Community of Inquiry' Method and ESL Learners' Speaking skill

Abdul Shakour Preece*, Mohammed Waziri Bularafa
Department of Curriculum and Instruction, International Islamic University Malaysia
Jalan Gombak, Kuala Lumpur Malaysia
*Corresponding author: shakour@iium.edu.my

ABSTRACT
The research explored the effects of 'Community of Inquiry' (COI) method on the elementary school students' speaking skill. The participants comprised of twenty five ESL learners of beginner and pre-intermediate level at a private school in Kuala Lumpur. The sample included four male and three female students in grade five. Qualitative research method was used to investigate learners' use of spoken English during the COI discussions. Seven sessions, lasting one hour each were video-taped and analyzed using content analysis, focusing upon Facione's (2006) six critical thinking skills, namely: interpretation, analysis, explanation, evaluation, inference and self-regulation. The findings showed that through cooperation and imitation, five of the six critical thinking skills were practiced by students with the exception of 'self-regulation'. Moreover, specific grammar and vocabulary items were prevalent in learners' speaking. For example: the First Conditional was used to offer solutions and alternatives; Present Simple was employed when defining concepts or stating facts; and Past Simple was used when students narrated their experiences to explain or support ideas and opinions. It is clear that COI provides valuable opportunities for students to express themselves and practice their listening and speaking skills. As such, it represents a good method for introduction into mainstream Malaysian public schools, especially ESL.

Key words: Community of Inquiry, ESL, Speaking skills

Introduction

In Malaysia, English is considered a Second language (ESL) as it is used widely alongside the Malay language in official matters, such as law, education, government, business and the media. English is also a pre-requisite for entry into Malaysian universities being one of the main languages of instruction for higher education. At various points of time, Malaysia has employed measures to promote English language in its educational settings towards attaining developed-nation status. One of these efforts includes the 1996 Education Act that further reaffirmed the role of English. Another more recent policy entitled
‘Memertabatkan Bahasa Melayu Memperkukuhkan Bahasa Inggeris’ (MBMMBI) sought to strengthen Malaysians mastery of English language so that they could study and explore various fields to compete globally (Yamat, Fisher and Rich, 2014). A reflection of the importance given to English by the Malaysian Ministry Education is its statement that, “In keeping with the National Education Policy, English is taught as a second language in all government-assisted schools in the country at both the primary and secondary levels of schooling” (KPM, 1995, p. 1 as cited by Yamat, Fisher and Rich, 2014). However, Nunan (2003) maintains that studies looking at the impact of English on language policies in Asian countries shows a deterioration of standards of English among Malaysians which could hinder the national aspiration to become a developed nation by 2020. This decrease in Malaysian students' English language proficiency calls for an investigation into the possibility of finding new methods and strategies for teaching that promote fluency and confidence among students, particularly in the productive skills of speaking and listening.

A new approach

The literature is rich with methods and approaches that reflect the changes that have taken place over the years in TESL teaching due to changes in the theories about second language learning and language acquisition. Familiar names such as: ‘Grammar Translation Method’, ‘Audio-lingual Method’, ‘Direct Method’, Content-based Instruction and more recently ‘Communicative Language Teaching’ and ‘Task-based-learning’ represent these developments in theory and practice of TESL. The latter approaches show the trend towards ‘constructivism’ and 'learner-centeredness' that was missing from earlier, more traditional methods. In line with these changes, the researchers sought to find a different approach that offers ESL cognitive engagement by means of social-constructivism a. To this end, a pedagogy called ‘Community of Inquiry’ (COI) was employed by the researchers who recognized its potential to promote the active participation and critical thinking skills using stories and philosophical discussions, as will be seen. However, COI has so far only been used or studied with first language learners and so the challenge was to implement the approach with second language learners.

Social-Constructivism

The theoretical framework that underpins this study is largely derived from the Vygotskian social constructivism theory. Vygotsky conceived learning as a culturally embedded and socially mediated process in which discourse plays a primary role in the creation and acquisition of shared meaning making (Murphy et al., 2009, p.741). According to constructivism, ‘individuals create or construct their own understandings or knowledge through the interaction of what they already know and believe and the ideas, events and
In a constructivist learning environment, according to Murphy et al. (2009), children develop reading skills and abilities through authentic participation in a literacy-rich environment and are apprenticed into the literate community by more knowledgeable others (e.g., parents, teachers, or more capable peers). Learning activities in constructivist settings are characterized by active engagement, inquiry, problem solving and collaboration. ‘Rather than a dispenser of knowledge, the teacher is a guide, facilitator and co-explorer who encourages learners to question, challenge and formulate their own ideas, opinions and conclusions’ (Abdal Haqq, 1998, p.2).

Community of Inquiry and Language Learning

Community of inquiry is a social constructivist method that aims to engage the participants, both teacher and students in collaborating with each other in discussion to grow in understanding of the world around them, forming a community of inquiry. The COI model has been shown to be very effective at engaging students in learning and exploring ideas, improving critical thinking skills, affective skills and collaborative skills (Pardales and Girod, 2006). A study by Millett and Tapper (2011) discussed collaborative philosophical inquiry and concluded that collaborative philosophical inquiry has a marked positive effects on schooling and thinking skills; and schooling, socialization and values of students. The paper suggests that available empirical evidence is strong enough to warrant implementing collaborative philosophical inquiry as part of a long-term policy.

In a study involving COI and second language learning, Abdul Shakour Preece (2013) employed COI with 'thinking stories' to engage intermediate level, ESL learners at a tertiary institution in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The findings revealed that COI has great potential for improving listening, speaking, reading and writing skills in a holistic way; however the study concluded that more information is needed about the kinds of language that is used by second language learners who are exposed to COI.

Research has shown the advantages of COI for ESL, such as: 1) intrinsic motivation for students; 2) genuine interaction through ‘inquiry dialogue’; 3) learners-centeredness and social-constructivism; and 4) holistic practice of all four language skills. There is therefore a need to explore further the effects of COI on ESL learners’ speaking skill and to identify exactly what kind of language is being produced in terms of grammar, vocabulary and critical thinking skills.

The study sought to answer the following three research questions:

1) Which are the main critical thinking skills used by ESL learners when speaking in a community of inquiry?
COMMUNITY OF INQUIRY’ METHOD AND ESL LEARNERS’

2) What are the effects of COI critical thinking skills on ESL learners' spoken grammar?
3) What are the effects of COI critical thinking skills on ESL learners' spoken vocabulary?

Research Method

Research Design
The present study adopted a case study design which is form a qualitative research method involving in-depth, contextual analysis of a situation or setting to gain information usually about a small group of participants; seeking to increase understanding about particular issue or problem, with reduced generalizability Patton (1990); Sekaran & Bougie (2010); Leedy & Ormrod (2005), Qualitative method often addresses questions about people’s ways of interacting, organizing or relating in order to answer the why and how of human behavior, opinion, about experiences or information that is difficult to obtain through more quantitatively-oriented methods of data collection.

Setting
The research was conducted in a private Malaysian, primary school in Gombak that adopts the Malaysian national curriculum and public examination system. Most of the teachers, staff and students are Malaysian.

Participants
A purposeful sampling procedure is used in qualitative research to gain accurate, information-rich, in-depth data about case studies (Patton, 1990). In this study, the sample consisted of twenty five Grade 5, elementary school pupils who were studying ESL on a regular school time-table. All the pupils were Malay.

Data collection
Data collection took the form of audio and video recordings for each COI session. The sessions lasted for one hour and there was a total of seven sessions, spread over seven weeks. The same participants were maintained for the entire duration of the program.

Data Analysis
Facione’s (2013) critical thinking skills were used to outline good thinking that is opposite to irrational and illogical thinking. The six categories are: interpretation, analysis, evaluation, inference, explanation and self-regulation and were used as a basis for organizing
COMMUNITY OF INQUIRY’ METHOD AND ESL LEARNERS’

and analyzing the data of the study i.e. the researchers identified which critical thinking skills were being used by learners in the COI discussions, and then looked for patterns or themes in the language used, in terms of vocabulary and grammar

**Findings and Discussion**

The analysis of the data from the recordings of the COI sessions revealed which critical thinking skills students were using and the language associated with these.

**Critical Thinking Skills**

The findings showed that five of the main critical thinking skills were used by students in their speaking during discussions, with students being able to interpret concepts, analyze issues, evaluate ideas, explain concepts and infer from statements. A summary of the main critical thinking skills along with their relevant sub-skills can be seen in Table 1 below.

Table 1

_Critical Thinking Skills And Sub-Skills_

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Critical Thinking Skills</th>
<th>Sub-skills</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1-Interpretation</td>
<td>a-Categorize</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b-Clarify meanings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-Analysis</td>
<td>c-Examine ideas, reasons and expressions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>d-Identify arguments, assumptions and beliefs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-Explanation</td>
<td>e-Present arguments, ideas and explanation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-Evaluation</td>
<td>f-Compare against area</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-Inference</td>
<td>g-Drawing conclusions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2

_Common Vocabulary & Language Functions in COI Discussions_

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key Vocabulary</th>
<th>Functions</th>
<th>Story topics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I think</td>
<td>(1) Expressing opinion,</td>
<td>Mira and God</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For example, like</td>
<td>(2) Providing examples.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Because, that's why</td>
<td>(3) Reasoning,</td>
<td>Kimmie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maybe</td>
<td>(4) Expressing likelihood or doubt</td>
<td>The Five Senses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I mean</td>
<td>(5) Providing more explanation</td>
<td>Three poor boys</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actually</td>
<td>(6) Expressing emphasis</td>
<td>Picky princess</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If</td>
<td>(7) Conditional statement</td>
<td>The fairest teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I guess</td>
<td>(8) Expressing possibility</td>
<td>The good harvest</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2 shows the most commonly used vocabulary and functions across the sessions with students using certain words to: express opinions, give examples, call others attention to reason or to express possibility, condition or lay emphasis. Examples of these expressions are: I think, like, because, for example, imagine, actually, if and I guess.

Critical thinking skills and spoken language

According to the analysis of the data, students in COI used various kinds of words to express ideas during discussions. It was found that students engaged in critical thinking skills to analyze, explain, express, argue, evaluate and judge each others' opinions (See Table 3 below).

It was also found that students made use of various kinds of grammatical structures to perform the critical thinking skills, such as: present tense, past tense, conditional, adverbials, adjectives, prepositions and exclamations. These show that students were attempting to clarify and provide explanations and meaning to what they were saying i.e. they were interpreting, explaining, analyzing assumptions, and evaluating statements made by one another during the COI discussions about topics like: friendship, fairness, lying, God's creation and the five senses. For example:

Money is nothing worth than heaven because, money you can get, I mean you can buy something with money, I know like gems or something like that, but heaven you can’t buy, you can’t get everything. S1, (DU 101)

I think both of them work hard because the teacher needs to handle the students and also teach them, as, it’s hard because some people understand and some people doesn’t. S7, (DU, 37)

Actually, the goal of life is to live a good life, do good and hopefully inshallah we shall go to heaven. S1 (DU, 123)

Table 3

Critical Thinking Sub-skills & Grammatical Structures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Critical thinking skills and sub-skills</th>
<th>Grammatical Structures used</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a) Categorizing</td>
<td>Adjectives, present tense, prepositions (a, only, always, also, that).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1) Interpretation</td>
<td>b) Clarifying</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1st conditional, reasoning terms (because), exampling term (like, for example).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical Thinking Skills And Sub-Skills</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The following excerpts from students speech were transcribed verbatim and used to demonstrate examples of language used to express the critical thinking skills and sub-skills in Table 3 above:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1) **Interpretation.**
   
a) Categorizing: There were no apparent examples of categorization during the seven COI sessions.
   
b) Clarifying:
   
   Umm **because** Kimi **said** something that is not true so **also** her grandmother feelings was hurt S2 (DU, 106)

   The above statement is regarded as interpretation because of the question asked by the teacher: “**do you think those lies are the same?**” the initial response of the student was “**No.**” The then teacher asked again, “**then tell us why they are not the same**” and the student provided the above response. The response by the student denotes that she understands and comprehends the story and gives meaning to the grandmother feelings. As a result, the statement 'clarifies' her understanding of the event. We can deduce that the student has understood the situation by providing meaning to what happened. This shows evidence of deduction which Facione (2015) calls interpretation, “**the ability to comprehend and express the meaning or significance of a wide variety of experiences, events, and situation**” (p.5).
Moreover, the words and phrases in bold exemplify grammar usage e.g. “because” which connotes an adverbial clause of reason used to clarify the meaning of an event, while the past tense verb “said” refers to an event that has taken place in the past.

It is like if you do something wrong, you do think that it is something wrong S1 (DU, 67)

This statement also connotes interpretation which can be understood from the question asked: “how did that make you feel? Thinking Allah is watching you? Feeling good or bad? does not feel bad”? The student's response, “50 percent, 50 percent”, led the teacher to ask another question, “what do you mean?” The student's statement was an interpretation of his statement "50 percent, 50 percent", stating that if you know something is wrong, that is the first 50 percent, and if you do something bad that is the second 50 percent.

We notice below that a question commencing with “how” or “What” seeks more explanation, while the word "like" gives more detail to the interpretation of an event by providing a simile. If it is used to express a condition or general fact then the present tense form is used.

Like if life was easy and everything will be slowly forgotten, we will slowly forget about God for example we can slowly forget to pray” S 1(DU 247):

The question asked by the teacher: Do you think the test... does the test teach you something? This question is asking about the lessons one can learn from the tests of Allah through the temptations that befall us. The student thereafter provides a clear interpretation of a statement already made which centered about the tests befalling human beings and the lessons that can be learnt from them. This student interpreted that if our lives are too easy, without difficulty, then man may gradually forget God. In this way, the student is trying to support the main idea made previously. It is therefore an example of interpretation because it shows the speaker can distinguish between a main idea and a subordinate idea, and provides a subordinate idea as an interpretation of a main idea made previously. For interpretations, the language used by the student was conditional in the form of "if". Interpretation also makes use of words such as "like" and "for example", in order to make the statement clearer.
2) Analysis

c) Arguing:

I think best sense is the eyes because if we can’t see we can know what is in front of us and what are the back of us. S3(DU 217):

The question that caused the above response was: "Which do you think is the best sense?" This made the student express her personal opinion and her reason for saying it. We can deduce from this that she is expressing an argument which is a critical thinking sub-skills of the main skill of 'analysis'. This is because the student expressed her opinion, then provided her reason for maintaining this position. 'Analysis', according to Facione (2015), is used to identify the intended and actual inferential relationship between statements, concepts and questions intended to express belief, judgment, opinion and reasons. We can also deduce that the brief analysis made by the student is a form of argument, as one main feature of argument is when someone makes a claim and states various reasons for making such a claim (Facione, 2015). The language used by the student to perform this function was, “I think”, before stating her opinion. She used the conjunction “because” to express her reason, while the other words used are in the present tense form.

The teacher asked the following question, “Okay let’s say for example so if you did bad in my class I punish you the same way everyone does is that being fair?” to which one student responded, “Yes.”

Then the teacher further asked, “Okay Alia why do you say yes?” which prompted the following response:

I think it is fair because if our friend is being naughty like shouting or playing and we just ignore him so we should be punished” S6 (DU,80)

This statement equally denotes an argument, as explained earlier, where a student made a point then followed it with a supporting idea. Equally words such as "I think” express a personal opinion, denoting a reason for an opinion. When the subordinate idea is a condition, then the present tense is used.

3) Evaluation

There were no apparent examples of evaluation during the seven COI sessions.
COMMUNITY OF INQUIRY’ METHOD AND ESL LEARNERS’

4) Inference

f) Drawing Conclusions:

We pray for God because we want heaven and if we got heaven we got everything.
S1 (DU, 136)

The above excerpt was in response to the question asked by the teacher: "Why must we pray to Him (Meaning God)?" The response not only answers the question but also provides the end benefit derived from prayer. This means that the student drew a conclusion from the statements made. In essence, inference is made at the end of a statement. In this case the student infers a conclusion. Facione (2015) states that inference is the ability to identify and secure elements needed to draw reasonable conclusions from statements, data and evidences.

The student concludes with the statement, “we got everything”. Here the word “if” is used to infer a conclusion i.e. "if" denotes the first conditional as an inferential statement, whereas "because" is used to express a reason. Unfortunately, the student uses the wrong tense for the first conditional using "got" instead of "will get".

If Kimi heard that granny is sad, it took a long time, so we must wait for the right moment to tell the truth. S 2(DU 139)

The statement above is another inferential statement. We know this by the question asked by the teacher beforehand: “Why do you still think that she should lie in the beginning?” The student not only explained why, but also concluded that people need to learn when to tell the truth and when not. As this is a conclusion, it is therefore another example of inference.

We notice once again that a conditional clause with “if” characterizes the drawing of an inference. Equally the word “so” seems to precede the end result or the conclusion of an issue.

5) Explanation

The following statement was in response to the question asked by teacher, “Do you think money cannot give you heaven, but heaven can give you money?”

Because we know how people always say that, goal of life is to become good, to become an isolate and to go to heaven. Now but some people mistaken this goal of life for money, to get a home and how they will mistaken something that we can get in heaven” S1 (DU,114)
This response culminates in an argument about heaven and money, where the student first expresses her opinion that “money is better than heaven”, then the teacher asks for further explanation, resulting in the student's explanation and conclusion. Facione (2015), holds that explanation is the ability to present the result of one’s reasoning in a clear and coherent way. Thus, the student's clear elaboration of her previously held opinion is an example of explanation. Generally statement that provide detailed explanation or further information tend to use the words “because” and “that”, while the tense used in such explanations is generally present tense.

The teacher asked the class: Which do you think is the best sense? One student answered:

I think best sense is the eyes because if we can’t see we can’t know what is in front of us and what the back of us are. With eyes we see ourselves, we see person that want to do bad for us we can run for them. With eyes we read book we write. S3 (DU,217):

The student states his main point which is: “the best sense is the eyes.” and then presents his reason for saying that to make himself clear. As before, this represents explanation and the vocabulary used to explain his personal opinion is: “I think”, while “because” is used to express the reason for his opinion. Again, the tense used is present tense which is being used to gain understanding of facts.

Conclusion

Pillay (2005) points out that English language is a tool for gaining knowledge, especially in the field of science and technology. Yet, competency and fluency among Malaysian students remains a subject of concern among educators, parents, and stakeholders despite the priority given to English language in the educational system in Malaysia. This study therefore focuses on the introduction of a new method for ESL known as community of inquiry to provide a lively, learner-centered environment where learners are free to express their opinions about a range of philosophical topics in whole class discussions.

The findings of the research show that four out of the six critical thinking skills outlined by Facione (2013) were employed by ESL learners who were engaging in COI. Moreover, the use of critical thinking skills gave rise to meaningful listening and speaking by means of interpreting concepts, analyzing issues, evaluating ideas, explaining concepts and
inferring from statements. The COI stories and discussions also provided an input and output of specific vocabulary and grammar related to the critical thinking skills, as seen above.

It is therefore interesting to note that Thadphoothon (2005), asserts that critical thinking is an important part of communicative language learning, while Rezaei et al. (2011) support the idea that critical thinking fosters language learning. In the light of this, it is hoped that continued imitation, cooperation and discussions engendered by COI, will enrich ESL learners’ spoken vocabulary and grammar until they become more proficient speakers of English. If this is the case, COI should be introduced into mainstream government schools to allow our children to benefit from this new approach.

References


International Conference on Language, Literature, Culture and Education

17th & 18th October, 2015
COMMUNITY OF INQUIRY’ METHOD AND ESL LEARNERS’


