

Undergraduates Students Facilitators' Insights on their Involvement in an Impactful Volunteering Project

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Abstract

The study investigates ESL students' facilitators' perception regarding their involvement in a special community service project called "Project Tutor" which was carried out in order to help sixty primary school students from a rural school to be more interested in learning English. The student facilitators (SF) were twenty undergraduate students from a university in Malaysia who volunteered for the project. The project duration was two months. After the project ended, the student facilitators were asked to reflect on the impact of the project towards them in a reflective journal note and answer semi structured interview questions to analyze their feelings regarding their involvement in the community service project. The findings show that the project is regarded as a win-win situation as the student facilitators are able to improve their English-speaking confidence as well as motivate them to be more involved in future community service projects.

Keywords: ESL, Community Service, Speaking Skill, Tutoring.

Introduction

This study explores the perception of ESL undergraduate students regarding their involvement as facilitators in a university-based community service project which provided English tutoring services to a group of primary school students from a selected school situated in a rural area in Malaysia. The main aim is to discover how the project has benefited the ESL undergraduate students' particularly in terms of how the project has helped them to improve

their ESL speaking skills as well as increase their interest in getting involved in future community services and volunteerism organized by their university. This study is significant as to date there is little existing literature and research being covered on this related topic particularly within the ESL and within Malaysian context. Therefore, this study contributes to this field of knowledge and will be useful to ESL educators, students and researchers who are interested in finding ways to improve ESL speaking skill.

Literature Review

Although it is important for tertiary level students to be competent in English many of them still face difficulties in mastering the language particularly in speaking skill Kaufman and Lionel (2000). Among the problems faced are due to the lack of or in adequate vocabulary, grammatical errors and poor pronunciation which led them to speak in broken English. It is reported that many Malaysian tertiary students are not competent in speaking skill (Ting et al, 2017; Ismail, 2018). In fact, many students who graduated with bachelor's degree still do not have a satisfactory communicative level. Their communicative weakness in English speaking skill including public speaking has an impact towards their chances to be employed. It is reported that one of the reasons that hinder Malaysian graduates' chances to employed within three years after they graduate is due to the poor performance in job interviews due to the weakness in English speaking skill (Ting et al, 2017).

Studies have reported that there are many reasons for the weakness such as lack of practice particularly in the natural setting (Herlinawati et al, 2024; Ismail et al. 2011). Psychological barriers faced by the students which include factors like lack of motivation, afraid of making mistakes or speaking broken English in front of peers or others, lack of self-confidence and so on (Ismail et al. 2021). Therefore, it is important that students are provided the chance to practice outside of classroom and be involved in activities that provide them with the chance to practice speaking English.

According to Kaufman and Lionel (2000), it is common to find ESL students to be literally speechless when they are placed to speak in public. One of the reasons is they lack the skill and confidence to do so and become apprehensive (Ratn Singh et al, 2012). A higher rate of communication apprehension can impact on a person's behavior, relationships, the perception of others, occupational choice and employment opportunities and education. Therefore, ESL students should be given the opportunities to participate in English-based activities that provide them a chance to practice speaking in the language, especially in authentic situations (Wan Mustapha et al, 2009; Yoke, 2021).

Benefits of Community Service to Students

University-based community service projects are activities which are organized by the university for their students to be volunteers and be involved in helping the community (Astin & Sax, 2001; Ismail et, 2018). According to Astin & Vogelgesang (2001), university-based community service has the potential to enrich the students' experience and knowledge in various aspects. Studies have reported benefits of enhancing students' soft skills such as leadership, negotiation, cooperation. Students are also encouraged to push the boundaries and be inspired with successful role model who contributed much to the society and strive to

continue pushing to the next level of engagements from university level to the district, national and international.

University-Based Community Service ESL Tutoring Projects

It is important that undergraduates are given the chance to be involved in various university-based community service projects which help them to communicate with others outside of their classrooms and in authentic situations (Astin, & Vogelgesang, 2001). Involving university students in a community service project such as one which provides a cross-age tutoring service to some primary school students is a good move which can bring some positive outcomes not just to the tutees (the primary school students) but to the tutors (the university students) involved as well, especially in terms of their communication skills in English. Evidently cross-age tutoring brings a lot of benefits not just to the tutees but to the tutors as well. Research in the field (Astin & Sax, 2001; Eyler, & Giles, 2000) emphasized three commonly cited benefits which are the learning of academic skills including language communication, the development of social behavior and classroom discipline.

One of the reasons cross-age tutoring works may be that tutors and tutees speak a more similar language than do adult teachers and students. According to Kaufman and Lionel (2000), the tutees who are being taught by a peer or someone closer in age to them feel freer to express opinions, ask questions and risk untested solutions. The interaction between instructor and pupils is more balanced and livelier; therefore, this then stimulates the tutors to communicate well with the tutees. The feeling of being accepted by their tutees encouraged the tutors to speak using the target language and this will significantly improve their speaking performance.

The Research

The objective of the study is to analyze ESL student facilitators' perceptions of cross-age tutoring (a community service project) and to discover how it benefits them. To date there are limited number of research being published that considers ESL students' experience and views regarding their involvement in ESL cross-age tutoring community service particularly within Malaysian context. Hence, it is imperative to carry out this study as the findings can play a pivotal role in facilitating students' course of learning exposure and benefits particularly in terms of ESL speaking skill.

The student facilitators (SF) were twenty undergraduate students from a university in Malaysia who volunteered for the cross-age tutoring project. The project requires the student facilitators provide English lessons for sixty primary school students in a rural area in Malaysia for two hours once a week for two months. After the project the subjects were asked to write a reflexive journal note to reflect on their involvement as student facilitators. Four of them agreed to answer semi structured four interview questions in order to analyze their feelings regarding how the community service project benefits them in terms of their ESL speaking and communication skills and their attitude towards the language. The data for the journal entry and interview were analyzed descriptively. The six-step stages for qualitative data analyses suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006), were employed which are by immersing oneself in the data or data immersion, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining,

and naming themes whereby the focal idea of each of the themes included are then identified, analyzed, and reported in the findings.

The Main Findings

Analysis of the data from the journal entry also revealed that the student facilitators (SF) felt that the community service project has improved their attitude towards speaking in English.

1. In terms of the benefits of the community service projects, the student facilitators reveal that the project gives them a chance to speak English in an authentic situation:

The project gave me a chance to practice speaking in front of real students, real audiences (SF5)

After the project I feel my spoken English is so much better. It gave me a chance to improve my speaking skill when I taught the students (SF10)

The project provided me a chance to improve my speaking skill in English, I think I have improved a lot (SF 12)

The student facilitators mentioned that the project makes them feel less afraid and more confident to speak English:

I was not confident to speak in front of the public before, but after two months of practicing with the rural students, teaching them in English, I am now more confident (SF20).

The feeling of being able to speak and teach English to the primary school students is really great. I am happy to do it and now feel more confident. (SF18).

Yes, I admit I still speak brokenly some time, but I think I am more proficient and confident after this project. (SF16).

2. The student facilitators feel that by facilitating the students, they are able to improve their speaking skill:

It is a good project because not only do I get a chance to help the primary school students, but I also get to practice my speaking skill (SF 13).

Being the facilitator and tutor motivated me to prepare the teaching materials and to deliver the lessons in English which I feel helped my English too especially for speaking skills (SF14).

Yes, I think it has helped me improve my public speaking skill. I was a poor public speaker before (SF19).

3. The student facilitators also claimed that they become more motivated to speak in English and improve themselves after the project:

The good feeling that I got after this project ended makes me become more motivated to improve on my proficiency especially speaking skill. (Sf15).

After this project ended, I do feel motivated to improve my English further and to speak more in public. (SF17)

It gave me the motivation to deliver and teach in English, I feel motivated to speak more in English. (SF14).

Moreover, analysis of the data from the interview revealed that most of the student facilitators (SF) feel that the community service project is beneficial to them.

1. The student facilitators claimed that their attitude towards speaking has improved after the project:

I think my attitude towards speaking in English has improved. Before I was not interested in doing so outside of class because I feel that people may judge if I make mistakes, but now my attitude has changed, and I am more encouraged to do so. (SF 1).

Before getting involved in this project, I did not really bother to improve my speaking skill but after having to teach English and become a tutor I feel it is important to keep on improving my English and practice speaking more (SF2).

After the project I realized the importance of being able to speak well in English and make other understand me better. (SF4).

2. In addition to speaking skill the student facilitators also mentioned that being the tutor for the project helps them to improve their overall communication skill:

The project had a good impact on my overall communication skill. I was given a lot of guidance and able to practice my speaking skill quite well. (SF3).

Teaching in English and tutoring the primary school students have indeed improve my overall communication skills (SF5).

Tutoring in English was great, I had a lot of fun with the students, and it certainly enhance my communication skills (SF2).

Conclusion

It is important that ESL students are given the opportunity to enhance their English proficiency in a natural setting. As speaking skill is one of the most difficult skills to master and has been reported to be among the factors that hinder graduates from being successful in job interviews as well as being employed in their selected career, it is pertinent that more effort should be placed towards exposing undergraduates to the environment where they can easily practice communicating in a natural setting (Ismail et al, 2018). Furthermore, getting involved

in community services also offer a lot of benefits to undergraduates in terms of social skills and particularly the ones that motivate them to practice speaking in English. Therefore, cross-age English tutoring project is an ideal context for the student facilitators to do so and the findings in this study has proven that it is a win-win situation for the undergraduates (Greenwood et al, 2003; Ismail et al, 2023). Not only do they get to contribute to the society but also, they had the chance to improve their English-speaking skill and therefore become more motivated and interested to be involved in similar projects in future.

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