more demanding task of oral and written communication for academic and vocational purposes (see K. I. Abdullah et

al., 1995 for a detail discussion of the framework of the programme and M. Hamzah et al., 1995 for examples of the learning materials).

2.1 The underlying principles of the ECE programme

The approach adopted and the activities designed are guided by four principles, each is briefly described below:

I) Language acquisition is most effectively facilitated if it is embedded within the learners' field of study or work.

In an academic setting, the main concern of learners is the acquisition of knowledge related to their present field of study or future workplace. It is therefore pedagogically logical that the subject matter, linguistic input and learning activities be derived from and embedded in the learners' immediate area of interest – Civil Engineering. The activities are designed to promote language acquisition through the content of Civil Engineering.

II) The main role of the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) instructor is to manage learning.

The ESP instructor's main role is to manage learning by setting up conditions in the classroom that will promote language acquisition. This role includes designing suitable learning materials, setting up relevant tasks and acting as a resource person to the learners on matters related to language. It is important that the ESP instructor, being a language expert, does not take it upon himself to teach the content of Civil Engineering. Any validation of the truth or otherwise of subject matter related to Civil Engineering should be referred to four possible sources: students of Civil Engineering who

themselves have some knowledge of the subject matter, authentic texts on Civil Engineering, Civil Engineering lecturers, and practitioners in the field.

III) Input that is comprehensible and authentic promotes language acquisition.

The input, especially in the form of written texts, has been graded both conceptually and linguistically, from simple (but authentic) to complex. It is hoped that such input will be challenging but not frustrating to learners. The instructor's aim is to assist the learners to eventually become independent users of English for academic and professional purposes. The learners should therefore be assisted to progress towards independent use of authentic texts that they are expected to handle in their current studies or future workplace.

IV) Language training is part of human resource training.

In addition to the development of communicative and linguistic skills, language training should include the training of the 'whole person' to include the inculcation of personality traits such as confidence, independence and initiative. The learner-centred tasks designed require the learners, working in groups, to take responsibility for the successful completion of their own assigned projects. In doing so, they develop the skills of time management, teamwork and interpersonal communication.

An example of how the underlying principles are put into practice is found in the next section. It takes the form of a description of a task assigned to learners.

3 The Project Work

This section describes one of the main tasks learners do in the third and final course of the ECE programme. The task is entitled “Project Work: Insights into the Civil Engineering Profession”.

The project work aims to develop in learners qualities of confidence, initiative and responsibility. It is intended to provide opportunities for the learners to interact with Civil Engineering professionals in the workplace while collecting information on the profession. Through this activity, it is hoped that learners will acquire good communication skills, especially the skills of interacting with practitioners in the engineering field (e.g. practicing engineers, contractors and other professionals) as well as the skills of planning, negotiation and time management.

To achieve the aim of the project, learners are expected to work independently in small groups outside class hours to gather the necessary information. The group decides on the areas of information they are interested in or think will be useful or of interest to other Civil Engineering students. Based on this, the learners then gather information by interviewing as many practitioners in the field as possible (among the categories of information that learners in the past had gathered include career path, duties and responsibilities, and problems faced). Although the interview is the main source of gathering information, the learners could also collect information from books, journals and the Internet.

The learners are also expected to come up with an action plan detailing the

steps to be taken to complete the project and the division of duties and responsibilities among group members. The instructor will allocate some class time to guide the learners (e.g. to prepare them for the interview sessions), to monitor their progress as well as to motivate them in their work. After collecting the information learners are expected to present their findings orally to the class and to turn in a written report of their findings.

4 The Study

The aim of the study was to specifically find out the perception of the students on the Project Work assignment. The study also examined the viewpoints of the students regarding the ECE programme as a whole.

A total of 170 second-year undergraduates from the Civil Engineering Faculty who had followed the ECE programme participated in the study. Two sets of questionnaires were distributed, one focused on the project work while the other focused on the overall evaluation of the programme.

5 Findings of the Study

For the purpose of this paper, only related data from the study will be presented. This takes the form of questions extracted from the questionnaires. The first part discusses responses of two open-ended questions related to the experience of the learners while carrying out the project work. The questions are *1) What is one valuable experience that you gained from the project?* and *2) What is one problem that you faced while conducting the project?*

Part two of the findings section presents responses to the second set of questionnaire which aimed at examining the perception of the learners on the ECE programme as a whole.

5.1 Learners' Viewpoints on the Project Work

Unlike many language programmes which boast of providing good training to develop specific language skills in learners, most of the responses given reveal that the ECE programme is unique in the sense that it provides 'real world' learning experiences to the learners. The responses given to Question 1 range from satisfaction in having the opportunities to meet up with professionals in the Civil Engineering field to gaining knowledge in the Civil Engineering field, and developing specific soft skills and self esteem.

With regards to learners' satisfaction when meeting professionals in the field listed are some of the (unedited) responses given by the learners:

- *I have the chance to meet with the engineer and have a face-to-face interview.*
- *I interview someone-engineer, and he gave me support for me to be an engineer. Now I am ambitious to be an engineer.*
- *Interview the engineers. Before this, I have never talked with a professional engineer.*

The learners felt that the chance to meet and speak to a 'real' engineer is a new learning experience. Though it was the learners who schedule the appointment and conducted the interview sessions with the engineers, it was the approach adopted by the ECE programme which made it possible for the learners to experience such rare opportunity. The ESP practitioners played their part by setting up the necessary conditions for the smooth running of the project as stipulated in Underlying Principle II.

On another valuable experience learners gained i.e. obtained knowledge on Civil Engineering, the following are what some of learners said (again responses have not been edited):

- *I get many more information about civil engineering.*
- *I've got a lot of information about the real life of civil engineers such as the difficulties, the duties, the experiences and many more.*
- *I know how to be a good engineer. Maybe I can copy their way to be a professional in civil engineering.*
- *I know many terms of use in civil engineering.*

We can see from the claims above that having the learners do what is related to their study and future vocation makes learning more relevant. By finding out and discussing about the Civil Engineering field would also likely facilitate language acquisition (refer Underlying Principle I and III).

In addition to gaining knowledge on engineering, the learners felt that they also had developed specific soft skills and improved their self-esteem. The responses below seem to prove this point.

- *My group-mates are multi-racial. So, I learn how to communicate and co-operate with them.*
- *If I was not forced to, I am not sure I will ever conduct an interview. So, the interview session itself is a valuable experience to me.*
- *Teamwork is important. Don't be selfish. As a leader, don't be too emotional when something unexpected happens. Be professional.*
- *I learned skills such as interaction, planning and management.*
- *And also, I have gained confidence to speak in English from now on.*
- *I also get to learn how to make a good presentation from my friend.*

The project work without doubt trains learners to develop their communication skill but it apparently also contributes to the training of the 'whole person' as suggested by the responses above (in line with Underlying Principle IV).

In response to Question 2, it was found that problems faced by the learners while completing the project were mainly related to difficulty in getting hold of the interviewees, time constraint, managing people and lack of confidence due to poor language proficiency. Table 1 below contains some of the responses given by the learners (again these have not been edited).

Table 1: Responses to “What is one problem that you faced while conducting the project?”

- Hard to find suitable person to interview and to get all the information given by the interview.
- The problem is to make an appointment because the interviewee always busy.
- Don't know what to ask in the interview and hard to find the interviewer.
- The demand of completing an assignment in the time period.
- Time to conducting the project.
- Difficulties to meet/discuss with my group-mates as they live in various places.
- Feeling shy/shame to speak and interview engineers.
- We're ashamed and not good in English.

The above findings point to the fact that the problems faced by the learners are in fact real. With real problems faced, learners have to find real solutions. While solutions to language problems can be 'prescribed' by language instructors, the learners just need to learn the ropes to handle such problems. And to be able to handle such situations would mean learners need to be more mature, responsible, confident and independent – traits highly valued in industry.

5.2 Learners' Viewpoints on the Effectiveness of the ECE Programme

In this section findings from the second set of questionnaire are presented (see Table 2 below). The aim was to examine the perception of the learners on the ECE programme as a whole.

The majority of the learners stated that the ECE programme had helped them:

- (1) increase their knowledge of Civil Engineering (87.6% agreeing)
- (2) in their studies in Civil Engineering (74.1% agreeing)
- (3) improve their English (80.6% agreeing).

Table 2: Viewpoints of learners regarding the effectiveness of the Civil Engineering programme

No.	Statement	1	2	3	4	5
1	The course has helped increase my knowledge of Civil Engineering	37.6%	50.0%	4.7%	2.4%	4.7%
2	The course has helped me in my studies in Civil Engineering	21.2%	52.9%	17.1%	5.3%	3.5%
3	The course has helped me improve my English	34.1%	46.5%	12.9%	3.5%	2.9%
4	I am now more confident in my use of English	12.9%	48.8%	30.0%	5.3%	2.9%
5	The English for Civil Engineering course should be continued in UTM for other Civil Engineering students	45.9%	34.7%	10.6%	4.1%	4.7%

N = 170: 1 = Strongly Agree, 2 = Agree, 3 = Not Sure, 4 = Disagree, 5 = Strongly Disagree

More than 60% of the learners claimed that the ECE programme had made them more confident in using English. The learners had also responded positively (more than 80%) as to whether the programme should be continued for other Civil Engineering undergraduates. Hence, the ECE programme was able to help learners not only to improve their understanding of Civil Engineering but also to improve their English and build up their confidence in using the language.

6 Conclusion

Language acquisition is more than just the acquisition of linguistic competence. It is also the acquisition of discourse competence, sociolinguistic competence, pragmatic competence and strategic competence (see Canale, 1983). Thus, language learning activities should not be restricted to textbooks and the physical set up of the classrooms. The study revealed that learners expressed satisfaction towards the learner-centred, real play project work carried out. Learners felt that the activity, through interaction with practitioners in the workplace, had increased their knowledge in Civil Engineering as well as developed certain soft skills. It had also helped them become better learners of the English language and had enhanced their confidence in using the language. Overall, the ECE programme with its real world tasks and appropriate pedagogy was seen to be relevant and useful to the learners, and hence recommended to other Civil Engineering undergraduates.

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