6th International Research Symposium in Service Management, IRSSM-6 2015, 11-15 August 2015, UiTM Sarawak, Kuching, Malaysia

Brainstorming as a Way to Approach Student-Centered Learning in the ESL Classroom

Norseha Unin[a],*, Polin Bearing[b]

[a]Universiti Teknologi MARA Sarawak, 94300 Kota Samarahan, Sarawak, Malaysia
[b]SMK Jalan Arang, 93250 Kuching, Sarawak, Malaysia

Abstract

Student-Centred Learning (SCL) encourages students to take an active role in the learning process. Brainstorming is one of the ways to approach SCL because it is an open sharing activity, which is usually conducted in small groups to encourage participation. However, students are often reluctant to speak voluntarily in the English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom. This study explores the use of brainstorming activities to promote speaking engagement in the ESL classroom. 321 Form Four students from an urban secondary school in Kuching participated in the study. The purpose of the study was to explore the types of brainstorming activities used and how brainstorming was employed to promote SCL. The data were obtained through questionnaires completed by the students, interviews with three English teachers, as well as through classroom observations during the brainstorming sessions. The findings show that brainstorming activities using word lists, word mapping, and also pictures are commonly utilized in the speaking tasks. It was observed that brainstorming contributes to the increase in students' motivation, confidence, and participation as reflected by the positive students' behaviour during classroom observations. The findings are consistent with the studies by Slavin (1995) and Hamzah and Lu (2010), who found that students were more confident and motivated to express their ideas when brainstorming in small groups. Accordingly, the findings support Cullen's (1998) belief that brainstorming activities encourage students to become better learners, especially when low proficiency students can learn from the better ones. This study not only sheds light on the use of brainstorming to address students' reluctance to speak English more voluntarily, but also provides useful insights for teachers to deal with the reluctance to speak in the ESL classroom.

Keywords: ESL; Student-Centered Learning; brainstorming

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +6019-8619886.
  E-mail address: uninnors@gmail.com

1. Introduction

In the language classroom context, brainstorming is often used in teaching writing as part of the pre-writing phase (Richards, 1990, as cited in Cullen, 1998). Brainstorming is usually a small group activity which encourages students to focus on the free flow of ideas. The main purpose of brainstorming is to generate as many ideas as possible within the specified time frame given in the classroom. The ideas generated are not evaluated until the task is completed and often a wide range of ideas is produced. Although not all the ideas generated are useable, the initial ideas can be viewed as a starting point to more useful ideas. ESL teachers can use brainstorming activities to encourage students to share their ideas with one another on a particular topic or question. In Malaysian schools, English is taught as a second language and it is not the main medium of instruction. Speaking in English has always been a daunting experience for many students; thus, English teachers are confronted with the challenge of getting students to participate in the ESL classroom. In some situations, students are reluctant to use English for speaking activities. In fact, speaking in a second language has been viewed as the most challenging of the four language skills (Bailey, 2006, as cited in Soraya 2010). As such, student-centered learning (SCL) that requires active involvement and participation (Brandes & Ginnis, 1986) from the learners becomes a method to encourage speaking engagement in the ESL classroom.

1.1. Purpose of the study

The student-centered learning literature (Lea, et al., 2003) refers to SCL as a reflexive approach to the teaching and learning processes for both teacher and learners. Additionally, SCL is regarded as a process that pays attention to deep learning and understanding, as it encourages students to take an active role in the learning process. According to Blake and DeVries (2004), brainstorming activities that provide a meaningful learning environment in a relaxed atmosphere can be used as one of the strategies to promote speaking skills. In this study, brainstorming is employed as a way to approach SCL for speaking skills. In the context of this study, speaking skills refer to the ability and fluency to speak spontaneously, with no extensive pauses or repetition when speakers are responding reasonably within the turns of the conversation. This study explores the use of brainstorming for speaking engagement in the ESL classroom. The purpose of the study was to explore the types of brainstorming activities used and how brainstorming was employed to promote SCL among the students at an urban secondary school in Kuching. Finally, the study also gathers the students' and teachers' perceptions on the use of brainstorming activities to promote speaking skills.

1.2. Methodology

This study on brainstorming as a way to approach student-centered learning in the ESL classroom utilized a mixed-method approach using three instruments for data collection. For quantitative data, the survey technique was used to obtain numerical data from the 321 student participants. The survey was conducted to gather the types of brainstorming activities used and the students' perceptions on using brainstorming activities to promote speaking skills. For qualitative data, classroom observations were carried out on three different classes for 40 minutes each. Students' participation in the brainstorming sessions was observed to get a sense of their responses and interaction based on the tasks given by their teachers. The overall participation in each session was recorded and the involvements in the three different sessions were compared. Finally, three English teachers were also interviewed to obtain their views on the use of brainstorming strategies for speaking skills. For the interviews, a purposeful sampling technique (Merriam, 1998 & Patton, 2005) was used. All three teachers used brainstorming in small group discussions to encourage participation in the speaking tasks.

2. Theoretical perspective

Speaking activities in the classroom should not only be interesting to students, but must also create a real need for communication. As a kind of learning that provides the opportunity for students to bring real and authentic speaking experiences (Richards, 2008), SCL provides a non-threatening environment (Overby, 2011) to the learning process.