TEACHING AND LEARNING OF TERTIARY SKILLS VIA ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROGRAMS: THE PERCEPTIONS OF TERTIARY ESL LECTURERS

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ABSTRACT

The embedment of tertiary skills through English Language Programs (ELPs) is believed to equip university students with a set of skills. Tertiary skills are a combination of generic skills, language skills and academic literacies which consist of (1) Communicative Skills, (2) Critical Thinking and Problem Solving Skills, (3) Team Working Skills, (4) Information Management and Life-long Learning Skills, (5) Entrepreneurship Skills, (6) Leadership Skills and Proactiveness and (7) Ethics and Integrity. However, the way ELPs is designed at university somehow restricts the implementation of such skills to be effective. For that reason, this study aims to investigate English lecturers’ perceptions on the teaching and learning of tertiary skills through ELPs at one university in Malaysia. In order to gain in-depth data, semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight English lecturers and were later descriptively analyzed. The findings suggest that it is impossible to integrate all skills in one ELP as the nature of each ELP is to develop certain skills only. In terms of pedagogical and methodological aspects, tertiary skills are implemented from the constructivist point of view. According to the lecturers, in general, the students demonstrated a modest level of tertiary skills acquisition. This study concludes that ELPs can be the right platform to offer students with not only knowledge related to language but also various other skills required at tertiary level. This study also offers insights into the effective syllabus design for tertiary ESL programs.

Keywords: Tertiary Skills; English Language Programs; Teaching and Learning.
INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Education previously was only focusing on the outcomes and neglecting the process behind the outcomes. Now, the system has changed to preparing university students to face the unpredictable real world after they have graduated (Bowden and Marton, 1998). The so-called competent graduates are expected to be the university products which according to Bridgstock (2009) they are not only possessing content knowledge and skills but also other skills and values that define them as a whole individual. As a response, Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia introduced a set of skills in 2006 which is better known as soft skills to be integrated into the tertiary curriculum. This is done with an intention to have “a right balance of diverse abilities” (Devadason et al., 2010, p. 321) graduates. In order to support ministry’s effort, universities introduce their own graduate attributes which are constructed within their own discourses to work towards producing competent graduates. Such attributes are a range of academic and generic skills to workplace skills which shape the way teaching and learning process is operated at a university.

A holistic approach to teaching and learning is necessary in order to produce graduates who are the content expert and proficient in skills. Constructivist learning is believed to be the best answer for universities to have holistic outcomes of schooling. This is because, university learning is focusing on developing individual growth and not only on achieving certain objectives at the end of the programs. As stressed by Chan (2010), university should provide “diverse learning opportunities [so that the students can experience and help them grow] into a better person [and hence, for them] to make use of these opportunities is a prerequisite” (p. 4819). The belief about English language learning should be learnt constructively should affect how English is supposed to be taught and how English curriculum should be developed. The classroom practices involving classroom environments and assessments should be a continuous and complex process for such knowledge and skills to be naturally attained. English language programs should be looked at as a comprehensive program which develop the English knowledge and skills and also many other related skills beyond language.

There are so many names used to label skills beyond technical knowledge. In this study, the skills are conceptualized as Tertiary skills (TSs) which is a combination of generic skills, language skills and academic literacies. Since literacy is defined according to its context, this study conceptualizes tertiary skills from the skills listed in the graduate attributes of one university, University Teknologi Malaysia (UTM). The skills are (1) Communicative Skills, (2) Critical Thinking and Problem Solving Skills, (3) Team Working Skills, (4) Information Management and Life-long Learning Skills, (5) Entrepreneurship Skills, (6) Leadership Skills and Proactiveness and (7) Ethics and Integrity.
Due to the fact that lecturer is one of the most important agents in the process of implementing tertiary skills, there should be a closer look at their perspectives. Therefore, this study intends to:

a) investigate the tertiary skills being promoted in English programs at the university
b) examine how tertiary skills are being promoted

THE STUDY

The focus of this study is to seek the types of skills, approaches used and factors involved in the teaching and learning process of tertiary skills through ELPs interpretatively. The study is purely qualitative and the data were descriptively interpreted with involvement of process and meaning (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998). This study is derived from the existing MOHE soft skills policy and UTM’s graduate attributes. However, to further understand the implementation stage of the skills, the perceptions of the lecturers who are one of the classroom agents needs were taken into account.

The respondents

As for the respondent, they were chosen “purposefully”. This method is done to ensure that their answers are leading to answer the research questions as suggested by Creswell (1994). All four lecturers have had more than three years of teaching experience. The reason for choosing the lecturers was because they were believed to have enough experience and knowledge to share. Their judgments were believed to be valid on discussing the topic of the current situated pedagogical and curricular factors surrounding university students’ acquisition and development of TS. As this study is qualitative, the number of respondents should not be an issue as the focus is more on the richness of the data. The focus is more on the data saturation. Therefore, the cycle of interview would keep on going until the data is saturated. This is the reason for the number of respondents to be four people.

Research instrument

There was only one research instrument used in this study which was semi-structured interviews. The researcher was the one conducting all the interviews. The researcher audio-recorded the interviews as to make sure the data was accurate. The interviews were guided by a list of questions as Merriam (1998:74) emphasizes that in semi-structured interviews, the researcher need to be “guided by a list of questions or issues to be explored...”. All interview sessions were conducted face-to-face on one-to-one sessions. This was done to provide freedom to the interviewees in elaborating their views.

Data Analysis

In order analyze the interview data, the study employed Inductive Coding system. First, all the recorded sessions were transcribed verbatim. Second, the
transcriptions were kept in text forms. Then, the data were reduced analytically by coding system. The researcher read the transcription of the large text data of each interview session to locate the recurring ideas. The recurring ideas were later grouped into several themes which were heavily linked to the research questions. Next, when the point of saturation reached the coding also finished. Lastly, the researcher descriptively interpreted all the themes found.

After the data was analyzed, an independent inter-rater was called to moderate the data. This was done to ensure no biasness in the researcher’s judgments. The independent inter-rater task was to verify the data and also identify any other themes that the researcher might have missed. The inter-rater was a senior lecturer from the same university where the data were collected. She was chosen as she majored in the same field as the researcher. The assessment of the third party reviewer is crucial to guarantee the accuracy of data.

FINDINGS

In this present study, the findings were analyzed along three dimensions: TSs being promoted in ELPs at the university, ways the skills are being promoted and factors affecting the teaching and learning of these skills.

Tertiary Skills Being Promoted in English Programs at the University

According to the lecturers, each ELP calls for different skills to be implemented. They stated that some subjects focus on developing “individual skills” (Lecturer 1, 2 and 3) such as communication skills, critical thinking and information management and lifelong learning skills. On the other hand, some subjects emphasize on skills related to “teamwork” (Lecturer 4) such as teamworking skills, communication skills and critical thinking skills. Their responses are as in excerpts below:

"The first two English subjects is when students are asked to work on their skills in participating in groups while the elective courses require them to develop their individual skills like critical thinking and communication skills."  
- Lecturer 2

"The elective course focuses on oral communication skills a lot while the other two are a mix of skills especially critical thinking, teamworking and communication skills."  
- Lecturer 2

"Second English is more to teamwork. They will be working in group until the end of the semester. Of course they will be using a lot of communication skills and critical thinking and problem solving since they have to come out with questionnaire and everything.”  
- Lecturer 4

"Third English is more on individual skills, where they applied all the skills learnt, so mostly, the information management and lifelong learning skills."  
- Lecturer 3
Among all TSs, the four lecturers claimed that communication skill is a must skill to be implemented in ELPs. “Critical thinking” was the second skill that was highly promoted to students as mentioned by Lecturer 2, 3 and 4. Lecturer 3 and 4 highlighted that teamworking skill was also the crucial skill to be integrated in ELPs. Lastly, Lecturer 2 claimed that leadership skills is a skill where it was not openly promoted but “it surfaces through the activities”. All claims regarding the skills are as below:

“...because English right, our focus is more on communication, all that four components, reading, writing, speaking and listening and some related generic skills...”

- Lecturer 1

“More or less yeah I do teach all the skills but focusing more on the communication and critical thinking... Entrepreneurship not that much, if I'm teaching career search or workplace communication I will definitely using them a lot. Leadership it surfaces through the activities. I don’t explicitly tell them what it is.”

- Lecturer 2

“For English the most important skills is a communication skill...All the three subjects led the students' involvement like communication skills, teamworking skills and critical thinking.”

- Lecturer 3

“I only practiced the skills that are stated in the outline. Honestly, only 3 skills that I incorporate the most, communication skills, critical thinking and problem solving and teamworking.”

- Lecturer 4

All lecturers stressed on one skill that was seemed to be difficult to be implemented in ELPs which was entrepreneurship skills. Lecturer 1 remarked that she “[doesn’t] know how to introduce [the said skill] in English classroom” because as claimed by Lecturer 3 that it was not in the syllabus. According to the Lecturer 2, Entrepreneurship [is] not much in terms of implementation...but it’s a sage in terms of knowledge” which why Lecturer 4 suggested that “university needs to ...suggest to [lecturers] how [to] come out with [the] ideas of teaching or integrating the skills.” The interviewees’ responses can be examined in the statements below:

“One of the skills entrepreneurship I think for English I don't think it's working because I don't know how to introduce it in English classroom. I don’t think our focus is on that.”

- Lecturer 1

“Entrepreneurship maybe not much in terms of implementation it’s just in terms of knowledge. Maybe the skill itself is not elicited through the negotiation activity but it’s a sage in terms of knowledge.”

- Lecturer 2
"Skills like ethic, entrepreneurship and information management, I don’t find it much in the course outline. Maybe because we are English, we have nothing to do with the entrepreneurship skills and ethics and integrity. For content subjects yes, they are required and needed."

- Lecturer 3

"For the entrepreneurship skills, university needs to actually suggest to us on how are we actually can actually come out with you know ideas of teaching or integrating the skills because we don’t know how. Students they need to have this type of skills in order to help them to strive better in their career especially. It’s just that me as a language teacher I’m just not really sure how to do it."

- Lecturer 4

Generally, the lecturers agreed that TS need to be integrated as to have successful skills implementation. However, in a single program, not all skills can be promoted. As claimed by Lecturer 3, although not all skills are integrated in one subject, after completing the three compulsory ELPs, the students will have all the skills in-hand. The lecturers’ responses can be seen as follows:

"In the syllabus, just language skills normally taught, not the tertiary skills...but, some yes but not all. But through activities and all the skills are indirectly integrated..."

- Lecturer 1

"Although the skills are not directly stated in the syllabus, it is up to the lecturers to integrate in the class."

- Lecturer 2

"However, it is impossible to integrate all the 7 skills within one subject. As we know we have different levels of students in one class. Of course we want to have all that 7 skills, but it’s quite difficult. But, in the three subjects, I believe yes, we can."

- Lecturer 3

How the Skills are being Promoted

As for the ways the skills are being promoted, three main aspects were found from the interview responses which were classroom activities, assignments and assessments.

The lecturers said that classroom activities helped students a lot in acquiring the skills as claimed by Lecturer 1, she liked the activities to be “challenging [for] both mind and physical” of the students. She added that the students “…like something that they can know more about.” Lecturer 1 also stated that implementing language games activities in ELPs is good since they “test [students’] language skills and also thinking skills... [They would be]... competitive and start arguing and defending their answer[s] or decision[s].”

Besides language games, “video discussions” (Lecturer 3) and “Jigsaw reading” (Lecturer 4) also assisted the students in acquiring tertiary skills. All
lecturers also mentioned “presentations” like “formal classroom presentation” (Lecturer 1) or “impromptu speeches” (Lecturer 3) were also a way to provide students with the necessary skills.

All four lecturers decided that a range of assignments given to the students also a way to let them practice and develop their tertiary skills. Although the assignments were all based on the “syllabus” (Lecturer 3) but the lecturers need to be “...creative in providing the students the flexibility to deliver their assignments or outputs” (Lecturer 1). This is because “the process of completing the assignments [requires them to use and]...integrate many skills” (Lecturer 2). Among the assignments that were conducted in class in a form of group discussions (Lecturer 3 and 4), writing a paper be it online writing (Lecturer 1), collaborative in-class writing (Lecturer 3), individual presentations (Lecturer 4) and many more.

Besides, classroom activities and assignments, the lecturers believed that assessments is also a tool to help students developing their tertiary skills. All of them said that it is important for lecturer to be flexible with the rubric as to fit the students’ abilities. “Students have different abilities... Works and commitment [should also be looked at instead of just language and content because] some students with low proficiency...are very motivated to learn... We can see they are really trying to improve themselves... [Therefore,] changes [in assessment are required] according to the abilities of students” (Lecturer 3). Lecturer 1 clearly stated that “some assignments need an adjustment in terms of its assessment”. Lecturer 2, 3 and 4 said that, writing needs to be assessed “individually” for it to be effective but if it was done in groups, group “consultation[s]” (Lecturer 2) is a must in order to see their equal “contribution[s] to the group” (Lecturer 2 and 4), “commitment[s]” and “[leadership] roles” (Lecturer 3).

In short, it can be said that there were three main aspects which were classroom activities, assignments and assessments that helped the skills being promoted in ELPs.

DISCUSSION

Based on the findings, there are two matters of concerns arose to be discussed which are the prominence and the obvious abandonment of certain skills and the constructivist approach to the teaching and learning of skills.

The Prominence and the Obvious Abandonment of Certain Skills

From the findings, there were three skills, communication skills, critical thinking and teamwork skills that the lecturers frequently mentioned as the skills they promoted in class. This finding coincides with previous studies
highlighting that these three skills to be the most promoted skills in university, regardless the types of programs. Among them, Aksal et al. (2008), pointed that; “teamwork, communication and logical [and] critical thinking skills” (p. 558) were the most developed skills among students so as a nationwide study done by Abdul Karim et al. (2012) which showed that aside leadership skills, “communication, critical thinking and problem solving [and] teamwork” (p. 547) skills were the high-ranked skills. From this it can be said that, lecturers across universities and countries might have the same beliefs about wanting to promote these three skills more than any other tertiary skills.

Lecturers believed that communication skill is important as it is the “vehicle for learning” (Barrie, 2007, p. 456). In order for learning to happen students’ need to be able to communicate effectively with their peers and lecturers. Besides communication skills, critical thinking and problem-solving skills, was the next skills being highly promoted by lecturers in classroom. The lecturers found this particular skill to be crucial because it reflects the students’ academic knowledge and it would be able to tell whether a student is successful or not (Hager et al., 2002). Teamworking skills on the other hand intensively promoted by the lecturers because it allows so many other skills to be integrated and develops students to be a whole individual. Crebert et al., (2004) underlined that “interactive group learning at university [develops]… generic skills and abilities” (p. 10) so this is the reason why “the development of [teamwork] is well worth supporting and fostering” (Dunne, 2000, p. 363).

From the lecturers’ responses, the biasness in terms of promoting the skills can be seen as there were several skills which were not given attention to. First, information management and lifelong learning skills was neglected, although some lecturers do mentioned it but it was just touch and go. This skill is indeed important as Aksal et al., (2008) links the skills directly to the effort of producing capable graduates. Second, ethics and integrity was also not a favor skill to be incorporated by lecturers. This may be because the lecturers do not see much the relevancy it has on ELPs as the skill is more related to the workplace and future career programs since Crebert et al., (2004) said that, “high ethical standards were felt to be more appropriately developed in the workplace” (p. 15).

The leadership skill was one of the unpopular skills among lecturers because they always think that teamworking and leadership came in a package as claimed by Crebert et al., (2004) that “Opportunities for teamwork in the undergraduate curriculum offer students not only the chance to develop leadership, interpersonal and communication skills, but also to practice ethical decision-making” (p. 10). In contrast to a study conducted by Devadason et al, (2010) which reported that leadership skill to have a lack promotion in university. This previous finding was on the same page as this present study which showed the lecturers might have overlooked the importance of this skills.
It is obvious that among the skills, entrepreneurship skills was directly stated as a skill that is difficult and some said that impossible to be implemented in ELPs. The finding aligns with several past studies which the skill was always the least skills being promoted in classroom curriculum which to mention among them are Abdul Karim et al., (2012) and Nikita and Furuoka (2012). The lecturers have this strong perception that entrepreneurship skills as a not relevant skill in ELPs that it should actually be drawn from students’ own motivation to acquire the skill (Kavanagh and Drennan, 2008). The truth is, although entrepreneurship skills sounds too detached with ELPs but when it is looked at a bigger perspective as suggested by Salih (2008), it deals with students’ ability to think creatively and innovatively as support to find good business opportunities and presentations.

As response to this matter, it is important for ESL lecturers to carefully design their classroom curriculum as “a responsive teacher needs to be flexible and alert to student need” George (2009, p. 174). This is to make sure all the skills are fairly promoted. The lecturers need to be flexible and creative in implementing both language and skills within tertiary classroom contexts because George (2009) once said that “good teaching mirrors good parenting; if [teachers] are genuinely committed to the independence of learners, then [they] need to work consciously to this end and to be willing to let go of control, after offering the tools for learning, enthusing learners with [their] vision and values, and introducing [the students] to the substance and paradigms of knowledge, as [they] recognize them” (p. 174). Due to the nature of skills which are context-related and heavily dependent on the norms and practices, Zakaria (2011) proposes that a proper planning to the teaching and learning of skills is essential for the implementation process to be successful.

The Constructivist Approach to the Teaching and Learning of Skills

The lecturers’ approach to teaching and learning the skills mirrors the constructivist approach of learning. This finding somehow parallels with a study done by Aksal et al., (2008) where they claimed that the use of constructivist approach in teaching and learning had benefitted not just the content learning but the skills attached to it as well. It can be seen from the interview responses that teaching and learning at tertiary level deals with students learning ‘how to learn’. Language is always growing with the involvement in social contexts and with of high efforts shown in making use of language, an individual would have the tendency to understand and acquire the language better. Therefore, learning a language is a process of putting it into use in order to successfully be a language proficient.

There is a linear relationship between social practices in language classrooms and the motivation to learn English as stated by Hernández (2003). This is the reason why the lecturers varied the types of activities and assessment conducted in classroom because good classroom practices that integrate social elements in them would shape students’ perceptions on the importance of language and skills. Good classroom practices always calls for the use of content knowledge and of course many related skills in order to execute them. This is why lecturers usually combined the use of several skills in one activity
or assignment because skills are interrelated-structure. Crebert, et al., (2004) highlights that although the focus is on a single skill area, but several other skills also need to be put into picture for the particular skill to be developed. Thus, it is important for the skills to be integrated as to ensure the skills promotion to be successful as shown in a remark made by Watson (2002), that the meaningfulness of knowledge is increased if the students can see the functional needs of the skills.

In designing the classroom curriculum, the lecturers supported student-centered learning. As Shakir (2009) asserted, student-centered learning is where students act as an active agent in the teaching and learning process. While playing an active role in class, the interactions the students make with teachers or peers would give a positive impact to their skills development. This is aligned with a statement made by Kember (2007) that the tasks which require interactions between student-student and student-teacher would encourage the skills development. The complexity of the tasks also demand the students to put many skills into practice in a way of building themselves to be competent in language.

Apart from classroom activities, tasks and assignments, assessments also an important element for students to develop language knowledge and skill. As stated by Boud (2000), assessments are actually learning tools because they allow students to reflect on their learning and expect improvements from the beginning. Therefore, through assessments students can be more responsible to their learning and they would be more aware of what knowledge and skills they should acquire from the beginning as to do well in a particular course or subject. Assessment is a good measure for students to see what level they are at and to motivate them to do better.

George (2009) concludes that “in learning how to learn, students need to be able to pinpoint sharply where and how they need help, to know how to get that help, and to recognize when they have got what they wanted and needed.” This shows that the concept of learning how to learn is “how to...acquire, apply and critique knowledge, how to fit it into a new context, how to interact with others in an academic or social community to share and develop knowledge within an explicit values system... [This concept also] gives [teachers] insight into [the students’ learning] in their own words [in order to help them better]” (pp. 168-173). Therefore, constructive learning approach is a good opportunity for students to have a luxury social learning experience and active participation to learn how to learn.

CONCLUSION

Tertiary ELPs are not merely language learning but they are the platforms for students to learn how to learn. This study concludes that the teaching and learning of skills is always socially situated and student-centered. The role of
ELPs is not just a linguistic competence program anymore but it is as the right platform to equip student with knowledge and skills beyond English language. This study also support the notion of producing competent graduates who are academically competent, own excellent attitudes and act ethically and morally in all parts of life.

REFERENCES


