

USING COOPERATIVE LEARNING STRATEGIES IN THE  
ACHIEVEMENT OF SPEAKING SKILLS IN A MUET CLASS

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## DEDICATION

To my beloved late parents

And to my siblings for their support and encouragement.

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This study would not have been possible without the help of several people. I wish to extend my sincere appreciation to them in helping me complete this project.

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May God Bless You All

## ABSTRACT

With the introduction of the Malaysian University English Test, there is a heavy demand on teachers to use different strategies in class sessions to improve students' speaking skills. This study was conducted in order to investigate how the use of cooperative learning strategies promoted and improved the use of selected speaking skills among Form Six students in a secondary school. The study was also conducted to find out the perceptions of the students in using cooperative learning in language acquisition. Using audio-recordings and an interview, the data was collected from 16 Form Six students. The findings of the study revealed that cooperative learning strategies increased the use of the speaking skills among students and students found it useful in language acquisition. From the audio-recordings and analysis of transcripts, cooperative learning behavior prevailed among members in the group. There was peer group support and encouragement to generate discussion among members. During group discussions students of heterogeneous language proficiency interacted by using various verbal strategies to ask for and provide information, seek and provide clarification and also to express opinions based on sub-topics given. Strategies used also revealed that students of higher language proficiency prompted the lower proficiency members to interact in group discussions by prompting and providing cues. Hence, through dynamic interaction in group discussions, elements of cooperative learning such as positive interdependence, face-to-face interaction, individual accountability and social skills were enhanced which led to an increase in the use of speaking skills among the Sixth Formers. The results of the interview also indicated that students prefer to participate in cooperative learning activities for language acquisition. Lastly, the researcher discusses pedagogical implications and suggests recommendations for future research

## ABSTRAK

Kajian kes ini yang melibatkan 16 orang pelajar Tingkatan 6 bertujuan melihat samada penggunaan strategi pembelajaran koperatif boleh meningkatkan kemampuan pelajar-pelajar tersebut dalam penguasaan kemahiran lisan dalam komponen lisan Malaysian University English Test (MUET). Kajian ini juga dijalankan untuk mengetahui persepsi pelajar Tingkatan 6 dalam menggunakan pembelajaran kooperatif dalam Bahasa Inggeris. Dua kaedah digunakan untuk mendapatkan data: audio rakaman dan temubual. Penemuan kajian menunjukkan bahawa strategi pembelajaran kooperatif meningkatkan penggunaan kemahiran lisan pelajar. Pelajar juga lebih minat pada penggunaan strategi pembelajaran kooperatif dalam pengajaran dan pembelajaran bahasa. Dari rakaman audio and analisis transkrip, didapati bahawa perilaku pembelajaran koperatif berlaku di antara ahli dalam kumpulan. Sokongan and dorongan kumpulan sebaya wujud untuk menghasilkan perbincangan dan interaksi antara ahli. Pelajar berinteraksi dengan satu sama lain dalam kumpulan dengan menggunakan pelbagai strategi lisan untuk meminta dan memberi maklumat, bertanya dan memberikan penjelasan dan juga untuk mengekspresikan pendapat berdasarkan sub-topik yang di berikan. Strategi yang digunakan juga menunjukkan bahawa pelajar yang lebih profisyen lebih mendorong ahli yang kurang profisien melalui dorongan dan isyarat. Oleh itu, interaksi menjadi lebih dinamik dalam perbincangan kumpulan yang mana elemen-elemen dari pembelajaran koperatif seperti saling pergantungan yang bersifat positif, interaksi bersemuka, akauntabiliti individu dan kemahiran sosial bertambah yang meningkatkan kemahiran pertuturan dikalangan pelajar Tingkatan Enam. Hasil dapatan temubual juga menunjukkan bahawa pelajar lebih berminat untuk menyertai aktiviti pembelajaran koperatif. Akhir sekali, penyelidik juga membincangkan implikasi pedagogi dan memberi beberapa cadangan untuk kajian masa depan.

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## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **1.0 Introduction**

The English Language plays an important and dynamic role of communication in stimulating growth and development in Malaysia. In this era of globalization with English being the lingua franca of the world, its role as a communication tool is becoming indispensable. Proficiency in English is understood and recognized as one of the prerequisites emphasized in the job market today. It is not only a contributing factor for employment needs but also necessary for one's professional career development.

Lack of effective communication skills especially in the English Language has been cited as one of the contributing factors of unemployment among graduates (Sibat, 2005; Jacob, Hui and Ing, 2006). This further reinforces the importance of having a good command of English for a better future. The English Language is an important part of the Malaysian School Syllabus from primary right up to tertiary level. However, studies and research have shown that a good number of students are still unable to speak the language effectively when they pursue their studies at post

secondary or at tertiary level despite learning the language from Primary One to Form Five. (Don, 2003).

To further encourage the learning of the English Language after Form Five and to ensure that Malaysia's human resources have a good command of English, MUET (Malaysian University English Test) a standardised language test was designed by Malaysian Examination Board in 1999 as a prerequisite for students planning to study at local universities. As mentioned by Zuraidah Mohd Don, a member of the MUET Syllabus Committee Malaysia, in her article (MUET: Issues and concerns, 2003), MUET may offer a solution to complaints about undergraduates who lack communicative proficiency and competency in the English Language to meet the demands made of them in the university and when they seek employment in the mainstream of life.

Through MUET, Form 6 students will be provided with assistance to hone their English language skills required at university or tertiary level to enable them to perform effectively in their academic pursuits when they move from a familiar world to an unfamiliar one. The general objective is to bridge the gap in language demands between secondary and tertiary education.

In view of the urgent need for students to improve their English communication skills, the researcher feels that cooperative learning provides an opportunity for students to interact and communicate in English. Oral communication skills can only be acquired through practice (Lo, Lajuni & Yee, 2007). Hence, it would be more practical to learn through continued practice rather than listen to lectures which are teacher-centered as learners may not be motivated and interested in doing the activities without being aware of what objectives the activities will achieve.

English Language teachers of pre-university or Form six students will have to ensure that they provide a platform for students to practice their spoken English so that Malaysia's future human resources have a good command of English which will help them when they go for tertiary education and also lead to substantially improved employment prospects especially in business and organisations with an international orientation.

With this in mind the researcher feels that cooperative learning will enable students to develop communicative competence in the English language by conversing in socially or pedagogically structured situations. Generally cooperative learning provides interactive and structured group learning that are considered optimal for learning the appropriate rules and practices in conversing with others. (Richards, J., 2007). Given that, there is a possibility that the use of cooperative learning strategies may enhance the achievement of selected speaking skills of the sample population.

## **1.1 Background of Study**

Speaking is an important skill because one of the keys in English communication is language competence.

The Malaysian University English Test introduced in 1999 is taken by those who have already sat for any of the following examinations: Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM), SPM (Vocational), Malaysian Certificate of Examination (MCE), Cambridge School Certificate or those who have gone through a 11-year formal education, that is equivalent to the O-level ( Don, 2003)

The Malaysian University English Test (MUET) seeks to measure the English language proficiency of candidates planning to pursue tertiary education at Malaysian universities. As explicitly stated in the MUET Handbook (Malaysian Examination Council, 1999:11), the MUET syllabus “seeks to consolidate the



English language ability of pre-university students to enable them to perform effectively in their academic pursuits at tertiary level, in line with the aspirations of the National Education Philosophy”. It serves to bridge the language gap between SPM school-leavers and university undergraduates. Students in Form Six classes will study English for one and a half to two years before furthering their education at public universities. It is a proficiency test of all four skills or components; listening, speaking, reading and writing.

Therefore, the MUET places a heavy demand both on teachers and students to develop and improve and develop competency in the four skills.

This study will focus on only the speaking component of MUET. The speaking component primarily tests students on communicative and interactive skills, observing social conventions, conveying facts and opinions, seeking and expressing relationships, making suggestions and recommendations, expressing agreement and disagreement, seeking clarification, stating and justifying points of view and presenting an argument among others. The speaking test is designed to elicit real spoken language through the creation of tasks that require candidates to present their views in the spoken form and interact with other candidates. The speaking component seeks to assess the candidates’ ability to interact in both social and academic contexts. This reflects the goal of language learning in the MUET syllabus that is to develop students’ communicative competence to enable them to use language in multiple functions it serves in real life.

There are two sections in the speaking component; an individual presentation (Task A) and group discussion (Task B). Each section fulfils a particular function in terms of task output or fulfilment, candidate output in terms of language use and interaction pattern or communicative abilities. In Task A or individual presentation, candidates are assessed among other things the ability to present facts or opinions, elaborate and develop new idea, justify and explain a topic or viewpoint clearly using supporting evidence or examples.

In Task B or group discussion, students are tested on the ability to interact with other members of the group using appropriate and relevant social expressions. Some of the communicative abilities assessed include the ability to participate in a

discussion, initiate and generate discussion, sustain and bring the discussion to a closure, express preferences and make decisions, ask for clarification and negotiate meaning.

Thus, the importance of the speaking component in MUET cannot be underestimated. The increasing language demands made of university students require that they be adequately equipped or competent language wise for entry into universities. English or MUET teachers shoulder the responsibility of making sure Form 6 students are well prepared to meet the demands. MUET teachers must provide or create ample opportunities for students to practice and learn as well as demonstrate the required language skills or abilities to the optimum level within the limitations of the classroom

In the light of this discussion, it can be deduced that cooperative learning is one such purposeful and interactive approach MUET teachers can draw on in improving speaking skills of Form Six students.

## **1.2 Statement of the Problem**

Studies show that undergraduate students are unable to communicate effectively in English to meet the language demands expected of them in university even after 11 years of schooling from Year One to Form 5 and 1 ½ to 2 years of schooling in Form 6 or matriculation studies (Don, 2003) .According to observations, instructional approaches or methods do not provide ample opportunities for students to use and practice the language learnt in the class. Time constraints and large class size of forty students with varying English Language proficiency levels may not be factors which are conducive to develop communication skills among students.

A report from the Majlis Peperiksaan Malaysia (Malaysian Examination Council, 2009) shows that 63.75% of 81 013 candidates who sat for the May Speaking paper in 2009 scored Bands 1 and 2. According to the MUET assessment criteria identifies them as “Extremely Limited Users” and “Limited Users”

respectively. 25% of them scored Band 3-“Modest Users” and only 1.97 % of these candidates scored Band 5 and Band 6 which identifies them as proficient users and highly proficient users. The previous years’ reports show similar findings on analysis of not only MUET speaking component results but also the other components of the language. These findings show that nationwide students have scored rather poorly in the speaking component which is an important cause for concern.

Therefore, this study attempts to investigate whether using cooperative learning strategies will promote achievement of speaking skills of Form six students in a secondary school in Kluang and indirectly help in the achievement of students’ oral communication skills in MUET.

### **1.3 Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to investigate if using cooperative learning strategies will help in the achievement of some selected oral communication skills in a MUET speaking classroom of Form Six students in a secondary school in Kluang , Johore.

### **1.4 Objectives of the study**

The study is to investigate if a program based on cooperative learning strategies will help in the achievement of some selected speaking skills in a Form Six MUET class in a secondary school in Kluang, Johore. The explicit objectives are as stated below:

- i) To investigate if using cooperative learning strategies will promote the achievement of selected speaking skills in a MUET classroom.

- ii) To analyse the ways cooperative learning strategies such as the Jigsaw Method, an instructional design promotes the achievement of speaking skills.
- iii) To determine the perceptions of Form six students towards cooperative learning in the achievement of selected speaking skills in a secondary school in Kluang.

### **1.5 Research Questions**

The present study attempts to answer the following research questions:

- i) Does using cooperative learning strategies promote the achievement of selected speaking skills in a MUET classroom?
- ii) How does the Jigsaw method promote the achievement of speaking skills?
- iii) What are the perceptions of Form six students towards cooperative learning strategies in the achievement of selected speaking skills in secondary school in Kluang?

### **1.6 Significance of the Study**

The findings of the present study is expected to provide a better understanding of the significance of using cooperative learning strategies for improving speaking skills in the context of the sample population. Moreover, this study also intends to analyse and establish the relationship between students' use of cooperative learning strategies and achievement of their speaking skills. Additionally, this study will enable other MUET teachers and English language teachers to recognize language learning and acquisition problems and possible instances to use cooperative learning strategies in solving similar problems in their

own groups of students. The students can gain a lot of benefits because cooperative learning strategies gives them opportunities to use or practice the language among their peers. Meaningful interaction in the classroom provides learners with opportunities to receive comprehensible input and feedback from their interaction partners (Ellis, 2005). Through cooperative learning, students develop higher self esteem and higher expectations of themselves (Gaith, 2003). Students also achieve academic benefits. It is assumed that, if found effective the strategies could be adopted by many teachers without special training. For teachers as well as policy makers, the findings of this study may have significant pedagogical implications in designing and implementing effective speaking or oral programmes for ESL students. It is hoped that cooperative learning can help students to develop and improve their acquisition of good oral communication skills to achieve communicative competence.

## **1.7 Definitions of terms**

Definitions of the terms used in the study are given below.

### **1.7.1 Cooperative learning strategies**

There are several strategies under the term of Cooperative Learning. For the purpose of this study the strategy chosen is the Jigsaw method which will be explained in Chapter Two.

### **1.7.2 Achievement/Improvement**

In this study achievement and improvement are used interchangeably. Achievement and improvement in selected speaking skills is observed when learners

use appropriate and correct sentence structures during interaction and discussion activities of the program. The differences in their discourse will be observed, noted and analyzed in Lesson One, Lesson Two, Lesson Three and Lesson Four while undergoing the Jigsaw method of instructional design. Positive differences in frequencies of instances of utterances of targeted skills will reflect that cooperative learning strategy used is effective in helping respondents to improve or achieve selected speaking skills in the MUET speaking component.

### **1.7.3 MUET**

The acronym MUET stands for Malaysian University English Test.

### **1.7.4 Oral communication skills/speaking skills**

Oral communication skills and speaking skills will be used interchangeably throughout the research. In this case study, achievement of some selected speaking skills in the MUET context will be operationalised as the ability to use various sentence structures to do the following:

The selected speaking skills based on the speaking component of the MUET syllabus are:

- 1) Asking For and Giving Information: How to be able to ask , determine and give information.
- 2) Seeking and Clarifying Information:
- 3) Expressing Opinions: How to be able to express feelings, opinions towards something.

## **1.8 Limitations of the Study**

This study was intended to be exploratory rather than prescriptive. The study is limited to the following:

Firstly, the research is based on a case study format. The participants of this study are therefore selected based on convenience. As such, no generalisation can be made outside of the parameters of the sample used. The results and conclusions to be made therefore only refer to the subjects used in this research.

Secondly, this study is limited only to investigate the effect of using Jigsaw method in improving only some selected speaking skills in the MUET speaking component.

Thirdly, the size of the sample was small; consisting of 16 students of whom 14 are of Chinese and 2 of Indian origin. The research was conducted only in one Form Six class in a secondary school. Therefore, findings of this small scale study cannot be generalized to other student populations. There may be extraneous variables that can invariably affect the findings such as the cultural and educational background of the students thus affecting the reliability of the findings

The results should be interpreted with caution as students' proficiency level; motivational level could differ in relation to an urban or rural setting and their socio-economic background. Secondly, due to time constraint, the respondents are treated to only 4 lessons of the treatment program. Since learning to use strategies with awareness requires constant practice over a sustained time period, the findings should be interpreted within this time frame.

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