"Hear! Hear!": Effecrive Business Language Practices to Stimulate Lively Classroom Discussions

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1. Introduction

In the field of second language learning, foreign language learning and English language teaching, one area that constantly attracts research is how to motivate learners to learn and to use the language being learned. In a world where globalization is prevailing, learning a second / foreign language is a common trend. As English has been enjoying the status of the most popular lingua-franca, it is also the most learned second/foreign language. Continuous efforts are made to improve and enhance the learning of English in this fast changing world. One of the major challenges for researchers and English teachers is how to motivate learners to actively learn and use the language. Numerous methods have been suggested to motivate learners, such as the use of audio-visual means like music, movies and video clips, as well as online games and social media. All these are fun and relaxing ways to increase the learners' exposure to English and consequently their interest to learn English. The authors of this study shared the same interest in creating ways to motivate students to learn and use English. The authors attempted to investigate the effectiveness of a particular way – card games – to engage learners to actively use English in a near-authentic situation.

The authors taught an English communication course to the sophomores and one of the objectives of the sophomore English course was to help students gain competence to communicate confidently and effectively at the workplace. Some of the tasks to simulate speaking are handling difficult customers and conducting formal meetings. Both types of situations call for a certain level of fluency when speaking. When conducting a meeting, a number of language functions (e.g. agreeing, disagreeing, interrupting, and inviting people to speak, to name a few) have to be properly mastered so that conflicts can be eliminated and ideas can be clearly received. In order to allow for chances to practice the various functions and corresponding set phrases, and to let students understand and experience the need to carry out the functions before the actual assessment, a set of card games was designed for students to play. The purpose of the research was to examine the effectiveness of the games as a tool to let students utilize the phrases to express their views and carry out the functions. The research questions, as a result, were:

- Are card games perceived by the students an effective tool for students to practice set phrases learned for conducting a formal meeting in English?
- To what extend are card games effective for reinforcing the learning of the set phrases?
- Can the use of competitiveness boost the motivation to learn and use the set phrases?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Student characteristics – anxiety

Asian students are often seen to be quiet and passive in an SL/FL classroom. Due to the fact that they are accustomed to the teacher-centered learning environment, it may

not be easy for them to see themselves as the center of the class and therefore, take initiative to learn. This is particularly so in an SL/FL classroom. Various factors can cause anxiety in the learners, and researchers have revealed that anxiety could lead to unwillingness to speak in the language classroom (Liu & Jackson, 2008; Tok, 2009; Wang 2010).

In a study done by Tok (2009), some Turkish year 1 undergraduate students of non-English major were surveyed, and the results showed that half of the participants felt anxious to communicate in the English lessons, and those who felt their English was poor would have higher anxiety and lower willingness to speak in the English class. Due to anxiety, "weaker" students in an ESL/EFL classroom often prefer to remain quiet and are unwilling to speak up. While the more proficient students could engage comfortably in the learning activities, the "weaker" ones would not see much improvement in their communicative competence due to their unwillingness to speak.

Several studies have discovered that ESL/EFL learners with higher level of anxiety had relatively less sense of language achievement, perceived themselves to have lower ability in the language they were learning, and were less sociable and less willing to communicate in the language classroom (Horwitz, 2001; Kitano, 2001 (as cited in Wang, 2010)). Liu and Jackson (2008) surveyed more than five hundred non-English major Chinese university students and revealed that unwillingness to communicate is the language classroom was related to the students' anxiety. Wang's (2010) study on 240 university first year non-English majored students in China also concluded that speaking anxiety was related to unwillingness to communicate (avoidance), language class risk-taking as well as language achievement. Among these results, the study on the relationship between anxiety and unwillingness to communicate in the language classroom is of more immediate interest to SL/FL teachers, because if lower level of anxiety can give rise to more willingness to communicate, learning efficacy can be enhanced.

Liu, Liu and Su (2010) examined anxiety from a different angle. Their study looked into the change of anxiety level over time. The survey involved nearly one thousand Chinese year-one university students of non-English major and they noticed that although the overall results showed that for the whole sample, the level of anxiety had significantly decreased and the level of confidence had increased, more than 30% of the sample did express their worries about their performance in class. It was also evident that over the term, when students had more access and exposure to English, their confidence would increase. Consequently, the researchers of this study suggested that teachers should use different types of activities to give students more chances to use the language.

2.2 Motivation and creating relevance for learning

Motivation has long been regarded as one of the key factors for successful second/foreign language learning. Gardner (1982) suggested the three aspects of second language learning motivation as "affect", "desire", and "effort", and in his later study, Gardner (1985) referred motivation to the "desire", "intensity", and

"attitude" towards second language learning. Dornyei's (2001) definition of motivation dictates that motivation can initiate and maintain goal-oriented behaviours. In order to initiate learning or create a desire to learn, the teachers have to show the relevance of the knowledge to learn.

Cheung (2001) stated that (in Hong Kong) English learned in the typical "teacher-centered and form-accuracy oriented" English classroom was often regarded as irrelevant, or as Mok (1990, as cited in Cheung, 2001) suggested, not applicable to real life. Biggs and Watkins (1993, as cited in Cheung 2001) revealed that school learning in itself provided very little motivation for students to learn. Cheung (2001) echoed this view and stated that students would not be interested in learning if they could not see the relevance. Consequently, teachers had to choose engaging materials and methods to motivate students to learn. Cheung also stressed the need for an English class to allow for student interaction, exchange of information and feelings.

In view of this, a card game for formal meeting can serve the purpose. The situations for discussion can be set in an environment that the students can relate to. Consequently, students can have adequate knowledge to create meaningful content, and can use the language functions learned to carry out the conversation.

2.3 The use of games and competition in language learning

Gamification, a term first used in the business context, is used in language learning as a way to engage students to learning by relating learning to the students' needs (myenglishlanguage.com, 2017). It stimulates the students' competitiveness as well as their collaborative spirits. It helps to put new vocabulary and concepts into a real-world context. Language learning games can be fun and provide incentives for students for practicing what they have learned.

Competition provides learners "a sense of external urgency and drama" and therefore, can motivate learners to be more interested and involved in the learning process (The ICAL TEFL Blog, 2015). Yet, competition has to be utilized in a moderate lever because intense competition will create pressure and anxiety and thus demotivate learners. Therefore, competition for language learning should be fun and engaging. It should allow learners to work with different members, as this could encourage teamwork. A good language class competition should also provide clear guidance and an achievable goal, and allow learners to practice skills previously learned. Although Zarzycka-Piskorz's (2016) study focused on online games, the findings could support other types of games being used to enhance classroom language learning. Zarzycka-Piskorz suggested that the urge to win could serve as a driving force to play a language game. Games could also allow students to improve teamwork and respect rules and norms.

Khonmohammad, Gorjian, and Eskandari (2014) conducted an experiment to investigate the usefulness of game-based instruction versus the traditional way to teach grammar, and their findings suggested that learners in the experimental group showed significantly higher motivation to learn grammar than those in the control

group. They advocated that grammar could be taught in a more enjoyable way through games. The researchers explained that games could be used to teach various aspects of English in a more lively and energetic environment and suggested that games were particularly helpful to encourage shy students to express themselves to other people.

Boarcas (2014) suggested the use of games was an effective way to practice communication for English for Specific Purposes (ESP). She claimed that games that required students to communicate with each other could allow students to develop their communication skills subconsciously in a comparatively relaxing environment, and she listed useful game types such as vocabulary games, interview, relay spelling, questions, detective, the coffee pot game as well as puzzles. Admittedly useful, these games focus on the vocabulary level. The authors of the current study aimed to examine the effectiveness of card games to reinforce students' use of phrases for various functions in business communication.

Zhu (2012) strongly advocated the use of games in the universities in China. Zhu explained that the traditional teacher-centered classrooms had to be reformed and provide students opportunities to practice and improve, and to do so, games would be an ideal way to teach communicative ability. The research stated the importance to allow students to actually use the language. Games, being played in a fun and relaxed atmosphere, could lower the students' affective filter (Krashen, 1982), and thus be more willing to speak.

3. Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative approach and an exploratory research method as the purpose was to examine the usefulness of card games and competition to English learning and to find out college students' perception of the three variations of the card game.

The purpose of exploratory research is to explore the research question(s). It is used to examine new issues or issues that have not been researched much. Exploratory research is not conclusive and does not lead to final solutions. Rather, it can help define the nature of the problem and help the researchers gain a better understanding of the issue. During the research process, the researchers have to prepare to change the direction due to the emergence of new data and views (Dudovskiy, 2017).

The content of the research is crucial for the choice of data collection method. Focus group discussion is effective for gathering various views on the research issues and for exploring the issues, as the group of people can "validate typical behaviours in a community or neutralize extreme views" (Hennink, Hutter, & Bailey, 2011); therefore, focus group discussion was suitable for gathering views and opinions of the students after they had played the games. The students were informed of the purpose of the focus group discussion and agreed to be involved in it.

Prior to the focus group discussion, the students had attended classes in which the topic of formal meeting was addressed, the basic structure of a formal meeting was explained and a set of useful phrases for various common functions to be used in a meeting was introduced. Sample meeting video clips were played to demonstrate how formal meetings were held. The useful phrases were also mentioned in the videos. Then the students would study the phrases and complete some simple exercises to reinforce the learning of the phrases. Afterwards, the students were put into small groups to play the games.

The purpose of the games
The purpose of the games was to engage students in general scenarios which they could relate themselves easily to. For example, it could be a meeting to discuss a group project or an event to be held. A deck of cards including phrases for six major functions (giving an opinion, agreeing, disagreeing, seeking clarification, interrupting, looking at options) was to be used for the games.

The design of the games

Tyson (1998) listed the features of an effective educational game:
-       It should be fun to play
-       There should be "friendly" competition
-       It should involve all students
-       It should encourage students to focus on the use of the language they have learned, not the language itself
-       It should allow students to practice and/or review the language knowledge learned
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The three games for formal meetings match these features.

The three games would be effective for practicing decision-making meetings. A scenario could be given and the game could be played at three levels.

Game 1 (level 1) – each student is given a set of cards for 6 functions to be carried out during the meeting. One student is assigned the role of chairperson and is given 3 more cards (opening the meeting, invite people to speak, and closing the meeting). The students in the group then take turn speaking, using the phrases on the cards. If a student cannot use a card during his/her turn, s/he will need to pass. The student who finishes all the cards first wins.

Game 2 (level 2) – a scenario for discussion is given. All cards (for the 6 functions) are put together in one deck, face down at the centre of the desk. The chair will start the meeting and the members will take turn, draw a card, and speak with the phrase on the function card drawn. The student who successfully say something with the given phrase will keep the card. If the student fails to say anything with the drawn phrase, s/he will put the card to the bottom of the deck and pass. In the end, the student with most cards wins.

Game 3 (level 3) – a scenario for discussion is given. All cards, face down, are put at the centre of the desk in 6 small piles according to their functions. The discussion begins after the chairperson has started the meeting. Whichever member wants to speak can select a function care and do so with the phrase drawn. Each member can only use 1 card at a time. The first member to collect cards of all 6 functions wins.

Data Collection

Students were grouped randomly to play the games as practice. When one game was finished, they would be shuffled and put into different groups to play the next game. Three classes of students taking the Year 2 English communication course were interviewed after the games to gather their views of the games. They were told the purpose of the study and they all gave consent and joined the group discussion. Every discussion was about 20 minutes long. A few prompts were used to start the discussion and the major areas for discussion were:

- Did you enjoy the games?
- How useful did you find the games?
- Which game(s) did you find more effective in terms of practicing the set phrases?
- How did you feel about the competition elements in the games?
- What suggestions do you have to improve the games?

As the goal of the focus groups was to collect information and views from the students, they could choose to participate in the discussion in English, in Chinese or in a mixed mode. The discussions then went through verbatim transcription. Afterwards, content analysis of the transcripts was conducted to discover the major issues / views shared by these participants.

4. Findings

Four major themes emerged from the focus group interviews: reinforcement of the target language, the effectiveness of the competitive element (including students' enjoyment), awareness of particular role(s) in business meetings and how these games can be improved. Another obvious but important observation among the interviewees that rapport among each group of students is an indispensable foundation for successful formal meetings.

4.1 Applying the target language

Teachers are not robots. In fact, many ESL teachers always try to insert fun and competitive elements into their classroom teaching (Quijano-Cruz, 2009). Adding fun activities in a classroom not only can motivate learning, but keeping the students engaged in speaking tasks. Nonetheless, two commonalities came out of the interviews. First, interviewees have all enjoyed taking part in all three activities. Additionally, by practicing the target language through these games, they have been able to memorize and apply the phrases that were taught in the previous class(es).

In relation to applying the target language in these activities, almost all students that were interviewed felt that these game have reinforced them to think of the meaning on the spot and use the target meeting language correctly.

"The first game helps me to categories the functions and be familiar with the phrases."
Regarding the first game, many students agreed that it was good to be given a few minutes to look at their own cards, and be to organize their thoughts and opinions before the meeting begins.

"I think it is good to prepare for a meeting. Not only the content, but also what I am going to say. Having these cards in front of me helps me to organize my thoughts and to plan how I can use the language according to each of the functions. If I don't plan in my head before it starts, I think I am not going to do as well as the others."

Being a Hotel Management second year student, interviewee J. even attempt to memorize the phrases during these games.
"They are helping me to memorizing all these phrases. I really didn't think that I could remember ALL of them, given how many there are."

Another student of the same group expressed a similar view.

"It really makes you think on the spot and it is exciting!"

During the focused group interviews, they two key findings were that students agreed that these games help them to be familiar with the function, the target language and have an awareness of applying them correctly. At the same time, the more capable students starts to memorize the target language, and later on, during the assessment, they were able to use these language phrases without the cards to remind them.

4.2 The motivation created by the competitiveness

The discussed of the focused group interviews had a general wave of agreement on the enjoyment of these games. Students indicated that they were motivated to be engaged in the meeting discussions. Heritage Management student C. is one of the particularly shy and quiet student points out that these games have encouraged to not being so quiet during English speaking tasks.

"It forces me to think on my feet and to express my opinion more. I don't think I can be quiet anymore, otherwise I would lose the game!"
"And, because everyone speak clockwise in the first game. I can't even escape, I had to speak."

A few other interview discussion point out that they all had to pay attention and listen to each other during the activities.

" In order to use the card correctly, so that I could get rid of them, I had to listen to what everyone says. If I want to disagree with someone, I first have to understand what s/he had said, then give my reasons why I was disagreeing with them. Same with the cards of 'clarification', I cannot ask someone to clarify if I don' understand what s/he is saying in the first place."

This game also motivate weaker students to practice their English speaking skills. One student of Heritage Management major indicates that he had to practice at home so that he is not losing the games.

"Seeing everyone in my group using the cards so quickly made me feel that my English is really not good. I don't want to be ended up only using a few cards. I want to use them all! So, I have to look at my list of language and notes again, to be more familiar with them.'

Therefore, the results have suggested that less capable and quieter students have been benefited by playing these games. Because of the competitiveness, they are encouraged to expressed their opinion and be familiar with the language and its functions.

4.3 Awareness of the different roles in formal meetings

Taking part in formal business meetings also means students have to understand the different roles including the chairperson, secretary and other participants. It is possible that this is confusing to some, especially when learners have never had the experience of playing a role in formal meetings. The interviewees, however, have agreed that these games help them to understand the different roles better. One student, who is Hotel Management majored, gave her opinion about playing the role of a chairperson:

"When I was picked to be a chairperson and given the cards. I had to know the steps of opening and closing a meeting. I check my notes if I don't. Sometimes, it is hard to remember all the steps and I may forget one or two without the cards. The cards are really helpful."

In other words, some students finds it challenging to begin a formal meeting and follow the procedures, as well as inviting others to speak. Another student from the same group also said:

" Sometimes, there are arguments in these meetings, because we all had to agree and disagree with each other. It is like non-stop! As a chairperson, it is good to be reminded that I had to summarize all the main points and end the discussion. The cards remind me to do so."

Other participants of the meetings also had to use the cards 'tackly' in order to win the game.

"*While I was playing the second game, I had to rearrange my ideas and said them in an order so that I could pick and us as many cards as possible, then win. It is great that I can use more than one cards. For example, I may ask someone to 'clarify' their ideas' then I either 'agree' or 'disagree', that's two cards in one go!*"

Students seem to be able to realize that discussion in English do not end with only one phrase or sentence. In order to create a logical flow in discussions, many have to apply language of more than one functions. It was also beneficial that students were given different roles each time so that everyone is given the opportunity of practicing different target language.

4.4 Ways of improvement

It is undoubtable that these three games help our students to engage in formal meeting speaking tasks. During the focused group interviews, students had also made a few suggestions to improve these games. Many of their opinion were related to motivation and learning:

"*After I finish all my cards, I don't need to speak anymore.*"

"*I don't like being the chairperson because I am always last to finish all the cards. I can never win.*"

Moreover, some of their suggestions were concerning the design of the games:

"*For the first time, the winner shouldn't be the one who uses all the card, but the one who is able to persuade others. That's the actual goal of a business meeting.*"

"*In the first game, perhaps I should just be given the 'agreeing' or 'disagreeing'. Having both can be difficult because sometimes I don't feel like changing my opinion.*"

As a teacher, my observation is that some weaker students find it hard to pay attention to others as they are too focused on the cards. This may result in a meeting that it is not achieving its goal, which is reaching a conclusion. Overall, the three card games were the key to the success of getting students to be engaged in business discussion. Moreover, students were each others' "advisors and assessors" as they had to monitor whether the cards had been used correctly (Leki, 1990). It is suggested that these game not only activate the ideas and opinion of learners, helping them to be engaged in speaking, it has an effect on improving their listening skills as well.

5. Discussion and conclusion

As discussed in the literature review, some students feel anxious to communicate in English classes. They are particular quiet and passive when participating in speaking activities (Liu & Jackson, 2008; Tok, 2009; Wang 2010). These games were designed specifically for weaker and shy students to be engaged and take turns to speak. These

students had also expressed the games have encouraged them and other members of the groups are also helpful to checking understanding before the discussion begins.

The end goal of these games was to win and finish the meeting with a decision. It is clear that the games have generated goal-oriented behaviors which was recommended by Dornyei (2001). By having a goal, students find the relevance and desire to win, then are motivated to master the target language, which is much more effective than the teacher-centered approach (Cheung, 2001; Gardner, 1982). These card games are a way to keep learners engaged, focused, as well as giving their willingness a boost.

As an ESL instructor and observer of this exploratory classroom research, there was a lively and energetic environment among all classes when playing these card games. This outcome is in line with the investigation by Khonmohammad, Gorjian, and Eskandari (2014) and shows that having the fun and active atmosphere have motivated the learner in a positive manner.

5.1 Limitations

The most obvious shortcoming to this project is that only students were interviewed. To fully examine the effectiveness of these card game, it would be better to contrast the views of students with those of teachers, however, the researchers' limited resources made that impractical. Secondly, the interviewees were all based in the same institute and share a basis for their student so commonalities are to be expected. To extend the validity of any findings, this research should be repeated in different bodies of population.

5.2 Conclusion

The findings have shown that these business card games have a number of positive outcomes. First of all, the games have helped students to further acquire the target language , and then reinforce to apply these phrases correctly. Many learners were able to memorise these phrases after playing the games a few times.

Furthermore, the competitive element has motivated all students even those who are shy and quiet. The games keep them engaged and students all seem to enjoy participating in these game-based activities. The atmosphere was lively and while learners were involved in their discussion, their listening skill was also enhanced. Learners are also able to take turns and practice different roles of a formal meeting.

There are still ways to improve the design of these games. By sharing our ideas, teachers of other ESL classroom can apply our strategies, then design their own competitive games and make their classrooms as fruitful as possible.

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