Competency in Seeking Clarifications in Oral Interactions: Learners' Perceptions on Effectiveness of a Teaching Module

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Abstract
Fresh graduates ought to be competent in using English due to the fact that the language has pervasive influences both in commerce and within the education system in this country. However, communicating in English could be a challenge to many ESL speakers. This scenario has motivated the development of a teaching module, aimed at enhancing learners' communicative competency in seeking clarifications as well as their confidence level when using English. Now that the module has been used by students in one public university in the country, the effectiveness of it as perceived by the learners was yet to be examined. The data were then collected through online questionnaires administered in two stages: before and after the use of the teaching module. Based on responses given by 135 respondents, the mean scores and standard deviation for the items in the questionnaire were calculated on the Google Form. The results showed some improvements in learners' competency in using English. Based on the conclusion drawn from this study, recommendations for future research are offered.
Keywords: Communication, Competency, Seeking Clarifications, Oral Interactions, Second Language Learners.

Introduction
Communication, as defined by Asma et al (2001: 26) involves "the sharing or exchanging of information or ideas between two or more individuals [and] usually results in some actions for both parties". In a workplace context, having good communication skills equates to being "communicatively competent" and this usually refers to an individual's ability to communicate with others effectively (Krishnan et al., 2019).

The notion of "communicative competence" started to gain popularity in the early 1970s when it was first proposed by Selinker (1972) in the context of language learning. Being communicatively competent, as asserted by Hymes (1972), refers to having both knowledge of abstract linguistic rules and the ability to use language in concrete situations of everyday life without ignoring the appropriate use of grammar. The notion was so influential at that time that it resulted in the movement of the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)

approach in second language teaching in the 1970s. This happened around the globe and Malaysia was no exception. The country first started adopting this communicative teaching approach in 1979 to form six students before gradually implementing it for all students in the national schools.

In Malaysia where English holds the position as a second language (ESL), it has always been a great concern for second language (L2) speakers to communicate effectively, particularly the fresh graduates who are trying to get into the job market for the first time. It is a worrying scenario when many existing employers give negative comments on Malaysian graduates' oral communication skills, claiming that they are not proficient in delivering their intended messages (Krishnan, 2019). This is supported by Ting et al. (2017) who reported that the excessive unemployment rate is regularly caused by the graduates' low usage and understanding of the English language.

Acknowledging the importance of being communicatively competent when interacting with others, a teaching module was developed with the purpose of exposing L2 learners to expressions that could be employed in oral interactions. Among the many language functions, seeking for clarifications becomes the focus of this module mainly because it is much needed in order to help speakers to accomplish their communicative goal(s). Now that the module has been used by students taking communication course, it is interesting to find out how language learners perceive the effectiveness of the module in terms of enhancing their awareness of the various expressions in seeking clarifications as well as increasing their confidence level when using the language.

The module, which was fully developed based on the researchers' past study on the use of various communication strategies, is suitable for students taking communication classes. One of them is English for Professional Interaction (ELC650) offered at a public university in the east coast of Peninsular Malaysia. In order to examine the effectiveness of this module, the current study was set to obtain L2 learners' perception on the effects of the module on two aspects; awareness of the various expressions in seeking clarifications in oral interactions and their confidence level in performing the course assessments which required them to communicate with the group members in English.

Research Objectives
In order to examine the effectiveness of the teaching module aimed at enhancing students' competency in using the English language, the current study needed to collect the data BEFORE and AFTER the students used the module. Hence, the data collection was conducted in two stages: before and after treatment on the students in terms of exposure to the module.

Based on the above main objective, the current study was set to
1. examine students' perceptions on their awareness of the various expressions that could be employed in seeking clarifications after using the module.
2. examine students' perception on their confidence level in performing course assessments involving oral interactions with group members after using the module.

Problem Statement

As a second language in Malaysia, English is used widely in the country and has pervasive influences both in commerce and within the education system. Undeniably, having good English language skills is an added advantage for those who wish to join the job market. Unfortunately, communicating in English could be a challenge to many ESL speakers in this country. As highlighted by Krishnan (2019), Malaysian graduates lacked proficiency in delivering their intended messages. Nuraqilah and Aminabibi (2018) added to this by asserting that producing sentences in English and speaking in that language is perplexing for most Malaysian graduates, even though they have been exposed to English language since primary school days. Meanwhile, Ting et al (2017) reported that the excessive unemployment rate is regularly caused by the graduates low usage and understanding of the English language.

Driven by the above scenario, a teaching module was developed to help the students to communicate more confidently in the English language. The aim of the module is to expose L2 learners to various expressions that could be employed when communicating with others. Among all the many language functions that L2 speakers are expected to perform when engaging themselves in oral interactions, the focus of the teaching module is on seeking clarifications since this language function is much needed by the speakers to achieve their communicative goal(s).

Literature Review

As highlighted earlier, "communicative competence" is the notion that has gained popularity in the field of language learning for decades. Being communicatively competent, as posited by Hymes (1972:282), is "dependent upon both (tacit) knowledge and (ability for) use [of the language]". Hence, one's good knowledge about a language should not be taken as an indicator of his ability in using the language. Schiffrin (1994) who advocates Hymes' concept of communicative competence, maintained that "communicative competence" includes both knowledge of abstract linguistic rules and the ability to use language in concrete situations of everyday life without ignoring the appropriate use of grammar. Hence, to be a competent speaker, one needs more than just the ability to speak well but also to consider the social use of a language (Paulston, 1974).

As for L2 learners, they are expected to encounter various communication problems in oral interactions due to linguistic inadequacies or other forms of problems. As a result, their main concern has always been on how to tackle those problems. Acknowledging this, Selinker (1972) proposed the use of "communication strategies" to help them communicate more competently. By definition, "communication strategies" refer to "every potentially intentional attempt to cope with any language problems of which the speaker is aware during the course of communication" (Dörnyei & Scott, 1997: 179). Based on this conceptualization, communication strategies are seen as being useful not only to tackle language-related problem but also other types of problems in L2 communication such as being unclear of the subject matter discussed.

While tackling language-related problems among L2 speakers has been the focus of many researchers, the current study focuses on helping language learners to be more competent when seeking clarifications by exposing them to various expressions available in the teaching module. Subsequently, the learners were asked about their perceptions on the effectiveness of the module in enhancing their awareness of the various clarification-seeking expressions

and confidence level when using the language. The research findings would indicate the effectiveness of the teaching module in improving learners' communicative competence.

Studies on Clarification-Seeking Expressions

Expressions in seeking clarifications are also referred to as "clarification-seeking strategies" and have been studied by many researchers. While some might focus on the strategy itself (Bjorkman, 2014; Dornyei & Scott, 1997; Sato, 2019), the current study is more interested in the expressions that could be employed in seeking clarifications. At this point, it is worth noting that "clarification-seeking expressions" is also termed as "clarification requests" or "clarification strategies". For the purpose of this paper, no distinctions are made between these terms.

Dornyei and Scott (1997) for one, use the term "seeking clarification" and consider such an act as one strategy that could be employed by L2 learners to achieve their communicative goal(s). Meanwhile, Fuji et al (2016) who conducted a study on interactional opportunities in EFL classroom, stated that learners' awareness of effective interaction could be raised through negotiations that occurred in oral interactions. This, according to them could result in learners' increased recognition of the benefits of giving interactional feedback, as evident by various clarification requests made by their respondents.

Another study was conducted by Kennedy (2017) who explored the use of communication strategy among English as a lingua franca (ELF) in relation to the communicative goal and the ELF users' thoughts and feelings about the interactions. Based on her findings, Kennedy (2017: p. 5) asserted that:

> "Few difficulties in understanding were evident [in oral interactions], but those which did occur were usually signaled by clarification or repetition requests (*Pardon*?) or inappropriate responses to questions. The interlocutors then negotiated the meaning of the initial utterance through rephrasing or elaboration".

The above statement by Kennedy (2017) that interlocutors would "[negotiate] the meaning of the initial utterance through rephrasing or elaboration" could be seen in Situation 4 of the teaching module (see Figure 1).

Another study that showed the significance of clarification requests in oral interaction was conducted by Bjorkman (2014) who analyzed the communicative strategies used by speakers in spoken lingua franca English (ELF) in an academic setting. The data comprised fifteen group sessions of naturally-occurring student group-work talking content courses at a technical university. Detailed qualitative analyses on the oral data showed that comprehension checks, confirmation checks, and clarification requests are frequently employed communication strategies while there are very few instances of self and other-initiated word replacement. It is worth mentioning here, as reported by Bjorkman (2014), the use of these types of communication strategies could be due to the nature of the high-stakes interactions where the focus is on the task and not the language.

The above review of past studies indicates the relevance of clarification-seeking strategies among L2 learners, many of whom are still struggling in conveying their intended messages when communicating in English. The teaching module is therefore

hoped to be able to familiarize them with various expressions when seeking clarifications and further, help increase their confidence level when using the English language.

Methodology
Research Design
The present study employs a quantitative research design with the main aim to examine L2 learners' perceptions on the effectiveness of a teaching module in the following aspects: aimed increasing learners' awareness of the various expressions when seeking clarification as well as their confidence level in completing the language course assessments.

The data were collected from online responses to a set questionnaire given by the respondents who enrolled in one communication course. The course, namely English for Professional Interaction (ELC650) requires the registered students to complete a total of four assessments namely Workplace Simulation (WS), Discussion Observation (DO), Video Critique (VC) and email writing. Among these assessments, WS and DO require the students to perform oral interactions with their group members, hence, posing the need for them to employ various types of CS, including Seeking Clarifications.

The Teaching Module
With its focus on seeking clarifications, this module consists of eight dialogues between a candidate and a panelist of a real staff recruitment interviews held at one public university in the east coast of Peninsular Malaysia. In short, the dialogues were taken from real research data. While the dialogue is labelled as a "situation", an explanation is provided about it to help learners understand the subject matter being discussed as well as the context of interactions. It is worth noting here that the focus of the module is on the candidates' utterances when seeking clarifications from the panelist. Aside from the explanation given, the module also gives a suggestion on how the expressions used by the candidate to seek clarifications from the panelist could be further improved for more effective communication. An example of this is shown in Figure 1 taken from Situation 4 of the module:
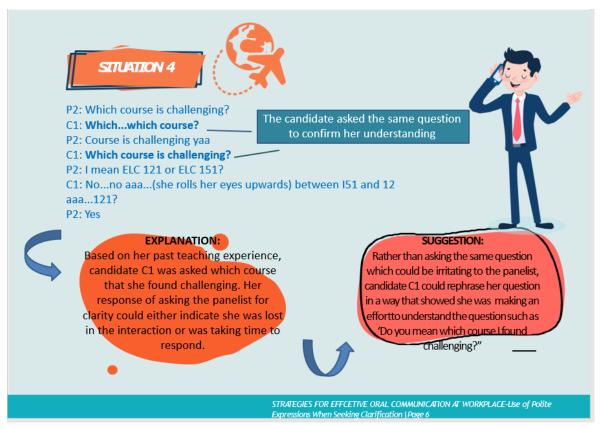
Figure 1: An example of expressions used in seeking clarifications taken from Situation 4 of the module.

Figure 1 illustrates how candidate 1 (C1) sought clarifications from the panelist about his questions related to the former's past teaching experience. As seen in the dialogue, C1 was asked about which course that he/she found challenging ("which course is challenging?") before he/she responded by asking the panelist back "which…which course?". The panelist then rephrased his question by asking "course is challenging yaa?". Unfortunately, the candidate was still unclear. He/she then tried to clarify the question by asking the panelist "which course is challenging?". When the panelist responded that he was referring to either ELC121 or ELC151, the candidate sought clarification from the panelist once again by uttering "no.. o aa…between 151 and 121 aaa.. 121?" before the former confirmed his/her understanding by saying "yes".

Referring to this situation, it can be seen that the candidate who was not clear of the question posed by the panelist tried to seek clarifications a few times by repeating the questions given by the latter. While this could irritate the panelist, the candidate is suggested to rephrase the question in his/her effort to get clarifications such as "Do you mean which course I found challenging?" in a polite voice tone. This way not only did the candidate show his/her effort, but also sounded more refined as opposed to repeating the panelist's questions.

The above is an example of how learners can seek clarifications in a more preferred way. In total, the module presents eight situations in which the learners could learn how to seek clarifications more effectively.

Sampling

In total, there were 165 ELC650 registered students in UiTM Cawngan Kelantan Kampus Machang. Out of this number, 135 responded to both links of questionnaires and hence,

became the respondents of this study. They were from three different faculties namely College of Computing, Informatics and Media, Academy of Contemporary Islamic Studies, and the Faculty of Accountancy. Out of a total eight groups, four groups were from the Faculty of Accountancy while the other two groups each were from the other two faculties. Aged between 20-24 years old, the students were from various states in the country including Sabah dan Sarawak.

Instruments
There were two instruments involved in data collection of the current study; the teaching module and a set of questionnaires filled up by the respondents before and after they went through the module as part of their self-regulated learning.

The teaching module aims to expose learners of English as a second language (L2) to various expressions that can be used when seeking clarifications from others at workplace. Meanwhile, the questionnaires consist of three sections. The questions in Section 1 relate to the respondents' demographic profile, Section 2 is on learners' awareness on the use of various expressions when seeking clarifications while Section 3 is on learners' confidence level in performing ELC650 assessments.

In total, there are four assessments to be completed by the students taking ELC650. They are Workplace Simulation (WS), Discussion Observation (DO), Email Writing (EW) and Video Critique (VC). While WS is a pair work whereby the students perform a role-play based on situations within a workplace context, DO is a group meeting in which the group members, consisting of four or six students are to discuss a work-related task before they come to a consensus for each aspect of the task. DO assessment brings them to the third assessment i.e., Email Writing in which each student is required to individually submit a report based on the output of their DO assessment. The last assessment, that is Video Critique requires the students to present their evaluation on a movie or any TV programmes without interacting with others.

Data Collection Procedure
In the current study, the teaching module was treated as students' self-regulated learning material. The students went through the module on their own at any time convenient to them within roughly a week. To meet the objective of the study as explained earlier, the students were asked to respond to the online questionnaires twice; BEFORE and AFTER they went through the module on their own. The following are the stages involved the data collection of the current study.

First, the lead researcher conducted separate online briefings about the module and the research project to all eight groups of students during one of their classroom sessions. Once they were ready, a set of online questionnaires was shared with the students to gain input about their levels of awareness of the various expressions that could be employed to seek clarifications and their confidence level when performing ELC650 assessments. The students were given two days to respond to the questionnaires before access to the first questionnaires was closed.

Next, the researcher shared the teaching module with the students and asked them to go through the module on their own for about a week before another link to the same questions was opened for the students to provide their responses after they were exposed to the module. This time, students were repeatedly reminded to respond within three days before the second link was closed. Except the demographic data, students' responses in Section 2 and 3 are based on the 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 that represents 'not very true' to 5 that represents 'very true'. It is worth reiterating at this point that the reason to get the students to respond twice was to measure the differences in their responses before and after using the module.

Data Analysis
As stated earlier, there was a total of 165 ELC650 registered students at UiTM Cawangan Kelantan. Out of this number, 151 and 176 students responded to the first and second questionnaires, respectively. Then a matching process was done based on students' identification number to ensure that only those who responded to both questionnaires were included for data analysis while those who responded only once (either to the first or second questionnaires) were excluded. When this was done, it was found that 135 students responded to both questionnaires and hence their responses were taken in for data analysis.

The data obtained were then quantitatively analysed on the Google Form in terms of average score and standard deviation for each item in sections 2 and 3 of the questionnaires.

Results and Discussion
This section discusses the research findings related to students' awareness of the various types of clarification-seeking expressions and their confidence level after using the teaching module.

Research Findings on Students' Awareness of Various Expressions in Seeking Clarifications
Table 1 shows the findings on students' awareness of the various expressions when seeking clarifications in oral interactions.

Table 2
Awareness on the Use of Various Expressions When Seeking Clarifications

Item	BEFORE the Exposure to the Module		AFTER the Exposure to the Module	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
1. I am aware that clarity on the subject matter is important for successful oral interactions.	3.72	0.982	4.44	0.643
2. I am aware of the importance of using the right ways to seek clarification in oral interactions.	3.66	1.134	4.47	0.667
3. I pay attention to the various ways to seek	3.55	1.005	4.31	0.728

clarification in oral interactions.			
4. I acknowledge the importance of being polite when seeking clarification from others.	3.91	1.011	4.49	0.597
5. I would insert politeness when seeking clarification from others using expressions such as "sorry?" and "pardon?".	3.81	1.023	4.45	0.688
6. When I am unclear of any subject matter, I would seek affirmation from others of what I have understood.	3.70	1.017	4.39	0.669
7. When I am unclear of any subject matter, I would ask others to explain accordingly.	3.78	1.005	4.39	0.658
8. When I am unclear of any subject matter, I would repeat others' phrases as a means to confirm my understanding.	3.68	1.027	4.40	0.682

Table 1 presents the respondents' awareness on the use of communication strategies in seeking clarifications. The elements which are presented in the teaching module include the importance of clarity on the subject matter, using the right ways to seek clarifications, and being polite when seeking clarifications. Since the focus of the module is on seeking clarifications, the respondents are expected to be able to gain and obtain knowledge on its roles in achieving successful interaction. Based on the data gathered, the most significant difference between the two mean scores, before and after the exposure to the module, was on the respondents' awareness of using the right ways to seek clarification, 3.66 and 4.47 respectively. Besides, the respondents stated that they did pay attention to the various ways in seeking clarifications (M=4.31) after being exposed to the module while the mean score before the exposure to the module was 3.55. Lastly, it is worth highlighting that the respondents acknowledged the importance of being polite with others when oral interactions took place. This is pertinent as the mean score was recorded as the highest, 4.49, after they were exposed to the teaching module. To conclude, it can be clearly seen that the respondents provided positive responses for all the elements presented in the module.

Research Findings on Students' Confidence Level in Performing ELC650 Course Assessments.
The findings on students' confidence level in performing ELC650 assessments are illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2
Confidence Level in Performing ELC650 Assessments

Item	BEFORE the Exposure to the Module		AFTER the Exposure to the Module	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
1. I am confident to perform the Workplace Simulation assessment.	3.06	0.976	4.03	0.772
2. I am confident to perform Discussion Observation assessment.	3.10	0.961	3.97	0.791
3. I am confident in using the English language when performing ELC650 assessments.	3.24	0.948	4.07	0.769

Table 2 depicts the respondents' confidence level in performing ELC650 assessments before and after they went through the teaching module. One significant difference was evident when the respondents claimed that they were pretty confident in performing the Workplace Simulation assessment a week after being exposed to the module (M=4.03). In regard to the use of the English language, the respondents believed that they were confident of a better performance in the speaking assessments which demonstrates the highest mean value, 4.07. Overall, the respondents' confidence level in performing speaking assessments increased significantly after they were exposed to the teaching module.

Considering the teaching module has positive effects on the students, its use should be extended to all students. By familiarizing the students with various language expressions that make them more confident in using the English language, the module helps to address the biggest internal obstacle in speaking English, that is lacking self-confidence (Hasibuan, 2013). As highlighted by Nijat et al (2019), Malaysian primary school pupils are mostly the victims of common physiological factors such as shyness and anxiety that affect their confidence in communicating their ideas since they were afraid of making mistakes. Although other factors such as unfavourable learning environment, inappropriate curriculum or even teachers' inadequate capabilities in teaching can contribute to L2 learners' lack of competency in using the English language, a small contribution of the teaching module could still make a difference in them.

Conclusion
In general, it can be concluded that the teaching module has helped language learners improve their awareness on the various expressions that can be used when seeking clarifications in oral interactions as well as their confidence in performing course assessments that require them to interact with others. The module is therefore hoped to be able to help the students perform better in their communication course such as ELC650.

Implications and Recommendation for Future Research
Aside from being used in language classrooms, this module is also suitable for self-regulated learning. Hence, it can help to promote autonomous learning among language learners and

make them become more competent in using English. More importantly, with higher confidence level when speaking English, it is hoped that the students will be more competitive when they join the job market upon their graduation.

While the results of the current study showed some improvements in students' awareness of the various clarification-seeking expressions that could be used as well as their confidence level in using the English language, the significance of such improvements is yet to be measured. Future research is therefore recommended to quantitatively determine the effects of this teaching module on learners' competency in using the English language.

Acknowledgement

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