The Effect of Active Learning Strategies on Students' Attitudes Towards English: A Study at Universiti Teknologi Petronas

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ABSTRACT

The availability and diversity of instructional methods in English classroom has increased tremendously in the last decade. As a result, the lecture format has been redesigned and more interactive teaching and learning strategies have been developed. Hence, this paper explores the effect of active learning on students' attitudes in learning English as a second language (ESL). Active learning techniques were employed in teaching and learning process for the duration of 12 weeks. At the end of the semester session 2017/2018, a set of questionnaire on students' attitudes towards English language and active learning was administered to 100 foundation students of English language course at Universiti Teknologi Petronas. The descriptive quantitative analysis was employed to analyse the data by using IBM SPSS statistical software. Findings of the study show that most students have positive attitude towards both English and the use of active learning to teach English. Besides, the higher-order cognitive skill and soft-skill could be developed through the use of active learning strategies.

Keywords: Active learning; Learning strategies; ESL; Individual learning; Cooperative learning

INTRODUCTION

Education system has undergone tremendous changes in the last decades. These changes are no longer an option, but rather a necessary progression to ensure a relevant education system. Countless methods and approaches have been introduced to provide students with learning experiences that best suit their needs in this new millennium. Recently, active learning has become an alternative to the conventional teaching methods as it is proven to have more desirable effects on developing learners' skills. Teacher-centred method is believed to be ineffective because it only provides learners with knowledge on the surface levels (McCarthy & Anderson, 2000). Classes are being conducted in such a passive environment, leaving no room for learners to explore and utilise their true potential. Active learning, on the other hand,

provides learners will endless opportunities to delve deep into the lessons, beyond what is taught by teachers in classroom. Active learning places great emphasis on stimulating learners' communicative and critical skills through activities that provide them with chances to actively participate and engage in classroom (Demirci, 2017). Knowledge that the learners receive through these activities will be more meaningful as they become part of the lesson experience, not just mere listeners (Lak, Soleimani & Parvaneh, 2017).

The role of English as an international language and professional medium of communication in Malaysia has placed an important emphasis on learners to acquire this language. In Malaysia Education Blueprint (2013-2025), it has become both necessity and priority to enhance students' proficiency in English to equip them well before entering the workforce. However, English language proficiency is not something theoretical that can be taught overnight. The four main skills in English; reading, writing, listening and speaking can only be acquired over time through constant practice and reinforcement. Common practices such as worksheets and workbook exercises are no longer proven to be effective. This conventional method may help learners to pass the exams, but they need more than just on-paper-practices to become proficient in English.

The way lessons are delivered in class plays a significant role in teaching and learning process. Every lecturer will deliver the same contents but what varies are their approaches and techniques. The most common struggle faced by learners that hinders them from understanding the lesson is their motivation level. According to Ekiz and Kulmetov (2016), the lack of motivation among students is due to the absence of many required needs in learning such as engaging teaching method and interactive classroom approach. The method of teaching English through repetition and book exercises contribute to the lack of motivation among students as there is very minimal interaction and participation involved (Khajloo, 2013). The integration of active learning in today's teaching approach serves as a solution to overcome all these common issues faced by both lecturers and students.

Active learning is an approach which necessitates students' involvement to the fullest, enabling them to take control of their own learning without being dependent on their teachers (Demirci, 2007; Bowman & Eison, 1991). Active learning in Malaysia's education system is no longer new as it has been extensively used over the years due to its proven efficacy. Universiti Teknologi Petronas (UTP), a renowned private university in Malaysia has always aimed at giving the best learning experience to the students. Aware of the common issues surrounding language learners and language teaching itself, UTP has encouraged its lecturer to integrate active learning approach in their teaching in order to produce students who are critical, confident and active.

Therefore, this study aims to identify the effect of active learning strategies used in curriculum and pedagogy on the attitude of undergraduate students at UTP towards English language. The researchers also explore the advantages and benefits of active learning strategies and its relevancies in 21st century of language learning.

ACTIVE LEARNING APPROACH

Traditional teaching approaches saw the teacher as mainly responsible for learning, while the students play the role of a mere receiver and act as a passive participant in teaching and learning

process (Araujo, A. & Slomski, V., 2013). Most traditional teaching approaches use white board and marker or in some cases; slides presentation to deliver the lectures.

Many scholars believe that active learning has positive impact on students' learning outcome. The active learning approach requires students to develop diverse activities in order to generate full consciousness of what they are doing since it involves content processing that allows them to learn (Michael, 2006) (Carr, R., Palmer, S. & Hagel, P., 2016). This process transforms the students' role from passive to active which let them become the main role in their own learning (Araujo, A. & Slomski, V., 2013). Hence, the key elements of active learning are introducing an activity in the classroom and encouraging the students to engage in the activity (Kanopka, C. Adaime, M. & Mosele, P., 2015).

In addition, the active learning approach engages students in learning process through various activities inside and outside classroom, instead of passively listen and take note from the teacher. Huge emphasis is put on higher order thinking and teamwork (Freeman, S., Eddy, S. L., Mcdonough, M., Smith, M. K., Okoroafor, N., Jordt, H., & Wenderoth, M. P., 2014). Examples of such activities include active listening and writing, peer teaching and role-play as well as debates.

However, there are lots of obstacle in implementing active learning which are difficult to overcome. This includes negative attitude from students who refuse to actively participate in the process and also lecturers who may lose control of the class. Active learning strategies requires changes in teacher's logic with the classroom environment (Kanopka, C. Adaime, M. & Mosele, P., 2015). Active learning demands teachers to firstly establish the goals to be achieved and to choose appropriate active learning strategies to reach the objective. Next, teachers need to plan the class activities to encourage students to pursue the necessary knowledge to achieve the learning objective by providing active learning strategies such as elaborating questions, debates, project and others.

EMPLOYING ACTIVE LEARNING STRATEGIES IN UTP

Think-Pair Share requires students to work individually on questions posed by the lecturers. Then, the students need to find a partner to discuss the answers both of them have come up with and together choose the best answer. Think-Pair Share is an effective approach as it provides students with more time to think, thus improving the quality of their answers (Rowe, 1974).

Focused Listing is a simple interactive activity which requires students to list their ideas individually on previous lessons' topics before sharing them with their group mates. After that, they need to come out with better ideas by using ideas contributed by each of the group mates. This strategy helps to activate students' thinking and their ability to recall and retain past lessons.

Peer led team learning (PLTL) is a method with the particularity that students lead the groups. They are recruited and trained for this role. They lead groups of six to eight classmates during workshops, solving previously structured problems. This method showed good results when students with the leader's role received a great experience, gaining knowledge about the subject, personal skills, as communication and professional skills as leadership (Micari, M., Streitwieser, B. & Light, G., 2005).

METHODOLOGY

Participants of this study are 100 foundation students from academic session 2017/2018 who took English 1 (FAL0013). English 1 syllabus mainly covers reading skills and literature component. In order to explore the impact of active learning towards their behavioural changes in English language class, a set of questionnaire was administered at the end of the semester. 12 weeks of intervention was done and three active learning strategies were used throughout the duration.

Research procedure

Four active learning strategies were used during the 12-week duration namely Think-Pair Share, Focused Listing and Peer Led Team Training (PLTL) interchangeably depending on the nature of the lesson. Think-Pair Share was usually used as an introductory activity to encourage students to share and present their ideas on given issues. Focused Listing on the other hand was used to discuss comprehension passages and articles and to recall previous lessons. Peer Led Team Training (PLTL) was employed for literature lessons, discussing poems and dramas assigned to them beforehand.

At the end of the semester students were required to response to a set of questionnaire adapted from previous study and modified to suit the current study (Mark, K. & Hara, B., 2015). The questionnaire consisted of three parts. Part A consists of questions on the learners' demography, part B elicits the student's attitude towards English language and part C probes on student's attitude towards active learning. This study employed descriptive quantitative analysis and the IBM SPSS statistical software was used to analyse the data. Basically, respondents' demographic information was presented in percentage and tables of frequencies. For answering part B and C, the mean score was compared the range of 1 to 5 to determine the level of agreement among learners. The level of agreement can be categorized into five categories, namely strongly disagree, disagree, not sure, agree and strongly agree.

Results and Findings

This study aims to analyse the impact of active learning strategies in learning ESL towards students' attitude. The data for this study were collected through a set of questionnaire and analysed in descriptive. This study's findings are categorized into three sections- learners' demographic information, students' attitude towards English and students' attitude towards the use of active learning. The findings are as follows:

Demographic Background

The findings revealed the learners' perception towards the use of active learning in learning English. As mentioned, the data for this study were obtained from the questionnaire and calculated using the descriptive statistics function in IBM SPSS version 22. This study's findings were then presented in three sections, learners' demographic information, learners' attitude toward English language and learners' attitude toward active learning approach. The results are shown below:

Table 1: Demographic Background

Items	Sub-items	(N)	(%)
Age	18-19	97	97
	20-21	3	3
Gender	Male	55	55
	Female	45	45
Program	Engineering	35	35
	ICT	30	30
	Science	35	35

Table 1 presents the demographic backgrounds of the English language learners in UTP. The respondents were students from all programmes in UTP who took English 1. Most of the respondents aged between 18 to 19 with (97%) and while the remaining respondents are aged 20 and above. Meanwhile, 55% of the respondents are female while 45% of the respondents are male. Majority of the student are engineering and science students and only 30% of them are ICT students.

B) Students' Attitude Towards English Language

Table 2: Students' Attitude Towards English Language

Items	(N)	Mean	Score
English is easy	100	3.47	Very high
English is exciting	100	4.07	Very high
English is complicated	100	2.70	High
English is confusing	100	2.66	High
English is scary	100	2.20	High
English is comprehensible	100	3.63	Very high
English is challenging	100	3.44	Very high
English is interesting	100	4.02	Very high
English is attractive	100	3.98	Very high
English is worthwhile	100	3.94	Very high

As shown in Table 2, The students need to answer questions on their attitude toward English language. Majority of the students believes that English language is exciting with the mean score of 4.07. The rest of the students choose other positive responses such as English is interesting (4.02), English is attractive 3.98, English is worthwhile (3.94) and English is comprehensible (3.63). A mean score of 2.20 is recorded for English is scary, which shows that majority of them are not afraid of learning English. Overall, this data shows that majority of the students have positive feelings towards learning English.

C) Students' Attitude Towards Active Learning Approach

As shown in Table 3, the highest recorded response is Active learning is an effective method in delivering the lessons with the score of 4.33, followed by active learning encourages students to participate in the lessons and active learning will help learners to communicate more with the peers with the same score of 4.07. Some students believe that active learning also will help learners a lot in remembering the lessons and it is the interesting way of learning English

language with the score of 4.0 and 3.98 respectively. In this regard, most of the respondents agree that active learning help them in improving their proficiency in English language.

Table 3: Students' Attitude Towards Active Learning Approach

Items	(N)	Mean	Score
Active learning helps you to communicate more with your peers.	100	4.07	Very high
Active learning helps you to understand lessons better.	100	4.03	Very high
Active learning helps you a lot in remembering the lessons.	100	4.0	Very high
Active learning is an interesting way of learning English language.	100	3.98	Very high
Active learning encourages students to participate in the lessons.	100	4.07	Very high
Active learning gives equal chance for students to involve in the lessons.	100	3.93	Very high
Active learning is an effective method in delivering the lessons.	100	4.33	Very high

DISCUSSION

One of the main obstacles throughout the employment of active learning strategies is the students' reluctance to be more proactive in their learning (Joel, 2007). Teachers need to be more creative and innovative in order to sustain student's participation in every activity provided in the classroom. The time required to prepare a new active learning strategy is longer than the traditional lecture (Cynthia, J. M. & Michael, J. M., 2014). However, the impact of active learning is bigger compared to the traditional lecture as it gives student more benefits and provide opportunities to develop self-confidence, practice life-long learning, polish higher order thinking skills and leadership (Omar, Taib & Basri, 2012; Jamila & Maslawati, 2017).

Employing active learning also helps to give students a more positive outlook towards English language. It changes the mind-set that English is scary and a boring subject. Active learning gives opportunities for students to experience deep learning and at the same time improve their English proficiency by participating in all activities in the classroom. Self-confidence and soft skills such as leadership could be developed and enhanced since all the activities need participation from the students. Active learning strategies also give equal chance for students to delve deep into the lesson. Therefore, the introvert student will not be ignored and the process of delivering lesson to all students will be more effective.

Besides, the consistency of active learning in classroom could encourage the students to be more participative in the activities. Students might not participate actively in first activity; but the consistency of active learning will change their attitude towards active learning strategies. Being afraid of making decision, grammatical error, reluctance could be abolished by active learning and teachers need to be a facilitator to control all the activities in the class so that everything will move in a right direction.

CONCLUSION

Promoting active learning is not an easy task to achieve, and teachers need to keep on practicing in class. This study has shown that active learning changes students' attitude towards both English language and active learning strategies itself. Besides, active learning also could improve the understanding of the knowledge and it is by far one of the methods to deliver lesson effectively as it gives opportunity for students to experience the learning process first hand. Soft-skills such as leadership and teamwork and higher-order thinking skills such as problem solving ability and critical thinking could be developed during the activities conducted

in the classroom. Therefore, with regards to future direction, it would be interesting to explore the effectiveness of active learning strategies on different subjects other than English.

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