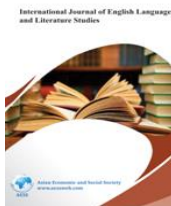




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PERCEPTIONS TOWARDS IN-CLASS ACTIVITY IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

Communicative approach of language teaching has attracted considerable attention since the early 1970s. The main argument reveals that communicative competence has been seen as one of the central goals to achieve for language learners. This derives mainly from the belief that language is a means of communication. Students in the English as Foreign Language (EFL) context are usually described as silent learners due to deficient communicative competence, along with the effect of traditional teacher-centered instruction approach. In a teacher-centered teaching environment, the students usually play passive roles who receive information or knowledge mainly from the teachers. Instead, the teachers play dominating roles, who decide and control almost the entire teaching and learning process. This paper intends to employ communication-based activity---simulation--- to understand the participants' perceptions and their problems when they use the target language in real situations. Forty-seven students take part in this case study. The results indicate that most of the participants hold positive attitudes toward simulation activities, regardless of their English proficiency. However, the participants also express their concerns, such as speaking anxiety, lack of confidence. To help the students rebuild their confidence, the teachers are suggested to develop appropriate communicative-based activities to increase the students' learning efficiency.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Beginning in the 1970s, voice for improving students' communicative competence became louder; the thought of adopting another teaching method emerged. The Grammar-Translation Method(GTM)has been adopted as one of the most popular teaching approaches in the English Language Teaching (ELT). The teachers and students in the EFL context pay more attention to the

learning of grammatical rules than the practical use of these rules. Hymes (1972) state that communicative competence is a person's ability to communicate in an appropriate way. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is one of the methods which accentuates its goal of language teaching on communicative competence. It is seen as a teaching innovation and has widely spread over the past two decades. From its introduction into discussions of language teaching and language learning, the term "communicative competence" has prompted reflection. Although it is extensively practiced in the English as a second language (ESL) setting, CLT is not successfully applied in the English as a foreign language (EFL) setting. English teachers from countries such as China, Greece, South Korea, and Turkey have made attempts to implement CLT; however, researches have shown that English teachers from these countries have faced many constraints that have hindered them from fully adopting this approach (Burnaby and Sun, 1989; Karavas-Doukas, 1996; Li, 1998; Eveyik-Aysin, 2003). Some of the more common constraints include large classes, grammar-based examinations, teachers' lack of cultural knowledge, lack of communicative teaching materials, and students' low English proficiency. The results from the above studies affirm the importance of understanding the fact that language learning can be most effective when language practice occurs in meaningful contexts instead of isolated linguistic settings.

The task-based approach has been welcomed to language teaching for its usefulness in foreign language acquisition. It has attracted considerable attention as a result of widespread interest in the functional views of language and communicative language teaching. As the learner-centered concept prevails, a great emphasis has been laid on the learners' perceptions of classroom aims and events. Simulations are seen as ways of bridging the gap between the classroom and the real world. Simulations are gaining increasing popularity because they are ideally suited to language practice. Bachman and Palmer (1996) affirm that language tasks are activities that involve individuals in using language for the purpose of achieving a particular goal or objective in a particular situation. In simulations, the language structure is cohesive because verbal interaction between the participants revolves around a central issue. The language used in simulation is functional; each participant plays a part in the interaction and the part demands appropriate language behavior, which includes social skills and social remarks suited to that role. To understand the participants' attitudinal change before and after the conduction of simulation activity, this paper is to develop the following two research questions.

2. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. To what extent the participants' attitudes has changed after the implementation of simulation activity ?
2. What are the problems that the teachers and students may encounter during the process of simulation activities?

3. THE PARTICIPANTS

Forty-seven students participate in this research. They are studying at one of the universities in northern Taiwan. 21 of them are female, and 26 male (See Table 1). They are evening class students, who choose English as their major. Some of them have either full-time jobs or part-time jobs, and some don't have any working experience. Their age ranges from 19 to 43. In the present research, the students are divided into two groups based on the scores of the General English Proficiency Test(GEPT). This test was developed by The Language Training and Testing Center(LTTC) in Taiwan, targets English learners at all levels in Taiwan. This test corresponds to Taiwan's English education framework, meets the specific needs of English learners in Taiwan for self-assessment, and provides institutions or schools with a reference for evaluating the English proficiency levels of their job applicants, employees, or students. The GEPT consists of five levels : elementary, intermediate, high-intermediate, advanced, and superior. Forty-seven students are divided into two groups: elementary level (Group B), and intermediate level (Group A).

Table-1. Background of the Participants

Group	Number	English level	Gender	Work
A	22	Intermediate	M.=9 F.=13	Yes.=14 No.=8
B	25	Elementary	M.=17 F.=8	Yes.=13 No.=12

4. SIMULATION ACTIVITY

All the groups were asked to perform the assigned task based on the instruction. Each of the groups was given fifteen to twenty minutes to complete their task. The central theme of this activity is to solve a problem and/ or make a decision through group work. To lessen the students' anxiety, they just need to write down their observation about the performance of each group. The main objective of this activity is to offer the students a real situation in which they have to complete the mission within limited time. This could be challenging task due to their English communicative ability. Each group consists of three to four members. One of them acts as the decision-maker, and the rest are team workers. They need to discuss with each other and then make the final decision. The researcher explains to the students and then offer them an example--- a foreign friend from the US is going to visit Taiwan, a tour plan should be planned through the team's negotiation.

5. RESEARCH INSTRUMENT

To collect the participants' perceptions towards in-class simulation activities, the researcher develops The Questionnaire of In-class Simulation Attitude Scale, which contains 10 items. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the background questionnaire responses, which consisted of means, standard deviations, maximums and minimums, frequency distributions, and percentages. A five-point Likert scale with five possible responses to each of the questions was used in scoring the scale. The scale ranged from 1(strongly disagree) to 5(strongly agree). SPSS was used to determine if there were any statistically significant differences between the responses.

6. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Forty-seven students completed the questionnaire for the pre- and post-surveys, and the results of the t-tests reveal that students' responses, regardless of their language proficiency levels, are higher than the neutral score (3.00). This indicates that the students hold positive attitude towards the simulation activities. In Group A (higher proficiency level), the mean score are 3.78 in the pre-survey, while the mean scores in the post-survey are 4.01. Similarly, the students in Group B (lower proficiency level) also respond positively towards simulation activities; the mean increases from 3.12 to 3.35. The detailed data is illustrated in Table 2. Although there is no significant difference between Group A and Group B, the respondents in Group A hold somewhat more favorable attitudes than that in Group B.

Table- 2. Pre- and Post-survey Results.

Group	Pre-survey		Post-survey		t	p-value
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
A	3.78	.63	4.01	.51	3.23	0.0000*
B	3.12	.72	3.35	.49	2.45	0.0001*

Note. *p.<0.05

Simulation is one of the communication-based English teaching approaches emphasizing the pragmatic, authentic, and functional use of the target language for meaningful purposes. Its main goal is to develop communicative competence in language learners, enabling them to communicate using the target language, which requires not only knowledge of linguistic form and meaning but also function. Of central importance in understanding the feasibility of implementing simulation is students' attitudes toward this approach to language learning. On the whole, the results in Table 2 show that most of the participants show positive towards simulation activities. However, Group A hold a more favorable attitudes than Group B. The detailed comparisons on score differences for all 10 items are illustrated in Table 3. The ten items are classified into two domains. Item 1 to item 5 pertains to the relationship between language learning and simulation; item 6 to item 10 relates to individual perception. The overall mean for the item responses for Group A and Group B are 3.86 and 3.21. In general, the two Groups hold positive attitudes towards the simulation activities, regardless of their language proficiency. However, language proficiency actually play an influential role affecting their responses from item 6 to item 10. The different mean scores range from item 6 to item 10 is larger than that from item 1 to item 5. Most of the respondents agree that simulation is suitable communication-oriented in-class activities (item 1: Group A, M=4.01; Group B, M=3.99), which can strengthen problem-solving skills (item 2: Group A, M=3.86; Group B, M=3.38). Simulation is a task-based activity aiming to create a student-centered learning environment, and the members in a group will work together to complete the assigned mission. During the process, the students will brainstorm and discuss with each other to find the best solution to the assigned task. The students reveal that simulation activities offer them more chances to interact with others (item 4: Group A, M=4.43; Group B, M=4.51) and also encourage their creativity (item 3: class A,

M=3.93; class B, M=3.56). Overall, the students regard simulation as a stimulating and helpful in-class activity that could help them to improve English communicative ability (item 5: Group A, M=4.21; Group B, M=3.53).

Item 6 to item 10 focuses on the individual perception as to individual work vs. group work; speaking anxiety vs. motivation. As to group work, the two groups make similar comments. They agree that working with others in a group makes them feel more comfortable compared to work alone (item 6: Group A, M=4.08; Group B, M=4.23). Although the students show positive attitudes toward simulation activities, there still exists somewhat reservation and uncertainty in their responses. The mean scores for item 7 for both groups indicate that many of the students lack confidence when using the target language (item 7: Group A, M=3.11; Group B, M=3.02) to communicate with others or make a speech in front of the class (item 8: Group A, M=4.18; Group B, M=4.21). Affected by their confidence in English communicative competence, the students show lower level of motivation to participate in communication-based in-class activities (item 9: Group A, M=3.19; Group B, M=3.09). In spite of their speaking anxiety, most of the students hold positive attitudes and feel motivated after they participate in the simulation activities (item 10: Group A, M=3.67; Group B, M=3.12).

The statistical analysis enables us to know the students' general perception towards communication-based in-class activities. To further understand what students react to the simulation activities, 8 students (four from Group A, and 4 Group B) were chosen for a 15-minute interview. The interviewees were labeled as A1, A2, A3, A4, B1, B2, B3, B4. They were requested to write down their likes and dislikes about the 10 items. All the 8 students mention that simulation is helpful to sharpen their language and problem-solving skills. A2 and B1 point out that simulation is a task-oriented and communication-based activity, which requires collaboration and communication among the members in a group. They believe that simulation activities will enhance their creativity and create more interaction among the members. A1 indicates that simulations are fundamentally learner-centered activities, with emphasis on the training of communicative skills, which establish situations in the classroom in which students employ language in a meaningful manner rather than artificial communication. A3 and B2 note that they are learning by doing during the entire process because they have to solve problems and make decisions on their own. Although simulation activities bring about some advantages for students' learning, the students also express their concerns. Seven of the interviewees mention that speaking anxiety and English proficiency are two of the most apparent factors affecting their performance in the classroom. B3 and B4 state that they lack confidence when they use the target language to make presentations or perform on the stage due to their English level. In addition, they feel shy and nervous when they use the target language to speak English in front of the class. In the EFL context, teachers usually play the central role and ask the students to do everything s/he arranges. During the teaching and learning process, linguistic accuracy is often overly emphasized. In such an exam-oriented learning environment, students pay more attention to their reading and writing skills rather than speaking and listening abilities. Consequently, when they are asked to use the target

language, they have difficulty expressing themselves fluently and naturally in a real situation. The interviewees state their problems and point out that local English teachers prefer adopting traditional GTM teaching method, in which they use L1 most of the time in the classroom. The students express that they wish to have more native English teachers with whom they can practice their English. Despite they suffer from speaking anxiety, the interviewees state that they are willing to be taught by more foreign teachers. The students also feel ambivalent about their circumstances; they actually want more communicative in-class activities but they feel stressful due to their low English proficiency.

Table- 3. Mean Scores for post-survey

Item	Group A	Group B
1. Simulation is suitable communication-oriented in-class activities	4.01	3.99
2. Simulation strengthens your problem-solving skills	3.86	3.38
3. Simulation encourages your creativity	3.93	3.56
4. Simulation offers you more opportunities to interact with others	4.43	4.51
5. Simulation is helpful to improve your language skills	4.21	3.53
6. I prefer group work to individual work in class activities	4.08	4.23
7. I feel confident when I use the target language	3.11	3.02
8. I feel nervous when I speak in front of the class	4.18	4.27
9. I prefer more communicative in-class activities	3.21	2.99
10. I feel motivated after simulation activities	3.67	3.12

7. PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATION

Scarcella and Crookal (1990) indicate that language learners acquire language when they are exposed to large quantities of comprehensible input, they are actively involved, and they have positive affect. It is teachers' responsibility to help the students to lessen their anxiety and motivate them to learn the target language with confidence. To reduce student anxiety and facilitate learning, the teacher should keep a low profile and students are free to interact with each other in the classroom without interruption. Rather than a traditional, teacher-centered classroom structure, the students should be active and have considerable control over their own learning. To make the simulation activity successful, the teachers' preparation play central role during the whole procedure. The teachers should familiarize themselves with the conventions of simulations, and they need to foresee the potential problems for conducting them in the classroom. The students should be familiarized with the teachers' instruction on the purpose of simulation and their duties during the activity. After the activity, the students should be asked to give their feedback to their teachers towards communication-based activity in the class. It will help the students to reflect their learning process, and also offer the teachers perspectives on teaching strategies that they may adopt and/or adjust in the classroom.

Simulations have been widely adopted as educational technique; however, they have only been applied to language teaching recently. (Tansey, 1969; Jones, 1980) Role-plays, simulations and games play similar roles in language learning and teaching. They serve as a bridge between the classroom and the real world. Simulations have been used as a technique in education for a long

time and it has also been applied to language teaching due to its usefulness. Simulation is a group activity in which students have chances to involve themselves in the event, to interact with each other, and to train themselves to work out the best way to solve problems and make decisions. This communication-based activity will be able to activate participation, to encourage communication, to develop language fluency, and to generate motivation. Through this activity, the students have ample opportunities to develop their communicative skills and really use the language they have learned in the class.

8. LIMITATION OF THIS STUDY

This paper is a case study, aiming to analyze the students' perception toward in-class activities. Although both quantitative and qualitative analysis have been applied to understand the students' reaction, the paper used a relatively limited convenient sample. In addition, some points could be further discussed, such as the relationship between the participants' working experience and their performance in simulation activities. Gender and age factors are also suggested to take into account during the conduction of simulation activities for further studies.

9. CONCLUSION

Ellis (1984) indicates that the learner will actually understand new linguistic knowledge and obtain information through the real use of the target language in task-based activities. The purpose of this study is to investigate the students' perception toward the simulation activity in the language classroom. In addition, the problems arise during the process of this activity are also discussed. The results indicate that students with different levels of English proficiency hold positive attitudes toward simulation activity. Most of the participants express that they are motivated by this in-class activity, they are encouraged to interact with their peers despite their English proficiency, and they are inspired to work closely as a team to complete the assigned mission. Simulation offers the students opportunities to really use the target language without much interference from the teacher. In other words, the students freely express their ideas during the entire simulation activity. The students feel more comfortable and confident when they perform their duties in a group. It is generally believed that anxiety can negatively affect the language learning and that reducing anxiety seems to increase language acquisition and learning motivation. It will be very helpful to provide the students with a lower stress, more friendly and supportive learning environment.

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