Tropical Summer School Experience: Gleaning EFL Students' Responses

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Abstract
Learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) might be a daunting experience especially if it were to take place in a foreign land comprising of speakers from diverse cultures and backgrounds. This paper thus aims to describe the responses of participants for a Summer School Programme at a tropical university in Asia. The respondents were non-native speakers of English but of Asian origin. Data were collected using closed and open-ended questions in a set of questionnaire. Forty respondents took part in the study. The obtained quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistic while qualitative data employed thematic analysis. The findings revealed that the respondents responded positively towards the Summer School Programme in relation to course contents, venue of the class, textbook and teaching and learning materials used as well as classroom facilities and accommodation. In contrast, regarding the trips and visits, a mixed response was obtained. Data emerging from thematic analysis also revealed that the Summer School programme had given the students an opportunity to use more English Language pertaining to listening and speaking skills. Apart from this, they had also gained experience in terms of better intercultural relationship and increased their confidence level in using English as a form of communication. This programme had become an eye-opener to its participants on the importance of using English and had enriched their experiences in their language learning. The paper concludes with proposed future improvements of the programme.

Keywords: English, Summer School, Oral Communication, Education, EFL

Introduction

As the oldest technical university in Malaysia, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM) has a lot of to offer in terms of science and technology. It has produced number of graduates in various disciplines, especially engineering and science and many of them are now working worldwide. UTM is a place to fulfil students' aspirations in which these students share the same goals and they would like to excel in their own field regardless of the country they come from. As part of UTM, the Language Academy helps to realize the aspirations of these students. Thus, the Summer School Project was created in the effort to bridge students from various nationalities. Starting 2014, with the support of UTM International Office and in collaboration with a Japanese University, the Language Academy began its new Summer School Programme.

Among the objectives of this programme are as follows: (1) to provide English Communication Skills Practice for undergraduates with emphasis on science and technology; (2) to develop confidence and ability to speak discipline-related matters in English; (3) to conduct and participate in groups discussing related science and technology issues in English; (4) to develop their ability to deliver an oral presentation in English. Thus, the aim of this paper is to share the participants' general responses towards a Summer School Programme at a tropical university in Asia namely, UTM.

Literature Review

The concept of Summer School is originated from its definition itself. Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary (2015) defines a summer school as:
 "a school or school session conducted in summer enabling students to accelerate progress toward a diploma or degree, to make up credits lost through absence or failure, or to round out professional education."

Nevertheless, for language learning purposes, it can be defined as**,** "special classes that are taught at a school during the summer" (Merriam-Webster Online Learners' Dictionary, 2015).
(2015).
In this paper, the Summer School concept is defined as a special class that is taught during a specific duration for the intended English as Foreign Language (EFL) speakers.

Learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) might be a daunting experience especially if it were to take place in a foreign land comprising of speakers from diverse cultures and backgrounds. It is fundamental for learners to be given a chance to experience a supportive learning environment in which they could nurture their language abilities to the fullest potential. Bearing this in mind, Vygotsky's zone of proximal development (ZPD) involving the scaffolding process (Verinikina, 2003; 2008) is necessary in harnessing the language ability of the leaners until they are confident to display their language ability. In this situation, it is a negotiation taking place between the learner and a more advanced language user complement the goals of the learning (Richard, 2002). Furthermore, Richard (2002) also points out that the learners must also possess the necessity to be open to social interaction that is going to take place and to have the right attitudes towards the target language and also other users of it.

Richard (2002) highlights that in order for English as a Second Language (ESL) learning to occur, the learners must be equipped with the following elements: (1) a comprehensible input in the target language; (2) a supportive interactive environment; (3) an environment which provides support for learners to negotiate meaning in L2 with the help from teachers and from the others; (4) an environment which provides opportunities for communicative interaction with others; (5) a purposeful and meaningful conversation and tasks for the learners; (6) a safe environment for learners to express themselves.

ESL / EFL language learning scholars have identified several factors that affect language learning. These are intrinsic and extrinsic factors. Among intrinsic factors as highlighted by Malaysian Institute for Teacher Training or known as Institut Pendidikan Guru (2011) are "age of the learner, personality, motivation, experiences, cognition abilities and his native language" (p.11). On the other hand, some examples of extrinsic factors involve, "mode of instruction, and the opportunity to interact with native speakers both within and outside the classroom" (Institut Pendidikan Guru, 2011, p.11).

Numerous studies have also been conducted in language learning motivation scholars such as Dornyei (1998), Csizer and Dornyei (2005), to name a few. Prasangani (2015) also found a significant relationship between learner selves and motivated learning among undergraduates of Sri Lankan which identified L2 learning is also driven from one's personal's goals. Bahous (2015) discusses several issues in motivation in language learning among which are: (1) clarity and purpose and motivation; (2) positive learning experiences and motivation; (3) attitude, anxiety and motivation; (4) interactive communicative methods and motivation; (5) impact of teaching strategies and motivation; and she suggested that scaffolding is necessary for the learners especially for non-existence communication in the target language.

Having this in mind, one of the tasks that language teachers or instructors is to come up with suitable tasks for their target audience. These tasks are related to Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Communicative Language Approach. Some of the principles of Communicative Language Approach are as follows (Institut Pendidikan Guru, 2011):
 (1) The target language is used for communication purposes; (2) errors are tolerated; (3) teaching is more learner-centred; (4) one of teacher's major responsibilities is to promote communication; (5) communicative interaction encourages cooperative relationships among students. (p. 85)

Drawing from Communicative Language Approach which is being applied in CLT (Richard, 2006), task-based learning (TBL) is considered to play an important role for language learning and providing momentum to the teachers and learners. The TBL aims to integrate all the four skills namely, reading, writing, listening, and speaking and escalates from fluency to accuracy plus fluency (Institut Pendidikan Guru, 2011; Richard, 2006). It has the goal to provide a natural context for using the language and in this matter classroom activity is considered as the task and the target language has to be used in order to complete the task. This task is an activity which reflects real life such as problem solving, playing games, sharing information or experiences and many others (Institut Pendidikan Guru, 2011; Richard, 2006). Hismanoglu and Hismanoglu

(2011) reported that EFL has been drawn to task-based approach since 1980s due to its view towards the language as a communicative tool as well as being learner-centred.

Overall, the above literature provides the fundamental in staging the programme to take place.

Methodology

The respondents of the study were non-native speakers of English and they were all Asians. There were 40 of them involved in the study. Their age range was between 20 and 23 years old. All of them belonged to a university in Japan pursuing a Degree programme in engineering or science.

In gathering the data, a mixed-method approach was employed. A set of questionnaire was employed in collecting the data. It comprised two parts namely, close-ended and open-ended. There were eight sections available in the questionnaire.

Quantitative data obtained were analysed using descriptive statistic namely, frequency and percentages while qualitative data employed thematic analysis. These will be presented and discussed in the Findings and Discussion section, later.

Findings and Discussion

The study has revealed some important findings. In general, the findings from the close-ended questions indicated that the respondents gave positive feedback towards the overall programme in which all the items were rated more than 50 percent.

The course contents obtained 90 percent while the lecturers and buddies had percentages ranging from 90 to 100 percent. This was the good side of the programme in which the contents were very well-liked by the learners as well as the lecturers and the buddies, who were comprised from UTM students.

Accommodation obtained slightly lower percentage which was 73 percent, followed by venue of the class (68 percent), textbook (60 percent) and classroom facilities (58 percent). These few items were the items that the host lecturers had little control over them. For instance, if the learners did not like the textbook as their learning materials, the host lecturers could not help it because the textbook was determined by the learners' own university.

In terms of activities, namely trips/excursions and in-campus visits, the students had a mixture of responses. Though majority of them liked the visits, a few did not like them. It was probably due to the learners' personal background.

The findings from the open-ended questions, revealed 4 main themes namely: (1) Opportunity to use more English; (2) Increase in confidence level in using English; (3) An eye-opener to the participants on the importance of using English; (4) Better experience in terms of intercultural relationship.

With regard to the opportunity to use more English pertaining to listening and speaking skills, some participants voiced out that:

"I think it was good that my speaking skills became good. I was afraid that I talked in English so far, and it was able to be improved by having come to Malaysia. I want to come to Malaysia again.."

Here, the learners felt very happy because they were able to overcome the barriers of being frightened to speak in L2. The joy of speaking was heightened by the buddies who were always willing to help them in using the language. This was depicted earlier in the literature where the learners emerged from the "not known" zone to the "known" zone in Vygotsky's ZPD. The UTM buddies as the more advanced language users had scaffolded the Japanese English language learners in bringing out the learners' language potential.

The following excerpt also portrays this situation:

"In conversation with UTM students, when I couldn't understand what they said, they speaked (*spoke*) slowly. So, it was help for me practice of English. It was great experience in this 2 weeks."

Hence, the buddies play an important role in helping the EFL learners in overcoming the fear of using the target language.

In relation to the increase in confidence level in using English of the leaners as a form of communication, the following depicts their responses:

"There are a lot of chances for practicing English in this course. And UTM students will be friend, also they are kind. So, *you can enjoy and improve English…"*

and also reflected in this,

"In UTM, I learned English that will be useful in the future. Also, I learned how to do my presentation. At first, I didn't like to do it. But, as I study how to do my presentation and do it many times, I became used to it. So *now, I'm not nervous when I do my presentation*. I could gain my confidence."

In learning the target language, learners will be able to study and grasp mastery of the language if they are given a supportive environment. This has been supported by Dornyei and Csizer (1998) and also in more recent studies such as carried out by Gilakjani et al. (2012) who outlined three levels of motivation which include: (1) finding learners' passion; (2) changing learners' reality; (3) connecting to learning activities.

The programme has connected with the leaners' passion in learning the language. By providing ample opportunities to learners to practice their L2, it also increases their confidence level to the extent that they are able to do it independently at the end of the learning period.

Furthermore, as the programme being an eye-opener to the participants on the importance of using English and enriched their experience in their language learning in which the following portrays their responses:

"   I think it's awesome. Because *everything was new to me. There were many opportunities which I had never do before.* For example, we have to speak English in front of everybody and communicate with UTM students. I could not speak English because I was shy and afraid of using English. But, due to give me many opportunities, I become of wanting to use English."

"This course is very interesting for me. I wanted to learn more English here."

"I grow up *(improve) English skill, communication skill by joining this programme.* And, I could make new friends in UTM. So, I want other students to know it."

Supportive learning environment provides an avenue to the learners to improve their English language skills. In interacting with the instructors and fellow buddies, they were not scolded because of making mistakes in which the approach of CLT is emphasized. Hence, they would feel comfortable and as their confidence level escalated, more new vocabulary and longer sentences became visible in the production of the language.

Finally, the qualitative data pointing to better experience in terms of intercultural relationship had responses as portrayed in the following responses:

"I want to stay here more. My best experience in UTM is culture sharing session and trip to Tanjung Piai with UTM students. In these events, we can know each cultures easily and pleasantly."

"Culture sharing session with UTM students because we could know each other and we could learn about English and Malaysia."

"Exchanging culture and I could make friend with students in UTM."

The above excerpts show that by sharing each one's culture promotes the richness and uniqueness of each national culture of the learners, and thus, respecting each other, which is the important value instilled among learners. Furthermore, this sharing was done in L2 and not in the mother tongue of the learners. Hence, sharing one's culture does not limit one to the native language of the participants/learners.

Recommendation of This Programme to Others
Data from quantitative has shown that the programme was favourable to all participants and they liked the programme very much where all of them (100 percent) said that they would recommend it to other students. This indicated that they had gained valuable experience throughout their learning process at UTM and that a few pointed out their regrets for not joining earlier as stated by a participant who pointed out that "if I had known the benefits of this programme, I would have joined it during my first year…" . This was indicated since about 50 percent of the participants were in their final year of studies. Thus, the programme has been fruitful to the learners in meeting their personal aspirations in learning the target language.

Conclusion And Recommendations

Conclusion

In general, the course was a beneficial course to improve learners' communication skills. Theoretical underpinning the teaching methodology employed by the instructors has enabled the learners to carry out the given tasks such as to practice their speaking skills through in-class presentations, group discussions as well as talking to buddies and other UTM communities. Furthermore, having undergone this programme, the learners also realized the importance of English. They were also able to improve their confidence level in using English and eliminate their shyness while using the language. In terms of intercultural relationship, the course was also able to expose the students/learners to a new culture and respect each other both from Japanese and Malaysian students' perspectives.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following are the recommendations for future improvement of the programme:
1.   Revise course materials from time to time to meet the learners' needs.
2.   Improve condition of the classroom.
3.   Train the buddies (TTB) for future purposes.
4.   Omit places that are not likeable to the learners.

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