

The Potential Use of Videos to Improve Communication Skills in an English Language Course

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Abstract

An important soft skill that would be advantageous for undergraduate students is the ability to communicate effectively in English in the workplace. The current study is part of a larger study which is being conducted since 2012 in a tertiary level institution in Malaysia. English is taught as a second language in Malaysia. This study looks into the use of two video recordings of two small groups of students who were enrolled for a Business and Professional Communication course. Both groups consisted of five students each. Both groups were assigned the same small group discussion activity. Each group was required to identify the main points in a letter of complaint and respond to these points. The session of 40 minutes was video recorded. Both groups of students were given a period of three days to view or review the video of their respective groups. Individual interviews with the ten students showed that there was more awareness regarding the way they, as well as their friends communicate. The issues mentioned by students included verbal and nonverbal communication. Students also gave reasons as to why they engaged in certain communicative behaviors during the small group discussion session. These included silence, attempts to give alternative views, or to agree with their friends. Finally, these information or feedback from students could be useful for pedagogical purposes to improve students' small group communication skills.

Keywords: English, tertiary level, videos, communication, pedagogical purposes

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Introduction

Similar to many universities in the world, the Business and Professional Communication course has been offered in Universiti Utara Malaysia, which is located in Kedah, a northern state in the west coast of Malaysia. Once students have completed their proficiency level courses, students from selected schools in the university are required to enroll for the Business and Professional Communication course. It comes under the broad umbrella of the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) course. An ESP course not only focuses on the language aspects of teaching English, but also on the skills and genres associated with the content area of specialization (Dudley-Evans, 2001). The Business and Professional Communication course aims to fulfill several objectives. This includes the ability to use appropriate verbal and non-verbal communication skills for completing assigned tasks, prepare and write business documents effectively, conduct meetings effectively, use appropriate grammar in the communication process and more generally to be competent in the 21st century business environment. The transferable skills that the course hopes to impart to the students include writing business documents, oral communication skills, teamwork, business ethics and problem solving skills.

Literature Review

The ability to interact competently is a very important skill (Riggenbach, 1998; Olsher, 2004; Young, 2009; Walsh, 2011). Students need to acquire interactional competence not only for academic purposes and interaction with their fellow students but also for communication when they join the workforce. Students will need this soft skill to progress in their career and communicate effectively to achieve positive outcomes in the process of problem-solving.

Many definitions have emerged regarding interactional competence (Kramsch, 1986; Young, 2008; Young & Astarita, 2013). Young (2008) defined interactional competence as “a relationship between the participants’ employment of linguistic and interactional resources and the contexts in which they are employed” (p.101). An important aspect of interactional competence is that it is local and context specific. Young (2003) used the term ‘interactional resources’ in the realm of interactional competence to include interactional strategies. Examples of interactional strategies include turn taking, keeping the discussion on track, managing topics, and signaling boundaries. Markee (2008) emphasizes the importance of verbal communication, non-verbal communication and semiotic systems.

Many studies have been conducted on the use of videos in teaching English as a second language, improving communication, or generally in the teaching and learning process (Choi & Johnson, 2005; Barbier, Cevenini & Crawford, 2012; Sowan and Idhail, 2014). Studies have found that videos are useful and help in the learning process. A study by Choi and Johnson (2005) on the use of context-based video instruction in online courses showed positive results. They suggest that the quality of the video should not be neglected. Sowan & Idhail (2014) found that the use of videos managed to keep the students positively engaged and develop a better understanding in their field of study. Barbier, Cevenini & Crawford (2012) found that videos could help to improve student learning at the tertiary level.

Research Methodology

All participants were students selected from Universiti Utara Malaysia who were enrolled for the Business and Professional Communication course. The course described in this article was a one-semester course of 42 contact hours during a 14 week period. The students were majors in the field of business and management. Two groups of students were selected for the study. Each group consisted of 5 students. Both groups were from the same class and had completed the first three courses on proficiency. These were English for Communication 1, English for Communication 2 and Process Writing. They had an average age of 20 and were a mixed group of males and females.

The 10 students who participated in the study were informed beforehand that they would be video recorded. They were advised to remain focused on their task, that was, to respond to a letter of complaint about an air conditioning unit which had been delivered to the customer and how to address the complaints. Students identified the problem based on the letter of complaint and then responded with a solution. The session of 40 minutes was video recorded. Both groups of students were given a period of three days to view or review the video of their respective groups. The students agreed to participate in further interviews. The 10 students were told that their actual names would not be used in the research report. They were assured that confidentiality would be maintained at all times and participation was voluntary. As a preparatory measure, the 10 students were requested to revise the relevant parts of the Business and Communication module on small group communication, discussions, verbal and nonverbal communication as well as the specific section on complaint letters. This included the format for responding to complaint letters. Appointments were made with the students so that the 10 of them could give feedback or respond to the video viewing session. Semi-structured interviews were conducted, but students were also allowed to express their opinions freely on the video recording of their task based on a letter of complaint. The 10 student interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Students were allowed to respond in English or in Malay. Malay is the national and official language in Malaysia. The transcripts of the students were shown to the students so that they had an opportunity to check for accuracy. Changes to the script were made where necessary based on the students' feedback.

Findings

The responses of the students in relation to the video viewing session were thematically organized as follows.

The most important strand related to the usefulness of video viewing. Students became more aware of their communication activities and what their friends were doing. Below are some of the excerpts from student interviews, with the focus on verbal communication.

Quote 1: I was surprised at how I appeared in the video. It was good to know this is how I look. Never knew I looked so serious. But it was nice to see myself although I found some parts shocking. Didn't realize I switched to Malay every time I needed to give quick answers. I noticed that I switched to Malay when there was like pressure to move on fast or to answer fast. But at least I gave some suggestions to find solutions.

Quote 2: I think this is very useful. I wasn't aware of so many things I was doing during the session. I noticed that sometimes I was listening to the other group instead of my own group, own friend. Sometimes, I think I wasn't like that, like I was in the video. Surprised.

Quote 3: I realized that I was doing a lot of talking and two of my friends were just following. Maybe, I should find ways to get them more involved so that they give more ideas during the discussion. It was almost like two take the lead while the other three just follow or just say something extra. Anyway, this is good for me. At least I realize now that this is meant for everybody to take part and not just to get the assignment, finish. This is the good time to practice.

Quote 4: I think I am very talkative. I just noticed how much I talk and occupy the discussion. It is like three of us active, one average, while one silent. At least, the other two discuss my ideas or add something. I think the quiet ones should be put together because this will make them talk. Otherwise, they will just sit there and they will not talk, just let others do the talking part. I don't really mind but sometimes, it is so irritating when someone just sits there. You don't know whether he is following or what? We are there to discuss together. So, if he is silent, why just sit there.

Besides these aspects of verbal communication, students also observed certain aspects of nonverbal communication. The excerpts below show that students became more aware of their nonverbal actions or behavior during the discussion session.

Quote 1: I didn't even look at my friend when she asked for other opinions. I seemed to be busy writing when my friends were discussing. ...Should have really paid more attention. Next time, I will try not to do this. At least, I should have signaled that I agree.

Quote 2: I didn't like the way I sat. So horrible. Like in a coffee shop. So shame.

Quote 3: I kept playing with my pen. Turning and knocking softly on the paper. I didn't even know I was doing this. ... I was embarrassed to see myself giving that funny smile when I was asked to talk about the answer to the problem. The group leader called me and I just smiled and looked down.

Quote 4: So embarrassing. I was yawning towards the end of the session.

One aspect that the students mentioned was about silence. Each group had one student who could be considered silent as they talked for less than 60 seconds throughout the session. The following are excerpts from the two silent students from the two groups. The first quote is in contrast to the second quote. The first is from a student who perceives he is weak in English while the second perceives himself to be good in English.

Quote 1: It is like this all the while. I have been like this from school time. In school the teacher always ask us to write, and that time I talk very less. So, in the university, I feel the same. I find it hard to discuss, difficult. I maybe can write but not easy for me to speak because the school time I spend mostly writing. I only speak during the lesson when forced. Here I like to just listen rather than talk. And I think the others in

the group speak better than me. So, I feel a bit embarrassed to speak. They feel OK to speak. I am not used to this. But I can write something for the question. ...I am not too good, not good in English, speaking. I have problems to start, to talk in English. I speak with funny pronunciation. So, I think everyone is looking at me when I am talking and I feel so shy. I feel safer when I do not open my mouth. Feel really, let the others talk. I say a few words when the leader asks me to talk. I prefer to remain quiet.

Quote 2: I respect my group members. I just keep quiet because I think they are using very simple English and they are a bit slow. I tend to speak fast and also my pronunciation is a bit different. I speak English at home and the way we discuss there is quite different. So, I just prefer to keep quiet and let the others talk. I know what is going on and prefer to remain silent. I don't want to appear too smart. My friends are smart but maybe this is the way the group likes to discuss. I prefer stronger arguments and reasoning. If I start like this, then maybe they won't like it. So, just keep quiet.

There were also other issues raised by the students. Students talked about time management to complete the task, the tendency to write when discussion was more important to provide solutions, the discussion confined to selected students during the session, and also the recording itself. Two of the typical responses are given below.

Quote 1: The recording should be good and clear so that students do not have to stress to listen. But since I was really looking at what I was doing, it was okay.

Quote 2: I think this should be a part of the activity itself. Students must have access to the recording so that they can view it whenever they are free and improve. Really useful for me, as this is the first time I am doing this. I noticed that time management could improve. Not wasting so much time in the beginning and then later rushing to finish. Also, some students need to be more active, at least pay attention. When asked to give opinions, not just accept everything. We need to write the solutions. Not doing other things like writing. And there seems to be very little other ideas coming.

Students' suggestions

Most of the students suggested that video recordings be done and students get the opportunity to watch these videos. The responses below represent the views of most of the students.

Quote 1: It is helpful. Students must have the chance to see themselves and see for themselves what they are doing. Maybe, they don't even know what they are doing. Even I didn't realize so many things. I think it is useful. And we can replay whenever we want to. So, maybe this could be done as part of the course. Students must have the chance to view themselves. I think they will learn so many things about themselves. The module gives advice. It must be used.

Quote 2: I think we should encourage video recording and then letting students have a look at what they have done. This is very useful besides the feedback we get from our teachers. We can see for ourselves what we have done. I feel there are so many things I want to improve now.

Quote 3: I think this video viewing will really be helpful for us. There are many things I myself learnt and I feel the other students will also learn from this video. At least the students know the way they are talking among themselves. What I notice is that some times, only two are talking and the rest seem to be busy with something else. When we watch, we are aware of this. Maybe, this will make us pay more attention to our friends. It is better with the whole group listening. Most of the time it is watching other peoples' video but this one has me in it. I am the one. I think other students will also learn a lot about themselves when they watch the videos.

Students' voices were heard through their responses. The findings provided useful insights on the use of the video and students were able to give useful feedback or comments after viewing the videos.

Discussion

Generally, the study gives some useful pointers on the use of the video. Videos could contribute in a positive way towards interactional competence. Students have voiced their opinions that they were able to see the actual processes they were involved in during the interaction and found it a positive learning experience. Most said that the video viewing was a useful exercise because it was related to them actually performing the task assigned, planning the time, identifying the problems and getting the task completed with the help of the guidelines given in the module. In other words, they were able to see in virtual reality form what would otherwise be normally explained using words. Video viewing provides possibilities for students to reflect on the session from many aspects such as their contribution of ideas, verbal responses, expressions of agreement, choice of words, and eye contact. The benefits of using videos were also evident in other studies (Choi & Johnson, 2005; Barbier, Cevenini & Crawford, 2012; Sowan and Idhail, 2014).

Furthermore, many of the students felt that videos can be embedded during the learning process so that they are able to not only assess the verbal communication but also the nonverbal communication that is taking place. Sometimes, there is a tendency to emphasize the written output but neglect important aspects of nonverbal communication. The communication processes are helpful as the output from the discussions serve as input in the writing process.

Video based learning has the potential to play a more central role in the teaching of this course, that is, Business and Professional Communication. It helps to meet the current needs of students, as well as recognize future needs. For example, the need for eye contact could determine whether the other students respond positively to a viewpoint or do not give it the attention it deserves. The need for appropriate nonverbal communication would be important in the future workplace as well. Video viewing can help students view themselves in relation to others to improve their communication skills.

Video recordings can serve as useful tools in the pedagogical processes. Teachers can tap on video viewing as they can replay it many times, or focus on certain aspects they wish to emphasize about effective interactional competence. The videos can also be viewed independently by students. However, the quality of the video should not be neglected, as suggested in a study by Choi and Johnson (2005). This point was noted by some of the students. Guidelines could be given on what to do when viewing the

videos. For example, students can observe the body language, eye contact and ways of showing agreement or expressing alternative views. Distracting mannerisms can also be discussed. This will help them to improve their communication skills (Riggenbach, 1998; Olsher, 2004; Young, 2009; Walsh, 2011).

Conclusion

The findings in this study suggest that most students have a favorable view of the use of videos in the teaching of English. Video-based learning has several advantages and students have cited several reasons for supporting the use of videos in the teaching-learning process. The usefulness of the video-based lessons can be seen from the feedback given by students that they were more aware of the way they communicate during the discussion. This includes verbal and nonverbal communication. Technically, video recordings allow for replays, pauses or selective viewing. The use of the video, as seen in this study, provides useful insights on ways to use it or incorporate into the scheme of work as a self-directed activity. Instructors might consider the use of professionally recorded videos of students' communication activities to be included in courses, as an addition to existing teaching materials. The use of a video taken with a group of students who have enrolled for the same course enables students to look at the task-based activity more analytically and critically. Students have more opportunities to reflect on their interaction and communication patterns. They are also able to view the other participants engaged in the activity. Further investigation would be helpful as the scope of this research paper is rather limited. More studies on the use of the video will provide additional input to make more informed decisions on the use of these videos to improve the standard of English among undergraduates.

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